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# Presbyterian

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**OUR MORAL GRAVITY**

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**ETHICS**

The unwelcome relative: Scott Rae ..... 4  
No good without God: William Lane Craig ..... 9  
Just indefensible ..... 11

**BIBLE STUDY**

The covenant family ..... 13

**NEWS**

Across Australia ..... 17  
Around the World ..... 18  
On the Agenda ..... 20

**REFLECTION**

A fitting end: Matthew Henry ..... 21

**SEXUALITY**

God says no: Peter Barnes ..... 22

**CULTURE WATCH**

Movie Watch: Bruce Almighty ..... 23

**LETTERS** ..... 24

**PRAYER** ..... 26

**BOOKS**

Wheel Tracks ..... 27  
Ernest C. Reisinger ..... 27  
My First Book of Memory Verses ..... 27  
Covenant Baptism ..... 27

**BACK PAGE**

Beware the bigots: Ted Baehr ..... 28

*editorial*

One of the features of modern space travel is the phenomenon of weightlessness. It affects people in different ways, but astronauts commonly complain that while the experience is fun for short periods, it's certainly no way to live. Why? Because humans yearn for a centre of gravity. We need to know which way is up.

The problem for those who live in outer space is that everything floats – even water. It's impossible to have a shower because the water doesn't fall from the shower nozzle. Similarly, food floats off plates. Astronauts like to get back to earth because they find the extreme disorientation unnerving.

What is true for space travellers is also true for those who have remained on earth but are sick of the moral weightlessness that has infected Western culture since the 1960s. Just like space, everything in the moral realm now seems to be adrift.

Hugh Mackay, the Australian social commentator, has put his finger on this alarming tendency in a recent article: "One thing is certain; we're not." He points to an unusual trend in colloquial speech which is an important sign of significant value shifts. It's found in the popular saying: "So, yeah – no" or alternatively "No, yeah – so, no."

Mackay finds it intriguing that now when we want to say "yes", we bolt a contradiction on to it. Is this simply a linguistic accident? Or is a cultural pointer to a deeper malaise? Is it a sign of the uncertainty and confusion that has descended on Australian society following our abandonment of a Christian worldview and our adoption of postmodern and relativist values?

Social historians since the '60s have documented the profound transformation – indeed revolution – that has taken place in the intellectual realm in the West. The notion of objective truth is now dead. No one believes that we can know anything for sure these days. The idea of "truth" and "right" now mean "true for me" and "right for me". We have reached a crisis point, particularly for morality. This issue of *AP* examines these issues in the critical area of ethics.

Peter Hastie 

# The unwelcome relative

*Relativists are fighting back. Christians, beware!*



**A**lan Bloom, the author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, launches his critique on Western society with the statement: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative." Bloom's observations signal that a revolution has taken place in the way we think. A crisis has occurred in our understanding of truth and morality.

Peter Hastie recently met Dr Scott Rae, Professor of Biblical Studies and Ethics at Talbot Theological Seminary, Biola University. Over breakfast in Irvine, Los Angeles, Dr Rae explained how this revolution has transformed our perceptions of morality and ethics and radically affected our culture.

Dr Rae holds an MA and PhD in social ethics from the University of Southern California, and a ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary. His major interest is in how Scripture applies to current social issues. He specialises in the subject of medical ethics and bioethics. He is the



**Scott Rae  
talks to  
Peter Hastie**

author of *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, *Brave New Families: the Ethics of Commercial Surrogate Motherhood*, *Biblical Ethics and Reproductive Technologies* and *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis of Ethics*. He is a consultant ethicist for five hospitals in Southern California.

**Is there any reason to be moral in today's world?**

Absolutely. The first and most obvious reason is that God commands it. Scripture is very clear that the moral life is not optional. Following Christ involves the cultivation of virtue. God expects us to adhere to biblical principles and values. Further, I think it's possible to make a case that all people should be moral whether they have spiritual leanings or not.

Most people still have an intuitive connection between virtue and the good life. We may give celebrity status to people who are very successful, very wealthy, and have no sense of moral values, but if you ask most people, "is that who you'd like your children to be like?", they'll sing a very different tune. I think there's still a connection in our culture between being a good person and living a good life. While many people would never aspire to be like Mother Theresa, no one would dare say that she has lived an unsuccessful life.

This is especially true from the point of view of business ethics. I find it very interesting that executives and boards of directors are increasingly suggesting that character counts – it's a real issue. Remember, these are people who usually have no theological axe to grind. What they're saying is "if we're going to do business, we must have people of character". Character builds trust, reliability and dependability. These are the important qualities that people in business are looking for. They don't want to be ripped off. So they get nervous when they meet a guy at the top

of his profession who's making lots of money, but is a notorious womaniser and on to his third wife. These types are usually alienated from their children and have virtually no friends. We may put celebrity status on these guys, but I think we rightly raise questions about whether they lead a good life.

### What's the alternative?

I like to put it like this – either you have morality or you have William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. That was the famous book, you'll remember, which showed what human beings are like when you throw out the rule book and let the strong and selfish take over. So take your pick. I haven't met anybody yet who has read *Lord of the Flies*, understood it, and still wants to live in that world. But those are the options. Either you have some sort of commitment to moral standards that transcend culture, or you live in a *Lord of the Flies* world where Nietzsche was right – it's all about power.

Now, the question is – can you hold to some idea of morality without it being theologically grounded? I think that's the harder question. Frankly, it's very hard to pull off. Obviously, people play at it. But the reality is that if you don't have any theological roots, your values are suspended in metaphysical mid-air. You have no real grounding for them. And this is where the discipline of philosophical ethics is today. We are promoting all kinds of systems and values, but without any ultimate grounding.

What we're finding is that relativism is making an incredible comeback. Many of us thought that relativism was dead and buried in the '60s when it had been discredited as a moral theory. However, what we're finding now is that the average person has bought into the idea of multiculturalism where one culture is regarded as good as another. So the multicultural emphasis inevitably ends up promoting moral relativism.

Frankly, I find it very interesting to see how morally inconsistent multiculturalists can be when it comes to speaking out against heinous practices around the world which degrade people. For instance, where are the radical multicultural feminists who ought to be speaking out against young girls being forcibly circumcised in the Middle East and parts of Africa? They're silent because they know they can't criticise this barbaric religious practice without stepping out of their relativism and saying, "Hey, you can't do that because it violates an absolute moral

standard that transcends culture!" Because they're relativists, they can't say that these young girls are being mutilated.

### How important is ethics? Do Protestants, who stress theology and spirituality, take it seriously enough?

Protestants have often been considered weak in this area. I sometimes think that our Roman Catholic friends have got a better overall approach to this subject. The term they use for ethics is "moral theology". In their eyes moral theology is a non-negotiable element of theology. As far as Roman Catholic theologians are concerned, if you don't do moral theology then you haven't done theology. I find myself in sympathy with that approach.

Ethics doesn't get the attention it deserves because most evangelicals today have a privatised faith. This means that the average evangelical's faith is privately engaging but socially irrelevant.

***Ethics doesn't get the attention it deserves because most evangelicals today have a privatised faith.***

Further, I think that the evangelical focus on spiritual formation has fed into that. If you ask somebody today, "how's your spiritual life?", they interpret that to mean "how's the quality of your time alone with God?" However, that's a very truncated view of spirituality. If all of life under the lordship of Christ is spiritual, then ethics must be integrally related to spirituality. Jesus certainly saw it that way. The Sermon on the Mount contains far more teaching about ethics than it does about a person's private relationship to God. The notion of a privatised faith – in the absence of personal ethics – is still a major problem.

### Why is there such concern about proper ethical behaviour when "tolerance" is so much in vogue?

The problem is that we can't live with our multiculturalism. It is simply impossible to tolerate every point of view. Should we tolerate the Islamic terrorists who are teaching jihad? I have no interest in tolerating that. I have no interest in tolerating people who circumcise young girls with a broken Coke bottle. I have no interest in tolerating people who do honour killings in India. I have no interest in tolerating people who sell their children into slavery

or who enslave young girls into prostitution. All these are abominable practices. They are injustices. I have no interest in tolerating the views of people who promote the killing of unborn children through abortion.

The problem is that our relativism has forced us into a different view of tolerance. Tolerance now means accepting someone else's views as equally valid with your own, which is classic relativism. If I went on to a secular university campus today and said that homosexuality is immoral, I would be accused not only of intolerance but also of inciting hatred on the campus. In the USA, the religious liberty to state my convictions has pretty much gone out the window.

If tolerance in Western culture means "accepting every position as equally valid", then Christians become by definition intolerant people. However, I believe the evidence clearly supports the fact that relativists are far more intolerant than the average Christian. If you go down to any secular university campus in America you'll find that the most intolerant people of all are the faculty in those institutions. They have a rigid ideological bias. Although they usually claim to be relativists, they aren't by any stretch.

### How do you explain the subtle changes that have taken place in the way we talk about morality today? Where we spoke of moral laws, now we talk about moral values.

Yes, there has been a subtle change going on. The idea that there were moral laws reflected the notion there were absolutes. And I think the notion of moral law implied there was a moral law-giver. I believe, at least in America today, that the battle lines in the war for the soul of our culture are drawn here ... that's where the dividing line is. The division is between people who hold that morality is a human creation and those who hold that morality has a transcendent source. The problem is that there are lots of religious people who think that morality is a human creation. Strangely, just because people claim to have theological roots, it doesn't follow that they believe that there is a transcendent source for morality.

### In our world many people say there is no such thing as black and white morality, just varying shades of grey. How should a Christian respond to that?

I think they are wrong. There are a lot of things that are black and white.

However, I do think the world is more complex than it was in the ancient world. The fact is that there are many issues in modern life that the Scripture doesn't directly address. The Scriptures develop principles and themes that touch on those areas, but some of the ethical issues that I'm concerned with do create problems for us.

Let me say that it's unrealistic to have expected the ancient authors to have addressed things they couldn't possibly have seen. I'm talking about reproductive technologies, things like that. I think there are principles and parameters that the Bible gives us ... we're not left without a witness. But, for example, take a lot of the genetic technologies. It's a little trickier to read the Scripture and apply it to them than it is to apply it to abortion or assisted suicide, where both abortion and assisted suicide were widely practised in the ancient world. The Bible's teaching on the sanctity of life is very clear.

However, in the ancient world they didn't have the capacity to clone a human being or play around with somebody's DNA. So just by virtue of the world being more scientifically complicated makes the application of Scripture more complicated as well. Obviously, in some of these areas there's room for people of good will and who are committed to biblical teaching to agree to disagree. One example that I can think of involves some of our students from Europe. When they attend our courses they can't believe that the preponderance of students in our program support the death penalty. They say that virtually nobody in the Christian community in Europe supports the death penalty. Now, I think the Scripture's fairly clear about that, but those who come from Europe are really caught off-guard by it. So I think there are some areas where we just can't be black and white.

However, it's a completely different story when people say that since there are some legitimate areas of disagreement, therefore it's impossible to have a black or white position. But this is an entirely unwarranted deduction. It simply doesn't follow. In fact, there's a lot that the Bible is very clear about, where it doesn't allow for any grey areas. My experience for the most part is that when people say that the Bible is not black and white, they just don't want to be subject to moral absolutes.

**Why do people assert so vigorously the idea that there's no such thing as absolute right and wrong?**

People see a lot of moral diversity in our culture. However, I think the amount of diversity is often overstated. Then they see these intractable moral debates where we're not really engaging one other; we're just shouting at each other. And they say, "If there's so little consensus on morality, how can there be any absolutes?" Personally, I think the modern multicultural movement has put a lot of strain on people who want to hold to moral absolutes. The problem is that if you hold to moral absolutes, you're vilified as being a cultural imperialist. However, I think many people would regard it as self-evident that some cultures are morally superior to others.

***The problem is that if you hold to moral absolutes, you're vilified as being a cultural imperialist.***



**To what extent do you lay the blame for the moral decline over the last 30 years at the feet of educators?**

Actually, I think there's a lot of fault to be shared around. It's not all the fault of educators. One of the factors in the moral collapse is the influence of relativism on our current parents during the '60s and '70s. We're reaping the whirlwind of that now. And so what kids are getting in the schools is not being countered at home. In fact it's being reinforced by parents who have been raised in the same kind of educational system. I also think some churches bear part of the blame too. The church, by and large, has preached a more privatised faith, where, as long as you're connecting with Jesus, that's basically all that God calls us to do. Of course, that's not enough. So educators bear a lot of the blame for the mess we're in, but so do parents and the church.

**Is there a difference between social customs and morality? Do we create our own morality?**

No, we don't create our own morality. Absolutely not. If we create our own morality, then we end up with *Lord of the Flies*. And if we create our own morality, then how do we make proper judgments when conflicts arise between cultures?

The way some people have tried to sort out their cultural differences with one another has been through terrorism or power. Terror is the new form of Nietzsche's will to power. It is a moral vision that terrorists want to impose, but they have no interest in persuasion or any kind of traditional method. It's strictly by force and power. And if we create our own morality, then there's nothing on the table that says "that's wrong". How can we possibly condemn anything if we make up our own morality? If you're a relativist you certainly can't. There are a lot of relativists who got pretty worked up about September 11. I don't understand why.

**Is it possible to hold to absolutes when different cultures have different opinions? Some cultures believe in one wife, others believe in more than one.**

We need to remember that it doesn't follow that there are no moral absolutes simply because we observe moral diversity in our world. I believe the Bible is very clear about one wife. I also think there's a good natural law argument that can be made for one wife as well.

I guess one thing that I want people to realise is that we actually hold many moral values in common. There's not as much diversity as people make out. We all seem to agree that we can't do business without holding the values of truth-telling, trust and contract-keeping. Indeed, we know that if we lose those values our economy will go down the drain as happened in Russia when the mafia took control. Think about all the moral values that virtually every civilisation has held in common. They are absolutely necessary to having a functioning society. If you don't have them you descend into anarchy.

I volunteer in my kid's classrooms every once in a while. When I went in one time, I looked around the classroom and there were all these moral maxims ... "play fair, take your turn, don't interrupt"... all these little things. It was a sort of "all I ever needed to know I learned in kindergarten". Actually, it was a kind of natural law treatise written on the blackboard. Then I thought to myself, "where did all these values come from? Is it a coincidence that we virtually all agree on these values?" It's hardly an accident. The reason we agree on them is obviously because God has revealed them in creation and also our culture has been more deeply influenced than it realises by Christianity. Now the interesting thing is that we have far more in common in basic moral values

than those issues on which we disagree.

When we face moral conflicts we try to discover the standards that transcend our culture. And I don't think you can have a standard that transcends culture consistently without a theological grounding.

**Some say moral absolutes are only social conditioning. Does society actually condition us to think this way or are moral values objective, real and independent?**

Actually, I hope it's both. It's very clear from the history of civilisation that moral values transcend culture. They are objective, they are out there. And that's the reason why culture conditions us to live by them.

Does culture condition us in other ways? Of course. But is culture powerful enough to dissuade us or to nullify objective values? Anecdotally, probably yes. But I think you can make a good argument that the moral anarchy of some place like Rwanda is the exception to the rule. What about terrorism? That tragically may not be an exception to the general rule. Many terrorists today are saying that their moral vision is an absolute that trumps even their own life. So I think it would be disingenuous to cite the Islamic moral vision as an example of moral relativism. It's actually nothing of the sort. If anything, it's an example of the total moral absolutist. As far as these people are concerned there are no grey areas.

**People sometimes say that if absolute values are imposed on you then you are no longer free. Does freedom mean the ability to create your own values?**

No, I think freedom means the right to make decisions without coercive constraints. By that I mean external coercive constraints. I would call "values" internal coercive constraints. If values are freely chosen, then they are not really coercive.

The original idea of freedom did not imply complete autonomy. It presumed constraints. For instance, a train is not free to go off the railroad tracks. It's made to run on them. In fact, if it doesn't live within that limitation, it can't function at all. A fish is not made to live on land. Again, it's not free if it tries to do so. So freedom doesn't mean "doing your own thing". It means doing what in your own conscience you know to be right. It is a completely cockeyed notion of freedom to think that you are free to do whatever you choose. Freedom and autonomy are two different things. Just because there is

some sort of constraint doesn't mean you are not free.

**How do you answer the charge often made that people who believe in moral absolutes are hard, intolerant and unyielding, while those who believe in moral relativism are caring and compassionate?**

That's a joke. The most rigid, unbending people in the USA today are relativistic, multiculturalist, university faculty. There's nobody else that's even close to them for being complete bigots. The Religious Right look like lapdogs compared to this group. Jerry Falwell is an incredibly gracious man compared to radical feminists like Catherine McKinnon. If I'm an outsider, I'd much rather live in Falwell's world than hers.

In my experience of university life, relativists are the most intolerant people around. Try getting someone with a conservative political agenda to speak on their campus. Or try getting someone who opposes homosexuality. Or try getting a woman to speak on those campuses who opposes abortion. Do they believe in free speech? I mean, hell would freeze over before that would happen. In theory it sounds right, but in reality it's light years from the truth. It's incredible that that is the perception that is out there. It's just mind-boggling. And it's because people don't see what is happening on the average university campus.

**Some say morality is a matter of individual conscience and personal motives and has nothing to do with an objective list of do's and don'ts.**

If morality is nothing more than my subjective preference, then we have no basis for making a moral judgement anytime, anyplace on anyone. Let's face it, if morality is subjective, then if it feels good for me to rear-end you with my car, who are you to make a judgement on me?

Lots of Christians go wrong here when they say we are not allowed to make moral judgments on others' actions. I'd like a dollar for every time I hear people say "Jesus said 'don't judge'". I'd like to say, "read the rest of the passage where he

says, remove the speck from your brother's eye, but only after you've taken the log out of your own". Jesus never said "don't make a moral judgment". Generally, the people who want a flight from objective morality tend to be the most morally judgmental people around. They've usually got more moral absolutes than you can poke a stick at. Seriously, ask them. Take a look at their ideological agenda. It's about as absolute as you can get. A woman's right to choose abortion is absolute. Tolerance is absolute. Freedom to make your own sexual preference is absolute. The list goes on and on. Opposition to the death penalty is absolute. Mandatory sex education is absolute.

**Dostoyevsky, in *The Brothers Karamozov*, says that if there's no God then anything is permissible. Is he right?**

I'd like to rephrase the question a little differently. I think you can have moral values that you adhere to without a belief in God. The question is, "Can you have an adequately grounded morality without belief in God?" I think the answer to that is "No". If you don't have a moral law-giver, then morality is a human creation. And once it's a human creation, then you're dependent on consensus for it. And what happens then is that the content of your morality becomes very thin. If you're consistent with this, the only moral value you can have is that of consent. That which we mutually consent to is right. That leaves the substance of morality very thin indeed.

I think Dostoyevsky was right in an ultimate sense. If there is no moral law-giver, then morality is whatever we come up with. There have been many disciples of Nietzsche in the 20th century. For those who are afraid of Christian ethics and the religious right, I'd like to remind people that we've had far more people killed under atheistic regimes in the 20th century than we ever had in the history of the church. Far, far more. If you're going to get queasy about that, then you need to look carefully at the 20th century. Murdering people for state purposes was morally permissible in atheistic regimes.

**Does this mean that being religious is the only possible basis for morality?**

Can an atheist have moral values? Yes. Can an atheist have adequately grounded moral values? That's an entirely different question. I think that when most people ask that question, that is what they mean.

Can an atheist be a good person? Yes. That's part of common grace and natural law. Can an atheist know the difference between right and wrong? Yes, again because of natural law. Most atheists don't live consistently with their atheism because they can't. To do so, again, takes us back to Nietzsche and the unbridled use of power for our own selfish purposes. If all we are is a product of time and chance, then there's no categories for anything like morality. It's the law of the jungle and the "selfish gene". If people hold to an evolutionary materialist worldview, then they can't really talk about traditional morality. They've ruled it out with their view of origins.

However, I don't want to say that you can't be good without a saving faith in Christ. You can be good in a civic sense without faith in God. But ultimately, the goodness that rains down on the just and the unjust ultimately comes from God. Natural law is not suspended in theological mid-air. It's still grounded in God's revelation. It is embedded in creation.

**Should morality take into account the question of the greatest good? And what is it?**

I'm not sure that I necessarily accept the premise that the greatest good for the greatest number is the desirable outcome. In fact, if you act on that utilitarian premise, then minorities are in big trouble. By definition they are in big trouble. Again, it would be possible to make a plausible argument based on the Islamic view that having an Islamic society would be the greatest good for the greatest number... that's an argument you could make. But who really wants to live in that world?

**If you want to live an ethical life, how do you determine the greatest good?**

To live a consistently ethical life you have to be committed to the highest good. Augustine got this right when he said that the highest good is to know God.

To live an ethical life you have to be committed to the common good over your own personal good. You must bal-

ance your self-interest with a concern for the common good. The Bible doesn't condemn self-interest, but it condemns the exclusive pursuit of self-interest. If you don't balance that with concern for the common good, then you are living an ethically truncated life. And increasingly in the West, we have lost the ability to even talk about the common good. It's all about individual rights. Politicians keep saying "Are you better off than you were

*To live an ethical life you have to be committed to the common good over your own personal good.*

at the last election?" That's the wrong question. The question should be is the "common good" better off than it was at the last election. But we no longer bring that into public discussion any more.

**Is there more than one source for Christian ethics? Can moral values exist apart from special revelation?**

Yes and yes. I think the Bible leaves a large door open for natural law. By this, I mean that God has revealed moral values outside the pages of Scripture. Take for example the oracles to the nations in Jeremiah, Isaiah and Amos. Actually, virtually all the prophets spell them out. If you look carefully, you will see that the prophets condemn the nations for the very same things they were condemning Israel for. They condemn them for things like violence, oppression, injustice, perverting the justice system, and trampling the poor. They condemned Israel for all these things too. There's no distinction in accountability ... whether you've had access to the law or not.

Naturally, the only way that this can be just is if God provided these nations with access to those values in some other means than special revelation. I think Romans 2:12-15 makes that clear – that God has revealed moral values even to the unbeliever, apart from the law. He has

written his moral law on all our hearts and this is an important component in addressing our culture. If you don't hold to something like natural law, then on what basis do you talk to our culture about ethics?

Personally, I think this is why we find Roman Catholics so active in public policy. Natural law gives them a bridge from their theological ethics to the secular culture. Often Christians from a Reformed-Protestant background are reluctant to admit that God has revealed his law outside special revelation, but the Bible says He has. If you don't believe in natural law, then it's difficult to build a bridge to our culture.

Imagine that the girl next door is heading out to have an abortion this afternoon. You can't wait for her to come to faith and be discipled – although that's your ultimate goal. Your immediate task is to tell her why abortion is wrong in ways that are compelling to her. Without a bridge to natural law you can't do that. You are conceptually stuck. Now you could go over there and open the Bible and preach to her, but I think that's unlikely to be compelling.

**Should Christians search diligently in the social sciences for empirical evidence that backs up special revelation?**

Yes, I think it's very important. However, I want to make it crystal clear that that's not ultimately what is authoritative, but it is persuasive to a culture that has lost its theological moorings. For example, I'm very interested to see what data comes out on children who are born into surrogate mother arrangements. I think we might find some very interesting things that support a Christian view on the family. I'm interested to hear from the Netherlands about how assisted suicide is working.

For example, I would oppose surrogate motherhood arrangements if I were a legislator. In most cases, not only does it violate my theology of the family, but it also constitutes the purchase and sale of children. We ought to oppose this on the grounds of civil rights and constitutional violations. Ultimately human beings should not be objects for barter on the open market. Now I want to make sure that people understand that that is ultimately grounded in the fact that human beings are made in God's image and that their dignity is grounded only in that place. But they also need to know that this is unconstitutional and ought to be illegal for that reason.

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# No good without God

*Atheists may be moral, but ultimately their alternative is nihilism.*

Can we be good without God? At first the answer to this question may seem so obvious that even to ask it arouses indignation. For while those of us who believe in God find Him a source of moral strength which helps us to live better lives than we would without Him, nevertheless it's arrogant and ignorant to claim that agnostics and atheists do not often live good moral lives — indeed, embarrassingly, lives that sometimes put our own to shame.

But wait. It would, indeed, be arrogant and ignorant to claim that people cannot be good without belief in God. But that was not the question. The question was: can we be good without God? When we ask that question, we are posing in a provocative way the philosophical question of the objectivity of moral values.

Are the values we treasure mere social conventions like driving on the left versus the right side of the road? Or are they simply expressions of our personal likes, such as having a taste for certain foods or not? Do moral laws exist whether we recognise them or not, and if so, what is their foundation? Moreover, if morality is nothing more than a purely human idea, then why should we act morally, especially when it conflicts with self-interest? Or, are we in some way held accountable for our moral decisions and actions?

I want to argue that if God exists, then it follows that objective moral values, moral duties, and moral accountability exist as well. However, if God doesn't exist, then morality is just a human way of doing things, that is to say, it is subjective and non-binding. Of course, we might still behave in exactly the same way, but in the absence of God, these actions would no longer count as good (or evil), since if God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist. So, it's impossible to be truly good without God. On the other hand, if we do believe that moral values and duties are objective, this give us moral grounds for believing in God.

Let's assume that God exists. This leads to a number of logical conclusions. First, if we assume that God exists, then clearly objective moral values (that is, values outside of us) must exist. To say that



**William  
Lane Craig**

there are objective moral values is to say that something is right or wrong independently of whether we believe that it is right or wrong. It is to say, for example, that Nazi anti-Semitism was morally wrong, even though the Nazis who carried out the Holocaust thought that it was good; and it would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or brainwashing everybody who disagreed with them.

If you believe in God as the self-existent Creator, then clearly He must be the source of objective moral values. Where else could they come from? God's own holy and perfectly good nature supplies the absolute standard against which all actions and decisions are measured.

God's moral nature is what Plato called the "Good". He is the source of all moral value. He is by nature loving, generous, just, faithful, kind, and so forth.

But let's go a step further. If God is moral by nature and, therefore, the source of morality, we should not be surprised that His moral nature is expressed in relation to us in the form of divine commands which become our moral duties or obligations.

Far from being arbitrary, these commands flow necessarily from His moral nature. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, our whole moral duty can be summed up in the two great commandments: First, you shall love the Lord your God with every part of your being, and, second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

On this foundation we can affirm the objective goodness and rightness of love, generosity, self-sacrifice, and equality, and condemn as objectively evil and wrong

selfishness, hatred, abuse, discrimination, and oppression.

Finally, if we assume that God exists, and that moral standards are objective, then it follows that God holds all persons morally accountable for their actions. Evil and wrong will be punished; righteousness will be vindicated. Good ultimately triumphs over evil, and we shall finally see that we do live in a moral universe after all. Despite the inequities of this life, in the end the scales of God's justice will be balanced.

Thus, the moral choices we make in this life are infused with an eternal significance. We can with consistency make moral choices which run contrary to our self-interest and even undertake acts of extreme self-sacrifice, knowing that such decisions are not empty and meaningless gestures. Rather, our moral lives have a paramount significance. So I think it's evident that believing in God provides a sound foundation for morality.

Contrast this with the atheistic hypothesis. First, if atheism is true, objective moral values do not exist. If God does not exist, then what is the foundation for moral values? More particularly, what is the basis for the value of human beings? If God does not exist, then it is difficult to see any reason to think that human beings are special or that their morality is objectively true. Moreover, why think that we have any moral obligations to do anything? Who or what imposes any moral duties upon us?

Moreover, on the atheistic view there is no divine lawgiver. But then what source is there for moral obligation? Richard Taylor, an eminent ethicist, writes, "The modern age, more or less repudiating the idea of a divine lawgiver, has nevertheless tried to retain the ideas of moral right and wrong, not noticing that, in casting God aside, they have also abolished the conditions of meaningfulness for moral right and wrong as well. Thus, even educated persons sometimes declare that such things are war, or abortion, or the violation of certain human rights, are "morally wrong", and they imagine that they have said something true and significant. Educated people do not need to be

*The moral choices we make in this life are infused with an eternal significance.*

told, however, that questions such as these have never been answered outside of religion.”

Now it is important that we remain clear in understanding the issue before us. The question is *not*: Must we believe in God in order to live moral lives? There is no reason to think that atheists and theists alike may not live what we normally characterise as good and decent lives. Similarly, the question is *not*: Can we formulate a system of ethics without reference to God? If the non-theist grants that human beings do have objective value, then there is no reason to think that he cannot work out a system of ethics with which the person who believes in God would also largely agree. Or again, the question is *not*: Can we recognise the existence of objective moral values without reference to God? Those who believe in God will typically maintain that a person need not believe in God in order to recognise, say, that we should love our children.

However, if there is no God, then we have *no real ground* for thinking that the herd morality that has evolved among the human race is objectively true.

After all, what is so special about human beings? Aren't we, on atheistic assumptions, just accidental by-products of nature? Haven't we simply evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe? Aren't we doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time?

Let's assume for the sake of argument that some action, say, incest, may not be biologically or socially advantageous. It

harms our survival. So, according to the evolutionary model, it has become taboo; however, on the basis of this atheistic view there is really nothing really *wrong* with committing incest. If, as Kurtz states, “The moral principles that govern our behavior are rooted in habit and custom, feeling and fashion”, then the non-conformist who chooses to flout the herd morality, say, by committing incest, is doing nothing more

serious than acting unfashionably.

Thus, if naturalism is true, it becomes impossible to condemn war, oppression, or crime as evil. Nor can one praise brotherhood, equality, or love as good. It does not matter

what values you choose — for there is no such thing as right and wrong; good and evil do not exist. That means that an atrocity like the Holocaust was really morally indifferent. You may think that it was wrong, but your opinion has no more validity than that of the Nazi war criminal who thought it was good.

Moreover, because of its coherence and internal consistency, the Nazi ethic could not be discredited from within. Only from a transcendent vantage point which stands above relativistic, socio-cultural customs can we offer such a critique. But in the absence of God, it is precisely such a vantage point that we lack. One Rabbi

***Because of its coherence and internal consistency, the Nazi ethic could not be discredited from within.***

who was imprisoned at Auschwitz said that it was as though all the Ten Commandments had been reversed: thou shalt kill, thou shalt lie, thou shalt steal. Mankind has never seen such a hell. And yet, in a real sense, if naturalism is true, our world *is* Auschwitz. There is no good and evil, no right and wrong. Objective moral values do not exist.

Moreover, if atheism is true, there is no moral accountability for one's actions. Even if there were objective moral values and duties under naturalism, they are irrelevant because there is no moral accountability. If life ends at the grave, it makes no difference whether one lives as a Stalin or as a saint. As the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky rightly observed, if there is no immortality, then all things are permitted. Given the finality of death, it really does not matter how you live. So what do you say to someone who concludes that we may as well just live as we please, out of pure self-interest?

Somebody might say that it is in our best self-interest to adopt a moral lifestyle. But clearly, that is not always true: we all know situations in which self-interest runs smack in the face of morality. Moreover, if one is sufficiently powerful, like a Ferdinand Marcos or a Papa Doc Duvalier or even a Donald Trump, then you can pretty much ignore the dictates of conscience and safely live in self-indulgence.

Again, acts of self-sacrifice become particularly inept on a naturalistic world view. Why should you sacrifice your self-interest and especially your life for the sake of someone else? There can be no good reason for adopting such a self-negating course of action on the naturalistic world view. Sacrifice for another person is just stupid. Thus the absence of moral accountability from the philosophy of naturalism makes an ethic of compassion and self-sacrifice a hollow abstraction. We thus come to radically different perspectives on morality depending upon whether or not God exists. If God exists, there is a sound foundation for morality. If God does not exist, then, as Nietzsche saw, we are ultimately landed in nihilism.

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*The*  
**Williamstown Presbyterian Congregation**

*is celebrating*

**150 years of Presbyterian worship  
in Williamstown, Victoria**

*on* **Sunday 14th September** *this year.*

*Our* moderator general, **Rt. Rev. Jack Knapp**  
will conduct the service and preach on that Sunday.

*At* **2.00pm** that afternoon, there will be a recital  
on our beautiful pipe organ by our organists.

*There* will be an anecdotal history of the congregation  
and its members available both on CD and in book form.

*We* hope to see you there and then.

# Just indefensible

*There is such a thing as just war, but terrorism isn't it.*

Christians have thought and written deeply and extensively about just war since the beginning of the Christian era. Historically there have been two major positions.

Pacifism would seem to have been the first view of the Christian churches during the first centuries. It is a view that has had its supporters right up to our own day, both inside and outside the churches. It has also always been the minority view, which in itself does not make it wrong.

The just war theory from the time of Augustine has always enjoyed the greater following among Christians. However, with the invention of nuclear weapons during the cold war between the West and the USSR the just war theory suffered a set-back, for the simple reason that in a nuclear war there is no way in which justice can be contained.

However, with the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union all that changed. Since then there has been an easing of nuclear tensions. The most recent change was September 11, 2001. This is the new terrorism, especially in its militant form as represented by movements like Jemaah Islamiah and Al Qaeda, which some have called World War III.

Terrorism demands a response and just war theory provides the moral framework and conscientious response that Christians and others need.

In the Old Testament, the Lord the God of Israel throughout the nation's history encouraged Israel to fight against her neighbours, the pagan nations surrounding her both inside and outside the land of promise. In these campaigns the Lord frequently gave victory to Israel by raising up military leaders and made them successful.

These wars were often defensive in response to the attacks of traditional enemies like the Philistines who wanted to enslave the Hebrews. Sometimes they were offensive wars of expansion as the Lord led them and gave them success in conquering and holding the land.

While there is nothing similar in the New Testament – largely because the church takes the place of Israel and the church is an international body with a spiritual mission to the nations – it would be



**Douglas  
Milne**

wrong to think that the New Testament has nothing to say on this issue.

Perhaps the closest we come is Paul's teaching about the state authorities being servants of God to oppose evil and to defend the good in society (Rom. 13:1–8). To carry out this God-given mandate the civil authorities are equipped with a sword that certainly stands for force of some kind.

Not only did Augustine and later writers see the need to spell out the stringent conditions under which war might justly be opened, but they also lay down criteria for conducting war once it has begun. The principal criteria are the following, first for going to war, then for waging it.

1: You go to war only for a just cause such as the defence of your motherland or the preservation of civilisation. Your reasons are open to inspection and debate.

2: You go to war as a last resort when all other avenues to peace have been tried but failed. Just war is opposed to all war-mongering.

3: You go to war for the right reasons – not, for example, to inflict revenge or because of nationalistic ambitions.

4: You go to war only under the authority of lawful governments and not as private individuals or protest groups.

5: You go to war because you believe that war will achieve more good in the long-term than not going to war. This means establishing peace and restoring a social order of law and justice for all.

These are some of the leading criteria for going to war. Now the criteria for conducting the war:

1: You differentiate civilians from mili-

tary personnel, doing everything possible not to harm civilians. This is the principle of discrimination.

2: You use proportionate force by not engaging in overkill, for example, wiping out the enemy forces when a short engagement will achieve the same end. This is the principle of proportionality.

3: You treat enemy soldiers humanely as prisoners of war, not engaging in torture or brutality. This is the principle of humaneness.

4: You deal honestly and justly with breaches of military discipline or war crimes, even among your own soldiers.

5: You work for a just peace and generous peace by aiming to restore law and order, even dignity, to your defeated enemy.

When we test the case of terrorism by these criteria we come up with the following sort of questions and answers. Going to war:

1: Is the war against terrorism just? Terrorism is a threat to world peace and to much that is noble and decent in civilisation. Its tactics are brutal and cowardly.

2: Is the war against terrorism a last resort? Terrorism is not open to peace negotiations and many would object to negotiating with terrorists on principle.

3: Is the war against terrorism being conducted from right motives and with right intentions? After September 11 strong emotions were aroused against those responsible. This had a lot to do with the new American response in pursuing the war in Afghanistan, for example.

4: Is the war against terrorism being conducted by lawful authorities? The war against terrorism has been supported by many countries through their governments and lawfully appointed leaders across the world.

5: Is the war against terrorism an expansionist war of Western hegemony in the world or aimed at the greater good of world peace? It is not easy to answer this question since a mixture of motives probably go into this war.

Ideally we ought to answer all five questions in the affirmative but enough has been said to establish the war against terrorism as a new just war that Christians

***The civil authorities are equipped with a sword that certainly stands for force of some kind.***

can approve and support. But what about the methods being used to prosecute this war? This leads to another set of questions and answers.

1: Are terrorists and their supporters being carefully targeted and innocent family members, for example, not being discriminated against? People are becoming aware of the difference, for all practical purposes, between more moderate and more extreme Muslims.

2: Are proportionate military means being used against terrorists? Since terrorists will usually fight to the death, many of them are being killed.

3: Are captured terrorists being treated humanely? As far as we know captured terrorists are being treated responsibly, although there may be exceptions.

4: Are war crimes and atrocities being brought to trial? This has taken place in Indonesia and Singapore, for example, after the Bali bombings.

5: Are there larger goals in place for a post-terrorist world? Countries are cooperating to rid the world of terrorists.

Once again we may argue that the answers to these questions about the ways in which the war against terrorism is being waged generally justify this war.

We all know how common it is for both sides in a conflict to claim that theirs is the side of justice, even claiming God's blessing and approval of their belligerence (for example, World War I). So let us, for the sake of the argument, take the view that the terrorists have a righteous cause, something that most of them do actually believe. Can they sustain their belief in

terrorism as a just war?

This requires that we apply the same criteria to their defence in conducting this war and in their methods in doing so. Four examples are enough.

1: Are terrorists rightly motivated? Terrorists transgress right motives because they are waging war out of hate and revenge, hoping to inflict as much damage and pain as possible on their enemies. Those who planned the September 11 massacre were apparently delighted at

*Theirs is a mindless, brutal campaign conducted out of twisted motives.*

the success of the operation. Those who executed the Bali bombings are unrepentant and have no sympathy for the bereaved families.

2: Are the terrorists acting by

lawful authority? The terrorists do not act under the auspices of governments by legal authority but as private individuals who are conducting their own private war of terror on the perceived enemies of Islam.

3: Do the terrorists observe the principle of proportionality? Terrorists transgress the principle of proportionality in their excessive measures against westerners and their targets.

4: Do terrorists avoid civilian populations? Terrorists transgress the principle of discrimination by endangering the lives of non-combatants in their terrorist bombings and mass killings. They deliberately

choose 'soft-targets' or civilian centres.

So the application of even these four criteria for just war fails in the case of terrorism and its methods. They have no reasonable or ethical justification for their campaign of terror against Western countries or governments that are friendly towards them. Theirs is a mindless, brutal campaign conducted out of twisted motives and open to investigation by international bodies for crimes against humanity.

We who belong to the Western nations must ask ourselves about injustice and wickedness in our own societies before condemning outright the acts of terrorists. Terrorism is a wake-up call to western countries to repent of their own evils and be right in God's sight. In the war against terror there is no place for self-righteousness.

We must be careful that in our zeal to track down the terrorists and avenge the death of many innocent people, we do not ourselves become brutalised and vindictive. Even terrorists have natural human rights, such as fair trial and protection from vigilante justice. Amnesty International, for example, has highlighted the plight of those terrorists who are shut up in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, without being charged or put on trial.

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*This is an edited version of a public lecture delivered at the Biblical Graduate School of Theology, Singapore, in June.*



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# The covenant family



**20 daily Bible studies  
on Genesis 21-28**

**W**e continue this month with the narrative in Genesis of Abraham and his descendants. In doing so, we learn a lot about human nature, its weaknesses and its strengths, and we are both challenged and encouraged.

But thankfully, these true-life stories teach us much more about God and his ways. Without the input of God's sovereign grace the adventures and circumstances of the lives of the patriarchs would be at best confusing and at worst beguiling. What if I were to use the account of how Jacob obtained his father's blessing to justify robbing a bank in order to support a child through Compassion Australia?

These Old Testament stories help us to understand something about the doctrine of Election or Predestination and help throw light on some of the hard sayings of Jesus. They work together with the New Testament to give us a deeper insight into what God is revealing to us in his inspired Word.

If you are using these daily Bible Studies for the first time you may like to have a brief look first through last month's studies to get some background on Abraham.

**Bruce Christian**

## DAY 1

### *If only it would last*

#### THE PASSAGE

GENESIS 21:22-34

**THE POINT** Abimelech could see great blessing coming to the 'newcomer' to the adjoining area (Abraham had been around there 25 years!). It was time to make a deal before things got nasty over property and water rights, so issues were brought out into the open and a clear agreement drawn up and 'signed' by oath. Unfortunately, history has shown that although God is Eternal (v. 33) human treaties aren't: the Israel-Philistine(Palestine) conflict remains!

#### THE PARTICULARS

- Even the pagan Philistine leaders recognised God's hand at work to bless Abraham in everything he did.
- Abraham was seen by others as an 'alien' in the world (see Deuteronomy 26:5, Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16).
- Showing kindness to others provides a good bargaining chip if a return favour is necessary at some future time.
- Preemptive negotiation is better than preemptive striking and often enables misunderstandings to be corrected (see Prov. 15:1).
- Abraham called on the LORD's name in every place he settled.

#### TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are there any treaties you need to negotiate to avoid conflict?

## DAY 2

### *The Lord will provide*

#### THE PASSAGE

GENESIS 22:1-14

**THE POINT** This is Abraham's greatest act of faith: to trust God's word and act upon it in spite of the fact that doing so would result in the only hope of its fulfilment being sabotaged! Hebrews 11:17-19 spells this out very precisely. The key lies in Abraham's response to Isaac's question: God himself will provide the sacrificial lamb! Jesus referred to this in his clear declaration in John 8:56.

#### THE PARTICULARS

- This episode was God's testing (ie proving) of Abraham's faith.
- Abraham was unhesitating in his response to God's call.
- God was fully aware of the place Isaac held in Abraham's life.
- Abraham was sensitive to Isaac's needs and feelings while not shrinking back from resolute obedience to God's revealed will.
- God pushed Abraham to the very edge in this test of his faith.
- Abraham's willingness to offer up his only, beloved son was a picture of what God himself was prepared to do, and did, for us.

#### TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What effect would this test have had on Abraham's ongoing relationship with his God? (See James 1:3)
- Has God ever tested (proved) your faith? How did you go?

## DAY 3

*Step by Covenant Step*

## THE PASSAGE

GENESIS 22:15-24

**THE POINT** We are again reminded of the close interaction between the outworking of God's sovereign purposes, Abraham's faith, and his actual obedience to God's will (see comments on Gen. 18:18-19 last month). Because of Abraham's progress in obedience, God reaffirms his unconditional promise of offspring and universal blessing, which was ultimately fulfilled in the single offspring, Jesus (see Galatians 3:15-18). We are also introduced at this point in the story to Rebekah in preparation for the news of Sarah's death (see 24:67 – Isaac must have been a 'mother's boy').

## THE PARTICULARS

- Because of who he is, the one and only God, the LORD can only swear an oath 'by himself' (see Heb. 6:13ff), putting his whole character on the line in the keeping of his promise to Abraham.
- Abraham was put right with God by faith alone (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4), but his ongoing obedience was an integral part of the Covenant deal God made with him (see James 2:20-24). We must hold these twin elements of revealed truth in tension.
- God was already anticipating a wife (thus offspring) for Isaac.

## TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do you ever doubt God's ability to keep his promises? Why?

## DAY 4

*The price has been paid*

## THE PASSAGE

GENESIS 23:1-20

**THE POINT** Why does God go to such great lengths to explain the circumstances of Sarah's burial? It is powerful narrative, impressing on us two very important truths: Abraham's covenant claim on the Promised Land; and the fact that Abraham is only a tenant (stranger/sojourner) there because his real home is in heaven (Hebrews 11:16). This is spelt out in the context of Abraham's great love for his covenant wife and her life of faith and devotion.

## THE PARTICULARS

- Although he did not yet possess any of the land the LORD had promised him, the death of Sarah inspired Abraham to invest in a portion of it for her burial by a firm, watertight transaction in the presence of many witnesses to avoid future controversy.
- The formal but hollow negotiation process established both Abraham's God-given right to the land (verse 6) and his legal purchase of it by paying the price in full (verse 16). Is this a picture of our redemption with the precious blood of Christ?
- Abraham set a clear example of honesty and charity in business.

## TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is there a tendency for us today to go to great lengths to avoid paying the market value? What does Proverbs 20:14 imply?

## DAY 5

*A new dilemma for Abraham*

## THE PASSAGE

GENESIS 24:1-9

**THE POINT** Covenant faithfulness is not always simple. The next step of obedience involves getting a wife for Isaac. Abraham has learnt from the Hagar/Ishmael episode that she must not be an 'outsider'. So Isaac can't marry a local; but nor can he go back to the land his father had left. Either option would nullify the covenant! Abraham has been told about his brother's family back home (22:20-24) but what if no suitable candidate is prepared to leave and come to Canaan? The only way is to try ...

## THE PARTICULARS

- Abraham entrusted his chief servant with an onerous responsibility. Exposing the 'thigh' (euphemism for genitals) to risk was an expression of trust, a very solemn way of swearing an oath.
- The servant was justly nervous about accepting a responsibility that had every chance of being impossible to fulfil.
- It was clear to Abraham that the promised land, Canaan, was a non-negotiable part of the covenant. There was no going back.
- Because of his faith, Abraham was confident of success; but he did not require his servant to be successful, only to be faithful.

## TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What is more important to you, success or faithfulness?

## DAY 6

*A lesson in guidance*

## THE PASSAGE

GENESIS 24:10-21

**THE POINT** Abraham's servant sets us an excellent example of how to trust God for guidance: he prayed earnestly; he was specific in his requests so that the answer could be recognised without ambiguity; and he used his common sense to enhance or eliminate possibilities. In other words, he avoided the 2 common errors: the 'promise box' approach (shut your eyes and stab); or the work-it-out-by-logic approach without waiting specifically on God. God responded to his spiritual devotion and his practical application to the task by sovereignly setting up the required outcome.

## THE PARTICULARS

- The 'common sense' side of the servant's application to his task included: taking the necessary gifts on the assumption of a successful mission; going to Nahor, the town bearing his master's brother's name; choosing a time and location when he was most likely to meet eligible women; and choosing a 'sign' consistent with qualities desired in a good wife (kindness, industry, etc).
- The 'spiritual' side of his method was specific believing prayer.
- The LORD's response was spectacularly clear and immediate.

## TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Should you modify your approach to seeking God's guidance?

## DAY 7

*Unexpected excitement*

## THE PASSAGE

GENESIS 24:22-31

**THE POINT** It is not hard to imagine how the story of Abraham's servant finding Rebekah ended up having such a prominent place in the traditions of God's people. The recounting of it must have been every Israelite girl's favourite bedtime story. The almost fairytale unfolding of the providence of God in events that came to play so significant a part in the formation of the nation who were his special covenant people is breathtaking. God's faithfulness, responding to the faithfulness of Abraham and his servant, is awesome, inspiring in us a desire to exhibit the same kind of faithfulness in our lives, that we too might be blessed.

## THE PARTICULARS

- The servant was not slow in acting on the clear evidence of God's sovereign hand in the events that answered his prayer.
- At each step Rebekah's response and behaviour confirmed the servant's belief that his prayer had been answered. God is so good; God loves me so; God answers prayer!
- Even Laban's reaction was amazingly spontaneous and positive.

## TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Have your current circumstances made you overly pessimistic about God's providence? Why not talk to him about it?

## DAY 8

*Gentle persuasion?*

## THE PASSAGE

GENESIS 24:32-49

**THE POINT** It is one thing to seek God's guidance in areas that affect only me and where my life is going. It's quite another matter to know God's will in things involving other people's lives. If I believe God has spoken to me in a particular way, how much should I use this to influence others? Is it a kind of spiritual blackmail to say, 'God spoke to me on the way to the meeting tonight ...', as if this somehow settles the matter without further discussion? Was Abraham's servant putting unfair pressure on Rebekah to say 'Yes' without seeking God's will for herself? We can understand the servant's confidence and excitement that he had found the right girl, but should he have told them everything? These are not easy questions to answer, but we can see God's hand in it all. Perhaps Rebekah needed the reassurance his story gave.

## THE PARTICULARS

- Knowing and doing the LORD's will was more important to the servant than all else, even rest and refreshment from his journey.
- Commitment to prayer was central to the servant's mission.
- Rebekah was left to decide for herself what to do (sort of?).

## TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How much pressure should we use to persuade others?

**DAY 9** *“I will go,” she said*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 24:50-58

**THE POINT** Abraham’s servant had left Laban and Bethuel little room for negotiation – it seemed the LORD had made his purposes clear. The only matter remaining for discussion was, ‘How soon?’. L and B were keen to claim the statutory cooling-off period but the jubilant servant was unrestrainable. When the LORD bestows such abundant blessing all we want to do is keep thanking and praising him – and telling everyone else. The good news must not be withheld from A and I a moment longer than the trip itself. Rebekah was obviously swept off her feet by the overwhelming gifts and prospects of further blessing from such a gracious God.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Laban and Bethuel were in no doubt about the clear evidence of the LORD’s guiding hand in all the events of the last few hours.
- The servant’s first reaction was to thank and praise the LORD. The days of nervous apprehension were over; success at last!
- The generous gifts symbolise God’s abundant blessing on those who seek to walk in his ways in all things (cf Malachi 3:10).

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Should Rebekah have asked for more time to consider her options? Do you tend to be too quick or too slow in responding?

**DAY 10** *Girl meets boy... and...*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 24:59-67

**THE POINT** It is not without significance that, when they met, Isaac had come from the area associated with his rejected half-brother Ishmael (see Genesis 16:14) and Rebekah had come from the area of Mesopotamia her great-uncle Abraham had been called on by God to leave. Their union was clearly part of God’s exclusive Covenant Plan, centred on a particular people in a particular place.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- The narrative of these few verses leaves us in no doubt that Rebekah left her father’s household and country (mentioned once in v. 59 and twice in v. 61), thus satisfying Abraham’s main concern.
- Her family’s parting blessing (verse 60) was quite prophetic.
- The LORD even orchestrated the final meeting of the 2 parties.
- Isaac was obviously the sort of man who needed a woman in his life. In the patriarchal narrative he is clearly overshadowed by his father and his son, and to some extent his wife. His part is little more than providing a link between Abraham and Jacob.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Isaac and Rebekah’s happy meeting and union fulfilled another step in God’s perfect plan for his people. But the path ahead won’t be free of trouble and strife. Are you trusting God with your life?

**DAY 11** *Abraham left all to Isaac*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 25:1-11

**THE POINT** Keturah and her descendants are a totally different matter from Hagar and Ishmael. Keturah was never more than a concubine, an ‘interest on the side’ which somehow was accepted practice even among men of God, in spite of the clear intent of Genesis 2:24! Hagar on the other hand was intended to be a surrogate mother for Sarah of the covenant son. This plan didn’t work and Ishmael became a major embarrassment in the scheme of things in a way that Zimram and his brothers never did. Today’s account of Keturah is quite inconsequential to the overall flow of the narrative – tomorrow’s account of Ishmael isn’t!

**THE PARTICULARS**

- A clear distinction is always kept between Isaac and all his half-brothers. Isaac was unique among them all (see Romans 9:7).
- Ishmael was involved with Isaac in the burial of their father Abraham, but the children of Keturah had no such involvement.
- In spite of its many severe trials, Abraham’s life could be described as satisfying and ‘full of years’. He had been a good and faithful servant who now entered into the joy of his Lord.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Are you comfortable with the doctrine of God’s electing grace?

**DAY 12** *Exit Ishmael... but...*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 25:12-18

**THE POINT** This short passage is of particular interest to us today. There are significant parallels between Ishmael and the covenant line of Isaac/Jacob. Like Jacob (Israel), Ishmael had 12 sons who became tribal rulers. The significance of all this becomes clear when we look at the Koran, written 2,600 years after these events and 600 years after the time of Christ. The Koran claims that the true covenant line was through Ishmael, the legitimate first-born son of Abraham. It even claims that Abraham was called on by God to sacrifice his son Ishmael (cf Genesis 22). Satan’s most powerful stratagem is to replace the truth with a counterfeit version of it (see 2 Corinthians 11:14, John 8:44) and by these means he deceives countless millions. The hostility that the descendants of Ishmael continue to show towards both the physical descendants of Isaac/Jacob (Israel) and their spiritual descendants (the Church) is demonstrated around the world on a daily basis. It is good to remember that Satan is a defeated foe.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- The effects of Abraham’s failure involving Hagar still live on.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Moslems and Jews today are without covenant hope because they have rejected Abraham’s true descendant, Jesus. Pray for them.

**DAY 13** *By grace alone*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 25:19-26

**THE POINT** The whole of Genesis 25 is best understood in the light of Romans 9:1-24. The choosing of Isaac and the rejection of Ishmael we can live with. After all, Ishmael’s mother was an Egyptian and outside God’s covenant with Abraham. But the choosing of one twin, Jacob, and the rejection of his (yes, older) twin brother, Esau, is much more difficult. The Holy Spirit tells us through the apostle Paul that this is how the sovereign Lord works: “Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls – she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’” (Rom. 9:11-12). He made the same point in Eph. 2:8-9. Jacob was not chosen over Esau because he was more godly; he was more godly because he was chosen!

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Like her mother-in-law Sarah, Rebekah was unable, naturally, to conceive children. The LORD intervened, supernaturally, on her behalf in answer to the prayers of her husband. Instead of having to wait 25 years like A and S, they only had to wait 20!

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Reflect on God’s sovereign grace that saved you although you did not deserve it or earn it. Thank him for loving you first.

**DAY 14** *Esau despised his birthright*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 25:27-34

**THE POINT** We are inclined to think of this event in the lives of the twins as of little consequence in the overall scheme of things. What is one small pot of stew compared with Abraham’s slip-up with Hagar or David’s acts of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11)? But God has a different perspective. We see his assessment of it expressed in Hebrews 12:16-17. This was a pivotal event that marked Esau off as being outside the covenant of grace and reflecting this in his lifestyle. Esau despised his birthright.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Isaac’s lesser spiritual stature compared to both his father and his younger son is reflected in his natural preference for Esau.
- The mindset of Esau/Edom (hairy/red) was on satisfying his worldly appetites; Jacob’s mindset was on his relationship to his God. The attractiveness of their separate personalities was secondary to this mindset. This is what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 2:11-16. It is why the ‘new birth’ is necessary.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- What is your mindset? Paul pleads with us to present our bodies as living sacrifices, to resist the pressure of the world to think the way it thinks, and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2). Are you doing these things?

**DAY 15** *The fruit of suspicion*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 26:1-16

**THE POINT** So many of our relationships become damaged and ugly through lack of trust. Isaac didn't trust Abimelech and the Philistines to act honourably towards his wife and so he deceived them. As it turned out they had a higher code of ethics than he presumed. The Philistines didn't trust Isaac with his increasing wealth and power so they sabotaged his wells to undermine his livelihood. In the end they could no longer co-exist in harmony. In our own times, lack of trust turns neighbour against neighbour, nation against nation, so that finally everybody suffers. But the root cause is our failure first of all to put our trust in the living God.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Isaac made the same mistakes his father had made (see 12:10-20, 20:1-18). We never seem to learn from history – or each other. Isaac even had the reassurance of God's protection and blessing.
- Deception will always be exposed; always someone is looking.
- Abimelech responded to Isaac's deception with gracious blessing at first, but inevitably tension between those enjoying the LORD's covenant blessing and those outside it leads to division.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Do you have associations you would rather were kept secret?

**DAY 16** *Seek peace, trust God*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 26:17-33

**THE POINT** In Europe where rivers cross national borders, quarrels over water use has led to war. In rural Australia, the shared use of limited water resources has become a very vexed and divisive issue. Human greed and lack of concern for the needs of others is at the heart of most of our conflicts. Isaac tried hard to avoid controversy and the LORD confirmed to him the promise he had given to his father Abraham concerning countless descendants.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Isaac did all he could to maintain a harmonious relationship with his neighbours. If they cut off his water supply he moved away and established new sources of supply. He looked to the LORD to provide all his needs. He established peace treaties.
- The LORD reaffirmed his covenantal promise 'for the sake of my servant Abraham'. Of the three patriarchs, Isaac seems to be the least effective. His life and contribution are accounted for largely in just this one chapter of Genesis (26), whereas over 12 chapters are devoted to Abraham, and more than 9 to Jacob.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Although Isaac's main contribution was to provide the link between Abraham and Jacob, the LORD honoured his quiet faithfulness and his peace-keeping efforts. Does this encourage you?

**DAY 17** *Pearl of great price*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 26:34-27:13

**THE POINT** Lest we feel sorry for Esau in being cheated out of the covenant blessing by his scheming mother and brother, Moses first tells us that he had already disqualified himself by marrying Hittite women, against his parents wishes. By contrast, Jacob, aided and abetted by his mother, was prepared to risk anything to obtain the prize. As we saw earlier, it was a matter, not of individual actions that might be judged 'good' or 'bad', but of mindset.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Esau was a clumsy man, motivated by immediate needs rather than long-term principles. There would be time enough later to reflect on God's covenant requirements (but see Heb. 12:16-17).
- In spite of this, Isaac's natural leaning was always toward his older, first-born son, Esau. He wanted the blessing to go to him.
- We cannot excuse Rebekah and Jacob's deceptive plan, but it is to their credit that they were prepared to risk everything for the LORD's blessing (cf Jesus' parables in Matthew 13:44-46).

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- We struggle with the question, 'If Esau was rejected because of divine non-election, how can he be blamed?' Paul deals with this in Romans 9:19ff. Romans 5:12 shows that all outside the covenant will be condemned because of sin, not non-election!

**DAY 18** *Grace abounding to sinners*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 27:14-29

**THE POINT** In the overall patriarchal narrative, Rebekah and Jacob are among the 'goodies' – they are on God's side, and he is on theirs. But their sins in this episode are many, and monstrous, and inexcusable. They took advantage of Esau while he was away answering his aged father's request; they took advantage of Isaac's blindness and vulnerability; they deceived; they told lies; they stole something that wasn't rightfully theirs. God speaks loudly and clearly against all such wickedness in his Word. We saw yesterday that their motives were good and honourable, but does this mean that the end somehow justifies the means? No, but God works out his sovereign purposes through us all, in spite of our sinful, scheming and disobedient hearts! He had already made it clear from the beginning that 'the older will serve the younger' (25:23). Was Isaac also scheming against this?

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Rebekah and Jacob let nothing stand in the way of obtaining the blessing; their deception was thorough and complete.
- Jacob not only deceived his blind father, he told blatant lies. Yet the LORD's full blessing still went to him (see vss 28-29)!

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Reflect again on God's sovereignty, electing grace in your life.

**DAY 19** *Who are you?*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 27:30-40

**THE POINT** In God's Plan, the birthright and the blessing go together. God 'blesses us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ' because 'he chose us in him from before the creation of the world' (Ephesians 1:3b-4a). It was when Esau sold his birthright (25:34) that he forfeited the blessing; the details were only a matter of time. An ocean of bitter tears could not bring it back. This is the point being made in the warnings of Hebrews 12:15-17 and 6:4-6. We cannot even start to imagine the effect on Esau of Isaac's 3 words, 'Who are you?'. We are reminded of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:21-23.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Without the birthright/blessing all Esau's efforts were in vain.
- The effect on Esau of the treachery is paralleled by its effect on Isaac who 'trembled violently' at the impact of the reality.
- Even at birth, Jacob (heel-grabber/deceiver) had his eye on the prize. Esau didn't see the full ramifications 'til it was too late.
- Esau's 'consolation prize' was a very sad second-best.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Do you know (or are you) someone who is running the risk of despising their birthright? Pray earnestly for God's mercy.

**DAY 20** *Diverging paths*

**THE PASSAGE** GENESIS 27:41-28:9

**THE POINT** The vast spiritual gap between Jacob and Esau is highlighted in this passage. In the predictable aftermath of the Great Blessing Robbery, Jacob clearly needs an urgent excuse to do some long-distance travelling. The need for an acceptable wife provides the ideal pretext (as his clever mother realised). But this move sets poor, covenant-ignorant Esau thinking and he realises at last that his parents don't approve of his Canaanite-Hittite wives. So, getting straight out of the frying-pan into the fire, he marries into the covenant-rejected family of his half-uncle Ishmael! It is so sad to see unregenerate man trying to please God in his own strength, using his own foolish 'wisdom', going further away.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Esau reacted the same way as Cain to his brother's blessing.
- Rebekah knew what made Esau tick, that in time other interests would fill up the blessing-gap in his life and Jacob would be safe.
- Jacob's covenant approval rating continued to improve with every move he made, whereas Esau's went from bad to worse.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Do these events help us to understand what Jesus meant when he said, 'Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.' (Mark 4:25)?



## Across Australia

### Message on homosexuality

**T**he Moderator-General, the Rt Rev. Jack Knapp, has sent a letter to every Presbyterian minister, home missionary, presbytery clerk and state assembly clerk clarifying the church's position on homosexuality. The move follows the Uniting Church's decision last month to allow practising homosexuals to be ordained.

Mr Knapp reminded ministers that the General Assembly of Australia in 1994 determined that homosexual practices are sin. The person who comes to Christ honestly seeking to leave this lifestyle will find Christ able to liberate from this sin. The church is to humbly exercise compassion towards homosexuals and witness to them.

The letter was also signed by the clerk of the GAA, Dr Paul Logan.

### New Moderator-General

**T**he Rev. Bob Thomas, minister of St Kilda Presbyterian Church (Vic), will be next Moderator-General of the Presbyterian Church of Australia. He will be inducted into office when the General Assembly of Australia meets in September 2004.

Mr Thomas, a former editor of both *New Life* and *AP*, came to faith in Christ on the last day of the 1959 Billy Graham Crusade. Ordained in 1971, he has served in the parishes of Ungarie-Weethalle, Bowral-Mittagong and Bexley-Rockdale in NSW.

He has twice been Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria, in 1995 and 2001, and is convener of the Theological Education Committee of the PCV.

### Sharing the faith

**R**ev. Keith Bell of Hamilton (Vic) has written an eight-week study course to

help Christians share their faith spontaneously in personal conversation. Eight people have graduated from the course so far. Mr. Bell hopes to continue to run the course and stimulate the sharing of the gospel in and around Hamilton. For more information, (03) 5572 1009 or carillon@h140.aone.net.au.

### Scots booming

**T**he ministry of Scots Church, Melbourne continues to develop under the leadership of Rev. Douglas Robertson. A monthly contemporary service UniChurch@Scots is being held involving people drawn from the Christian group at RMIT, Scots Church and from the inner city community. It is led by Ben Pfahlert.

Mr Pfahlert and Rev. Richard O'Brien (Scots Church Minister to the Melbourne CBD) were speakers at RMIT Christian Union mid-year conference. Around 300 people attended the Scots Good Friday service and the largest congregation for a number of years – more than 500 – worshipped on Easter Sunday. The visit of Rev. Dr Trevor Morrow to Scots as the 2003 Turnbull Trust preacher was a great success, reports the *Scots Church leaflet*.

### Looking forward

**T**he Moderator of the PCV and lecturer in practical theology at the PTC Melbourne, Rev. John Wilson, has composed a 14-page analysis of the situation the Australian Church faces at the moment, along with some constructive

responses. For copies, call (03) 9867 4637 or email melbonn@bigpond.com.

### Minister for St Ives

**T**he Presbytery of Sydney North inducted Rev. Dr John Woodward into St Ives-Pymble on 28 March before a congregation of 170. Rev. Dr Paul Logan (St Peter's North Sydney) preached, and Rev. Douglas Murray gave the charge. Guests included the Mayor of Ku-ring-gai Alderman, Ian Cross, and Dr Brendan Nelson, the local federal MP.

### Family camp

**M**ore than 200 ministers, home missionaries, theological students and their families came to Hall's Gap for the annual ministers' family camp from 30 June to 3 July. Also there were the Robinson family from Bicton (WA), the Waterhouse and Ware families from Mt Gambier (SA) and John and Lynette Ellis from the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Derha Dun in north India.

Rev. Bruce Christian spoke on encouragement from the life of Abraham, and the concert reportedly revealed a number of hidden talents.

### Cape York ministry

**P**resbyterian missionary work in Cape York, far-north Queensland, did not end when the long-established work was transferred to the Uniting Church in 1977. The Cairns Presbyterian Church continued a ministry, and appointed Ron

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Lyons as assistant with special responsibility for Aboriginal ministry in 1992. In 1993 **Presbyterian Inland Mission** provided a vehicle, and Ron and Jean Lyons began patrols to Cape York. They moved to Weipa in 2000 to work full time there and at Aurukun and Mapoon.

The Cape York ministry is supported by visiting teams of Christians from Brisbane, Townsville and other places, who help in running services, children's holiday ministries, visitation, literature distribution, prayer, compiling family trees (Aborigines place great importance on family relationships), religious education and running the Weipa student hostel.

### Get up and grow

**Dubbo** (NSW), **Randwick** (NSW) and **Mitchelton** (Qld) congregations are adopting the theme "Get up and grow" to help organise their church year. At the core of the idea is the perception that in most congregations there is a need to encourage and assist people in fully rounded Christian growth.

### Ministry available

**Rev. Wally Gear** has been supplying the **McKinnon Reformed Presbyterian** (Vic) congregation. A new RP minister has arrived, so Mr Gear would be happy to provide supply in vacant charges, or during ministers' long-service leave for congregations in the Melbourne metropolitan area for up to 12 months. Mr Gear can be contacted on (03) 9878 1295.

### New manager

**Michael Ellison** will become office manager for the **Presbyterian Church of Victoria** from 1 September. Mr Ellison has had extensive business, IT and commercial experience, including running his own business advisory and IT company. He is also a veteran of the **United Bible Societies**, for whom he established financial, management and IT systems in more than 20 Asia-Pacific offices. He is a national council member of **InterServe**, a Christian international personnel agency.

### Preaching workshop

**The Reformed Theological College's** 2003 biblical preaching workshop will be held in Geelong on Thursday 2 and Friday 3 October. This year's presenters, tackling Judges, include **Rev. Alastair McEwen**, RTC vice-principal and lecturer in Old Testament and **Dr Murray Capill**, lecturer in practical theology at the RTC.

The workshops are designed as an in-depth support for preachers, to challenge them, and assist them spiritually, to stimulate and help their thinking about their preaching, and to encourage them to ongoing faithfulness in Biblical preaching.

### Fire on the Mountain

**Ian McIver**, principal of **Reformed College of Ministries**, heads the speaking team at this year's **Fire on the Mountain** conference at Tambourine Mountain Convention Centre, Queensland on 5 to 7 September. The annual conference is dedi-

cated to developing a biblical worldview.

He will be speaking on the architecture of redemption. **Martin Howard**, deputy chairman of **Prison Fellowship Queensland**, will lead a seminar on the biblical view of crime and Restorative Justice. Other speakers include **Wesley Leake** and **Phillip Paul**, chaplain of **Presbyterian Aged Care** in Sydney.

For further information contact Kim Dale on (07) 5545 2041; tambopc@bigpond.com or www.fireonthemountain.net.



### Around the World

### Presbyterians growing

**The** Anglican and Presbyterian churches in the Republic of Ireland have recorded their first increases in support since at least 1881, according to a government census.

Over the past decade, the (Anglican) Church of Ireland grew by 30 per cent, to 115 611, and Presbyterians leapt by 56 per cent, to 20 582. Both figures, disclosed in the 2002 Irish national census published this year, easily outstripped population growth.

"Some of the growth we believe is from Roman Catholics converting to Anglicanism," said **Brian Parker**, spokesman for the Church of Ireland.

"Paedophile scandals have had an effect among Catholics, and some, particularly young people, feel a general discontent at

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the conservative edge of the [Catholic] leadership.”

**Stephen Lynas**, spokesman for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, said the church’s growth was mainly due to the arrival of asylum-seekers, particularly from West Africa and Asian countries.

The **Central Statistics Office** in Dublin says immigration is an important factor in the growth of the main Protestant faiths. Throughout the 1990s Ireland enjoyed one of the European Union’s most buoyant economies and was known as the “Celtic Tiger”.

Ireland – excluding six counties in the north, which are part of the United Kingdom – remains an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country.

### Pastor jailed

**Rev. Rinaldy Damanik**, an Indonesian pastor accused of illegal weapons possession, has been jailed for three years. Damanik was found guilty despite clear evidence that witnesses for the prosecution were tortured by the police in order to obtain their testimony.

**Damanik**, a key peacemaker assisting both Christian and Muslim refugees in the troubled Poso area of central Sulawesi, was travelling in a relief convoy on 17 August 2002 when police stopped him. Next day they announced they had found illegal weapons in the vehicle.

Legal expert **J. E. Sahetapy**, a key witness for the defense, said police broke legal procedure by searching the vehicle without a warrant. Sahetapy maintained that such evidence must be disregarded by the court. Citizens of Tentena, the city where Damanik lived, planned to hold a mass demonstration if the pastor was sentenced. However, he has discouraged those plans.

*Compass Direct*

### African Muslims attack

**M**uslim tensions are rising in East Africa in reaction to the US-led “war on terror” and the bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq. Malawi and Kenya in East Africa each have a Christian majority and a historically peaceful Muslim minority. When five alleged terrorists were deported from Malawi, Muslims rioters targeted the Christian community in **Mangochi** in late June, vandalising **Care for the Child** (USA) and seven churches. Thirteen people were arrested and Malawi’s President has vowed not to tolerate religious violence. In Kenya, when police arrested an outspoken anti-Christian Muslim cleric

on 13 June, Muslims rioted and burnt six churches in **Bura**, near Mombasa. The cleric has been released and no one charged over the church burnings. Christians in Kenya are greatly concerned.

*Evangelical Alliance*

### Christians boost US

**N**early two-thirds of new immigrants to the United States are Christian according to research sponsored by several government agencies. Forty-two per cent of immigrants are Catholic coming in from Latin America, 19 per cent are Protestant and 4 per cent are Eastern Orthodox. Eight per cent are Muslim, 4 per cent are Buddhist, 3 per cent are Jewish, 3 per cent are Hindu, and 1 per cent claim other religions. The 16 per cent of immigrants from non-Judeo-Christian faiths is four times higher than the national average of about 4 per cent. Fifteen per cent of immigrants claimed no religion.

*Religious News Service*

### New church born

**T**en months after missionaries began teaching the **Maco** people in **Caracas, Venezuela**, a new church has been born with more than 50 converts.

A sombre mood prevailed among the group for several days as they listened to Bible lessons on Christ’s betrayal, trial and crucifixion. But their sadness gave way to bright smiles and rejoicing when they heard of the resurrection.

At the conclusion of the teaching the missionaries invited the Macos to express

their thoughts about what they had heard. “We simply wanted to know what they thought, be it good, bad or indifferent,” wrote missionaries **Davey** and **Marie Jank**.

For an hour and a half a steady stream of people, men and women, young and old, spoke of how they were giving their sin to Jesus Christ, the one who died to pay for it all.

**Kaya**, the village captain testified, “The things that we are talking about today are not words that the missionaries have told us, they are words that God’s Spirit has spoken into our hearts.”

*New Tribes Mission*

### Concern in Italy

**P**ending amendments to a religious freedom bill being considered by Italy’s parliament could impinge on religious freedom, say evangelical Christians.

The bill, which is being considered by the parliament’s **Commission on Constitutional Affairs**, would eliminate the words “recognised by everyone” when discussing religious freedom. Minority religious groups worry that by modifying language that was previously uniform and unambiguous within legislation, the government is taking a diminished view of religious pluralism.

One worrying provision concerns printing and distribution of books and flyers inside of, or at the entrance to, churches. Under the proposed provisions, the state could censor what the proposed legislation calls “political propaganda consisting of incitement to hate and discrimination among religious denominations”.



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During the fascist period in Italy, police regularly visited minority churches and noted "anti-state" or "defeatist" statements, and the memory of such intrusion lingers today.

The President of the Evangelical Churches Commission for Church-State Relations, Gianni Long, sent a letter to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi expressing concern about the draft of the religious liberty bill that would go before the Parliament's Chamber of Deputies for discussion and approval.

*Adventist News Network*



## On the Agenda

### Cleaning up crime

In a city renowned for its long-standing crime problems, a policy shift in tackling crime is bearing much fruit – an endorsement of some traditional crime-fighting methods.

In the last 17 months, as crime has increased around the USA, many people have started to question whether New York City had reached the limits of its crime-fighting successes.

With the Rudolph Giuliani administration gone and a persistent budget deficit and anti-terrorism demands eating away at the resources of the New York Police Department, many New Yorkers began to sense that crime was on the rise.

But statistics show that crime has continued to fall, and the Bloomberg administration says the credit should go to a series of highly selective crime-fighting initiatives that have won significant victories in the streets.

Operation Impact, for example, rede-

ployed 800 police officers into 61 crime pockets around the city. Since then, according to the latest statistics available from the mayor's office, homicides in those areas have dropped nearly 47 per cent compared with the same period last year, while robberies fell 43 per cent and grand larceny crimes dropped 31 per cent.

Operation Spotlight targets a small group of chronic misdemeanor offenders who commit a disproportionate share of crimes and sends them to a special court for stricter sentencing. The number of those offenders sentenced to jail has increased 46 per cent from last year, and the percentage of those defendants held on bail has increased nearly 20 per cent over the same time last year, the statistics show.

A program that focuses on those quality-of-life offenders who by every indicator seem to vex New Yorkers the most has yielded 55,000 summonses and more than 800 felony arrests.

During his mayoral campaign, Michael R. Bloomberg's law enforcement message, such that it was, centred on a basic theme: Rudolph W. Giuliani had put the lid on crime, and if elected, Mr. Bloomberg would try to keep it there. But crime clearly took a back seat to his other priorities, like education.

Mr. Bloomberg, who came to the job with no crime-fighting background, has relied on the advice of his police commissioner, Raymond W. Kelly, and his criminal justice coordinator, John Feinblatt. The administration says it has come up with ways to make crime drop further, by zeroing in on the most intransigent pockets of criminality.

It has done that by keeping the key Giuliani-era crime fighting program, Compstat, a system that uses data to measure where crime is most persistent.

But the Bloomberg team has taken

Compstat even further, using the statistics to sharpen its crime-fighting focus beyond merely making more arrests.

"The two administrations are night and day when it comes to fighting crime," said Jeffrey A. Fagan, a professor of law and public health at Columbia University and an expert on crime in New York City.

"Giuliani launched large-scale initiatives citywide under the broad-brush theory about disorder," Professor Fagan said. The Bloomberg administration, he said, has "done a very, very good job of being highly selective in terms of how they use their resources."

Clearly, Mr. Bloomberg benefited from inheriting a city where crime rates had fallen dramatically in recent years, as they did in most of the nation's large cities. But while crime rates seem to have leveled off or crept up in other cities in the last year or so, in New York, much to the surprise of many experts, the rates continue to fall.

John E. Eck, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Cincinnati who studies policing and crime prevention across the nation, said that targeted policing efforts and better coordination of every aspect of criminal justice have been used successfully around the country.

Many of the Bloomberg administration's programs, however, hark back to old-fashioned law enforcement techniques.

Perhaps helping the drop in crime is the administration's relationship with minority groups, which appears better than that of the previous administration, even after two recent controversial cases in which black New Yorkers died as a result of actions by the police. This may stem from the administration's speedy attempts to take responsibility for police errors, and its overall efforts to improve community outreach.

*New York Times*



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# A fitting end

*It's our duty – and blessing – to close the day with God.*

*"I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone O Lord make me dwell in safety."*  
(Ps 4:8).

**D**avid, having finished the work and passed the dangers of the day, having counselled his friends around him to spend time with God and to offer the evening sacrifices of righteousness, concludes the day as he had begun it; with meditations on God and communion with Him.

It is remarkable that David used this language at the very time he was being pursued by his enemies and when his life was in peril. The language he uses indicates confidence in God as his protector and deliverer, as well as serenity of mind, and freedom from anxiety and dread.

When we retire to our rooms, we should lift up our hearts to God, the God of our mercies, and make Him the object of our adoring and most grateful praise. It is a time to review the mercies of the day, God's providential care and provision of all our needs and give thanks to God. We are to be as thankful for the shadows of the evening which invite us to sleep as we were for the new light of the morning to favour us in our daily work and pursuits. The same wisdom, power and goodness which make the outgoings of the morning to rejoice, make those of the evening to do likewise. Let us give thanks to Him who forms the light and creates the darkness, and let us also believe that the darkness of affliction may be as needful for us, in its season, as the light of prosperity.

When we lie down it is wise to think of death and of the great change to which that event shall introduce us. The conclusion of each day suggests to us the concluding day of our life on earth.

When we lie down, it would do us good

## Matthew Henry

to recognise the sins and omissions of the past day. While we rejoice in the divine goodness that has furnished the mercies of the day, we are not to overlook the inglorious return which we have made for them, and we should come with penitent and humble hearts before our God and Saviour. Not only have we need of Christ

***When we lie down it is wise to think of death and of the great change to which that event shall introduce us.***

for this purpose at our first conversion from sin, but ever afterwards, in this life, we need to apply to Him as our advocate, who appears for us in the presence of the Father, to procure us pardon and acceptance.

When we lie down, we are to do so in peace. In peace with God by repentance and faith, in peace with others by not allowing the sun to go down on our anger, and in peace with ourselves if, by the grace of God, we have in some good measure performed the work of the day and filled it up with acts of duty and of usefulness.

We may yield ourselves to sleep with the following reflections. We serve a gracious Master who allows us time for sleep, and furnishes us with all the requisite conveniences for it, and makes it to us so refreshing and so grateful. How frail are our bodies, which so often call for rest and relief

from fatigue, and require so large a proportion of our time to recover their strength by sleep. How sad is the case of those from whose eyes sleep departs, as the result of bodily or mental suffering. When we consider how earnestly nature longs for sleep, and how much refreshment is derived from it, we should regard with deep compassion, and remember in our prayers those to whom that and other comforts possessed by ourselves are denied.

**H**ow ungrateful are we to the God of the night and of the morning, when we so far indulge in sleep, beyond our need or advantage, as to make it a hindrance to that which is good; as when it keeps us from our hour of prayer and Scripture reading in the morning or in the evening. And we should remember that we now have one day less to live than we had in the morning. As time goes, eternity comes. How should the thought of it stimulate us to the appropriate use of our time, making our sleep not the less desirable, and our death much the less formidable.

The writer to the Hebrews speaks of a rest which we who have believed enter into, even in this world, as well as of a rest which, in the other world, remains for the people of God; a rest from sin and from the world; a rest in Christ and in God through Christ – a satisfaction in the blessings of the gospel and in the hopes of the hereafter. Oh that we may enjoy this rest while we live, and at death enter into something more than rest – into the joy of our Lord, and dwell at His right hand, where there are pleasures for evermore.

*This is an edited excerpt from Matthew Henry's The Bible Method of Daily Living (Colorado Springs: American Tract Society-Navpress, 1998).* ap

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# God says no

*Sorry, but the Bible is crystal clear about homosexuality.*

**H**omosexuality has been in the news lately – not just in Oxford Street, but in what professes to be the Christian Church. In Canada the Anglican Church seems determined to become as bankrupt morally as it is financially. In England, the homosexual Dr Jeffrey John has just been persuaded to withdraw from his appointment as Bishop-elect of Reading. Meanwhile, the Uniting Church in Australia has allowed what it has winked at for some years – the ordination of homosexual ministers.

The Anglican Primate of Australia, Archbishop Peter Carnley, has claimed that “the debate itself is testimony to the complexities of the interpretative task”. He calls for honesty and humility in dealing with what he says are “hotly disputed texts”. Finally, we are told, that “a civilised and reasoned discussion can be welcomed as a sign of vigorous life”.

So the first issue that we need to deal with is the Bible’s view of homosexuality. Actually, the biblical texts are not as difficult as Archbishop Carnley likes to make out. In the Old Testament, Sodom is described as a city whose inhabitants were “exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord” (Gen. 13:13). It is from Sodom that we derive the name of the sin “sodomy”. Although there were other sins involved (see Ezek. 16:49), it is clear that the widespread practice of sodomy was the main reason for Sodom’s destruction (see Gen. 18-19).

**S**odom became a byword for God’s terrible wrath on hardened sinners (see Deut. 29:23; 32:32; Isa. 1:10; Amos 4:11; Zeph. 2:9; Luke 10:10-12; 17:29; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 7; Rev. 11:8). To retain the biblical perspective, however, it needs to be pointed out that the sin of rejecting Christ’s representatives is worse even than the sin of Sodom (Luke 10:12).

Old Testament law is quite specific: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination” (Lev. 18:22). The civil penalty was the most severe possible: death (Lev. 20:13).

“Abomination” is a strong word that is found five times in Leviticus 18



**Peter Barnes**

(vv.22,26,27,29,30). As Gordon Wenham explains, “an abomination is literally something detestable and hated by God”.

The New Testament moral teaching is no different. In Romans, the apostle Paul speaks of God’s revelation of Himself to the Gentiles through the creation (Rom. 1:20). When this clear revelation is rejected, the result is that people worship idols rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:20-23). The road is all downhill from there, and three times it is said that “God gave them up” (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).

***Heterosexual  
desire is  
corrupted  
by the Fall;  
homosexual  
desire is  
corrupt in  
itself.***

When people are “given up”, one likely result is homosexuality. “For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due” (Rom. 1:26-27).

Homosexual unions are often promiscuous, and tend to be plagued by health troubles.

Unrepentant homosexuals are included among those whose lifestyle reveals that they will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10). To believe otherwise is to deceive oneself. Homosexuals are also listed among those who are lawless and insubordinate (1 Tim. 1:8-10).

Heterosexual desire is corrupted by the Fall; homosexual desire is corrupt in itself.

One wonders how God could have made Himself any clearer. The law of God excludes homosexuals from God’s kingdom. Yet the Bible also speaks of the won-

drous grace of God. In the cosmopolitan, sex-obsessed city of ancient Corinth, there were homosexuals who came to faith in Christ. Grace is offered to all who confess sin as sin, and come to Christ in faith.

The second issue that we must deal with concerns how such a situation has come about that professing churches will not submit to the plain meaning of Scripture. Let us confine ourselves to the Uniting Church of Australia. This was formed in 1977 as a result of the union of the Methodist, Congregational and some Presbyterian Churches. The Basis of Union was presented to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia in May 1973.

**T**his states that “The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which she hears the Word of God and by which her faith and obedience are nourished and regulated”.

It also praises the scientific enquiry into the Scriptures that has characterised recent centuries, and speaks of learning from contemporary thought. If one reads this carefully, one could accept it even if one only believed, for example, that a man called Jesus once lived on earth. Liberal theology – which refuses to accept the full authority of Scripture – provides enough loopholes for anybody and everybody to justify what they are doing. Given the liberal Basis of Union, the acceptance of homosexual clergy was only a matter of time.

Where do the churches go from here? Gordon Moyes is one of the leaders of the evangelical wing of the Uniting Church, known as EMU. He has argued against the liberals, yet he writes: “I love our denomination ... I am committed to remain within the Uniting Church and change it.” In my view, that is naïve, and EMU ought to rename itself OSTRICH. A better response would entail the setting up of a truly Wesleyan and Methodist Church. May God bring it about quickly!

*Peter Barnes is minister of Revesby Presbyterian Church, NSW.*

ap

## Movie Watch

### Bruce Almighty

Reviewed by Phil Campbell



Jim Carrey in *Bruce Almighty*

**I**'m not a Bible thumper, but I do believe that the force is with us," says rubber-faced actor Jim Carrey in Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph*. "My interpretation of the secret of life is not to do anything that makes you feel like you deserve to lose... and be grateful for what you have."

Yep, suddenly comedians are spouting theology. And it doesn't stop there. Tom Shadyac, director of the hit movie *Bruce Almighty* is a homespun expert too. He claims the movie, which sees Carrey gain divine powers for a week, is "exploring issues my friends and I have been talking about for the last 10 years".

"We'd go up into the mountains and go hiking and talk about God and life, faith and frustration and prayer," Shadyac told the *Los Angeles Daily News*. "Obviously the movie is a comedy, but we approach the subject of God with great reverence. We've been seeking God all our lives."

In fact, when Shadyac needed feedback on the first cut of the movie, he consulted his priest, Father Ken Deasy, of St Agatha's Parish, Los Angeles, along with well known LA Sikh Guru Singh. The result, according to the *LA Daily News*, is a "non-dogmatic message movie that won't offend anyone looking for a laugh, but might have a deeper meaning for anyone wanting to reflect on the themes". Shadyac claims the movie sets out to

make some serious points about the meaning of life – and it's apparently pitched directly at America's "religious" market.

The story is simple. Bruce Nolan is having a very bad day. Passed over for promotion as a TV anchor man, he unleashes his frustrations on live TV. He's fired... then beaten up in the car-park, crashes his car, and argues with his long-time girlfriend Grace (Jennifer Aniston). Furious, Bruce shakes his fist at God. "Smite me, mighty smiter! It's your fault! The only one not doing his job is You!"

God – played by a white-suited Morgan Freeman – decides to get in touch, paging Bruce and asking him to phone 7762323, where he lines up an interview. Ultimately, God gives Bruce the opportunity of a lifetime. "You think you can do it better? You've got all my powers for seven days."

**"Solve that one and you can let me know," smiles God.**



The fun begins... along with the poor puns and religious in-jokes. Bruce walks on a puddle, and parts the "red soup" with a strong wind. And that's just the beginning. In a later meeting, God calls him aside – "Come on, Bruce, take a closer walk with me." I suspect the subtle humour went right over the heads of most of the audience.

Not so subtle was the hilarious scene with a monkey, and the side-splittingly funny on-air revenge Bruce exacts upon his television rival. It's not often that a full theatre laughs as loud and as long.

**S**o what of the serious side? Bruce's powers come with one key limitation. "Here's the deal," says God. "You can do anything you like... but you can't mess with free will." "Can I ask why?" says Bruce. "Yes you can... that's the beauty of it," says God as he fades from view...

Naturally, Bruce uses the power to suit himself. He lifts skirts, moves the moon for romantic effect, toilet trains the dog, and decides to answer all the pesky emailed prayers with "Yes". The result, of course, is chaos – and disaster

for Bruce's relationship with Grace. "How do you make someone love you without affecting free will," cries Bruce. "Solve that one and you can let me know," smiles God.

So far, Christian commentators have been surprisingly charitable. Craig Detweiler, from Fuller Seminary's *Reel Spirituality* program, told the *LA Daily News* that the movie was "surprisingly faith-affirming". According to Detweiler, "It's a challenge to take God seriously, as well as a critique of our own misguided efforts to play God."

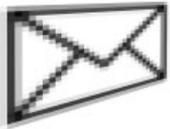
Ultimately, though, we shouldn't be sucked in by the fact that Morgan Freeman's "God" is such a nice old guy. Sure, he's full of wise-sounding aphorisms... "No matter how filthy something gets, you can always clean it up," and "Want to see a miracle? Be a miracle" are two of the more memorable. But ultimately, he offers the lure of a Christ-free, don't-worry-be-happy kind of religion.

On the positive side, Bruce finally sees the need to humble himself to God's will, and look for the good of others. Unwittingly, though, director Tom Shadyac and consulting priest Ken Deasy are guilty of exactly the thing the movie sets out to lampoon. The problem with Bruce Nolan is that he becomes exactly the god he wants to be, serving his own preferences and needs. Revealingly, Deasy and Shadyac have done exactly the same.

Asked how he thinks God would feel being featured in a comedy, Deasy says, "A funny, accessible God is closer to the truth anyway. I like (the idea of) a God with a sense of humour." Besides, says Deasy, "some unhealthy aspects of religion promote a fearful God... that works for some people, but if you believe that, it really keeps God at a distance. God is not just up there somewhere – he's inside us, wanting us to become the fullness of what we can be and helping us to do that."

That, of course, is very much the convenient, home-made "new age" God... and a long way from the true God of justice and mercy, who steps close as He reconciles the world to Himself in Christ. Ultimately, Shadyac has made a convenient "god" in his own image... a hilarious morality tale, but no help to the cause of the gospel.

*Culture Watch* editor Phil Campbell serves on the ministry team at Mitchelton Presbyterian Church. 



Letters

**No longer a church?**

Primarily the Christian church speaks about God's loving offer of forgiveness for sin and of new beginnings – all this through faith in Jesus Christ. Those who experience this forgiveness and new start gladly seek to live a life that pleases him.

Pleasing Jesus means choosing a lifestyle that conforms to God's standards. For the married this includes the lifelong, faithful commitment of one man and one woman in marriage. For all, this includes abstinence before marriage and faithfulness during marriage. This has always (for 2000 years) been what the Christian church affirms.

How then is it possible that a church can officially condone something that God condemns? The Bible condemns the homosexual lifestyle. Nature teaches the same. Even a common understanding of anatomy demonstrates the absurdity of it. A church that affirms the practice of homosexuality has departed from the gospel of Jesus. Is it still a church?

*John P. Wilson,  
Moderator,  
Presbyterian Church of Victoria*

**Welcome home, please**

We have all watched the events of the Middle East unfold over recent months, I see this as just another opportunity to present the gospel to people who are searching for answers.

Australia has a number of citizens who have been involved most recently in Iraq, Afghanistan, and over a decade ago in Desert Storm. During my time in Queensland I spent six years as chaplain to the Gold Coast Vietnam Veterans Association. I found many of the veterans to be hardened and difficult to reach – but they are reachable! One thing that helped is my personal identification as a Vietnam Veteran – I could identify with them.

During my term in Vietnam and upon my return, those of us who served were condemned by the general public and treated as criminals. I still have vivid memories of returning to my home country in winter with only one change of light summer civilian clothes. We were told to change into civilian clothes before we walked through the air terminal as protesters were there and would throw eggs and tomatoes at us, and we might even get attacked if we walked through the terminal in uniform. Such treatment and prejudice against veterans in general continued through the integration process into civilian life.

I ask that you reach out to the returning service men, women and their fami-

lies. Please give them a clear message that the Presbyterian Church welcomes them back and welcomes them into our church!

Please pray about your role. Please write to all returned service organisations asking them to pass on our warm "welcome home" to all servicemen and women. You might even designate a special day, a special service to specifically recognise any recently returned service persons. We have several reserve chaplains who may be able to assist.

*Rev. Robert L. Carner,  
Victorian Home Mission Director*

**Parenting who?**

It was good to see the articles on parenting (AP, July). It's a task that continues even as I near the age of 60. However the concern that I have for the Presbyterian Church is the lack of children who form part of our denomination and the seeming lack of concern by many congregations that they are childless.

I have returned last week from a prolonged period of leave and visited a number of congregations in my term of absence. I was shocked by the almost complete absence of children in the churches I visited. I know that the church in the West suffers in the same way and I believe that this is an enormous challenge to the Presbyterian Church.



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It seems that we are not catering for youth in our worship and in consequence we are not attracting the young marrieds who have children as we ignore their children.

I did not visit Victoria or NSW so perhaps I am wrong in my assessment but it would be interesting to hear from others in our church as to their experience. Are the youth receiving emphasis in the theological training at our colleges? Am I right in saying the Baptists seem to attract more Youth than we do? If so, why?

*Alan Perrie,  
Duncraig, WA*

### Motherhood statement

I am greatly enriched by the evangelical method of preaching systematically through the books of the Bible, but I feel that, in the process, we may be becoming inflexible and consequently dispassionate. I understand that the minister uses his knowledge of his congregation to reach out to individual and corporate needs through his preaching program.

However I feel that there are instances when a special Sunday can justify a diversion from the set course. I particularly refer to Mothers' Day. Although this is largely a commercially driven celebration, because of this strong emphasis in the secular world, it becomes a significant, if not a tumultuous, day for many people.

In the pews seeking solace are unfulfilled singles, childless couples, people who live with the guilt of past abortions; those separated from mothers by distance; children who have lost their mothers through death; mothers who grieve for children who have died or are terminally ill; mothers of disabled children for whom motherhood is often unrewarding; relinquishing mothers who have had children forcibly taken from them; people in fractured relationships with mothers or permanently estranged from them; and working mothers trying to balance their time and efforts. These are all people who come to church this day for comfort and encouragement. How many went home discouraged, depressed or even in tears?

In our search for doctrinal purity and practice we must not lose our love and compassion.

*Catherine M. Halsall,  
St Leonards, NSW*

### Mandaeen massacres continue

It has been widely reported that following the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime an upsurge in Islamic extremism is sweeping Iraq.

The Sabian Mandæan Association has received many details regarding the massacre of Mandæans (followers of John the Baptist) by Muslims in Baghdad and its environs, following the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.

It has been reported that at least 20 Mandæan women and girls have been raped by Muslims since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime. However, it is likely that the actual number of rapes is very much greater due to the shame and humiliation of the victims and their families and the absence of any authority able and willing to enforce law and order for the protection of Mandæans from Muslims. It has also been reported to the Sabian Mandæan Association that Muslims have invaded Mandæans' homes and raped their daughters in front of the parents.

At present telephone communications have not been restored between Baghdad suburbs and regular telephone communications with the outside world are unavailable.

We have also received an as yet unconfirmed report that a further 20 Mandæans may have been massacred by Muslims at Nasariyah and 30 at Basra.

The Sabian Mandæan Association notes reports that the American Governor recently welcomed Her Majesty's Foreign Minister for Australia with the words, "Welcome to free Baghdad." However, the reports that we have received indicate that Baghdad is "free" in the sense that Muslims are now free to murder, rape, terrorize and steal in accordance with the Koran.

*Khosrow Chobaili,  
President,  
Sabian Mandæan Association*

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## Books

## Wheel Tracks

Bob Armstrong

Privately published 2001, 2002.

*Reviewed by Stuart Bonnington.*

‘Now for something completely different.’ The recording of the history of Christianity in Australia continues to gather pace with new books appearing regularly, touching a wide range of subjects. With the publication of these three 70 page (or so) booklets – *The Wheel Tracks of the Pioneer Preachers*, *More Wheel Tracks of Australian Gospel Vans and Waggon*s, and *OAC Wheel Tracks* – a world of missionary service in Australia which has been largely forgotten, comes vividly to life.

Mr Armstrong has a least two great loves in his life: the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and cars/anything on wheels! He has assembled a vast range of photographs of “gospel vans and waggon” and tells the story of the spreading of the gospel wide and far through them and the Christian workers that they carried.

These booklets are very interesting and well produced. Anyone who is interested in learning more of this rather hidden aspect of the history of evangelicalism in Australia should obtain copies of them from R.M. and E.L. Armstrong, Rose Cottage, Mumbil, NSW 2820.

*Stuart Bonnington is minister of South Yarra Presbyterian Church, Vic.*

## Ernest C. Reisinger: A Biography

Geoffrey Thomas

Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002

*Reviewed by Mignon Goswell*

This biography opens to the reader the life of a significant personality in 20th century American evangelical Christianity. Here is someone who has been involved in more than one Protestant denomination.

Geoffrey Thomas deftly portrays the spiritual life and theological challenges of Presbyterians and Baptists in the USA

during this time, weaving this into the account of the life of a man greatly used by God.

Ernest Reisinger’s early family life was not easy. His father had a mental breakdown caused by great stock market crash of 1929 and was institutionalised for the rest of his life. A number of months in an orphanage following his father’s illness, then leaving school at 14 to help support his younger siblings caused heartache to Reisinger.

Right from this early time we see a series of godly men who cared for Ernie, prayed for him, spent time with him, talked with him, and taught him God’s word. These men may not go down in the annals of church history but they are a reminder that God chooses to work through his people – often ordinary people – who rely on an extraordinary God.

Convinced of the value of reading good books led to his remarkable ministry of printing, distributing and even writing books – a ministry still carried on by his son. This love of books also caused him in 1968 to become the first American trustee of the Banner of Truth Trust. This long association led the Trust to ask Geoffrey Thomas, an associate editor of the Trust’s magazine, to write this biography.

Many American ministers and parishioners can trace their biblical theology to the drive of Reisinger to have students and ministers read material that would consolidate their belief in or open up to them the Reformed position. The climax of the book is the part he played in helping the Southern Baptist Convention, America’s largest Protestant denomination, to go back to its historical roots.

*Mignon Goswell is a member of Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Victoria.*

## My 1st Book of Memory Verses

Carine Mackenzie

Fearn: Christian Focus

*Reviewed by Peter Barnes*

Children’s books of a Christian ilk tend to be either heavy or infantile. This one is neither. It is well-organised, and user-friendly in the right way. Young children should be delighted that it has been put together, covering the topics of God,

Jesus, sin, salvation, prayer, instructions, faith and promises.

Each page contains a verse from the New King James Version, a short explanation, and a little picture for good measure. These days the practice of memorisation is often scorned by geniuses with DipEds, but it is time the tide was turned back.

I welcome this little work. My only regret is that my tribe are a bit old for this kind of format. But parents with little children should make good use of it.

*Peter Barnes is books editor of AP.*

## Covenant Baptism A Biblical Perspective

Robert V. Clapham

Lithgow: Covenanter Press, 2002.

*Reviewed by Peter Barnes.*

Baptism is treated with as much confusion these days as anything else, so one can only welcome Bob Clapham’s capable treatment of baptism within the context of covenant theology. Essentially, the Reformed argument is that baptism is to the Church what circumcision was to Israel. This is dealt with in six propositions.

However, one might wish that the opening pages had been re-written. Bob refers to Baptist Churches, “some of which are for the most part biblical” – which rather assumes what Bob is seeking to demonstrate. The assertion that the early Church universally practised infant baptism is somewhat vulnerable. In the fourth century especially, many children of professing Christians were not baptized as infants, mainly due to a fear of post-baptismal sin. Even before then, Tertullian had argued against infant baptism, although I think he maintained a minority position.

Regarding Anabaptism in the 16th century, Bob seems to rely on A. A. Hodge’s claim that it arose in 1537. G. H. Williams refers to 21 January 1525 as ‘the birthday of Anabaptism’. On this day in Zurich Georg Blaurock (a nickname given to him because of his blue coat) called on Conrad Grebel to baptize him. Grebel did so, then Blaurock baptized 15 others. This is the first adult baptism on record, and it was not done by total immersion but by a substantial wetting.

In short, theology good; Church history not so wonderful.

# Beware the bigots

*It seems everyone is free to criticise, except Christians.*

Recently, Robert Knight, the director of cultural studies for the (American) Family Research Council, chastised conservative commentator David Horowitz for writing an article contending that Christian theology doesn't classify homosexuality as a sin.

Knight pointed out that both the Old and the New Testament treat homosexuality as a sin, and that it was bigotry for Horowitz to be lecturing Christians on their theology. David may not have considered the implications, but he reacted with a more strenuous broadside demeaning Christian theology.

Another commentator in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* insisted that Christians remove all references to Jews in the New Testament. In a *USA Today* opinion article, Rabbi Gerald Zelizer complained that Christian leaders "are too facile in generalising their criticism about Hollywood's portrayal of God and faith" after taking Christian comments out of context and denigrating Christian theology. He then prescribes what Christians should believe.

Surely this writer would be upset if Christians started criticising Talmudic theology. Furthermore, it's hard to believe that he would take statements by renowned Christians out of context, and then criticise them on theological grounds that he does not understand since he is not a Christian. The Bible is clear that "the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). The matters that Rabbi Zelizer is talking about concern a movie made by Christians treating issues from a redemptive perspective.

Shortly thereafter, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an opinion piece by two people from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a worthy Jewish organisation dedicated to helping people remember the evil slaughter of millions of Jews in the Holocaust in World War II. The men cautioned Mel Gibson about the possible depiction of Jewish leaders in his new

movie about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, *The Passion*.

These men get very upset, as we have and they should, whenever someone tries to revise the holocaust history by questioning minor historical details about Hitler's horrible genocidal program. Then they contradict themselves by wanting to revise the historical record by hiding the

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truth about the religious leaders who were involved in the trials that resulted in the death of Jesus.

As these men say, it was Pontius Pilate who ordered the crucifixion, but they leave out the fact that it was religious leaders who incited the mob into demanding the crucifixion.

Telling Christians what to think about their own faith has become the fashion in the media, but that does not make it right. It is a base form of religious bigotry and exposes the agenda of the bigots who want to eliminate Jesus, the Bible and Bible-believing Christians from the marketplace of ideas.

The persecution represented by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ led to brutal persecutions of the apostles and thousands of Christians throughout the Middle East and in Rome. Only the peaceful martyrdoms and loving actions of Christ's followers stemmed this bloody tide of terror.

Regrettably, the persecution of Christians was renewed in the 20th Century, which saw more than 100 million Christians persecuted and martyred in Africa, Asia and even Europe. Today this persecution continues unabated in the Sudan, South-East Asia and the

Middle East.

Now in the United States, some intolerant people are effectively calling for the exclusion of all things Christian from public discourse. These revisionists want to remove all the voluminous historical evidence about Jesus from schools, government and the mass media. For these intolerant people, all speech is acceptable, except references to Jesus Christ and the Bible, which they have forbidden in their politically correct purge of all public discourse.

In their attempt to revise history and erase the historical record, they are effectively crucifying Jesus Christ once more, though subtly than those who incited the mob before Pilate to yell, "Crucify Him!" To this Pilate replied that Jesus' crucifixion was upon their heads (see Mt. 27:15-25).

If we fail to remember this history, we will be doomed to repeat it. Don't let the commentators take away your freedom to think about God in a historically accurate way. If they can let Martin Scorsese defame the real Jesus by producing *The Last Temptation of Christ* in the name of the First Amendment, surely they can let Mel Gibson release the kind of movie about Jesus he wants to make.

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ap

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