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February 2007
No. 589

editorial

This issue of *Australian Presbyterian* is dedicated to the many Christians throughout our nation who belong to small churches of under 50 members.

On any Lord’s Day within Australia many ministers within the Presbyterian Church will experience the phenomenon of preaching to small groups of believers who may not total more than 20 people. This is especially so in remote rural areas, but it is also the case where new church plants have been established or where full-time pastoral care is unavailable.

My first year in the ministry introduced me to the small church. I had been sent to a rural area in north-eastern Victoria to serve an older congregation which had been established only recently. We owned no property and were forced to meet at 8:30am in rented premises on the outskirts of the town. Some 25 to 30 brave souls gathered each week – even during winter, when the temperatures were close to freezing! Throughout our first year the numbers remained unchanged, but slowly the church began to grow.

Some time afterwards our congregation established a new church in a town about an hour away. This was an even smaller congregation which attracted about 15 faithful members on a good day, fewer during holidays and bad weather. Several years later our church established another congregation some distance away in the Ovens Valley. Our first service there was held in the supper room of a local sports centre because no church facilities were available. We started with 10 people. Welcome to the small church!

Despite the smallness of each of these churches, I learnt an important lesson: God loves the small church and He can bless it. He delights to use small things to shame those that are large and attractive so that it may be apparent that the power is due to Him (1 Cor. 1:27). It is easy for church growth theorists and those who are enamoured with bigness to look down on small churches. In this issue we want to encourage the many smaller congregations in Australia who are bearing a faithful witness to God. I have discovered that some of the most impressive Christians that I have ever met have grown up in such circumstances.

Peter Hastie

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Dr John Benton is the pastor of the Chertsey Street Baptist Church in Guildford, Surrey. He was converted at 15 and later obtained a doctorate in science in theoretical chemistry and quantum mechanics from the University of Sussex. While an undergraduate student there, he met his wife, Ann, and in his own words, “I’ve been doing the follow-up ever since.” He later taught at Liverpool University.

He was called to be the pastor of his church in 1980. John also serves as the managing editor of Evangelicals Now and has written several books, including Losing Touch With the Living God, Slandering the Angels, Straightening Out the Self-Centred Church (all in the Welwyn Series), One World, One Way, and What’s Going On Out There? He has also written The Big Picture for Small Churches – How To Thrive and Survive as a Small Congregation (Evangelical Press) in which he emphasises that it is the health of a church, not its size, that is important.

John and Ann have four children, Matthew, Tom, Jessica and Owen.

John Benton talks to Peter Hastie

John, why did you decide to write a book about small churches? It’s sort of a counter-cultural thing to do in Christian circles, isn’t it?

Yes, I suppose it is these days. I did so for a number of reasons. First, this church was fairly small when I first came to it. If you compared it with the bigger churches in Guildford, it seemed insignificant. Obviously the church is not as small now and the congregation has grown in size and maturity. Chertsey Street Baptist Church is part of the Reformed Baptist movement. Generally speaking, our denomination is made up of fairly small churches. Now it happened that a few years ago I was asked to go and speak up in the north of England to a conference in Yorkshire about encouraging small churches. This forced me to think through a lot of issues and so my book on The Big Picture for Small Churches encapsulates my understanding of what the Bible teaches about this subject.

I love small churches; I have preached in many of them in the UK. They are all very dear folk and I understand the anguish that they sometimes feel because of their smallness. They are good people but somehow they feel that they are not as good as other people who are in bigger churches, and my heart just goes out to them. And that’s what prompted me to write my book.

As soon as I started thinking along these lines I thought, “John, you had better put pen to paper on this one and write to encourage other people”. So I started to write. The funny thing is that the more research I did on this subject the more I realised that the Lord so often starts in a very small way. God’s interested in things that are small. I know that may sound counter-cultural, but it’s certainly biblical. He takes one man, Noah. He takes one couple, Abraham and Sarah, and He works from there. So I felt that I was clicking into something that was very important. I think it’s particularly important in our modern culture where every-
thing is big and you are made to feel use-
less unless you are big. God doesn’t think
like that.

John, what’s your real concern for
small churches and what exactly do
you mean by a “small church”?
The reason why I am concerned for
small churches is that in the West, as well
as in parts of Asia, a large number of
churches fall into this category. While I
am well aware that the mega-churches are
the ones that seem to attract all the inter-
est and attention these days, the reality is
that, for the most part, Christians are
more likely to find themselves in a small
to average-size church. So it makes sense
to me to think carefully about how I can
encourage and support believers who find
themselves in such a situation.

What is a small church? I wasn’t quite
sure to begin with. I asked Christian
Research, which is a UK group that does
a lot of statistics on churches. They gave
me this rule of thumb: a small church is
any congregation with less than 50 people
in attendance. An “average” church, they
said, is anywhere between 50 and 150 peo-
ple. Anything above 150 they categorised
as large. They added that any church bigger
than 350 was “very large”.

So, according to Christian Research,
you might find a congregation of less than 50
is “small”. However, in all honesty, I’m
aware of congregations of between 15 and
20 people. So my heart is very much for
these dear folk. When I write about small
churches I am thinking of congregations
of between 15 and 40 people, and there are
lots of these sorts of congregations
around – far more than we expect.

Is there anything wrong with a
church being small? Is it a sign of
poor leadership or spiritual prob-
lems?

Not necessarily, although it could be.
I think that Christians need to under-
stand that there is nothing wrong with
being small. When Paul shared the gospel
in Philippi, the church that developed
there was quite small in its earlier stages.
It probably consisted of Lydia, the busi-
ness woman, the jailer and his family,
along with the slave girl from whom Paul
had cast out the demon. Obviously the
church grew from there. Paul also men-
tions other churches which met in
houses in the first century, so they
wouldn’t have been very big (see Rom.
16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15). The point
is that we don’t consider that a baby or
child has a problem simply because they
haven’t reached the size of their father or
mother.

Furthermore, sometimes God’s strat-
egy is to keep churches small. Although
the Western media has hardly noticed it,
over the last 50 years the world’s greatest
spiritual awakening has been taking place
in China. Christian demographers believe
that there are now more than 60 million
believers there. Yet many of these
Christians meet in small fellowships. In a
book called Operation China, the author
points out that in Yunnan province there
are about 300 Christians among the Jino
people. They live in the jungle and moun-
tainous areas of the province. The author
says that there are 31 churches among the
Jino. Do the maths to calculate the aver-
age size of each of those churches!

Obviously, they are small. Neverthe-
less, God has raised them up and it
seems that these small groups are
best suited to serve the
Christians there
at the moment.

The size of many of the
Protestant
churches in
France today is also a case in point.
Missiologists have suggested that smaller
churches, never exceeding 40 to 60 peo-
ple, are right for their situation. There
are a couple of cultural reasons for this.
First, French people seem to be suspicious of
large and powerful churches based on
their experience of the behaviour of the
Roman Catholic Church in the past. They
are more attracted to a church with close
personal relationships as in a family. Of

course, this only works where churches
are relatively small.

The second reason why the French
seem to prefer smaller churches is that their
cultural values of liberty, equality and fra-
ternity are important to them; they like to
have their say in decision-making. Being
in a small church makes it more likely for
this to happen. So I think that in certain
situations small churches can be the
design of God. In China and France this
seems to be the case.

Should people be discouraged by the
fact that they attend a small church?
If not, why?
No, I don’t think people should be dis-
couraged by the size of their fellowship. It

While mega-
churches
attract all the
attention, most
Christians are
likely to find
themselves in
a small to
average-size
church.

seems to me that the most important
question to ask is: are they receiving faith-
ful Christian ministry and is God really
working in their lives? Having said that, I
understand that in a society of large cor-
porations, big governments and giant
shopping malls it’s easy to fall into the
trap of thinking that unless an organisa-
tion is really big it’s not worth looking at.
The day of the corner shop seems to be
disappearing.

Unfortunately, television has condi-
tioned us into thinking that it’s only
things that are big and newsworthy that
are worth thinking about. Gradually, peo-
ple have become sensitised to this way of
viewing life. It’s a cultural bias that really
has no basis in Scripture. Christians need
to remember that God often starts in
small and rather insignificant ways. Jesus
makes this point when he talks about the
coming of the kingdom. It comes in an
inconspicuous manner (Mark 4:30-32). I
think this gives us enormous encour-
agement not to be downcast by numbers.
The Lord can save in whatever way He
chooses – whether by many or by few. We
need to recognise this cultural bias
towards bigness for what it is – a worldly
idea with no foundation in the Bible.

Having said that, I want to add that if
our churches are small because we know
there’s something spiritually wrong and we
are doing nothing about it, then that’s
an entirely different matter. But simply
being small is not a problem in God’s
eyes. I don’t think we should be discour-
aged simply because of our size. Large
numbers at church are not necessarily a
sign of health, as Jeremiah reminds us (Jer.

Is there any indication in the letters
to the Seven Churches in Revelation
that there’s something wrong with
being a small church?

No, on the contrary, there appears to
be some recognition that it is okay to be
small. In the letter to the church of
Philadelphia, Christ says: “I know that
you have but little strength...” (Rev. 3:8).
Some commentators, like John Stott,
have suggested that it seems likely that
what is meant is that the congregation
was not large. The letter to the church in
Philadelphia is one of only two letters
among the seven in which Christ does
not accuse them of wrongdoing. Since
the churches in Philadelphia and in
Smyrna faced serious persecution, it is
more than likely that they were smaller
than the other churches who were
rebuked.
Do you think God has a special strategy in having lots of small churches around the world? For instance, there are some situations in Communist and Islamic countries where it’s impossible to have large public gatherings. Are small groups of believers part of God’s plan?

Yes, I certainly think that’s true. I’ve already mentioned the phenomenon of smaller churches in France and China and some of the cultural reasons for this. There are obviously some situations where people are more comfortable in smaller churches than larger ones. There is no doubt that people prize a sense of family in their church where each individual feels that they are known and where they believe they can contribute. Again, that only works within a group of probably less than 100 people. Once you get bigger than that you start running into the problems of saying “Hello, are you new here?” and the person replies: “Well, actually I’ve been coming for the past nine months and you’ve obviously never noticed.” Unfortunately that’s the sort of thing that often happens when the church gets bigger. So I think God does have His strategy in that.

On the other hand, I want to make it clear that we should always want to grow. God expects us to grow in spiritual maturity and to be involved in evangelism. Christians should be seeking to witness to the lost. I certainly don’t want to give the message that it’s all right to be small and you needn’t try to grow. I am not saying that. What I am saying is, “Let’s try to grow through witness and service, but let’s recognise that the size of the church is in God’s sovereign hands.” We must be obedient to the Lord and reach out, but let’s not thrust ourselves if under God’s sovereign purpose there isn’t immediate revival or enormous growth.

What are the spiritual problems that cause you more concern than small numbers?

The things that concern Christ are doctrinal deviation, moral failure, factions in the church, people fighting one another, worldliness, and a lack of heart for evangelism. The number of people in a church is never mentioned as a problem. God can work with any number of people — whether many or few. The Bible says that (1 Sam. 14:6).

I often remind small churches about the story of Noah. It was eight people against the world. Eight — that’s all! Was the whole world wrong except these eight people? Yes, it was. Often the devil comes to people in small churches and says “Who do you think you are? Isn’t it rather arrogant to think that in this town of thousands of people, you alone — just the 20 or 30 of you — have got it right?” Yet this was precisely the situation for Noah and his family. The whole world was wrong; only Noah and his small family were saved. No one else survived the flood.

We see the same principle at work in Gideon’s war against the Midianites. God actually says to Gideon that he has too many men in his army. The reason why God used only a small number of men was that He was concerned that people might think that Israel’s success in battle was due to the nation’s strength and not God’s power. If this happened, the Israelites would be tempted to give glory to themselves. They would go around saying, “Well, of course, we have this wonderful army etc”. However, God wanted to put Gideon in a situation where it was totally obvious that there was no other reason why the Israelites had won the battle apart from God Himself. That’s why the Lord cut down Gideon’s force to only 300 men.

The same principle applies today. Is anyone surprised when people are taken along to some enormous evangelistic meeting with thousands of people and suddenly “get religion”? I don’t think anyone is surprised because they put it down to the hype, you know, to the emotion of the situation. But if people are saved in a small congregation where there would be nothing to mask the real spiritual problem. The problems with churches are never to do with numbers. The idea that we have solved our problems if we grow the church in size is wrong. An increase in numbers may simply mask more serious issues. The letters to the Seven Churches in the Book of Revelation remind us that the basic problems that churches face are spiritual ones.
are none of those things, then it does make people think “what on earth has got into them?” It might just be that they begin to take seriously the fact that God has met with these people.

The Scripture tells us that God works through small and simple means. Moses uses a rod to separate the Red Sea and to provide the Israelites with water in the wilderness. Jesus uses a small boy’s lunch to feed 5000 people. Small things in the hands of the Lord can have huge effects. That’s when the glory goes to God. I believe that it’s important for small churches to see themselves in that kind of way.

You’ve said that the basic problems behind the dwindling churches in Britain are not sociological. In your opinion, what are the real reasons?

I think a number of things need to be mentioned here. First, I believe that it’s the judgment of God upon our land. We are suffering under the Lord’s discipline. England went through a cultural crisis in the 1960s. I grew up in this period and I think one of the great turning-points was the publication of Lady Chatterley’s Lover in 1961. That was a moment of moral crisis in the nation. Second, I think the church has become far too middle-class and has lost the notion of radical discipleship. Today, Christians have settled for a comfortable view of life and our expectations as far as jobs and standards of living are concerned are no different from those of unbelievers. Christians want a nice salary, a large house and to enjoy their church experience, but they don’t want to be challenged to live a life of sacrifice as radical disciples. The simple fact is that the church no longer understands what it means to “take up the cross”.

The other problem is that the church has kept a culpable silence on serious moral issues of our day such as abortion, homosexuality and the like. When these issues were first raised I don’t recall any national church leaders speaking out vigorously against these things. Even evangelicals went quiet. They ignored it all and said that their task was simply to get on with evangelism.

So there was no prophetic voice raised against these things?

Not a word, as far as I can remember; not even from men whom I respected as great leaders. They seemed to be culturally disengaged. Of course, I could be wrong because I was a lot younger at the time, but I just don’t remember hearing any notable British church leaders speak about these issues until Dr Francis Schaeffer stood up and condemned abortion. I distinctly remember that. But all through the ’60s I don’t remember any of the evangelical leaders standing up and saying “look, we ought to be organising ourselves against this and we ought to let the parliament and our national leaders know that this is wrong”.

The sad thing is that it took about another 30 years for evangelicals to twig that the gospel actually has moral implications and that we had a responsibility to make God’s will on these issues known.

Some of our leaders have finally got around to doing it today but the nation is miles down the road from where it was then. And, of course, behind all these moral issues is the whole creation/evolution debate. Sadly, there are many respected evangelicals who have compromised on evolution. They have a foot in both camps. They try to make the Bible fit in with Darwinism without realising that the basis for our moral values with respect to family and sexuality are grounded in the creation ordinances.

What do you think of the church growth theory that has been so popular over the last 25 years?

I believe that Christianity is about a change of heart, not simply a change of behaviour. The gospel confronts us with the fact of God, and the fact of our sin, and our need for redemption from judgment. Tragically, these things are being watered down today by many evangelicals. The problem is actually far deeper than most church growth theorists realise. It’s not just a matter of attracting people to a service that they feel comfortable with. I mean, an attractive service will undoubtedly bring some people to the church, but there’s got to be that heart engagement with God which is the Holy Spirit’s work. That’s the great matter.

So I don’t think you can organise church growth simply by tinkering around with the style of worship. Of course, that’s no excuse to hold a church service which is archaic and that deliberately avoids modern music. I love some of the modern music and I look forward to singing it. But I never forget that music does not equal conversion. Lots of people make the mistake today that if you just tinker with a few things around the edges and make everything modern and hi-tech, then people will come and be changed. But it doesn’t work that way.

What sort of vision is needed by small churches if they are going to fulfil their calling to be faithful witnesses to God in this generation?

We need to be in real contact with our local community. When I first came to the church in Guildford I realised that we had lost contact with the community around us. We did not engage with our neighbourhood. But if we are going to bring the gospel of God’s power to people we must be living among them. Think about Jesus’ incarnation; He came and He lived among us. He did not commute back to heaven every night. He lived with us.

So a church must try to engage with its local community. That’s the first thing. We need to share the gospel through practical involvement with the community, showing Christian love to our neighbourhood. If the local church actually helps the people who live in the immediate area then their hearts and minds are open to asking questions about the gospel. One of the interesting things about the New Testament is that when it talks about ordinary church members evangelising, like Colossians 4:5, 6 and 1 Peter 3:15, it usu-
ally speaks in terms of them answering, or being prepared to give an answer. It assumes that somehow people will be asking us questions because the way we live actually provokes our neighbours or friends to ask them. And that’s the vision that I feel is absolutely necessary today. Again, that’s not the way that the mega-churches think about their mission. They usually draw people from a very wide area and their emphasis is usually about putting on a big show. Obviously, I don’t agree with that.

What are some of the ways in which a small church can witness persuasively to our secular world?

I believe that the secular world is a hard nut to crack but it is vulnerable at a number of points. The reality is that people are spiritual beings, regardless of their secular values, and so they do have a real hunger for spiritual reality. Therefore, when they meet Christians who really know the Lord and have a great sense of God about them, they sometimes become very curious about the nature of their faith.

It’s also true that secularists are often afraid of what the future holds for themselves and their families in a world that is morally disintegrating. Again, the sense of uncertainty that grips them gives Christians a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate why they can be confident about the future in a world that seems to be falling apart. And a church can do that through practical things like running a good, wholesome and exciting young people’s club. What do secularists have to offer at this point? Not much, as far as I can see. While there are a number of alternative youth programs on offer, people are given no assurance that their kids won’t be offered drugs there or that leaders will hold a certain moral or spiritual point of view. However, if a church runs a really good Christian youth club that is based on strong biblical principles, then that is a great opportunity for witness.

I think Christians should also try to help out other local organisations in unselfish ways. My own wife was for many years involved with the local school. She actually became the chairwoman of governors there for a while. When it came time for her step down, another of our elders’ wives took on the role and became deeply involved. So our local school had the benefit of some really fine leaders over a period of years. And I think that kind of thing makes people feel that the church really does want to do them good and actually cares about them. It’s often in situations like that that we find opportunities to share the gospel with people.

Another point that is often forgotten is that there are lots of lonely people in our materialistic world, especially those who are not well off. Secular materialism is all very well for the rich, but if you are not so well-to-do it can be very difficult as you get older and feel that you are not wanted by people. Showing hospitality to such people or going out of your way to visit them is a wonderful opportunity to show Christian love. So I think there are many ways like that that a good church can really use to make contact with people.

And it doesn’t need to be big to do that?

No, it doesn’t. At one level it is as simple as caring for our neighbours. My wife looks after a blind lady who lives two or three doors down from us. The blind lady has started coming to church. We’re not quite sure yet where she stands spiritually, but this is the kind of thing that Christians ought to do their best to be involved in.

How do we know that a church is starting to make the right kind of impact in its area or its local community?

You can see that you have made an impact when people begin to trust the church. You can see that you have made an impact when people begin to trust the church.
someone to introduce them around or are they the sort of person who doesn’t want to be made a fuss of? Some people want to be given a bit of space; they just want to come in and be a fly on the wall. So you really have to size up people and then treat them appropriately. That’s not always easy.

The one thing we must avoid at all costs is giving the impression that we think that we are somehow better than they are. We are all sinners, saved by grace. That’s the kind of atmosphere we need to have in our church. The other thing that is helpful at this point is to introduce them to other people in the church who may have similar interests or work in the same field as the visitor.

Do we have any idea how people from radically different religious backgrounds are affected by the demonstration of Christian love?

When Christians love other people from different cultures and religions it can have a profound effect. For instance, we can leave a significant impression on people from a Muslim background. Islam is quite a harsh religion and Muslim women can easily feel downtrodden by it. If Christians show Muslims respect, even at a very small level, it can have a great influence on them because as human beings they respond to love. Genuine Christian love touches them at a very deep level.

Should small churches be discouraged if they can’t devote many resources to the music ministry?

No, they shouldn’t be discouraged. Worship is not principally about music; it’s about the heart; it’s about love to God; and it’s about obedience and submission to the Lord. I’ve already mentioned that I love music, but music itself is not worship. Jesus warns us that “these people draw near to me with their lips but their hearts are far from me”. I’m sure that the Lord would be more pleased with a congregation that has great difficulty with an old piano but whose hearts are on fire for Him than the best electric guitars and drums that money can buy but with no genuine surrender. You can get swept away in the emotion of modern music when it’s not matched with a real heart love for God. I really don’t think small churches should be worried if they have relatively limited musical resources.

How important is the ministry of hospitality in the outreach of the church?

I think it is very important because it does two things. First, it says to the Lord, “Lord, I want you to be in my home. I’m not just interested in turning up to church on Sundays. I want to use my life for you”. Hospitality is a way that I can open up a bit more of my life to God. Then, second, it’s important because it makes people realise that you’re interested in them. You’re not just interested in a man sitting on a pew on Sunday; you’re actually interested in friendship, in sharing something of your life. You’ve spoken about the importance of a sense of “family” in a church. What role can older people have in creating such an atmosphere in a congregation?

I think some of the most valuable roles that are played in the church are played by the older people. If they are still active and healthy there are a variety of things that they can do that can directly assist the outreach and pastoral care offered by the church. You know, very often retired folk can open up their homes to students or others who are living away from their families. That is a tremendous thing. Often retired people have more time to do these sorts of things than others. I have certainly seen retired people involved in very good follow-up work. They have invited people around who have recently become Christians and simply been there for them. When newer Christians have sometimes had problems or whatever, they have been there for them. I have had older people in our church who have taken initiatives in this regard and said, “if you want to pick up the phone and talk to us, if you want to share with us the struggles that you are going through, we will be glad to listen and to pray with you”. When people who have retired from the workforce do this sort of thing they play a vital role.

Again, some older people can play a strategic role in the church through prayer. I can’t emphasise this enough. Often they may not be well enough to get around and be involved in more physically demanding ministry, but if they are mature Christians they can be powerful intercessors behind the scenes. This is an essential ministry. They may not be able to do much entertaining or show hospitality because their health is not good enough, but they can still pray. Further, they can have a real pastoral ministry over the phone. They can show they care for people by ringing them up and, without prying, finding out how to pray for others in ways that will help face their demands and challenges.
ne of the features of church growth theory over the last few decades has been its preoccupation with the size of the local church. In our increasingly urban world, the gurus of church growth have exhorted us to renounce “smallness” in favour of “bigness”. One of them has trumpeted “bigness” as the solution to effective world evangelisation. “Big buildings, big car dealers, big supermarkets, big shopping centres are the norm … People are conditioned to think big in the city … we cannot afford to keep our churches small… the size of the modern city demands that we think big.”

However, if “smallness” is the underlying difficulty, one would expect to find numerous references in the New Testament to it and also, presumably, some strategies to remedy the problem. But when we search for such information, the evidence is by no means easy to find. In fact, it’s like looking for a needle in a haystack because none of the New Testament writers make the point that larger numbers of people in church make a congregation more useful to Christ. So if smallness in itself is not a church’s problem, what is?

In a word, the Bible says that the problems of the church are always spiritual and largely arise from the unrelenting warfare in which we find ourselves. It is sad that many Christians today don’t see it.

Having been raised in a materialistic and secular culture, many of us have difficulty in accepting the reality of Satan and the existence of demonic powers. Nevertheless, the apostles teach that just as Satan attacked Jesus in the wilderness as He readied himself for the task of redemption, so Satan also targets the church.

This should not surprise us because the church represents Christ in bringing salvation to the world and by providing an environment in which believers can experience spiritual transformation. As Paul says, the church is “the pillar and foundation of the truth” whose purpose is to make known “the manifold wisdom of God” to all the nations and the heavenly powers (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 3:10; Mt 28:19). Since the church has such a strategic role, the devil’s interest in destroying it is perfectly understandable.

The question is: how does he go about his task? Paul’s letters provide us with some insight. In writing to the Ephesians, he counsels them about “the devil’s schemes” (6:11). The term schemes is used elsewhere in the letter in a context which suggests cunning and deceitfulness (4:14). Used here in connection with Satan, it implies that Satan does not always launch frontal assaults but specialises in less obvious subversive activities. The use of schemes in the plural suggests that Satan’s attacks may be ongoing and take a variety of forms. Some may be overt, such as persecution, whereas others may be less obvious. Donald Grey Barnhouse once commented that one of Satan’s most successful ruses was to get his agents past Presbytery ordination committees so that he gained control of pulpits across the nation.

While Paul has much to say about Satan’s strategy against the church, it’s in the book of Revelation that we find the most direct references to his schemes and tactics. One of the characteristics of Revelation is the number of times that Satan and his supernatural forces are mentioned in the book. Indeed, there are more references to Satan and his work in Revelation than anywhere else in the New Testament. Furthermore, the references are spread uniformly throughout Revelation and cover every dimension of the underworld from direct attacks against the church to the “deep things of Satan” (2:24).

We are fortunate to have this information because as Barnhouse reminds us in The Invisible War, one of Satan’s cleverest strategies is to keep us in ignorance of his being and the fraudulent nature of his claims. Thus, the book of Revelation is of real help because it gives us a comprehensive account of the many ways in which the devil tries to destroy the church.

Most importantly, Revelation reminds us that life for the church is war. It’s a war that Satan has begun in heaven and which he continues upon the earth (12:7, 17). His aim is to destroy the church and devour it (12:4, 17). He’s a specialist in deception and his malevolence know no bounds. He will stoop to any means to achieve his ends (12:9, 10, 12).

Whether Christians actually believe this is a moot point. During a war a nation takes its security seriously; it prepares for possible attacks. But do believers today think that Satan is a more deadly enemy than terrorists, or realise that he can be covertly at work in our denominations, theological colleges, and local churches? This is the question that the book of Revelation forces us to answer.

Perhaps the most helpful insights that we gain into Satan’s tactics against the church are found in the Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3). These seven churches represent the universal church. In this sense, they are an invaluable guide in demonstrating how Satan prosecutes his war against the church in every age.

Interestingly, when we compare these letters with the rest of Revelation, we find nothing in them that explicitly indicates persecution from the Roman authorities. On the contrary, the trials of Christians are more directly linked to sinister forces such as Satan and hostile Jews (2:9–10, 13). Further, John lays the blame for the churches’ troubles on perhaps less obvious causes such as false apostles, heresy, false prophecy as well as idolatry and immorality (2:2, 14, 20).

All these threats are spiritual in nature and are a sign of the devil’s handiwork. Indeed, the frequency in these letters of
serves to warn us that Satan, who is the
any real sense of spiritual life. All this
well because in neither church was there
we can presume that there was something
Although it is not explicitly stated, I think
"prophecies of Jezebel" (2:14, 15, 20).
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Presbytery of Sydney, confided to a
who was found guilty of heresy by the
more recent times, Dr Peter Cameron,
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trom that was known as the "Love
Feast". When Christians refused to
was the preferred weapon used by the ear-
liest enemies of Christianity. They spread
rumours that Christians were cannibals
be "the body of Christ" at
the Lord's Supper. They accused them of
debauchery because they shared in a com-
mon meal that was known as the "Love
Feast". When Christians refused to
the divinity of Caesar, they
vilified as traitors and atheists. Persecution is nothing new.
One, the devil attempts to silence the
church in many places through threats of
violence. The fact that the vast majority of
Iraqi Christians have fled their country in
recent times is a reminder that Satan will
do whatever he can to eliminate Christian
in a culture. The various forms of
anti-vilification and anti-conversion laws
in many democracies today are a further
attempt to use the sanction of official
force to stifle Christian comment and wit-
ness. The source of the trouble, however,
is ultimately Satanic.
Another tactic employed by Satan to
discredit the church is to lure believers
into scandals, especially involving sexual
immorality (2:14, 15, 20). Whether
Christians realise it or not, Satan actually
sets traps which are designed to catch
them in situations of moral compromise.
Once these actions become known, the
person is disgraced and the church
malign. When a church leader is
involved in immorality, Paul describes
the resulting shame as falling into the "devil's
trap" (1 Tim. 3:7). Satan knows full well
that if he can bring discredit upon a
church leader, then outsiders will be dis-
clined to hear the gospel.

This explains why it's so important
that pastors, elders, and ministry leaders
have a blameless reputation both within
and beyond the church. The conse-
quences of serious moral failure on their
part blunt the ability of the church to
reach its community with the gospel. The
recent fall of Ted Haggard in the United
States illustrates the damage that can be
done when prominent Christians are
lured into infidelity. Satan knows this and
specialises in "setting traps" for those with
pastoral responsibility.

It is interesting to note that in at least
half of the churches mentioned by
John, false teachers and a watered-down
gospel constituted a problem. Just how
prevalent these issues are today is any-
one's guess, but it highlights the need for
extreme vigilance in our presbyteries, the-
ological colleges and churches. The pres-
ence of false teachers among us is utterly
destructive of our spiritual life and sense
of mission.

Further, John highlights the fact that
false teaching comes in many forms. He
refers to the "doctrine of the Nicolaitans",
the "teaching of Balaam" and the false
"prophecies of Jezebel" (2:14, 15, 20).
Although it is not explicitly stated, I think
we can presume that there was something
seriously wrong with the teaching in
Sardis (3:1-6) and Laodicea (3:14-21) as
well because in neither church was there
any real sense of spiritual life. All this
serves to warn us that Satan, who is the
arch-deceiver (12-9), targets the pulpits
and teaching programs of our churches.
Church leaders must always be alert to
this possibility and guard the gospel.

Satan's second tactic is to stir up vio-

tent opposition to the church so that
Christians become afraid to witness and
fall into silence. In the first century there
seems to have been extreme hostility to
the churches in Smyrna and Pergamum
that was stirred up to a large extent by the
Jews (2:8-17). The frightening nature of
this threat is expressed in phrases such as,
"the devil is about to throw some of you
into prison", "tribulation", "testing", and
"be faithful unto death" (2:10). The sever-
ity of the persecution becomes clear when
we read that "Antipas, my faithful witness,
was killed" (2:13). This opposition serves as
a reminder to us that suffering, as
 Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, is the badge of
a true Christian".

But not all suffering is of a physical
nature. Satan realises that sometimes he
can inflict more pain upon the church
through the shame of slander than
through physical threats (2:9). Slander
was the preferred weapon used by the ear-
liest enemies of Christianity. They spread
rumours that Christians were cannibals
because they ate "the body of Christ" at
the Lord's Supper. They accused them of
debauchery because they shared in a com-
mon meal that was known as the "Love
Feast". When Christians refused to
acknowledge the divinity of Caesar, they
were vilified as traitors and atheists.
Persecution is nothing new.

Today, the devil attempts to silence the
church in many places through threats of
violence. The fact that the vast majority of
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The last tactic that I want to explore is
the way in which Satan encourages the
appointment of "people-pleasers" into
church pulpits. It seems apparent from
the complacency and lifelessness in the
churches of Sardis (3:1-6) and Laodicea
(3:14-22), that the ministry of Christ's
"sharp two-edged sword" (1:16) had been
blunted. The preaching was powerless.
Why? We can only speculate about what
might have been happening, but the level
of self-satisfaction in the church suggests
that the pastors had capitulated to a "give-
people-what-they-want" style of ministry
that left them comfortable in their materi-
alism and self-love. It seems that both
these churches had lapped up the witty
reassurances, small talk and soothing
words of the audience-driven preachers
and had forgotten that they needed a
more confronting style of preaching that
included the themes of sin, righteousness
and judgment.

The lesson of The Letters to the Seven
Churches in Revelation is plain: the size
of a congregation should not be its chief
concern; of far more importance is its
awareness of the tactics Satan can employ
against it.

Peter Hastie is issues editor of AP.
Rushing to eternity

The meaning of time is outside time.

In Psalm 90 Moses considered the nature of God: He is from everlasting to everlasting. To God, a thousand years are like a watch in the night. We human beings, however, are compared to grass which grows up and flourishes in the morning, but is cut down and withers in the evening. Even if we survive 80 years, it is soon cut off and we fly away.

If these things are true – and they obviously are – it is surely strange that we are so reluctant to contemplate what is both self-evident and of such crucial importance to us all. It ever was thus, as Blaise Pascal pointed out: “Since men are unable to cure death, misery, and ignorance, they imagine they can find happiness by not thinking about such things.”

Unlike many of us, Moses faced the truth of God’s eternity and our transience, and prayed: “So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps.90:12).

The 19th century Anglican minister and hymn writer Henry Twells wrote a poem that all of us older ones can relate to:

When as a child I laughed and wept,
Time crept.
When as a youth I waxed more bold,
Time strolled.
When I became a full-grown man,
Time ran.
When older still I daily grew,
Time flew.
Soon I shall find, in passing on,
Time gone.
O Christ! Wilt Thou have saved me then?
Amen.

Time seems to accelerate as we get older, like a runaway vehicle heading downhill.

As the year 1999 rolled into 2000, the Sydney Harbour bridge was emblazoned with the word “Eternity”. It was a surprising way for an avowedly secular nation to celebrate the passing of time. Humanly speaking, it was meant to be a tribute to Arthur Stace – known as Mr Eternity – who was converted from a life of alcoholism and petty crime in 1930. In 1932 Stace heard John Ridley preach on Isaiah 57:15 (“Thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity”).

Ridley cried out: “Eternity! Eternity! I wish I could sound or shout that word to everyone in the streets of Sydney. Eternity! You have to meet it. Where will you spend eternity?”

Stace could hardly write his own name yet he went out into the street and wrote “eternity” on the footpath in a beautiful copperplate script. Later, he made the first “e” into a capital to thwart a man who had tried to deface the word by placing an “m” in front of it, thus turning it into “meter-nity”.

For the next 33 years, Stace continued to write “Eternity” on the streets of Sydney. It is a fitting message to a culture immersed in the here and now, and reluctant to ponder the issues of life and death, of time and eternity.

Others could put this message in a more elegant framework. Henry Francis Lyte wrote:

Frail as summer’s flower we flourish;
Blows the wind and it is gone;
But, while mortals rise and perish,
God endures unchanging on.

Isaac Watts spoke of time as “like an ever-rolling stream” which “bears all its sons away”. The Psalmist says that we are dust, and our days like grass, or like a flower of the field that flourishes for a brief time until the wind blows it away (Psalm 103:14-16).

Many of Jesus’ parables deal with the passing of time and the need to be prepared for eternity. The rich fool (Luke 12) and the five foolish virgins (Matt. 25), for example, were unprepared for death or the coming of the King.

How should we then live? We should live in time as those who know that time is passing quickly. The meaning of time is outside time – in eternity. Charles Spurgeon put it as succinctly as anyone: “Time is short. Eternity is long. It is only reasonable that this short life be lived in the light of eternity.” This means that as sinners living in time we need to cast ourselves on the mercy of Him who is the Lord of eternity, and has the power to grant everlasting life.

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The church today can easily fall into the trap of adopting the world’s methods to solve its problems. Already we are reading far too many books on marketing as a means of addressing the drift in our society away from the Church. A far better, more reliable, and more effective source of information and encouragement is the Gospel record.

This month we will work through five chapters of Matthew’s Gospel, chapters that will be a good manual on church growth. Jesus will teach us in parables about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like; He will show Himself to be God’s True King; He will challenge us to be kingdom-oriented, wholly committed kingdom people; He will encourage us to be patient and persevering while at the same time to expect to see real growth. He will show us what authentic faith looks like, and what the fake version looks like; He will give us a firm promise about the future of His church. We don’t need manuals on marketing – we need directions on discipleship, on what it means to walk in the steps of the One Who said, “I will build my church (on the confession that I am the Promised Messiah, the Son of the Living God) and the gates of hell will neither overcome it nor prevail against it.”

Bruce Christian

Instruction manual

20 daily Bible studies in Matthew 13-17
The dirt on unbelief

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY
- Are we ultimately accountable for the kind of soil we are?

Unseeing eyes, unhearing ears

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY
- How does Jesus' use of parables help us to see the need to explain the Gospel as simply and clearly as possible to unbelievers?
- How does Jesus’ answer to the disciples help us to see that we can never lead someone to faith in Christ by logical argument?

Weed better be careful!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY
- Opinions are divided as to whether this parable has any bearing on Church discipline. Some take Jesus’ words, “The field is the world” (38, ie not “the Church”) to indicate that Jesus is not warning us here against over-zealous discipline. But if it is hard to distinguish wheat from weeds in the world generally, how is it any easier to do it with any certainty in the Church?
- What is the real danger of over-zealous Church discipline (29)?

Despise not the day of small things

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY
- Does the Church today truly reflect the kingdom of heaven?
DAY 5

THE PASSAGE  MATTHEW 13:44-52

THE POINT  Nothing has ever been more important than the kingdom of God.

THE PARTICULARS

• Jesus’ intention in each parable is clear and simple; we ought not to be concerned with the ethics of other parts of the story that provide a framework for the main point(s). Like the kingdom of heaven, the treasure was so important when discovered that the man was prepared to sacrifice everything else for it. The ethics of his secrecy so as not to risk missing out is not before us.

• In the other pearl of a parable Jesus wants to drive home the point, so relevant to us in the western Church today.

THE POINT

Old truths, new insights

The parable of the net draws together all Jesus’ teaching in this chapter: there will be a Day of Reckoning when those who have been indifferent, superficial, compromising, or two-faced, or half-hearted about following Him will be separated for ever from those who have made it their No. 1 priority and so have seen God patiently working in and through their lives.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Where does God’s kingdom rate in your lifestyle? How is this reflected in the way you spend your time? ... energy? ... money? ... or the use you make of your God-given abilities?

DAY 6

THE PASSAGE  MATTHEW 13:53-58

THE POINT  The relationship between faith and miracles is enigmatic. Some argue that miracles are wholly dependent on man’s faith, citing many instances like Matthew 9:22, 29; Mark 10:52; Luke 7:50; etc. However, in Luke 7:12-16, neither the boy nor his mother showed any faith prior to Jesus’ raising him from the dead, and the story of Job shows us that great faith does not guarantee miraculous healing – quite the opposite! Moreover: the miracles were intended to prove Jesus’ true identity as God (John 10:25, 38; 14:11; 20:30-31) and therefore could not be rendered powerless simply by unfaith on our part; and they are also the means by which God shows His grace to helpless, undeserving sinners who are unable/unwilling in themselves to turn to Him in any case. Jesus’ autonomous decision not to do many miracles in His hometown was in line with the principles He taught in Matthew 7:6 and 10:14 rather than their lack of faith limiting His power.

THE PARTICULARS

• The people who’d seen Jesus grow up and who knew His family had become too accustomed to His humanity to recognise His true divinity; worldly thinking had blinded their spiritual eyes.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Do we let familiarity and human wisdom stop us from recognising in each other the spiritual gifts God has given us to share?

DAY 7

THE PASSAGE  MATTHEW 14:1-12

THE POINT  Herodias was both the niece of Herod Antipas (the daughter of his half-brother Aristobulus) and his sister-in-law (the wife of his half-brother Philip). So Herod’s seduction of her was trebly wicked since it also involved the rejection of his own wife. Because the courageous, godly John the Baptist was afraid to speak, this story was told out to Antipas openly, the tetrarch had him in the dungeon. But Herod’s conscience at least held him in awe of the Baptist, readily accepting that God had given him certain miraculous powers. Herodias and her lovely daughter (Salome) were not so endowed in the scruple department, their method of getting John off the stage altogether being as sick as it is legendary.

The Son of God had come to a very evil world.

THE PARTICULARS

• Like his father, Herod the Great, who slaughtered the children in Bethlehem in the hope of killing the Messiah (2:16-18), Herod Antipas was hated by the Jews. Jesus had no time for him either, refusing to answer his questions at His trial (Luke 23:8-9).

• Like the One Whose coming he heralded, John suffered a demeaning, ignominious death; but he was allowed a decent burial by the faithful band of followers. Jesus was also moved (cf 13).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• What is it costing you to remain faithful to Jesus and His truth?

DAY 8

THE PASSAGE  MATTHEW 14:13-21

THE POINT  That all four gospels record two instances of feeding miracles emphasises their importance in understanding Who Jesus is.

THE PARTICULARS

• In spite of His own heavy heart (because of what had happened to John), and His desire for solitude, Jesus still felt compassion for others – for the lost sheep of Israel (13-14, cf Mark 6:34).

• The disciples shared Jesus’ concern for the people, but felt helpless to provide the necessary resources. We can identify with them as we see the plight of so many refugees today (15, 17).

• Jesus’ challenge to the disciples to learn to trust God to supply their need (cf 6:26-27) was a good teaching opportunity – He already knew exactly what He intended to do (16; cf John 6:5-6).

• Instead of ignoring the disciples’ ridiculously meagre resources Jesus took them and multiplied them to meet the need – and more.

• The feeding of the multitude is a creation miracle that is clearly intended to leave us in no doubt at all that Jesus is God. The whole Biblical record of God’s revelation of Himself as Creator and Provider of all things leads to this conclusion. To try to explain it away in any other way is to miss the whole point.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• What different things do you learn about Jesus from this event?

"Bring them here to me"
THE PARTICULARS
• Jesus again needed time alone in prayer with His Father (cf 13) so He made the disciples go away, probably reluctantly (22-23).
• John tells us (6:19) the boat was 5-6 km from shore when Jesus came to them just before dawn, which means the storm must have driven them off-course south where the lake gets wider (24-25).
• After a 9-hour, strenuous, life-and-death struggle the disciples were in no fit state for calm assessment of what they saw (26).
• Jesus incorporated His simple, divine password, “I AM”, into His words of reassurance (cf Ex. 3:14, John 8:58; NIV: “It is I” — 27).
• Peter’s faith and trust were intact while ever his mind was taken up by the undeniable evidence – staring him in the face – of Jesus’ divine nature; but they deserted him as soon as he reverted to a strictly human-scientific perspective that excludes God (28-30).
• Jesus is God: He rules every aspect of the world He made (31-36).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY
• How many proofs that Jesus is truly God can you identify here?

DAY 12

THE PASSAGE  MATTHEW 15:21-28

THE POINT This beautiful story leaves us in no doubt as to the true nature of God’s grace and how it extends to all without distinction.

THE PARTICULARS
• Jesus’ withdrawal to Gentile territory (21) was probably to get some relief from the pressure of having to deal with (i) humble Jewish people who wanted to crown Him as Messiah but who had no understanding that the crown He was to wear would be made of thorns; (ii) Jewish leaders who saw Him as an impostor and wanted to kill Him; and possibly, (iii) Herod’s scheming.
• The Gentile Canaanite woman had a better understanding of Jesus’ true identity than many Jews: she called Him “Lord” (the word used in the Greek OT to translate “yahweb”) and “Son of David” (ie “Messiah”); she knew He had God’s power to cast out demons; and she came with a submissive, repentant heart (22).
• Jesus, presumably deliberately, set up the situation that gave the woman opportunity to prove to onlookers the “great” faith He knew she had. (This contrasts with some other healings where He required no expression of faith on the part of the healed!)
• The woman thoroughly understood the nature of grace (27).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY
• Do you persist in prayer when you feel God is not listening?
THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 15:29-39

THE POINT

Mark tells us (7:31) that these miraculous works of Jesus were done in the Decapolis, the region SE of Lake Galilee which had come completely under pagan influence. What He’d done among the Jews (14:13ff) He is now prepared to repeat among the Gentiles, showing Himself to be the promised Messiah for all people.

THE PARTICULARS

• Even among “foreigners”, Jesus’ fame spread quickly, and many benefited from His Messianic ministry. Their response contrasts with that of His own people (13:53ff) – they “praised the God of Israel” (29-31; cf Paul citing Isaiah 65:1,2 in Romans 10:20,21).

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 16:1-4

THE POINT

An incredibly dumb question on my part at a picnic many years ago has led to a family expression used to point out any failure to see the obvious: “Where’s the tap?” Jesus had performed an unknown number of miraculous signs among the Jews and beyond – of which Matthew has recorded more than 17 public instances up to this point – and the Jewish leaders ask Him for proof of His claimed Messiahship! There was no excuse for such unbelief (cf 11:1-6). There is none so blind as those who don’t want to see.

THE PARTICULARS

• The old adage, “Red at night, shepherds’ delight; red in the morning, shepherds’ warning” has been a fairly reliable weather forecasters’ guide for a long, long time. Our pride in our ability to predict the weather only heightens our condemnation for our inability to see God at work in His world, especially in Jesus.

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 16:5-12

THE POINT

In our fallen nature we are more inclined to think about, and be concerned for, our physical well-being than our spiritual well-being. So, when Jesus mentioned the yeast of the Pharisees, the disciples’ minds automatically turned to bread. Had the Master noticed their failure to bring enough supplies, and so was He warning them against becoming indebted to these hostile Jewish leaders by asking them for some? Was He saying their mission could in some way be compromised at this point by eating with them? It was all too cryptic and confusing for these poor, earth-bound minds to think about, and be concerned for, our physical well-being than our spiritual well-being. So, when Jesus mentioned the yeast of the Pharisees, the disciples’ minds automatically turned to bread. Had the Master noticed their failure to bring enough supplies, and so was He warning them against becoming indebted to these hostile Jewish leaders by asking them for some? Was He saying their mission could in some way be compromised at this point by eating with them? It was all too cryptic and confusing for these poor, earth-bound minds to grapple with – but it gives Jesus the opportunity to make two important points concerning Kingdom thinking.

THE PARTICULARS

• The disciples needed yet another reminder of Jesus’ Kingdom principle set before them earlier in the Sermon on the Mount concerning anxiety over physical needs like food (7:25, 26, 33). The 2 feedings of the multitudes should surely have been more than sufficient proof of the validity of that teaching (8-11a)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• How does this passage help us to answer people who say that they would believe in God if only He would give some concrete proof that He exists? What would constitute concrete proof?

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 16:13-20

THE POINT

An inspired declaration: the foundation for Christ’s Church.

THE PARTICULARS

• The title “Son of Man” is only ever used in the Gospels by Jesus to describe Himself. The Jews would have seen it primarily as referring to the coming figure of Daniel 7:13, and the disciples would have become accustomed to Jesus’ claim to it (13).

• The current rumours identifying Jesus with departed heroes of faith could have implied either likeness in charisma/mission, or some divinely inspired “resurrection” (14; cf 14:2; Malachi 4:5).

• Peter’s (correct) recognition of Jesus as the Messiah could only have been divinely inspired — as also with us (16-17, cf 11:27).

• In a play on Peter’s name (Petros, “Rocky”) Jesus defines the true foundation of His Church: confessing Him as the Messiah (18a).

• All Satan’s influence/power will never be able, either to overcome Christ’s Church, or to withstand its advance in rescuing us from Satan’s hold (the Greek allows both meanings) (18b). Christ calls His Church to maintain true doctrine and exercising right discipline on His behalf among His redeemed people (19).

• Jesus resisted the spread of wrong ideas about His identity (20).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Is the Church today truly fulfilling all Christ called it to be?
joy of recognising the Holy Spirit’s fruit in us, and the discomfort of seeing the remaining influence of our fallen nature; the time gap between vs 17 and vs 23 is probably embarrassingly short!

• Man has no place for hardship and suffering in his “ideal” world; but, as followers of Jesus we need to learn to think again. The path to heaven is the path our Saviour trod: putting aside self-interest and this world’s glory, and living only for Him (24-26).

• The Lamb who will reign is the One who was slain (Rev 5:12); in seeing Him die they saw Him coming in His kingdom (27-28).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• How do you respond to Paul’s challenge in Colossians 3:1-4?

We are all under the sentence of death; the man’s epilepsy is part of the outworking of that sentence, and reminds us that to some extent all our bodies are failing to function properly as God intended.

• Satan uses every opportunity to upset God’s ordered world, but again we see Jesus’ complete mastery over him (14-15, 18).

• Jesus’ reference to the mustard seed shows that the disciples’ condition, and therefore his innate disjunction from true faith.

• Verse 21 does not appear in the more reliable manuscripts.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Are we serious enough about Jesus working through us today?
Across Australia

**Good news from Iraq**

Presbyterian army chaplain Martin de Pyle reports from Iraq, where he was deployed for the second time in December, that new opportunities arise constantly to witness, encourage, help and just be a mate.

“Every Sunday I hold a church service, which has been well attended. Also, I have started to regularly visit the Fijian soldiers’ camp to do some preaching and teaching along with some pastoral work. Most of them have a very strong faith, and their hymn singing is outstanding. Together with the Australians, all the Fijians attended the Christmas service, and the volume of their singing coupled with their harmonising during the singing of the carols, was beyond description.

“At least twice a week, sometimes more often, I give a presentation on the history of ancient Iraq. During the presentation, along with other background material, I give a complete survey of the Old Testament. We then travel to the excavations of ancient Ur where I take them through the ruins of the city, and down into underground tombs that date back some 4300 years. The soldiers do this in their time off, and some have even booked up to do it for a second time!”

Martin seeks prayers for the safety of all our deployed personnel. Pray also that they serve in this unstable and at times hostile country, they might pause to think about issues that are eternal, and come to know Him who is Lord over all – our blessed Lord Jesus Christ.

Martin de Pyle is deployed to Dhi Qar province in Iraq. He is the chaplain to more than 500 Australian soldiers in the Overwatch Battle Group (West).

**Klaas Runia dies**

One of the original members of the faculty of the Reformed Theological College in Geelong, Dr Klaas Runia (born 1926) died on 14 October in the Netherlands. Dr Runia taught systematic theology at the RTC from 1957 to 1971 and had a great influence on its development and believers in many places and congregations through his teaching, writing and speaking. He also served as an associate editor of the *Reformed Theological Review*.

**Vale Malcolm Cram**

The Rev. Malcolm Donald Cram died in Canberra on 11 December after a short illness. Mr Cram began his study for the ministry in the 1960s, but for family reasons was unable to proceed beyond licensing to take up an exit appointment. He remained active in the church both in Australia and South Africa (where he moved in 1974).

Returning to Australia in 1977, he settled in Goulburn where he continued his career as a librarian. In these difficult years for the church he threw himself into the life of the Goulburn Congregation (Argyle Parish), which had to regroup following Union.

The call to the ministry had never left him and he applied to the Presbyterian of Canberra, and was licensed again in 1992. He was ordained and inducted to Gladesville–Hunters Hill in 1995.

I’ll health, which would dominate the rest of his life, forced him to demit, retiring to Canberra in 2000. But even in retirement he found a niche, becoming moderator of Belconnen Home Mission Station (in which parish he lived) and, to the limits his debilities allowed, effectively ministered there.

Malcolm was active in the courts of the church, held a passion for the orderly worship in the church he had known since boyhood, and was possessed of a keen mind with which he gave his all to the service of his Lord, both in secular life and in the ministry.

**Scots overseas**

The senior minister of the Scots Church in Melbourne, the Rev. Douglas Robertson, was recently the guest of the Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Alabama while on a study trip looking at the concept of church revitalisation. The study is part of the on-going impact across the country of the recent *Embers to a Flame* conference held in Melbourne and on the Gold Coast.

**Appointments**

The Rev. Robert Boase was inducted to the *ST Ives-Pymble* charge in Sydney on 24 January. Mr Boase, the son of the Rev. Peter Boase, will be the youngest minister ever at St Ives-Pymble. He is a graduate of the PTC Sydney and has been serving at The Entrance since his ordination in 2001.

The Rev. Mark Powell has been called to the Cornerstone Community Church in Concord from Wee Waa.

Mr George Michael, Mr Kirk Farquharson and Mr Peter English have been ordained/inducted as elders at Cairns Presbyterian.

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New church plant Kenmore Presbyterian Church has had an encouraging start, growing steadily from the initial Bible study and prayer group. Then came church on Sunday with Sunday school and crèche. The Bible study divided into two growth groups. Next the ladies started a day-time growth group with crèche, followed by a third growth group and the church’s first regular youth group.

It now has an average Sunday attendance of nearly 50 adults and children, more than 20 adults in growth groups, and the congregation’s giving is rapidly approaching what the church needs to be self-funding.

Minister Steve Blencowe believes that morning tea is a helpful gauge of where a church is at. If everyone stays around for morning tea – that’s a start. If there are people who willingly serve by providing food – that’s good. But if everyone makes the effort to talk to one another and get to know each other, that’s even better.

**Light duties**

Dr Phil Burcham, Associate Professor in the School of Pharmacology and Medicine, University of Western Australia, has been appointed as the inaugural chairman of Festival of Light Australia’s WA Branch Committee. Dr Burcham and his family worship at Scots Church, Fremantle.

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know newcomers – that’s super. And that’s happening at Kenmore, he says.

Fairholme appointment

Fairholme College in Toowoomba has appointed Mrs Sandra Hawken to lead the college into the “Middle School” era. Mrs Hawken has wide experience in independent schools, from supervising girls’ boarding at St Phillip’s College, Alice Springs, to (most recently) head of Junior School at Lindisfarne Anglican School, Tweed Heads.

During these years, Mrs Hawken has raised three children (now adult) and completed a Master of Education degree. In 2004, she was given the Quality Teaching Award of the Australian College of Educators. With her husband Robert, Mrs Hawken is an active member of the Presbyterian Church.

Matter of principal

Sixty people gathered at the Future Contours of Ministry dinner held at St Lucia, Brisbane, in September to meet Dr Bruce Winter, the incoming principal of the Reformed College of Ministries and to hear his thoughts on ministry training.

Dr Winter, a world-renowned teacher, the author/editor of several books on the New Testament, and an editorial adviser in the production of the English Standard Version (ESV) Bible, demonstrated his preaching gifts with a captivating presentation.

Dr Winter said theological training could trap Christians in three areas: reading books about the Bible and reading it less; talking more about God and not to God; and suspending our gifts while we train for academic degrees. But he said the God; and suspending our gifts while we merely known as the teacher and scholar of the calibre of Dr Robert Bruce Winter at QTC, the 2007 Year of Excellence will allow students regular contact with faculty and interactive fellowship support groups. Students will also have lunch-time interactions with Christians who practise their faith daily in the secular world.

Dr Winter will teach the first Year of Excellence intensive, The Cross and the Clash of Cultures from 12-17 March.

Fatwa for insulting Christ

Muslim fundamentalists in Britain have issued a death sentence on an award-winning gay playwright who wrote disrespectfully about Jesus Christ. The Sharia Court of the United Kingdom issued a “fatwa” late last year condemning dramatist Terrence McNally to death for writing the controversial play Corpus Christi in which a Jesus figure in Texas enjoys a torrid sexual interlude with Judas Iscariot and later endures crucifixion as “King of the Queers”.

Outside the opening night performance at the Pleasance Theatre in North London, representatives of the Islamic Court solemnly handed out copies of their fatwa, a religious edict signed by Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad. The Sheikh reminded the press that Muslims revere Jesus as a messenger of God, even though they discount the story of His resurrection.

The declaration accompanied a cautionary word to British Muslims: Don’t try this at home. “We would warn individual Muslims not to try to carry it out,” the sheikh helpfully explained. If McNally travels to an Islamic state, however, he certainly risks arrest and execution.

Pastor’s heart attack

The Rev. D. James Kennedy, the longtime pastor of Fort Lauderdale’s Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church and a driving force in the national religious conservative movement, was in a serious condition just before New Year after suffering a heart attack.

Church officials said Kennedy, 76, was rushed to a local hospital from his home in the Coral Ridge neighbourhood. Although they were extremely concerned about his health, the officials said Kennedy soon became more alert and responsive.

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Fears for Anglicanism

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, has expressed concern about the “recrimination and bitterness” that may accompany a formal split in the 77 million worldwide Anglican Communion – though he admits that “it’s not the worst thing in the world”.

In a television documentary on Canterbury Cathedral broadcast in early January in Britain, Dr Williams said that he was concerned that Christians should not be set more deeply at odds with each other.

“And because I am an ordinary, sinful human being, I fear the situation slipping out of my control, such as it is,” he added.

He declared on the program: “I fear schism, not because I think it’s the worst thing in the world but because, at this particular juncture, it’s going to be bad for us. It’s going to drive people into recrimination and bitterness.”

He said: “We can’t take it for granted that the Anglican Communion will go on as it always has been. There’s no way of moving on without asking the hard questions.”

The worldwide Anglican church has been deeply divided over homosexuality, especially after the church in the United States appointed a gay bishop.

Polish archbishop resigns

Archbishop Stanislaw Wielgus, who had been appointed the new head of the Warsaw Catholic Archdiocese in Poland, dramatically resigned last month, less than an hour before he was due to be installed in the city’s historic cathedral.

Firm findings by a church commission showed that Wielgus had collaborated with the former communist country’s secret police on numerous occasions.

Turk criticises Pope

Ankara’s top government religious official accused Pope Benedict XVI of “doing injustice to Turkey” by declaring after his historic visit to Turkey late last year that the country’s Catholics live under difficult conditions. In an interview with the semi-official Anatolian News Agency published in the liberal Radikal newspaper,
Director of Religious Affairs Ali Bardakoglu complained that the problems of Turkey’s religious minorities were exaggerated during the Pope’s visit. In an address from Rome after his return, Benedict noted that the “small flock” of Catholics in Turkey “live in conditions that are not easy”. His gentle but direct remark echoed similar comments sprinkled throughout his four days of public statements while in Turkey.

15 years for ‘blasphemy’

On November 26, two Pakistani Christians were sentenced to 15 years in prison and a fine of 25,000 rupees each for burning the Koran. On October 18, Boota and James Masih, a married couple, were asked to clean a Muslim family’s store and burn the garbage when they finished. The two gathered all the garbage in a donkey cart and burned it outside the home. Some Muslim neighbors saw the burning and discovered Koranic papers in the fire. An angry mob gathered and planned to burn Christian homes and churches. Police controlled the mob by arresting James and Boota, even though they are illiterate and did not know the contents of the garbage.

Extremists face death

A court in Bangladesh has sentenced two Islamic extremists to death for murdering Dr Abdul Gani Gomes, a Christian convert from Islam, in September 2004. Four friends, including the two convicted, admitted to killing Gomes on the order of JMB (Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh), a banned Islamic militant group. Gomes, 30 years of age, worked with an aid organization run by the JMB.

Villagers sometimes rape Christian women as a means of intimidation, but because of the shame associated with rape, few of these incidents are reported.

Conversion banned

The government of Eritrea wrested control of the Orthodox Church in December, the day after security police seized a man’s property and his car. The Eritrean Orthodox Church had been operating in the country for 30 years, and the government had previously allowed Christians to worship in certain churches."
Clergyman released

A Chaldean priest kidnapped in front of his Baghdad home in December has been released, the Chaldean Patriarchate has reported on its official website. Father Samy Abdulahad Al-Raiys was freed six days after he had been abducted in Baghdad’s Al-Sinaa street near the University of Technology while driving to his parish. “It is the fifth priest kidnapped, and two were killed in Mosul,” commented one Baghdad priest who requested anonymity. “So many of us are frightened. We are asking, ‘Who will be the next?’”

Convert tried for murder

A 14-year-old convert to Christianity faces murder charges for stabbing her uncle to death in northern Iraq. Asya Ahmad Muhammad is on trial in Dohuk city’s Juvenile Court for plunging a kitchen knife into her uncle’s chest last July after he began beating the teenager, her mother and younger brother. The dead man’s family claimed the need to restore “honour”, supposedly lost because of his female relatives working in public. Muhammad’s attack was religious. “The attack on Asya Muhammad and her mother was caused by [Sayeed Muhammad’s] family being upset with the father for becoming a Christian,” lawyer Akram Mikhael Al-Najair told Compass.

Iranians arrested

Iranian secret police began to raid and arrest leaders of one of the Islamic republic’s indigenous house church movements in December, arriving unannounced in the early morning hours to search their homes in Tehran, Karaj, Rasht and Bandar-i Anzali. Several members of the house church movement were called in for a day or more of interrogations and then released. But eight remain under arrest, including one woman. According to one source, those arrested have been told they face 10 accusations, including evangelisation activities and actions against the national security of Iran.

Saddam execution condemned

While the Islamic world’s debate on Saddam Hussein’s execution seems largely centred on its timing during a holy Muslim festival, Eid al-Adha, initial responses from Christian leaders seem to largely recycle the longstanding debate on whether capital punishment is ever justified.

The Vatican’s line was unequivocal, with Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican’s press office, saying it always opposed capital punishment.

In an official statement, the Vatican said capital punishment was always tragic news, a motive of sadness, even when the person was guilty of grave crimes. Execution could not reconstruct justice or reconcile society, but risked augmenting the spirit of revenge and sowing seeds of new violence.

Cardinal Renato Martino, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace said the execution answered “a crime with another crime … No one can give death, not even the state.”

Jonathan Gledhill, the Church of England’s Bishop of Lichfield, was the only mainline Christian leader cited by Christianity Today to publicly argue that Hussein’s execution was just. He said that anyone who deliberately murdered another human being “immediately forfeited his or her right to life”.

The bishop said that there were good reasons to oppose the death penalty but Saddam’s execution could not be criticized as unjust because he had been afforded a fair trial and an opportunity to appeal.

Anglican colleagues disagreed, with Bishop of Ripon and Leeds John Packer saying: “Maybe it will raise the public mind how offensive and morally unacceptable this form of justice is. The element of forgiveness central to Christianity is lost in execution.”

Before the execution, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said he did not believe in the death penalty, though Saddam deserved punishment, “because it effectively says there is no room for change or repentance”.

American evangelical leaders said little, according to Christianity Today, perhaps because “in most evangelical circles there is little condemnation of capital punishment for far less notorious crimes”.

Pastors win appeal

By Barney Zwartz

Two Christian pastors found to have vilified Muslims under Victoria’s religious hatred law won their appeal in December and hailed the decision as a victory for free speech.

The Court of Appeal ordered the case to be reheard at the original tribunal, before a different judge and with no further evidence. It set aside the orders for public apologies in newspaper advertisements and for the pastors not to repeat their remarks.

In 2005 Judge Michael Higgins found that Pastors Danny Nallah and Daniel Scot and Catch the Fire Ministries vilified Muslims at a seminar on jihad in Melbourne in March 2002, in a newsletter and in a website article. He said these suggested that the Koran promoted killing and looting, that Muslims wanted to take over Australia and terrorists were true Muslims.

In the Court of Appeal, Justices Geoffrey Nettle, David Ashley and Marcia Neave overturned that finding but rejected the appeal that the Racial and Religious Vilification Act was unconstitutional.

They ordered the Islamic Council of Victoria, which brought the original complaint, to pay half the appellants’ appeal costs, then accepted an ICV submission that the state should bear that cost.

After the hearing, Pastor Nallah said: “I’m really thankful to the Lord. I would be pleased to see it completed and not go back to the tribunal, but what we got was more than a blessing.”

He said it was a great day for free

Donvale Presbyterian Church

has relocated while church extensions are underway.

You will find us at the Seventh Day Adventist Church Central Road, Nunawading Melways 48 D11 Services at 9.30am and 6.30pm www.donvale.org

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speech. All laws needed to be tested, and this had now been tested and found to be a bad piece of legislation.

Pastor Scot thanked his supporters and vowed to continue conducting seminars on the Koran and Hadiths (Islam’s sacred texts). “Some Muslims have got the idea they have to hide the truth, and that’s very sad,” he said. “People should know it from the primary sources and not be misled by politically correct teachers who don’t know the reality of Islam and want to glorify it with false pretensions and assumptions,” he said.

Justice Nettle said the tribunal equated hating the religious beliefs of Muslims and hating Muslims because of their religious beliefs. This was not so: many people might despise Pastor Scot’s perception of Christianity yet not dream of hating him. “No doubt the purpose of the act is to promote religious tolerance. But the act cannot and does not purport to mandate religious tolerance.”

He said whether Pastor Scot’s descriptions of Islam were true were irrelevant; the question was whether they incited hatred.

He found that the tribunal was wrong to rule out the section 11 exemption based on a genuine religious purpose.

Japanese outreach

By Stephen Young

One of the spiritual poverty nations of the world is Japan. It is said that only 0.3% of the nation is Christian and they are considered an unreached people group with the gospel of Christ. Here in Australia there are more than 15 groups scattered around the major cities who are trying to reach the Japanese for Christ. Of these, three are ministering through the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

The Japanese need to be reached through their own language, but it is more effective if it is done in English and Japanese. The Melbourne Japanese Language Christian Church began in 1991 at Canterbury Presbyterian Church and have more than 50 people attending their Sunday services.

The Perth Japanese Christian Church meets in West Leederville and is approaching its sixth year. More than 30 people attend their Sunday services. The Creek Road Presbyterian Church in Carina, Queensland has some 60 people attending their Japanese-English service, but about two thirds are not Japanese.

Missionaries who have worked in Japan have been helping these churches and have come from the Presbyterian Church of America and the Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

The church in Melbourne is praying for a bi-lingual minister to take over the ministry there. A number of Japanese adults have been converted and baptised here in Australia.

Perth Japanese Language Christian Church

My staff were killed

Christians in the Middle East have paid a high price for the Iraq war, the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad and the Pope’s controversial remarks about Islam.

Egyptian Copts, Iraqi Chaldeans and the Palestinian Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant communities have faced violence and even death at the hands of their Muslim neighbours.

Canon Andrew White, president of the Foundation for Reconciliation in the Middle East, told The Times that the Iraq war had had a dire effect on the lives of Christians in the region, particularly in Iraq, where he is the vicar of St George’s Church in Baghdad.

“All my staff at the church have been killed,” he said. “They disappeared about a year ago and we never saw them again. Of the rest of my congregation, most say they have been targeted in some way or have had letters delivered with bullets in them. People forget, or the Islamic groups don’t realise, that Christianity was in the Middle East before them and therefore they see Christians as being part of the Western coalition military presence. Things have got considerably worse since the Iraq war.”

Tensions have also increased elsewhere. In Syria one Christian Assyrian said that he was planning to emigrate to Canada because of growing Islamic fundamentalism in a society having to absorb huge numbers of Iraqi refugees.

In Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, Christian Arabs are a vulnerable minority caught between sympathy for their fellow Palestinians under Israeli occupation and their own tensions with the much larger Muslim Palestinian community.

Hanna Massad, the pastor of Gaza Baptist Church, said that the conflicts highlighted a difficult issue of identity for Christian Arabs. “The issue is who we are. Are we first Christians or are we Palestinians?” he said.

“For me my priority is my faith. I am a Christian first but I am also a Palestinian, I am Arab. Of course as a Christian Palestinian Arab we suffer with the (Israeli) occupation but at the same time I cannot, because of my personal faith, use violence.”

In Jordan conditions are easier in a dwindling Christian community that remains an influential force. Here Christian Arabs sent thousands of letters to the Holy See asking the Pope to apologise for his recent controversial remarks about Islam.

The Times
God’s mysterious will

Providence, like Hebrew, can only be read backwards.

A n encounter with a friend from my teen-age years reminded me of the wise and pithy words of the Puritan writer John Flavel: “The providence of God is like Hebrew words — it can be read only backwards.” I was leaving a restaurant in my native town in Scotland one day and there was my friend being helped along by his elderly mother. His condition was just as someone had hinted to me. His had been one of those active, energised, intense spirits; but now his powers had been wasted by a serious car accident.

To my intense delight he recognised me, and for a moment the old energy seemed to surge into his being. Just as quickly it subsided, like a light bulb fusing in the moment of illumination. It was as though the sight of a friend from the past had deceivingly invigorated him, only to remind him immediately of his terrible infirmity.

His gesticulations had always been one of his chief characteristics. Now the look in his eyes, the movements of his hands and body all created a wistful melody in the minor key. He was the one who had given me the first Christian books that ever made a real impression on me; who had poured out his own life-energy to befriend me and teach me.

Of this, and other experiences in life, I have sometimes thought, “It just does not seem to make sense.” At such times, Flavel’s words have often comforted me, and helped me to readjust my myopic spiritual perspective. They have reminded me to fix my mind and heart on God’s wise, gracious, and sovereign rule, and on the assurance that He works everything together for His children’s good, so that I do not inquire too proudly into why I cannot understand His sovereign purposes.

The ultimate explanation of the tragedies of life lies beyond our personal lives and even beyond time.

Of course one occasionally meets Christians for whom the Lord’s purposes are “all sewn up”. They know exactly what He is doing, and why He does it. Such comprehensive wisdom is difficult to dislodge; but sadly it is the precocious wisdom of the immature Christian who has not yet learned that while “the things revealed belong to us and to our children”, there are also hidden and secret things that “belong to the Lord our God” (Deut. 29:29). God’s ways and thoughts are not ours. We never have them “taped”. We can no more read in detail God’s secret purpose for our individual lives than we can understand Hebrew if we try to read it from left to right. To imagine we can is to be suffering from a form of spiritual dyslexia.

One great reason for this principle is to teach us to “Trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding” (Prov. 3:5). So perverse are we that we would use our knowledge of God’s will to substitute for actual daily personal trust in the Lord Himself.

Flavel’s Law (if we may so speak of his wise words) has widespread relevance for Christian living, but is particularly important in four ways:

The big decisions. It is true of the big decisions of life. God does guide His people, and leads them in the right paths (Ps. 23:3). It is a great thing to come to a major decision with the assurance that it is His will. But we would be mistaken to imagine that we therefore knew in detail the reasons behind His plan. Many a Christian has discovered that obedience to what they believed to be God’s will seems to have led to great personal difficulties. Only later do we discover God’s purpose in leading us to a new orientation or situation may have been very different from the extrapolation we made from the first points we saw on the divine graph of our lives.

The tests. It is true of the test of life. We struggle to endure them for what they are in themselves. After the event we are relieved to have them at our back. But, in fact, earlier testings are often preparation to strengthen us for later ones. Only when we have been brought through the later one does the earlier one more fully “make sense”.

The tragedies. It is true of the tragedies of life. We will not fully see their place in the divine economy in this world. Their ultimate explanation lies beyond our personal lives and even beyond time (think of Naomi’s triple bereavement in Ruth 1, and how that led, in the slow unfolding of God’s purpose to Ruth’s conversion, marriage, motherhood, the coming David and finally the birth of Christ). I have no special insight into God’s purpose in the life of my friend; but that He has a gracious purpose is beyond doubt, however opaque it seems at present.

T he whole. It is true of the whole of life. As C.S. Lewis illuminatingly put it, only when someone has died do we see his/her life in its completeness. But even then we catch only a fleeting glimpse of what will finally be made manifest. The ultimate unfolding awaits the day when “I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Has it ever struck you that our Lord’s words in the Upper Room had long term as well as short term significance? “You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

Sinclair Ferguson is an Alliance Council Member and professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary.

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Sinclair Ferguson
Imagine that a Hollywood director wants to make a film depicting God, and that he doesn’t know the Christian account of God becoming human (which several directors have already tackled). Surely it would be a special effects extravaganza, dominated by images of glory and power.

What is almost inconceivable is that the encounter should be with a helpless newborn baby in a rough stable, far from the centres of civilisation. It’s hard to envisage a less likely way to encounter God – except perhaps as a man nailed to a cross, tortured and torn, slowly asphyxiating. No wonder this portrayal of the divine was, as the Apostle Paul noted, a scandal to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews – and to many since: God identifies himself with suffering humanity, startlingly weak and vulnerable.

Yet weakness is at the heart of the Christian message, a beautiful truth that Christmas should highlight. Unfortunately it is a truth the church often seems to forget, falling instead into the twin perils of legalism and triumphalism. In Australia, too much of the church is comfortably middle class, complacent, and detached from the human misery around and inside it.

I don’t mean to disparage the thousands of ordinary Christians who sacrifice time, energy and money in many ministries and who act as the invisible glue that stops society fragmenting worse than it has. But they are not what springs to mind when the ordinary Australian thinks of church.

Hypocrisy, perhaps; wowserism, probably; fallibility, certainly. But this is a judgment Christians are willing to embrace, for most of them know they are weak. That paradox of strength in weakness in which they put their hope encapsulates much of the power and appeal of Christianity, a religion of paradoxes. Jesus tells us, for example, that the last shall be first and he that would keep his life must lose it (a reference to self-denial rather than suicide). In Christianity there is always tension between the now and the not yet, between doing and not doing, between freedom and bondage, and comfort and consolation. Listen to the passionate hope that American slaves put into their spirituals. That, of course, is why atheists often actively despise Christianity: they see it as false and deluded consolation for the weak or weak-minded.

I can’t count the times atheists have told me that whereas I can’t cope without a crutch they have the strength (or courage, or clarity of vision) to see the world as it is without false props. Leaving aside that fact that such unambiguous certainty about metaphysics is itself a false prop, in one sense their attack is well-founded: Christianity is for the weak and inadequate.

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick,” said Jesus; “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.” Paul pointed out to the Corinthians that “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.” Weakness is at the heart of the Christian message.

Unfortunately the church has often forgotten that vital truth, falling into the twin perils of legalism and triumphalism. In Australia, too much of the church is comfortably middle class, complacent,
The second, the age of reason, dominated the 16th century Protestant Reformation, and was foundational to the emergence of modern societies. Theology became a set of reasoned propositions, and God was seen as law-giver, providing the structure to all of life. Mysticism was viewed with suspicion, and the sermon became the centerpiece of the worship service. This still characterises most mainline Protestants.

The latest stage emphasises experience and participation. The duty of the follower, Bouma says, is “to feel the grace of God, to feel saved, spirit-filled and full of joy.” The emphasis has shifted from correct belief to correct feelings. Pentecostal Christianity offers success theologies, prizing emotion over intellect, “celebration, not cerebration”.

It has brought the era of the megachurch, particularly in the United States, but found at Hillsong in Sydney, or CityLife, Crossway and CareForce in Melbourne. From one perspective – mine, as a “second-stager” – this has not been an unmixed blessing. Their energy, honesty and desire to make their actions reflect their beliefs – in other words, a comparative lack of hypocrisy – are admirable. And a more coherent approach to doctrine has emerged in the past 25 years, giving such churches a firmer intellectual base. The downside, at least in the West, is the way Pentecostals have united religion and worldly aspiration in the health, wealth and happiness teaching known as the prosperity gospel – the perfect religion for a self-obsessed consumerist religion, and a perversion of biblical Christianity.

American theologian Carl Trueman asked three evangelical audiences what miserable Christians could sing in church. Each time, “the question elicited uproarious laughter, as if the idea of a broken-hearted, lonely or despairing Christian was so absurd as to be comical.”

By excluding the cries of loneliness, dispossession and desolation from its worship, the church has effectively silenced and excluded the voices of those who are themselves lonely, dispossessed and desolate, both inside and outside the church, Trueman wrote in Themelios magazine (reprinted in AP last December).

And at the same time the church has implicitly endorsed the banal aspirations of consumerism, generated an insipid, trivial and triumphalist Christianity and confirmed its impeccable credentials as a club for the compliant. “The idea that Christianity, at whose centre stands the Suffering Servant, the man who had nowhere to lay his head, and the one who was obedient to death – even death on the cross – should be used to justify the idolatrous greed of affluent Westerners simply boggles belief.”

This leads to a further danger: it changes the way Christians see the world. They are taught to expect victory, progress and success at every turn, which is theologically wrong and pastorally disastrous in a world in which suffering is inevitable.

Trueman suggests that evangelicals should start reading the psalms again, the Bible’s own hymnbook, which is often dropped from modern worship in favour of vapid pop ballads precisely because it is largely taken up with lamentation, with
feeling sad, unhappy, tormented and broken; emotions that lack credibility in modern Western culture.

Part of the paradox is that weakness adds strength to ministry. Christianity gains purchase when it ministers out of weakness to weakness. The Apostle Paul pleaded with God to remove the “thorn in his flesh” but was told, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12). Modern clergy belong to the class of professional experts who are expected to solve problems quickly and dispassionately – an expectation that helps build the crippling illusion.

The Holy Spirit is called the Paraclete in the Greek New Testament, the one who comes alongside (usually translated as Comforter, Advocate, or Helper). Ministers are those who get alongside those to whom they are ministering. Ministry is not something dispensed from above.

According to the late Catholic mystic Henri Nouwen, “pastoral conversation is not merely a skilful use of conversational techniques to manipulate people into the Kingdom of God, but a deep human encounter in which a man is willing to put his own faith and doubt, his own hope and despair, his own light and darkness, at the disposal of others who want to find a way through their confusion and touch the solid core of life”.

The authority of the church must be compassion. Who can save a child from a burning house without risking being hurt by the flames, Nouwen asks. Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without risking similar pains in his own heart or his peace of mind? Who can take away suffering without entering it? The great illusion of leadership, Nouwen says, is to think that people can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.

Against all this, the baby in the manger should not be a sentimentalised legitimation of consumerism and complacency but a rebuke. It’s hard to see him with fresh eyes, but we should look again at what he reveals about God and humanity, about the humbling and moving beauty of the incarnation, and about grace.

English priest Daniel O’Leary reflected in The Tablet about picking up a tiny baby during a Christmas service. “A baby is an amazing symbol of both power and powerlessness. Or, perhaps, more accurately, of power within powerlessness. As I felt the totally trusting baby stir sleepily in my hands I thought about her utter vulnerability, her total trust. How ambiguous and paradoxical it all was. And how shocking, too. This is what love does. It gives away its power. It renders itself destructible. All this runs against the grain of our competitive and controlling nature. How can weakness be understood as the secret of true love?”

But that is what love is like, O’Leary suggests. It surrenders. It has no more masks, no more expectations, no more certainties.

The Bethlehem baby’s defenceless presence, his shocking and precarious weakness, his overturning of all our ideas about the nature of God, stunned us into silence.

What could be weaker than the newborn baby in the manger, and what could be stronger than the love that put him there?

Barney Zwartz is religion editor of The Age, where this article first appeared.
T. F. Torrance
An Intellectual Biography
Alister E. McGrath
Reviewed by Stuart Bonnington.

One stands in awe of sheer number of books published by Dr Alister McGrath, who, with this biography, gives the reader who is interested in the development of Christian theology after Karl Barth a sure-footed guide to one of his most important disciples, T.F. Torrance.

The description “intellectual biography” is deliberate and considered. Torrance is primarily to be regarded as a man of ideas, someone who has a passion for the life of the mind as it is encountered by the reality of God. McGrath acknowledges that focusing on Torrance as a man of ideas inevitably means diminished attention to issues which might concern a traditional biography.

This is a reprint of the paperback edition of a biography of Professor Thomas Torrance first published in 1999. It is in two parts. The first, on “the emergence of a scientific theologian”, covers fairly standard biographical territory as it plots the life of Torrance from his birth in China in 1913, education in the 1920s and 1930s, first experience as a theological educator at Auburn Theological Seminary (home of the 1924 radically liberal Auburn Affirmation), parish and wartime service (1940-50) to his time training students for the ministry of the Church of Scotland, first as Professor of Church History (1950-1952) and then as Professor of Christian Dogmatics (1952-1979).

Even with McGrath’s self-imposed limits, there is a substantial outline of the life of Torrance. But one does feel, especially as the narrative moves closer to its end (which in the first section of the book is 1979), that the story is being given in almost summary form. In this 2006 reprint, the Torrance story stops nearly 30 years ago. As the complete bibliography reveals that Torrance published 266 items from 1980 to 1999, it is unfortunate that opportunity was not taken to bring the narrative of his life up to date. McGrath himself says “Torrance’s ‘retirement’ can only be thought of in terms of a cessation of administrative and teaching duties. The writing, speaking and research continued at a remarkable rate … including two of his most significant works – The Trinitarian Faith (1988) and The Christian Doctrine of God (1996)”.

Torrance was of course of a generation which moved away from classic Reformed theology quite markedly. Here we mean belief in the Bible as the inspired written Word of God and of the Confession of Faith as a faithful summary of the Christian faith.

In a very valuable statement of his basic theological position (which nevertheless is not completely clear) Torrance stated that his belief lay between “rationalistic liberalism” and the “rather rationalistic and fundamentalistic way of interpreting the Bible being advocated in Inter-Varsity Fellowship circles together with a rather deterministic Calvinism which was then mistakenly being imported into the thinking of the Christian Unions”. However, one often gets the feeling that what was being rejected as evangelicalism was actually really a straw man, not being necessarily the true, best or inevitable expression of the historic Christian faith.

With the example of his father, the devoted missionary, and of his mother, the Christ centred believer, Torrance was drawn toward the neo-orthodoxy of Barth, which seemed to preserve the best of the past without any of its perceived negatives. The Scottish theological teacher H.R. Mackintosh was also a great influence on the young Torrance, through his off-repeated aphorism “when I look into the face of Jesus, and see there the face of God, I know that I have not seen that face elsewhere and cannot see that face elsewhere”.

These words were remarkably echoed during Torrance’s war service when he helped a dying soldier prepare for death and eternity. The desire for a Christ-focused, experienced Christianity is laudable, but the question the neo-orthodox believer cannot avoid is, without objective revelation given in the Bible, how sustainable long term is such theology? The tragic decline in the Church of Scotland (except in those parts which have remained true to the classic, confessional view of the Bible) suggests that a church enamoured with neo-orthodoxy (or liberalism) simply runs out of spiritual momentum and begins to dissolve.

I wondered why so little was said of Professor Daniel Lamont, a key influence on Torrance’s view of the relationship between Christian theology and science. Lamont was a traditional conservative who had missed out in 1914 on the New Testament chair at St Andrew’s College in Sydney (the NSW Assembly appointed Samuel Angus instead). Some readers will also be surprised that McGrath dismisses Cornelius Van Til’s assessment of Barth (and Emil Brunner) as “inexpert analysis.”

The book’s second half is titled The Contours of a Scientific Theology. It has three blockbuster chapters, starting with Torrance and British Barth-Reception. Here the reader is given a fascinating review of the reception of Barthian theology in Scandinavia, England and Scotland and then a discussion of “the mechanics of Barth-reception”. Pages 133 to 145 should be required reading for anyone interested in the course of Christian theology in the late 20th century.

The next chapter, Revelation and Salvation, is also excellent, with The Place and Purpose of Natural Theology bringing us via the masterful pen of McGrath to the very heart of Torrance’s special understanding of Christianity.

Yet this chapter reveals a great theological irony. This is that Barth’s greatest disciple has made some of his most important and distinctive contributions to Christian theology by rejecting one of the most fundamental aspects of Barthianism – the denial of any kind of natural theology. And that Torrance has done this, because for natural theology to be valid, it needs to be controlled by normative revelation, which must be located “somehow” in the Holy Scriptures. This rejection of Barth’s teaching occurs because “Barth’s objection to natural theology lies in a conceived danger (italics mine) – that such a natural theology will be seen as an independent and equally valid route to knowledge of God, which may be had under conditions of our choosing. Yet this danger is averted if natural theology is itself seen as a subordinate aspect of revealed theology, legitimated by that revealed theology rather than by natural presuppositions or insights.”

McGrath says Torrance argues that Barth’s fundamental concern can be identified and honoured. There is indeed a danger that natural theology might become an independent route to knowledge of God, bypassing and marginalising Jesus Christ and Scripture. “Yet if theologia naturalis is seen within the ambit of theologia revelata, this difficulty is eliminated.” Here the reader could also ask how much else of traditional Reformed
Christianity Barth and his disciples rejected on the basis of conceived danger?

It is also hard not to see in Torrance’s subtle yet certain rejection of Barth on natural theology, and the form of that rejection, the fundamental problem which has caused others to reject Barthianism on many other matters, namely that without the objective and normative control of the Bible as the Word of God in written form in questions of Christian doctrine, his theology spins off into idiosyncratic conclusions that move him and his followers away from the great historical mainstream of Christian teaching.

The biography has some great pictures (although the quality of their reproduction is not good in some places), a “complete” bibliography (only up to 1999) and a full Curriculum Vitae. We eagerly await the second, fully updated edition of Torrance: An Intellectual Biography.

Stuart Bonnington is minister of Scot’s Kirk, Fremantle, WA, and superintendent of the PIM.

What the Bible Teaches About Guidance

Peter Bloomfield
Reviewed by Peter Barnes

Back in 1980 Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson published a work on Decision Making and the Will of God, which argued from the sufficiency of Scripture against the common evangelical notion that there is a will of God for each of us that we need to attempt to discover. Like Friesen and Maxson, Bloomfield argues that to attempt to discover the secret will of God is folly at best and unbelief at worst (see Deut. 29:29). Eve was told that she could eat the fruit of every tree in the Garden, except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; she was not told specifically what meal to prepare each night. That remained her choice.

Bloomfield writes in a punchy style, and mocks what he calls a “Toyota theology” – that which treats feelings as if they were oracles from heaven. He refers to the notion of ongoing revelation as “the scandal of the church today”. At times he seems to be somewhat excessive. The term “peace with God” surely has some subjective element in it. And the “fight fire with fire” approach will break down if someone claims to have received a revelatory dream and you counter that you had one that said not to listen to the first one. The problem, of course, is that the first person believes his dream is authentic whereas you know that yours is not.

Wayne Grudem’s views of non-infallible prophecy get a pasting – as they deserve. Also, Peter deals with Stuart Robinson’s views on the place of dreams in many Muslims who become Christians. While Peter is quite vehement against taking these seriously, he nevertheless admits that “it does not deny that God may use such dreams in the process of salvation”. This is a difficult issue, and requires a bit more work, although one must say that the whole situation would be a lot clearer if such dreams were not regarded as revelatory.

For the Christian thinking through the matter of guidance, this book would make a wonderful starting point. There is so much angst amongst Christians on this issue, which easily leads to rationalisations and just plain nonsense. It is good to commend a work full of biblical common sense on the subject.

Peter Barnes is AP books editor.

Under the Scaffold

Faith Cook
Reviewed by Mignon Goswell

Faith Cook, who is well known as a writer of biography, here turns to writing a historical novel. Tom Whittaker is a fictional character but the life he leads is bedded in historical reality. The novel is set in Haworth, England during the mid-1700s. Tom is deeply challenged and affected by the preaching of William Grimshaw who was curate in that village. John and Charles Wesley and George Whitfield also appear in the book. Although Tom and some of the other characters are fictional all that is written about these preachers is factual.

Tom’s life is hard and he has to deal with death from a very young age. We find a realistic portrayal of the stages of Tom’s spiritual development. The climax, as the title suggests, happens under the scaffold but you may be surprised as to what and where that scaffold is!

Historical novels are a recognised way of letting us live in the age about which we are reading. They bring a different perspective on historical events. This is a good read for teens and adults alike and is sure to engender an interest in going further into the lives of these great preachers and delving into a period of history that saw remarkable turnings to God.

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

Amy Carmichael

Can brown eyes be made blue?

Carine Mackenzie
Christian Focus, 2005.
Reviewed by Peter Barnes

The subtitle of this work comes from the famous prayer of Amy Carmichael as a child, when she asked God that her brown eyes might become blue. She was somewhat bewildered and disappointed when they retained their natural colour!

It is a book that is most suitable for introducing the marvellous and inspiring life of Amy Carmichael to the next generation. It also deals with the issue of God’s long-term answers to prayer. In both content and presentation, it is a work that is warmly commended.
prayer

FEBRUARY 2007
21 Presbytery of Sydney North 21 parishes totaling 24 congregations with about 2820 c&a (communicants and adherents) and 675 yf (younger folk – Sunday School and youth), 2 deaconsesses, 1 departmental officer, 1 defense chaplain, 3 theological candidates, 14 retired ministers and 5 under jurisdiction. Colin Short clerk.
22 Qld Outreach and Nurture Committee – Andrew Newman convenor; John Nicol director, John Mansfield and David Hopper assistants.
23 Clayton parish Melbourne with about 145 c&a, 100 yf and 17 e (elders); Michael and Kerry Jensen.
24 Ho Ju Young Rak Korean parish, Homebush Sydney with about 55 c&a, 40 yf and 4 e; Stephen and Sarah Kim.
25 David and Ashleigh mission partners (APWM) workers from Ashfield, Sydney teaching with Pioneers in east Asia.
26 The pupils, staff and council of Fairholme College, Toowoomba – Mr J S Klan principal; Richard Jessup chaplain.
27 Drouin parish, Gippsland, Vic. with about 220 c&a, 80 yf and 15 e; Ken and Gianna Brown.
28 New Life home mission station, Camira, southern Brisbane with about 30 c&a and 5 e; Will Henderson.

MARCH 2007
1 Presbytery of Derwent, southern Tasmania – 5 parishes including 3 special (home mission) parishes totaling 6 congregations with about 435 c&a and 120 yf, 1 retired minister. Robert White clerk.
2 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Bowenfels parish (Lithgow area, NSW) including Mr Lambie, Portland and Warrang with about 65 c&a and 7 e.
3 Kaniva-Nhill home mission station western Vic., with about 55 c&a, 15 yf and 3 e; Ron and Jean Williamson.
4 Peter and Anne Burke mission partners (APWM) workers from Wahroonga, Sydney in financial and hospitality work with SIM International in Joss, Nigeria.
5 Greg and Rosemary Braid mission partners (APWM) workers from Tasmania and Victoria in linguistic research with Wycliffe Bible Translators in South Asia.
6 Steve and Lisa North starting ministry in Moss Vale parish including Burrawang, Bundanoon and Berrima NSW southern highlands with about 100 c&a, 15 yf and 11 e.
7 Numurkah parish Vic. including Tallgaraoppa and Cobram with about 90 c&a, 6 yf and 8 e; Frank and Merle Savage.
8 St Marys parish outer western Sydney with about 70 c&a, 20 yf and 5 e; Les and Shirley Fowler.
9 Bundoora parish northern Melbourne with about 170 c&a, 40 yf and 3 e; Neil and Jayne Chambers and John and Elizabeth Diacos.
10 Presbytery of Benalla, Vic. – 7 parishes and 2 home mission stations totaling 22 congregations with about 635 c&a and 140 yf, 1 retired minister. Robert Finster clerk.
11 Noel and Catherine Carpenter mission partners (APWM) workers from Hobart training with Missionary Aviation Fellowship to work in PNG with Wycliffe Bible Translators in aviation.
12 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Whitford’s parish, Perth with about 150 c&a, 75 yf and 6 e; Paul Spackman.
13 Surrey Hills parish Melbourne with about 140 c&a, 35 yf and 10 e; Chris and Rose Sirisveera; and the Deaf Christian Fellowship which meets there – Tony and Anne Salisbury.
14 Wingham and Upper Manning parish NSW North coast including Krambach with about 50 c&a, 15 yf and 2 e; Michael and Roslyn Deal.
15 Willows (Thuringowa) parish North Qld with about 95 c&a, 80 yf and 6 e; David and Elizabeth McDougall.
16 Ministry and Mission Committee, NSW Peter Currie convenor; Bruce Meller and John Invin superintendents.
17 Stephen (and Naomi) Lilley mission partners (APWM) workers from Hurstville in translation with Wycliffe Bible Translators in South Asia.
18 Coffs Harbour parish NSW North coast including Woolgoolga with about 295 c&a, 85 yf and 9 e; Jamie and Jenny Newans.
19 John and Karine Woldhuis mission partners (APWM) workers from Sydney as church planters in Ecuador partners (APWM) workers from Wahroonga, Sydney as church planters in Ecuador as church planters in Ecuador.
20 Chester Hill parish Sydney including Vietnamese and Burmese congregations, with about 40 c&a and 5 e; Luke and Hae Ja Yoo.

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Forget not Israel

Re the articles on Israel (AP, November), to be fair, a case for the other side should be stated.

First, the promise of the land of Israel to Abraham was forever. The same word is also used about God’s existence, everlasting life, the Noahic and New Covenants. None of these are temporary. The covenants cannot be lightly dismissed unless we have clear evidence to the contrary. Israel miraculously still exists. This points to the covenant’s persistence. We have no business cancelling God’s promises.

Second, the New Testament supports God’s covenant with Israel. Romans 9:4 confirms that the covenants belong to the people of Israel, and Romans 1:28 states that Israel is loved because of the patriarchs. The covenants are ongoing.

Third, the Bible contains prophecies about the Messiah as the conquering King of Israel who will rule the world. But to fulfil them the Messiah has to be the King of Israel. Christ’s claim to a literal kingdom of Israel as a nation in its land on the day of his return is a serious possibility. We should not lightly dismiss a further need for Israel.

Finally, there is a clash of world views at the heart of this issue – Islam (often supported by secular materialism) against a biblical world view. Fundamentalist Islam dominates much of the Middle East. This claims the whole land and endorses Koranic prophecy about the destruction of the Jews. Unless a literal reading of the Koran is renounced, political settlements will be deceptions. Christians should support the Jews in their claim to the land. Those who seek the destruction of Israel should be seen as enemies of a legitimate sovereign state. (For a political justification of Israel see “Big Lies” on www.frontpagemag.com)

Stephen Moody,
Beaconsfield, Vic

Keeping our religion

Either God is, or religion is. Barney Zwartz seems to think religion is (AP, November). He writes, “Muslims are right to demand religious freedom in the West.” Why? It is antichrist in its own lands, is it not also in the West? Is there a right to practise just any religion? A Nicolaitan, where the religious leader replaces God, an agnostic, atheist or humanist agrees, for it does not matter when God is not a person but an idea.

Where God is, there is God’s Word, good, truth, heaven, blessing. But there is also the lie, evil, a devil, hell, and a curse. Religions contrary to God’s Word are evil. The Jonestown massacre sprang from evil religion; from the lie; from Satan. Baal worship and witchcraft are evil. When God turns a fertile land into a desert it is because the people are evil, believing the lie, practising religion contrary to the Word of God. They are cursed. When God prospers a nation, making them great, a blessing to others, it is because God has known them, and blessed them.

Freedom to practise any religion denies the existence and nature of God. It is the catchcry of the foolish who never see the judgment ahead. False religion is antichrist; it cannot but oppose true religion. Its adherents will always be an enemy, never a friend, “Can two walk together unless they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3).

We won the right to choose our religion in the Reformation. Let’s keep it.

Neil Cadman,
Norman Park, Qld

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Welfare to work

The Bible shows us how to look after the poor.

Dr Samuel Johnson declared that “a decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilisation”. Whether it is the test may be debatable, but it is certainly a crucial test. If we love God, we must also love our neighbour, including our poor neighbour. In William Tyndale’s view, “the most despised person in the realm ought to be treated as if he were the king’s brother”.

The Old Testament teaches that strangers, widows and orphans are not to be oppressed (Ex. 22:21-27), but treated with open hearts and hands (Deut. 15:7-10). Vineyards were not to be completely reaped or gleaned so that some of the crop could be left for the poor and the stranger (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:17-22).

The Lord is described as the God who “administers justice for the fatherless and the widow; and loves the stranger” (Deut. 10:18). He is “a father of the fatherless, a defender of widows” (Ps. 68:5) – a concern which is strongly and cogently reaffirmed in Psalm 146. The believing community is to look after its weaker members and, indeed, all who come within its orbit.

As a result of God’s character and His law, the prophets were vigorous in their condemnation of those who oppressed orphans and widows (e.g. Isa. 1:17,23; 10:1-2; Jer. 5:28; Ezek. 22:7; Mal. 3:5). Likewise, in the New Testament, the Pharisees were condemned for devouring widows’ houses (Mt. 23:14). The believer is therefore to be one who is “a helper to those who have no protector” (Job 29:12). He or she is “to visit orphans and widows in their trouble” (James 1:27).

It is noteworthy that the Old Testament instituted a system of welfare, but not welfarism. The medieval period often extolled the virtues of the beggar, as one who embraced what Francis of Assisi called “Lady Poverty”. Jacques de Vitry (c.1160-1240) even told of two beggars – one blind, the other lame – who were healed against their wills when they could not get out of the way of a procession bearing the miracle-working body of Saint Martin. The supposed miracle destroyed their easy-going lifestyle. The Reformation, however, rightly insisted that none should beg who were able to labour.

It is noteworthy that the Old Testament instituted a system of welfare, but not welfarism. The poor person had to actually glean the vineyard in order to obtain his next meal. As a widow, Ruth, in the book named after her, carried out this practice, and so met her kinsman-redeemer and future husband, Boaz.

In the New Testament, only morally qualified widows were to receive support from the church (1 Tim. 5:5-7,9-15). The Bible forbids us to support “merry widows” or freeloaders. Furthermore, the task of providing for any widow is said to be the job of her family first (1 Tim. 5:4,8,16). It is a sad fact that charity can promote irresponsibility and dependency. It is neither compassionate nor helpful simply to throw money at poverty, and make-believe that if the poor have the income to gamble and sustain a drug habit, we have shown kindness to them.

To quote the Puritan, Richard Stock: “This is the best charity; so to relieve the poor as we keep them in labour. It benefits the giver to have them labour; it benefits the commonweal to suffer no drones, nor to nourish any in idleness; it benefits the poor themselves.” If that is true, it has implications for public policy: To link charity to work for those who are capable of it is to treat the poor as human beings with capacity and dignity.

When asked why he laughed at political schemes which were supposedly designed to improve the lot of humanity, Dr Johnson replied that “most schemes of political improvement are very laughable things”. Politicians are fond of making ludicrous promises. While he was Prime Minister, Bob Hawke promised that by 1991 no Australian child would be living in poverty. The Bible is rather more sober about life this side of glory. The very part of the Old Testament which declares that there will be no poor among God’s people (Deut. 15:4) also notes that there will always be poor people in the land (Deut. 15:11). Just before His crucifixion Jesus endorsed that latter statement (John 12:8).

We are to strive to bring about a situation where there is as much justice and compassion as possible, without falling for the utopian line that heaven can ever be created on earth. Jonathan Edwards declared in a sermon on Christian Charity based on Deuteronomy 15:7-11 that “it is not merely a commendable thing for a man to be kind and bountiful to the poor, but our bounden duty, as much a duty as it is to pray, or to attend public worship, or any thing else whatever; and the neglect of it brings great guilt upon any person”.

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