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october 2002

COLOSSIANS

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editorial

There is little more frustrating than returning from a bookshop with a new book only to discover that you had it all along. It was always sitting there on your shelves; it's just that for some mysterious reason you forgot that you had it. This is not hypothetical, it has happened to me. The second time I did it I began to have serious doubts about my state of mind. Fortunately, it hasn't happened again for quite some time. Nevertheless, it has served as an expensive warning that I must remember what I have, lest in my desire for something more I forget what I already possess.

The quest for "something more" is a tendency that we all share, but it becomes particularly dangerous when we allow it unfettered expression in the spiritual realm. In Colossians Paul reminds us that believers, whether discouraged by their inconstancy or stirred by pride, may yearn for spiritual resources that they already have. Whatever the reason for wanting more than Christ, it arises from the false assumption that our faith in him provides insufficient resources to transform and prepare us for a God-centred life.

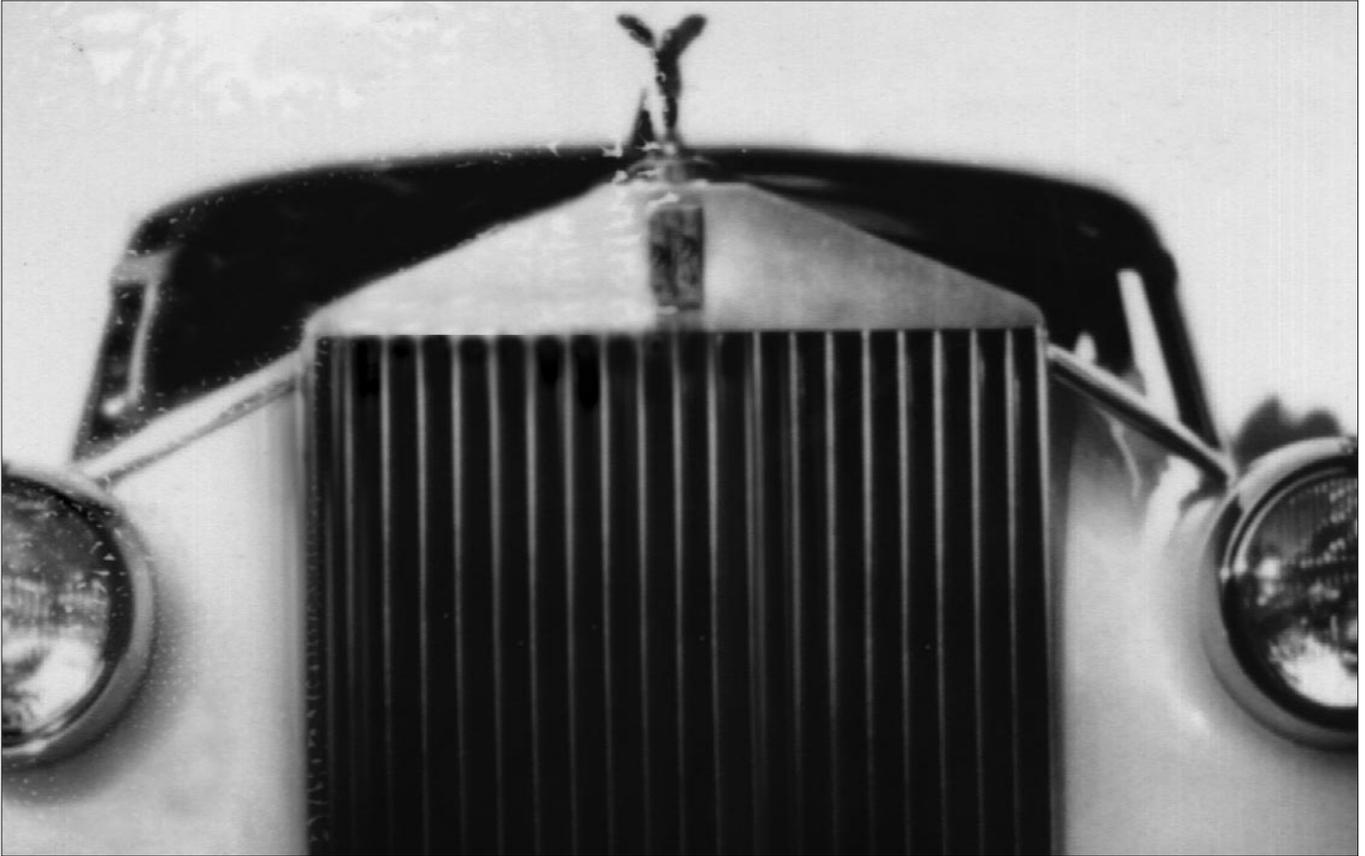
Church history has shown us that this thirst for something more than Christ has led people to seek a higher life through such things as mystical visions, tongues, rebaptism and self-denial. All these alternatives to simple faith in Christ are touted as holding the key to that elusive "something more". But they can't, as Paul reminds us. To possess Christ is to have "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3); it is to be united with the One in whom "dwells all the fullness of deity in bodily form" (2:9).

The New Testament is at pains to point out that faith in Christ is the key to abundant life. It is from the fullness of Christ's grace that "we have all received one blessing after another." (John 1:17) And Peter tells us that "his divine power has given us everything necessary for life and godliness through our knowledge of Christ." (2 Peter 1:3) Since we are made complete in him (Colossians 2:10), the mature Christian will rejoice in the simple gospel.

Peter Hastie 

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The base-model gospel is perfect. No extras are needed.



Paul's letter to the Colossians speaks to a spiritual problem with which believers in the church of the 21st century continue to wrestle. It's the quest of always seeking something more than we already have in the gospel. Sadly, those who are on this quest are unaware of their spiritual resources in Christ. Believers who are influenced in this way are always on the lookout for more of the Holy Spirit, more ecstatic visions, more special powers and the like.

Ian Smith, a former pastor and missionary, now teaches New Testament at the Presbyterian Theological Centre in Sydney. Over the past five years he has made a special study of Colossians. He has recently submitted his PhD thesis to Sydney University on the Colossian error. *AP* spoke to him about this widespread spiritual quest for something more.

Why don't people often preach on Colossians?

One of the main reasons, I think, why ministers find it difficult to preach a com-



Ian Smith
talks to
Peter Hastie

plete series on Colossians is that by and large they find it hard to understand the precise nature of the error with which Paul is dealing. Until you understand something of the error that had arisen in the church, it becomes very hard to grasp the overall message of the book.

What is the underlying message of Colossians that has special relevance to the church today?

The main message of the letter is about Christ's complete sufficiency to meet all our spiritual needs. In every generation the Church has been faced with different errors where people have tried to suggest that having faith in Christ is simply not enough. So today, for example, there is no shortage of mystical movements within the church which claim that the mark of superior spirituality is to seek and find

new revelation from God in some form other than the Scriptures.

I've lost count over the years of the number of conversations that I've had with people who have talked about how God has guided them through experiences, dreams, and other sorts of phenomena as though these are superior forms of guidance to the Scriptures. There are Christians in all denominations who think like this. It's not an error that is particularly confined to the charismatic churches. I think we are more mystical than we think we are.

The difficulty with this type of so-called "higher revelation" is that it's so subjective. How do you determine whether such revelation is really from God? Paul writes to remind us in the letter that God locates the fullness of his revelation and blessing in the person of Christ and in his saving work upon the cross. Since we only learn about these things in the Scriptures, we need to remind ourselves that we only attain fullness of blessing as we meet Jesus Christ in the Scriptures and rely upon his work for

us upon the cross. This is the gospel message that Christians need to remember in every generation.

Are there any other trends in the church at the moment that represent challenges to the sufficiency of Christ?

Well, I think that the tendency towards legalism is certainly always present. Legalism is the belief that faith alone is insufficient to save you. Legalists also claim that in order to be fully assured of an interest in Christ you need to keep certain rules. Paul points out in Colossians, for example, that the errorists were putting a fair bit of emphasis on dietary restrictions as an essential part of one's spiritual growth. Some of the Christians there also believed that it was necessary to keep the Sabbath, as well as to be circumcised and to practise certain forms of asceticism. Unless you did these things, it was alleged, you couldn't reach your full spiritual potential.

You find similar tendencies today. Sometimes, among older members of our denomination, you will meet people who believe that there is an association between doing certain good works and being a Christian.

You can detect the same thing amongst younger people, too, although in a slightly different form. For example, in evangelical circles there's nearly always a package of spiritual dos and don'ts that we need to observe in order to qualify as a bona fide Christian. For instance, it might be the necessity of having a Quiet Time; or it might be becoming involved in organised evangelism. Of course, these are all good things and should not be discouraged. But when people ground their salvation in these sorts of works, they are drifting into legalism. Paul expects that Christians will engage in these sorts of activities, but only as a response to what Christ has done for us.

Legalism is a tendency in us all. While it expresses itself in a variety of ways, it comes back to a trust in self and adding to the gospel of Christ. In a rather perverse sort of way, we have this deep-down fear that God's grace to us in Christ is just not enough; somehow we think that we have to add to it with all sorts of rules and devotional practices to bring us to full maturity.

Over the past 20 or 30 years the church growth movement has claimed that the Church needs modern management and marketing

techniques. Is this a challenge to the sufficiency of Christ?

It doesn't hurt to glean things from outside the Bible, but if we start to put our confidence in programs that have been produced by the pragmatic business world then we run the risk of adopting the Colossian error. Our great need is to understand, as Colossians teaches us, that Christ is the head of the Church and that he will successfully build it. The job of the Christian and the church leader is to be obedient to Christ, to preach his word, to pray more, and to depend on him for the church to grow.

I think it can be a real danger to trust in pragmatic solutions and current trends. Of course, that's not to say that we should be ignorant of what's happening in society and fail to exegete the world around us. We need to do that as well, but that's not where we put our confidence. Our confidence is always in Christ.

What was the religious climate in Colossae at the time of Paul? Are there similarities to our situation today?

Colossae was in the Lycus Valley in modern-day Turkey. In AD60 it was a city in decline and was probably the least significant of all the cities Paul wrote to. But the important thing for us in relation to the letter is that there was a Jewish minority within Colossae and they seem to have been influenced by mystical practices of the time. We also know that people were fairly superstitious in the region of Phrygia around Colossae. From what we can piece together, people seem to have combined these superstitious and mystical practices with Christianity as they tried to claim a superior form of spirituality to others.

Now, I frequently see that attitude today. I see people making elitist spiritual claims. We saw it in the Toronto blessing, for example, and before that we came across it in John Wimber's power evangelism a decade ago. It's not hard to find the tendency in a range of different movements in recent years. Sometimes we see it in people who look down on other Christians with different theological traditions from their own. It's sad when

Christians, who are agreed in the essentials of the gospel, develop elitist attitudes to each other because they have a different heritage or network. When Christians deny the reconciling work of Christ and start to claim their superiority to fellow believers, they are falling into the Colossian error.

So what was Paul's principal pastoral purpose in this letter?

In a few words, he is driving them back to Christ as the way to experience life to the full. The Christians in Colossae were claiming that they had had special encounters with God through some sort of mystical revelation.

They made some extraordinary claims about visions. It's likely that some were claiming that they had witnessed the very court of heaven in a way similar to Isaiah when he had his vision in the temple. Jews of the time, who were caught up with these mystical practices, focused on people like Elijah and Enoch who had ascended into heaven. These people claimed that they had a similar sort of access to the immediate presence of God.

When people made these claims of special mystical encounters, they were also saying that the original message that the first Christians had heard in Colossae from Epaphras – one of Paul's disciples – was not sufficient. If you wanted a higher form of spirituality, then you needed to follow some of these mystical practices.

So Paul makes a forceful point in this letter about the sufficiency of Christ. As far as he is concerned, what more could a person have than to be in Christ? After all, Christ is the very fullness of God in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. That's why Paul directs these believers to focus on Christ, and particularly his reconciling work in the cross and the resurrection.

Epaphras had to visit Paul in Rome presumably because he felt that he couldn't answer the errorists in Colossae. Does this indicate the importance of Christian leaders being properly trained in theology?

I think it's safe to assume that Epaphras was one of Paul's students while Paul was in Ephesus. In Acts 19 Luke talks about the church-plant there and how, for a couple of years, Paul taught daily in the Hall of Tyrannus. Epaphras was probably a graduate of that centre. Once he finished his training, he went to Colossae and planted the church. I think the important

What more could a person have than to be in Christ? After all, Christ is the very fullness of God.

thing to note is that Paul gives him really good after-sales service. He continues to disciple Epaphras so that when a problem emerges within the church, even though Paul is probably in prison at Rome hundreds of miles away, Epaphras makes the trip to see him. It wouldn't have been easy to have visited his mentor.

This letter also reminds us that Paul, despite the fact that he's involved in intensive theological education, is constantly involved in the church. He knows what's going on in the churches. For instance, he knows about the way the gospel is being attacked when he writes to the Galatians. And he's aware of a different Jewish spiritual problem in Colossae. He has his finger on the pulse. So there's a very close relationship between theological education, ministerial practice and spiritual formation. And Paul is very involved in it all.

What does the text tell us about the precise problem in Colossae? Can we identify the error?

The passage that gives us the clearest teaching on the problem is Colossians 2:8-23. In verse 8 Paul talks about "hollow and deceptive philosophy", and he uses a word in conjunction with it which is not really clear in the English. Sometimes the English terms "basic principles" or "elements" are used, but I think the Greek word "stoicheia" is best understood as "evil spirits", and that's what the Colossians were afraid of.

In ancient society (as well as in some modern ones), people lived in fear of evil spirits. If you go to many non-Western societies, you will see that the gospel is often understood as the victory of Christ over the powers of evil. These evil spirits were thought to control sickness and disaster and other harmful things. So it was understandable that people lived in the fear of them.

Now the Colossian errorists were claiming that you could escape these evil powers by denying the body. In this way, the powers would not be able to work in our physical nature. So if a person engaged in some form of physical denial his spirit, in effect, could be raised above

the level of the earthly and actually commune with God. This made it possible to receive special divine revelation and have a vision of heaven imparted to him in the present. It was like pushing a spiritual "fast-forward" button that took you straight to heaven. Not surprisingly,

As soon as you start to take away the sufficiency of Christ, you lose assurance.



these people began to make claims about having attained a higher form of spirituality than others who did not follow these ascetic practices.

The problem with all this, of course, is that when they claimed the power of victory over evil, they didn't claim it on the basis of Christ's victory over the powers of evil and sin. They claimed that their victory was due to ascetic practices and legalism. It was through their fasting, their observance of the law, and keeping religious holy days that they gained access to heaven and release from the powers of evil.

What spiritual effects did this false teaching have on those who were beguiled by it?

As soon as you start to take away the sufficiency of Christ, you lose assurance. As soon as you begin to trust in the things you do, then you start to wonder whether the things you do are good enough. And so, these seekers after the "higher life" were taking away any assurance that they might get from the gospel. When Paul responds to them, he points out in 2:15 that Christ has "led the principalities and powers in a triumphal procession". It is because of the death of Christ and his resurrection that the evil powers have been defeated. It's got nothing to do with their ritual observances.

For instance, observing a ritual like circumcision conveys no spiritual power; however, trusting in the saving power of Christ's death and resurrection does. When Christ died and rose again he performed the spiritual equivalent of circumcision because he did something that actually cut off our sinful nature. The problem in Colossae was that some of the believers were pleasing their sinful natures and becoming proud by undergoing demanding religious exercises that were meant to bring fullness of life. But Paul will have nothing to do with this sort of thing.

The first step to having any relationship with God is humility which leads to repentance. That's why the Colossian error was so dangerous. Its tendency was to lead people away from the gospel and away from the sufficiency of Christ. It pandered to pride and led people to put confidence in religious exercises as a way to spiritual fullness. The result was that they lost their assurance.

Can you tell us briefly how this particular error arose?

The short answer is that these religious practices flourished in certain sections of inter-Testamental Judaism. We have also discovered that there were a number of traditions of spirituality within first century Judaism which had marked similarities to what we see in Colossae. One of these is Merkabah mysticism. It was a tradition of Jewish spirituality that focused a lot on heavenly visions and provided the means for worshippers to attain an immediate vision of God on his heavenly throne. It was based around a number of Old Testament figures like Enoch, Elijah and Daniel, all of whom ascended into heaven either physically or through visions.

Merkabah mysticism promised people visions of heaven and God's throne, and the prospect of returning to earth with some sense of higher spirituality.

Something like this seems to be happening in verses like 2:18 where people are claiming the worship of angels. I think that what Paul meant is that some believers were claiming that they had witnessed

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the heavenly court, where angels were worshipping God. I don't think these people were actually worshipping angels. What they reported was that they had seen angels at worship. If it was a case of the Colossians worshipping angels, that would have been idolatry and I think Paul would've come down much more strongly against them. So some of these Christians are influenced by Jewish mystical practices and they've mixed up Christianity with that form of Judaism. Basically, they've become a group of mystics and they have to be countered for the sake of the gospel.

Are there any lessons that we can learn from Colossians about discipling, team ministry and evangelism?

I think the important thing about discipling is to invest in responsive people and do it well. Paul had a small group of disciples around him just as Jesus did. Epaphras was one of them; so was Timothy. Paul kept a close contact with them all. You can see how close they are when Epaphras decides that he has to see Paul in Rome and Paul writes letters to Timothy. By focusing on this group, Paul saw a multiplying effect. For instance, from the letter we learn that Epaphras goes and plants three churches in the Lycus Valley: one in Hierapolis, one in Laodicea and one in Colossae. So we have this multiplying effect.

It's also reasonable to assume that Epaphras would be discipling others. The letter suggests that evangelism was done in the context of gathering people

together in new congregations and instructing them in the faith. It was church-based evangelism. It wasn't conducted by some para-church organisation separate from the church.

Paul describes Epaphras as a man of prayer. Are there any significant conclusions we should draw from that?

Yes, it's interesting in 4:12 that Paul mentions that Epaphras wrestles with God in prayer. It was obviously an enormously important part of his ministry, and one that Paul wants to commend. Epaphras seems to be praying about how to deal with this problem. His prayer is grounded in his deep love for the people in Colossae. And Paul reflects that same sort of prayer when he opens the letter, where he thanks God for the faith and the love of the Colossians that springs from their hope that is stored up for them in heaven. Paul is committed to praying for the churches and so is Epaphras. I think there's a lesson for all of us here.

What lessons can we draw about the importance of investing in another

person's life from this letter – for example, Paul's involvement with Epaphras in the place of follow up?

Well, one interesting thing in the letter is that we're not sure whether Paul ever visited the Colossians. We have no record in Acts of Paul having visited the Colossians, and I think it's implied in the letter that he didn't. Yet he writes to them as a Pauline church. Why? Because they're the second generation result of Paul having invested his time in Epaphras.

I believe it is important for us as Christians to continue to minister to significant people and groups that we have ministered to in the past. Whether we've been a youth group leader in the past, or a Sunday school teacher, it's important to stay in touch with people we have helped in the past. Of course, we don't want to dilute our ministry so that we become totally ineffective; but there are points where we need to look at investing in some peoples' lives over the long-term. We should continue to pray for them and where possible, to teach them.

We read about this Pauline principle in 2 Timothy 2:2. This is the way to make the gospel multiply and grow. We need to be discipling some key people really well. Paul did it with Timothy; Peter did it with Mark. A notable example in the 20th century was E.J. Nash, an Anglican minister, who wrote to John Stott every week for five years after Stott's conversion at 17. We can't do enough of this intensive type of follow-up. Paul's example with Epaphras is a model for us all. ap

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Off the track

A time-traveller's guide to Colossae, home to Judaistic heresy.

I had been to Turkey a number of times, though not to Colossae. True enough, I had come close. My visits with tour groups had brought me several times to Hierapolis (modern Pamukkale) and to nearby Laodicea. But Colossae was 30 kilometres further on, past Denizli, the major city of the region. Tour groups are always pushed for time and there just had not been enough of it to make it to Colossae – ever! Last year, though, I was with a TV crew filming the light-hearted Bishop, Chef and Fisherman series and – yes – we were including Colossae in the itinerary. At last!

The three Roman cities – Hierapolis, Laodicea, Colossae – were built next to the old Lycus river, a tributary of the Meander which does indeed meander all the way to the Aegean near Miletus. These rivers are long since silted up, the rich top-soil having washed downstream to make fertile plains for cotton fields, citrus and stone-fruit groves.

The Lycus valley is wide and flat-bottomed. Rainfall levels so far inland are not high, but the area is fertile. I was reminded a little of the Hunter Valley or the Barossa Valley: dryish, yet fruitful. The closeness of the cities is evidence of the natural wealth of the land. The river that snakes



**Paul
Barnett**

its way through the surrounding hills and mountains formed a kind of frontier between Roman civilisation and the wild tribes to the east.

Laodicea was the biggest of the three – probably. Laodicea was famous for its black-wooled sheep, for its local eye-salve and for its wealth through banking. The terrible earthquake of 60AD destroyed the city, but the locals had the money and the drive to re-build, all without outside help from the emperor's purse. Apparently, this was a matter for local pride. Laodicea is a vast empty, elevated archaeological site overlooking the Lycus. Remnants of race tracks, theatres and aqueducts tell of past splendours.

Hierapolis, just a few miles away and clearly visible, was most likely the next biggest. The mineralised hot springs cascading down the cliff leaving their gleaming white deposits justify the modern name Pamukkale, "Cotton Castle".

Just as many people came to see the wonders in Roman times, so today the area attracts millions of visitors. However, in ancient times people came not just to visit for the day or so, but to live there. Or rather, to die there. That is, to die over a greater span. It was believed that the hot springs – taken by bathing or drinking – prolonged life. In fact, Hierapolis (Temple City) became a necropolis, a city to die and be buried in. The remains of the city are full of tombs as well as boasting one of the finest, best preserved Roman theatres anywhere.

Colossae was on the further side, about 11 miles beyond Laodicea. Unlike the other two, there is only a "tell" (or mound) to be seen. It is, perhaps, 80 feet high and covers many acres. Apart from some sherds (broken pottery) there is absolutely nothing else. It all lies beneath the surface awaiting the archaeologist's spade. The same earthquake of 60AD struck Colossae. Unlike, Laodicea, its people had neither the money nor the drive to rebuild. Doubtless the locals scattered and re-settled. Colossae finds no mention in Revelation.

Colossae is the most picturesquely located of the Lycus cities. Quite nearby, the massive Honaz mountains rear up, with their chilly waterfalls descending from the heights. Is this the explanation for Jesus' words to Laodicea, that they are lukewarm? Hierapolis had hot water gushing up from the depths and Colossae had cold water plunging down from the heights. But Laodicea was tepid, neither hot nor cold; not one thing or the other.

Paul most likely passed through the Lycus valley on his third missionary journey as he travelled overland from on the east west Roman Road from Antioch in Syria through southern Galatia to Ephesus. It does not appear, however, that he stopped to preach the gospel along the way, except in the existing churches of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (the colony).

Based in Ephesus, however, his ministry touched Epaphras, a man from Colossae and – so it appears – Philemon also. Both were to play significant roles in bringing the gospel to the Lycus Valley

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cities. It is clear from Paul's letters to the Colossians and also to Philemon, that churches had been established in Colossae (both the main church and the church in Philemon's house), in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

I am always amazed that churches had been established in such a remote location as in the Lycus Valley a mere two decades after the historical lifespan of Jesus. This speaks volumes of the enthusiasm of Paul and his fellow-workers like Epaphras and Philemon. Let God give us a new outpouring of that enthusiasm today, along with the sacrifice that goes with genuine discipleship.

Not all was well, however, in Colossae. Paul's churches faced great difficulty, including the felt pressure to merge with the existing and powerful cultural environment, whether pagan or Jewish. With the Corinthians (in the First Letter) the problem the church faced was their pagan environment and its preoccupation with rhetoric, temple culture, the ecstatic and disbelief in resurrection.

However, in the case of the Colossians – as with the Galatians – it was Judaism. Specifically, a form of mystical

Judaism that was seeping into Colossian attitudes. It seems that some of the Colossian believers were inclining to the view that Jesus was an angelic figure, as in some form of Jewish angel-hierarchy, so that both his genuine deity and humanity were being denied. At the same time, salvation was being sought in Jewish-style ways, through Sabbath-keeping and self-denial through food laws. Gentile males, apparently, were to submit to circumcision. These, apparently, are the contours of new teaching sweeping through the Colossian church, in contrast to what they had been taught by Epaphras who, in turn, had been instructed by the apostle Paul.

Scholars debate when, and from where, Paul wrote to the Colossians and Philemon. Some say Rome after 60AD. But for me there is no doubt that Paul

wrote from Ephesus (during a brief imprisonment) in the early middle 50s.

Many reject Pauline authorship, calling Colossians deutero-Pauline. This holds no water for me as a theory. Philemon is undoubtedly by Paul. If so, then Colossians is also by Paul; the two are peas in a pod. So too is Ephesians; these three letters are very closely connected in style and circumstances. There are some differences in style compared with other Pauline letters, but these can be accounted for by the author's accommodation to local Asian writing idioms.

At any rate, the letters to Colossae, whether to the church proper or to Philemon's "house church", are brilliant shorter epistles from the great apostle and are worthy of our loving attention.

Dr Paul Barnett is a leading New Testament scholar, and author of a number of authoritative New Testament commentaries and books on apologetics and first-century history. Formerly Bishop of North Sydney, he lectures at the Presbyterian Theological Centre, Sydney, Moore Theological College and Regent College, Vancouver. ap

This speaks volumes of the enthusiasm of Paul and his fellow-workers like Epaphras and Philemon.

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A model minister

Like Paul, we should honour a prayerful church planter and pastor.

An article on Epaphras? Pardon? Who? Even those who have heard of him might wonder what we could possibly learn from someone who's mentioned in passing only three times in the New Testament (Col. 1:7-8; 4:12-13 and Philemon 23).

But to relegate Epaphras to obscurity because his name pops up only a few times in Paul's letters would be a mistake. Why? Well, to begin with, among all the friends and co-workers of Paul, Epaphras holds the distinction of being the only one whom Paul explicitly commended for his intercession. It seems that, along with Paul, he realised the tremendous possibilities of working through prayer. Again, his example and practice in ministry, specifically church-planting, provides a model that may overcome a fundamental spiritual weakness that's found in many places in the 21st-century church.

Prayer is under threat in the church today. People find themselves forced to work longer and longer hours. There seems to be an ever-increasing demand to produce more and more – often with the same resources as before. It's not surprising that ministers and Christian leaders feel the pressure too. The Christian community expects them to develop larger churches, to keep on “the cutting edge” of ministry, and to keep breaking new ground.

When this pressure is coupled with our natural tendency towards self-reliance, a great temptation arises – to simply try harder in the Lord's service rather than to revive our efforts in prayer.

Eugene Peterson touches on this problem in his book *Working The Angles*. Even though he speaks from a North American context, his words are relevant to Australia. He points out that most ministers are Augustinians in their pulpits. That is, we preach divine sovereignty, the primacy of grace, and the glory of God. But the minute we finish preaching, we become Pelagians. We put our confidence in what we do. We practice a theology that makes human effort the primary element in pleasing God. We demonstrate this tendency in our planning committees, in our anxiety to please and in our obsessive



**Stuart
Bonnington**

attempts to meet the expectations of people.

According to Peterson, this dogma produces the sort of thinking characteristic of the North American pastor: “If things aren't good enough, they will improve if I work a little harder. Add a committee here, recruit some more volunteers there, squeeze a couple of hours more into the workday.”

Acting in this Pelagian manner comes quite naturally. The problem is that Pelagius seemed to be an unlikely heretic and Augustine an unlikely saint. By all accounts, Pelagius was urbane, courteous and convincing. Everyone seemed to have liked him immensely. On the other hand, Augustine squandered his youth in immorality, had some kind of Freudian thing with his mother, and made a lot of enemies. But the question is: which one is right?

While most theologians agree that Augustine was right, the vexing question is how did Pelagius come to organise our schedules? He has, if we are honest. But the trouble is that while our closet Pelagianism won't get us excommunicated or burned at the stake, nevertheless it cripples our pastoral work. Indeed, it's catastrophic to the church's health and wholeness.

The way that Epaphras went about his ministry calls us beyond our natural understanding of serving Christ to a far better way, but one which challenges the priorities that many Christians have. From what we can piece together from the Acts of the Apostles and the letter to the Colossians, the church in Colossae was founded by Epaphras himself.

Apparently, he heard the gospel from Paul during his ministry in Ephesus in AD 53-55 (Acts 19:10) and then returned to his old stamping-ground in Colossae. Some five to seven years later, Epaphras joined Paul in prison in Rome to tell the apostle of a strange teaching threatening the health of his home church and to remain with Paul to pray for the churches of the Lycus Valley (Acts 28; Col 4:12,13).

In the first and last chapters of Colossians we find a couple of references to Epaphras. Paul acknowledges his part in planting the church (1:6c-8) as well as his hard work and intercession for the churches in the Lycus Valley (4:12-13). From these fleeting references we are given a window into the pastoral ministry as it was conducted in the first bloom of the Christian faith. It remains a model for our practice until Christ's return.

In the first reference to Epaphras, the focus is broadly on his practice of ministry. In the latter, Paul focuses on his prayers which undergirded all his activities. What, then, do we learn of his ministry from Paul's reference to it in Colossians 1:6-8?

Clearly, it was marked with great success because the three churches of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis were the fruit. Paul tells us that, first of all, his ministry had been marked by a deep and systematic teaching of the Christian gospel that had drawn men and women to become sincere and dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ. Second, it was owned by Paul as a faithful, trustworthy work that was in full sympathy with his own teaching and practice. And, finally, it was a ministry that was rooted in humility, hard work and sacrifice for the glory of God and the spreading of his gospel.

New churches will never be planted and established without persistent and comprehensive preaching about Christ in an absolute spirit of loyalty to the Bible. This ministry also demands workers who are full of zeal and are willing to pay the price of costly service. This was Paul's pattern of ministry. It can also be discerned in the ministry of his fellow-workers such as Epaphras. The first preachers worked extraordinarily hard in the ministry of the

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gospel. Of course, all of this fits in with our activist age very well. The gargantuan labours of people like Epaphras seem to justify the frenetic activity of some Christian workers that sometimes leads to ministerial burnout. This is particularly so when the pattern of activity described here in the first part of the letter has been embarked upon in isolation from the rest of what Paul says about Epaphras at the end of Colossians.

So what saved Epaphras from big-headedness or ministerial burnout? He had learnt that he could only preach the gospel effectively if he also simultaneously prayed for the grace of God to bring forth great fruit! His practice of prayer, which is mentioned in Colossians 4:12-13 is a magnificent illustration of what the Lord Jesus meant when he said "for without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

So how are we to plant new churches and build up existing ones? By working and praying hard in the energy with which God supplies us by his grace! Epaphras was the "bondservant of Christ", which points us to the depth of his relationship with and reliance upon Christ. This is the key to his prayers – his knowledge of Christ's love for him and of his love for Christ! It was remarkably like Paul's own experience and ministry practice. In fact, the apostle goes out of his way to stress the close correspondence between his own ministry and that of Epaphras. Both are involved in the same struggle for the gospel. Both are committed to urgent intercessory prayer as part of that struggle along with their desire to bring the Colossians to full Christian maturity.

The way Paul describes Epaphras' prayer life indicates that he knew what was happening in the churches he had planted, that he was in spiritual agony for

them as they struggled with false teachers and the complexity and subtlety of their teaching, and that Epaphras was continually asking God to strengthen and advance the faith of the Colossians so that they would grow in maturity as Christians through all these trials.

While Paul recognised the crucial part that Epaphras' hard work and prayer had played in the founding of these three churches, implicit in his reference to Epaphras' prayers is his belief "that God

Nothing we are taught, no technique, no program can take the place of spiritual work immersed in prayer.

makes the church grow". Nothing we are taught, no technique, no program can take the place of spiritual work immersed in prayer or the prayer that expresses itself in Christian labour.

Of course, we shouldn't be surprised that we naturally incline towards hard yakka because we think we can "do" this for ourselves. But mature Christians understand that they will only see fruit if the Lord works. And they know that this usually happens as they pray. Therefore, it becomes crucial to our ministries that we do so.

We need to ask ourselves: do we pray with God's help as an expression of our relationship with Christ? Are we driven to prayer because of what we know about the pressing needs of those who are pre-

cious to us? Do we sense a need to pray because unbelief is so dominant in our country and the enemies of the gospel seem so strong? Do we pray because we realise just how important it is that the Lord's word take deep root within Christians' hearts? Do we cry out for the Holy Spirit to revive our congregations so that the Lord will reveal more of Christ and his glory to them? Do we intercede with God to raise up more labourers for his harvest who will work with zeal and for his glory?

During a visit to a congregation some time ago, the session clerk remarked to me that you could tell more about someone spiritually when you heard them pray than simply through talking to them or hearing them preach. His comment struck me. It reminded me of a famous statement by the renowned minister, Robert Murray M'Cheyne: "What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is, and no more."

By this standard, Epaphras was a mighty man indeed! But, we must remember that this was not his natural disposition; it was wrought by the grace of God alone. All of us, ministers, leaders and congregations, need to take a leaf out of the book of Epaphras by becoming more committed to the growth and witness of our congregations and more resolved to continue in a ministry of prayer.

Stuart Bonnington is minister of South Yarra Presbyterian Church, Melbourne. 

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A joyful thron

Delight is our duty, and it may require determined effort, writes John Piper.

Christian hedonism is a controversial name for an old-fashioned way of life. It goes back to Moses, who wrote the first books of the Bible and threatened terrible things if we would not be happy: "Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and a glad heart ... therefore you shall serve your enemies" (Deut. 28:47-8).

And to the Israelite king David, who called God his "exceeding joy" (Ps. 43:4); and who promised that complete and lasting pleasure is found in God alone: "In your presence is fullness of joy" (Ps. 16:11).

And to Jesus, who said, "I have spoken to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full" (Jn 15:11); and who endured the cross "for the joy set before him" (Heb. 12:2).

And to James, the brother of Jesus, who said, "Consider it all joy ... when you encounter various trials" (James 1:2).

And to the apostle Paul, who was "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10).

And to the apostle Peter, who said, "To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of his glory you may rejoice with exultation" (1 Peter 4:13).

And to Augustine, who in 386 found his freedom from lust and lechery in the superior pleasures of God. "How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose! ... You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure."

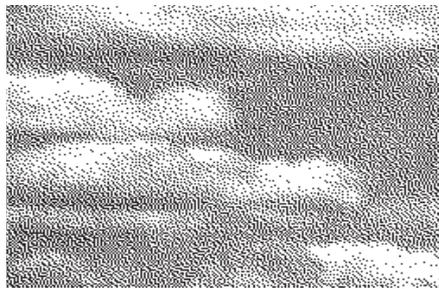
And to Blaise Pascal, who saw that "all men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end".

And to the Puritans, whose aim was to know God so well that "delighting in him may be the work of our lives".

And to Jonathan Edwards, who taught as powerfully as anyone that "the happiness of the creature consists in rejoicing in God, by which also God is magnified and exalted."

Christian hedonism is not new. So, if it is old-fashioned, why is it so controversial? One reason is that it insists that joy is not just the spin-off of obe-

IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD



dience to God, but part of the obedience. It seems as though people are willing to let joy be a by-product of our relationship to God, but not an essential part of it.

People are uncomfortable saying that we are duty-bound to pursue joy. They say things like, "Don't pursue joy; pursue obedience." But Christian hedonism responds, "That's like saying, 'Don't eat apples; eat fruit'." Because joy is an act of obedience. We are commanded to rejoice in God. If obedience is doing what God commands, then joy is not merely the spin-off of obedience, it is obedience.

The Bible tells us over and over to pursue joy: "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous ones" (Ps. 32:11). "Delight yourself in the Lord" (Ps. 37:4). "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Phil. 4:4).

The Bible does not teach that we should treat delight as a mere by-product of duty. C. S. Lewis got it right when he wrote to a friend, "It is a Christian

duty, as you know, for everyone to be as happy as he can." Maximum happiness, both qualitatively and quantitatively, is precisely what we are duty-bound to pursue.

One wise Christian described the relationship between duty and delight this way: Suppose a husband asks his wife if he must kiss her good night. Her answer is, "You must, but not that kind of a must." What she means is this: "Unless a spontaneous affection for my person motivates you, your overtures are stripped of all moral value."

In other words, if there is no pleasure in the kiss, the duty of kissing has not been done. Delight in her person, expressed in the kiss, is part of the duty, not a by-product of it. But if that is true – if delight in doing good is part of what doing good is – then the pursuit of pleasure is part of the pursuit of virtue. You can see why this starts to get controversial. It's the seriousness of it all.

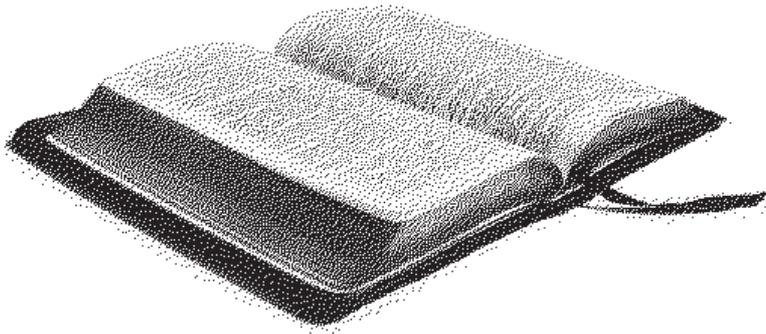
"You really mean this?" someone asks. "You really mean that hedonism is not just a trick word to get our attention. It actually says something utterly, devastatingly true about the way we should live. The pursuit of pleasure really is a necessary part of being a good person." That's right. I mean it. The Bible means it. God means it. It is very serious. We are not playing word games.

Let it be crystal clear: We are always talking about joy in God. Even joy in doing good is finally joy in God, because the ultimate good that we always aim at is displaying the glory of God and expanding our own joy in God to others. Any other joy would be qualitatively insufficient for the longing of our souls and quantitatively too short for our eternal need. In God alone is fullness of joy and joy forever.

"In your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Psalm 16:11).

*This is an edited extract from John Piper's book *The Dangerous Duty of Delight* (Crossway Books, 2001).*

Word for the wise



**Know Christ, know life;
no Christ, no life.**

20 daily bible studies in Colossians

Put yourself in Paul's shoes. In prison in Rome, unsure whether you will ever again visit the churches you planted.

You remember those earlier days when the Lord who saved you by his grace set you apart to take the life-transforming message of the Gospel to the Gentiles. You are thankful that the work you did in Asia Minor, such as Colossae, has grown and expanded, and that believers are remaining faithful in spite of opposition.

But you are also concerned. You have received reports from Epaphras and others that the church faces a greater threat of heresy from within.

Now, as you read through Paul's letter this month, think about our own church today. Colossae is in Turkey, a region where the Church has been overrun by Islam for more than 1000 years. How important is it for us here in Australia to take seriously Paul's warnings, to recommit ourselves to the eternal truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to be determined, not only to "put off" the world's ways and live godly lives, but, "struggling with all his energy", to "proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ."

Bruce Christian

DAY 1 Faith, hope & love that show

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 1:1-6a**

THE POINT Paul is continually grateful to God for the clear evidence of the results of the work of Gospel truth in the lives of the saints (all believers) at Colossae, particularly through its outward expression in their faith, love, and hope.

THE PARTICULARS

- Paul was commissioned (sent) by God himself to proclaim the Gospel of Christ (Messiah) Jesus (Saviour) (1).
- Paul worked in partnership with others (Timothy – and many others, as we will see throughout the letter (1 – cf 1:7, 4:7-17).
- God's Church consists of brothers (and sisters) who are holy (separated to God alone) & faithful (devoted to God alone) (2).
- God the Father is the source of grace and peace (2).
- Paul prayed continually (with thanks) for the Church (3).
- Paul's 'trio'- faith in Christ, love for fellow-believers, hope of eternal life in heaven – were all alive & well at Colossae (4-5).
- The Gospel is the word of truth (5-6).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you committed to Christ's gospel as the only word of truth?
- What evidence might others see of faith, love and hope in you?

DAY 2 Contagious faith

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 1:6b-8**

THE POINT The Gospel is not a dead dogma or system of beliefs; it is a living reality based on God's absolute revealed truth in Christ. It is characterised by growth, both in the lives of individual believers & the Church, and in outreach to others.

THE PARTICULARS

- The Gospel is a living, growing, fruit-bearing reality, changing people into God's friends & making them more like Jesus (6).
- This effect of the Gospel is not limited to any one place; what was evident in Colossae was also happening everywhere (6).
- God's expression of his saving grace in Christ is absolute truth; we benefit from it by coming to an understanding of it (6).
- Paul acknowledged Epaphras' faithful ministry as part of the process God used to bring the believers at Colossae to faith (7).
- Believers share in God's love through the Holy Spirit (8).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is your faith a truly living faith, or have you become stale & unproductive? Are you growing as a Christian? Is your Church growing? Are others in danger of 'catching' faith from you?
- Epaphras had a liaison ministry bringing great encouragement throughout the Church. Do you write letters? phone? visit?

DAY 3 *The Christian's growth chart*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 1:9-14**

THE POINT Paul has great concern that the Colossian believers will grow in every aspect of their life in Christ. He reminds them of all that God has done for them to give them eternal life.

THE PARTICULARS

Paul prayed continuously and specifically for the Colossians:

- that they would never fall short in knowing God's will (9);
- that the Holy Spirit would give them wisdom and insight (9);
- that this would result in specific outcomes in their daily lives:
 - a witness that brings honour to Christ's name (10);
 - a life that pleases the Lord in every respect and detail (10);
 - a life that is fruitful in good works (10);
 - knowing God better each day (10);
 - having God's strength to be patient and remain firm (11);
 - a life marked by joy & thankfulness (not complaining!) (12).

God has done everything necessary to bring us to heaven for Jesus' sake: rescued us from bondage to the darkness of sin, paid the price to redeem us, and forgiven all our sin (13-14).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Use the details of Paul's prayer as a check list for your own life. In what areas do you need some help? Do we pray these things regularly for each other?

DAY 4 *God's Christocentric universe*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 1:15-20**

THE POINT Paul makes it clear that Christ can never be considered as one among many. He IS the only true God, the Creator & Ruler of the Universe, the reason why anything exists, the only basis for reconciliation. His Church, which he bought with his own blood shed on the cross, is the centre of his operations. The Church must never surrender the absolute supremacy of Christ.

THE PARTICULARS

- When we see Christ we see God; he is God (15, 19).
- Christ is the reason why Creation exists; he took part in creating the Universe, he rules over every part of it, what we see & what we don't see, and, in fact, holds it all together (15-17).
- Christ is the only one who has conquered death & he now lives to rule over his Church in the world. He is Lord of all (18).
- Reconciliation between Man & Creation, Man & his neighbour, Man & himself, and Man & God is only possible in the way God has provided – the cross of Christ. All else is futile (20).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Can scientists such as Paul Davies ever solve the mysteries of the Universe if they exclude God's revelation in Christ?
- Is reconciliation possible in the world today without Christ?

DAY 5 *Only one way to heaven?*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 1:21-23**

THE POINT There is only one way of salvation for everybody – through faith in Christ' sacrifice. We've heard it, let's live by it.

THE PARTICULARS

- Without Christ we are God's enemies – in the way we think and in the way we act (21).
- God's sending his Son from heaven to become a man and to die physically on the cross in our place is the only means he has provided for us to be reconciled to him (22a).
- By making us his friends in this way God is then able to declare us 'not guilty' and to set about changing us into the holy people we must be if we are to live with him (22b – see 2:13-14).
- We nevertheless have a responsibility to press on in our faith; the enemy of assurance is not doubt but complacency! (23a – see Philippians 2:12-13 for the balance between grace and effort).
- Amazingly, salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ is the fair basis on which God will finally judge everyone (23b).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- On the basis of these verses, what will be the fate of a sincere, good-living Moslem, or Hindu, or Buddhist, or Jew, or average law-abiding Australian, if they reject God's offer in Christ?

DAY 6 *No pain, no gain*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 1:24-29**

THE POINT The Gospel is about power & energy & victory & hope & glory. But strangely, it is based on struggle & suffering & defeat & death. Triumph for the Church is assured, but triumphalism does not sit comfortably with the essence of the Gospel.

THE PARTICULARS

- Jesus suffered on the cross to save us; he told us that following him involved facing the same kind of opposition & suffering in the world; Paul knew his suffering for Jesus' sake, though great (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-29), was not yet finished; nevertheless he rejoiced in it because the Church benefited from it (24).
- We are God's saints ('holy ones') whom he has chosen to understand what is disclosed in his Word concerning the Gospel of Christ and our hope of spiritual riches and glory (25b-27).
- Paul's task was (25, 28-29), and ours is (27), to tell everyone the Good News about salvation in Christ by proclamation, warning, & teaching, with the aim of getting them to heaven.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you happy to suffer for Christ, the Church and the Gospel?
- When you seek to lead people to Christ do you just tell them the Good News or do you persevere with challenging & discipling them until they're well on their way to heaven?

DAY 7 *Christ the key*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 2:1-5**

THE POINT Paul is concerned that believers are absolutely committed to a totally Christ-centred view of the Scriptures, salvation, life, the Universe. Only then will they be able to stand firm against the heresies already creeping into the Church.

THE PARTICULARS

- Paul's concern for the members of the Church in different places affected him deeply, even if he didn't know them personally and was unable to be among them physically (1, 5).
- The (OT) 'mystery' of God is fully revealed in Christ; we can't understand the OT unless we see all of it pointing to him (2b).
- Christ is the 'treasure chest' of all we can know about God (3).
- Paul's concern for believers is that they fully understand this 'mystery' (2b) and that they are therefore able to stand firm against the heretical views starting to infiltrate the Church (4).
- A prerequisite for this knowledge is a positive spiritual outlook and a commitment to unity & love among believers (2a).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is Christ at the centre of all your thinking about the meaning of life? How does this affect your conversation and behaviour?
- What wrong thinking in the Church today is addressed here?

DAY 8 *Christ the Transformer*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 2:6-10**

THE POINT Christ is fully God and the reason for everything that is. He rules the Universe. In him we become everything God intended us to be when he created us in his image (Gen. 1:26-27).

THE PARTICULARS

- We don't just receive Jesus as Saviour, we receive him as Lord. He has the right to control every part of our lives. (6)
- Living in Christ is a growing, strengthening experience, enabling us to understand our faith better, and giving us an immense sense of gratitude for everything God is doing in us. (7)
- All philosophies of life, world views & scientific theories that don't have Christ at the centre are only man-made inventions which in the end are hollow, deceptive & like a straight-jacket (try discussing the fossil record with an Evolutionist!). (8)
- Christ, who became a man, is 100% God himself and he rules over the whole Universe. (9-10)
- In Christ we become everything God intended us to be. (10)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How much difference is there between a Christian & a non-Christian? Read 2 Corinthians 5:17. Spend some time thinking about the difference Jesus has made in your life and outlook.

DAY 9 *Christ the Saviour*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 2:11-15**

THE POINT The change Jesus makes to us is not merely cosmetic & superficial. It gets to the heart of the problem of sin & deals with it fully and comprehensively. It gives substance to outward rites & symbols like circumcision & baptism. Christ's work on the cross for us does what God's written Law could never do.

THE PARTICULARS

- The only way anyone can be put right with God is to be 'made alive' in Christ and to have their sins forgiven. (13)
- Jesus made forgiveness possible by suffering the penalty for our sin on the cross. This wrote 'Paid in Full' across the written charge established by God's perfect Law against us. (14)
- The OT covenant sign of circumcision represented the cutting off & throwing away of our sinful, physically-focussed nature. The NT covenant sign of baptism represents our identification with Christ. The signs themselves can't achieve what they represent, but Christ's death & resurrection enable us to. (11-12)
- The cross was God's final victory over Satan's power. (15)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Have you come to grips with the heart of the Gospel (or rather, has it come to grips with you?) or are you still depending on outward rites and the keeping of rules to get you to heaven?

DAY 10 *Christ the reality and head*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 2:16-19**

THE POINT Christ has made a 'public spectacle' of all that is false & that detracts from him (15). We must therefore be careful not to risk letting such things 'disqualify' us for the prize.

THE PARTICULARS

- The trouble-makers in the Church at Colossae were using wrong things to measure spiritual maturity. They had lost sight of the fact that believers are primarily members of Christ's body, that Christ is the Head, & that it is God who causes growth. (16, 19)
- Christ alone is the ultimate reality; everything else in the out-working of our spiritual life is only of value if it focusses on him or points to him. If Sabbath keeping, for example, becomes an end in itself its real purpose has been lost and it becomes a hindrance to spiritual growth rather than a help. (17)
- Making any beings apart from Christ a focus of, or even an aid to, worship negates true worship and could disqualify us. (18)
- Emphasising spiritual experience, even & especially if accompanied by claims of humility, can lead us astray in both our understanding of the Gospel of Christ and in our living it out. (18)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How might the Church or individual believers let an emphasis on ritual or experience become an obstacle to spiritual growth?

DAY 11 *Beware of the Pharisees!*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 2:20-23**

THE POINT Human logic always tends towards the keeping of outward rules & regulations as feel-good exercise. The trouble is, once we take this line we end up by convincing ourselves we are doing well when in fact our hearts & motives are still sensual & worldly: inside we are no different from people who don't worry about any rules! It happened in the OT Church (Isaiah 29:13), in the Church of Jesus' day (Matthew 15:1-20), at Colossae, and at many stages in the Church's history since. What about us today?

THE PARTICULARS

- Unregenerate man thinks in a way that is opposed to God's way (see Jeremiah 17:9). This is what sin does. When Christ transforms us by his death we die with him to this old way of thinking. We must resist the tendency to drift back into it. (20)
- The old way of thinking emphasises rule-keeping instead of a heart committed to the Lordship of Christ in every way. (20-23)
- The 'rule-keeping' often appears to be very pious & disciplined & humble but it can easily become a cover-up for sin. (23)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Can you think of an instance of someone using rule-keeping to hide sinful/sensual behaviour? Have you ever noticed this tendency in yourself? Might others suspect this tendency in you?

DAY 12 *Citizens of heaven*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 3:1-4**

THE POINT Christ died and rose again. The born-again believer 'dies' to the world's way of thinking and 'rises again' to think in a 'heavenly' way, in God's way. Christ now rules in heaven and one day will come again from there; his followers should even now be thinking (and behaving) as befits citizens of heaven in preparation for when this happens.

THE PARTICULARS

- Christ's death and resurrection is a picture of how we die to the world's way of thinking and start to live for Christ. (1, 3)
- Our 'mind set', governing every aspect of our life & behaviour, should itself be controlled by the fact that Christ now rules. (1)
- We can't have it both ways: a mind set on God's ways is a mind not set on the world's way of thinking. (2)
- The Christian's life is totally wrapped up in Christ & God. (3)
- This will be most evident when Christ comes again in glory. (4)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are there parts of your life not governed by a mind set on things above? Why not make a list and work through it this month?
- What are some of the aspects of modern living (& thinking) that put pressure on us to focus on this world instead of heaven?

DAY 13 *God takes sin seriously*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 3:5-11**

THE POINT Being a Christian is not just a case of being 'more good': it is about 'casting off', 'dying to', the old way of living altogether & having a whole new approach with a new set of guidelines based on being a new person, remade in the image of God through Christ, and coming to know (and therefore practise) his ways better each day. A necessary byproduct of this is that all Christians become part of one family regardless of background.

THE PARTICULARS

- Before we are born again by the power of God at work in us we are all by nature inclined towards ways opposed to God's way and are therefore subject to his wrath. (5-7)
- We need to take decisive action to change our old ways. (5, 8-9)
- Adopting God's ways also requires decisive action. (10)
- When we are totally caught up in Christ and he is in us we lose any distinctive 'labels' that might otherwise separate us. (11)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Use the specific sins Paul draws attention to in verses 5 & 8-9a to revise the list you made yesterday. Don't forget God means business when he uses phrases like 'put to death' and 'you must rid yourselves'. Are we a bit lax about these things today?

DAY 14 *Essentials for fellowship*

THE PASSAGE **COLOSSIANS 3:12-17**

THE POINT Some items are essential in the Christian's wardrobe ('... clothe yourselves with ...') and some things are essential to the Christian's make-up ('... rule in your hearts ... dwell in you richly ...'). We do well to make sure we are not treating any of these as optional extras! Everything is to centre on Christ.

THE PARTICULARS

- We are God's chosen people, set apart for, & loved by, him. (12)
- The way God requires us to act towards one another reflects the way he acts towards us. (12-14)
- Love (see 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 for its definition) is the cement that holds together all the virtues a Christian should show. (14)
- The peace Christ gives us (see John 14:27, 16:33) should be the obvious controlling influence in all our relationships. (15)
- Paul reminds us 3 times to be thankful. (15b, 16b, 17b)
- As God's family we should take every opportunity to encourage one another from his Word & by praising him together. (16)
- The Lord Jesus must be the centre of all we say and do. (17)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are corporate worship & Bible study high priorities with you?

DAY 15

Family matters

THE PASSAGE

COLOSSIANS 3:18-21

THE POINT The family and its inter-relationships are not an accident of evolution; they are established by God from the beginning to help us understand our relationship with him. The world today is rejecting this to its peril, but if the Church follows the world it will be negating an important part of God's revelation.

THE PARTICULARS

- God has established relationships in the family as a picture of the Church's relationship with him. As the Church (his Bride) submits to him, so wives are to submit to their husbands. (18) (See Ephesians 5:21-32 for a fuller statement of this principle.)
- The command given to husbands is not to rule but to love. Headship in Christ's kingdom is exercised by caring service. (19)
- The command given to children is to obey their parents. Again, this is to reflect our relationship to God as our Father. (20)
- Again, the corollary of the children's obligation to obey is not an instruction to command & rule but a warning not to embitter or exasperate the children. God knows our weakness. (21)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How much do relationships in your family give to the watching world a clear picture of the relationship between God and his people? Where and how could improvements be made?

DAY 16

Industrial relations

THE PASSAGE

COLOSSIANS 3:22-4:1

THE POINT Continuing from yesterday, even relationships for Christians in the workplace must reflect the master-slave aspect of our relationship with God. Paul refers to himself as a slave of Christ (Romans 1:1, Titus 1:1) – he is our Master. Christian employees should work 'as working for the Lord'; Christian employers should deal graciously with those under them, just as God deals with us. In the end we are all accountable only to him.

THE PARTICULARS

- Christians have an important role as employees to witness by working hard even if no one is looking. This reflects their relationship to the Lord who, ultimately, is their true boss. (22-24)
- Although we work as 'slaves' in the world, and as 'slaves' of Christ, there is a strange paradox – we have an 'inheritance' in heaven! This is because of what Christ has done for us. (24)
- God is just in his dealings with men; sin brings punishment. (25)
- Employers should realise they too must give account to God. (1)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What are some of the causes of unrest and dissatisfaction in the workplace today? Is there anything you can do in your job to improve things by applying the principles in this passage?

DAY 17

You shall be my witnesses

THE PASSAGE

COLOSSIANS 4:2-6

THE POINT We are committed to using every opportunity to make the otherwise hidden secrets of the Gospel clearly known to a lost world. The very nature of the task requires the full use of all of the following: prayer, clear presentation, consistent & balanced lifestyle & witness, persistence, intelligent apologetics.

THE PARTICULARS

- Prayer must be at the very heart of all our evangelism because:
 - there are pitfalls we need to be alerted to; (2)
 - there is much to be grateful to God for; (2)
 - it is God who opens the doors for opportunities; (3)
 - God reveals the otherwise hidden 'mystery' of Christ; (3)
 - we need help to make the Gospel message clear. (4)
- Open evangelism may result in imprisonment but, rather than hinder the work, this can provide new opportunities. (3)
- We must always be careful, alert & sensitive in our behaviour because we don't know when fresh opportunities may arise. (5)
- All we say & do must strike a balance between grace & bite. (6)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How are your prayer life and witness both going? Are you making the most of every opportunity in both?

DAY 18

Keep in touch

THE PASSAGE

COLOSSIANS 4:7-9

THE POINT Paul places a lot of importance on ongoing personal contact among the Lord's people as they work together in the cause of the Gospel. The visit of Tychicus & Onesimus with the written letter adds another dimension to its purpose.

THE PARTICULARS

- The personal contact that Tychicus & Onesimus will make with the churches in the Lycus valley will give the opportunity for a first hand eyewitness report about Paul's situation in Rome.
- This was especially applicable to Onesimus (Philemon's runaway slave – see Paul's Letter to Philemon) because he was already known among them.
- Paul always saw his work as a team effort and encouraging one another in the work as an important aspect of it.
- Tychicus & Onesimus were both faithful in their ministry.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How many missionaries do you write to to encourage on a regular basis? (I am convicted by my own question!)
- How important to you is personal, face-to-face contact with other believers (eg Sunday worship, small groups, visiting and hospitality – not e-mails!)?

DAY 19

Encouragement in trials

THE PASSAGE

COLOSSIANS 4:10-14

THE POINT Apart from his imprisonment Paul had many trials and disappointments. Among these was the fact that not many of his Jewish compatriots had recognised Jesus as the Messiah and turned to him. There is also the possibility that Demas was starting to show signs of backsliding (see 2 Timothy 4:10). But to compensate for all this there were many who stood by him.

THE PARTICULARS

- Aristarchus was another prisoner for the sake of the Gospel. God often provides others to share with us in our trials. (10)
- We have no record of the previous communication concerning Mark; it may simply have been the request to receive him. (10)
- Not many Jews had turned to Christ as a result of Paul's missionary endeavours but those that had were a comfort. (11)
- Epaphras had a great ministry as a prayer warrior, 'working hard' that his countrymen would mature spiritually. (12-13)
- The contrast in the description of Dr Luke and Demas could indicate that Demas was already cooling off. (14, cf 2 Tim 4:10)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What friends has God provided to bring you encouragement & to labour for you in prayer? Do you acknowledge their help?

DAY 20

Finish well

THE PASSAGE

COLOSSIANS 4:15-18

THE POINT Paul was not one for giving up part way through a task. In spite of his chains and possible physical disabilities (poor eyesight?) he was able to write Colossians all by himself. The issues he raises in this letter are so important, in terms of standing firm for the truths & implications of the Gospel in the face of heretical teaching that diminished the person & work of Christ, that he wanted all his letters to be read in all the churches in the region. Eventually he will be able to write to Timothy: 'I have finished the race, I have kept the faith' (2 Timothy 4:7). It is on this basis that he tells Archippus to finish well.

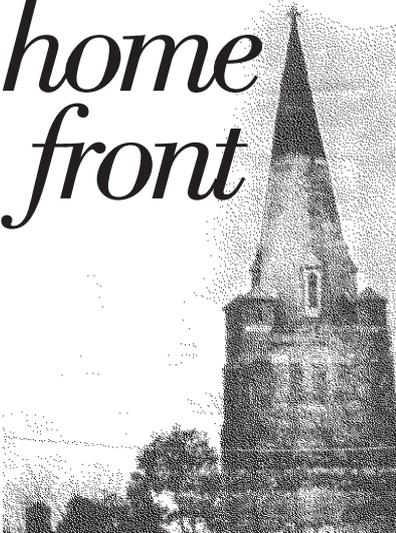
THE PARTICULARS

- As the Church expanded it met in different places, usually in people's homes. (15)
- In spite of this three different groups kept in close contact with each as the one Body of Christ. (15-16)
- It is important to finish the tasks we receive 'in the Lord'. (17)
- We are to remember one another, especially those in trials, knowing it is God's grace that sustains us in his work. (18)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is there some task you have been leaving unfinished?

home front



A venerable birthday

With a donation of 50 pounds, the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union began life on 25 August 1890. Today, 112 years later, it is still providing spiritual and practical support for missionaries in Australia and abroad.

The PWMU has stimulated vision for the missionary cause in Presbyterian congregations, supported the committees set up the church for mission and social work, and sought in every way possible to extend the Kingdom of God. In recent years PWMU has provided financial support to missionaries, overseas students, home missions, capital works, the Middle East Reformed Fellowship and social services.

Half century of service

Braemar Presbyterian Homes in Western Australia celebrates 50 years of service later this year. The original Braemar was opened on 8 November 1952. A number of celebrations are planned for the week beginning 28 October, climaxing with a function on 8 November, with PCA Moderator General Rt Rev. Jack Knapp.

Central Coast turns 10

The Presbytery of the Central Coast (NSW) first met at St Davids Presbyterian Church, Woy Woy, on 25 August 1992. As Rev. John Broadhead wrote in the 10th anniversary newsletter: "History and communication are two important aspects of the church's life. The former was once described as God's

story and the latter is vital to the life of the church and too often sadly neglected."

Gosford minister Rev. Rod Mallison, is demitting the parish from 31 December. He began long service leave on 29 September after a combined worship service. The Mallisons will continue to live on the Central Coast and be available for Supply.

Appointments

The Presbytery of Ballarat (Vic) reports that licentiate John Brennan, the exit appointee to Horsham, was ordained and appointed to the Horsham appointment parish on 19 July. On 2 August, home missionary Ron Williamson was set apart for his new appointment in the home mission station of Kaniva-Nhill, and he and his wife Jean were welcomed to the parish.

On Sunday 25 August, Colin McLeish was inducted into the session of St Davids Presbyterian Church, Woy

Woy (NSW), on 25 August. Mr McLeish was previously an elder with the Caringbah (NSW) congregation for many years.

From Queensland, the Presbyterian and Methodist Schools Association (PMSA) and the board of Brisbane Boys College have announced that Graeme McDonald will be the new headmaster. Mr McDonald, who has a distinguished educational management background at some of the Australia's most prestigious schools, will be the eighth headmaster in the college's 100-year history. He takes over from acting headmaster Greg Johnson, who returns to the post of deputy head.

Not Hastie for long

AP is pleased to note the recent announcement of the engagement of Sarah Hastie, the eldest daughter of Ashfield minister Rev. Peter Hastie and Sue Hastie to Dr Mark Perrin of Sydney.

Dale Stock

1957 - 2002

Dale Stock, who drowned in Pakistan in July while saving a child, was born in that country to missionary parents who worked in the Punjab area with Hindu tribal people.

He attended Murree Christian School, where his children Esther and Luke now attend, and graduated in 1976. Between 1976 and 1982 Dale attended the Christian Technical Training Institute in Gujranwala, Pakistan. During 1982 and 1984, he studied in the US in further technical training and at Bible College.

While waiting for a visa to re-enter Pakistan, Dale worked at the Oasis Hospital in Abu Dhabi. In 1986 he returned to Pakistan through the missionary organisation Interserve. He began work at the Kunri Christian Hospital, where he met Nicky Van Leeuwen, and they married in June 1987. Esther was born in 1988 and Luke in 1991.

In 1996 they moved to Tando

Mohammed Khan to concentrate on evangelism, while Nicky worked as a nurse in a clinic refurbished by her brother Symen and some other friends he had brought from Australia.

On 13 July Dale and Nicky joined Bill and Sheila McKelvie and, with their children, went to a lake for a swim and a picnic. Suddenly Dale and Bill saw that the children were struggling in a strange undertow and went to their aid. With all his strength Dale brought one of the McKelvie children towards the shore, where Bill and the others were being pulled to safety by onlookers. Dale disappeared under the surface and his body was found by divers about 40 minutes later.

Due to the intense heat of the Punjab (48-50C) at the time, Dale was buried the next day. A memorial service in Urdu was held 10 days later. The Mitchelton Presbyterian Church in Queensland held a memorial service on 25 August.

Alan Alexandre Knox 1914 – 2002

Elder Alan Alexandre Knox's long service to the Lord Christ Jesus was completed on 7 May, reports Ringwood-Heathmont session clerk *D. Fraser*. Alan was elected elder of Ringwood-Heathmont (Vic) in 1986, and served the congregation faithfully until his passing.

The session wishes to place on record its appreciation of Alan's dedicated services to the session, board of management and the congregation over a period of more than the 16 years he was an elder.

Alan displayed great foresight, unshakeable faith, integrity and sincerity, assisted by his love of the Scriptures. He was proud of his heritage, tracing his lineage back to the reformer John Knox.

To his brother elders and those placed in his care he was a caring and thoughtful friend who was prepared to go "the second mile".

Buddhist witness

Rev. Dr Botros Abedalla has written a booklet explaining Buddhist teaching and offering Christian responses. This witness to a religion increasingly influential in the West follows the widely circulating booklet on Islam that Dr Abedalla published earlier this year. For more details, phone (03) 9700 6717.

Good news for Victoria

The statistical returns for 2001 submitted to the October meeting of the General Assembly in Victoria show that while membership figures continue to decline slightly (1.69 per cent in 2001) overall attendance figures have continued to be stable for the past five years at around 6600. In 2001 for the first time the actual number of attendees were more than the total number of communicants (6619).

Over the past several years the 18-30 age bracket in attendance in the PCV has been increasing, going from 9 per cent in

1993 to 12.2 per cent in 2001. A similar trend may be emerging in the 12-17 age bracket. It is very encouraging to see that in 2001 nearly half of all gains in membership were by profession of faith. Gains by transfer from other church have been in steady decline since 1997 (12.6 per cent then, 8.3 now). The return also revealed 31.5 per cent of the PCV were aged 65 plus.

Tremper Longman III at PTC

One of the world's leading Old Testament scholars, **Dr Tremper Longman III** of Westmont College, California, has been teaching on Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes at the **Presbyterian Theological Centre**, Sydney. He presented the 2002 **Eliza Ferrie Lecture**. Next year **Rev. Dr Richard Pratt** has been invited to lecture on preaching from Chronicles.

Cheltenham conference

In August Cheltenham Presbyterian Church, Melbourne, hosted a well-attended public meeting on stem cell research and human cloning. Speakers **Bill Muehlenberg** of the **Australian Family Association** and **Dr Matt Piercy** alerted those present, including federal and state MPs, to the medical, scientific and ethical issues involved. Cheltenham minister **Rev. David Palmer** has produced a discussion paper on the topic.

On Sunday 8 September the first service of a new **Sudanese** congregation under the oversight of the Cheltenham session was held. About 40 Sudanese believers were joined by 30 regulars from the Australian congregation, led by **Rev. Choul**.

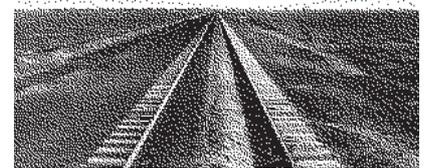
PTC evangelism course

In August and September the faculty of the **Presbyterian Theological College**, Melbourne, organised the first in a series of short courses planned for weekdays and for laypeople from the churches. 'Sharing the Gospel' was taught by **Greg Goswell** and **Tony Bird** (PTC), **Abedalla Botros** (Arabic Church), **Helen Bell** (chaplain, La Trobe University), **Peter Owen** (Melton), students **David Assender** and **Matt James**, and **Stuart Bonnington** (South Yarra). The course attracted good support from Christian circles outside the Presbyterian Church.

New PIM committee

The **Presbyterian Inland Mission** has formed a new sub-committee, the **WA Patrol Extension Committee**, to raise support for PIM work in WA, including new patrols. **Rev. Martin de Pyle** of **Swan Hill** (Vic) will lead the new sub-committee which has members in Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia. **David Hart** of the **David Shearer Patrol** in the mid-west of WA has been appointed consultant. The first aim is to raise \$80,000 for a new patrol vehicle.

*across
australia*



Christian university

The **Association of Christian Tertiary Education**, the **Association for Christian Higher Education in Australia** and **Christian College for Tertiary Education** have formed a **Christian Institute for Tertiary Education** to establish a Christian university in Victoria.

Their constitution incorporates a statement of Christian belief and principles under four headings: why Christian scholarship, the how of Christian scholarship, the contribution of non-Christians, and academic freedom of Christian scholars.

The authority of Scripture as confessed in the creeds of the Protestant Reformation is clearly stated.

Accreditation for any courses offered will be sought through an affiliation with an overseas university or college, with an ultimate goal of recognition in Australia from state and federal governments. For further information contact **Rev. Cor Vanderhorn** (03) 9311 1661 or cor@net-space.net.au

Australian in Brazil

Rev. Linleigh Roberts, an Australian Presbyterian minister, ministered in Brazil in July and August, addressing the general

assembly of the **Presbyterian Church in Brazil**, lecturing at the Seminary in Belo Horizonte, and speaking at a pastors' and leaders' conference. The Brazilian church plans to publish some of his materials in Portuguese.

At the end of August, he and his wife, **LaVerne**, will be leaving the US for teaching ministry at the **African Bible College** in Lilongwe, Central Africa, until December.

Fewer books

Australian Christian Literature Society judges expressed concern at the decreasing number of new Christian books – especially children's books – being published in Australia. They awarded **Australian Christian Book of the Year 2002** to *What Some of You Were*, edited by **Christopher Keene**, and published by Matthias Press. They described the book as a bold and timely commentary on homosexuality from a distinctly Australian perspective. It combines open, honest and at times moving personal stories of those who grapple with homosexuality (their own or that of people close to them). Personal testimonies are supplemented with appendices providing impressive medical, social and theological perspectives on the issue.

This book is refreshingly free of jargon and is a compassionate treatment of an issue which – the book itself admits – has been handled poorly at times by Christians. Although necessarily technical in parts the book is readily accessible to a broad Christian readership.

Certificates of Commendation were awarded to *Making Good Churches Better* by **Kevin Giles** (Acorn Press), and *If I were God I'd End all the Pain* by **John Dickson** (Matthias Media).

Moyes in Parliament

Rev. Dr Gordon Moyes was named in a joint sitting of the New South Wales Parliament on 3 September as the replacement for **Elaine Nile MLC**, who has retired because of ill health after 14 years in the NSW Legislative Council.

Dr Moyes will also continue his broadcasting career as **Wesley Mission's** Superintendent on Sydney's newest radio Station, Radio 2 1611 AM every Sunday night.

MAF moves north

Mission Aviation Fellowship is moving to Cairns in North Queensland after 51

years of being head-quartered in Melbourne. The move reflects changes in operations and the extremely difficult conditions in the aviation industry, MAF reports.

MAF's tradition of offering heavily subsidised services to church and mission, by being expert in managing a cutting-edge aviation operation is virtually unsustainable today, and the mission is seeking financial partners to enable the ministry to continue.

V.M. Ambrose House at 5 Court Street, Box Hill, Vic, will be sold to allow relocation of MAF's head office to Cairns early next year, to be closer to the Papua New Guinea and North Australia Branches. The engineering facility, MAF Aviation Services, will be relocated from Ballarat to Mareeba Airport near Cairns.

Fighting teen suicide

A new online magazine for young people is fighting the appalling Australian statistics on drug abuse, suicide, and alcoholism. **Right Turn** – founded by a group of professional editors, journalists, social workers, web-designers and researchers – offers advice, information and counselling to Australian teenagers in a format that most appeals to them.

Australia has one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world. Every 18 hours one young person between the ages of 15 and 24 takes his or her own life – a quarter of all deaths in that age group.

For more information, please phone Lisa Saut on (02) 48723330 or write to editor@rightturn.info

Praying for the persecuted

As worldwide persecution of Christians increases dramatically, the **Bible League** is distributing free copies of a booklet specifically designed to lead Australians in relevant prayer.

The booklet *I Know Your Afflictions* is a 21-day prayer guide that offers insights into difficulties being experienced by Christians in 21 countries. The Bible League is also providing a Bible money box with each booklet so that those who pray may add a gift for God's people who are without his word. A dollar a day over the 21 days of prayer will place at least three Bibles or seven New Testaments in the hands of persecuted Christians who desperately need the hope and comfort found in the Word of God.

More than 200 million Christians live in daily fear of discrimination, arrest, impris-

onment or death. For free copies of the booklet, phone toll-free 1800 800 937 or visit the website www.BibleLeague.com.

Church in contempt?

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reports that the **Uniting Church** has become the first church in Australia to face contempt of court charges – over the sacking of two employees who ran its Wesley Gardens nursing home at Belrose.

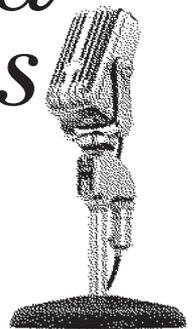
The NSW Industrial Relations Court has initiated proceedings against the church, saying its treatment of the employees was calculated to interfere with the administration of justice.

Carrying the word

In September next year, a team of up to 50 cyclists will cycle 4200 kilometres from Perth to Hobart to raise money for literacy projects in India. The cyclists will be riding under the banner of **Bike for Bibles**, a fundraising initiative of **The Bible Society in Australia**. The ride is expected to raise more than \$200 000 to distribute Bible Society literacy materials.

Bike for Bibles is looking for interested cyclists to register now, so that they will have a year to train and raise funds for the epic adventure. Call toll-free 1800 251 389 or email bike4bibleswa@bible.org.au.

world
news



Iraq warning

A leading Pakistani Christian has warned that an attack on Iraq by America could cause a severe increase in persecution for Christians in Pakistan, according to the UK-based **Christian Solidarity Worldwide**.

Cecil Chaudry, executive secretary of the **All Pakistan Minorities Alliance** and

a key Christian leader, said: "I see terrible things happening if Iraq is invaded, including attacks on our churches and even attacks on our homes. Any attack on Iraq is going to signify to the extremists, rightly or wrongly, that this is a war of Christianity against Islam.

"When the Gulf War took place Iraq was the aggressor and Pakistan was part of the multi-national coalition force, but our churches were stoned, a Catholic priest was manhandled and furniture burned. If the UN give their support to action against Iraq it will still be difficult for Christians, but the Government may be able to keep the situation under control as they will say that Pakistan as a country has to stand by the Security Council's recommendations."

Assist News Service

Ruling the waves

Christians working in the media in Great Britain are so "creative and talented" that they could lead Christian broadcasting into a new, more effective dimension, according to **Dr Ted Baehr**, a Christian expert on the entertainment media.

"Britain is in a fledgling state of rediscovering Christian values and the impact of the media," Dr Baehr said. "It's about to break through new boundaries and explore new areas that we don't often explore here in the United States because we have built up too much of a successful formula for Christian broadcasting."

"Christians are now being allowed by the British government to have more freedom in producing Christian programming," Baehr noted. "Thus, they are in a position to explore the unexplored; to go after an audience that is not the normal audience. I believe their scripts are a little more edgy than ours and maybe they can make a difference, but they seem to be more in touch with the contemporary humanist and even pagan culture than a lot of people in the States."

Dr Baehr is founder and chairman of the Hollywood-based **Christian Film & Television Commission** ministry and *Movieguide*, a biweekly magazine that reviews movies from a biblical perspective.

Assist News Service

Indonesian threats mount

Christians in the Central Sulawesi, Maluku and Papua provinces of Eastern Indonesia are under severe threat of both jihad and military attack. In all three

provinces, large numbers of **Laskar Jihad** and foreign mujahideen have infiltrated and the Indonesian military is actively supporting the jihad.

In Maluku and Papua, several recent fatal attacks have been perpetrated, seemingly to provoke major sectarian strife. The Christians of Maluku and Central Sulawesi disarmed after the peace accords, while the Papuan separatists generally do not have automatic weapons. However, the fatalities all appear to have been inflicted with Indonesian military issue automatic weapons. Christians have been blamed for these attacks but it is suspected that the military may be responsible. Christians are at great risk.

Evangelical Alliance

Same-sex marriage

A Superior Court judge in Quebec, Canada, has ruled that the federal prohibition of same-sex marriages is unconstitutional, and has granted two men the right to marry.

Michael Hendricks and **René LeBoeuf**, who have been together since 1973, first applied for a marriage licence in 1998 and have been battling the federal and Quebec governments in provincial court.

"Requiring couples to be heterosexual to enter into marriage cannot be imposed by a legislature because it is a fundamental right," wrote Justice Louise Lemelin. The distinction based on sex "undermines human dignity and denies the applicants' equality rights under section 15 of the Charter," she wrote.

The National Post

Cloning problems

Cloned mice have hundreds of abnormal genes, which explains why so many cloned animals die at or before birth and proves it would be irresponsible to clone a human being, scientists have said.

The process of cloning introduces the genetic mutations, and there seems no immediate way around the problem, **Rudolf Jaenisch** and colleagues at the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology** reported in a recent issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"I think this confirms suspicions that I have always had and that many others had that cloning is a very inefficient method at this point," Jaenisch said. "It is very irresponsible to think this method could be

used for the reproductive cloning of humans."

Three scientists worldwide have said they are on the verge of creating a cloned human baby, but none has produced evidence.

Reuters

Hungary for education

At a ceremony to mark the opening of a new year at the **Calvinist College** in the town of Papa, Hungarian President **Ferenc Madl** suggested that the growth of church schools was the most important development since communism collapsed in 1989.

"The rapid spread of church schools was one of the most important achievements of the free and independent Hungary over the past 12 years," he said.

Government figures show that about 1.5 million pupils and students returned to primary and high school. Christian schools account for about six per cent of the country's education system.

Assist News Service

Russian crack down

A Swedish missionary has been expelled from Russia and a Catholic priest was denied entry into the country, as part of a reported crack down against churches and Christians, reports *Assist News Service*.

The deportation of **Leo Martensson**, who had worked in Russia as a missionary for nine years, was ordered on 10 September when his visa was cancelled.

Martensson's lawyer **Aleksandr Antipyonok** described the expulsion as an illegal decision. "There is no basis for it," he said.

Martensson had been invited to work in the southern Russian region of Krasnodar, by the local diocese of the **Evangelical Christian Missionary Union**, a registered Protestant denomination.

Also on 10 September, Polish Catholic priest **Edward Mackiewicz** was denied entry to Russia despite holding a valid visa. Border guards reportedly told him that his parish in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don had been "abolished".

He is the fifth foreign Catholic priest to have been denied access to the Russian Federation this year. Foreigners working with other religious communities have also had their visas stripped from them.

The great debate

When Philip Adams and William Lane Craig locked horns over God, AP was there.

Nowadays most people are somewhat uneasy about the idea that anything is absolute. We love to have options. And the world to many people is looking less black and white and increasingly grey, particularly in terms of morals, ethics, and religion. Relativism is on the increase and the “whatever works for you” mentality is winning friends and influencing people.

Phillip Adams expressed some of these thoughts recently in an article in *The Australian* where he discussed some of his views on the existence and relevance of God – namely, he doesn’t and he isn’t. And furthermore, that it really doesn’t matter anyway, as long as we all seek to “get on with treating each other decently”, and don’t let a “little thing like God come between us”.

What seems most offensive of all to many people is the idea of an absolute God. Only one God. And only one way to approach him.

Catharine Lumby, writing in a similar vein in *The Bulletin*, concluded in a recent article that “no one religious group has a monopoly on the claim they’ve secured direct access to an absolute authority – that they’ve got a set of rules for who we ought to be and how we ought to live”.

Debates about the existence of God have been raging for centuries. Where you sit along the spectrum of belief, ranging from Christian through to agnostic and on to atheist, affects your outlook on much, if not all, of life. The challenge to debate this subject was recently taken up by representatives from both ends of the spectrum in what turned out to be a rather fiery war of words and philosophies.

Dr William Lane Craig, Christian apologist and Research Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, in La Mirada, California, visited Sydney to take part in the debates as part of the Sydney University Evangelical Union’s AbsoluteGod mission.

His opponent was Phillip Adams, the



Tracy Gordon

prolific and sometimes controversial broadcaster, writer and film-maker. Adams does not hide his views on religion, saying “I’ve spent a life-time attacking religious beliefs and have not wavered from a view of the universe that many would regard as bleak. Namely, that it is a meaningless place devoid of deity.”

Craig and Adams tackled two topics:



“The problem with God is that as science advances, he decreases.”

PHILLIP ADAMS

absoluteReality, a debate on the existence of God, and absoluteFact, a debate on science and Christianity, friend or foe?

Craig started the ball rolling, setting out his two-fold aims as contending that there are no good reasons to think that atheism is true and secondly, that there are good reasons for thinking theism is true. He added that he was not

claiming that he could prove that God exists with mathematical certainty, but rather that it is more probable on balance that theism is true than atheism.

He discussed how astrophysical evidence indicates that the universe began to exist in an explosion called the Big Bang about 15 billion years ago, and that the standard Big Bang model describes a universe which is not eternal in the past, but rather came into existence a finite time ago. “Not only all matter and energy, but physical space and time [itself] came into being at the initial cosmological singularity, which marks the boundary of space and time.”

Beginning with the idea that the universe had a starting point, based on philosophical and scientific reasoning, Craig argued that there is a “personal creator of the universe who is immaterial, timeless, changeless, spaceless, immensely powerful and who created the universe out of nothing”.

“We are brought not merely to a transcendent cause of the universe, but to a personal creator, and this is what everybody means by God,” Craig said.

Adams began by stating his reluctance to be part of a debate tackling such an “immensely serious subject”, but rather than presenting a case for atheism, he went on to argue that Dr Craig was more of an atheist than he himself was probably aware, listing a host of gods that he did not believe in – Jupiter, Zeus, Odin and Thor, among others. Craig



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SINCE 1961

What they said

William Lane Craig

- Debating Adams was “like arguing with a village atheist”.
- Adams is “basically a person who is full of sound and fury ... mostly bluster and little substance.”
- “Media personalities get away with pseudo-intellectual posturing”, but “when confronted with genuine scholarship his pretensions are exposed”.

Phillip Adams

- Craig is “deeply personally offensive”, presents an “outrageous distortion of science”, and he calls on “obscure authors” to support his views.
- Craig is more of an atheist than he is probably aware of.
- The debates were “fraudulent and a complete waste of time”.

replied that you only have to believe in one God to be a theist, whereas you have to believe that no God exists to be an atheist.

Adams told how, when he was five, he “gave up on God” and found that “believing in God was unnecessary”. He agreed with other writers, who had come to similar conclusions in their own lives, who wrote that God was the name we gave to what we didn’t understand, and that he was simply another question.

Asked how he could make a firm decision on such a weighty issue at five, he said that by five everyone on earth has been hand-fed a religion. “People don’t have the right to express a belief that they haven’t examined, and 99 per cent of people fit into this category.”

Adams, the son of a Congregational minister, said that people “create God in their own image according to their needs and circumstances and cultural attitudes”. On the relationship between God and humans, he said: “We’re only here because after a few billion years an asteroid hit the planet and wiped out the dinosaurs, allowing a new species to be dominant, namely us. In turn we’re likely to be wiped out ourselves by our own stupidity, or by another asteroid.”

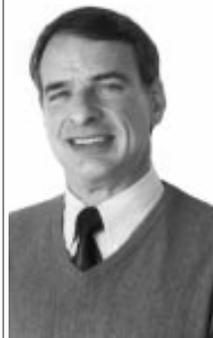
As to the relevance of God, Adams argued that God, “if he exists, should be ashamed of himself”, adding “for the last couple of thousand years he has caused nothing but trouble”.

Adams said he could not think of an example of a case where religious belief sorted out a problem. “Christianity specifically promised us peace, love and harmony. It doesn’t deliver.”

Addressing the relevance of God William Lane Craig cited the time in his life when as a teenager he began to ask some big questions about the meaning of existence. “I found the answer in Jesus Christ and in God. I found that through Jesus Christ I could come to know this personal creator in a personal way that invested my meaning with joy, hope and

“We are living in an era of renewed interest in the dialogue between science and Christian theology.”

WILLIAM LANE CRAIG



purpose that I never dreamt possible.”

Tackling the issue of science and Christianity, Phillip Adams said “the problem with God is that as science advances, he decreases”.

“In a sense, yes, a scientist can be a Christian, and a Christian can be a scientist. But Christianity and science are utterly different ways of looking at the world and they will never, ever be happy in their marriage,” he said.

He ridiculed the idea that Christianity is crucial to science. To say that “is to deny, for example, the immense contribution of Jewish scientists and the simple fact that every major scientist alive today would not agree with one iota of Christian theology, least of all the

absolutely critical idea of physical resurrection.”

Adams concluded: “Science imposes far bigger questions than religion. Religion never wanted to change anything. Religion wanted to believe in a world with a physical solid heaven, literally up there and hell down there ... You have two modalities: you have the constant thrusting and questing in science ... always testing, always hypothesising and giving up when the idea is wrong and going on, versus religion, all religion, not just one, Christianity, which is about the preservation of dogma, which is about the preservation of rules, which is about keeping things the way they are. Nothing could be more difficult than science and Christianity, nothing.”

William Lane Craig contended that “Christianity is an ally to science, in that it can furnish a conceptual framework in which science can flourish. More than that, the Christian religion historically did furnish the conceptual framework in which modern science was born and nurtured ... we are living in an era of renewed interest in the dialogue between science and Christian theology.”

While the debate did cover some academic ground, there were heated exchanges. Adams said he thought the debates were “fraudulent and a complete waste of time”. He found Dr Craig “deeply personally offensive” and added that he presented an “outrageous distortion of science”, and that he called upon obscure authors to support his views.

Craig commented that the debates were very useful to expose Adams for “what he is ... basically a person who is full of sound and fury ... mostly bluster and little substance.” He added his dismay that “media personalities get away with pseudo-intellectual posturing” and that “when confronted with genuine scholarship his pretensions are exposed”.

Craig said Adams had little understanding of the arguments and that it was like “arguing with a village atheist”.

At the end of the day, students were encouraged to inquire further into the question of the existence and relevance of God. “I would encourage you, if you are an open-minded seeker today to do what I did, to look into this, to begin to explore, to keep an open mind, because I believe that it could change your life, that same way it changed mine,” Craig concluded.

Journalist Tracy Gordon worships at Ashfield Presbyterian Church, Sydney. 

Would Jesus worship here?

Across the world, God moves in mysterious ways.

Travelling gives me glimpses of a variety of church styles. I remember my first Russian Orthodox service, designed to express mystery and majesty. The service goes on three to four hours, with worshipers entering and leaving at will. No one invites congregants to “pass the peace” or “greet the folks around you with a smile”. They stand — there are no pews — and watch the professionals, who are very professional indeed.

I did not understand a word of the service, but then I learned that none of the other congregants did either: Russian services are conducted in Old Slavonic, which only the priests understand.

In Egypt I attended a service conducted in a Coptic language that none but the priests could speak. Whereas publishers in the US bring out a new version of the Bible every six months or so, in much of the world worshipers can't understand a single word read to them from the pulpit.

Seeker-sensitive churches in the US even target worship services toward specific age groups, hence the “Gen X churches” springing up in warehouses and strip malls. These tend to dispense with formalities and reduce worship to praise music, announcements, and a “teaching”. Some Gen X churches innovate with dramas or “object lessons” that make the Bible come alive. I watched a thousand young people sit spellbound as their pastor splattered a costumed “priest” with blood and made him hold a stack of firewood throughout the sermon to demonstrate the tasks of the Levites.

As one of the most religious countries on earth, the US offers something for everyone. Some Armenian churches in America conduct worship in a language and style unchanged in a millennium. At a Christian Reformed church near Chicago, when I inquired if I could speak from the platform rather than the elevated pulpit, the shocked reaction suggested that I had asked to speak in my underwear. In Colorado my pastor paces the platform wearing jeans and a polo shirt.

In the Philippines I visited an open-air church constructed of poles and thatch in

Philip Yancey

a tiny village. Pigs and chickens wandered through. An old Scottish missionary couple had established several dozen similar churches in the remote hills. Founded on the Plymouth Brethren model, they had no pastors — indeed, most of these believers had no idea that elsewhere in the world Christians hired professionals to lead their worship.

What would make a family-based youth ministry different to any other ministry to youth?

one of the few evangelical churches, which meets in a hotel conference room; Hus's own church is kept in museum condition, but rarely used. John Calvin's church still dominates the landscape in Geneva, but most Swiss see it as a relic, not a nourishing source of life. Even in Rome the coffee bars attract far more participation on Sunday mornings than the churches.

In Japan a congregation of 200 qualifies as a “megachurch”. I met adult converts who came to church, and eventually to Christ, because they wanted to practice their English or learn to play the piano. As Western culture abandons its Christian heritage, Asians reclaim it, stocking our symphony orchestras, collecting our art, and in some cases embracing our faith. A teacher friend on Chicago's north shore tells me her Jewish and WASP students no longer recognise such biblical names as Samson and Daniel; she has to call on Korean students to identify them.

I have learned to see strength, as well as confusion, in these many worship styles. For example, some missionaries

criticise the Russian service for its distant, impersonal style. Yet under a Communist regime that had no place for God, the Orthodox Church continued to place God at the centre and survived the most determined atheistic assault in history.

Nevertheless, how strange we must appear to outsiders trying to comprehend our faith from such diverse clues. All these churches, from the sacramental to the user-friendly, have their own internal logic — and all mysteriously trace back to a Palestinian rabbi who spoke mostly in synagogues or in fields of grass.

My travels have left me with a few lasting impressions. First, not many people in church look like they're enjoying themselves.

Second, Christianity may show its best side as a minority faith. I see more unity and creativity in places like the United Kingdom and Australia, where Christians have little hope of affecting culture and concentrate instead on loving each other and worshipping well.

Third, God “moves” in mysterious ways. To visit the burgeoning churches of the apostle Paul's day, you would need to hire a Muslim guide or an archaeologist. Western Europe, site of the Holy Roman Empire and the Reformation, is now the least religious place on earth. In Latin America, while the Catholics preached God's “preferential option for the poor”, the poor embraced Pentecostalism.

Meanwhile, the greatest numerical revival in history is occurring in China, one of the last atheistic states and one of the most oppressive. Go figure.

Philip Yancey is a noted Christian author. This article is reprinted from Christianity Today, February 2000.

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Soul food?

Philip Yancey's latest book is a mixed blessing.

When I read my first book by Philip Yancey – *Where is God When It Hurts?*, published in 1977 – I had no idea that he would become so popular. His work on suffering was well-written, and made some helpful points, but it was permeated with a defective view of the sovereignty of God, and at times seemed to imply universalism. There seemed little point in giving it to suffering saints when Joni Eareckson's books were available.

Only occasionally did I get around to reading Yancey's other works – and that was only when they became so popular that I felt obliged to catch up with the trends. Yancey has the style of a good journalist. He writes well, he stimulates, he sometimes irritates, he repeats stories, and he makes mistakes. In *What's So Amazing About Grace?* he portrays Calvin's Geneva in a way which is demonstrably inaccurate. He writes as though Calvin were the dictator of the city, and the Consistory were there to do his bidding. He even trots out an old chestnut – the oft-quoted but erroneous claim that the Consistory beheaded a child who struck his parents.

It is revealing that Yancey is regarded as an evangelical believer, who serves as editor-at-large for *Christianity Today*. The reviews which he has received in evangelical magazines and journals have been warm to the point of being overdone. *Soul Survivor* has received more than its fair share of accolades, but it is a strange, albeit moving, book. It is supposed to consist of 13 little biographies, but its over-arching theme is autobiographical: how my faith survived the church. In fact, the work is as much about Yancey as anybody else.

Yancey's strictures on the church are so savage in places that it is difficult to see how Yancey could fit into any church which taught anything in a definite way. He launches this work with 10 pages on "Recovering from Church Abuse". Perhaps he could commence his next work with 100 pages on "Recovering from Journalists' Abuse". Honesty is praiseworthy, but Paul still gave thanks for the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:4), and Hebrews 11 does not wallow in the sins of the saints.

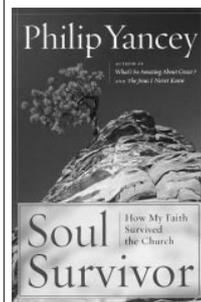


Peter Barnes

In Yancey's view, modern churches simply condemn sinners. One wonders how many churches Yancey has visited recently. These days one is more likely to have to endure a sacred dance than a tirade against homosexuality.

Yancey's subjects constitute an odd, if interesting, collection. Yancey does not hide Martin Luther King Jr's immorality. King is said to have derived his inspiration from Gandhi and the Sermon on the

The most dangerous feature of Yancey's work is his separation of doctrine from spirituality.



Mount, but sometimes his rhetoric resembled Churchill on a bad-hair day. In his last speech, delivered in Memphis the night before his tragic assassination, King indulged in all the tricks of oratory: "I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land." Many have found this speech very moving, but it is the sort of windy rhetoric which means whatever one wants it to mean.

The chapter on G. K. Chesterton is both amusing and stimulating. Equally fascinating, albeit in a different way, is the chapter on Dr Paul Brand of Vellore Hospital. Dr Brand makes the thought-provoking comment that pain is necessary in a fallen world: "I thank God for pain. I cannot think of a greater gift I could give my leprosy patients." Even more startling – and profoundly moving – is the comment by one patient that he was grateful

for his leprosy because it was this disease which led him to know Dr Brand and the other Christian doctors, and the God who lives in them.

Yancey has an ear for the penetrating comment. Robert Coles maintains that novelists understand life and psychology better than do the social scientists – although that is probably to state the obvious. Kierkegaard's remark concerning the philosophy of Hegel is along the same lines: "Hegel explained everything in life except how to get through an ordinary day." The strength of Yancey's observations is precisely this refusal to be sidetracked or impressed by academic jargon, and his willingness to deal with reality.

The chapter on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is full of suggestive insights. It is all set against the background of the murderous Soviet empire, and Solzhenitsyn's explanation in 1983, when he looked over a regime which had massacred 60 million of its own people, and concluded "men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened".

Yancey's capacity to summarise a person's life and work comes to the fore in his treatment of Gandhi. Barely five feet tall, weighing about eight stone, wearing the same loincloth every day, Gandhi had some intriguing habits. His ritual ablutions and his testing of his vow of celibacy by sleeping next to naked young women have rightly been criticised. Gandhi professed a love for Christ's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, but he refused to accept Christ's deity and perfection. He declared: "I cannot concede to Christ a solitary throne."

The most dangerous feature of Yancey's work is his separation of doctrine from spirituality. For example, he writes of the wonders of life – the tiny, delicate flowers on the mountains of Colorado, the coral and tropical fish of the Great Barrier Reef, the gorgeous butterflies of Brazil, the whales of Alaska, the giraffes and wildebeest of Kenya, and the musk oxen of the Arctic. Then he adds: "I have also sat in hot classrooms and listened to theology professors drone on about the defining qualities of the deity – omniscience, omnipresence, omnipo-

tence, etc. Can the One who created this glorious world be reduced to such abstractions?" It is a loaded piece of writing, and somewhat beyond the canons of fairness.

Yancey writes sympathetically about each of his subjects – perhaps too sympathetically. One can empathise with Dr C. Everett Koop, as the Surgeon-General under President Reagan. His appointment in 1980 set off a storm of protest and a campaign of vilification against him by pro-abortion feminists. By 1989, when Koop naively concluded that there was little evidence that abortion greatly affected the women who had them, he had also disappointed, if not alienated, many of his fellow evangelicals.

Chapters on John Donne, Annie Dillard, Frederick Buechner, Shusaku Endo, and Henri Nouwen conclude the work. Two quotations will illustrate the dangers in Yancey's approach. Frederick

Buechner is cited with approval: "Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less a position on than a movement toward, less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is waiting. Faith is journeying through space and time." According to the apostle Paul, faith is a bit more than goose-bumps on the sky-dive. It is not resting on our own righteousness, but depending wholly upon the righteousness of Christ (Phil. 3:8-9). One would like Yancey to point that out occasionally.

The second quotation comes from Henri Nouwen: "What makes us human is not our mind but our heart, not our ability to think but our ability to love." Nicely put, but if dogmatism can be unhealthy so too can being warm and fuzzy. Love is greater than knowledge (1 Cor. 8:1), but that does not mean that one doctrine is as good as another – as the

epistle to the Galatians makes clear.

Yancey gives some splendid illustrations of the Christian life but he often fails to work from the Bible outwards (he rarely refers to the Bible); he delights in confusing depth with a failure to give clear biblical answers (an appreciation of life's complexity is no excuse for being foggy); and he separates doctrine from spirituality (the implication is that all his subjects are Christians simply because they are interested in spiritual things).

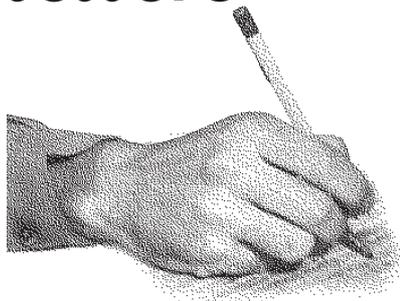
One yearns for a definition of grace which would set it apart from lawlessness with spiritual overtones. Yancey says that he writes as a pilgrim. One wishes that he could write too as a theologian. After all, John Bunyan managed it.

Philip Yancey, Soul Survivor (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001).

Peter Barnes is books editor of AP.

ap

letters



Small isn't beautiful

Michael Horton (*AP*, May) says "the big mega-churches aren't actually bringing unbelievers to church," and that they consist mainly of people from other churches who "go into them because they find them more fun," and because they want to remain "unaccountable." This is too broad a judgment.

I came to know the Lord through Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church; at that time their membership was just over 8000. I've heard Coral Ridge referred to as a "birthing centre" because such large numbers of people come to know the Lord through their many ministries. Yes, attendees could get lost in the crowd and remain unaccountable and rootless. But every effort was made to integrate new-

comers into small groups for both discipleship and service. I have met many believers with vibrant faith in large churches.

I hope no readers assumed that Horton's indictment of mega-churches implied that the average small congregation is more rooted or more spiritual. I have sometimes encountered the attitude that a small church is more "pure", the flock having been pared down to the "faithful few".

Let's be honest: some people do attend church to be entertained, but this happens in small churches as well. The size of the church is not the issue, what every congregation needs to ask itself is, "have we settled into a complacent expression of our faith that demands very little of us, so makes little impact on our word?"

Too many of our small churches are small because they lack vision, enthusiasm, and (like Horton's mega-churches) the theological acumen, spiritual insight, and power to make a difference. Many of our churches are struggling with internal conflicts or with elders (a leadership team) that would not come close to meeting the scriptural qualifications of the office. Other churches are small because they simply don't know how to make a bridge into their communities.

We must make sure congregations are taught to build bridges that are theologically sound, and are motivated by a heart filled with love and compassion for the

lost. Some are doing this (the Donvale and Creek Road Presbyterian Churches are two examples), others need to follow their lead.

*Rev. Robert L. Carner,
Berwick, Vic*

Tidal wave

I must say the flood of negative comment on my letter (*AP*, June) responding to Murray Adamthwaite somewhat surprises me. However, each letter evidences the same difficulty endemic in much of the discussion on Noah's flood: a sincere but populist approach that does not carefully weigh what is said.

I can assure your readers that if they read my book on Genesis 1-11 or view my website, they will know that I stand fair and square on the matter of first importance: that there was one man, Adam, from whom all humanity descended and through whom all humanity fell through federal representation. But like virtually all the 1112 Presbyterian ministers who began their Australian careers before 1901 – and who knows how many since? – I am not convinced from Scripture about 24-hour days in Genesis 1 or a geographically universal flood in Genesis 6-8!

*Rev. Dr Rowland Ward,
Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia
Wantirna, Vic*

Lights, camera, action!

Craft your own 15 seconds of fame, and the church will benefit.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, moving pictures are worth about a million. Usually here in Culture Watch we look at other peoples' movies – the latest and greatest cinema blockbusters. But with the digital video revolution in full swing, this month we're taking a quick look at the potential of video-in-church ... with some tips for making your own.

With a growing number of churches using new technologies like data projection (projecting computer images onto a large slide or movie screen), digital video is a logical step. Your videos can easily be displayed with a standard data projector – or on a TV – and it's easy to get professional-looking results.

While home video cameras have been around for years, digital video cameras offer one key advantage – with a simple add-in card for your home computer, you can edit your video to perfection. Add still images, music, and titles, and the finished product can look equal to anything you'll see on TV.

So what do you need to get started? First, a "mini-DV" or Digital 8 camera with a "firewire" connection – that's the magic connection between the camera and your home computer. Suitable cameras start at around \$1299. Of course, you'll need a reasonably powerful computer – the latest models are ideal – with a "firewire card" to receive the video from the camera. My card cost \$79. Add video editing software at around \$200, and you're ready to roll. (The latest version of Windows includes Windows Movie Maker free of charge – it's not bad as a starting point. Some firewire cards include software packages too.)



Phil Campbell

Let me give you some examples of digital video in action. At our church, we were keen to encourage more women to join the weekly women's Bible study group.

Camera in hand, we interviewed some of the current members. They were terrific – passionate about the benefits of "Women on Wednesday", and delighted to have the chance to be movie stars ... even if only for 15 seconds. Some shots of happy kids in the child-minding zone, a close up of the great morning tea, and it's time to edit. Add titles, trim the bits that weren't so great, add a music track ... and the results were ready for viewing at a special women's morning tea. It worked!

We're using video to promote other church events too – a great way to avoid dreary "intimations". Short videos can bring people together and create group identity. Our Saturday working bee became a 60-second "highlights" video on Sunday morning – great fun spotting who was there, and an encouragement to those who didn't make it to come along next time. And when co-pastor Maurie Cropper found himself in Murree, Pakistan, during the recent terrorist attacks, he came home with a stack of photos that made their way into a 3 minute "mini documentary" that brought the events to life for all of us.

Finally, some simple rules. Like anything else, video can easily be overdone. My best rule of thumb for editing is, "if it can be cut, it must be cut". Watch the trailer for an upcoming movie, and you'll see that a two-hour movie can be summarised in 30 seconds. It's surprising how much you can convey quickly – each scene in a trailer lasts only one or two sec-



A scene from the Mitchelton video

onds. So don't labour the point. For use in church, we're aiming at around 2.5 minutes for a "documentary spot", and no more than 30 seconds for an event advertisement. And we're only planning to use video once or twice a month.

Does it work? So far, people have been laughing and crying in all the right places. Well-edited digital video can "take you there" in new ways; people can connect with one another, catch the feel of events they missed, and be enthused for things to come. And among the members of the video generation, there's been a huge "thumbs up" just for trying something new.

Phil Campbell is the editor of Culture Watch, and a member of the ministry team at Mitchelton Presbyterian Church. Visit the church website at www.mpc.org.au 

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Balancing act

The narrow path is often a tightrope.

So much of the Christian life depends on balance or proportion. There are dangers on every side – we need to be zealous but zeal can become unwise or obnoxious; we need to be gracious but our grace can become weakness; we need to be courageous but not to be foolhardy; we must believe that God is capable of doing whatever he wishes but we must not tempt him by presuming that he is there to do our bidding.

As C. S. Lewis said: “Opposite evils, far from balancing, aggravate each other.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge made a similar observation: “Every reform, however necessary, will by weak minds be carried to an excess which will itself need reforming.”

In the light of this, it is not surprising that the Scriptures so often warn us about the need for balance and getting the proportion right. We are told to speak the truth, but the fact that we are objectively accurate does not exhaust our responsibilities because we must speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

Phillips Brooks said that preaching is “truth mediated through personality”. So, too, is the whole Christian life. We cannot build our ministries or our lives simply by pounding away at error. The result is less than lovely – hence Francis Schaeffer’s understandable disenchantment with the Bible Presbyterian Church in the 1950s. At the same time the demands of love cannot be an excuse to evade the claims of truth.

We are told to confront and, if possible, restore the sinning saint, but we must do so in a spirit of gentleness and humility (Gal. 6:1). In the 9th century BC King Jehu carried out God’s judgment on the house of Ahab (2 Kings 9-10), but in Hosea 1:4 God calls the house of Jehu to account for the blood that was shed. There is no contradiction in this, despite what the biblical critics assume. It is true that Jehu carried out God’s righteous judgment, but he did not carry it out righteously. On the contrary, he was guilty of great cruelty. Jehu had zeal but no love.

Jonah too was lacking in this regard, although not to the same extent. He



Peter Barnes

became angry that Nineveh repented at his preaching, and that God was so gracious and forgiving towards Israel’s fearsome enemies (Jonah 4:2).

Leaving aside the issue of whether the miraculous gifts can be confined to the time of the apostles, it is still noteworthy that in 1 Corinthians 12-14 Paul spends three chapters in seeking to curb the

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excesses of the Corinthians on the matter of tongue-speaking. However, he concludes by saying “do not forbid to speak with tongues” (1 Cor. 14:39). Obviously, he feared that some at Corinth could

swing from one extreme to the other.

At Thessalonica too he feared that some were quenching the Spirit by despising prophecies. The right response was not to reject all prophecies but to test all things, and to hold fast what is good (1 Thess. 5:19-21).

“Rabbi” Duncan used to say that it is a matter of “wheat and arsenic” – it depends on how much wheat and how much arsenic is in the mixture. Circumcision in order to evangelise Jews is fine (Acts 16:1-3); circumcision in order to be right with God is to fall from grace (Gal. 5:2-4). To see spiritual warfare primarily in terms of casting out demons is to distort Scripture,

but to ignore the existence of Satan’s angels is also to distort the biblical message.

On secondary issues, the Christian tries to balance his freedom (Gal. 5:1) with the desire not to unduly offend others (1 Cor. 10:32). In one sense, we do not seek to please men (Gal. 1:10); in another sense, we do seek to please men (1 Cor. 10:33).

In fact, so great are the dangers that we can actually think that we are being balanced when we are compromising or confusing the truth. Professing Christians often tell me that they are neither Arminian nor Calvinistic. Ultimately, that does not make sense – either we choose God because he first chose us or he chooses us because we chose him. There are extremes on either side, but there is no logical middle ground.

Similarly, one often hears – for example, by Billy Graham and John Stott – that the social gospel and old-style evangelicalism are both true in what they affirm but false in what they deny. One receives the impression that they are like the two wings on an aeroplane – both needed for the machine to fly. However, that picture is misleading. The gospel has serious social implications, but the social gospel is not just one-sided but heretical.

Arthur Pink used to warn that “error is not so much the denial of truth as the perversion of truth”. Get the balance wrong, and we are disobeying the Word of God. Often in life, it is as Charles Simeon said: “The truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme; but in both extremes.”

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