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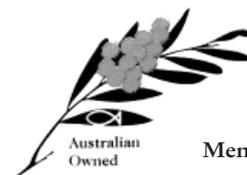
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editorial

One of my favourite hymns is *This Is My Father's World*. It wonderfully affirms the goodness of creation. Every time I sing it I remember how the reformers liberated the church from the crippling notion that God is only interested in certain aspects of life – the religious ones – and is unconcerned about anything that can't be used in the business of Christian mission.

When evangelicals espouse the view that only spiritual issues are of ultimate concern, not only are they forgetting their theological heritage, but more specifically they are denying the goodness of God's creation and the doctrine of divine calling. It was Calvin and Luther who reminded the church that the Christian vision must affirm the created order of life by virtue of the Bible's teaching about Creation and the Incarnation.

The problem in evangelical circles today is that there are two popular but misguided views that trouble younger Christians as they wrestle to discover God's will for their lives. Both these views arise from misunderstandings of the Creation, Incarnation and divine calling. One view implies that if you can't be a full-time minister or missionary, then you've settled for second-best. The second view says that if you can't be involved in "full-time" ministry, then your basic call in life is to provide the financial support for those in the front-line of ministry. More often than not these views are not directly taught; instead, they are indirectly implied.

In the last couple of years I have had to counsel young people who have been brought to a point of crisis by these ideas. They have come to me to seek counsel: "Should I quit my profession, which I find enormously fulfilling and helpful to others, since to continue in it is to settle for second-best?" This view seems to assume that not every lawful activity in the world is good and, further, that lay people are not really called to anything other than to engage in Christian ministry. The other view, that lay people do have a calling, and that calling consists of cash-generation to pay for the bills that the clergy run up, is equally problematic.

It is because many people are troubled by these ideas today that we have devoted this issue of *Australian Presbyterian* to the question of divine calling.

Peter Hastie 

Called to serve

Our “call” takes many forms, and God blesses them all.



Professor Paul Helm has held the J.I. Packer Chair in Theology and Philosophy at Regent, Vancouver, Canada since 2001. Previously he was Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion at King's College in the University of London. He has served as President of the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion. Before joining King's College in 1993, he was Reader in Philosophy at the University of Liverpool. Educated in Worcester College, Oxford, Professor Helm has written many articles and books, mainly focusing on the philosophy of religion and Christian doctrine in the Reformed tradition. He is married and has five children. Among his many books are: *The Providence of God*; *Eternal God*; *Faith with Reason*; *Faith and Understanding*; *Calvin and the Calvinists*; *The Beginnings*; *The Callings*; *The Last Things* and his most recent major work, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford University Press 2004), to which *Australian Presbyterian* will devote a forthcoming issue. Peter Hastie spoke to Professor Helm in Vancouver recently.



**Paul Helm
talks to
Peter Hastie**

You've said that sometimes it's forgotten that most Christians are not intended to be in "full-time Christian service". What do you mean by this?

By "full-time service" I mean the idea that the whole of one's life is to be devoted to witness and evangelism. Among evangelical Christians there has grown up the idea that to choose an "ordinary job" means that one cannot be a Christian in the fullest sense. This has led many Christians to believe that the first question to be asked about their life and work is not whether it is worthwhile, satisfying and useful, but whether it provides them with the opportunity to witness. As a result many Christian young people feel pressured, if not by others then by themselves, into thinking that the only worthwhile life in God's sight is a career in some

church-related activity.

It's easy to see how such a view has arisen. By the very nature of things, Christian activities are centred upon the local church where the minister plays the leading role. Because the minister tends to be the dominant figure in congregational life, this often gives the impression that his life and work is meant to be a pattern for the rest of the congregation. Some believers are therefore led to assume, wrongly in my view, that it's a normal Christian aspiration to be a minister or to be as like a minister as is possible. These Christians think that they should be engaged in essentially the same ministry as their pastor, or some other Christian worker, who is employed in church activities on a full-time basis. Unfortunately, what they forget is that almost by definition only a small fraction of the Christian population can be ministers in that sense.

Is it possible to be a Christian in the fullest sense in a job that is not completely directed to full-time ministry

such as evangelism, witness or preaching?

Yes, of course it is. You don't have to be employed full-time in evangelism and witness to be living an authentic and fulfilled Christian life. There are a number of reasons why this is so.

The first reason is that the Scriptures teach that our motives and intentions are central to integrity in the Christian life. God is supremely interested in why we do things: do we, for instance, perform a certain work simply to please Him or do we undertake it to advance our own interests? Our motives and desires are very important to God. He is pleased when whatever we do, even such mundane activities as eating and drinking, is done for His glory (1 Cor. 10:31). So having right motives in one's work is more important than the work itself.

The second reason why we can be Christians in the fullest sense, even though we are not involved in specifically religious work, is that we live in a world that was made good by God. This means that all human endeavour, unless expressly forbidden by God, is good. True, the world is now fallen. But I think it's important to point out that the world is fallen in *all* respects, not fallen in *some* respects more than others – and so a Christian can, with the right motives and intention, take up a lawful job or a role in life with good conscience. Why? Because he/she is living in a world originally made good by God in every respect and with the right motives can please God in almost whatever is done. This means that Christians can bring about good outcomes in the world through fulfilling a calling of almost any kind.

What harm has been caused by the view that only “full-time” Christian service is the proper occupation for a faithful Christian?

Well, I think this view has led to a narrow vision of the Christian life. Although Christians who have this view are well-intentioned, their attitude actually produces a great deal of harm. Sometimes, as a result of being confronted with this attitude, young people tend to regard “full-time Christian service” as the only fitting occupation for a faithful Christian.

A further problem this view produces is that Christians begin to think of themselves as having a “spiritual life” which is sharply distinct from their everyday life in family, work and leisure. In their minds, a “spiritual life” is a life of prayer and watchfulness, of Bible-reading and church-

going. As a result of this distortion, instead of the Christian life being thought of as an integrated whole, it is artificially broken up into compartments which have little or nothing to do with one another. When this happens the “vertical” dimension of a person's life with God seems unrelated to the “horizontal” dimension of his life on planet Earth.

Again, the view that faithful Christians will seek “full-time” Christian work is the outworking of an implicit clericalism, where the minister's work – and Christian ministry as a whole – is understood as being a sacred and holy calling in a way that more mundane tasks and activities are not. So we see, strangely enough, a kind of replication in Protestantism and in reformed churches of patterns of thought which were characteristic of the pre-reformation church.

But in saying that, I don't want in any way to disparage or belittle the centrality of the Christian ministry and the importance of learning and having an educated ministry. The problem is that there is often a desire for the Christian ministry simply to replicate itself, rather than to see itself as one means of fostering Christian life in the world.

Can you explain the notion of “calling” as we find it in the New Testament?

The word “calling” refers, of course, in its narrow and theological sense to the effectual call of the gospel – where a sinner called by grace experiences the regenerating and efficacious work of the Holy Spirit. Reformed scholars use technical words such as regeneration, illumination and sanctification to refer to various aspects of this classical idea of calling.

However, there is another sense in which the term “calling” is used in the New Testament. We find it, for example, in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where he refers to the various callings of people (1 Cor. 7:17, 18, 20-24). When he uses the term in this sense, he's referring to their worldly callings or vocations. In referring to their life and work in this way, it seems to me that he legitimises those “callings” in a number of ways. The first thing we should notice, I think, is that he

doesn't use any language that disparages their callings. You never find him saying or implying that these callings are to be looked down upon, or are anything other than legitimate.

But also, more strongly than that, we find him recommending to a variety of Christians in a variety of callings to stay where they are. This makes him, almost by default, rather politically and socially conservative. Nonetheless, from Paul's point of view, the default position is for people to remain in the callings that they have been given according to God's providential wisdom. Further, I think Paul would argue that only if there is clear evidence that a person has both the gifts and desire for Christian ministry, in the narrower sense, is such a course to be pursued. So, the legitimate position, the default position as I said, is that according to Paul, Christians ought to stay where they are, where the gospel finds them.

Some people have suggested that when God “calls” people it is always to some form of full-time ministry. Is there any truth in that?

Well, it's true that some people are called to full-time ministry, but that's not the only calling that Christians receive. The situation becomes even more complicated when we think, for example, of Paul who had a calling as a full-time apostle to the Gentiles but who also worked to support himself in his calling as a tent-maker.

Of course, I think we're living in a different social world from Paul and the Corinthians. Today people do have opportunity through education, work experience, and leisure to deliberate about what they might do. There are many opportunities open to young people today and our world offers a greater range of choice in determining one's calling. Nonetheless, it seems to me the same basic principle applies for people then as now ... it's to do with guidance. If a person believes that he or she has certain talents and a certain bent, if he finds fulfillment in a certain sort of work, then these indications seem to me to be signs of the Lord's calling. I don't believe that we should always be looking for such evidence to be overridden by some sort of special voice, or miraculous intervention which removes the notion of calling from the ordinary pattern of reasoning and reflection about what one may do or is fitted to do. This also applies when we are thinking about the notion of calling

to some sort of exclusive, religious ministry.

How did Christians become confused about the idea of calling in the Middle Ages?

I think it's a very complex story that involves a number of different influences. Part of the problem was due to misunderstandings about sexuality and celibacy which contributed to the growth of the monastic movement from the fifth century onwards into the Middle Ages.

Then there was the idea that there were two types or levels of Christian life – the “perfect life” and the “permitted life” – which had also arisen around the fifth century. People who were in religious orders were expected to follow the stricter path and so a distinction began to develop between Christians. This distinction was encouraged by a priestly understanding of the ministry and the sacraments. So gradually there arose the idea that there were two orders of humanity within Christendom: the priesthood, which was governed by canon law, and the ordinary man, who lived under common law.

Clergy also gained a great deal of prestige through the teaching that they had a quasi-magical power in dispensing the sacraments – *ex opere operato* – and this idea, coupled with the belief that the city and the everyday world was in some way more tainted than the solitary or monastic life, helped to contribute to the misunderstanding of the biblical notion of calling. So there were a number of reasons why Christians misunderstood the doctrine.

You've claimed that one of the dangers facing Christians is the temptation to divide life into spiritual and secular compartments. How does this sort of thinking lead to the idea that normal living for the Christian is a spiritually second-rate existence?

Well, it's a sort of split-mindedness, isn't it? There are a number of elements to it. The basic idea that drives this way of thinking is the belief that the only thing that matters is the work of redemption in the narrow sense. Along with this notion is the further one that the work of redemption has to be within the church and consists in simply evangelising and enjoying the fruits of evangelism.

Unfortunately, people who think this way often neglect and are puzzled about the place and purpose of God's creation. For instance, how does the world relate to the church? How should Christians treat

the created order? Should they ignore it, flee it or embrace it? Affirming the original goodness of all creation should be a matter of deep concern for people who have a strong view of God's sovereignty and believe that He's the Creator.

The pattern of thought that I'm talking about is extremely odd when it is found amongst evangelicals because it gives the impression that they believe that much of God's creation has been, so to speak, abandoned by Him or demoted to second-rate status. The consequence of this is that the ministry of the church isn't geared to fitting believers for Christian fulfillment in their everyday callings and activities.

I think this is a constant problem in the church. There is always a subtle and unconscious pull away from everyday life back into church.

From Paul's point of view, the default position is for people to remain in the callings that they have been given.



How did Luther recover the true idea of calling at the Reformation? According to Luther, is there anything different about a person being called to full-time evangelistic, pastoral ministry?

Luther recovered the biblical idea of calling, as did Calvin, by showing the error of the medieval, sacred/secular distinction, particularly as it found its expression in clerical orders in the medieval period. He showed from the Bible that the minister was simply a servant of the word of God and did not have a priestly, sacerdotal role.

How did his understanding of priesthood differ from medieval views?

Well, Luther believed that the priesthood was not confined to a clerical caste but applied to all believers. Luther understood the New Testament to teach that priesthood was not simply the calling of an elite group within the church; rather, every Christian, by virtue of being a Christian, was both a priest and a king (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:5). In essence, Luther's rediscovery of the true meaning of priesthood had a levelling-up effect within soci-

ety. It destroyed the idea of a hierarchical, priestly caste. It put every one on an equal footing and made all legitimate work a spiritual activity.

This rediscovery of the priesthood of all believers gave Christians, according to their opportunities and abilities, a sense of dignity in the various forms of work in which they served. As long as believers were rightly motivated to please God, all their works were worthy – even sweeping a room with a broom, as the English poet George Herbert pointed out. Again, motivation and intention are the key elements in determining whether an action is legitimate and good. The only *real* barriers to any occupation are whether the occupation itself is forbidden or whether it is likely to lead others into sin. These seem to be the only qualifications that I can think of that shape what are otherwise the world-wide opportunities that Christians enjoy. God has set us all to work in His good world, and we have a duty to explore, develop and manage it.

Christ called 12 apostles to work “full-time” in teaching and evangelism. Was this an exceptional call or does it set a pattern for all Christian discipleship?

Well, it clearly was exceptional. It was exceptional in the light of Jesus' ministry because he called the 12 to this particular task and not every one of his hearers. We know from the New Testament that the 12 played a distinctive role because they represented the 12 tribes of Israel. So there was definitely a theological rationale behind the idea of the 12 apostles. They were the leaders of the New Israel. In that sense, the appointment of the 12 is something unique in the history of the church and we should not seek its replication.

Then there's the issue of how we are meant to apply language in the New Testament that was in the first instance addressed to the 12 and not to others. I think we need to be wary of the tendency of too readily applying language which was originally addressed to other audiences apart from ourselves. Of course, New Testament language may be a direct command to us 2000 years later; then again, it might only be of indirect application. I think the proper approach is to understand these words in their original setting and then apply them to ourselves in our different contexts.

We take this approach with Paul's letters. We recognise that in the first instance they were not addressed to us – they were addressed to believers in

Corinth or Rome or wherever. Once we have understood the meaning of the text in its original setting – then, and only then, are we in a position to identify the underlying principle and its application to ourselves in a different context. If we fail to understand the original life-setting of the Scriptures, we can overstep the mark and apply these words directly to ourselves in a way that was not intended. When we do this we can create mischief. Treating the Bible in this cavalier and uncritical way fails to show due respect to the inspiration, trustworthiness and authority of Scripture.

Some Christians believe that their daily work merely exists to provide them with living expenses and to give them a source of income so that they can support Gospel ministry. Are they right in this?

Well, not in my view. I think such an understanding reduces the significance of many legitimate and essential activities and gives everything in life a merely incidental value. On this view everything is simply as a means to this wider goal of evangelism and outreach.

My principal objection to this view is that it implies that nothing I do as a Christian is worthwhile in and of itself. None of my activities, if they are not directly related to evangelism and full-time church work, has any intrinsic value. This means that my involvements in culture, music, the arts, appreciation of the natural order, the desire to sustain and foster the environment – just to mention a few currently fashionable concerns – are worthwhile in and of themselves. They only become useful when they can be used in the worship services of the church or in evangelism and outreach in its various forms. Such a view devalues the worthwhileness of so many activities – things like farming, caring for the sick, teaching, to mention just a few – and I find that very disheartening.

Calvin said each individual is appointed to a particular living and serves there as a sentry at a post. Does this mean that Christians should ever be anxious about their station in life?

Well, it is coupled with the point I've just been making. If you can satisfy yourself in your own mind that what you're doing is intrinsically worthwhile in the Lord's eyes, and that where you are is where you should be in God's providential wisdom, then you won't always be

looking over your shoulder to see if you should be involved in some sort of "full-time" Christian ministry. Nor will you be consumed with anxiety about your job as to whether that is really what you ought to be doing. So the idea that God appoints us to our various situations frees us psychologically from certain kinds of anxiety.

Of course, Calvin's teaching about providence in general should do that, and his teaching about providence coupled with this emphasis upon each person being legitimately placed where they are, should reinforce each other. So Calvin's right – we are stationed in life like sentries. We are in the place of God's appointment and we shouldn't forget this when emphasising the importance of the legitimacy of different Christian callings.

Finally, we must remember that Christians are called to be salt and light in whatever specific calling we find ourselves. In other words, we have an overriding responsibility to bear witness to the Lord regardless of our calling. If I am called to be a doctor, I am called to be both a doctor and a Christian. The same applies if I work at a lathe or at a supermarket check-out. If we are called to it, we are called to it by God. It is legitimate.

At the same time we must remember that we are the Lord's people so we must

see ourselves to be in the world but not of it.

What sort of questions should people be asking themselves to determine whether the sort of work that they have in mind is really worthwhile?

I think they're common-sense questions in the main. Some of these questions concern a person's fittedness – if I feel myself attracted to work that is physically demanding, then am I the sort of person who has the physical capabilities to undertake it? If I think myself called to a place where skills of leadership are required, then do I have those leadership qualities? And the way to answer that question is to remember that you don't always answer it for yourself, but seek Christian guidance from people who have seen you from an objective point of view and who therefore may see you better than you see yourself.

Then there other sorts of questions that have to do with temperament, intellectual capacity, medical and physical matters, as well as family responsibilities. All these matters should go into the mix. Sometimes decisions are not always clear-cut. It may be that we come to a decision, which is an "on-balance" decision. This means that "all things considered", we ought to pursue Path A rather than Path B. We certainly should never seek guidance by using occult means such as consulting the stars and the like.

Nor should we expect to find "God's perfect plan" for our lives spelled out somewhere. Looking for such a plan seems to be an extraordinary way of seeking answers to questions about guidance. One doesn't find a word about this in the

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whole of the New Testament.

Ultimately it's a question of fittedness. And this means that we have to be honest with ourselves. It may be that our conscience tells us at some stage that we are actually running away from a responsibility that God wants us to assume. For instance, we might be running away from ministry like Jonah and so it would be relevant to take our conscience into account as we contemplate what we should do. So, it has got to be a common-sense approach involving other people as well as ourselves. If a person trusts his or her minister in this regard he may be able to offer some helpful advice. But it's got to be undertaken before God with one's conscience attuned to Christian responsibilities.

Is there such a thing as a call to the ministry? How do people receive it? For instance, does it come miraculously and is it accomplished by visions/voices?

Yes, there is such a thing as a call to the ministry, but it's a difficult matter. I think we can usually rule out visions and voices because nowadays these are usually aspects of the divination/occult-type guidance that I think is misplaced. Further, I don't believe that there is any in-principle difference between fulfilling

one's calling as a Christian minister and fulfilling it in some other way. Are there any clear grounds for saying that there is an in-principle difference in the manner of God's call in either case?

Nor should we expect to find "God's perfect plan" for our lives spelled out somewhere.

Personally, I think that discerning a call to the Christian ministry involves questions of fittedness, self-examination as to one's motives and intentions, and seeking the opinions of others who are qualified to offer advice.

There is also the important question of personal desire or constraint. I don't think one can rule out that somebody should feel a strong inner constraint to the Christian ministry and feel in some way impelled to become a minister.

To what extent does the new life to which Christ calls us affect our present circumstances and relationships? Does our freedom in Christ allow us to be more mobile with respect to jobs and less tied to relationships?

Although our world today is in many

respects vastly different to the world of the first century, that doesn't change the basic parameters of what I have been trying to say. As I have already mentioned, today we have vastly more opportunities with respect to travel and education. But I don't think these increased opportunities change any of the principles involved. For instance, you might hear of opportunities in other countries, and you could regard yourself as particularly fitted for the task, perhaps uniquely fitted. In those circumstances, considering the position would be legitimate, but you would also have to take into account how assuming this responsibility might affect your family circumstances, your duty to parents and other obligations that you might have. That's part of the mix, part of the hard thought that has to go into making decisions of this kind.

If work is a God-given calling, where do we draw the line between fulfilling our calling and workaholism?

We need to remember that although our work is a calling, it is not meant to be an all-consuming thing. It is one thing to emphasise the legitimacy of all kinds of work for a Christian, along with the qualifications required for it. However, it's another thing to say that fulfilling that calling is more important than other duties we may have – duties, for example, to our husbands and wives, our children, our parents and friends. All these must be respected in the pursuit of a calling.

While our various callings as Christians are legitimate, we must be wary of making them the be-all and end-all of life. The New Testament is full of warnings about misplaced ambitions. Jesus cautioned his disciples by reminding them that where their treasures are, there their hearts will be also. We must make it our ambition to lay up treasures in heaven. It is easy, even as a Christian, to be overly concerned about earthly treasure.

In the West, we put special emphasis upon work that involves knowledge, individual initiative, and responsibility along with the consumerist lifestyle that goes with it, and we look down on repetitive, mundane work. Is this a Christian way to look at work?

Christians may be torn in this. I think every Christian is given talents, and we must use these talents in order to glorify God. If I am called to use my brain, my leadership qualities, my personality, and

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my organisational talents, then that should not tempt me to belittle the calling of anyone who is differently equipped. I suppose the best analogy we have here is Paul's teaching about the body of Christ. Every member of the church is equally a member – there is a kind of egalitarian strand to his teaching. But he also emphasises that within this egalitarian relationship to Christ there are legitimate differences as well. Not all members of Christ's body function as hands or eyes.

It is true that there are different kinds of work. Some sorts of work are more difficult than others. With regard to the more mundane forms, I think there are certainly people who are better suited to repetitious work. They may find they can live with the demands of this type of work which would drive other sorts of people mad. On the other hand, they may find that they cannot sustain or bear the demands of complex knowledge work. What legitimises their work is that it is given meaning and significance by the fact that what they do is a good thing. When they do what some may regard as mundane activities they can be assured that their work is valuable to God if it is done for God's glory and with the aim of pleasing Him. They should certainly not feel inferior as though they belong to a lesser order of Christian because they are involved in humble work.

Does a Christian's calling to work come to an end when he retires, or is unemployed, or inherits a fortune?

I may have given the impression in what I have already said that our callings are meant to be identified with paid employment. Of course, for the vast majority of people this *will* be the case, but there are exceptions and qualifications to this general rule. As a calling is wider than our work, so it is a mistake to identify our calling with paid employment.

Obviously, as people get older and their natural capacities decline, they get weaker in body and mind. Sometimes people find that their skills are no longer required because their work is superseded by new technology. These factors have to be taken into account when determining whether a person should consider a change in occupation. When a person's health, skills or family circumstances have undergone a major change, he must again review his personal circumstances and see, whether given the chance to retire, he should retire or continue on. If a person

believes that he should retire then there will be other opportunities to use his skills in alternative activities or hobbies. This is a difficult area in which to give advice. I think in this sort of area one has to be very discriminating in the way in which guidance is sought, and especially so when one is thrown into unemployment. I find it difficult to prescribe a general rule which would apply to every Christian who is passing through these major life transitions.

How should a Christian face unemployment? Are we free to do as we please in such circumstances, as



The idea of calling invites us to see our lives as a whole, before God, and recognise that people differ.

though we are on one long holiday?

An unemployed Christian has a lot of enforced leisure time. What is he to do? Is he to treat each day and each week as a long holiday? Not only is idleness of this kind psychologically and often physically destructive, it is also incompatible with a Christian's calling. While it is not desirable or possible to go into detail here over what a Christian ought to do in such circumstances, nevertheless a person who is unemployed through no fault of his own should not worry or complain himself into inactivity. Are there opportunities to be retrained? Could he secure odd jobs? Ought he to look for work away from home? Does he have a hobby that he can develop? These and many other questions are the sorts of things that an unemployed Christian should be asking himself.

How does the idea of Christian calling affect the modern notion of "leisure"?

Well, we have touched on that a little. First, let me say that I do not think that there is a theology of play or leisure which could prescribe amounts and kinds of leisure for everyone. Such an idea is absurd, however well-intentioned it may be. The fact is that it is difficult to provide a biblical justification for leisure and recreation by appealing to isolated texts and passages of Scripture which

refer, for instance, to the Sabbath rest, or to what Ecclesiastes says about the importance of the present, or to what the Song of Solomon says about the celebration of love between the sexes. The problem with all such appeals is that they are forced, for such passages have no reference to the twenty-first century idea of leisure time and how it may be spent. What we need to do is to think in a biblically distinctive way about leisure in terms of our calling.

So how does leisure relate to these ideas of calling? I think in this way. The idea of calling invites each of us to see our lives as a whole, before God, and to recognise the obvious fact that people differ from one another. Nothing should be done, in the name of a Christian theology of leisure, or of anything else, to erode these differences.

For many in the 21st century, in the West, the enjoyment of leisure time which is not wholly occupied with recovering from the effects of working is a fact that can be taken for granted. It is one of the "inputs" into our lives. It represents a new set of opportunities along with, say, the higher standards of provision for health that we all have come to expect. And since calling is not equivalent to paid work, increasing amounts of leisure ought not to be an embarrassment to the Christian any more than the fact that small-pox has been eliminated should embarrass him. Formerly life consisted in working and resting from work. Now it consists in working, resting and "leisure time".

But leisure is a word for many different things – playing sport and watching it, traveling, developing sophisticated hobbies, and so on. If the differences between people which I have been stressing as part of the biblical account of calling and the different kinds of leisure are added together, then very many different attitudes both to paid work and leisure and to their relationship are possible.

Some people find fulfillment in one life-long, week-long job, some in a combination of work and leisure, some in work which is not employment, some in work which is play for others, and so forth. All such differences are compatible with Christian integrity and with the idea of each Christian having a calling. What is not compatible with this is any activity which is sinful or for which the motive and end is unchristian, or which is the imposition of one pattern of living by others. Again, "let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind".

ap

We are all priests

All true Christians are in full-time ministry, whatever we do.

I remember a public meeting at university when I first came across the idea that “full-time” ministry was the most appropriate calling for the faithful Christian. I still recall the speaker’s impassioned plea to think of the millions of people in the world who were destined for a Christ-less eternity unless many of us heeded his call to become evangelists and missionaries. And I also distinctly remember that he challenged us to give up our small ambitions in this world so as to embrace God’s plan for world evangelisation.

It was a moving appeal, and while it didn’t directly affect my decision to train for the Christian ministry, it did create a tension in my mind. Could a Christian in good conscience pursue any of a thousand different careers while there were still so many people who hadn’t heard of Christ? Who would warn them of the coming judgment and point them to Jesus as the Saviour?

Come to think of it, was it even legitimate to be spending time pursuing cultural, artistic and sporting activities? Eric Liddell’s sister, Jenny, in the film *Chariots of Fire*, echoed many of the lecturer’s sentiments when she accused her gold medal-winning brother of selfish indulgence by running in the Olympics. The issue is: is the only way to evaluate our lives to ask the question whether our occupations have provided us with umpteen opportunities for witness and evangelism? Many modern Christians seem to think so.

In my experience as a pastor I often come across young people in particular who experience enormous spiritual torment over these issues. Well-meaning friends, who recognise their considerable talents, suggest that they are wasting their lives if they do not devote themselves exclusively to gospel ministry. Often, these friends exert considerable psychological pressure to persuade them to pursue theological studies or to begin Gospel ministry training.

Usually, the two assumptions that are implicit in their advice are, first, that the Christian life consists essentially of “witness” and evangelism and that those who do not devote themselves seriously to this



**Peter
Hastie**

task are a lesser breed of believer.

The second assumption is related to the first in that it sees life as divided into spiritual and worldly components. The spiritual realm consists of religious activities such as prayer, Bible-reading, evangelism and church attendance. The worldly realm, by contrast, is found in the more mundane activities of life – holding a job, doing the

shopping, paying the bills and changing a nappy. These activities are considered of a lower order, and therefore less important.

My aim in this article is to examine the second of these assumptions and to see

whether it is well-grounded in Scripture. Then I want to look at Martin Luther’s contribution to the doctrines of priesthood and vocation to see how the 16th century reformer used biblical insights and historical theology to bring balance to this perplexing subject.

First, then, let’s look at the assumption that the spiritual realm stops at the church door and does not extend into the public square. In the Genesis creation account, we read that God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. The pinnacle of God’s creative activity, of course, was man – male and female (Genesis 1:26, 27). Note the repeated reference to God’s reaction after each of His creative acts. One refrain is repeated over and over: “God saw that it was good.”

One can only draw the conclusion that God is at pains to affirm the essential goodness of the material realm. Christians are meant to believe that the created order is fundamentally good and that activities that explore, develop and protect that order are meaningful, worthwhile and

pleasing to God. Unfortunately, not every generation of Christians has seen the world in this way.

During the early history of the church a movement developed that regarded the material realm as basically evil. The movement was known as Gnosticism, and although it was condemned by the church, it has never really been silenced. Gnostic tendencies have appeared in the church in every generation. They are easily identified by the way in which they compartmentalise existence into spiritual and material realms with the implication that activities related to the material order are of a lesser kind. This means, for instance, that a doctor who looks after our bodies is engaged in a less important form of work than a minister who is principally concerned for people’s souls.

This assumption runs into a brick wall when we think about the Incarnation. The Incarnation represents God’s love for the world. God, who is Spirit, became man. That is, the Divine was somehow united to the material world.

The implications of the Incarnation are revolutionary and Christians in various ages have struggled to come to terms with them. For example, the Docetists in the second century couldn’t conceive how the spiritual could be linked to this world. On the other hand, in the fourth century, the Arians had difficulty coming to terms with the idea that a man could be God. They couldn’t bring themselves to believe Jesus really was divine.

Each of these heresies, whether Gnosticism, Docetism or Arianism, compartmentalises the spiritual and material realms, and each is reluctant to affirm the fundamental goodness of creation and the human activities that support it. And this is why we should be especially wary of modern tendencies within the church that manifest these characteristics, especially when they appear in the guise of well-intentioned advice that effectively downgrades every occupation that is not directly involved in the ministry of the Gospel.

So in a real sense, the fundamental goodness of the created order is the issue at point in whether “full-time” Christian ministry is the most worthy occupation

***Down through
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of the church.***

for a Christian. In my judgment, this notion is founded on a defective understanding of the goodness of God's creation and the reality of the Incarnation.

Sadly, down through the centuries the idea that matter is somehow inferior, and that its possession (usually in the form of gold) is evil, has been the bane of the church. For instance, in the Middle Ages it found expression in the radical call to poverty by St Francis of Assisi, and today the same note is struck by Marxist liberation theologians who assume that wealth is fundamentally evil and that rich people must be compelled to give it up (usually at the point of a gun). Both these movements are founded on a basic misunderstanding of the goodness of creation, and the idea that church-related ministry is a superior calling for the Christian is equally defective. It is founded on a similar (but often unconscious) misunderstanding.

Now for Luther's part in all this. Luther was born into a world where it was assumed that Christendom was comprised of two different orders of people – the religious (monks, nuns and priests) and the laity. The first order was considered a superior class. The distinction between the two had developed in the early centuries of the church.

The idea is first found in the book *Demonstration of the Gospel*, by Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (AD 265-339). He argued that Christ in the Sermon on the Mount authorised two ways of life for believers. One way is referred to as the "perfect life"; the other is the "permitted life". The perfect life is spiritual, dedicated to religious exercises and reserved for the clergy and religious orders; the permitted life involves every day activities such as politics, soldiering, farming, and raising a family. It is the lot of ordinary believers.

This division controlled the social order from the early Middle Ages until the Reformation. For example, while both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas praised the work of farmers, craftsmen, and merchants, they always regarded the religious life as qualitatively superior to the secular life.

Luther reacted violently to this teaching. His understanding of the doctrines of justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers and Christian "calling" cast doubt over this division of life into spiritual versus secular orders. He denied there was a special religious vocation because he claimed the call of God came to each man

at his common tasks. One of Luther's contemporaries said, "This is the work which emptied the cloisters".

In Luther's mind, the real "spiritual estate" was made up not of clergy but of the whole body of believers through Jesus Christ, clerical and lay alike. Further, he believed that the Bible taught that every Christian was a priest (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:5). A soldier belonged to the spiritual estate as much as a bishop. He said: "We are all consecrated priests through baptism, as St. Peter says in 1 Peter 2:9 'you are a royal priesthood' ... all Christians are truly of the spiritual state and there is no difference among them except that of office." Elsewhere he says: "Scripture makes all of us equally priests; and the churchly priesthood which we now separate from the laity is really called 'ministry'. In fact nowhere is it called priesthood."

A number of consequences flow from Luther's view of the priesthood of all believers. First, perhaps the most obvious is that "lay people" can live the Christian life to the full. The distinction between clergy and laity as an order of existence is abolished. This puts paid to the idea that "full-time" church work is somehow better than other callings.

Second, although some believed that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers undermined the pastoral office, this was not so. Luther was at pains to remind people that the pastoral office was a vocation too, a calling from God with its own authority and responsibilities. The office of the preacher and the work of evangelists and missionaries are absolutely essential to the advance of the Kingdom.

Third, the "priesthood of all believers", while it did not mean that everyone automatically became involved in full-time church work, did turn every kind of work into a sacred calling. Up until this time, people in the church had looked upon marriage as a second-class form of existence. However, Luther insisted that marriage was a legitimate calling and that a mother and father could be priests to their own children and could render a valuable religious service unto God.

The second doctrine which transformed Luther's thinking about a

Christian's role in the world was the doctrine of "calling". Since the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers had abolished the distinction between the spiritual and secular realms, Luther saw that the biblical teaching of calling was particularly significant in explaining a Christian's work and relationships.

Further, once Luther realised that all of life was spiritual, he suddenly saw how ordinary work could be done for the glory of God. If all worthy occupations were divine callings, then no labour was beneath a man's dignity. "A dairy-maid can milk cows to the glory of God," he said. Further, Luther saw that common work was good because God Himself performs these tasks. For instance, God is a tailor who makes a coat for the deer that will last a thousand years. He is also a butler who sets forth a feast for the sparrows and spends on them each year more than any king.

All of this solves the problem that so many Christians face today: is the only true calling a call to full-time service? No. And if I can't be a full-time Christian worker, does my work have any significance apart from being the means to pay the church's bills? Yes. If you doubt it, remember the goodness of creation, the reality of the Incarnation and the contribution of Martin Luther to the doctrines of the priesthood of all believers and divine calling.

Peter Hastie, minister of Ashfield Presbyterian Church, Sydney, is issues editor of AP.

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A force for good

John Newton persuaded William Wilberforce to stay an MP – thank God!

Imagine that a gifted young man, able to think well on his feet, and to speak for three or four hours if need be, were to profess faith in Christ and ask for advice as to what he should do with his life. Today almost any evangelical minister would be quick to encourage such a man to consider entering the ministry. First the Metro or MTS programme, then theological college, then a lifetime of holding forth in pulpits and at conferences. Not so, however, when William Wilberforce visited St Mary's church in London on 4 December 1785, and confessed in a note to "ten thousand doubts" about himself.

The rector was the converted slave trader, John Newton, who had come to know God's amazing grace. Newton read Wilberforce's note, and set up a meeting between the two men on the following Wednesday, 7 December.

Wilberforce had emerged from a university career in Cambridge, where he had played cards rather than attended lectures. In 1780 he stood successfully for Hull, and so became a member of the British House of Commons. Yet he was struck by what he called the "shapeless idleness"



Peter Barnes

of his past, and was inching his way towards saving faith in Christ. A polished speaker, armed with a talent for devastating sarcasm, Wilberforce was well suited to a life which revolved around public speaking.

The "great change", as Wilberforce called conversion, came through means of the conversation of Isaac Milner (the evangelical tutor from Queen's College, Cambridge), and reading Philip Doddridge's book *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, together with the Bible. By 1787 Wilberforce was clear concerning his evangelical convictions, and wrote: "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners." By "manners", he meant what we would call "morals".

Until Newton's death more than 20 years later in 1807, "the old African blasphemer", as Newton used to refer to himself, often advised the eloquent young politician on spiritual matters. Newton was never keen to urge Wilberforce to enter the ministry. In 1786 he wrote of him: "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing both as a Christian and a statesman. How seldom do these characters coincide!" Ever the optimist, Newton added that "they are not incompatible".

In 1796 Newton again advised Wilberforce to remain in politics: "I believe you are the Lord's servant, and are in the post which He has assigned you; and though it appears to me more arduous, and requiring more self-denial than my own, I know that He who has called you to it can afford you strength accord-

ing to your day." Newton never fell for the line that the only possible avenue of Christian service was so-called "fulltime ministry". All Christians are called to full-time ministry in their respective callings.

So Wilberforce pressed on in the House of Commons. Each year he would argue the case for the abolition of the slave trade, and each year he would be defeated. Finally, in 1807 the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed, and the House of Commons broke out with three *hurrahs* for Wilberforce – quite an unusual display of enthusiasm and affection for politicians. Finally, in 1833, when Wilberforce himself was long retired and near death, the parliament abolished slavery itself.

Wilberforce was an extraordinary man. He thought that what was needed in politics was not more talent but "resolute integrity".

Was Newton right to steer Wilberforce away from the pulpit, and keep him in the hurly burly of the world of politics? It would seem so. As Wilberforce himself put it: "A man who acts from the principles I profess reflects that he is to give an account of his political conduct at the Judgment seat of Christ."

The greatest need in the Western world today may not be more preachers so much as more Christians of true salt and light who can operate in whatever sphere of service God has placed them.

Peter Barnes is minister of Revesby Presbyterian Church, NSW.

ap

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Society's attitude to work is very different from a century ago. Then our vocation, whether paid work or work in the home, was at the centre of our life. Opportunities for rest and relaxation were peripheral. Today, our leisure time is much more likely to be central in our thinking. Work has become a means of making money to enjoy our leisure.

The danger with the modern emphasis is that it leads us to focus on what the world owes us, rather than what we can contribute for the common good. This can lead to "idleness" — not that we are doing nothing, but we do what we do for the wrong reason.

Paul saw this as a potential problem for the young church of Thessalonica, and addresses it in his two short letters to them, which form part of God's inspired Word to us. There was also some confusion concerning Christ's Second Coming. It is interesting that these go together because in His parables about this great event Jesus Himself was concerned that we should be found doing the Father's will, fulfilling our vocation, when He comes.

Bruce Christian

■ DAY 1 *Godliness & the three bearers*

THE PASSAGE 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-3

THE POINT Paul never lost his deep pastoral concern for the churches he'd planted. His letters to them usually contained admonition and the correction of errors and misunderstanding. But he always began them on a positive note, full of gratitude and praise. It is a good model for the attitude in which we should approach tasks that have the potential to cause tension. In this letter Paul chooses to highlight the obvious fruit being borne among the Thessalonians by his favourite trilogy of virtues: faith, hope and love.

THE PARTICULARS

- The Church is established in the eternal Godhead. Therefore it isn't just an optional extra for believers; they are part of it (1).
- Paul maintained an active, grateful, personal and prayerful relationship with all the churches of which he had been part (2).
- Authentic faith will give birth to good work (cf James 2:18)(3).
- True love will give birth to sacrificial toil (cf John 15:9-17)(3).
- Genuine hope gives birth to the ability to keep going in spite of the inevitable set-backs in our experience (cf Romans 8:25)(3).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Would a biography of your Christian life show clear evidence of genuine faith, hope and love? Would yesterday's diary entry?

■ DAY 2 *Clear as a bell*

THE PASSAGE 1 THESSALONIANS 1:4-10

THE POINT Paul commended the Thessalonians because they were a living testimony of God's grace and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit among them. It was like a clear-sounding bell that rang out across the whole region, even beyond their own borders.

THE PARTICULARS

- The powerful impact of the Gospel in Thessalonica was clear evidence of the Holy Spirit's work and therefore of the fact that God had singled them out to be the recipients of His love (4-5a).
- Much of Paul's ministry was through relationships. His living with the Thessalonians is what had the biggest impact (5b-6a).
- Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (cf Galatians 5:22), suppressing any suffering or persecution that comes from following Christ (6b).
- The dramatic change the Gospel produced in the Thessalonians made them a natural example for others to follow. The most striking thing was that they put the one, true and only living God first in their lives; nothing else took His rightful place (7-9).
- Their security in the risen Christ as Saviour enabled the Thessalonians to look forward to His future Coming in judgment (10).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is your life a clear-sounding bell that peals out the reality of God's saving grace in your family/neighbourhood/office?

DAY 3

Honest to God

THE PASSAGE

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-6A

THE POINT Paul's Church planting efforts in Thessalonica in 51AD lasted only a few weeks. He had travelled the 100km from Philippi, having been forced to leave there because of violent Jewish opposition (the gaol/earthquake/evangelism episode in Acts 16). Now similar opposition in Thessalonica forced another hasty retreat (Acts 17). This gave rise to some criticism that Paul was nothing more than a superficial, opportunistic, self-serving peddler of the gospel. Paul points out how contrary to fact this criticism was, challenging the church members to verify this from their own experience ("you know" in verses 1, 2 and 5).

THE PARTICULARS

- The positive response to Paul's proclamation of the Gospel in Thessalonica was clear proof of the success of his visit (1).
- With God's help Paul stayed valiantly committed to the Gospel in spite of ongoing opposition, thus proving he was genuine (2).
- The Gospel can be (and often is) undermined by heresy, less than honest motives, trickery, saying only what people want to hear, flattery, hypocrisy and greed. Paul could demonstrate that he was approved by God and remained true to the task given to him (4-6).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How does our proclamation of the Gospel stand up to Paul's?

DAY 4

Honest to men

THE PASSAGE

1 THESSALONIANS 2:6B-12

THE POINT Paul did not only aim to be honest to God in his gospel work, he also made sure he was honest to men. We would do well today to follow his example of leadership in the Church, combining strength with humility and authority with service (cf Phil. 3:17).

THE PARTICULARS

- Paul saw his relationship to the churches he'd planted and nurtured as an intimate and loving parent-child relationship (7-8, 11).
- Paul was careful never to use (or abuse) his rightful apostolic authority and privilege to take advantage of others (6b, 9).
- Paul was careful to be above reproach in all his dealings with believers, to the point that he could call God as a witness (10).
- Paul's underlying purpose in everything was for believers to behave consistently with their profession. He used all the ploys of a human father – exhortation/encouragement, comfort/understanding, urging/commissioning – to achieve his purpose (12).
- It is God who acts first to call us into His kingdom and glory (12).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Why is the parent-child relationship so helpful as a model for leadership in the Church? How does it strike a good balance?
- Is it common to see this balance in Church leadership today?

DAY 5

God's Word at work

THE PASSAGE

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13-16

THE POINT Paul's dramatic conversion on the Damascus road (see Acts 9:1-19) effected a 180° turn-around in his thinking. Although he had been a Pharisee who was hostile to the idea of Jesus' being the Messiah (cf 1 Tim. 1:13), he was now equally passionate in denouncing the Jews in their continued disbelief and opposition.

THE PARTICULARS

- Paul was quite self-conscious of his special calling from God to be an Apostle (cf 1 Corinthians 15:8-10), chosen as an official instrument to declare God's inspired word to the Gentiles. The believers at Thessalonica gladly accepted such authority (13).
- In the early days of the Church, persecution of new believers by their fellow Jews wasn't confined to Judea; it continued wherever the Gospel was preached and new churches were planted.
- Paul did not try to absolve the Jews as a group from their part in the guilt of Jesus' death with its consequent judgment (15-16).
- Commitment to God's Word usually results in active hostility.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Why were the Jewish leaders so antagonistic towards Jesus?
- Why did they persist in their antagonism to his Church?
- Why is there still such strong resistance to the Gospel by Jews?

DAY 6

A model for ministry

THE PASSAGE

1 THESSALONIANS 2:17-3:5

THE POINT Paul can never be found guilty (although many try!) of being a cold, detached theologian. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he teaches us profound spiritual truth. But it is always in the context of a warm, loving, personal relationship with his family in Christ. We would do well to make the sentiments he expresses in these verses a model for our own approach to whatever ministry God has given us to do within His Church.

THE PARTICULARS

- Paul knew that he was involved in a spiritual battle (17-18, 5).
- Paul had a deep, personal concern for the people who had come to faith through his ministry; he longed always to be with them.
- Paul saw them as trophies of God's grace that he could hold up before the Lord when he returned, giving him a real sense of joy and fulfilment, and making all his efforts worthwhile (19-20, 5).
- Paul did not let setbacks discourage him; he always had a contingency plan, usually involving others as co-workers (1-2).
- Persecutions are an inevitable part of following Jesus, because they are part of God's sovereign plan for us in Christ (3-4).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is there someone to whom you could have a special ministry of nurture and encouragement, someone who could be your trophy?

DAY 7

The value of each other

THE PASSAGE

1 THESSALONIANS 3:6-13

THE POINT Paul was greatly encouraged by Timothy's report of growth in the young church plant at Thessalonica. The fact that they were standing firm in the Lord in spite of much persecution from the Jews was like new life to his own persecution-worn body.

THE PARTICULARS

- Things Paul was excited about regarding what was happening in his newly-established Church at Thessalonica included -
 - their faith that enabled them to withstand persecution (6-8);
 - their genuine love and affection for Paul and his colleagues (and this in spite of only a relatively brief acquaintance) (6);
 - the beginnings of their love for each other and for outsiders (12).
- The uplifting effect the news of all this had on Paul included -
 - revitalised energy in the midst of trials and tribulations (7-8);
 - gratitude to the Lord and a renewed sense of joy in him (9).
- The outcome for Paul in his ministry included -
 - a desire to revisit them to teach and encourage them (6, 10-11);
 - ceaseless prayer for them and for their continuing growth (10);
 - prayer for their growth in holiness before Jesus' Return (12f).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Whom are you encouraging just now? Who's encouraging you?

DAY 8

Out of control passions

THE PASSAGE

1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-8

THE POINT We live on the other side of the globe, nearly 2000 years later, in a vastly different culture, but Paul's directives to the Church in Thessalonica are exactly what needs to be said to us today. The pressure on Christians in a sex-oriented society to conform to the ways (and clothing fashions!) of the world is enormous, and it seems to me the Church is not being the salt and light God intends it to be. We need to take Paul's inspired words to heart.

THE PARTICULARS

- Paul speaks with the authority of the Lord Jesus himself (1-2).
- In spite of good initial progress, Paul recognised the potential for future trouble if a definite stand was not taken against the immorality that permeated the society (3-7). So must we!
- Progressive sanctification (being made holy since God is holy) is an essential part of our salvation (3, 7-8; cf Hebrews 12:14).
- Avoiding sexual immorality requires concerted effort; temptation needs to be "nipped in the bud" (cf Ephesians 5:3). And sexual sin is never private; it always affects someone else (6).
- God is very serious about the sexual purity of Christians (5-8).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What restrictions will applying this passage place on your lifestyle – your TV/film watching, your reading, your social life?

DAY 9 *Lifestyle evangelism*

THE PASSAGE 1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-12

THE POINT Out of all the methods we use to reach people for Christ, “lifestyle evangelism” is probably the simplest and most effective. In every age, and especially today, people are looking for something that is real. In an age driven by selfishness, greed, and the desire to be provided for and entertained, we can make a powerful impact for the Gospel as salt and light, just by being different.

THE PARTICULARS

- Being born again carries with it the disposition to love others with the “agape” love God has for us. We are taught it by God himself (9; cf 1 John 4:7-11). But we still need to be encouraged to grow in affection for our brothers and sisters in Christ (10).
- Ambition for personal advantage or aggrandisement have no part in a Christian’s approach to life. But there are things we can be ambitious about: the sort of quietness that comes from contentment and trust in God (cf Isaiah 30:15); being sufficiently absorbed in fulfilling our own calling from God so that we are not interfering in the affairs of others (cf John 21:20-22); and not being afraid to get our hands dirty to earn our way (11-12).
- Honest, hard work is a powerful witness to unbelievers (12).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is your lifestyle an attractive witness? What needs to change?

DAY 10 *Christ is surely coming*

THE PASSAGE 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

THE POINT Another reason for consistent Christian living is the fact that Jesus will return. Nevertheless, some confusion had already arisen within the Church in Thessalonica as to what would happen when this occurred. Would believers who had already died be at some disadvantage, missing out on the glory of such a great event? Paul wants to clear up this confusion, giving a brief but inspired outline of the events surrounding the Lord’s Second Coming. He allows for the possibility of it happening in his own lifetime (15, 17), but his language does not require it.

THE PARTICULARS

- Confusion about the key points concerning the Second Coming can even lead believers to the same despair as unbelievers (13).
- Jesus’ own resurrection is proof that believers who have died will be raised to life when he comes (14, 16b; cf 1 Cor. 15:20).
- The momentous event of the Second Coming on the world stage (16) will bring together all believers: the Church Triumphant (those who have already died) and the Church Militant (those still alive) in one unprecedented reunion in the sky (17).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you looking forward with anticipation to the Return of Jesus? If it were today, are you ready? What do you need to do?

DAY 11 *Daylight behaving*

THE PASSAGE 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

THE POINT Jesus told several parables to make clear that He will come back without warning, and that the reason for this is as an incentive for consistent, godly living. Paul expands on this teaching here.

THE PARTICULARS

- Paul had done his work at Thessalonica; he knew they were well informed as to the surprise element in Jesus’ Return (1-3).
- People do things they’re ashamed of under cover of darkness so that no one can see them. If we live every part of our lives as if the world is watching in broad daylight then we will not have to shrivel up in embarrassment when Jesus does appear (4-7).
- Self-control (cf Galatians 5:23) and faith, hope and love (cf 1:3) are basic virtues we need to concentrate on as children of the Day (6, 8). These certainly make us stand out in our society, providing us with the protection we need in our warfare! (8)
- We can encourage each other not to give up in the battle since salvation is absolutely secure in our Lord Jesus Christ (8-10).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Does your understanding of the Gospel include a clear picture of the sure and sudden Return of Christ, possibly today?
- We live in a society whose motto is, “If it feels good, do it”. Why is self-discipline so rare today? What is happening as a result?

DAY 12 *Working in the daylight*

THE PASSAGE 1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-15

THE POINT As Paul brings his letter to a close he includes some practical instructions on Christian living, for individuals, but mainly for the Church as a community of God’s people. God designed us to find fulfilment in satisfying work, which is best done together.

THE PARTICULARS

- Paul recognised, and so endorsed, a form of Church government where some are giving responsibility for spiritual oversight, leadership and discipline (elders/teachers). They are to be given appropriate respect in love because of their devotion to their onerous task – cf a similar exhortation in 1 Tim. 5:17 (12-13a).
- It is interesting that in the context of Church government Paul points out the need to pursue actively peace and harmony (13)!
- Not only are we to be self-disciplined (6, 8), we are to help each other, warning and encouraging others in an attitude of patience and forgiveness if the sanctification process is a bit slow (14-15)!
- The “idle” are those who, due to lack of self-discipline, are the drifters who are out of work, not because there are no jobs available, but because of a mind-set that assumes they shouldn’t have to work – they are convinced society “owes” them (14).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Which part of these instructions do you find most difficult?

DAY 13 *Walking in the daylight*

THE PASSAGE 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-28

THE POINT As Christians, our whole existence is tied up inseparably with God. We must be serious about walking in fellowship with him.

THE PARTICULARS

- Joy, prayer and gratitude should be so much a part of our new life in Christ that there are no times when they’re not evident, even, and especially, in the midst of persecution. They form a sort of trilogy, each in turn being the outcome of the other two (16-18).
- Verse 18 is really saying, “Give thanks in each and every circumstance of your life because that particular circumstance is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (cf Romans 8:28) – a hard but valuable lesson for us to learn about God’s sovereignty.
- We need to be open to the Spirit’s leading, but careful to test that it is truly the Spirit’s leading (19-22; cf 2 Corinth. 11:14).
- We are a spirit-soul-body unit; the whole unit must be made and maintained holy by God; only thus can we be at peace (23).
- Our confidence is in God’s faithfulness to do what He says. We therefore need to read His Word daily and depend on His grace.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you able to rest in God’s faithfulness to His promises?
- Is there any part of your life you don’t want God to sanctify?

DAY 14 *Church growth that counts*

THE PASSAGE 2 THESSALONIANS 1:1-4

THE POINT This letter was probably written only a few weeks after the first one to correct any misunderstandings that were reported back to Paul after it had been read. It gives further detail about the Second Coming and again addresses the problem of idleness in the Church. But, on the whole, Paul continued to be greatly encouraged by what was happening in the church he’d planted.

THE PARTICULARS

- The Church is established in God the Father, whom we can call our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ (cf Ephesians 1:22-23); He is the source of grace (unmerited favour) and peace to us (1).
- Paul continues to be thankful to God for evidence of even further growth in the faith and love of the Thessalonian believers (3).
- The Church at Thessalonica had become a model to the other churches of perseverance and trust in God in the face of intense persecution and other testing difficulties. It is interesting that faith and endurance can only be demonstrated in the context of struggles so these should be seen as blessing (4; cf James 1:2-3).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Paul gives no indication as to the numerical growth that has occurred in the church plant in Thessalonica. Do we have something to learn from this today? In what do we boast?

DAY 15 *God is just*

THE PASSAGE 2 THESSALONIANS 1:5-10

THE POINT As their “father” in Christ, Paul was obviously distressed by the persecutions the Thessalonians were called on to suffer for their faith. Yes, he is encouraged by the good effect such trials have had on their faith, but he would naturally like to see some justice happening in their circumstances. (We are usually more concerned about the suffering of our spiritual children than we are about our own!) Paul is looking forward to the Return of Jesus when God will finally vindicate all who have suffered.

THE PARTICULARS

- The Thessalonians’ perseverance is actually evidence of God’s justice, even though he has allowed them to suffer unjustly. We need to keep this in mind today as we see great injustices being done to Christians in Africa and other places (5; cf Rev. 6:9-11).
- We must leave the whole question of justice and vengeance in the Lord’s hands alone (cf Romans 12:19). His people will surely be vindicated when Jesus comes with the fire of Judgement (6-7).
- Judgement will come on those who fail to believe the Gospel. Their fate is described as “eternal destruction” and being “shut out from the presence of the Lord”. Hell is a stark reality (8-10).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Will you meet Jesus as your Saviour or Judge when he comes?

DAY 16 *A model prayer*

THE PASSAGE 2 THESSALONIANS 1:11-12

THE POINT The activity of prayer is an excellent example of the interaction between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. Paul has just expressed his confidence that God will consummate all His purposes for His chosen people when Jesus comes again. Instead of this obviating the need to pray it drives him to pray harder!

THE PARTICULARS

- Paul knows that the Thessalonians’ suffering for their faith will be justly vindicated when Jesus returns. But this cannot stop him from praying earnestly and constantly that they will also be found worthy of God’s calling on that great Day (11a).
- He also prays for fruit from their labours: that God will exert His power to fulfil their Spirit-inspired desires and faith-inspired actions (11b; see Philippians 2:13 for the background for this).
- Paul’s prayer is also reminiscent of Jesus’ prayer for His disciples the night before He was crucified. Jesus prayed that His own name would be glorified and that through Him the disciples’ name would be glorified as well (12a; see John 17:1, 10, 21-23).
- Whatever happens in answer to prayer will be on the basis of God’s grace alone, through the finished work of Jesus (12b).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How does your prayer life/emphasis compare with Paul’s?

DAY 17 *The Day of the Lord*

THE PASSAGE 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

THE POINT Perhaps because of intense persecution, Thessalonian believers had become preoccupied with the (2nd) Coming, the Parousia, of the Lord Jesus. In 1 Thessalonians Paul had shown that the death of some believers before Christ’s Return was no problem. They’d misunderstood either that letter, or his preaching, or another letter we don’t have – or someone was spreading false rumours. Whatever the source there was a rumour that the “Day of the Lord” had already come. Paul sets this false idea to rest by drawing attention to some obvious (to them!) realities.

THE PARTICULARS

- Evidence that the “Day of the Lord” had not yet come included the fact that it would be associated with a very public rebellion against God and the exposure of the identity of the “man of lawlessness” (cf “antichrist” in 1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7 where “anti-” means both “against” and “in the place of”) (3-4).
- The thing delaying the exposure of Satan’s henchman (cf 9) was clear to Paul and his readers (6-7) but it remains a mystery to us.
- God is sovereign; even Satan’s deception and rebellion are under His control; but man’s responsibility for unbelief remains (8-12).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you resting in God’s sovereign grace as you wait for Jesus?

DAY 18 *God chose... stand firm*

THE PASSAGE 2 THESSALONIANS 2:13-17

THE POINT The tension between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility was hinted at in yesterday’s passage (see especially verses 10b-12 and the interaction between God sending the powerful delusion and the unbelievers’ refusal to love the truth and be saved). Paul again balances God’s choice with our response.

THE PARTICULARS

- The most appropriate response to the outworking of God’s saving grace in human lives is gratitude for His love. He chose us from the beginning and called us to Himself; and it is His Spirit who makes us holy so that we can share in His glory (13-14).
- This work of His sovereign grace cannot be divorced from the means by which it is applied to us: our hearing of the truth of the Gospel and our active belief in it (13-14, cf Romans 10:14-15).
- Paul never isolates God’s sovereign election from a strong call to obey, stand firm and persevere (15, cf Philippians 2:12-13).
- But at the same time he notes our utter dependence on the encouragement and strength of the Holy Spirit to get us through (16).
- Paul agrees with James: deeds and words are inseparable! (17)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How does Paul relate God’s choice and our response in verse 12?

DAY 19 *Pray for us*

THE PASSAGE 2 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5

THE POINT Paul consistently made requests for prayer when he wrote to the believers in the various churches. He knew that without God’s help he could achieve nothing. Without the Spirit of God at work in the hearts of men all his efforts in preaching and teaching were to no avail. He was also aware of the dangers he faced from his own countrymen as he proclaimed Jesus as the only Saviour. It is worthwhile praying because God is faithful.

THE PARTICULARS

- As God’s Word does its work in us and His name is honoured through that Word bearing fruit, so we should pray for this process to continue to bring others to faith in the Lord (1).
- An implication of verse 2 is that anyone who does not have faith (in Jesus as Saviour) is in the class the Bible refers to as “the wicked”. Failing to accept God’s gracious provision is evil.
- We need to pray for the Lord’s protection for one another; it is worth doing because we are talking to a faithful God (2-3).
- Exhorting one another to greater obedience and perseverance, and putting our confidence in God to work out His purposes in us anyway, are complementary, not mutually exclusive (4-5).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Has God been faithful to you in prayer? Have you been to Him?

DAY 20 *No free lunch*

THE PASSAGE 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-18

THE POINT Paul concludes with the other matter raised in his first letter: the value of good, honest work, and the danger of laziness. His principles have relevant application to believers today.

THE PARTICULARS

- A disposition towards laziness is contagious. We find it easier to have a positive attitude to work if we are among people who find real fulfilment in their tasks and are not just there to watch the clock and pass the time. And idleness breeds idleness (6-9).
- Failure to play our part in the scheme of things inevitably puts a greater burden on someone else. There is no free lunch (8).
- Being a good role model to others often requires us to surrender rights and privileges. This is especially so today in a society that puts more emphasis on rights/privileges than on serving (9-10).
- The sin of idleness can easily lead to other sins like meddling in the affairs of others and all that results (11; 1 Peter 4:15).
- We should never give up on doing the right thing, even if others do! Good self-discipline puts us in a position to exercise spiritual discipline towards our brothers in Christ (13-15).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How do you approach your work? Are you a good role model?



Across Australia

New ministers

A new group of graduating students from our three theological colleges have taken/are about to take up various appointments and ministries. They are: In NSW, **David and Ashleigh Burge** – Missionaries to Mongolia; **Michael and Anita Campbell** – Mudgee congregation; **Robert and Christine Coleman** – Wollondilly congregation; **Ben and Louise Johnson** – Blacktown East congregation; **Peter and Caroline Williamson** – associate minister at **Western Blacktown**, working at **Glenwood**; **Scott and Grace Xu** – NSW Mission and Ministry are looking at a consortium to establish a ministry amongst Mandarin-speaking Chinese. In Victoria, **Andrew and Kareen Gall** – Naracoorte congregation (SA). In Queensland, **Kwang-Ho Song** – assistant minister at **St. Andrew's, Townsville**; **Cameron Wills** – Atherton congregation; **Will Henderson** – New Life Camira congregation.

Joining the army

Rev. David Niven has left The Gap Charge (Qld) to become a full time Army Chaplain. As a consequence he wishes to sell some of his books. Mr Niven can be contacted on 0413 489 200. St. Andrew's Townsville celebrated its 150th anniversary in October. The guest preacher was the **Very Rev. Dr Ken Gardner**. Dr Gardner spoke on holiness. Copies of the messages, which **PCQ Moderator Ron Pilkington** describes as "very scholarly, thoughtful and excellent", are available.

Open night

The Presbyterian Theological College in Melbourne held its open night at the end of October. **Rev. Dr Neil Chambers** of **Bundoora** (Vic) spoke on making the most of theological education. His address can be downloaded from the college website. Graduation took place on 26 November at the end of a year of consistent and solid growth. **Tim Meyers** of Pioneers preached. The 25 years of college ministry by the principal, **Dr Douglas Milne**, was marked with a surprise presentation.

Caloundra growth

In late October the Session of the **Caloundra-Maleny** (Qld) congregation added 16 new members by public profession of faith to the church roll. **Gordon Hunter** was ordained and inducted to the eldership at Maleny by **Rev. N. Thomason** at Maleny on 24 October.

Hospital dedicated

On 16 October the Presbytery of Sydney North dedicated the **Allowah Presbyterian Children's Hospital**. The hospital forms part of the outreach work of the **PCNSW Social Services**. **NSW Moderator Rev. Dr. Paul Logan** spoke from Mark 10:13-14 and unveiled two plaques, one relating to the past history of Allowah Hospital and the October dedication itself.

Good business

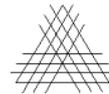
Una and Henry Kim of **St Ives-Pymble** (NSW) were finalists and award winners in the **Ethnic Business Awards** (under \$5 million turnover p.a. section) held at the end of October. The awards were later screened on SBS Television.

Peripatetic pastors

Various Presbyterians were among the 8500 riders who took part in the **Great Victorian Bike Ride** that toured around the south west of the state in late November. They included ministers **Richard O'Brien** from **Scots' Church** (Chaplain to the event) and **Peter Orchard** (**Ashburton**), elder **Col Rump** and his wife **Chris** (**Leongatha**), elder **John Flett** (**Eltham**) and **Tom Leach** (**Koroit**). There was also a team from King's College, Warrnambool. Participants cycled more than 550 kilometres in eight days so everybody enjoyed the rest day at Apollo Bay. It was a physically demanding week so some, including Peter and Richard, took up the offer of a second rest day! The event which started at Port Fairy finished in Geelong where relatives and friends greeted the weary cyclists.

Tasmania doubles

The **Tasmanian Assembly** in May 2004 dissolved the **Presbytery of Tasmania** and organised two new presbyteries, the **Presbytery of Bass** in the north of the Apple Isle and the **Presbytery of Derwent** in the south. The new presbyteries met for the first time on 7 December 2004.



Presbyterian Theological Centre – Sydney "FROM EVERY NATION – REACHING A MULTICULTURAL CITY"

18-20 April 2005

This conference will examine the challenges of bringing the gospel of Christ to people and establishing healthy churches in a multicultural community.

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❧ Featured Speakers Include: ❧

CS Tang (Cornerstone Church), **John Davies** (PTC), **Mike Wilson** (Strategic Ministries, Anglicare, Sydney), **John Thew** (CMS Australia) and a presentation from the **National Church Life Survey**.



To be held at the Presbyterian Theological Centre
77 Shaftesbury Road, Burwood NSW. For more information
contact John McClean on 9744 1977 or jmcclean@ptcsydney.org

Faithful service

On 21 November 1954, four elders were ordained and inducted at **St Paul's, Lismore**. After 50 years two of these elders, still at Lismore, have celebrated their "jubilees". They are **Trever Bartholomew** and **Jack Gaggin**. Both have given conscientious service to the Lord and the Church. Trever and his wife, **Amy**, are the parents of **Rev. Arnold Bartholomew** of **St Andrew's Canberra**. Jack has had his activities restricted by a stroke and he was recently declared to be an Elder Emeritus. Trever and Jack had their long service recognised at the December Communion at St. Paul's.

Vale Sunny

Presbyterians in Victoria will be saddened to learn of the death of **Mrs Sunny Muller** on 21 March in Crescent City, Florida, USA. Sunny was the wife of **Rev. Dr. John H. Muller** who had served in the PCV during the mid-1980s. The Mullers had been members of the Reformed Church in the United States and came to Australia to engage in church-planting and pastoral work. Dr. Muller was appointed by the Victorian General Assembly to lecture in pastoral theology at the Presbyterian Theological College. He conducted this ministry with distinction and was instrumental in helping many young pastors adapt to the challenges of modern pastoral life. He also served as a pastor to the Swan Hill and Colac congregations. Both these congregations flourished under John and

Sunny's ministries and they saw numbers of people become Christians.

The Mullers returned to America in the early '90s and have been involved in a variety of short-term pastorates in a number of states over the last 10 years. John and Sunny had been married for 62 years when Sunny was suddenly stricken with a cerebral haemorrhage while attending a musical program at a nearby church. She died five hours later. John continued to serve the Crescent City Presbyterian Church in Florida where his contract came to an end on December 31, 2004. He may continue pastoring if the Lord opens another door. John can be contacted at 128 South Prospect Street, Crescent City, FL, 32112, USA.

WA Assembly

The smallest of the six state assemblies, the **West Australian Assembly** met at St Columba's Church, Peppermint Grove, on 29 and 30 October 2004. The 16 Commissioners were led in worship by **Moderator-General Bob Thomas** and the Moderator of the 2002 and 2003 Assembly, **Rev. Darrell Thatcher**. **Rev. Keith Morris**, minister of St Columba's, was elected and inducted as Moderator of the 2004 assembly.

The Moderator welcomed **Rev. Peter Kossen** who brought greetings from the **Christian Reformed Church** and **Rev. Andrew Priddle** and **Simon Stewart** who brought greetings from the **Westminster Presbyterian Church**. The assembly was advised that a new Presbyterian Church Act has been drafted to replace the

Presbyterian Church Act 1908. The assembly also encouraged Sessions to develop plans for training women for gospel ministry. **Rev. J. Nocher** was thanked for 20 years of faithful service as Chaplain to the **Braemar Presbyterian Homes for the Aged** in Bicton and East Fremantle. The assembly also resolved to hold a planning day to give prayerful consideration concerning how to develop further the ministry of the PCWA.



Around the World

More life: here and later

Research shows that regular churchgoers live longer than non-believers, an American study has found. A 12-year study tracking the mortality rates of more than 550 adults over the age of 65 found that those who attended services at least once a week were 35 per cent more likely to live longer than those who never attended church. It also found that going to church boosted elderly people's immune systems and made them less likely to suffer clogged arteries or high blood pressure.

Susan Lutgendorf, a psychologist at the **University of Iowa** who did the study, said: "There's something involved in the act of religious attendance, whether it's the group interaction, the world view or just the exercise to get out of the house. There's something that seems to be beneficial."

The researchers found that among individuals who reported never attending religious services, the risk of death over the 12 years was 52 per cent. By contrast, the risk of death of those who attended more than once a week was 17 per cent over the same period.

Sydney Morning Herald

The boy who doesn't exist

18-month-old **Luka Eyvazov** does not officially exist, *Forum 18 News Service* has found, because **Azerbaijani** authorities refuse to issue birth certificates for children with Christian names. "We have letters from village residents and 98 per cent are opposed to registering Christian names," local registration official **Aybeniz Kalashova** told *Forum 18*. **Mehman Soltanov** of the **Justice Ministry** asked *Forum 18* "why did they

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choose a religious name?" and speculated that it was not Luka's parents who chose his name but "some religious sect".

Luka's father, **Novruz Eyazov**, insists that children are from God and told Forum 18 that "We went many times to ask what basis they had to interfere in our family life. They indicated there was pressure on them from on high. When they told me to choose the name of a famous Azerbaijani poet or writer instead," he told Forum 18, "I responded that Luke, as one of the Gospel-writers, will still be famous when all the poets and writers are long forgotten." Without birth certificates, people cannot go to kindergarten or to school, get treatment in a hospital or travel abroad.

Bible for Panama

After faithfully preaching the Gospel in Panama for 40 years, a Guaymi pastor has held the New Testament in his own language for the first time. Up until now he has been reading the Scripture to the church in Spanish, then explaining it in Guaymi.

The Guaymi New Testament arrived in Panama on 18 December. **Wycliffe** missionary translator **Bill Bivens**, a Guaymi translator, and translation helpers handed over the completed New Testament to the leaders of the Guaymi church in a dedication ceremony.

New Tribes Mission missionary **Eleanor Larson** started serving among the Guaymi in 1952. But the tribe's population exceeds 100,000 and, instead of villages, the people live in farms scattered over the mountains. Their life is rigorous and ministering among them is difficult.

New Tribes Mission

Turks get NTs

There has been mixed reaction to the successful Christmastime distribution of more than 50,000 New Testaments in the Turkish cities of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, according to a report received at the Grand Junction, Colorado-based US office of **Turkish World Outreach** from the **Alo Dua Prayer Centre** in Istanbul, Turkey.

The report, made available to *ASSIST News Service*, says: "You and we have both been amazed at what the Lord has done! Thousands of New Testaments went out in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Alo Dua Izmir got their 'OK' one hour before they were going out on the streets. Alo Dua

Ankara, due to threat of protestors, had to do a last minute location change."

The Alo Dua correspondent said the police went from being main opponents to helping hand out NTs and getting NTs themselves! "After being out on the streets, the Turkish believers who were distributing with us are strengthened, and realise that they could publicly be bold for their faith." The correspondent said there were many reports (good and bad) about the NT Distribution on the internet, TV, radio, and newspapers – all of it free advertising!

The following Sunday (January 9), there was a protest of around 70 Turkish nationalists shouting Islamic chants outside the Alo Dua Prayer Centre, the Alo Dua writer said.

Rongliang arrested again

One of the most prominent **Chinese House Church** leaders, **Pastor Zhang Rongliang**, was arrested at Xuzhai village, Zhengzhou city, Henan province in December. Zhang's wife and children were not at home and are now in hiding. The apartment was searched and all Pastor Zhang's Christian DVDs, materials and photos revealing relationships with for-

eigners and foreign agencies were confiscated.

Zhang is the leader of the **Fangcheng Mother Church**, Henan, and the leader of the **China for Christ Church**, which is one of the largest house church networks in China, estimated to have more than 10 million members. He has been well known by the international community as one of the house church patriarchs. Pastor Zhang has already spent twelve years in prison for his faith during five separate detentions since his secret baptism in 1969. He experienced harsh torture, including electric shocks, during his prison terms.

It is reported that there is now a government disinformation campaign against house churches, similar to that used against the **Falun Gong** before the major crackdown against them. In recent weeks, the Chinese government has launched an international media propaganda campaign. It was reflected from articles both in an overseas pro-China website called **DUOWEI** news and the *New York Times*. The articles portrayed house churches as secret religious fanatics who even commit murder in the fight for new membership.

Voice of the Martyrs

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On the Agenda

Flew concedes God

One of the best-known atheists in the academic world, **Professor Antony Flew** of the England's University of Reading, has accepted the existence of God, the **Institute for Metascientific Research (IMR)** has announced.

In a symposium sponsored by the IMR at New York University last year, Professor Flew stated that developments in modern science had led him to accept the action of an Intelligent Mind in the creation of the world. In "Has Science Discovered God?", the recording of the symposium released in December, Flew said his conclusion was influenced by developments in DNA research.

"What I think the DNA material has done is show that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements together," he said. "The enormous complexity by which the results were achieved look to me like the work of intelligence."

"It speaks very well of Professor Flew's honesty," observed America's pre-eminent philosopher of religion, **Alvin Plantinga**. "After all these years of opposing the idea of a Creator, he reverses his position on the basis of the evidence."

In 1955, Flew set the agenda for atheism with "Theology and Falsification", a paper first presented at a meeting of the Oxford University Socratic Club chaired by C.S. Lewis. This work was reportedly the most widely reprinted philosophical publication of the last half century. Over the decades, he has written 28 books and edited 12 others; at least 10 of his books were critiques of belief in God. He has also had debates and discussions with a wide range of religious believers. In one such debate, he declared: "We reject all transcendent supernatural systems, not because we've examined or could have examined each in turn, but because it does not seem to us that there is any good evidence in reason to postulate anything behind or beyond this natural universe."

Also participating in the NYU symposium were Dr Gerald Schroeder from Israel, Dr John Haldane from Scotland and Dr Paul C. Vitz from New York. The MIT-trained Schroeder, who once taught

at MIT in Boston and worked at the Weizmann Institute and Hebrew University laboratories in Israel, is the author of the best-selling book *The Science of God*. Haldane is Professor of Philosophy at St. Andrews University in Scotland and the author of numerous publications on culture, philosophy and religion. He delivered the Stanton Lectures at Cambridge University and is scheduled to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen University in 2005. Vitz, professor of psychology at NYU, is the leading psychologist of religion in the U.S. His many books include *Psychology as Religion and Faith of the Fatherless*.

In the course of the symposium, the participants address the origins of the universe, life, reproduction, consciousness, language and the mind while also discussing the existence of God, the problem of evil and the roots of atheism. Although many biologists have not considered the philosophical implications of DNA or reproduction, this dimension is of particular interest to professional philosophers Flew and Haldane. One theme of discussion is the thesis that of all of the great discoveries of modern science, the greatest is God.



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The Gospel chained?

A Victorian judge brings Christians a step closer to persecution.

Friday 17 December 2004 will go down as a sad day for Christians in Victoria, for on this day under the State Government's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001, religious freedom and freedom of speech took a mortal wound in this state. On this day, Judge Michael Higgins found in the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal that a Christian group and two pastors vilified Victorian Muslims.

I believe the finding of Justice Higgins against Catch the Fire Ministries is a grave injustice, and entirely the result of the application of this iniquitous Act.

Judge Higgins found against Catch the Fire Ministries (CTFM), its leader, Pastor Danny Nalliah, and a seminar leader, Pastor Daniel Scot under clause 8 of the act, which says "a person must not, on the grounds of the religious belief or activity of another person or class of persons, engage in conduct that incites hatred against, serious contempt for, or revulsion or severe ridicule of, that other person or class of persons".

Two months after the act became law, Pastor Nalliah, an AOG pastor and president of CTFM, organised an all-day seminar in three sessions with another AOG Pastor, Daniel Scot, to explain aspects of Islam and its history from the teaching of the Koran and Hadiths and in so doing to assist Christians to reach out in love to minister among the growing Muslim community in Melbourne. The three sessions covered Jihad from the Koran, the Koran and the Bible, and Witnessing to Muslims.

The seminar was advertised through various Christian outlets including the CTFM website. The Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) was instrumental in three Muslim converts of Anglo-Australian ancestry attending portions of the seminar. With the backing of the ICV, these three Muslims lodged a complaint.

In support of his decision, Judge Higgins said: "Pastor Scot, throughout the seminar, made fun of Muslim beliefs and conduct. It was done, not in the context of a serious discussion of Muslims' religious beliefs; it was presented in a way which is essentially hostile, demeaning and derogatory of all Muslim people, their



David
Palmer

god, Allah, the prophet Mohammed and in general religious beliefs and practices."

In fact the decision went further, finding that both pastors lacked credibility as witnesses – Scot's evidence was said to be "very unsatisfactory in many ways", and Nalliah's was "evasive, inconsistent and exaggerated".

These are extremely damaging conclusions, but are they fair?

Writing in *The Sunday Age* on 2 January, columnist Terry Lane said: "The pomposity of the judgment is breathtaking.

'Expert witnesses' called by the Islamic Council of Victoria are believed and praised by the tribunal for their academic qualifications and expertise. The 'expert witnesses' called by the respondents are ridiculed for their mendacity, lack of academic standing and bias. There is little mention of the bias evident in the applicant's witnesses." And again Lane avers, "reading the transcript of the VCAT judgment, which is riddled with errors, is a depressing affair for anyone who cares about the fundamental freedom to say what we are thinking without fear of prosecution".

I have read both the transcript of the seminar and the tribunal's reasons for the decision. My assessment is as follows.

First, the decision ascribes the worst of all motives to the two pastors. The whole seminar, it is said, was simply an exercise in incitement of "hatred against, serious contempt for, or revulsion or severe ridicule of" Muslims. This assessment completely ignores repeated statements scattered throughout the transcript of the seminar, such as that Christians are "to

share the love of Christ", "we do love Muslims", "Muslims are not our enemy", "we need to pray for Muslims". On more than one occasion, Scot says "the Koran is a wonderful book". Whilst Scot does use humour at times, to say "throughout the seminar" is too severe and fails to take into account the dynamics of a Pentecostal assembly, and especially where people are struggling to come to grips with the material being presented.

Second, the decision pays no credence to the history of Nalliah and Scot. Nalliah, originally from Sri Lanka, lived for a time under sharia law in Saudi Arabia, while Scot, a Pakistani, was forced to flee from Pakistan when charged by Muslims with blasphemy. Both have experienced radical Islam, and both are concerned that Islam, should it come to dominate in Australia, would cast aside its current benign appearance in favour of the radical Islam currently coming to the fore in parts of Europe. This version is epitomised by the recent murder of the Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim offended by van Gogh's documentary on female repression within the Dutch Islamic community.

The seminar was held only six months after the destruction of the twin towers and Australian Christians might be expected to want to know from their own leaders something of the nature of the Islamic religion that had motivated the plane hijackers. It is not good enough for the decision to declare that the "interpretation of the Koran by Pastor Scot represented the views of a small group of fundamentalists, namely Wahabbists, who are located in the Gulf states and who are a minority group, and their views bear no relationship to mainstream Muslim beliefs and, in particular, Australian Muslims". It is well known that the Saudis with their oil income are actively exporting Wahabbism throughout the Western world, building mosques, providing Islamic teachers and more. Australians, having lost many people in the Bali bombings and now with alleged Muslim terrorists under investigation in their own country, know this to be so.

Third, the judge rejected the respondents' argument that the seminar was exempt under the act as a properly consti-

Are judges now required to make theological judgments under the act, and just how qualified are they to do so?

tuted religious exercise. This finding seems highly questionable.

Fourth, the decision does not respect Scot's deep and thorough familiarity with the teaching of the Koran and Hadiths. One of the reasons Scot's credibility is faulted is Scot's treatment of a particular portion of the Koran. The decision goes over a number of pages proving Scot wrong when in fact Scot has the support of the Hadiths and it is the decision that is faulty.

This fourth point raises two important issues.

Are judges now required to make theological judgments under the act, and just how qualified are they to do so? Making decisions about which version of Islam is truly authentic is a big call for a judge in a secular court to have to make, and certainly a decision open to question. This point is reinforced by the Judge's assertion that the one billion adherents of Islam "regard the Koran as equivalent to the Bible; that it agrees substantially with Christian beliefs save for particular events". This would be news to most Muslims and Christians, if not downright offensive to both. Further, the decision judged the shocking material cited from the Koran by Scot as no longer relevant to the 21st century – this is clearly contrary to the views of those Muslims who regard the Koran as dictated from the hand of Allah and therefore unalterable.

In the second place, are we to assume that Christians quoting and commenting on Islamic texts in ways the Muslims object to will be penalised?

This ability to critique another person's position is integral to a free and democratic society. Senator Grant Chapman from South Australia has recently well observed: "it is the role of teachers in every religion to demonstrate why their faith is worthy of adoption, and this may involve showing why – in their opinion – other religions may be less truthful, or even in error". The decision makes no allowance for the apologetic function in religion. It is unreasonable to make it a condition of apologetics to gain the approval of your adversary for what

If Islam cannot be criticised, this is a rare privilege invariably denied to Christianity.

you wish to say about their theological position. The state has no right to intrude in this way. If Islam and its writings are now to be placed in some privileged position whereby they cannot be criticised, this indeed is a rare privilege, a privilege invariably denied to Christianity by its cultured despisers in the West. If this is so, then it is a serious indictment of the Act.

It was a great mistake for the Government to lump religious vilification in with racial vilification. Race and religion, with few exceptions, in the modern world are not the same thing. Race for any person is a given, not so religion. Both Islam and Christianity are missionary religions, counting adherents among an ever

expanding number of races and people groups, and this situation will not change.

Australia must remain open to all who love liberty and truth and therefore the prospect of making a good life. We must affirm in this context that Muslims should have liberty to make disciples for "their god, Allah (and) the prophet Mohammed", as we too, should have a similar liberty to make disciples for our Lord Jesus.

Leaving aside the emotive trappings of the word, "vilification", were the two Pastors at fault? Yes, they were, though in different ways. I found the evidence of some of the literature provided by Nalliah at the seminar and on the CTFM website an embarrassment to read, and no doubt offensive to many Muslims. Daniel Scot, while drawing a distinction on a number of occasions during his seminar between what he called the "true Muslim" – that is, someone holding to the teaching of the Koran and Hadiths as he was expounding it – and the "vast majority of Muslims" who "don't know what's in the Koran", failed to mention a third group around which the ICV built its case, namely those Muslims, who, having knowledge of the Koran and Hadiths, choose to understand it in a more benign fashion.

So, has persecution of Christians finally arrived? It will have, unless the judge's decision is overturned or the government withdraws or amends the legislation to remove religious vilification. The Presbyterian Church of Victoria, which virtually stands alone among the Christian denominations in Victoria in being thoroughly orthodox across all its constituencies, needs to be at the forefront for such outcomes to be achieved.

In fact it was a Muslim who gave one of the best summaries of the issues. Arguing in *The Age* on 4 January against the concept of religious vilification, Amir Butler, executive director of the Australian Muslim Public Affairs Committee, wrote: "Religion is, in essence, simply a set of ideas about the world and how one conducts one's affairs. As religion is, unlike race, a matter of choice, it does not need the same legal protections. Instead, it is imperative to our pluralist society that all religions be able to compete freely in the marketplace of ideas. If an ideology or idea is defective, then it will be exposed and rejected with the same efficiency as substandard commodities are rejected in the commercial market."

David Palmer is chairman of the Victorian Church and Nation Committee. 

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God only knows

The Asian tsunami highlights the problem of suffering.

Is God to blame for the tragic tsunami that took tens of thousands of lives last week? *Age* journalist Kenneth Nguyen spoke for many when he asked that question on the Opinion page recently. It was a version of what theologians call theodicy: how can a God who is all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful allow evil? Either He is not all-powerful or not all good, the argument goes.

I want to make three points, none of which is likely to satisfy agnostics and others who pose the question in this way. First, there is no explanation for suffering such as the tsunami wrought. Second, there isn't even a question. Or, to put it another way, the question of theodicy rests on some flawed assumptions that render it irrelevant. And third, there is a lesson from such suffering, and Jesus teaches it when asked a very similar question.

It's natural to seek an explanation, a way of showing that tragedy on such a scale doesn't render our or God's existence absurd. And many have offered "explanations", such as the claim that suffering brings growth or that it produces other benefits or even that all wrongs will be rectified in heaven. The prophet Isaiah observes that when the righteous die they are removed from evil (Isaiah 57, verses 1 and 2). All these things may be true, but they don't explain or justify suffering.

Even if we had an explanation, would that provide comfort so that the grieving survivors can struggle on? Their needs are deeper than simply explanations. I cannot speak for other religions, but the God of the Bible can give voice to that pain and provide a way to go on. That is the solace of religion, and it is powerful, and it is not false.

It is also why the question cannot be put as theodicy puts it, for the spirit in which the question is asked is crucial. To call upon God in the midst of one's own suffering – specific pain in a specific context – is understandable and right, but this is not what happens when the general question is put. Too often it descends to point-scoring, and trivialises the suffering.

Theodicy discusses suffering as a theoretical abstraction to be justified by logical inference from an abstract philosophical deity who is reduced to a set of attributes:



**Barney
Zwartz**

perfect goodness, perfect knowledge, perfect power. This philosopher's god is a metaphysical creation of the Enlightenment for purposes of argument – the person and teaching of Jesus, for example, does not enter the discussion.

But, as Christian philosopher Stanley Hauerwas shows, for the early Christians, suffering was not a metaphysical problem needing a solution but a practical challenge needing a response of faith. Apparently it never occurred to them to question their belief in God or His goodness because they were unjustly suffering. Rather, their faith gave them direction in the face of persecution and general misfortune.

Hauerwas says that to suggest there is a so-called problem of evil that is intelligible from anyone's perspective is to turn the Christian faith into a system of abstract beliefs, in which the role of God is to ensure a successful outcome for human purposes. But Christianity is not a set of doctrines; it involves an encounter with God and membership of a believing community.

What then is the lesson of suffering? Jesus is asked (Luke 13) about some Galileans "whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices".

Rebutting the ancient theory that disaster is a punishment for sin, Jesus asks his questioners whether these Galileans were greater sinners than other Galileans because they suffered this fate. And 18 residents of Jerusalem who died when a tower fell on them, were they worse than others in the city? "I tell you, no, but unless you

repent you will all likewise perish."

In other words, asked for a theological account of suffering, Jesus instead highlights the urgency of the gospel call of the Kingdom of God: repent and believe. He is surely not suggesting that if you don't repent a tower will fall on you, but that your perspective has to be from eternity.

The book of Job dedicates 42 chapters to the meaning of suffering and concludes that it is to endure. Good advice, and unavoidable. But the biblical author notes that in all his travails Job did not sin, nor did he blame God (1:22).

The truth is that no one rejects God because of the abstract issue of evil in the world (as opposed to evil endured oneself). People reject God for other reasons, reasons they do not always understand, and use the theoretical difficulty of theodicy to reinforce and justify that stance. We're all naturally gifted at rationalising positions we want to hold.

But trusting in God or rejecting God won't stop us suffering, because as Job also wrote, man is born into trouble as surely as sparks fly upward. And a faith that dissipates under pressure was possibly not a deep faith in the first place.

The victims of the tsunami, the vast majority of whom seem to be religious people, understand this, as another *Age* opinion article argued. Mihir Bose showed that they accept that life can be capricious and cruel, and "it helps that religion is so much part of their everyday lives, be they Hindus, Muslims, Christians or Buddhists".

Theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, who lost a son in an accident, writes: "Suffering is down at the centre of things, deep down where the meaning is. Suffering is the meaning of our world. For Love is the meaning. And Love suffers. The tears of God are the meaning of history."

"But mystery remains. Why isn't Love-without-suffering the meaning of things? Why does God endure His suffering? Why does He not at once relieve His agony by relieving ours?" All I can say is, God alone knows – and that's enough.

Barney Zwartz is religion editor of The Age, where this article first appeared.

AP

Fool's paradise

The tsunami may astonish the media, but not Christians.

The faith of “religious people” all over the world, so we’re told, has been flattened by a spiritual tsunami. Did you feel it? If you weren’t dumped by the first wave of tragic TV footage, then you may well have lost your footing in the flurry of media coverage that followed. Because suddenly, the question of “god” was on the agenda.

The question we Christians were grappling with – at least, according to media commentators – was “How can a loving God let such a thing happen?” We Christians were – again, according to media reports – struggling to reconcile the Tsunami disaster with our faith.

By day two of coverage, Sydney Anglican Dean Phillip Jensen was in the firing line for suggesting that the disaster was a reminder of God’s judgment. Letters to the editor flowed thick and fast, together with dozens of torrid editorials and articles.

While Mr Jensen confirmed he had told a journalist that “disasters are part of [God’s] warning that judgment is coming”, he made clear that his statement was taken out of context; his main point had been that “now was the time to help victims of the disaster” rather than engage in theological debate. Too late. The theological cat was out of the bag.

And so the headlines flowed. “Waves of destruction wash away belief in God’s benevolence” was the header of Edward Spence’s musings in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 30 December. Spence, a philosopher at Charles Sturt University, guided the reader through a short course in theology. “Traditionally,” he says, “the Judeo-Christian God, considered the most supreme and perfect being in the universe, has been ascribed the following necessary attributes: omniscience (all-knowing), omnipresence (present everywhere at all times and at once), omnipotence (almighty and powerful) and benevolence (all good and caring).”

I can’t remember the last time I read those terms in the newspaper! Spence concluded his tour of the “problem of evil” with a call for compassion, and a helpful reminder that in Christ, God is said to have “joined us in our suffering”.



Phil Campbell

Also on 30 December, staff writer Kenneth Nguyen pondered the same questions in *The Age* under the headline “Is God to blame for this?” “People may question their faith because of the random death and destruction caused by the tsunami,” writes Nguyen. “For agnostics, including me, the tsunami has highlighted just how unpalatable the idea of an interventionist God ultimately is. Of the thousands killed in the disaster, probably about one-third were children, too young to have a fully considered view on the existence of God. Did they deserve to die? And what of the many Christians

Follow the Bible, not the sentimental view that the media says Christians are meant to hold.

and Jews, including charity workers, still missing? Do they, and their family members, deserve their suffering?”

By 2 January, the headlines were claiming that God had Gone Missing (Misha Schubert, *The Sunday Age*), and by 4 January, apparently it was concluded “Tsunamis are Not the Wrath of God” (Paul Stenhouse, *The Australian*). Even Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams was entering the fray, with an article titled “Testing Times Test Our Belief”.

Feeling swamped? I’m not surprised. A good place to start untangling the mess is in the excellent article “God alone knows why there is suffering on earth” by Barney Zwartz, religious editor of *The Age*, which is reprinted in this edition of *Australian Presbyterian*.

But more importantly, the current debate is a reminder of the importance of approaching such big questions with a clear view of what the Bible actually says, rather than a sentimental view that the media says Christians are meant to hold.

To me, the most bemusing aspect of the media storm has been the suggestion that Christians are somehow “surprised” at the destruction brought by the tsunami.

In fact, the Bible is abundantly clear that we live in a world that’s far from the Garden of Eden – and our “world view” should reflect that. Mankind’s first rebellion fractured the created order, and every day we live with the consequences.

Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8: “We know that the whole creation has been *groaning* as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

The world itself groans. And we groan with it. Whether it’s a tsunami, the African AIDS pandemic, or the endless cycle of war and poverty that has taken 3 million lives in the Sudan, we’re constantly reminded that we live in a world that groans for redemption.

Paul says we should wait patiently in the midst of the groaning, even when we’re lost for words. Instead, of course, we surround ourselves with entertainment and pretend we’re still living in Eden – a sugary Disneyland that crumbles when hit by even the smallest of waves.

Culture Watch editor Phil Campbell is on the ministry team at Mitchelton Presbyterian Church, Qld. ap

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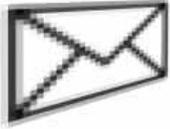


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Letters

Too right

Although Neil Cadman's letter "A Tough Law" (AP, October) was a well thought out letter, I was confused by the closing statement: "For is it not Australia's lawbreaking which is causing the drought?".

At the time of reading the letter, our local area was experiencing heavy rain with minor flooding.

If the closing statement is true then some Australians are over-keeping the law; even Ezekiel 14:14 states that Noah was a righteous man!

Perhaps farmers everywhere should take heed of Eccl. 7:16-17 – Do not be overly wicked, (and) ... Do not be overly righteous.

*Ralph Holvast,
Murwillumbah, NSW*

Feminism and the Fellowship

Tracey Gordon's article "Fractured families" (AP, December) certainly had some disturbing anecdotal evidence of the sins of the "Fellowship". However, as she catalogued their transgressions I must admit to some surprise that "some former members criticise the expectations the group held of women – particularly their place in marriage, where it was emphasised that they should be submissive, quiet and gentle." Did Tracey Gordon give this as an example of fellowship sin or of the former members' reluctance to obey God's word?

The last time I read 1 Peter 3:1-4 it said the exact same thing, Peter exhorts women to be "submissive" and clothe themselves with "the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight". Submissive, gentle and quiet. For all their failings, when it comes to teaching about the roles of men and women in marriage the Fellowship seem to be a lot closer to the truth than

some of their former members and I suspect a whole lot of evangelicals too.

*Rev. Darren Middleton,
Miranda, NSW*

Father figures

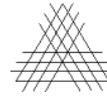
Postcards to a *padre* indeed! As someone who has come to know and love many of the Presbyterian Inland Mission "padres" during my time in Charleville, I must ask why PIM persists in using what appears to be a very unbiblical title for its personnel.

The word "padre" is Spanish for father and this is the title which was accorded to

the Catholic missionaries in South America. Apart from its total irrelevance to Australian culture, I must point out that the Scripture says (Mat. 23:8-9 NKJV) "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven."

Personally I would rather send a postcard to a pastor (Eph 4:11 NKJV): "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers."

*Pastor Allan H. Grant
Charleville, Qld*



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Books

**The Callings:
The Gospel in the World**

Paul Helm
Banner of Truth, 1987.

God at Work

Gene Edward Veith, Jr.
Crossway Books, 2002.
Reviewed by Peter Hastie

Evangelicals are renowned for their concentration and dedication to evangelism and mission. Not only are these legitimate concerns, but they should have the highest priority in the church. However one by-product of this intense focus is that evangelicals have sometimes thought that a believer who is doing an “ordinary job” cannot be a Christian in the fullest sense.

Both *The Callings* and *God at Work* redress this misunderstanding. Paul Helm, a leading British philosopher, takes issue with those who question the notion of a divine calling to every Christian. His book is an astute survey of the biblical teaching, the historical impact of the various forms of dualism that have corrupted Christian thinking throughout the ages, and the profound influence that rigorous Christian thought and practice can have on the social order.

Helm affirms the goodness of all lawful forms of work and gets his teeth into such perplexing issues as how a Christian should approach leisure and what sort of strategy an unemployed Christian should have. His section on calling and eschatology is extremely thought-provoking and should be a stimulus to Christians to perfect the gifts that God has given them here on earth: “To suppose that the life of eternal bliss in Christ will be a memory-

less, skill-less or character-less affair is to do violence to the whole doctrine of sanctification ...all of His people bear the character and marks of their calling and of the grace of God experienced in them.”

Veith is a professor of English at Concordia University, Wisconsin, and culture editor of *World* magazine, a leading Christian publication. Veith unpacks the biblical, reformation teaching about the doctrine of vocation, emphasising not what we should specifically do with our time or what careers we are called to, but what God does in and through our callings – even within the home. In each task He has given us – in our workplaces and families, our churches and society – God Himself is at work. Through his brilliant application of Luther’s teaching on vocation, Veith helps us to see that the “mundane” activities that consume most of our time are “God’s hiding-places”. Both books are critical of the dualism that affects much evangelical thinking. They are highly recommended.

Peter Hastie is issues editor of AP.

The God I Love

Joni Eareckson Tada
Michigan: Zondervan, 2003..
Reviewed by Peter Barnes

Joni has told her story often enough, but this is the latest, most penetrating and most moving account. After her diving accident in 1967, Joni almost died, and had to spend two years recovering in hospital.

From the age of 17, she has been a quadriplegic. Her testimony is deservedly well-known, and has been greatly used in many parts of the world, including China, where her autobiography *Joni* was the first Christian book ever published by a government-run publishing company. I found chapter 21 most compelling as it deals with Joni’s visit to Romania when it was still ruled by a communist regime. Joni muses on what happens to a culture when God is exorcised from it: “Evil goes unchecked, with everyone suspicious of his neighbour, unraveling every thread of decency.” It is a lesson the West should heed.

Before her accident, Joni wrote on a card: “Dear Box, I am tired of saying I’m a Christian out of one side of my mouth and saying something else out of the other.” God answered that prayer in a way she would not have chosen, but which she has come to embrace. Her last comment is a laconic one: “There are more important things in life than walking.” More profoundly, Joni has come to appreciate that “the weaker we are, the harder we must lean on God – and the harder we lean on Him, the stronger we discover Him to be”.

This is a wonderful book, even with its love of sentimental hymns, and lessons drawn from a statue of Christ. Nevertheless, Joni has been raised up by God to teach us what it means to trust Him in darkness. She has taught us how her paralysis is yet her greatest mercy. In an age addicted to instant gratification, this is a much-needed work.

Peter Barnes is books editor of AP.

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How to become rich

Jesus came to give us true wealth: His riches.

Many “How to...” books are available in the bookshops. Some of them undoubtedly offer good advice by people who have learned the hard way in various aspects of life. Perhaps the most numerous are those dealing with money, written either by those who have made millions, or those who still dream about it.

But the Bible talks about riches in many passages. Jesus gave advice to the rich young ruler that made his face fall and he went away very sad: “Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mk. 10:21).

However, Paul talks about another sort of riches when he encourages the Christians in Corinth to be generous in their giving. He quotes the best example of all to move them to similar self-sacrifice: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

It’s striking that in the New Testament this is one of several great statements about the Lord Jesus that come in passages teaching very practical lessons. Others are Jesus’ response to the request of James and John for exalted positions in His kingdom (Mk. 10:45), and Paul’s appeal for unity in the church at Philippi (Phil. 2:5-11).

What is the teaching of this verse in Corinthians, and how does it apply to us?

First, it teaches that the Lord Jesus, the eternal Son of God, left the outward display of divine majesty when He came to earth for us.

If grace is the display of unmerited favour, how wonderfully Jesus’ coming into our world displays grace! Paul tells the Corinthians that they already know about this grace, for it is contained in the message of the Gospel they had heard from him. Likewise, we too have heard the same message of grace over and over again. We sing:

*Thou didst leave Thy throne
And Thy kingly crown
When Thou camest to earth for me.*



Allan Harman

That’s the pre-eminent demonstration of grace, that the Lord Jesus should leave His heavenly glory, become the babe of Bethlehem, and ultimately give Himself as a ransom for many. It is in this way that God demonstrated His love for a lost world (Jn. 3:16). He humbled Himself to come and save us, and that humiliation took Him to His death on Calvary.

In Jesus we gain riches that are abundant and that endure.

Second, it is through faith in the Lord Jesus that we too become rich.

Here are the real riches! Not just some money or earthly possessions that may make us feel that we are wealthy.

The true wealth is what is spiritual and eternal. Jesus came in order to give us of His riches. When we trust in Him we gain heavenly citizenship. That is what Paul teaches in another of his letters: “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6-7).

What’s the message of the Bible concerning riches? Don’t put your hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but “hope in God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17). Don’t let your life be dominated by the love of money, for as Paul points out the desire for material wealth can often cause people to wander from the faith (1 Tim. 6:10). Remember too that whatever wealth we accumulate we can’t take with us (1 Tim. 6:7). However, when we come to Jesus in believing trust, we gain riches that are abundant and that endure. The real riches are spiritual and in coming to

Jesus we gain an inheritance that can’t be taken from us.

Third, we must follow the example of the Lord Jesus, giving ourselves first to Him and then to others in the service of His kingdom.

Grace calls for a response. The giving of Jesus calls for us to give ourselves, and that must be first of all to the Lord Himself. Self-dedication to the Saviour and the work of His kingdom is the first and basic response to Jesus and His love. Just as Paul describes the response of the Christians in Macedonia, his description should characterise us as well: “They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will” (2 Cor. 8:5).

Other things follow. We give of what we are and what we have. We recognise the lordship of Jesus over our lives, and so we give of our talents and our possessions for the work of His kingdom.

Those to whom Paul wrote at Corinth excelled “in this grace of giving”. How is it with us? Is that what others say about us as they look at our lives?

The pattern is clear — the Lord Jesus had all the glory of heaven, yet He came down to earth to save sinners. He did not think that His position in heaven as God’s Son was a thing He needed to clutch at. He was eternally the Son, and so He came willingly to earth to become poor. His poverty results in our gain. “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift” (2 Cor. 9:15).

Allan Harman is moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria.

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