

A U S T R A L I A N

Presbyterian

THE MAGAZINE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

august 2007



The New Birth

Andrew McGowan • 'Hate' pastors vindicated • Fundamentalist delusion

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF VICTORIA

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The Theological Education Committee of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria invites applications for appointment to this position. The position is full-time, for an initial period of three years, effective from 1 January 2008.

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Applications should be sent to the address below to arrive before 31 August 2007. A job description for the position is posted on the college website.

Inquiries should also be directed as below:

The Convener
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THE MAGAZINE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

NEW BIRTH

- A priceless mystery: Andrew McGowan4
- Spirit-renewed: David Hann9
- Life in the spirit: Mike Taylor11

BIBLE STUDY

- Food, glorious food
- 20 Bible studies in Isaiah 56-6613

NEWS

- Across Australia19
- Around the World20
- On the Agenda22

REFLECTION

- Woe swept away: Elisabeth Elliot24

VILIFICATION

- Pastors vindicated: David Palmer25

ATHEISM

- Fundamentalist delusion: Barney Zwartz25

- LETTERS29

- PRAYER30

- BOOKS31

- John Newton: Jonathan Aitken
- The Great Gain of Godliness: Thomas Watson
- Leviticus: Philip H. Eveson

ESSAY

- Alone before God: Peter Barnes32

editorial

Most people today believe that mankind's greatest problem is ignorance, not sin. John Locke, the 17th century philosopher and the father of modern education, did much to advance this view. He taught that every child at birth is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. In his view, it was limited knowledge that represented the greatest threat to humanity. If the human race was plagued by evils, then better education was the most efficient remedy.

The contrast between this optimistic view of human nature and the Christian assessment is striking. According to Christian theology, the crisis facing humanity is caused by sin, not ignorance. Christians believe that man is a sinner who must be saved by Jesus Christ. Humanistic thinkers, on the other hand, believe that people do evil because they are untaught, and that if we only had better-funded programs and improved learning processes in our classrooms, then we could transform the world. Redemption, on this model, comes through education.

However, while modern education may introduce many blessings into our world, it is powerless to change human nature. We must realise, as did John Milton in his famous essay on education, that the first task of an educator is to "repair the ruins" created by our first parents, Adam and Eve. But how do such repairs begin? Certainly not by going to good schools, getting better grades, experiencing a higher standard of living or gaining access to improved job opportunities. None of these things can alter human nature. As Jesus said, "What is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). Instead, the Christian answer to the plight of man is the new birth.

Sadly, the notion of regeneration by the Spirit is largely forgotten today, even in the church. It is not uncommon to find Christians pitting their hopes for personal and social transformation on political legislation and government intervention rather than the personal conversion through the new birth. George Smeaton, the Scottish theologian, had some sage advice when he said, "theology that... repudiates the supernatural is soon divested of all evangelical power... the essential feature of Christianity is the new birth: and so indispensable is it that without the new nature there can be no evangelical health or progress".

Peter Hastie 

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A priceless mystery

God acts, then we do, and behold...



Professor Andrew McGowan is a Church of Scotland minister and principal of The Highland Theological College in Dingwall, near Inverness. The Highland Theological College is one of a federation of 14 colleges and research institutions that together form the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Dr McGowan obtained his PhD in historical theology from Aberdeen University. He has contributed to a number of books, journals and theological dictionaries and is the author of *The New Birth* (1996) and *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston* (1997). He edited *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 2006) and his book *The Divine Spiration of Scripture* will be jointly published by IVP UK and IVP USA in November.

Dr McGowan is married to June, and they have three sons. He has served in various parishes of the Church of Scotland. His first appointment was the most unusual because he had six places of worship where he had to preach, and five of



**Andrew McGowan
talks to
Peter Hastie**

them were reached by boat!

Andrew, what led you to write your book *What Born Again Really Means*?

Actually, I was asked to do it. I gave a paper at a church conference in which I tried to show what happens when someone becomes a Christian. Since the Bible uses lots of different words to describe this process, I was trying to show the relationship between the new birth, justification and sanctification. My aim was to explain in simple terms how all these doctrines fit together in a logical sequence. It happened that one of the people from Christian Focus – the publishers – was there and asked if I would make it into a book, which I did.

What does it mean to be “born again”? Is it the same as conversion?

People often use the terms as though they mean the same thing but in the Reformed tradition, particularly as we see it in Warfield, Hodge and others, there is an important distinction between “regeneration”, which is an act of God by which we are fundamentally changed, and “conversion” which refers to a turning to God (from the Greek word, *metanoia*, meaning repentance). Conversion refers to that exercise of faith and repentance by which we turn to the Lord. The way that I have expressed it here is the way that Reformed theologians have traditionally explained these terms although others have used the terms differently. I find it helpful to remember that being “born again” is what God does, and then in response to that He calls us to exercise faith and repentance. We must not forget that faith and repentance are gifts, but gifts that we have to exercise. This means that conversion takes place when we turn back to God as we exercise those gifts.

Is a person ever aware of the moment in which he is born again? Is it possi-

ble to be born again and not be aware of it?

Jesus says that regeneration is a mysterious process (John 3:8). Two of the most distinguished Christian preachers I know have both said that they cannot name the day when they became Christians. In one case, the person said “I know that at the beginning of the summer I was not a believer, but at the end of the summer I was. And all that summer I was reading the Bible, praying, talking to people and wrestling with issues in my own life. And during that period God brought me to a place of complete assurance of salvation and I knew that I was a child of God. However, I couldn’t put an exact date or a time on the moment I actually became a Christian.” I believe that this man’s testimony of how many people come to an experience of God’s grace is a reliable one.

So, when Jesus says that the experience of being born again is a mystery, it means that it happens in ways that are beyond our understanding?

I think that the moment of new birth is instantaneous but the events surrounding the experience seem to vary from Christian to Christian. I know of some people who have laboured under conviction of sin for weeks – even months – before they experienced spiritual renewal and were liberated from that condition. Others apparently have given no thought at all to the gospel, but they respond as soon as they hear it. They obviously experience a real change in their lives from that moment. Nevertheless, they don’t seem to undergo a prolonged period of conviction of sin in the preceding weeks and months. Among my friends, people seem to have had many different experiences. I think the important thing is that a person actually *experiences* the new birth – knowing the time and date is of far less significance. Not every Christian would agree with me on this. I have a very good friend who used to work with Inter Varsity Fellowship and he said that if a person didn’t know the time or date of when he was born again, then he really ought to question whether he was regenerated in the first place. I’m not prepared to go that far; to do so would be to question the conversion of some of the leading Christian preachers of our day.

Andrew, you grew up in a Christian home. Your father was an elder and your mother was active in the women’s union within the church. You went to Sunday school, youth

group, and Boys’ Brigade. You say that you even felt called to the ministry. Nevertheless, you claim that you weren’t born again. How do you explain that?

I grew up in a church where I had never heard anyone speak about the new birth. It was a Presbyterian church that, to some extent, had embraced liberal theology. I knew nothing about the new birth until I spoke to people at school about it. Some friends of mine who were in the Scripture Union also spoke to me about regeneration (being born again). It all came to a head when my next-door neighbours took me to a meeting to hear an Irish evangelist. Although I had made up my mind to speak to this man after the meeting, his presentation of the gospel convinced me that I had to be in a right relationship with God personally and that I had to be born again through the Spirit of God. And as I analysed my condition, I realised that I wasn’t born again.

This idea of being born again comes from Jesus, not from big-time evangelists or Billy Graham.

So you are saying that going to church is one thing, but actually having a genuine experience of God through the Holy Spirit is something entirely different?

Oh, going to church and being involved in all its activities is a wonderful experience and I don’t regret for a moment that I was brought up in that happy situation. Nevertheless, it doesn’t guarantee that you are saved. The reality is that it’s possible to go through all the motions of Christianity and to attend church but never to have been renewed by the Holy Spirit. And that’s my fear – I believe there are many people in our churches week by week who are not born again of the Spirit of God.

No doubt there are many people who say that they understand the need for forgiveness of sin, but why all this emphasis on spiritual renewal or new birth? Why do people need to be born again?

If you imagine that all your sins were written on a board and God came along and wiped the board clean, then, by the following week, the board would be filling

up again fairly rapidly. And so, in one sense, it’s not a complete solution for God to forgive sin. He also needs to change our natures so that we actually desire to live in a way that pleases Him. God has to deal with the reason for our sins as well as the sins themselves. He has to deal with the problem that causes the sins, and so regeneration is necessary as well as forgiveness.

How do you respond to people who say that there are many unbelievers who live better lives than Christians? Why do these people need to be born again?

It is certainly true that there are many people who are not Christians who live decent lives. They can be good parents, honest workers, faithful husbands or wives, and model citizens. There should be no doubt in our minds that many people live respectable lives, but that in itself is a result of God’s grace – or, as it is also called, God’s common grace. The Bible teaches that although we are all sinners, none of us are as bad as we could be if sin were to be allowed free reign in our lives. We are all potentially capable of the evil things that we read about in our newspapers. It’s not just that some people are particularly evil; we are all capable of that kind of evil, but God by His grace often restrains us and helps us to live in a way that enables society to function. Nevertheless, every human being needs to come to the place where he or she is reconciled to God and their sins are forgiven. Apart from the new birth, this is simply impossible.

Why do you think so many people today are dismissive of the idea of being born again?

I think partly because the idea has been associated in people’s minds with the big-time evangelists and their mass crusades. Many people have come to regard these people as fakes and charlatans, and certainly some of the famous TV evangelists have shown clearly that they had feet of clay. Billy Graham escapes almost all of these charges because he is so clearly a man of God. I think most people put him in a different category. But there is a popular mentality which is dismissive of big-time evangelists, and I have even had people say to me, “You know, all that ‘born again’ stuff, that’s not for us.” They seem to think that because they are members of the church they don’t need the new birth. In their minds the new birth is only necessary for people who go to rescue mis-

sions. The problem here is that these people don't understand their Bibles as they should. This idea of being born again comes from Jesus, not from big-time evangelists or Billy Graham. The new birth comes straight out of the Scriptures.

Do you think that those who dismiss the notion of regeneration do so because they have failed to understand their true spiritual condition?

I think that's undoubtedly the case. If you were to conduct a questionnaire on the main street of any of our cities and ask people, "Do you think you will go to heaven when you die?" many of them will still say "Yes!" But if you ask the supplementary question, "What is the basis for your conviction that you will go to heaven?" then very few will say anything about the new birth. They will talk about how they have always tried to live a good life and that they have never harmed anyone. They'll protest that they have always tried to do their best, and so on. What all this reveals is that they are ignorant that their sin has separated them from God and that because of that condition they have no hope apart from a supernatural encounter with God by his Spirit.

How then should they think of themselves?

The only way to see yourself in relationship to God is to remember that outside of faith in Christ you are spiritually dead and completely incapable of responding to God. That's how Paul understands our situation in Ephesians 2:1-3.

Okay, what do we mean when we talk about people being spiritually dead?

I mean that there is no spiritual life in them whatsoever. If a person is spiritually dead, he is not just disabled; he is dead or unresponsive to God. Dead people don't respond. They can't help themselves. If you are dead you need far more than a spiritual top-up. It's not a question of pulling your socks up and doing better, either. It's recognising that one's entire condition before God involves death and separation. That's the point that Paul is trying to make in Ephesians 2.

Well, what about if they say, "Look, I am very much alive, very much in touch with culture. I can appreciate the aesthetic things of life?" What about that?

Well, that's physical life, mental life, no question about that.

Well, can you tell me some of the tell-tale signs which would indicate the presence of spiritual death?

I suppose the first thing that I could say about spiritual death is that those who are suffering from it are usually unaware of it. That's one of the characteristics of death; you lack consciousness of your state. In this case, people are unaware of their separation, hardness and lifelessness towards God.

Second, people who are spiritually dead show very little interest in reading the Scriptures. The Bible seems to be a boring and useless book to them. Of course, some people like scholars who are spiritu-

If a person is spiritually dead, he is not just disabled. Dead people don't respond. They can't help themselves.



ally dead may read it and find it fascinating; however they may not be interested in it as a book of salvation so much as material for their PhDs. So you have to be interested in the Bible for the right reasons.

Third, people who are spiritually dead have little interest in prayer except in times of crisis or trouble. Even then, they often admit that it doesn't seem as though there is anyone who is listening at the other end. They might also go through the motions of attending church but they would have no delight in it or hunger for it; they simply do it out of a sense of duty.

Fourth, their worldview is self-centred instead of being God-centred. I don't mean "self-centred" in the way that we often use that expression; I simply mean that they see themselves at the centre of the world rather than God. This means, for example, that the way in which they make moral decisions would be based on what they thought was going to be most advantageous to them rather than wanting to know what God thought about the matter. Those are just a few of the points I would make.

Why are the nice people the most likely ones to trip up on the idea of being born again?

Well, let's just assume that that's true

even if it's not proven. I think that if people are currently making a real mess of their lives, if they are heavily into drink or drugs, or if their marriage has broken down, or if other relationships have broken down, or if they have lost their job because they can't get on with people, then often that brings them to the point where they can see that something has to change. And sometimes that is an opportunity for God to transform their lives when they realise that resolving to turn over a new leaf is not enough and they need to ask God for forgiveness and a new heart.

The problem for people who are morally upright, who are good citizens and reliable parents is that it's difficult for them to see that they have a major problem. When everything seems to be going well in their lives, and they are financially secure, then such people can go through life believing that everything is fine. So it's possible, if everything on the outward level seems to be okay, to disguise a serious inward condition.

You said that you grew up in a liberal church. To what extent do you think that the preaching about God that you heard affected your understanding of your spiritual need, and ultimately the necessity for you to be born again?

Yes, I grew up in a liberal Presbyterian church and I do not recall ever hearing the minister preach that I needed to be born again. Fortunately, there were people in the congregation who believed the Bible and when I became a Christian (and that was at age 14) I began to attend the young people's Bible group where some of them were teaching. So I had three or four years with them before I went to university.

However, the greatest help that the church gave me was that it exposed me to the reading of the Bible. We had to read the Bible for Boys Brigade, Bible exams, and Bible Class. We also had to read it in the Sunday School. After I became a Christian so many of the things that I had heard from reading the Bible all began to make sense to me. I think a child who has learnt the Catechism at some stage and then becomes a Christian later on has a similar sort of experience. Once he may have found the Catechism boring and uninteresting, but now, after his conversion, the truth suddenly comes alive for him in a new way. I think in many ways it was like that for me. Although I can't ever recall the minister preaching that I needed to be born again, I certainly experienced a

lot of Bible-reading and I had a good introduction into the importance of reformed theology as well as church life and church government from a Presbyterian perspective.

How important is it for preachers to explain the doctrine of God and human sin if people are to appreciate fully the need for the new birth?

I certainly think it's very important in preaching the gospel to cover the whole counsel of God. One of the Church of Scotland's most significant ministers was William Still, who died some years ago. One thing that he taught me was that it is essential for ministers to preach the whole Bible systematically, chapter by chapter, so that people are acquainted with all the major teachings of the Scriptures.

I have sometimes found myself in situations where Christians favour a "seeker-friendly" approach. Where this happens people are inclined to say things like, "Let's not say too much about sin lest we scare people off", or "Let's not say too much about judgment because that might drive people away". Obviously it's a good thing to befriend people and I certainly understand the importance of friendship evangelism. However, I don't think this gives us licence to leave out certain key elements of the gospel because we think that it will make it easier for people to believe in God if we dispense with them. If we take this approach, it's really saying that God doesn't know the best way to bring people to salvation.

People sometimes come to the Lord in ways that defy our understanding. There have been times when people have responded to my preaching and I have not been focusing on the doctrines of grace or on human corruption and the need for salvation. They may not have known much at all at the time when they turned to God and believed in Christ as their Saviour.

So I am reluctant to say that God only confronts people when they have had time to understand A, B and C as far as doctrine is concerned. I think it's important in our preaching of the gospel that we try to cover all the essentials of the faith. I think every preacher should aim to explain who God is, what He demands of us and why it is necessary for us to be changed. That should be a consistent goal of the Christian pulpit.

What are some of the most common errors that people make in their thinking about what it means to be a Christian?

I think that one of the most common errors today in Scotland is the idea that a Christian is simply a person who has a connection to the church. As a parish minister in the Church of Scotland, I often visited people in their homes when a family member had died. Often they would say to me, "We are part of your church, minister". Actually, what they mean is that they once went to Sunday School in our church or they were a part of one of our organisations. In their view, being a Christian is simply being a part of the church. It doesn't matter how loose the connection is.

Other people think a Christian is someone who simply believes in God. If they do that and grow up in a so-called Christian country, even though they have no connection with the church, then they think they must be Christian. They don't consider themselves Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus. So they think they must be Christians. As a parish minister, I have known people who, when admitted to hospital, will put down their religion as Church of Scotland. When I ask them who their minister is they usually don't know.

Regeneration and water baptism are both important, but they are not the same thing.

What does the Bible teach about the nature of regeneration?

The truth is that the Bible doesn't say a great deal about regeneration. There are only a few places in the New Testament where there is really any kind of explanation about the meaning of regeneration. According to Titus and John's Gospel, regeneration refers to a renewal of life by the Holy Spirit whereby faith comes to the believer. The believer usually hears the outward call of the gospel and this is accompanied by an effectual call of the Holy Spirit. At that point the person is spiritually renewed and receives the gift of faith. And that is why in the confessions of the 17th century they don't talk about regeneration at all; they talk about effectual calling. Actually, the expressions are interchangeable terms. So regeneration occurs when that outward call of the gospel is combined with the effectual call of the Spirit and a complete spiritual renewal takes place. Then we receive the gift of faith from God, which is the faith

by which we are justified. It is difficult to say much more than that about regeneration because the New Testament doesn't offer much more.

Is there any basis for Roman Catholic claims that children are regenerated through the act of baptism?

No, there is no basis at all for it. I do not believe that the Bible teaches baptismal regeneration. Baptism is a very important sign. It's the sign of entry into the family of the Christian church, of the grace of God towards us, and of God's promised covenant blessings of forgiveness and spiritual renewal. I baptise those who come to faith in Christ through regeneration and I also baptise their children. I do so because Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:14 tells me that the children of even one believer are holy and that they are set apart for God. In that sense, they are children of the covenant and part of the fellowship of the church.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that when they are baptised they are thereby regenerate. I think I understand John 3:5, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" to mean that the washing of water in baptism and the washing of the Spirit in regeneration are both important, but I do not necessarily think that this verse implies that they are connected or that one produces the other. In fact, in verses 6 and 8 where the rebirth of the Spirit is also mentioned, it says nothing about water. Water is only mentioned in verse 5. So regeneration and water baptism are both important, but they are not the same thing nor do they normally take place at the same time.

Is baptism of the Holy Spirit a second experience that actually comes after the new birth as some Charismatics teach?

I do not believe so. As I understand it, baptism in the Holy Spirit is that experience of effectual calling/regeneration. It is the initial work of the Holy Spirit of God in the life of the believer. Paul tells us in Romans 8 that the person without the Spirit does not belong to God and is not a Christian. So clearly, I don't think it's possible to become a Christian and then later to receive the Holy Spirit.

So when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:13, "for we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body", he's actually referring to that initial experience of regeneration?

I believe so, yes. I have met Christians whom I greatly respect who have taken a different position on this, but I believe them to be mistaken from an exegetical point of view.

What is the impact of regeneration on a person's identity, personality, character; what part of a person's life does regeneration affect?

Regeneration affects the inner nature and character of a human being. Our basic personality type may not change; an extrovert will not become an introvert or an introvert an extrovert. A person who is dynamic and outgoing in character is not going to become a quiet person.

In what sense is regeneration the solution to our broken relationship with God and the change of life that we need?

Well, it's a large part of the solution in that having been born again through the Spirit of God we can begin life with a new power within us. Paul says that every man who is in Christ is a new creation. We are no longer what we were before. God's power is at work within us to help us become holy. Regeneration is also the solution to the problem of a broken relationship with God because when we are effectually called and renewed by the Spirit we receive the gift of faith, and by that faith are made right with God through Jesus Christ.

However, regeneration is not the whole answer because after we are born again we have the whole of our lives to live after that. So it is stage one of the journey. It's the beginning. The reason I say that is that I have sometimes been in churches where once a person is born again it's almost as if they say "That's it, they're okay, they're going to heaven", and there is no sense that that person has to be nurtured. Some churches put so much emphasis on the new birth that they then forget everything that's required afterward.

What are the problems that regeneration and justification are trying to address?

Every human being has two problems; one is that I have a sinful nature, and the second is that I am cut off from God, alienated from Him. Both of these problems have to be addressed. Regeneration addresses the first problem and justification addresses the second one.

So justification deals with the immediate question of my relationship

with God being irretrievably broken down?

Yes, you might say that regeneration and sanctification are dealing with my sinful condition, whereas justification and adoption are dealing with my status in the eyes of God. When these doctrines are taken together then we get a picture of the whole change that God is effecting. If God simply forgave our sins – that's justification – but He didn't also change our inner condition – that's regeneration – we would still be back where we were before. But by regeneration and justification God deals with both problems.

Some churches put so much emphasis on the new birth that they then forget everything that's required afterward.

How did Christ achieve this justification for us and how does He make it possible for sinners to stand before a holy God?

God has said that the wages of sin is death and that sin cannot

go unpunished. However, God, out of His great love for us, has sent his Son who freely took the punishment for all those who will be in heaven so that we do not have to go to hell to pay the punishment of our own sins. Christ has already borne that punishment for us. In addition, Christ lived a perfect life and his perfect righteousness is imputed to us, so that we can stand before God "clothed in the righteousness of Christ".

Why is it so important for the evangelical church to recover the doctrine of holiness today? In what sense are Christians meant to be holy? Is holiness a question of not drinking, not gambling and not smoking?

I think holiness has often been understood in Christian circles in entirely negative ways, particularly in the fundamentalist circles where Christianity is almost defined by the things you don't do. I don't feel that such a view of Christianity is true to Scripture at all. In Scripture holiness is a positive thing. We are encouraged to see holiness in terms of the imitation of Christ, of the sanctification by the Spirit, of seeking to be like God, obviously not in the sense that we share God's being, but definitely in the sense that we participate in His character. There is an old hymn in which we sing, "That I may love what Thou dost love, and do what Thou wouldst do". I think holiness consists of

getting to the point where we can sing those words from our hearts and know almost instinctively what Christ would do and then do it. Sadly, most of us are a million miles from that. The important point I want to make is that holiness is essentially a positive thing.

Of course, there are some things which we shouldn't do that are in the form of commandments, but Christians have often added thousands of their own commandments which are not actually there in Scripture. So to the list of commandments that we have in Scripture we have rules like, "you can't drink, you can't smoke, you can't go to the movies, you can't dance, and women can't wear make-up", and the list goes on and on. However, I don't think that this is what holiness means.

If regeneration by the Holy Spirit is the first step in the process of sanctification, what does the believer have to do?

While regeneration is the first step in the process of sanctification, it's not the first step *we* take. It is the first step God takes. And it is only when God has given us new life through regeneration and that we have been justified by faith that we are ready to take our own steps. Our task at that point is to bring our lives into conformity with God. I think that's what the Scripture means when it says "work out your salvation with fear and trembling". Paul doesn't mean that we have to earn our salvation; it means that we have to work out the salvation that God has given in every area of our lives. This will affect how we think, our moral lives, the way we deal with other people in our relationships, the way in which we approach our work, in fact everything.

That is why I think the Dutch Christian writers are much more powerful than some others in the Reformed tradition because both Kuyper and Bavinck had this tremendous emphasis on a world and life-view. Incidentally, I think they got it from the Scottish theologian, James Orr, because Kuyper attributes the idea to him, having been influenced by Orr's book entitled *The Christian View of God and the World*. And so I find in our Dutch writers a much greater sense that Christianity is a world and life-view and that everything has to be made consistent with that. That's why the first step that we need to take after our regeneration is to commit ourselves to living out the life of Christ in every area of our existence. In other words, we need to live consistently with our world and life view. ap

Spirit-renewed

Two crushing disasters forced me to rely on God.

My brother, Peter died in a car accident when he was 33. He left behind his wife Gillian and their four children, aged from five to one. After his death, Gillian and the children remained in the same town where they received much support from the church my brother had helped to plant.

Karen, my wife of only a few months, and I both prayed about what the Lord wanted us to do to support our bereft family. We both separately, but simultaneously, sensed a strong conviction to be mature and sacrificial in our love. So we made a decision to move to the same town for a time to support them. While there we also planned on saving money for Bible college. We felt that the Lord was leading us in this direction in our marriage and this encouraged us in our grief. We looked forward to supporting our family in a more direct way now that we would be living nearby. Yet just a short time before our move, both Karen and I were involved in a car accident in which she lost her life and I was badly injured.

Over the weeks and months that followed during my recovery, I struggled in my grief to understand what the Lord was doing. What did He intend by taking my wife? How could this be? We were just three days from celebrating our first anniversary. Were our convictions real? It had all seemed so clear – thanks to the Holy Spirit's leading – but in the aftermath of the accident there was just brokenness, pain and confusion.

Though extremely perplexed about the Lord's leading and deeply traumatised by the dreadful situation of life without Karen – there began to be a work of God in my life. I experienced a daily renewal that took place as I depended more and more upon Him. As I cried out to the Lord in my helplessness, another conviction came. It was in the form of "meditate on My Word". So I did the only thing I could and responded by opening the Word.

I began with John 14 and then continued with the Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes and much of the New Testament. For hours each day I would soak up the precious



**David
Hann**

Word and pray. And so, in a very real way, I began to experience the outworking of Romans 12:2, "be transformed by the renewal of your mind for you to know what is the good, acceptable and perfect will of God".



The temptations to despair were very powerful, but the Spirit's convictions to "honour the Lord" were even stronger.

What was God's will for me in my situation? It wasn't to know why it had all happened, but rather to trust the One who did. The temptations to despair and self-destruction were very powerful, but the Spirit's convictions to "honour the Lord" were even stronger. When I was tempted to despair of God's goodness, He reminded me of the death of Christ and the Spirit's present pleading on my behalf (Rom. 8:26-27). When tempted to doubt God's power, I was reminded of our Lord's resurrection and the abiding presence of the Spirit – my deposit – who guaranteed me of the glory to come (Eph. 1:14).

The spiritual convictions to glorify God by being faithful and joyful in Christ continued. I began to realise more and more that I had been "sanctified" or set apart as holy by the Triune God Himself – even from before infancy when my parents made me wise about the Scriptures. It was a comfort to know that the Father had set me apart as His very own, through the person and work of His Son, and then upon believing sealed me with the Spirit of adoption. It was now in my broken state that I more fully realised that not

only had I been sanctified in Christ, but I was also being called to live a holy or *sanctified* life that glorified Him (1 Cor. 1:2). And so God's ongoing work of sanctification – or, perhaps better, still, glorification of Himself through me – took shape in my utter weakness.

In every way, the Lord's Word to the Apostle Paul resonated deeply within me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9), for it was in my utter weakness that I turned again to His Word, and depended upon the Spirit to renew me. Though missing Karen terribly, I was humbled that the Lord would choose to display His grace and power in such a servant as me. I declared His praises more and more to all who visited me and in kindness supported me through those dark days. Day by day I grew stronger in my faith as I meditated on His Word and experienced the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. My hope for heaven still abounded even though there were many

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times when I languished in earthly grief.

Why did the Lord take Karen? To this day I don't know, but I have this conviction: I don't need to know. In every way, not knowing affords the testing of faith that best glorifies Him. What about our convictions to be mature and sacrificial in our love – were they real? I realised that the decision to move to be nearer to our family was a step of faith born out of our spiritual convictions. The fact that the Lord didn't permit our plan to eventuate didn't in any way undermine the fact of those convictions. I know that the Lord put them in both our hearts.

Little did I know it then, but it was to be Karen's final test of faith before she would be welcomed into our Lord's very presence. It was for me merely the beginning of a time of severe testing, where He would display His glory. It called for humble maturity to realise that though "a man plans his course" it is the Lord who determines his steps (Prov. 16:9).

I needed to realise that spiritual convictions are intimately connected with the Word. It was the great reformer John Calvin who brought such clarity to our faith. So in the context of a husband's and wife's convictions, to be mature and sacrificial in one's love was a right and godly

thing to do. To support one's family was also right. But could it be said with absolute conviction that it was the Lord's will and the Spirit's leading to go to a certain place at a particular time? Sometimes we need to exercise a little restraint in jumping to such conclusions. The 20th century theologian Emil Brunner once had to learn this lesson. He prayed for God to raise a strong leader for the

From the dreary to the distressing to the delightful events of life He will conform us to Christ.

German nation in the aftermath of World War I. When Hitler came to the fore, Brunner claimed that God had answered his prayers. Karl Barth rightly pointed out to him that he dared not make such a claim.

We need to realise that the Holy Spirit convicts us with respect to sin, righteousness and judgment. He leads us into truth (John 16:8ff.). In the case of Karen and me it was a conviction over righteousness that led to a God-honouring decision to move. And so Karen and I acted with

godly wisdom upon a true spiritual conviction. Was our Lord unfaithful for taking her home at the tender age of 26? I trust that He wasn't. Karen knows that He wasn't. My arrangements don't always accord with God's steps for me. No matter how pious my plans might be, it must remain His prerogative alone to determine the outcome.

Was God cruel or powerless for denying us our plan by taking Karen from me? An unbelieving eye might have said so, but I trust that He wasn't. Christ died for us. He rose for us. He lives to intercede for us. The power of His Word and Spirit transformed a delusional, traumatised widower into a God-glorifying servant who spoke of eternal hope in the midst of his earthly pain. The Lord also chose to look after Peter's family in His own way. They all have a vibrant faith and express maturity far beyond their now adolescent and teenage years.

I did end up saving enough money to study at theological college. I'm now six months finished and involved in full-time ministry to university students. I trust the words of Job 42:2 for my own life, "I know that you can do all things, no plan of yours can be thwarted". After five years, He brought Renée into my life. We married and now have a beautiful baby daughter. In His goodness, that has been the Lord's will for me. Yet even in the absence of these blessings, His goodness was already manifested in His sustaining power.

The need is for us to trust that He does bring about His glory in and through us as we depend on Him. Though none of us can presume to know the "secret things of God" (Deut. 29:29), He exercises our faith all the more by calling us to trust that "in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). From the dreary to the distressing to the delightful events of life He will conform us to Christ. He does that, as we depend on the grace of Christ and meditate on His Word with the help of His Spirit. In all things He works. But in all things will you trust? His glory will unfold in our lives even as our eternal glory waits.

David Hann serves as a full-time AFES worker at the University of Technology, Sydney. He has been licensed to preach the gospel by the Presbytery of Hawkesbury and is manager of the Presbyterian student hostels in Lewisham. ap

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Life in the spirit

Spirituality is deeper and broader than mere mysticism.

Spirituality has become a buzz word. It is cool to be spiritual. Whether it is tarot cards, numerology, guiding lights or crystals, spirituality is on the rise. In the last few months our family has been watching the ABC drama series *Sea Change*. One of the characters in that series, Carmen, is depicted as very spiritual. She speaks of aligned planets affecting people's behaviour, lines of cosmic energy and tantric union. She teaches yoga and meditation, and seems to have a deeper understanding of life and the cosmos. To the average person, her spirituality is accepted, liked and attractive.

However, compare her likeable character with another character on TV, Ned Flanders. He is religious, devout, and almost puritanical. But is his character positive? Is he seen as spiritual? This raises the important issue of what is it that makes one person spiritual and another not? Throughout history Christians have come up with different answers to this question.

Some Christians have suggested that spirituality is something that roughly equates to mysticism. Mysticism isn't a particularly Christian idea, although there are some so-called Christian forms of it. The essential idea behind mysticism is that you can have an unmediated, direct experience of God. This experience is supposed to be so profound, so sublime, and so transcendent that it cannot be put into words. Mysticism involves leaving reason and rationality behind and experiencing God in his transcendent goodness. It focuses on encounters with God that affect our feelings rather than hearing words which affect our understanding.

Again, other Christians have tended to identify authentic spirituality with asceticism. This involves the idea that you can become more God-like and closer to God by separating yourself from the world and worldly passions. If we can somehow get rid of earthly goods and renounce the pleasures of the flesh, then we can focus our minds and energies on the vision of God. In some forms of asceticism people are considered more spiritual by being single or abstaining from sex. Underlying extreme asceticism



Mike Taylor

is contempt for the material world and a belief that only the spiritual realm really matters. My favourite ascetics were the "pillar" saints. They lived in the desert in the 5th century and thought that by living on top of a pillar, away from the rest of the world, their souls would somehow be closer to God.

But is being mystical or ascetic one of the marks of true spirituality? Not

according to the apostle Paul. Interestingly, in his first letter to the

Corinthians, he moves in an entirely different direction and defines Christian spirituality more in terms of truth and morality than anything else. While many people today see spirituality in terms of emotional or mystical experience, or a connection with a higher power, or even self-fulfillment, rarely is it understood in terms of truth and morality. Nevertheless, for the apostle Paul, true spirituality is anchored in the knowledge and holiness of God.

In 1 Corinthians, we discover that Paul contrasts the "spiritual" person with others whom he refers to as "natural" and "worldly". These contrasts reveal two things about genuine spirituality. First, that real spirituality is characterised by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who reveals to us the thoughts of God in words. And second, that such spirituality is deeply concerned about moral living.

In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul argues that one of the chief functions of the Spirit is that He provides us with true knowledge of God and the ability to trust in Him. He

goes as far as saying that only those with the Spirit can know the truth of God, because it is spiritually discerned (2:14-16). Conversely, a person without the Spirit, the "natural" person, thinks that the things of God are foolish (2:14). Not only are natural people unable to discover what's in God's mind, but in their sin, they have also blinded their minds to His revealed word (2:11). The Spirit, however, knows the thoughts of God and makes them known to us (2:10). It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that we discern these spiritual truths declared in the gospel.

Likewise, it is the Spirit who enables Christians to believe in Christ. God, by His Holy Spirit, awakens our dead hearts, shows us Christ, and strengthens us to believe in Him. Paul gives the test for genuine spirituality: "No one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed', and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). Genuine spirituality is rooted in our confession of Christ. This explains why Calvin says that "faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit". John Newton said of true spirituality that it was "the disposition to count all things mean and vain, in comparison to the knowledge and love of God in Christ".

The sign, then, of genuine spirituality is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The mark of this indwelling is knowledge of, and trust in, the Lord Jesus Christ. All Christians by necessity have the Holy Spirit, without which they could not accept Christ. Thus, all Christians are spiritual.

At this point biblical spirituality differs from many other spiritualities because it regards a commitment to the truth of the gospel as being of central importance. Whereas many in the world want to remove reason and language from their spiritual experience, the apostle Paul calls us back to a relationship with God that is based in the words of Scripture.

Speaking of the gospel, Paul says, "this is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (2:13). Genuine spiritu-

Real spirituality is characterised by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who reveals to us the thoughts of God in words.

ality is based in words. The Holy Spirit, who knows the thoughts of God, gives the words to Paul that he might speak truly about God's secret wisdom (cf Jn 14-16). In the Scriptures we have the true testimony of God, guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, who has imparted spiritual truths in words. He has shared the very mind of Christ (2:16).

Throughout the letter Paul expresses a real confidence in the ability of human language to speak truly of God. He says that the Corinthians had been enriched in all knowledge and speech through the testimony of Christ (1:5-6). Later in the letter, Paul reminds them of the gospel by which they are saved, if they hold firmly to the word that he preached (15:1-2). Paul's condemnation of the tongues speakers was because of the meaninglessness of their language (14:9). What they said, without interpretation, was unintelligible and unedifying.

In chapter 1, however, Paul considers the great wisdom of God to be the preaching of the gospel of Christ crucified. While the Jews wanted miracles, and the Greeks wisdom, Paul preached the message of the cross (1:17, 22-23). Indeed, if Paul isn't exaggerating in his self-effacement, it wasn't even particularly good preaching (2:3-4). Nevertheless, it is this message of Christ crucified that is the power of God for salvation (1 Cor. 1:24, Rom. 1:16). So we see that Paul shows a real confidence in the ability of human language to convey meaningful truths about God.

There are, of course, some who say that we cannot have such confidence in words. They argue that since God is transcendent and far above us, poor human language cannot describe Him. Others claim that we can only speak in vague metaphors about God. Others, again, go further by saying that we can only speak of what He is not, and not what He is. With such teaching, it is no wonder that some spiritualities reject words and rationality in order to attain a non-verbal experience of God. However, if we cannot use human words to speak of the infinite God, then mysticism becomes the only means to comprehend Him.

These arguments would, of course, have real strength if true spirituality were about humanity reaching up to God in search of Him. However, the persistent teaching within Scripture is that God has first spoken to us. He spoke to the man created in his image, Adam, then to Abraham and Moses, then through the prophets, and finally in

Jesus. He has made Himself known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and as creator and redeemer. Further, He graciously gives us His Spirit that we might hear and believe.

These verses also give us confidence in the assertions about God found in Scripture. Some theologians argue that God reveals Himself only through His actions in history and that the Bible is just a human record of that revelation. However, here and elsewhere, the Bible itself affirms that it is God's written word. Indeed, God has acted in history, but it is in Scripture that He has given His own authoritative interpretation of those acts. He has, therefore, provided us with the meaning of His action. It is only in the true propositions of Scripture that we find any reliable knowledge of God.

The chief division in the Bible is between spirit and flesh, not between spirit and matter.

Thus genuine spirituality is based in words. Or better, it is based in the words of God found in the pages of Scripture, illumined by the Holy Spirit.

The second major sign of spirituality in 1 Corinthians is its strong moral concern. For instance, we see that the spiritual person is opposed to the worldly one (3:1-4). The word for "worldly" in these verses comes from the Greek word *sarx*, which translates as "flesh". "Flesh" in the Bible is seen in opposition to the Spirit. It represents the sinful nature, the fallen world that is passing away, the old life, in other words – life in Adam.

Paul reminds us in Galatians 5 that we can walk by the Spirit or by the flesh. We can practise the deeds of the flesh – sexual immorality, idolatry and divisions – or walk in the righteousness of the Spirit. In Colossians 3 he speaks of putting off the old life and clothing ourselves with the new. The flesh represents life in Adam, but the Spirit, life in Christ (Rom. 5-8).

In 1 Corinthians Paul says that the flesh is seen in the way that the Corinthians lived just like everybody else. Following worldly wisdom, they were jealous and argued, visited prostitutes, sued each other, indulged in pagan festivals and used their gifts in order to honour themselves. But in all of this, rather than being spiritual, they were being worldly – of the flesh. They were still living in Adam.

Against this background, Paul calls on them to practise true spirituality. That is, he tells them to flee sexual immorality and idolatry, and to use their knowledge and gifts to love and care for one another. He calls them to be what they are – set apart for God and called to fellowship with Christ. True spirituality means living in Christ; not in Adam. It means to live not as the "old man" but as the new one. It means to walk by the Spirit and not by the flesh.

At this point, it is interesting to note that the chief division in the Bible is between spirit and flesh, not between spirit and matter. Spirit and matter are both pronounced good by God. When we think about it, the main element of many spiritualities is this distinction between the material or physical world and the so-called "spiritual" world. For many people there is a distrust or dismissal of the material element. They regard it as evil or somehow illusory and they feel that they need to try and remove themselves from it so that they can attain their true spiritual state.

However, in biblical spirituality, physicality and creation are affirmed. Christians look forward to a new creation, in which we will have new bodies. The Bible never sees matter as evil. All things are good if received with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4). God is creating a new heavens and a new earth. In Christ's resurrection, God affirms His creation and our created life. Christians can rejoice in their physicality. It is right to enjoy this world – to enjoy fresh pasta and the joys of married love. Asceticism, which denies these simple pleasures, is wrong. True spirituality is not redemption from creation, but living in light of God's redemption of creation. Its primary concern is not fleeing from the world but removing ourselves from sin, and walking by the Spirit.

In his book, *Stirrings of the Soul*, Michael Raiter helpfully demonstrates that when the apostle Paul speaks of spiritual people he speaks of those who are indwelt and energised by the Holy Spirit. Paul's thinking about spirituality is not centred on us, per se, but on the work of God's Spirit in our lives. It is this work that produces the true knowledge of God and those fruits of righteousness that characterise genuine Christian spirituality.

Michael Taylor is a student at Moore College and a student intern at Ashfield Presbyterian Church. He was formerly a science teacher.



Food, glorious food

*20 daily Bible studies in
Isaiah 56-66*

These final eleven chapters of Isaiah are full to overflowing with rich food for thought as they look forward to the day when God will renew all things, when all His wonderful promises will be fulfilled, when He breathes new life into His people, His church, and when all nations will turn to Him. The prophet is clearly pointing us to Jesus, God's Anointed One (the Christ/Messiah). In God's providence we live in a time in history which the Bible calls "the last days", when we look back to Jesus' first coming, His incarnation, and forward to His second coming. We also live in a time in the church's history when we can look back over 2000 years of God's dealing with His church through ups and downs, and at which I for one long for a renewal of the church that will bring us back to the power and authority of God's Word and give us a prophetic voice that will both challenge and give hope to our godless society. Preparing these studies has encouraged me afresh to pray for such a renewal as we wait for the Lord's return.

In attempting to get to the end of Isaiah in 20 daily portions I have had to deal with larger sections than I could really do justice to in the space available. But I hope the little bit I have managed will inspire us all to reflect more deeply, and perhaps read more widely, on what God is saying to His church today in this part of His infallible Word.

Bruce Christian ▶

DAY 1

Salvation – close and wide

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 56:1-8

THE POINT Isaiah reminds us that the Day of Salvation is imminent, far-reaching, and widely embracing; our lives should reflect this!

THE PARTICULARS

- Unlike many schemes that enthuse us for a while and then fizzle out God’s Plan of Salvation has not been shelved and forgotten. It is still very much at the forefront of His activity in the world, and because the next big climactic event is Christ’s Return to reveal true righteousness (cf John 16:10), we need to be ready (1).
- Acknowledging our total dependence on God to provide all our personal needs, expressed most clearly by setting apart 1 day in 7 as His special day on which we rest from pursuing our

own agenda, is what will show Him where our heart truly is (2, 4, 6).

- God’s covenant promise in the Gospel of Salvation has always been intended for all nations (cf Genesis 12:3), as Jesus Himself made clear when He quoted this passage in Mark 11:17 (3, 6-8).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- The Ethiopian eunuch, who was reading Isaiah 53 when Philip shared the Gospel with him (Acts 8:26-39), probably read this passage shortly after in his journey. How would he have felt?
- Would someone observing your lifestyle get the impression that you are expecting Jesus to return fairly soon? In what way?

DAY 2

Watchdogs that don’t bark

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 56:9-57:2

THE POINT The embattled apostle Paul knew where he’d rather be if he had the choice: at peace in heaven with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5). Things were so bad in Isaiah’s Israel that he could see the death of the good people as a positive blessing from a merciful God.

THE PARTICULARS

- While the LORD was declaring His intention to save the rejected “heathen” whose lifestyle at least acknowledged His sovereign rule (56:1-8), He pronounced harsh judgement on the leaders of His covenant people, men who failed miserably in their duty of care. They were oxymorons: watchmen with their eyes closed; sleeping watchdogs with their mouths shut;

revelling shepherds, feasting on lamb chops with no regard for their responsibilities for the sheep’s future; “carers” who couldn’t care less (56:9-12).

- To punish Israel’s leaders, God only had to withdraw His hand of mercy and protection from them (56:9; cf Romans 1:18-32).
- Israel had moved so far away from the covenant relationship they should have had with the LORD that they hardly noticed what was happening as the “good guys” disappeared (1-2).
- Harsh providence is often for our good (1b-2; cf Romans 8:28).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What is happening to our Christian heritage today? Why?

DAY 3

Flirting with the world

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 57:3-13

THE POINT The main quarrel God had with His covenant people was their worldliness. The gods of Canaan were worldly gods and the whole point of worshipping them was to be prosperous, sacrificing their children to Molech in the hope of getting a better crop. Such worship, while pretending to be the LORD’s people, was spiritual adultery; it is no less so in Western nations today!

THE PARTICULARS

- Israel’s spiritual adultery did not just happen overnight; it was the result of flirting with the world and its selfish, appetite-satisfying, lustful ways over an extended period of time (3-9).
- Israel was unwilling to admit to its obvious sin and failure

(10).

- Man trusts in his own goodness, but such false hope can only have currency if God stays silent. If He exposes what we hope in, it will be found useless; He alone must be our refuge (11-13).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What would Isaiah say about “prosperity theology”, and all the worldly, man-centred razzmatazz associated with it, today?
- Would God see any difference between sacrificing children to Molech and killing them by abortion for economic convenience?
- Has the Church compromised too much with the world in an effort to be relevant and acceptable to man’s sinful desires?

DAY 4

Rest... but only in Jesus

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 57:14-21

THE POINT God is holy and therefore cannot tolerate sin in His presence; for the humble and contrite there is comfort, forgiveness, peace, and a new heart; for the arrogant who persist in their sin and rebellion there is no peace, but continual upheaval and turmoil.

THE PARTICULARS

- God’s holiness always puts a dividing barrier – a chasm, a wall – between Him and sinful Man; but, for all who willingly admit their need, there is love and mercy, not only to provide the way back to Him, but also to empower them to take hold of it (15)!
- God is justifiably angry with our persistent sinful attitude and behaviour, but He realises our helplessness in this condition

and so is willing to take the initiative, to make the first move, to forgive and heal and restore (14-19a). That is why Jesus came.

- God’s concern for us is inspired by the fact that we differ from the whole of the rest of Creation: we are made in His image (16)!
- Because He is holy, God is angry with Man’s sin and therefore must punish it (17). Unless we understand this side of His character we will never understand why Jesus died (cf Mark 15:34).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do you feel caught in an avalanche of water, waves and mud? Peace can be found in Jesus alone (19-21; cf Matthew 11:28-30).

DAY 5

Hypocrisy... beware!

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 58:1-9A

THE POINT There is no sadder scenario than religious people thinking they are impressing God with their outward show of worship and the observance of rituals but missing the whole point of what God is doing in His world. The people Isaiah addresses here are the spiritual ancestors of the Jewish leaders John the Baptist and Jesus faced nearly 800 years later (cf Luke 3:7-14; 20:45-46), and of Church leaders today whose outward profession is not backed up by an outworking of grace in humble service.

THE PARTICULARS

- God's people were so intent on impressing Him with religiosity that they were deaf to His instructions; even a trumpet blast and megaphone would not get through to them that they

were, with great devotion and sincerity, going the wrong way (1-3a)! Paul faced exactly the same problem in his own day (Romans 10:1-4).

- The observance of the ritual of fasting, no matter how sincere it might appear to be, is of no value unless it is accompanied by a genuine concern for justice, peace and the needs of others (3b-7).
- When we get it right, God is more than ready to pour out His Spirit on His people and surround them with His blessing (8-9a).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are we taking seriously Jesus' teaching about what is involved in being members of His Kingdom (eg in Matthew 5-7)?

DAY 6

True Godliness

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 58:9B-14

THE POINT The LORD longs to bless His people, His Church. Although this blessing is His sovereign work and the outworking of His covenant of grace alone (14), there are certain conditions to be met. We do not earn the blessing by meeting such conditions, but we do forfeit it by behaving inconsistently with what grace means.

THE PARTICULARS

- Behaviour that demonstrates that we have never understood the real meaning and significance of God's grace includes:
 - oppression of others by lording it over them (9);
 - failing to come to the support of the oppressed (10);

- having an accusing nature and a maligning tongue (9);
- failing to feed the hungry, generously and sacrificially (10);
- failing to acknowledge dependence on the Lord for material prosperity by setting apart 1 day in 7 as His work-free day; or failing to rejoice at being in His presence on that day (13).

- The Lord's blessing consists of having His light to guide in the midst of a dark, confused world (10-11); protection from severe weather conditions (11); the security of a stable society (12); freedom to rejoice in the Lord's sustaining presence (14).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How can we be more effective as salt and light in our community?

DAY 7

Why a society disintegrates

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 59:1-11

THE POINT If a society has moved away from God's care and protection it is not because He doesn't know of its plight or is unable to do anything to help; it is always because of Man's sin/rebellion. Our society is headed for disaster just as Isaiah's was, and for similar reasons; it is the Church that must repent and seek God.

THE PARTICULARS

- We cannot blame God for our society's woe; it is our fault (1-2).
- Contemporary examples of the sins listed here might include: abortion (3a); false advertising and biased reporting (3b); court cases concerned only with winning/losing rather than justice

(4); deception in business dealing (badly conceived investment projects) with all their web of intrigue that is eventually laid bare with much hurt and loss (5-6); lack of self-control (often as a consequence of alcohol or other harmful drugs) (6b-7).

- Lack of honesty and integrity leads to confusion and unrest.

A society that embraces the truths and principles of God's Word is stable and happy; but as soon as it departs from these so that there is no absolute truth, no basis for moral right and wrong (as does ours today), there is only darkness and despair (8-11).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Should Christians be more vocal about the sins listed above?

DAY 8

The Redeemer will come to Zion

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 59:12-21

THE POINT As Isaiah reflects on how bad the situation is, he realises that there is no hope for mankind unless God Himself intervenes. We need a Redeemer, one who will come and pay the ransom to free us from the sin in which we are hopelessly bound, one who will defeat the forces of evil opposing us. He is pointing to Jesus!

THE PARTICULARS

- The very first step to take on the path back to God is to admit that we have sinned, in fact that we are sinners by nature (12).
- The sins listed in verses 3-11 are all sins committed in human society; but ultimately they are sins of rebellion against God, as

David realised after his adultery with Bathsheba leading to his deception and "execution" of her husband (see Ps. 51:4) (13).

- When justice disappears, the righteous are in danger (14-15a).

- God Himself alone must take up the fight against the sin that has so infested the human race. It will be about "salvation" (the root word from which "Jesus" comes) and righteousness (the quality that Jesus "brought to the table" to claim our freedom) (15b-18).

- Salvation will flood in to all nations, through the Jews, to those who repent, in fulfilment of all His covenant promises (19-21).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Can salvation come by any other means than through Jesus?

DAY 9

*A radiant Church***THE PASSAGE****ISAIAH 60:1-9**

THE POINT That Zion (Jerusalem) is the OT symbol of the Church in every age is clear throughout Scripture (cf Hebrews 12:22-24). Isaiah prophesies here concerning Zion's future glory and blessing as he looks forward to the Church's impact on the whole world.

THE PARTICULARS

• In spite of amazing advances in science and technology the world seems to be plunging into ever deepening darkness, especially as the spiritual darkness of Islam feeds on the moral darkness of the West. God's intention for His Church is to be a light shining into this darkness, drawing nations and kings into its light (1-3).

• Isaiah's message of God's judgement on His sinful people would have been most disheartening. Was there any hope for them at all? Yes! He now gives them a glimpse of the last chapter in God's story – in the Messianic New Creation with the Church in all its radiance. This is also what the book of Revelation is saying to the Church – Christ's radiant Bride, but discouraged by persecution, failure and defeat (4-7; cf Rev. 21:1-7).

• The one to whom all nations will submit and pay honour is the LORD, the Holy One of Israel. This is Jesus! (8-9; cf Mark 1:24)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Does our attitude to evangelism/missions reflect this passage?

DAY 10

*Glorious... and victorious***THE PASSAGE****ISAIAH 60:10-22**

THE POINT Not only will God's Church be glorious, she will be victorious. All nations will come from near and far to her, and among those named in this chapter are some of her traditional enemies (6-7). The whole political scene will be turned upside down with the once crushed, scorned and demoralised people becoming everyone's "pride and joy". The extravagance of Isaiah's language as he tries to describe what God will bring about says it all!

THE PARTICULARS

• God will use the people and kings of foreign nations to rebuild and re-establish His Church (10a, 11c-12, 14); and they will provide all the resources to do this as well (11b, 13, 16a, 17a).

• God will replace His judgement with His mercy (10b, 15, 18, 20).

• The New Order will be marked by openness (11), glory (13, 21), holiness (14), joy (15), contentment (16), permanence (17, 21), peace and righteousness (17-18a), and eternal light (19-20).

• It is all by God's righteousness and saving grace (14b, 17b, 18b).

• The last sentence of this chapter is a good reminder: the LORD is in control, and we must balance His promise to act quickly with accepting that His timing is always perfect (22b; cf Psalm 90:4).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• How does Revelation 21 draw on the imagery of Isaiah 60?

DAY 11

*Behold, I make all things new***THE PASSAGE****ISAIAH 61:1-11**

THE POINT Isaiah continues to describe the New Order of things that God will surely bring about. Everything he has said so far on this theme is clearly pointing to Messiah's reign, but Jesus confirms this at the beginning of His ministry by reading from Isaiah 61 in a synagogue in Nazareth, tying its fulfilment directly to Himself (Luke 4:14-21), and then verifying it by His words and works.

THE PARTICULARS

• In Hebrew, "anointed" (1) is the root of the title "Messiah".
• Again Isaiah points to a time of renewal, when grace and mercy will replace judgement, and salvation will extend to all nations.

• In 3 places in Psalms and 10 in Isaiah, the words "salvation" and "righteousness" are used as parallel terms in the same verse (10). "Righteousness" is about God's covenant relationship with His people: His commitment of love and faithfulness to them, and their recognition of complete dependence on Him. A "righteous" person is not one who keeps a set of rules, but one who trusts fully in God's covenant of grace to save him (cf Romans 4:1-3, 10:1-4). In this way, righteousness cannot be divorced from salvation.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Reflect on Jesus' ministry in the light of Isaiah 61. Make a list of how Jesus fulfilled the prophetic statements in this chapter.

DAY 12

*Give Him no rest***THE PASSAGE****ISAIAH 62:1-12**

THE POINT God will bring about the final salvation of all His Elect through His Church. It will be on the basis of His sovereign grace alone, through the sacrifice of His own Son, who died on the cross for their sins, and whose righteousness fulfils all the requirements of the covenant on their behalf. If this is so, we should pray!

THE PARTICULARS

• Note again the equating of Zion/Jerusalem (1) with the Church (12), and of righteousness with salvation (1); Isaiah, yet again, has the coming of the Messianic Kingdom (ie Jesus!) in view.
• Isaiah speaks confidently of the Church's final victory over all her enemies, and of the peace/glory/blessing she will enjoy;

yet he still urges us to pray earnestly that this will happen (1, 6-7).

• Our mighty Saviour/Redeemer has come, and will come again with the Church He has bought (10-12; cf 1 Thess. 4:16-17).

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

• Does this passage drive you to fervent, believing prayer for the salvation of the world and the building up of the Church? Do you "give [the Lord] no rest till He establishes [the Church] and makes her the praise of the earth" (6-7)? Will we unite in this?

• In what different word pictures does God describe His Church here? What impact does each have on you as a member of it?

DAY 13

The grapes of wrath

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 63:1-6

THE POINT When God comes as the Judge to avenge His righteousness and His people against the wickedness of the nations it will be like the treading out of the grapes in the wine-press. This symbolism is singularly appropriate because the wine-treader gets stained with the red of the grapes. The Plan of Salvation also involves Judgement (cf John 3:16-21, 36) and Jesus, the Saviour and Judge, has been stained with His own "red blood" in the execution of it. Julia Howe has captured this idea well in the hymn: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored."

THE PARTICULARS

- Edom ("red") and Bozrah ("vintage"), though Israel's traditional enemies and therefore destined for God's wrath (cf 34:6), are used here symbolically because of the meanings of the names (1).
- The one coming is the victor who has fulfilled all the terms of the Plan of Salvation through the shedding of (his own) blood (1-2; Revelation 19:11-16); there is no one else to do this (3, 5).
- God's justice requires that His enemies' blood be shed to placate His wrath against sin; for the Elect, Jesus' blood has been shed.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How does this passage show that Jesus died only for the Elect?

DAY 14

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 63:7-19

THE POINT Here (x2) and in Psalm 51:11 are the only places where the term Holy Spirit (ruach qadesh) occurs in the OT (although there are other implied references to the Third Person of the Trinity). It is significant that Isaiah uses this term in the context of Israel's loving and merciful Father and His promise of a Redeemer who, in fact, must also be God Himself (3-5). This clear reference to the Trinity, so long before the Incarnation and Pentecost, occurs in a passage about relationships: a God, whose nature is relational, wrestling with the tension between His love for His people and His covenant faithfulness toward them on the one hand, and His holiness as He deals justly with their sin on the other.

THE PARTICULARS

- The LORD has a proven track record of kindness to Israel (7).
- As Saviour/Redeemer (specially in Jesus, the "messenger/angel of His presence/face") He has demonstrated His empathy with their distress, helplessness and need – He "carries them" (8-9).
- Sin grieves God's heart, but it must be punished; the punishment causes us to reflect on past mercy, leading us to pray... (10-14).
- ...and realise that only our relationship to Him matters (15-19).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do you know God as Father... and as Son... and as Holy Spirit?

DAY 15

How then can we be saved?

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 64:1-12

THE POINT Sadly, we often have to reach rock bottom before we come to see the real depth of our depravity in the sight of a holy God, before we truly admit that "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags". But when we do reach this point, we know that we can cry out to Him in prayer, not just because He is our merciful and faithful Father, but because He is omnipotent and able to rescue us; more than that, that He, the Potter, can remake us as His holy people.

THE PARTICULARS

- What God did at Mt Sinai, centuries before Isaiah wrote these words, lived on in the minds of His people, and even in the minds of other nations around them. It was awesome.

But now things have become so bad that the prophet longs for another intervention by God on behalf of His people on the same scale (1-4).

- It is one thing to plead for God to intervene on the grounds of justice; but our sinful condition is so great that the only basis we have for pleading to be saved is His sovereign grace (5-9) ...
- ... there is also the honour of God's name (10-12; cf Ezekiel 36:22).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Someone commented after reading the prayers of the Puritans: "They were either much more sinful than I, or they had a much better understanding of God's holiness; I think it is the latter."

DAY 16

An obstinate people

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 65:1-7

THE POINT Isaiah's message here is applied by Jesus to the Jews of His day in His Parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14:15-24). God's special chosen people were obstinate and deaf to His loving, pleading invitation; they were so busy with their own agenda, even in their worship of Him, that they did not hear Him when He called. As in the parable, this brought God's judgement on them, and resulted in the invitation being extended to others outside the covenant. The same scenario is repeated when Paul is rejected from synagogues and turns to the Gentiles (cf Acts 13:44-48).

THE PARTICULARS

- God's grace is sovereign: He calls whom He will (1; Acts

13:48).

- The Pharisees ("separated ones") of Jesus' day could easily have spoken the words of vs 5a; and Jesus' comments about them in Matthew 23 are consistent with the sentiments of verse 5b! It is possible to think we are pleasing God while being "smoke in His nostrils", as King Josiah also discovered (2 Kings 22) (2-5).
- Because He is just, God must eventually punish all sin. As David says, the wicked might appear to be prospering for a while, but their time will eventually come (see Psalm 37:35-36) (6-7).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you trusting in Jesus to bear the punishment for your sins?

DAY 17

My servants... but you...

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 65:8-16

THE POINT In Romans 9-11 Paul wrestles with the problem caused by the fact that the covenant promises of a faithful God to His chosen people, Israel, are irrevocable; and yet their continuing failure to recognise and embrace the Saviour He provided disqualified them from its blessing. He sees the solution to this dilemma in the provision of a faithful remnant (see especially Rom. 9; 11:1-5). It is “remnant” theology that Isaiah is espousing here. God’s patience with His people is seen in Jesus’ parable in Luke 13:6-9)

THE PARTICULARS

- God’s response to Abraham when he wrestled with Him over the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18:16-33) is reflected in what Isaiah

says here about God’s patience in dealing with man’s sin (8).
 • God guarantees a faithful remnant, embracing the fulfilment of all His promises from west (Sharon) to east (Achor), and the assurance of forgiveness for past sin (cf Joshua 7:24-26) (9-10).
 • God distinguishes between those who serve and worship Him and those who forsake Him for this world’s fortune (11-16).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is God delaying the judgement our nation deserves at the moment because of those who are faithfully serving Him? What lesson is there here about the need for earnest prayer and evangelism?

DAY 18

The curse reversed

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 65:17-25

THE POINT Two aspects of NT teaching make it clear that these verses in Isaiah’s prophecy are pointing to heaven: (i) Revelation 21 uses similar imagery to describe the New World that will come into being when Jesus comes again; and (ii) Jesus told His disciples to expect hardship and trouble in the world until He returned in power and glory. Nevertheless, the message here is the Church’s hope, and this picture of heaven should be ever before us as we strive together to be the people of God, a foretaste of heaven in a fallen world, waiting patiently for it (cf Revelation 6:9-11).

THE PARTICULARS

- The Second Law of Thermodynamics shows that Creation is

by its nature subject to decay: the Bible attributes this to the curse resulting from Man’s rebellion (Gen. 3). This whole system can only be redeemed by a fresh start, a New Creation (17-19).

- The brevity of the span of our earthly life, with all its pain and strife (cf Psalm 90:5-10), constantly reminds of the effect of our sin on the created order. In the new order of things this pattern, and the curse that caused it, will be removed. Revelation 21:4 completes the picture and we are told that in heaven “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (20-23, 25).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Does God sometimes seem distant to you? Does verse 24 help?

DAY 19

Your Word is Truth

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 66:1-16

THE POINT The best policy always is to submit to the authority of God’s Word, leaving the outcome to Him regardless of man’s wisdom.

THE PARTICULARS

- Religion too easily leads Man into thinking that somehow he can impress God by his religiosity: he can build imposing places of worship (1b); and make a great show of sacrifices he brings, as if, by so doing, even to put God in his debt (3; cf 1:10-17).
- God’s answer to this attitude that springs from pride is to show that we can’t “give” Him anything because He made it all (1a, 2a); and what He really wants from us is submission to His revealed truth (his Word) and a humble, contrite heart (2b; cf Micah 6:8).

- If we set our own agenda without seeking God’s ways through His Word, He has no choice but to bring judgement upon us (4).
- Following God’s path, even, and especially, in this modern age, and in the Church (“brothers”), can bring harsh opposition; but the outcome is in God’s hands and we must just trust Him (5-6).

- God will surely (even swiftly as He sees it) plant, establish, feed, comfort and bless His true Church (7-13; cf Rev. 12).
- The Church’s God has the last say in human affairs (14-16).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is the Church today really seeking God’s ways in His Word (4)?

DAY 20

Make disciples of all nations

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 66:17-24

THE POINT Isaiah the prophet now summarises the message given to him by the LORD to deliver to the covenant people, Israel: they were God’s exclusive, special people, joined to Him in a sacred union that was itself to be exclusive (cf Exodus 20:1-3); they had thought they could have the best of both worlds, basking in the glory of being the chosen race, giving lip-service to the covenant requirements, while at the same time fraternising with people of other nations and enjoying the sensual aspects of their worship; and, much to their amazement, this would result in God rejecting them and extending His Plan of Salvation to encompass all other nations. As we read the Gospels and Acts we see that this was also the message Jesus

brought to the world and entrusted to us.

THE PARTICULARS

- There is a perfect balance between the new, inclusive character of the New Covenant and its complete continuity with the Old!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is the Church today guilty of flirting with the world? Apart from obvious gross examples of this in the past in places like South America where syncretism has all but made the Gospel unrecognisable in, for example, the Roman Catholic church, are there instances where we pander to Man’s fallen nature when we should really be proclaiming the offence of the cross?



Across Australia

Scots go Indonesian

The Scots Church, Melbourne, has seen the admission of 45 new members all from an Indonesian background at a special worship service held on 1 April and led by the **Rev. Douglas Robertson**. The new members are under the spiritual oversight of the Scots Church Session with worship services being conducted at 5.15 pm by **Dr Sen Sendjaya**, who serves as the lay minister/teaching elder of the new Indonesian language congregation.

Appointments

The Presbytery of Sydney North on 3 June ordained **Mr D. M. Wollcott** and inducted him into Ryde charge.

The **Rev. Gerhardt van Tonder**, formerly a Presbyterian minister in Harare, Zimbabwe, was inducted at Mackay, Qld, on 8 June by the Presbytery of Central Queensland.

The **Rev. Keith Walker** has accepted a call to the **Springwood-Winnalee charge** (NSW). He has served at **Tamworth Community Church** since 2001.

On 1 June, at the **Niel Black Presbyterian Church, Noorat, Victoria**, the Presbytery of **Kilnoorat** ordained **Miles Fagan** as a Minister of the Word and Sacraments and inducted him into the pastoral charge of Noorat.

Vale Doris Stamp

AP notes with sadness the death of **Mrs Doris Stamp** on 14 March. Mrs Stamp was the wife of the **Rev. H. Arthur Stamp**, a well known minister in Victoria. Arthur and Doris married in 1948 and served in the Presbyterian Church of Queensland and in Victoria.

WA churches unite

A major outreach initiative in Spring 2008 will unite churches of all denominations in what could be the biggest campaign of its type in Western Australia. Developed by **Bible Society**, the *Jesus. All about life* WA campaign will use prime time television in conjunction with a broad range of events and activities run by local churches and Christian organisations.

The chairman of the WA steering committee, **Rob Douglas**, said the television campaign was intended as a catalyst for local churches to plan their own outreach activities, and ultimately would provide quiet Christians with the opportunity to share their experience of Jesus in a way that best suits their situation and personality.

"We have the advantage of building on the success of similar campaigns in Adelaide, Canberra and Tasmania," Mr Douglas said. "From their experience we see the potential for 500 churches of all denominations coming together in a united voice that will have a powerful impact on our state."

Endorsement for the campaign has come from the heads of the **Anglican Church, Baptist Church, Churches of Christ, Uniting Church, Salvation Army** and the **Vineyard** group of churches, as well as Christian groups including **Scripature Union, Fusion**, and the **Bible Society**. It is hoped that other denominations and Christian organisations will come on board as time progresses.

Queensland return

The **Rev. Colin Barwise** has returned to Townsville (Qld) from Melbourne as a result of family illness.

Indonesian tour

Eight students of the **Presbyterian Theological Centre, Sydney**, made a study tour to Indonesia for ministry and learning during late March and early April. It went brilliantly, the tourists said. Team spirit was very good, and the programme was full. The study tour featured Bali (evangelism and growing a holistic Christian community), Makassar (meeting theological lecturers), the spectacular mountains of Toraja, where every hillside brings into view another church – 500,000 members of the Presbyterian-Synodal confessional church in a society of 650,000).

Moderator-General Nominate Robert Benn writes that following the visit, expatriate workers told him that there are at least two new opportunities to teach English in Indonesia.

Malawi visit

From 15 June to 5 July a team of students from the **PTC Melbourne** headed by **Moderator-General Bob Thomas** and the **Rev. John Wilson**, the clerk of the

Victorian Assembly and lecturer at the **PTC**, visited Malawi and Zambia to further develop the relations established between the **Presbyterian Church of Victoria** and **Church of Central Africa Presbyterian**.

Lockhart centenary

On 22 April, 150 visitors and congregation members past and present of **St John's Church, Lockhart** (NSW), met to mark 100 years of worship services and Christian activities in the town. The **Rev. Mike O'Connor** led the service, with the **Rev. Peter Greiner** leading in prayer. Former minister **Bruce Knapper** was also present.

Larry appeal

The **Cyclone Larry Appeal** launched by **Moderator-General Bob Thomas** has seen just under \$75 000 raised and distributed in the **Gordonvale/Babinda charge** area and the **Tablelands charge** area.

Isa turns 75

The **Mt Isa charge** (Qld) marked its 75th anniversary with a special service on 27 May. The small local congregation was encouraged by the presence of a group of friends from **St Andrew's, Townsville**, who travelled 12 hours by road to be with them. **Queensland Moderator Rudi Schwartz** (who also happens to be the minister of St Andrew's and the moderator of Mt. Isa) conducted morning communion service. This saw two new families join the congregation. In the afternoon a praise service was held at the old Presbyterian Church (now part of the **UCA**) at which the **director of Home Mission, the Rev. John Nichol**, preached.

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Around the World

Court helps Copts

Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court has quashed a previous ruling that had denied Coptic citizens the right to regain their legal Christian identity, ordering a retrial on the hotly contested case. The court based its ruling on Egypt's civil law containing no reference to *ridda* (abandoning Islam), which is punishable by death under Islamic law. **Ramses el-Nagar**, one of the Christians' lawyers, said the ruling establishes that the same legal principles apply to Muslim and Christian citizens alike, allowing applicants to change religious identities without having to take their cases to court. The case reflects the high stakes involved when Islamic law serves as the legal base in religiously plural societies. At a hearing on 18 June, defence lawyer **Mamdouh Ramzi** asked government lawyer **Mazhar Farghali** what he would do if a Muslim wished to convert to Christianity. "I would cut his throat," Farghali replied.

Compass Direct

Prosecutors defend Christians

A Turkish state prosecutor has demanded acquittal for two Turkish Christians on trial for "insulting Turkishness" under the nation's controversial Article 301. **State Prosecutor Ahmet Demirhuyuk** told the **Silivri Criminal Court** on 18 July that there was "not a single concrete, credible piece of evidence" to support the accusations filed against **Hakan Tastan** and **Turan Topal**, former Muslims.

He said the accusers have provided no

evidence that the two men had cursed Turkey and Islam and then tried to force them to accept Christianity. Rather, **Demirhuyuk** said, the plaintiffs have given contradictory explanations of their claims. "There is absolutely no system or practice to consider it a crime for Christians to learn or spread their religion, or to gather for worship," **Demirhuyuk** said.

Compass Direct

China expels missionaries

In what looks like the largest expulsion of foreign missionaries since 1954, when the Chinese Communist government expelled all foreign religious workers after taking power in 1949, **China Aid Association** confirms that a central government-directed campaign to expel suspected foreign missionaries has been ongoing since February. According to reliable **China Aid** sources and collaborated reports by at least five different mission agencies, over 100 foreigners accused of being involved in illegal religious activities in China have been expelled or deported this year between April and June.

Assist

Kiwis ignore law

Only 29 per cent of New Zealanders support the anti-smacking law passed recently, and 78 per cent plan to ignore the law and continue to smack as a form of correction, despite the possibility they might be prosecuted. These are the key findings of research commissioned by **Family First NZ** and conducted by **Curia Market Research**. The poll surveyed almost 1000 people and found continued overwhelming opposition to the new law.

Twenty-nine per cent strongly or somewhat agreed with the new law, 62 per cent strongly or somewhat disagreed with

the law and 9 per cent had no opinion either way. "This law will turn the huge proportion of good parents and grandparents into law-breakers and politicians have failed to hear and acknowledge the voice of New Zealanders," said **Bob McCoskrie**, national director of **Family First**.

Assist

Muslims attack village

Christian families fled a Pakistani village in Punjab province in June after an armed mob injured Protestants preparing for an evangelistic meeting, the victims' lawyer said. Seven Christians were injured when at least 41 Muslim men armed with guns, axes and wooden sticks attacked a **Salvation Army** church in Chak 248 kilometres north of Faisalabad. The Christians' refusal to give in to demands that they cancel the evangelistic meeting prompted the attack, **Sindhu** said. Police initially refused to file a case against the mob, and doctors came under pressure from the Muslim attackers to under-report the Christians' wounds.

Vietnamese torture Christian

A young Hroi ethnic minority man who refused to recant his Christian faith died from injuries received while under official interrogation, as Vietnamese **President Nguyen Minh Triet** visited **US President George Bush** in Washington. In his early 20s, **Vin Y Het** died on April 20, leaving a pregnant wife and two small children. From **Son Hoa** district in the coastal province of **Phu Yen** in south-central Vietnam, **Het** became a Christian in September 2006. Not long after that, local government officials summoned him to their offices and pressured him to sign a document denying his faith. When he refused, they had him savagely beaten.

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Muslims target Britain

A former imam is warning that extremists are aiming to establish sharia law in the UK – and that Britain has become the world “number one target” for Islamic strategists. **Sam Solomon**, a former imam and Islamic lawyer now living in the West, raises concerns of creeping Islamisation in the UK. He has written a special report on Islam in the latest edition of *Witness* magazine, published by **Release International**, a Christian ministry to the persecuted church.

He writes: “The UK is the number one target of Islamic strategies in the West (because) the former British Empire controlled some of the largest Muslim communities. Immigrants from these countries... have taken full advantage of Britain’s liberal politics.”

Sam Solomon raises concerns that the militants’ aim is to establish sharia law in the UK, applying it first to Muslim communities, then extending to the entire population.

Hindus try to burn pastor

A mob of Hindu extremists beat a pastor and tried to set him on fire before parading him naked in the suburbs of Bangalore, capital of Karnataka state, on 8 June. Some 150 people allegedly led by Hindu extremists cornered independent pastor **Laxmi Narayan Gowda** in a room in his house and began assaulting him in front of his wife and two small children. One of the assailants threw kerosene on the pastor, and another tossed a burning Bible onto him, but miraculously he did not catch fire, said **Sam Joseph**, a Karnataka-based leader of the **All India Christian Council**. The extremists then stripped the pastor naked and hung a board around his neck that said, “I am the one who was converting people,” before parading him through the area. “By this time, the mob had swollen to about 1,000, as more people joined in to harass and torture the pastor,” Joseph added. The pastor is recovering in hospital.

Compass Direct

Theologian Brown dies

Harold O. J. Brown, an evangelical theologian known for his activism against abortion, died on 8 July. Brown’s most prominent work was helping form and intellectually arm the pro-life movement. He was also a devoted professor and men-

tor at **Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Reformed Theological Seminary**, an ordained Congregationalist pastor, and a prominent writer in the evangelical movement.

Mike Kruger, academic dean of Reformed Theological Seminary, said Brown was “one of the brightest thinkers that this generation of Christians has seen. He has been a monumental influence over the last 30 years in American evangelicalism.

“His legacy will be felt not just in the broader public he’s met, but [also through] the people he’s trained to be the next generation of Christian leaders,” said Kruger.

Christianity Today

Hope against apostasy law

Christian and government leaders say they are hopeful that Pakistan’s parliament is unlikely to support the death penalty for Muslims who abandon their faith. Critics have worried that the **Apostasy Act 2006**, proposed in May, signaled further reduction of religious freedom in Pakistan, where vigilante enforcement of strict sharia law has been on the rise. The bill likely will not be approved in its original form by the **National Assembly’s Standing Committee on Law and Justice**, where it is being revised, a member of the committee said. “The person who changes religions of his own will and wish, according to his own thinking, should not be punished at all,” **Dr Sher Afgan Khan Niazi** told *Compass* from Islamabad.

Bhutanese Christians barred

The civil rights of Christians in Bhutan are eroding rapidly. The government has recently begun clamping down on Christians by barring some congregations from meeting for worship. This has caused at least two Gospel for Asia-affiliated churches to temporarily close their doors.

Correspondents in Bhutan also report that the government is planning to enact laws to further restrict the practice of Christianity in the country. Bhutan, a small country wedged between China and India, is less than 1 per cent Christian, and anti-Christian sentiment runs strong.

Gospel for Asia

Police torture woman convert

Security police in Alexandria, Egypt have repeatedly tortured a young woman convert to Christianity in custody since 16 July. Fanatic Islamist relatives of **Eman Muhammad el-Sayed**, 26, attacked her on Monday while she and her husband, also a convert from Islam, were strolling through a local fair in Alexandria. El-Sayed’s male relatives immediately grabbed her and began to beat her, attempting to shove her into a car and vowing to kill her. Police intervened in the street-side fracas but promptly arrested the victim herself. Each day since then, El-Sayed has been subjected to hours of interrogation and severe physical torture in a police security headquarters in Alexandria, including electrocution of sensitive parts of her body.

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On the Agenda

Archaeological breakthrough

By Dan Wooding

An expert working at the **British Museum** in London has confirmed the existence of an important Biblical figure after deciphering a cuneiform inscription on a small Babylonian clay tablet.

This news comes in a story carried on the 24 Hour Museum website found at www.24hourmuseum.org.uk. The story said, “Austrian Assyriologist Dr **Michael Jursa** made the breakthrough discovery confirming the existence of a Babylonian official mentioned in the Old Testament and connected to the Babylonian king **Nebuchadnezzar**.”

“The clay document is dated to the 10th year of Nebuchadnezzar II (595 BC) and names the official, Nebo-Sarsekim. According to chapter 39 of the Book of Jeremiah, he was present at the siege of Jerusalem in 587 BC with Nebuchadnezzar himself.

“In 601 BC King Nebuchadnezzar marched to the Egyptian frontier where the Babylonian and Egyptian armies clashed, with both sides suffering heavy losses. Over the next few years the struggle between the Babylonians and Egyptians

continued and in the course of these campaigns Jerusalem was captured (597 BC).

“To find a cuneiform reference to someone connected with these remarkable times is rare but evidence from non-Biblical sources for the existence of any individual named in the Bible – other than kings – is incredibly rare.”

The story continued, “Nebo-Sarsekim is described in the book of Jeremiah as ‘chief eunuch’ (as the title is now translated, rather than ‘chief officer’). Dr Jursa’s translation of the Babylonian tablet proves that his name was really pronounced as Nabu-shar-russu-ukin, and gives the same title, ‘chief eunuch’, in cuneiform script, thereby confirming the accuracy of the Biblical account.”

Dr Jursa, who is Associate Professor at the **University of Vienna**, said, “Reading Babylonian tablets is often laborious, but also very satisfying; there is so much new information yet to be discovered.

“But finding something like this tablet, where we see a person mentioned in the Bible making an everyday payment to the temple in Babylon and quoting the exact date is quite extraordinary.”

Dr Jursa has been studying cuneiform at the British Museum since 1991. It is the oldest form of writing known to us and was commonly used in the Middle East between 3200 BC and the second century AD.

Assist News Services

Lebanese Christians in peril

By Elizabeth Kendal

In the Middle East, Sunni and Shiite Muslims are embroiled in a political struggle for supremacy that started more than 1300 years ago. Shiite theology says only a direct descendant of Mohammed can lead Muslims, thus delegitimising Sunni dictatorships. Sunnis have countered with a fiercely anti-Shiite doctrine.

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon are prime sites for conflict as they are home to local Islamist militants – Hamas and Hezbollah respectively – whom the Iran-Syria Shiite axis can co-opt and support to advance their regional agenda. All the local Islamists need to do is overthrow the “apostate” regimes and Islamist forces will have access to the borders of Israel. This has already happened in Gaza and now eyes are on the West Bank and Lebanon.

Rumours abound that violence will erupt in Lebanon during (northern) summer or spring. It is circulating that the Syria-backed Hezbollah may stage a coup against the Sunni-led, US-backed elected government or else establish a parallel government to rule over territories it dominates. Weapons have reportedly been flowing in from Syria. Many observers believe this civil conflict is imminent. If it erupts and is not quickly resolved then Israel will probably be targeted. Being militarily weak, Islamic militants rely on terrorism, human shields and propaganda. During the Hezbollah vs Israel war of July 2006, Hezbollah persistently launched rockets into Israel from behind UN posts and from inside residential complexes and Christian villages.

Lebanon’s Christians are facing perilous times, for whenever Sunnis and Shiites fight each other, Christians and Jews suffer enormously, primarily because Islamic fundamentalist zeal boils. Also, concerned Sunni and Shiite leaders wanting to minimise intra-Islam conflict will seek to unite the Muslim sects against a common “enemy” – Israel, Christians, the

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US and US-backed regimes – to advance the common goal of Islamisation. As lamented recently by Lebanon's Maronite Catholic leader, **Archbishop Beshara Rai of Byblos**, "if the Sunnis and Shiites agree, their agreement would come at the expense of the Christians. And if they disagree, the Christians become their victims".

*World Evangelical Alliance
Religious Liberty Commission*

Churches aid Zimbabwe

By Michael Ireland

With inflation exceeding 4500 percent – some reports put the figure nearer 8000 percent – currency no longer buys food and medical care in the African nation of Zimbabwe. There is little food due to drought and poor harvests, and the collapse of civil infrastructure has meant basic services are no longer available to the majority of Zimbabweans.

Christian churches in the country, however, are fighting poverty, hunger and HIV among Zimbabwe's decimated communities and helping to meet the basic day to day needs, says UK Christian relief agency **Tearfund**.

Peter Grant, Tearfund's international director, says the situation is desperate with children now suffering from very high levels of chronic malnutrition.

"People are dying. It's the very young, the very old, and those with Aids who are the most vulnerable," says Grant. "We heard recently of a church leader who had to bury a grandmother and a baby from the same family over the same weekend. As the year goes on with the continuing food shortages, we can expect the situation to get worse, and more people to die."

Tearfund says that even if people could afford to go to hospital, there are no longer medical supplies to treat them. The wages of hospital staff do not even cover the bus fare to work.

The crisis has engulfed the cities, where food distributions were rarely seen previously. Middle income school teachers told Tearfund that they can't even afford to buy sugar.

Esinah is a grandmother in her 80s, caring for eight Aids orphans. Queuing for maize, beans and oil at a food distribution funded by Tearfund she spoke of the people dying in her community. "There have been many deaths and people are starving," says Esinah. "Without this food we could be dead by now. Only God knows what will happen."

Assist News Services

Huge change for Anglicans

By Jonathan Petre

New British Prime Minister **Gordon Brown's** decision to allow the **Church of England** to choose its own bishops for the first time since **Henry VIII** has been broadly welcomed by church leaders.

The reform – one of the biggest changes in the relationship between church and state since the Tudor king fell out with the Pope in the 16th century – will reopen the fraught issue of disestablishment.

It will also dismay many Anglicans that such a major reform could have been announced with so little consultation or public debate.

Mr Brown was at pains to minimise the fuss by overtly supporting the church's established status, a constitutional arrangement supported by most churchgoers. His announcement is nevertheless bound to refuel the demands of a vociferous minority for all ties to be cut between church and state, including the right of bishops to sit in the Lords.

The **Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu**, has played down the impact of the reforms. He pointed out in a statement that the new arrangements for choosing bishops had originally been proposed by the church itself 33 years ago.

In those days, the Crown had the sole right to appoint archbishops or bishops when vacancies arose without reference to the church. But a report endorsed by the Synod in 1974 recommended changing the system to allow the church to forward

the name of just one candidate to the Prime Minister.

This was too radical a step for the then holder of the post, **James Callaghan**. He devised the compromise under which the **Crown Appointments (now Nominations) Commission** forwards two names, allowing the Prime Minister to choose one to pass to the Queen or, in rare cases, ask for more names.

Yesterday, however, Mr Brown effectively introduced the Church's original proposal by surrendering his right to select between different candidates. He also made clear that he would do the same for other senior ecclesiastical appointments still made by the Crown, including a number of cathedral deans and canons.

But the Queen will retain her role in appointing deans to the so-called "royal peculiars", the handful of churches and chapels, including Westminster Abbey, which have an historic royal connection.

Welcoming the proposals, Dr Sentamu said in his statement that Mr Brown had consulted both him and the **Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams**, about his intentions.

He said he was "grateful" for the Prime Minister's backing of the continuing role of the Queen and the "establishment by law of the Church of England."

But some clerics said that the removal of Downing Street from the process of choosing bishops and deans could further concentrate power in the hands of a few senior prelates. **Canon David Holding**, a Synod member, said: "This goes to the heart of the Church/state relationship. It has huge implications.

"It will threaten the diversity of senior appointments, and could well lead to the old boy network running riot."

Telegraph

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Woe swept away

No matter the test, pick up the broom!

Four more days until she would be 17. It would be her father's birthday, too, but there would be no celebration this year. It was the depth of the Great Depression and her father was dying. The children knelt around the bed while their mother prayed, but the girl wondered whether anyone was listening. Was God near enough to hear a prayer? Did he take any notice of their situation?

On the day of the funeral it rained. Only the mother's friends came — the father's didn't bother. The girl, who was working as a maid, had to borrow a dress for the occasion. When they returned to the empty house the sense of desolation was nearly overwhelming. But the widow, who had been silent for three days, went into the kitchen, picked up her broom, and began to sweep.

"I cannot explain how that action and that soft whisk-whisk sound gave me courage to go on," the girl wrote many years later. "My mother was now the head of the house, and we followed. We did not sit down and ask "What next? What will we do?" Our home was mortgaged and my father's lawyer stole her property. She walked out of his office a penniless widow with seven children, ages 8 to 18. Later someone asked my mother how she stood it. The answer was simple: "I prayed."

The combination of prayer and faithful carrying out of duty had been balm to many, when all hope has seemed to dissolve. The Word of the Lord came to Ezekiel: "I am taking from you at one blow the dearest thing you have, but you must not wail or weep or give way to tears. Keep in heart; be quiet, and make no mourning for the dead" (Ezek.24:15-17 NEB).

God denied Ezekiel the usual expressions of mourning and told him he was not to "eat the bread of despair". Ezekiel's response was, in effect, Yes, Lord. "I spoke to the people in the morning," Ezekiel said, "and that very evening my wife died. Next morning I did as I was told." Obedience was his consolation.

So the psalmist also found it. "Happy are they who obey his instruction . . . In

**Elisabeth
Elliot**

thy statutes I find continual delight ... I will run the course set out in thy commandments, for they gladden my heart" (Psalm 119:2, 16, 32). Happiness, delight, gladness — where can they come from when the world has fallen in?

A study of this psalm reveals the psalmist's firsthand knowledge of nearly every sort of human woe. For each he finds the same comfort: the Word of the Lord, variously called "commandments",

The "roaring lion" knows well that his prey will be much easier to catch when weakened by sorrow or trouble.

"instruction", "counsel", "law", "statutes", "truth."

He understood the sense of alienation all of us experience: "I am but a stranger here on earth." He knew unfulfilled desire: "My heart pines with longing."

He had been "put down": "Set me free from scorn and insult . . . the powers that be sit scheming together against me." He knew all about the sense of utter desolation: "I lie prone in the dust . . . I cannot rest for misery." He had been persecuted: "Bands of evil men close round me . . . Proud men blacken my name with lies."

The one who wrote this psalm had plenty of reason, humanly speaking, to feel very sorry for himself. But it is not self-pity that prompts him to list his troubles. It is rather a candid assessment, in the presence of the Lord, of the truth of his situation, each item on his list followed by prayer for the particular help needed, or by a renewed affirmation of trust in the Word of his God.

The one who is called "a Roaring Lion" (1 Pet. 5:8) knows well that his prey will be much easier to catch when weakened by sorrow or trouble of any kind. The woman with the broom shamed the lion.

She did not faint in the day of adversity, collapse in a heap, or wallow in a slough of self-pity. She knew where to find the strength to carry on. She went there at once and received the power which, as the apostle Paul discovered, "comes to its full strength in weakness".

In the same way I have been rescued from the lion's claws when everything in me said, "You can't take this". I woke one morning in a tiny temporary leaf shelter in Ecuador's jungle to find rain falling in solid sheets. The river had risen dangerously. The thought of trying to pack up in the downpour, get into a dugout canoe with my little daughter, and be poled up another river all day long to a remote clearing was too bleak. I was lonely, desolate, trapped. But that "Amazing Grace" that had brought me safe thus far reminded me of what I should do. I looked up to the Lord. "Lo, I am with you all the days," came the word. All the days, no matter what the weather, or how total the isolation. I took heart and, like the woman with the broom, did the next thing, which was to pack up and get myself and Valerie into the canoe. I think it rained all day, but it didn't matter, for the weather in my soul had cleared up.

A wonderful thing happens when we turn to the Lord and "pick up the broom". We find, as the psalmist found, that "this day, as ever, thy decrees stand fast; for all things serve thee." (Psalm 119:91 NEB)

This article was previously published in Eternity Magazine, March 1987. 

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Pastors vindicated

A victory for common sense nevertheless still leaves questions.

It seemed good to me, having followed all things related to the now notorious Victorian religious vilification case closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Presbyterians.

On 9 March 2002, Daniel Scot, an expert on the teaching of the Koran and Hadith (collections of the sayings of Muhammad) and some years earlier forced to flee Pakistan because he faced the death penalty under that country's then newly enacted blasphemy laws, spoke at a seminar organised by Pastor Danny Nalliah of Catch the Fire Ministries (CTFM).

Three topics were covered: Jihad from the Koran, the Koran and the Bible and Witnessing to Muslims.

The seminar was held just two months after the Victorian Government's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act became law. The key clause (clause 8) in this law with respect to religious vilification states, "A person must not, on the ground of the religious belief or activity of another person or class of persons, engage in conduct that incites hatred against, serious contempt for, or revulsion or severe ridicule of, that other person or class of persons."

The act includes an exception clause whereby it is open to the accused to establish that their conduct "was engaged in reasonably and in good faith in the course of any statement, publication, discussion or debate made or held, or any other conduct engaged in, for any genuine religious purpose".

Unbeknown to the organisers of the seminar, a member of the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV), working with the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) at the time for the express purpose of ensuring people from Arabic and Muslim communities were made aware of their rights under anti-discrimination laws, encouraged several recent converts to Islam to attend the Seminar.

The ICV and the converts then lodged a complaint against CTFM and the two pastors.

Conciliation failed in the EOC. The case was then taken by the ICV to the Victorian Civil and Administration



**David
Palmer**

Tribunal (VCAT), where after failed mediation a hearing was set before the deputy president, Judge Michael Higgins. The hearing extended over many days from 15 October 2003 to 29 March 2004, with Judge Higgins releasing a "Summary of Reasons for Decision" on 17 December 2004 in which he found heavily



***The two
pastors will be
remembered
for their
courage and
persistence
under fierce
attack and
for their
fidelity to
the Christian
cause.***

against the two pastors. A week later he released his 140-page "Reasons for Decision".

A further six months elapsed before Judge Higgins made orders for remedy on 22 June 2005. These involved a public apology by the two pastors in the form of large advertisements over two consecutive weeks, in *The Age* and *Herald Sun* acknowledging their vilification of "all Muslim people, their God, their prophet Mohammed and in general Muslim beliefs and practices". The advertisement would also say "that Pastor Scot was not a credible witness and that he had not acted reasonably and in good faith".

This prompted a renewed round of opposition to the law by advocacy groups, including the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) which coordinated a group of churchmen and lawyers to approach the Victorian Government seeking the repeal of the act, or failing that, significant amendment.

Eventually with the Presbyterian Church of Victoria taking the lead through its Moderator, Dr Allan Harman, a group of senior church leaders drawn across the Protestant-Catholic-Orthodox divide presented their proposals to the Government. The Government response was to expand the religious exception clause to include "teaching, conveying and proselytising of a religion".

Following Judge Higgins' orders for remedy, the two pastors appealed to the Supreme Court of Victoria. The appeal was heard by a panel of three judges sitting as a Court of Appeal on 21 and 22 August 2006. On 14 December, the three judges unanimously upheld the appeal against the tribunal's decision, effectively unravelling that finding and the basis on which it was constructed.

With the penalties set aside, the court ordered the matter be sent back to the tribunal with the stipulation that it be heard by another judge and without the calling of further evidence. Furthermore, the Islamic Council of Victoria, which originally brought the complaint, was ordered to meet half the two pastors' appeal costs, likely to have been a six-figure sum.

In an important finding for the by now sullied reputation of Pastor Scot, the lead opinion of the Court of Appeal found that the tribunal erred in its assessment of the 19 specific instances of supposed vilifying statements made by Pastor Scot, either by misconstruing Pastor Scot's words or failing to take into account other ameliorating material presented in the seminar.

When the matter was listed for hearing in VCAT on 22 June, the ICV requested that the matter be mediated. A successful mediation resulted in the following VCAT press release:

"Notwithstanding their differing views about the merits of the complaint made by the ICV, each of the ICV, Catch The Fire Ministries, Pastor Scot and Pastor Nalliah affirm and recognise the following:

1) the dignity and worth of every human being, irrespective of their reli-

gious faith, or the absence of religious faith;

2) the rights of each other, their communities, and all persons, to adhere to and express their own religious beliefs and to conduct their lives consistently with those beliefs;

3) the rights of each other, their communities and all persons, within the limits provided for by law, to robustly debate religion, including the right to criticise the religious belief of another, in a free, open and democratic society;

4) the value of friendship, respect and co-operation between Christians, Muslims and all people of other faiths; and

5) the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act forms part of the law of Victoria to which the rights referred to in paragraph 3 above are subject.”

This five-year-long saga has proved beneficial to Pastor Danny Nalliah and his ministry. Among all who value free speech and religious liberty, as well as those concerned about the progress of Islam in the West, the two pastors will be remembered for their courage and persistence under fierce attack and for their fidelity to the Christian cause in a day of confusion and compromise. It took two recent non-Anglo Saxon arrivals to Australia with real experience of Islam to make a stand for religious freedom.

In the end the pastors were vindicated: the courts required no apology, and the right to robustly debate religion, including the right to criticise the religious belief of another, was upheld.

While each pastor carried the burden of false accusation and anxiety, there was a particular cost for Pastor Daniel Scot. As a result of the case, the demand for his services as a teacher on Islam in Australia’s Bible colleges dried up. It is to be hoped that his teaching ministry will once again be welcomed.

The ICV will be extremely disappointed with the outcome but relieved that the press either ignored the mediated outcome or else misrepresented it to their benefit.

Arguably, the ICV’s central concern in bringing its complaint was to use the religious vilification law to place Islam and its teaching as set out in the Koran and the Hadith in some privileged position whereby it could never be subjected to scrutiny and criticism. The incoherence of the Islamic texts and incompatibility with modernity means that they cannot withstand critical examination. Should

this happen, the identity and coherence of their communities is threatened. For this reason, Muslims will not give up easily on this issue, though in this instance, thanks to the two pastors, they have failed.

This case also clearly demonstrated the dangers for the judiciary in taking sides in religious disputes. Some of Judge Higgins’s statements were breathtaking in their naivety and ignorance. Thus he asserted that the one billion adherents of Islam “regard the Koran as equivalent to the Bible; that it agrees substantially with Christian beliefs save for particular events”. He judged the shocking material cited from the Koran by Scot as “no

longer relevant to the 21st century” – this clearly contrary to the views of those Muslims who regard the Koran as dictated from the hand of Allah and therefore unalterable. Judge Higgins in fact

As much as Christians may dislike the Victorian law, it is not going to disappear any time soon.

found Scot to have called Muslims “demons”, a finding whose falsity was exposed in the Court of Appeal finding, but only after that initial finding was repeated around the world by the press.

But how are Australians, and Christians in particular, to be made aware of the challenge and ambitions of Islam?

Christians presenting material on Islam do have a problem of how best to approach the topic. The experience of Christians past and present under Islamic rule has been mostly bad, if not appallingly bad. Whilst Islamic terrorists find no difficulty justifying their actions from Islamic texts, most Muslims (it is to be hoped) either don’t understand the jihadist teaching of the Koran or else choose to interpret it in a more benign fashion.

Rather than starting with topics like jihad and dhimmitude – as important as these topics may be – a more profitable approach is likely to begin with the very different conception Islam holds of their god Allah compared to God’s own self revelation recorded in the Bible. Everything we know and observe that is so disturbing about Islam flows from their false understanding of the nature of God.

And we always need to remind ourselves that the Muslim is our neighbour in

need of Christ, even as we are disconcerted by specific Islamic teaching or reflect upon the terrible ongoing persecution of Christians in majority Muslim lands.

As much as Christians may dislike the Victorian law, it is not going to disappear any time soon. The Government should be quietly pleased by the outcome.

This is not to say other governments will now follow suit. On the contrary, the uproar over free speech resulting from this dispute scuttled any plans by other state governments to bring in Victorian-style religious vilification legislation.

While the settlement between the parties in this case does not constitute a precedent binding on VCAT or a court, the clause concerning the right to “robustly debate religion, including the right to criticise the religious belief of another”, does point to the likely settlement of the case in favour of the two pastors had mediation failed. This observation is strengthened further by the Government’s amendment of the Act in 2006 to include proselytising as “a genuine religious purpose”. This amendment implicitly includes the comparison of two religions, and therefore criticising one and advancing another in the course of that comparison.

Does this mean Christians have nothing to fear from the act?

A lawyer who provided expert legal advice for our approach to Government has this to say: “The Act as amended still leaves a defendant with the burden of proving that they acted reasonably and for a genuine religious purpose. Even if criticism of another religion can now come within a genuine religious purpose, persons doing that retain the burden of proof to show that they acted reasonably in doing so and that their actions were part of a genuine religious purpose. In short, much of the sting has been removed for the time being but there are still traps to be wary of.”

In the meantime we need to strengthen ourselves in our Trinitarian and Christ-centred faith so that we all may have courage to lift our heads out of the bunkers and robustly contend for the Faith with Muslims, atheists or whoever, for make no mistake, in a day of general declension, we have the truth about God, ourselves, and the life well pleasing to God and neighbour.

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

Fundamentalist delusion

Atheists have become the new zealots in the God debate.

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

— Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

Here's Richard Dawkins, sword flailing, mowing down his foes – all of them, Christian, Muslim, Jew, male or female, old or young. He cannot sheath his sword until the world is cleansed of religion, all of it, because it is a superstition, everywhere and always evil, blinding people to the “truth”.

He's on TV, the internet and in print. But he's not alone, he's the vanguard of an army. Just behind him is French philosopher Michel Onfray, gadfly journalist Christopher Hitchens, and Melbourne philosopher of psychology Tamas Pataki – all authors whose books attacking religion have come to me in the past few months.

All have produced outspoken and sometimes vitriolic attacks on religion. It's not enough that they have seen the light themselves, religion everywhere must be extinguished. Let no one believe.

One might easily picture Dawkins as a puritanical preacher, prowling and peering into living rooms to make sure no one is up to sin, such as teaching religious faith to their children. That's “child abuse”. Or as the great evangelist, going into all the world to make disciples and bring the “good news” of atheism to set the captives free. “If (*The God Delusion*) works as I intend it, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down,” he writes.

What a wonderful irony: it's almost impossible not to turn to religious metaphors to describe this new and militant atheism with its grand vision of a new earth where the lion will lie down with the lamb and there will be no more tears. Rid the world of religion, insist the crusaders, and you rid it of its greatest evil.

Observing this bilious farrago of fury, I'm bewildered. Of course militant fundamentalist atheists are entitled to their views, and entitled to want to persuade



**Barney
Zwartz**

others. But as those who claim their passing virtue is reason, why are they so unreasonable?

Am I too strong? Consider these thematic statements from Michel Onfray (*An Atheist Manifesto*): “Monotheism loathes intelligence” and is “fixated on death”. He would even like to deny democratic equality to believers. “Equality between the believer and the thinker who deconstructs the manufacture of belief, the building of a myth, the creation of a fable? ... If we say yes to these questions, then let's stop thinking.”

He's worse than Dawkins because as a philosopher he should be above his deliberately distorted and unbalanced arguments. (Reason's implicit duty to fairness is apparent in the word “reasonable”.) He gave a typical example in Melbourne in May while promoting his cynical and unpleasant book.

Asked to compare social action for justice by atheists and religious people such as nuns and Jesuits, Onfray said they had nothing in common. The nuns acted only for themselves to go to heaven, whereas atheists acted from a love of justice.

It's hard to have any respect for a man who speaks so contemptibly and contemptuously about the self-sacrifice of others. He's wrong. Those nuns do it because they love God, justice and people. No doubt for most it's a complex and shifting set of motivations. All Onfray can manage is the shell of a caricature.

One of the problems with the debate, as framed by these writers, is it's just a shouting match, and they want the bigger

megaphone. There is no need to listen to religious people or engage with their thinking because they are wrong, stupid, brainwashed, deluded or wicked. That demonising of most of the world's population rather closes off discussion.

Tamaki apart, they are long on rhetoric and polemic but little else. They take the most extreme examples from religion, treat them as paradigmatic and allow no exceptions. Tamaki, who considers that the Abrahamic faiths are baleful and delusory, suggests many people believe not just from ignorance or inability to reason, but from unconscious psychological needs. Many – but not all – believers are in the grip of narcissism and mental infantilism. In passing, he criticises Dawkins' writing for its “psychological poverty”.

Tamaki writes as a scholar, with careful and qualified argument. I'm happy to accept that Christians are influenced by unconscious desires and motivations – and so, of course, are atheists. I would have liked his thoughts on that. Christians, constantly told that they turn to religion because psychologically they need a crutch, retort that atheists reject God because psychologically they are afraid to be accountable. (An important caveat: most atheists, like most believers, are neither militant nor fundamentalist.)

About two months ago I began an Age blog on religion (<http://blogs.theage.com.au/thereligiouswrite/>). I was gratified by the large response, but surprised that a sizeable majority came from atheists. Whatever the topic – the new mufti, consumerism, architecture, persecution – they have dominated the debate, constantly returning to argue the fatuity of faith and its evils. Though most posters have been polite, one atheist has sent in 150 posts, always trenchant, usually insulting, seldom reasonable.

Early on, I asked atheists posting to the blog why they were on the front foot. The most common suggestion was that they were responding to a rise in fundamentalist religion – “the back foot hasn't worked. We tried to live and let live, and unfortunately the religious fundamentalists took this to mean we deserved to die,” wrote LD.

Rev. Des said the causes were 9/11 and the internet, which allowed atheists to form a loose community and find their voice. Zadie suggested: "You've had 2500 years to prove the existence of the Christian god and failed. It's time reason was allowed a hearing." Twist was tired of tiptoeing around religious beliefs, while Wyn Richards took issue with "religion's self-proclaimed monopoly on morality".

There's no doubt that religious fundamentalism – especially, but not only, Islamic – is rising around the world and providing cause for concern. However, theists add at least one other explanation. Alister McGrath in *The Dawkins Delusion* says increasing atheist stridency stems partly from fear that atheism is failing, and that *The God Delusion* is more designed to reassure atheists whose faith is faltering than to engage fairly or rigorously with believers. Western atheists thought religion would simply die, but instead it is flourishing. How can belief in God persist when there is no God? "The anxiety is that the coherence of atheism itself is at stake. Might the unexpected resurgence of religion persuade many that atheism itself is fatally flawed as a world view?"

McGrath says it is this deep, unsettling anxiety about the future of atheism that explains Dawkins' dogmatism, aggressive rhetoric, hectoring and bullying.

Interestingly, atheists such as Dawkins seem not to have abolished God so much as replaced him – with "science". The way they speak of science, it is no longer an important and beneficial human practice, as we all recognise, but a transcendent good, the hope of humanity.

But science, as most scientists acknowledge, has limits. As Oxford University philosophy professor Dan Robinson has pointed out in the face of atheists' demands for scientific "evidence" of God, the evidence science produces is "that empirical sort confined chiefly to the marks that matter makes on matter".

It explains causes, but not whether there are reasons behind such causes. It can't determine or explain human achievements in aesthetics, morals, politics or law, let alone whether there is meaning in the universe, or what it is.

Stephen J. Gould was, like Dawkins, an atheist who was an articulate and accessible writer on science. But he clearly saw that the natural sciences are consistent with both atheism and religious belief. Otherwise half his colleagues were enormously stupid – whichever half. Dawkins dismisses this without reflection (as a fundamentalist ideologue must), saying he

simply does not believe Gould could have meant it.

McGrath, like Dawkins an Oxford don, and a molecular biophysicist before he became a theologian, comments: "Whereas Gould at least tries to weigh up the evidence, Dawkins simply offers the atheist equivalent of slick hellfire preaching, substituting turbocharged rhetoric and highly selective manipulation of facts for careful, evidence-based thinking." Dawkins offers surprisingly little scientific analysis, he says.

To McGrath, Dawkins' absolute insistence that real scientists are atheists simply represents the triumph of dogma over observation. He is the mirror image of famous creationist scientist Henry

Morris, who saw the world as polarised between believers and atheist scientists in a cosmic battle of truth against falsehood, good against evil. Dawkins simply replicates this fundamentalist

It shouldn't shock anyone that scientists themselves are prone to human failures.

scenario from the opposite side.

McGrath says many atheist scientists have vigorously opposed Dawkins. Why? He quotes a leaked email from leading atheist philosopher Michael Ruse last year to Daniel Dennett, author of another anti-religious diatribe, calling Dennett and Dawkins "absolute disasters" in the fight against intelligent design.

"What we need is not knee-jerk atheism but serious grappling with the issues – neither of you are willing to study Christianity seriously and engage with the ideas – it is just plain silly and grotesquely immoral to claim that Christianity is simply a force for evil, as Richard (Dawkins) claims." No believer could put it better. Or, as John Stuart Mill said: "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that."

Further, it shouldn't shock anyone that scientists themselves are prone to human failures. This is not a criticism of the scientific method, but it is not always practised with complete purity. Drug company sponsorship of research, and influence over findings, for example, show what problems can arise. Nor are they immune from prejudice. Scientists who are believers often meet intolerance, as Francis Collins, a devout Christian who is director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, told *The New York Times*. "It

should not be a taboo subject, but frankly it often is in scientific circles," he said.

The same article quoted Nobel laureate Herbert Hauptman, who was asked whether one could be a good scientist and believe in God? He replied that "belief in the supernatural, especially belief in God, is not only incompatible with good science, but damaging to the wellbeing of the human race".

Again, Hauptman is fully entitled to his opinion, but a pronouncement from a scientist doesn't make it science. That sort of intolerance stems not from science but other factors of psychology and experience that help shape his thinking. The problem is that because an eminent scientist says so, many people accept it unquestioningly. (The same is true, of course, of eminent religious figures.)

Dawkins and many of his followers seem to be resurrecting a short-lived 20th-century scientific philosophy called logical positivism, which holds that only what you can measure or prove empirically can be called truth. All other discourse is meaningless, especially questions of meaning. It was short-lived, partly because it failed its own test – it couldn't be measured or empirically verified.

The way these books are selling, though, shows they have touched a nerve in modern Western society. And I don't deny that some of their concerns are justified. As an adult, I have been both atheist and Christian, and as both I had and have questions.

No religion has all the answers. Neither does science. Where Dawkins and I can agree, as representatives of the two positions (if I can immodestly assume that role just for a paragraph), is that humans are a tiny and finite part of an overwhelming and infinite cosmos. We are both moved by the awe and wonder the universe inspires.

In an age of extreme polarities, that's a salutary call to humility and perspective from which discussion can be profitable. My blog has provided a microcosm of the God debate, including both ranters and the more irenic who are interested in actually engaging with those who believe differently. I know which are more interesting and persuasive.

As the prophet Isaiah put it, all flesh is as grass – the flower fades and the grass withers. But he also had this advice, which we can all take to heart: "Come now, and let us reason together."

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





Letters

Personal view

I did not write in my capacity as a Federal Court Judge with respect to the letter AP published of mine in June, but as an individual.

*Hon Garry Downes AM,
Sydney*

No one is unscathed

Garry Downes says that he has a fundamental disagreement that the Bible does not teach "male leadership" but on what does he base that disagreement? The Bible does teach that woman is made for man and not man for woman (1 Cor. 11:8). That surely implies male leadership and that is why they are to be obedient to their husbands (Tit. 2:5). Moreover the teaching in Isaiah is that when man does not or

is unable to exercise leadership over woman then it a condemnation upon them. "My people! Children are their oppressors and women rule over them ..." (Isa. 8:12).

Now in spite of the fact that "love suffers long and is not easily provoked" (1 Cor. 13:2-3), he is offended at any insinuation that his beliefs have been influenced by feminism or paganism, yet he says he was a member of the youth fellowship and Procurator of the Presbyterian Church at Dee Why for 20 years from 1960. Yet Dee Why Presbyterian was a "liberal" church, so much so that 50 per cent of the congregation left that church and joined themselves to the Reformed Church of Dee Why in which they had a significant influence. I later attended this church. Now I defy anyone to say that a "liberal" is not influenced by feminism. In fact it would not surprise me if today's feminism did not begin in "liberal" churches.

As for anyone, anywhere in the Western World to say that they have not been influenced by pagan (a broad term) or feminist beliefs, direct or indirect, I think that is foolishness for I know myself that I have, and everyone I know has. Does Mr Downes not know his star sign?

Has he never listened to rock and roll? Does he never watch TV? Has he no Green values? Does he value Aboriginal sacred sites? And is not woman's ordination a feminist value?

While by no means agreeing with any non-biblical argument against women's ordination I do think the rest of Isaiah's lament is true of Australia, "O my people! Those who lead you cause you to err, and destroy the way of your paths." (Isa. 8:12)

*Neil Cadman,
Norman Park, Qld*

Women's ministry

After reading the articles on the role of women in the church, and in light of the subsequent letters promoting the female cause, perhaps a biblical case could be made for women to be excluded from membership of the denomination and the attendant rights. They could be auxiliary members. Then they could be responsible for morning tea and other necessities – just as in the case of the Lodge.

*Stan Gliszczynski, member,
Portland Presbyterian Church*

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Books

**John Newton
From Disgrace to
Amazing Grace**

Jonathan Aitken
London: Continuum, 2007
Reviewed by Iain H. Murray.

This is by no means just a popular biography of Newton, well-timed to coincide with the bicentenary of his death. Popular, rather than academic, it certainly is, but brilliantly written, and founded on first-hand research into original, unpublished sources.

Aitken's work is a valuable and permanent addition to the considerable amount of material on Newton already available. Short chapters, no footnotes and a storyline that keeps the reader engaged, the book will hopefully win a hearing where other Newton titles might not. (I bought my copy in a London bookshop where evangelical literature is not normally found.) Unless the reader is hostile to evangelical Christianity, it is hard to see how anyone could not rise from these pages without a growing esteem for the one time curate of Olney and vicar of St Mary's Woolnoth, London.

There is a good deal of documentation on sources used at the end of the book. Only very occasionally are statements in the text weakened by no explicit reference to the source on which they depend for their authenticity. For instance, the assertions of the subject's sexual immorality in his pre-conversion sea-faring days; and claim that Newton was influential in recommending Carey for Bengal and William Jay for Bath. Newton's closeness to Wilberforce is brought out more fully than we have seen elsewhere, supported by manuscript sources.

Aitken's evangelical commitment is unambiguous. In a typical sentence he writes: "In an age when far too many Church of England incumbents were laid-back, lukewarm or sometimes downright lazy in going about their duties, Newton displayed prodigious energy flowing from a life of prayer and personal dedication to the Lord." The only obvious point at which, for me, his opinion is out of step with Newton's is where he describes Newton's journey to

conversion as courageous. The book would be strengthened if more attention had been given to the theology of conversion, both as it refers to Newton and to his wife, Polly. Similarly missing is some account of 18th-century spiritual conditions – "a predominantly Christian country"? – but that has often been dealt with elsewhere, and the concentration on biography is one of the appeals of the book.

Jonathan Aitken's previous best-known biography was his award-winning life of Richard Nixon. From that subject to the author of "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds" is a long way. Aitken could not have written his Newton biography when he wrote of the American president; that he can write such a book *now* is due to the same experience as took Newton "From Disgrace to Amazing Grace". We are thankful.

Iain H. Murray is a noted author and minister.

**The Great Gain of
Godliness**

Thomas Watson
Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1682, reprinted 2006.
Reviewed by Peter Barnes

Thomas Watson writes in an epigrammatic style which is easy to follow, memorable and thought-provoking. Charles Spurgeon yearned for this work on Malachi 3:16-18, and failed to obtain it, but it has since been discovered and reprinted. The first part is on the character of the godly, and the second part on the good effects of godliness. Oddly enough, the treatise finishes with a treatment of "A Consolation in Affliction", from Psalm 119:65.

Malachi deals with those who speak of God in dull days, and Watson writes: "I believe that one main reason for the decay of the power of godliness is a lack of Christian conference." He adds: "A good life adorns religion, a good tongue propagates it." Like all the Puritans, Watson saw an entrenched failure in sanctification as a sign that one was never justified: "If holiness sparkles in us, it is a sign we are jewels."

There are a couple of errors – a footnote on page 148 is missing, and one on page 24 refers to the wrong Lucian (Watson meant the pagan satirist; the publisher thinks he meant the Christian

martyr at Antioch in AD 312). For all who wish to derive spiritual benefit from the Puritans, Watson is one of the best authors to begin with, and this work maintains Watson's reputation as one of the most readable of the Puritans.

Peter Barnes is books editor of AP.

Leviticus

Welwyn Commentary Series
Philip H. Eveson
Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2007.
Reviewed by Mike Taylor

This is a thorough and clear explanation of the foreign and difficult book of Leviticus. How many people have floundered in those deep waters? Eveson takes the reader by the hand and guides him through, making the journey a pleasant and informative one.

He writes for a general audience, and so endeavours to explain each difficult idea. His explanations are clear and simple. Sitting squarely within the reformed tradition, Eveson offers straightforward biblical answers to the many questions of Leviticus.

The best part of this commentary is Eveson's constant desire to show how Leviticus points to, and is fulfilled by, our Lord Jesus Christ. The commentary is overflowing with helpful application and challenges that are clearly relevant for Christians today. Each chapter reads like a sermon, engaging both the text and our world.

The simplicity of this commentary will be frustrating to some. Generally, Eveson does not offer an appraisal of different interpretations of various issues in Leviticus. He does not give detailed discussion of individual verses. As an aid to serious study it would be very beneficial, but insufficient.

Its simplicity makes it very readable and helpful for any Christian who just wants to read through Leviticus. Apart from its length, it could be used devotionally. Eveson has made Leviticus accessible to all, by offering a simple guide to its rituals and showing its relevance to the Christian life.

Mike Taylor is a student at Moore College, Sydney.

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Alone before God

Loneliness is the most devastating malady of the age.

One of the most affecting lines I have ever read appeared, of all places, in the *New York Times* of 20 May 2007. A man called Richard Guthrie received a number of those irritating phone calls from telemarketers, who then sold his name to con artists.

What was extraordinary was Guthrie's attitude to the telemarketers, and what this led to. Guthrie explained: "I loved getting those calls. Since my wife passed away, I don't have many people to talk with. I didn't even know they were stealing from me until everything was gone."

Advances in telecommunications have not led to advances in any sense of community or a reduction in the number of lonely people. No wonder the Beatles sang in *Eleanor Rigby* of all the lonely people, and no wonder Paul Tournier referred to loneliness as "the most devastating malady of this age".

Poor Richard Guthrie illustrates the truth that for most people "it is not good that man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). Hence we also read that it is God who settles the solitary in a home (Ps. 68:6). Being with the wrong company can deceive us and ruin our morals (1 Cor. 15:32), but being alone – even being alone in a crowd – can be a devastating experience.

Friendship is one of the consolations of this vain world: "Two are better than one ... for if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!" (Eccles. 4:9-10). A friendship betrayed is a particularly hurtful experience (Ps. 41:9). It is natural to look for comforters, and devastating when there are none (Ps. 69:20).

Jeremiah writes of the isolation that can come from being a child of God in a sinful and rebellious world: "I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because Your hand was upon me, for You had filled me with indignation" (Jer.15:17). The story of Athanasius is often recounted in terms of *Athanasius contra mundum* – Athanasius against the world. To believe as



Peter Barnes

Athanasius did, that Christ alone is the divine Saviour, when even the religious world is obsessed with compromise, and is a lonely business. Then, as now, the world is surprised when Christians do not join it in debauchery, and it maligns them (1 Pet. 4:4).

Christians are not made of cast iron, and the apostle Paul himself, when imprisoned and awaiting execution, felt his vulnerability as a human being. His second letter to Timothy contains the poignant request: "Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me" (2 Tim.4:9-11a).

On the night before His crucifixion, even the Lord Jesus Christ looked upon His disciples with deep affection as "those who have stayed with Me in My trials" (Luke 22:28). They failed to measure up as friends as three times they fell asleep when He had asked them to watch and pray (Mtt. 26:36-46). In His humanity, our Lord craved human company as He prepared for the next day when He would be forsaken by God and man.

Paul and even Jesus longed for company in their trials. Paul notes that at his first defence no one came to stand by him,

then he adds: "But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me" (see 2 Tim.4:16-17). Christ too commented: "Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave Me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me" (John 16:32). Lesser mortals, exemplified by the Puritan, Thomas Brooks, have experienced something similar: "Though my comfort is gone, yet the God of my comfort abides."

This is a fallen, fractured, and alienated world. We are not what we were created to be, and this affects all relationships. In the present expression of the new creation, there should, however, be some substantial healing of that sense of alienation. The Christian is restored to a right relationship with God and with his fellow Christians. He is, says Paul, "one new man in place of the two" (Eph. 2:15). Before there was the old Jew-Gentile hostility, but in Christ that is transformed. The new community in Christ is to be where there is compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness (Col. 3:12-13). As Dick Lucas comments: "It is God's purpose that in the local church should be seen a glimpse of the new man."

In Christ and with His people, the effects of the fall will remain, but there is also healing and blessing in this broken world. Grace leads to brothers dwelling together in unity (Ps. 133:1). It is true, as Bonhoeffer put it: "Self-justification and judging others go together, as justification by grace and serving others go together." The Pharisees thought they were righteous before God and so despised others (Luke 18:9); the Christian stands on grace alone and so seeks to serve others.

Peter Barnes is minister of Revesby Presbyterian Church, Sydney. 

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