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When Christians sing *Guide me O Thou Great Jehovah*, we are responding to the many promises of Scripture that God will guide us. As we read the Bible we discover this to be so. From Genesis to Revelation we find that God has guided His people through many different modes of revelation – audible voices, visions, pillars of cloud and fire, signs and prophecy.

The question is, how does He guide us today? Should we still expect Him to use the same forms of disclosure that played a crucial role in Israel's history? For instance, does God still speak to us with an audible voice as He spoke to Moses? Are we meant to put out a fleece in the same way as Gideon? Should we elect church leaders by using the lot? What place should we give to dreams and visions? What are we to make of claims to contemporary prophecy?

One of our commitments as Presbyterians is to the importance of biblical theology. We recognise that there is a definite progress in the way in which God has revealed Himself to His people over time. As the Old Testament era passed away, God introduced a new way of communicating with us. During the period of the Old Covenant He spoke in a variety of different ways, but now in the age of the Gospel God has spoken finally and definitively in His Son (Heb. 1:1-2).

The clear implication is that these former Old Covenant modes of communication are outmoded with the arrival of Jesus Christ. What was makeshift and transitory has now given way to a complete and permanent source of guidance in the Scriptures. The primitive Old Testament forms of guidance have been superseded by the final and superior "tradition/teaching" of the New Testament (2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6).

It is interesting that Paul counsels Timothy to guard the good "deposit" which God has left us (2 Tim. 1:14). This constitutes the "pattern of sound teaching" which is to be found in "all Scripture" (2 Tim. 3:16). Clearly, the only source of guidance which God has now authorised for believers is to be found in the Scriptures, interpreted by the Holy Spirit, all other forms of revelation having now ceased.

Peter Hastie 

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He leadeth me

God guides – but He doesn't send emails from heaven.



The Rev. Peter Bloomfield taught at high schools in NSW before completing theological studies at the Reformed College in Geelong during the late 1970s. Since 1990 he has ministered in the Presbyterian Church at Bald Hills after pastoral ministries in the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia and the Westminster Presbyterian Church.

He has served on the lecturing staff at the Queensland Theological Hall for 18 years. Peter taught a variety of subjects there including Greek, Old Testament, and especially Homiletics. Peter has also written four books with Evangelical Press in recent years – in addition to a book on guidance, he has written three expositions of Old Testament books (Esther, Job, and Judges). Peter and his wife Lesley have two daughters and three grandchildren.

Peter, do you find that many Christians have a real struggle with the idea of divine guidance?

Yes, it's a great problem for many people and causes them a lot of stress and



**Peter Bloomfield
talks to
Peter Hastie**

confusion. Christians know that God guides them – the Psalmist tells us that “He leads me beside quiet waters... He guides my feet in paths of righteousness” (Ps. 23:2, 3) – but they have difficulties in knowing how He leads. For instance, does God communicate personally with us, revealing His own individual plan in all the twists and turns of our lives? Are we meant to get on to some heavenly chatline and get answers for what clothes we should wear or what we should eat for dinner tonight?

The problem is that many Christians are unaware of the enormous liberty God has given us in decision-making. The “will of God” from our perspective is not just one small dot in the centre of a circle. Rather, it is a number of different possibilities where a range of alternative choices are pleasing to God. So long as we

act according to the word of God, we are free to decide as we wish. And this is a problem for some of us because many Christians cannot cope with this sort of freedom.

Again, there's another problem we face when we talk about the will of God. It arises because the expression “the will of God” is an ambiguous term. It has two distinct meanings. The right approach to guidance begins by recognising that distinction. God's will is either revealed or unrevealed. His revealed will is also called His moral or preceptive will. It refers to what God has plainly said, what He expects and demands from people. It consists of all the ethical principles that He wants to shape our thoughts, words and deeds. It tells us what should happen and what should not happen.

However, there is another aspect to God's will which is not revealed. We call this God's sovereign or secret will. It's God's master plan for everything in the universe. It is a blueprint of all that will definitely come to pass throughout history.

However, we face a problem in knowing this secret will. If you want to know what is going to happen tomorrow morning, then you are going to have to wait until tomorrow afternoon to find out. We simply cannot know in advance what God has in store for us in the future. In other words, it's impossible to know God's so-called "perfect plan for your life". When people are looking for this type of guidance, they will be frustrated. God does not give it. We only know it from hindsight. There's another point too: there's no advantage in being able to pry into God's sovereign will, because you cannot possibly miss out on it anyway. It is impossible to avoid or frustrate what God has secretly purposed or decreed.

Is this desire to know God's secret will a major problem that Christians have in understanding guidance?

Yes, I think it is. When you fail to understand that one aspect of God's plan is always hidden from us, then it's easy to become engrossed with looking for what some Christians think of as "God's perfect plan for my life". Inevitably guidance then becomes a search for that plan – "the centre of God's will for me" – in everything. This implies that doing God's will always amounts to just one possible outcome based on one right decision. For example, if God's perfect plan for my life includes marriage, then I must somehow "discover" the identity of the partner He intends for me. This turns decision-making into a mystery pursuit. We become detectives trying to discover in advance what God has decreed. The assumption is that God leaves a trail of clues for us to find and fit together like the bits of a jigsaw puzzle.

The problem with this approach is that "God's perfect plan for my life" is not a biblical concept. In fact, it can lead to a lot of frustration because it just doesn't work. I defy anyone to show me where in the Bible they can discover God's will for the endless little decisions we have to make like which shoes to wear, what to eat, or what form of transport to use. It simply can't be done. Nevertheless, a perfect plan must include all these things. Thankfully, people become inconsistent and end up ditching this approach. They simply make a free choice based on common sense and personal preference. Of course, there will always be pious Christians who will "baptize" their decisions with religious mantras like, "I felt led to do this; I have a real sense of peace about this". But the Bible never speaks like that either.

The right approach to guidance recognises that God has "shared" only the broad parameters of his plan but not the intricate details. Asking if something is "God's will" is really not helpful because it's an ambiguous term with two different meanings, as I have already mentioned. All we need is God's moral or preceptive will. Guidance is not a search for divine messages outside the Bible. There is no extra revelation to look for. We have the whole counsel of God, namely everything the Bible teaches or logically implies.

Does the fact that we are sinners mean that we are always going to have troubles with guidance?

Yes, it does.

Good guidance comes from knowing the Bible well, and using proper methods for interpreting and applying it. Since we are all imperfect it's easy to make mistakes. A high view of Scripture

is good but that will not automatically prevent us from misusing it. We need to let factors such as the literary genre of the text as well as the historical, grammatical, and contextual details play their full part in correctly reading the Bible for us. We should never interpret one part of the Bible in a way that is contrary to another part or the teaching of the whole. If we ignore the organic (progressive) nature of revelation then we are likely to make lots of errors. We are bound to make wrong decisions if we treat all biblical texts without respect to their cultural background and their place in God's unfolding plan of revelation. For instance, there are some Christians who think that all the laws of theocratic Israel still apply directly to the Christian church, which is clearly wrong.

Again, even when we correctly interpret the Bible sin can still affect us. Our decisions might be shaped by undesirable pressures like covetousness, lust, ambition, and pride. Personal integrity is clearly a factor in guidance and each of us must answer to God for that.

If God has a plan for us which will be fulfilled, how does He reveal it to us as individuals?

God fulfills His purposes by means of "up front" guidance (corresponding to

His revealed will) and "behind the scenes" guidance (corresponding to His secret will). The Bible is God's candid up front guidance. There He tells us what should and should not happen in the world. We are responsible to act accordingly. But the master of the universe also works behind the scenes to bring about good results that would not otherwise occur. In Paul's words, "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

Of course, we are usually unaware of this happening. What we do experience can be so unpleasant that it feels like God has actually lost control. It may feel like nothing is working for our good. Job didn't know what God was doing behind the scenes when he was afflicted with suffering, nor did Jeremiah in the pit, nor Joseph in prison. But the Bible asserts that God always remains in control. God is mysteriously guiding His people according to His sovereign plan.

This behind the scenes guidance is unpredictable since it allows many things to happen which God's up-front guidance says should not happen. He tells us up-front not to cheat, or murder, or steal, or tell lies. These happen, but God overrules them as He pleases. The problem is that there is no standard rule for predicting how God will direct the course of history. Such information is not available for our daily decision-making.

It is important to trust in God's behind the scenes guidance. Our spiritual maturity depends on that. So we sing "Guide me O Thou great Jehovah ... hold me with your powerful hand". Even when we get things wrong, God is behind the scenes guiding so that our ultimate good is achieved. But He does not tell us the steps in that process: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God" (Deut. 29:29). Our duty is to listen to God's up front guidance and walk by that light alone. God's secret will reassures us, but only His revealed will can guide our decisions.

What implications does this have for other ways of trying to discover the future such as fortune-telling and astrology? What should Christians think of these practices?

Well, God has told in the Bible what He wants us to know. The rest of His plans are "His secret things". Insofar as fortune-telling and astrology try to uncover the hidden purposes of God, they are clearly wrong. Scripture itself plainly

Personal integrity is clearly a factor in guidance and each of us must answer to God for that.

forbids trying to pry into the future. I think Isaiah chapter 8 sums it up well. After rebuking Israel for even considering contact with clairvoyants of any kind, the prophet asks the loaded question ... "Should not a people consult their God? ... To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn."

Guidance is a hotly contested subject among believers. Some Christians think that God leads in very specific and dramatic ways such as voices, dreams and inner promptings while others think that God has given us nothing more than a set of biblical principles. What are the extremes we need to avoid?

One extreme to avoid is rationalism. Some Christians think that guidance is merely a clinical intellectual matter of rightly interpreting and applying the Bible, while ignoring the importance of a loving, obedient and personal walk with God. Another extreme is individualism. This happens when Christians ignore the fruits of great scholarship and the historic creeds. Manipulation is also another problem, where we try to bargain with God and pry into His secret will.

Personally, I am convinced the greatest danger facing evangelical Christians today is the resurgence of mysticism. Mysticism takes place when we treat mere experiences as divine revelations. This is now quite common and has become a disturbing trend. Christians today are repeating the errors of the past when they use mystical language about "feeling led" as they baptize various experiences as the promptings of God. These problems have a long history in groups like the Gnostics, Montanists, Pietists, and Quakers.

The Protestant Reformation, with its focus on "sola Scriptura", delivered us from mysticism by focusing on the Bible alone. It's sad to see mysticism becoming popular again in churches around the world. I have no hesitation in calling it the scandal of the modern church. That's

why a considerable part of my book *What the Bible Teaches About Guidance* is devoted to proof of the sufficiency of Scripture.

There are now lots of churches with self-styled "prophets" who claim that God has given them special messages. It's irrelevant whether these messages come through tongues or "words of knowledge" or the leading of the Spirit, or any other name. The bottom-line is that these alleged revelations are in addition to the Bible.

A lot of confusion arises because people fail to distinguish the Holy Spirit's work as the comforter from his work as the revealer.

Virtually every cult relies on this sort of revelation. It is not orthodox Christianity.

The only place where we find true and authoritative guidance for our knowledge and relationship with God is Holy Scripture. It is perfect, God-breathed, and sufficient to equip

believers "for every good work". It has no gaps that need to be filled or supplemented with fresh revelation from heaven. This explains why the Presbyterian Church of Australia rightly confesses, "Nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or human traditions" (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 1:6). These are the basic truths of historic Christianity.

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in guidance? Does He bring us fresh revelations of God's will or does He merely help us to understand its full meaning?

It's impossible to understand God's Word without the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14), but a lot of confusion arises because people fail to distinguish His work as the comforter from His work as the revealer. As our comforter, He draws near at various times, and in various ways, providing help for us according to our needs. His help may take the form of restraining, protecting, strengthening, motivating, reviving, or encouraging us. In this ministry we come to experience God Himself. This is not the Spirit revealing His will and word. That has ceased with the Bible. Rather this is the Spirit revealing Himself. This is God drawing close to us in His gracious embrace. The distinction between these two ministries of the Spirit

is the distinction between Christian experience and Christian guidance.

The guidance is uniform and normative because the same Spirit reveals the same truth to all of us in Scripture. We must all live by the same inspired words. Within that uniform framework we are free to make our personal decisions. But the Christian experience is multiform and non-normative. It is different for every Christian. No Christian can expect or require anyone else to have precisely the same spiritual experiences. These ministries of the Holy Spirit are both vital, but they are not the same. We must not equate experience and guidance, nor can we define what we may feel as a message from God. Happenings are not hints. There is always a degree of mystery in the things humans experience.

In the Old Testament God revealed Himself through prophets, Urim and Thummim, the lot, dreams, signs and by direct speech. Are Christians under the New Covenant meant to seek any of these things?

No, these things belong to the age of the church's infancy, the age of incomplete revelation. The Westminster Confession is unambiguous: "God's former ways of revealing his will have ceased" (1:1). There is no further revelatory product and no further revelatory process. God has ceased giving His will. He finished speaking when He sent his Son. Jesus is God's final word, the climax of all revelation (Heb. 1:1). He has nothing more to say. God's last word is essentially, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him" (Mark 9:7). We "listen to him" until the end of the New Testament. Beyond that we are hearing strange voices.

On the basis that God spoke to Elijah in a still small voice and Christ revealed Himself to Paul in a blinding light, should we expect amazing encounters with God as a means of divine guidance? Is there anywhere in the New Testament where we are taught to seek special revelations of such a nature?

Elijah and Paul are not paradigms of us. God chose them for unique roles, as instruments of revelation. What happened to them was typical of all true prophets and apostles – they received direct revelations of God's will. That is not the case for the vast majority of God's people in other ages. We need to understand that a biblical account of some event is not necessarily a prescription. We have

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the inspired record of these revelations in Scripture. That is all we need.

Does God intervene anywhere in the New Testament in answer to a request to manifest His will?

When the Apostles nominated three candidates to replace Judas as an apostle they requested God to show His choice. God obliged by causing the lot to fall upon Matthias. We should keep in mind that this happened during the final period of ongoing revelation (there was no complete Bible at this stage). I think it's also significant that this issue was not decided by a subjective appeal like "I felt led", or "God told me", or "we had a real sense of peace about Matthias". God used the objective indicator of the "lot" as He had done in the past.

Can you explain how God guides us through the Scripture? To what extent does He guide us through its teachings, commands and prohibitions?

Even a perfect map will produce wrong guidance if we misread it. Church history is littered with the wrecks of misguided people who thought they were doing God's will. The Apostle Peter warns us that the Bible contains "some things hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort". God certainly does not guide us via ignorant mishandling of His word. True guidance requires a commitment to good scholarship and to the harmony and unity of Scripture. Despite what some modern scholars have claimed, there are no secret encoded messages to be dredged up from beneath the surface of the words.

It's almost certain that we will get poor guidance if we follow mantras like, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it", as if the Bible is transparently simple and requires no intense thought about its meaning. It's much wiser to follow the line "a text without its context is a pre-text". And since God is consistent, we should be suspicious of any so-called guidance that is contrary to good theology. A wise man values the historic creeds and stays in the main stream of orthodox scholarship. To seek God's guidance in novel ways from Scripture, especially in ways that are foreign to well-established biblical interpretation, is a recipe for disaster.

How important to receiving guidance is it to develop a heart for God?

It's very important. We cannot expect

the illumination of the Holy Spirit if He is grieved by our lives. We cannot expect heat from a fire that is quenched. Personal integrity is an important factor for divine guidance.

How should we apply these principles to marriage, for example? Are there certain prohibitions to note? What specific teachings about marriage would we need to know? Does the Bible help us to determine the kind of person we should be looking for?

Apart from avoiding close blood relationships, the Bible warns believers not to marry unbelievers regardless of how attractive they find them. God's covenant with us in Christ always sets the legitimate boundaries for every other commit-



Church history is littered with the wrecks of misguided people who thought they were doing God's will.

ment we might consider, especially marriage. Sadly, it's not uncommon for Christians to find out the hard way about the folly of ignoring this truth. Personally, I am not inclined to draw up a check-list for a good marriage partner. References to "compatibility" are simplistic. Experience often shows that contrasting personalities with diverse interests and gifts can enjoy long happy marriages. Presumably some sort of chemistry is involved, but genuine love means living to be a blessing for one another. There is a lot of freedom here and God is amazingly gracious. As long as the person you propose to marry is a committed Christian, the safest advice is to marry a reasonable person with adequate social skills and whose company you enjoy.

Does God have any guidance for Christians who may be considering divorce?

There are many simplistic opinions on this complex issue, like "The Lord hates divorce". Yes He does, but He also hates adultery. He hates wives being used as punching bags, or mentally abused, or treated as a piece of property. The Bible (properly understood) allows divorce as a

gracious alternative to a sentence of abuse until death. But even a legitimate divorce is no panacea. It might solve an immediate problem but it inevitably creates others. Anyone considering divorce should first get advice from mature Christians with proven competence at interpreting both Scripture and people. Let them help you weigh up all the options and the likely consequences. If possible, you should also speak to reasonable people who have suffered divorce. Above all, avoid naïve and simplistic individuals and those who make light of divorce! Also, avoid the self-righteous on their high moral ground (the "holier than thou") and steer well clear of legalists. Give yourself plenty of time to think deeply before you make such a momentous decision.

How does God lead us with respect to jobs and callings? Are some areas of work inappropriate for Christians? How do we know if God is leading us into some particular career path?

The choice of careers is a matter of Christian liberty. There is no right or wrong job in this vast area of freedom with the exception that you should exclude any job that compromises Christian ethics. The best way to make a wise choice is to get a sober assessment of your gifts and interests. There are different sorts of tests which people can undergo which are quite helpful in providing guidance.

Does God guide us through prayer? Why is it so essential to guidance?

Prayer is an important element in seeking guidance because when you pray, you recognise that you are absolutely dependent on God's wisdom for direction and that you must have a submissive heart to do His will. The problem is that not all prayers about guidance honour God. Some prayers virtually deny the sufficiency of Scripture. The denial may be unintentional but nonetheless it's real.

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It happens when people ask God to provide new or extraordinary revelation or when they ask the Lord to “speak to my heart” about what decision to take. Not only is this asking God to spoon-feed us like babies by making the decision for us, but it also embraces the idea of “ongoing revelation”, an error that is emphatically denied in the historic Christian creeds.

Should we pray to “discover” God’s will?

No, we shouldn’t be praying to discover God’s will at all. There’s no need to discover it because we already have it fully revealed. Our task is to correctly read, interpret, understand and then apply it to our daily lives. Our prayers should focus on these sorts of issues. So we pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit... “Lord, help me to gather up the biblical teachings in context, in harmony, and in proportion. Give me a right understanding of Scripture as it relates to the decision I need to make”.

We should also pray for wisdom and discernment to correctly assess the circumstances around the decision. We need wisdom to keep things in proportion, to set correct priorities, and to avoid prejudicial blind-spots. We need wisdom to deal with the opinions and reactions of others, and wisdom to know how to handle the

possible consequences of our decision. We also need discernment to know which of any valid alternatives will be the most expedient, useful and practical.

And we should pray for the humility and spiritual discipline to be submissive to Scripture, especially when it goes “against the grain”. Godliness involves self-denial. Options that may personally suit us might be detrimental to others. If we put the interests of the kingdom of God first,

One of the consequences of God’s common grace is that non-Christians are often some of the most useful and gifted people.

there is always a cost. We also need humility after a decision is made. No matter how wise our decision is, the results may not be what we hoped for. God is not bound to join the dots according to our mental projections.

What place does godly counsel have in determining God’s will?

The counsel of wise Christians can be very helpful, especially when we are facing several legitimate options. It’s a mark of humility to recognise that others can know far more than we do. The

writer of the Proverbs says: “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” (Prov. 15:22). Wisdom learns from those who have walked a path before us. The way to get good answers is to ask good questions. But at the end of the day we need to weigh up all opinions. We also need to assess how godly the counsel is.

How important is it to get advice from mature Christians? Should we ever seek guidance from non-Christians?

One of the consequences of God’s common grace is that non-Christians are often some of the most useful and gifted people. They frequently have invaluable advice to assist our decisions in important matters like health, housing, education, finances, and law. Being a Christian doesn’t mean that you are a better mechanic or builder than someone who is unconverted. Sadly, in some cases it doesn’t even guarantee greater integrity. Only a fool would refuse good advice from people qualified to give it.

Is the Presbyterian Church’s system of government, with its opportunities for godly people to be directly involved in the decision-making process, well adapted to discern the will of God?

In *theory* our polity should screen out wrong forms of guidance, but in *reality* problems still occur. The best system is only as good as the people in it. Ministers and elders should be godly and have a deep knowledge of the faith – at least, that’s the theory. However, there are certain realities that arise as a result of sin. For instance, do ministers and elders always take their ordination vows as seriously as they should? Do all office-bearers actually understand the theology embodied in those vows? Do congregations always give full respect to biblical qualifications when they elect elders? Are Presbyterians free of unhelpful traditions? Is a plethora of committees a sure way to wisdom?

The answers to these questions are fairly obvious. I remain committed to Presbyterian polity but I am aware that sin affects every system of church government. Having served in three different Presbyterian denominations, I have sometimes witnessed people claiming to know the will of God who use mystical, subjective, and guilt-tripping practices to discern it. The “God told me” error is alive in Presbyterian circles and we deceive ourselves if we deny it.

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God's final word

Direct revelation ended with the New Testament.

With the meteoric rise of modern Pentecostalism and its claim to ongoing revelation it is hard not to ignore the challenges it puts before the traditional churches. Should we have prophets? Should we be speaking in tongues? Should we expect miracles? Indeed it is these very things that are being thrust forward as the ingredients of church growth and success.

And we have to ask: why are the Pentecostal churches growing and the traditional churches shrinking? Have we missed something? And where does the Bible say that tongues, prophecies and miracles have ceased from the church?

There are a number of passages in the New Testament which I believe help us to answer some of these questions, particularly on the matter of revelation. Let's begin with Hebrews 1:1-3: "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (NKJV).

To understand these verses we must take into account the main purpose of the writer of this book which was to convince his readers of the superiority of the New Covenant over against that of the Old. They were hankering after the "good old days" of Old Covenant practices. The apostle Paul had an ongoing battle with this throughout much of his ministry. So this wasn't unique to the Hebrew church.

In these first few verses of the book the writer gets straight to the heart of the issue: the matter of revelation. How does God speak to us today and how is this better than the way He spoke to the Old Testament church? In answering this question he makes a direct comparison between two different forms.

Old Testament revelation was "at various times", "in various ways" and by various "prophets". The key word here is "various". It came at various times beginning with Moses and arriving piecemeal



**Paul
Cornford**

over a thousand-year period (approximately). It came in various ways such as by visions, dreams, voices, a sheep's fleece, the urim and thummim etc. And it came by various prophets beginning with Moses at around 1500 BC and ending with Malachi at around 400 BC.

By contrast the writer describes New Testament revelation, i.e., the revelation of the "last days" (Acts 2:17) as God having spoken to us in a son.

Let's stop there a moment. I want to suggest that this is one of the most profound statements in the whole Bible and worthy of our meditation. The writer has just answered all of our questions concerning New Testament revelation. Why do I say that? Let's take a closer look.

The words "has spoken" in the Greek are in the aorist tense which can be illustrated by a full stop. It denotes completed action or something that has happened once and does not continue. This suggests that the speaking of God in Christ, either through Christ Himself or His apostles, is a completed action that terminates with the New Testament.

The main difference then between the Old and New Testament revelatory modes is the difference between a plurality of prophets, modes and portions on the one hand and the singularity of prophet, mode and portion on the other. And in case you are thinking that God has short changed the New Testament church, the writer goes on to describe who and what this "Son" is. He is, among other things, the "brightness of His glory

and the express image of His person".

John gives us a similar description of this revelation in the following passages.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father?'" (John 14:8-9).

In both of these texts we see something of the uniqueness of the revelation of God in Christ. It is as if John were telling us that not even all of the Old Testament prophets put together could rival the utter clarity and transcendence of the revelation that Jesus provides us.

We conclude, then, that the Lord Jesus Christ is *the* prophet of the New Testament church who has given us a vastly superior revelation to anything the ancient church ever received through its various prophets and various modes. Jesus has met all of the New Testament church's prophetic needs and has rendered obsolete the dreams, visions and voices of the Old Testament dispensation.

Having answered the fundamental question concerning the nature of New Testament revelation we go on to explore exactly how this singular act of revelation was achieved and how it applies to the church of the last days.

We know that Jesus' entire public ministry was completed within three years. This was well and good for the church of Jesus' day but what about the rest of the church who didn't see and hear Him speak and weren't able to put their hands into His nail prints? To understand the mechanism of New Testament revelation, we turn to John 14:25-26: "These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

Although these words were addressed

Jesus has met all of the church's prophetic needs and has rendered obsolete the dreams, visions and voices of the Old Testament dispensation.

specifically to the 11 (Paul came later) it guaranteed them a good memory of all that Jesus had taught them throughout His public ministry with the help of the Holy Spirit. And what better way to record this teaching than in writing; from which came the New Testament. Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit enabled His apostles and their associates to record the teachings and events of Jesus in a way that guaranteed their truth and accuracy right down to the very words used. This is called "verbal inspiration" and is a core doctrine of the Presbyterian Church.

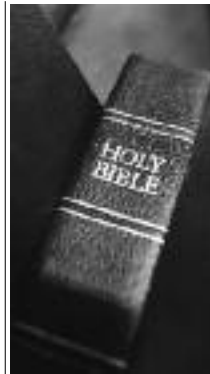
We might feel at this stage that we have more than adequately answered the challenge put to us by modern non-cessationists (those who believe in ongoing revelation). But when we turn to the book of Acts and Paul's teaching on the charismata we find that new revelation was still coming thick and fast right up until the end of the apostolic period. For example, in the apostolic church we have prophets such as Agabus who prophesied a great famine that almost wiped out the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-28) and Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 14 to seek the gift of prophecy.

So how do we explain this in the light of Hebrews 1:1-2? We turn to 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. "Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it

will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Here Paul tells us that prophecies and tongues and the supernatural gift of knowledge will fail when the "perfect" comes. The question is: what is this "perfect" that Paul is talking about and when

The full canon of Scripture taken together does indeed provide us with a "face to face" encounter with the divine character.



will it be? Some commentators see it as the final return of the Lord Jesus Christ and verse 12 would seem to support that view. However the word rendered "perfect" by our translators can just as easily be rendered "complete". In fact, if we take into account the previous verse where Paul is talking about the "partial", it is more likely that he would contrast this with the "complete" rather than the "perfect".

There are several good reasons why we should interpret the "complete" as a reference to the completion of the New Testament canon of Scripture and the partial as Paul's word for what is essentially an Old Testament mode of revelation still operating in the church up until the end of the apostolic age. Let's consider them separately:

Paul's reference to the partial: In verse 9 Paul refers to the supernatural gifts of tongues, prophecy and knowledge as partial. This reminds us of what the writer to Hebrews says about the nature of Old Testament revelation which came in parts: a part here and a part there, but was never complete. If this is true then it means that the Old Testament mode of various prophets, various modes and various parts persisted in the church up until the completion of the New Testament canon at which time the "partial" was no longer necessary.

Paul's use of the childhood metaphor: In verse 11 Paul compares prophecy, tongue-speaking and supernatural knowledge with childhood and the coming of the "complete" with adulthood. This is not the only instance where Paul uses this metaphor. We also find it in Galatians 3:23 - 4:7 where he compares the church of the Old Testament as a child under the tutelage of the Mosaic law. This church comes of age in the "fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4) when "God sent forth his Son".

P*Paul's use of the mirror metaphor:* In verse 12 Paul goes on to describe tongues, prophecy and supernatural knowledge as looking into a dim mirror. We know that the mirrors of Paul's time were of polished brass and gave only a dim reflection. The "complete", on the other hand, is like a face to face encounter where we see others as clearly as they see us, or to use Paul's words, to know others as they know us. The question arises: is there any sense in which the completed canon of scripture gives us a face to face encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ?

The mirror metaphor is not about what Jesus actually looked like. If that were important God would have preserved an image or an inspired drawing of his face. But we do know that it was the divine character of Jesus that the apostles came face to face with and which they bequeathed to the future church in the Scriptures. And it is no overstatement to say that the full canon of Scripture including the books of the Old and New Testaments taken together do indeed provide us with this type of "face to face" encounter with the divine character.

In conclusion, we affirm along with the writer to the Hebrews and the apostle Paul, that the revelation of the completed canon of Scripture, especially the Old and New Testaments taken together, is actually far superior to the partial mode of prophecies, tongues and miracles. It is as superior as adulthood is to childhood, as a face to face encounter is to polished brass, and as the complete is to the partial.

Paul Cornford is the minister of North Pine Presbyterian Church, Brisbane.

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Marriage guidance

Are you asking the right questions?

To get married, or not to get married is not as easy as it seems. For a start, there's an apparent theological difficulty. In the book of Genesis we read, "it is not good for the man to be alone" (2:18). This seems to suggest that marriage ought to be for everyone. But then in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, we read, "It is good for a man not to marry" (7:1).

Is this a contradiction or is Paul saying that there are some exceptions to the general rule? It seems that the latter is more likely the true interpretation. However, if it's OK to be married or single, how do we work out whether we should marry, and if so, what sort of a marriage partner should we be looking for?

Let's assume that God has gifted you in such a way that you are meant to be married (1 Cor. 7:7). Now for the big question: Who is the right person and where is he or she? *I'm waiting!* Why aren't they here yet? Maybe they are here and I haven't realised it? Oops! Better marry my girlfriend quickly! What if he/she doesn't come along in time? What if I don't meet every single available person in the world before it's too late and therefore I never meet the right one? Panic! How will I know?

If you are a single person who is troubled by uncertainty over whom you should marry, or panic over whether you will ever be able to get married, then read on.

God loves us too much to leave us without guidance in every area of our lives, and how to get married to the right person is no exception. As the creator and sustainer of life and relationships, God gives us the wisdom and warning we need from Scripture as we contemplate marriage.

First, let's look at some important questions that we should be asking ourselves as we consider the possibility of entering into a life-long marriage relationship with a potential husband or wife.

One is, are we truly content in God regardless of our condition in life? The reality that the Bible so clearly spells out is that if you're not content to be single, you certainly won't be content married. Paul



**David and
Renee Hann**

says we need to be content in whatever circumstances God has appointed for us. His testimony is, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation" (Phil 4:12). We must recognise that He has the guiding hand in our circumstances (Proverbs 19:21). God will determine our marital status.

If we try to take matters into our own hands then our lives can become very complicated. Eve wanted to do just that – to take over God's job. You may find yourself doing this when your desire to be married usurps your desire to honour the Lord. Ask yourself whether the relationship you are seeking is more about fulfilling your own needs rather than serving the Lord. You must accept that God doesn't owe you a husband or wife. He may have some other plan for you. Remember that God's wisdom transcends our own: "How unsearchable His judgments and His paths beyond tracing out?" (Rom. 11:33).

Another is, are you praying to glorify God in your decision? "Dear God, please give me a spouse." Is this the kind of prayer God wants to hear? Perhaps a reason for the Lord's silence in response to these sorts of prayers is that He wants us to grow in godliness. Our prayers reflect our maturity – one of the reasons that "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" is that the prayers of the righteous reflect the Lord's pleasing will (James 5:16). By reading the Scriptures and praying daily, we will be more able to keep a proper perspective on our desire to

be married, and will be more likely to respond to God's potential calling in other areas of our lives.

A third question is, is your proposed marriage partner a Christian? Paul warns us, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14). Remember that finding a Christian isn't about finding someone who says they are a Christian and goes to a reputable church. The Bible tells us "by their fruit you will know them" (Mt 7:16, 20).

Look for someone whose actions reflect their hearts' desire to know our Lord Jesus more deeply and on a daily basis. Find someone who displays humility in speech and action: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit" (Ps. 51:17). Make sure they are honest: "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts" (Ps. 51:6). Even Christians have been deceived by others who have withheld information about drug use, gambling and a criminal past. Be assured that they acknowledge their sin (Ps. 51:6). Are the fruits of the Spirit obvious in their lives?

Fourth, are you committed to sexual purity? "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity..." Girls, don't buy the lie that you will cement the love and commitment of a man if you give yourself to him sexually. Men, make sure you are treating "younger women as sisters, with absolute purity" (1 Tim. 5:2).

Furthermore, we should take a sobering leaf out of Song of Solomon, where the female "beloved" counsels the "daughters of Jerusalem" not to arouse or awaken love until it so desires (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). This refrain in the Song of Solomon is timely wisdom for us. We live in a society that everywhere says, "if it feels good, do it... sex is there to be enjoyed and indulged as much as you like – with whomever and whenever you like". But the Song reminds us that it violates God's law to push sexual boundaries before you get married (Song 2:7). To do so is to awaken "love" before the time is right – which binds yourself to someone with whom you have no commitment before God.

Fifth, are you carrying guilt for sexual

sin? If you have fallen into sexual immorality, remember that sexual sin is not the unforgivable sin. You can receive forgiveness, cleansing and spiritual renewal (1 Cor. 6:9-11). If you have fallen, are you repentant? You can confess your sin and receive forgiveness (1 John 1:9). Men, have you confessed your sin to a trusted brother, and girls, to a trusted sister in Christ? (James 5:16). If you have baggage from previous relationships in this area, it is vital that you deal with it before taking it into the next. Remember, Jesus Christ offers a fresh start. Commit your past to the Lord as you trust Him in the present with your hopes for the future.

For further consideration... Consider seriously whether or not you are ready for marriage. What is your relationship history? How do you rate your maturity as a Christian? What are you going to bring to this relationship? Do you seek to solve problems biblically? Is it your habit to submit to Scripture in all areas of life – and especially the relationship domain?

Think seriously about the character of the person you might consider marrying. Write a list of the things you really admire about them. Your list should include the fruits of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22). If it only includes things like “he makes me laugh”, “I try new things with him” or “she’s really hot”, then you have a problem.

“Listen to advice and accept instruc-

tion, and in the end you will be wise” (Prov. 19:21). Ask some of your trusted Christian friends and leaders for counsel. What do they observe about the two of you? Ask your parents. This is true whether you are 20 or 38. Even if your parents aren’t believers, the Lord has seen fit to have them raise you – so they may have some valuable insights to offer. The Bible does not instruct adults to obey their parents, however it does point out the folly in completely disregarding their instruction.

Ask some of your trusted Christian friends and leaders for counsel. What do they observe about the two of you? Ask your parents.



Look for someone you agree with on most things. Girls, would you be able to lovingly submit to this man on points where you differ? Men, is this woman one you are able to lead tenderly in the Lord? “A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping” (Prov. 19:13). There are many areas of Christian living that are still being debated by great theologians. You are wise to choose someone whom you agree with on most, if not all of these big, but not

gospel, issues. Endlessly arguing over how to interpret “the rod of correction” might be amusing for after-dinner conversation, but when your children are throwing tantrums in the supermarket you had better know and agree on what you are going to do.

Choose someone who is self-controlled. Do you think the man who is unable to control himself before marriage with his girlfriend is likely to be able to control himself as a married man with other women? “Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control” (Prov. 25:28).

Think seriously about whether or not you are ready to leave and cleave. Do you understand what “leaving” your parents will involve? Do you understand what “cleaving” to your spouse will require? You may need to talk with both sets of parents about this reality to help determine what your new life as Mr and Mrs will look like.

Don’t be discouraged by the images of “beauty” and “desirability” that our culture prizes. The Bible is starkly absent of instructions such as you must be able to dance, you must be a gorgeous blond, you must be a size 6 (or the new 4!), you must be able to make others laugh, you must have a lot of money and a successful career in order to be a worthy marriage partner. The Lord’s wisdom tells us that “charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting” (Prov. 31:30). Remember, God is the one who made you and he loves you more than you can ever fully comprehend this side of Heaven (Ps. 139).

Consider how you relate to each other’s families. A common reason for marital problems is due to a failure of the husband to defend his wife against criticism by her in-laws.

A final note: perhaps you are in a relationship right now and are trying so hard to make sure that you have covered all the biblical ground you need to cover that you forgot to enjoy being with the other person. Remember God’s intention for relationship: “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Marriage is a wonderful gift from our Lord, one to delight and rejoice in. It has been our experience that in God’s time, with God’s leading, getting married to the right person is not hard work. May the Lord bless you and keep you as you look to Him.

David Hann, a graduate of Moore College, is the manager of Reformers’ Bookshop, Stanmore, NSW. Reneé, his wife, is a young mother.

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Rebuilding the rubble

*20 daily Bible studies in
Nehemiah 1-8*

Both the beginning and the end of the Babylonian captivity of the southern kingdom of Judah are spread over many years. The deportation went from 597 to 587 BC, and although the return began with Cyrus's decree in 538 BC, the resettlement process was still going on nearly a century later when in mid 445 Nehemiah rebuilt the Jerusalem wall. Jeremiah's prediction of "70 years" (25:11f, 29:10), while symbolic of a "whole/complete" lifespan (cf Psalm 90:10), is usually taken to be the time from the temple's destruction in 586 to its rededication in 516.

Nehemiah's place in salvation history was to organise and supervise the rebuilding of the city wall from the mess of rubble that had remained an embarrassing blot on the OT church's geographical and theological landscape for nearly a century and a half. The calibre of his leadership – with its decisiveness, its total looking to and depending on God to guide and provide, its perseverance in the face of every kind of discouragement, and its transparent humility – stands out as a powerful model for us today. Nearly 500 years ago, God brought His church back to its true historic roots under the leadership of Luther, Calvin and others. These great men of God built walls to define the church in contradistinction to the world. Are these walls being reduced to rubble? Are we trying so hard to be relevant to our culture that we no longer know who we are? Are we demolishing our defining boundaries in the cause of ecumenism?

These are hard, confronting issues. How, and where, is God guiding His church today? There is much we can learn from Nehemiah's leadership as we face this question. **Bruce Christian** ▶

DAY 1

Blessed are those who mourn

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 1:1-4

THE POINT What do we do when things are not going well for the people of God, His Church? The Scriptures are full of God's promises for us, and reminders of His sovereign power and covenant faithfulness. The OT is looking forward to the coming of the Church's Messiah-King; the NT is anticipating the Bridegroom returning for His holy, pure, radiant Bride (cf Ephesians 5:25-27). But we look around us today and see, or hear of, "trouble, disgrace, and broken down walls". There are some good things happening, but sadly the overall picture is not as encouraging as we might have hoped. There is "trouble": the world is opposing our message; there is "disgrace": our behaviour often brings dishonour to the name of Christ; and

the "wall is broken": we have compromised with the world so much that offensive, defining doctrines to do with the cross, repentance, election, hell, justification, creation, inerrancy, etc, are no longer at the cutting edge of our message (or even in it at all). Perhaps it is time to weep with Nehemiah!

THE PARTICULARS

- Nehemiah was deeply concerned for the state of God's Church because he was deeply concerned for the honour of God's name.
- Nehemiah's first resort was earnest, heartfelt prayer and fasting.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How concerned are you for the spiritual health of our Church?

DAY 2

A model prayer

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 1:5-11

THE POINT Nehemiah's prayer is a model for us to copy in our prayer life.

THE PARTICULARS

- God's overwhelming awesome greatness is the first foundation on which Nehemiah will make his specific plea (5a).
- God's covenant love/mercy/kindness promised to those who are His people, His Church, is the second foundation (5b).
- Nehemiah is totally committed in prayer; he shuts out every distraction and sets no time limit, because God listens always (6a).
- Nehemiah knows he cannot proceed with his request without first acknowledging his personal involvement in the people's

sin, their failure to fulfil their side of the covenant; a penitent, contrite heart is a prerequisite for prayer (6b-7; cf 1 John 1:8ff).

- God's promise of forgiveness and restoration for the repentant sinner, or sinful people, is the third foundation for his plea (8f).
- His all-powerful God's track record of covenant faithfulness is the fourth foundation on which Nehemiah builds his case (10).
- Nehemiah's request is sincere, whole-hearted, and specific (11).
- He recognises God's providence in all this (11c; cf Esther 4:14).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do all the elements of Nehemiah's prayer feature in yours?

DAY 3

Mighty God, bold petition

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 2:1-10

THE POINT "Zeal for the Lord's house" (or in this case "wall") consumed Nehemiah; it motivated him to trust God and make big requests.

THE PARTICULARS

- If Nehemiah had always been a bit grumpy and hard to get on with, Artaxerxes wouldn't have even noticed he had a problem! What an important lesson this is for us! (1-2; cf Proverbs 15:30)
- It is usually not easy to hide "sadness of heart"; are we sensitive enough to the needs of those for whom we have the duty of care (family, neighbours, friends, fellow believers) to recognise their need without their having to tell us? Artaxerxes was (1-2).

• Nehemiah had no way of knowing how the King would react to his wall-building idea; it had the potential to be his undoing – but he trusted God to help him: he prayed ... then spoke (2b-5).

- Artaxerxes' favourable responses at each step in the dialogue prompted Nehemiah to be more bold in asking (cf Luke 11:5-13).
- Whenever the work of God's Kingdom is advancing we can expect to see organised opposition from vested interests (10).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How excited are you about seeing the Church grow and prosper?
- Are our petitions to our heavenly King too tentative/vague/reserved? Do we suffer from "chronic timidity syndrome"?

DAY 4

Mighty job, careful planning

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 2:11-20

THE POINT We see here the real genius of Nehemiah's leadership qualities. He knows exactly what he wants to achieve; he distinguishes clearly between the factors/people that will help in the pursuit of it and those that won't; and he plans the whole exercise very carefully before enlisting too many others. He is a model leader.

THE PARTICULARS

- Nehemiah can't rebuild the wall alone; but allowing too big a committee of well-meaning "experts" to get involved too early in the planning process of such a complex operation could be quite counter-productive. So he does the reconnoitring under cover of darkness with a few trusted men. Time taken to plan carefully usually means the overall job will be done much

faster! (11-16)

- Nehemiah was a great motivator. He points out two undeniable facts to his potential labour force: their situation in Jerusalem is desperate, psychologically/spiritually as well as physically; and the project already had his God's blessing upon it (17-18).
- Opponents of the Gospel are experts at using ridicule and false rumours to undermine God's work. We must identify and rebuke them, and then ignore them and press on in God's strength (19-20).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- In the light of Nehemiah's example, what changes do you need to make to your leadership style within the life of the Church?

DAY 5

Teamwork

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 3:1-16

THE POINT Do you think Melatiah (7) – or any other tongue-twister named person in this chapter – would have guessed that 25 centuries later, millions around the whole world would be reading about their contribution to the wall? But that is just how God works, achieving amazing things, building His Church and His Kingdom, through ordinary, insignificant people like you, me, Melatiah of Gibeon, and Shallum's daughters (12). Everyone has a job to do; everyone matters. This is the reality Paul was trying to impress upon the status-seeking Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:18ff.

THE PARTICULARS

- The clergy rolled up their sleeves and got their hands dirty at

Nehemiah's working bee. By doing this, and by dedicating their finished product to the Lord who had given them strength to do it, they set the tone for the whole operation (1; cf 17, 22, 28). It also contrasts with the pompous nobles of Amos's territory (5)!

- People of all gifts, abilities, skills, trades, etc, joined in (eg 8).
- A mark of Nehemiah's godly leadership was his attention to detail and his personal interest in individuals: he remembered and recorded who did what; everybody was very important to him.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are many hands making light work in your Church fellowship?

DAY 6

Rubble-raising

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 3:17-32

THE POINT We live in a society that doesn't restore old buildings; it is much easier to knock them down, clear the site, and build a new one. We do the same thing with old electrical appliances and hymns. Think how much simpler Nehemiah's task would have been if he'd ignored the rubble and just started again from scratch. But for him, the connection with the past meant something: the old wall had been important, defining God's covenant people over against a world that opposed, or just ignored, Him; its destruction had brought disgrace to God's name (2:17) and it needed to be re-established. With the lessons of the Exile behind them, there was a bright new future for Israel, but its continuity with the past, and all that

their faithful God had done, was significant. It was the old wall being repaired; it was not a "new" wall.

THE PARTICULARS

- A striking aspect of the work here was the way so many next-door neighbours all pitched in and did their little bit. A totally daunting task became an achievable reality simply by dividing it up into small, workable segments. What a lesson there is here!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do we too readily give up on the old traditions of the Church because it's easier to start afresh than to deal with the rubble? What valuable things are we in danger of losing if we do this?

DAY 7

Let the world deride or pity

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 4:1-5

THE POINT There is a sense in which Sanballat and Tobiah represent people excluded from the divine Covenant but wanting the boundaries to be widened to include them. They are much like people today who are upset by evangelical theology that holds a firm line on the person and work of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the Reformation doctrines of grace – people who want salvation to be more inclusive than is allowed by John 14:6 or Acts 4:12. To them, the wall Nehemiah is building stands for a defining line that is too precise a divide between God's Elect and Man in his lost condition. No, they don't want the wall rebuilt. For them, it is less a defence strategy and more a theological statement, a spiritual symbol rather

than a physical barrier! This is borne out by Nehemiah's total commitment to its necessity, and Ezra's public reading of the law (Ch. 8) after its completion. Nehemiah has special relevance to our own "age of tolerance" – there is no shortage today of detractors and mockers of Reformation truth!

THE PARTICULARS

- There is nothing more discouraging or crippling than mockery.
- Nehemiah's defence was his steadfast dependence on God (4-5).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- It would have been easier for Nehemiah to forget the rubble and start afresh elsewhere. What does his perseverance teach us?

DAY 8

Watch and pray

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 4:6-9

THE POINT The opposition of the Jewish authorities to Jesus' ministry was not unlike that of Sanballat, Tobiah and Co to Nehemiah. As the repairs to the wall progressed steadily and surely, with noticeable milestones being reached, their simple contempt and ridicule turned to scheming and plotting of specific militant action. The effectiveness of the Church's mission can often be measured by the intensity of the opposition it encounters. If we cave in to the demands of a world that sees the preaching of the cross as foolishness, and try to take the offence out of our message to make it more user-friendly, we will face little antagonism; but if we are faithful to God's revealed Word and refer to contentious issues like sin, the

wrath of God, repentance, hell, etc, we will find we are up against many Sanballats and Tobiahs who see these things as a divisive wall, totally out of place in a post-modern society.

THE PARTICULARS

- Nehemiah never allowed anything to turn him from his resolve to build the wall. When opposition came, he did two things: he prayed to God; and he took decisive action to meet the threat.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Have we been too long allowing popular opinion to define our preaching and worship? When does a sincere effort to be relevant with the Gospel slide over into capitulation to a hostile world?

DAY 9

Remember the Lord... and fight...

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 4:10-14

THE POINT Nehemiah is a very useful role model for the Church because he had to face every conceivable tactic the devil uses to undermine and frustrate the advance of God's Kingdom. His ability to deal calmly and decisively with attacks on many different fronts all at once is very impressive, and we would do well to learn from him today. Satan's strategy is to catch us off guard from behind while we are trying to ward off a frontal attack. Nehemiah is not the first or last of the Bible's heroes of faith to strike a right balance between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

THE PARTICULARS

- Satan's common weapons include: physical tiredness, the size

and complexity of the task, and the discouragement of mess (10); secret infiltration into our ranks and guerilla warfare (11); the "numbers game" (cf Psalm 33:16-19), and panicky gossip (12).

- Nehemiah's defence strategy included: careful use of available resources, and family solidarity (13); keeping everyone in the picture (including his leaders), reminding them of God's power, and reminding them of their responsibility for dependants (14).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What are some of the particular ways Satan attacks the Church today? In the light of Nehemiah's example, what specific things can we do, and what precautions should we take, in defence?

DAY 10

The trowel and the sword

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 4:15-20

THE POINT Presbyterian ministers and elders promise to "assert, maintain and defend" the Church's doctrinal position.

All are important and necessary if we are to prevent the spread of harmful heresy.

THE PARTICULARS

- Here we have a good, practical example of Paul's principles of teamwork (cf Romans 12:4-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-30, Ephesians 4:7-13). Encouraged by God's providence in dealing with their enemies, everyone had a specific job to do, and stuck at it (15).
- Nehemiah was careful to maintain a balance between attacking the work and defending the workers. He did this at both a macro-level (half the workers being employed in defence and

the other half in building, 16) and at a micro-level (each building worker having a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other, 17-18a).

- The Lord's work can often be lonely, and therefore discouraging; coming together on a regular basis gives an opportunity to be encouraged by others, as well as to encourage them (18b-20).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do we organise rallying "trumpet calls" for mutual encouragement in the Lord's work? Do we take up all the existing opportunities for encouragement? Is it always your first priority to answer the regular "trumpet call" to worship each Lord's Day?

DAY 11

Work while it is day...

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 4:21-23

THE POINT There is much debate and division in the Church today about the relevance of the 4th Commandment for Christians. Does God require us to observe a "sabbath rest"? In our society, with its "weekend", "long-weekend" and "leave" mentality, it is easy to overlook completely the first bit of the Commandment: "Six days shall you labour and do all your work." Most Australians see work as something you have to put up with to be able to enjoy the real purpose of life: the weekend. Our wrong attitude to the fulfilling "labour" that God ordained for our benefit and well-being, a blessing for its own sake, is ruining our national health and economy as we become more obese, lazy, demanding, and welfare-dependent.

Nehemiah encouraged all the people to make efficient use of every minute of the daylight hours, and even to stay alert during the night! No wonder they finished in 52 days!

THE PARTICULARS

- A significant aspect of Nehemiah's impressive leadership model was his emphasis on community for both protection and progress, as well as setting a clear example, practising what he preached.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Have we lost the "Protestant work ethic" today? Is it possible to be a modern, corporate workaholic and yet have a wrong attitude to the place of work in God's created order of things?

DAY 12

You can't eat walls

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 5:1-8

THE POINT As if having to rebuild a wall from discouraging, messy rubble, infested with over 140 years of weeds and undergrowth, was not enough, Nehemiah also had to contend at the same time with the gripes and squabbles of the people under his care. Here is yet another valuable lesson to be had from his leadership style. As I write these notes, Australians are facing hard economic times because increasing interest rates and fuel prices are putting a big burden on even a moderate-income family with a high mortgage. And it seems that unless this problem is addressed, we will continue to see the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, with quite disastrous consequences for our society as a whole.

THE PARTICULARS

- The war/wall effort was taking its toll on the community held together by subsistence farming in need of a labour force (1-3).
- There can be much unnoticed injustice in human society (4-5).
- Problems always arise if our natural human tendency towards greed is left unchecked. Nehemiah saw the need and addressed it, as did the Early Church (cf Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; 6:1-6) (6-8).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is it possible that we can become so intent on Gospel ministry we overlook the every day needs of our own Church family? What precautions do we need to take to avoid this happening?

DAY 13

Good, godly leadership costs

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 5:9-19

THE POINT I've never studied economics and am completely ignorant when it comes to financial matters, but it does seem to me that the more people are earning their crust by investing/manoeuvring money instead of real work that makes a material contribution to the lives of others, the more fragile the economy becomes! The things that stand out about Nehemiah's leadership in today's passage are: he addressed the problem head on, challenging the offenders with core ethics; he put his money where his mouth was and set a transparent example of self-sacrifice; and he was not afraid to declare the issue to be a spiritual one, reminding the people of their accountability to the living, sovereign God. It was risky, but

amazingly effective! Who would take such a risk today?

THE PARTICULARS

- A Christian's credit card belongs to God, and is a vital part of his Gospel witness to the watching world around him (9).
- The very low 1% criticised by Nehemiah (11) could have been a monthly rate, comparing with 12% per annum. Jesus did not condemn the fair investment of money (cf Matthew 25:27), but our prime concern must be the welfare of others. Nehemiah was attacking people's greed and underlying selfish motives (10-11).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is Nehemiah challenging any area of your life today?

DAY 14

Nehemiah's plain "O no!"

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 6:1-9

THE POINT When the Devil failed in his attempt to divert Jesus from taking the path to the cross by opting for a social welfare gospel ("turn the stones to bread") or a "signs-and-wonders" gospel ("jump off the Temple"), he pressured Him to compromise, to meet him half way, avoiding the offence of the cross and substituting it with a more reasonable approach that would allow people to have the best of both worlds – a foot in both camps. Now that the doors were all that needed to be done, Sanballat needed to negotiate – and in the process probably to look for a chance to remove his nemesis altogether! Nehemiah resisted this ploy ... again, and again, and again. Sadly, the Church has not been so steadfast.

THE PARTICULARS

- Nehemiah remained fully committed to his God-given task (1-3).
- Satan never gives up easily (4; 2 Cor. 11:14; 1 Pet. 5:8).
- The more the Church stands firm on revealed truth (cf Jude 1:3), the more the world's media will try destabilise it by innuendo, rumour-mongering, and distortion/misreporting of its motives. Nehemiah refused to give an inch, relying on God alone (5-9)

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- In what ways has the Church tried to be more acceptable to the world by compromising its message/stance, its defining "wall"?

DAY 15

Be alert...

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 6:10-14

THE POINT What a salutary lesson this is for us today!

Somehow, we have become so soft and gullible, believing anything that seems to be "spiritual", especially if it "works", without testing it carefully, thoroughly and prayerfully against Scripture. Satan must be quite encouraged by how easily he can trip us up, and then turn our mistake into an accusation against us – a double whammy!

THE PARTICULARS

- How easy it is for Satan to seduce us into moral failure by a seemingly harmless "home visit", "behind closed doors"? (10, 13)
- Nehemiah did not shrink from his responsibility in the face of

danger (cf Jesus, Lk 13:31-33; and Paul, Ac. 21:10-14), nor did he go beyond his limitations (cf Joseph, Gen. 39:8-9) as a non priest (cf Uzziah, 2 Chron. 26:16), but trusted God (11, 9b).

- Nehemiah first stood firm, then later verified what he suspected; "faith is believing what we do not see" (12-13; Heb. 11:1).
- In the end, our final vindication against all the false prophets who try to undermine our testimony and frustrate the work of God's kingdom, must come from God (cf Romans 12:19); our task is to remain faithful against inside and outside attacks (14).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are we as vigilant as we should be against the Devil's schemes?

DAY 16

...and keep on being alert

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 6:15-7:3

THE POINT What had seemed like an impossible task, ridiculed by its many detractors (cf 4:2-3) was completed, with God's help, in under 2 months. This "miracle" of grace was not only a triumph of faith for Nehemiah and his team, but a great source of discouragement to all those who had opposed it, much as Paul pointed out to the Philippians in 1:27-28. This did not mean, of course, that they would not continue to undermine God's Church by every means possible. Nehemiah knew he would have to maintain the vigil.

THE PARTICULARS

- It is ironical that those who have opposed God the most will be left with the least excuse for rejecting Him (6:16; cf Psalm 2:1-6) .

• Like many others in the 2,500 years since, Tobiah (a Jewish name meaning "the Lord is good") tried to use his "good works" and family/marriage connections to influence the Church to his own advantage, to shift it away from the true faith (6:17-19).

- Having the wall itself in place was not enough to guard the city from outside influences: faithful, godly people are necessary to keep constant watch at the gates. To get our Church back to its historical Reformation roots 30 years ago was one thing, but is useless if we don't "assert, maintain, and defend" these (7:1-3).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What's symbolised by having "some near their own houses" (3)?

DAY 17

Roll call

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 7:4-73

THE POINT As mentioned in the notes yesterday, having the building of the wall as a symbol of the defining of the Church must not lead us into thinking the Church is bricks and mortar, or even orthodox doctrine – the Church is the assembly of God’s redeemed people, bearing witness to and serving their Saviour in a hostile world. Nehemiah’s “roll call” at this point in the story, with the wall completed and the gates installed and functioning, might be boring (because we know little else of most of the names) but it is an important reminder of this fact. Every believer, saved by grace, counts.

THE PARTICULARS

- The leaders among the people are recognised as having a spe-

cial role to fulfil, but the common people, although here remaining nameless, still need to be accounted for on the official roll. The keeping of an accurate record of names in every generation was necessary in order to establish their identity as true children of “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”, but more importantly because they were waiting for their promised Messiah in the line of David.

- The special mention of the “priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, and temple servants” (39-56, 73) shows the central place the worship of God had in the whole life of the city and its people.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How important are Church membership and worship to you?

DAY 18

Amen! Amen!

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 8:1-8

THE POINT The wall is in place, the people are all accounted for – all that remains to put the smile back on Nehemiah’s once sad face (cf 2:1-3) is for the Book of the Law of Moses to be read. This was the foundation of their faith, the LORD God’s revelation of Himself to His Covenant people whom He continued to love and save by His grace. What a moment, what a blessing, what a God!

THE PARTICULARS

- It is only a few days since the completion of the wall and the large, high platform is erected; Nehemiah had lost no time (1).
- The people “as one man” were genuinely keen to be there; this was not a drudgery, a compulsory ritual that had to be gone

through so they could get on with the real things of life (1, 5-6).

- There was no age or sex discrimination; everyone who could understand was there, hanging on every word for 6 hours (2-3)!
- The presence of the Levites as counsellors, and the spontaneous response of the people, emphasise the event’s significance (6-8).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Has the regular worship of God become a chore for you, or do you look forward to being with God’s people each Lord’s Day to hear significant slabs of God’s Word read and explained? Do you start looking at your watch if it is going on too long?

DAY 19

The penny drops

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 8:9-12

THE POINT The emotional atmosphere on this truly amazing day in the life of the repatriated exiles is (hopefully) typical of our response to God’s Word. There is sadness because it convicts us of our sin; but there is joy because it tells us of God’s mercy and blessing and of His gracious provision of a Saviour. And we don’t seem to get the balance right: some of us are always dour at worship because we are overwhelmed by God’s holiness; but some of us are so happy-clappy that we somehow forget we are sinners! Nehemiah again shows his true qualities as a leader – there is “a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:4), and he seems to know which is which!

THE PARTICULARS

- Because the leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, made it clear that the reading of God’s Law was a very sacred thing, their response of weeping was spontaneous and appropriate. Nehemiah’s correction helped them to focus on God’s gracious provision.
- A proper understanding of the Gospel will always result in a deep, godly joy that expresses itself in close fellowship with other believers and in sharing together, especially in meals.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do the people with whom you worship get the balance right? What adjustments would you like to see for a better balance?

DAY 20

Wow! A Bible party!

THE PASSAGE

NEHEMIAH 8:13-18

THE POINT “So the move to make Scripture the guiding principle of Jewish life was powerfully initiated. The great teaching operation on the first day of the month, the training session which had followed it, and now the seven days of readings at the festival, had exposed the people to the fundamentals of their faith with considerable thoroughness.” (Kidner) The psalmist declared, “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” (Ps. 119:105) Do we need to recapture the spirit of the Feast of Tabernacles, rejoicing in a God who is willing and able to guide us as pilgrims through the wilderness of this sad world to His Promised Land? The Jews had now experienced a second “exodus” from Babylon and had discovered a

new love for, and appreciation of, God’s Word as a guide for life. Do we need to make this discovery?

THE PARTICULARS

- The extensive reading of the Law led to an intensive study of it.
- Their discovery of the feast of Tabernacles led to obedience requiring a lifestyle change (cf 2 Kings 22:11-14; James 1:22-25).
- Their joyful celebration of the Feast for 8 days incorporated in it the reading of the Law of Moses.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How is your daily Bible reading going? Is it life-changing?



Across Australia

Scot attacks PCA

The outgoing Moderator of the Church of Scotland, the Very Rev. Sheilagh Kesting (the first woman to hold the office), has criticised the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

In her retiring Moderator's report to the Scottish Assembly, she said: "The Presbyterian Church of Australia had just taken a decision at its assembly to discontinue the ordination of women to the eldership (*sic*) – a similar decision having been taken in relation to ministry a few years ago.

"One of the saddest moments in my year was when I asked why the church had taken this decision. Was it a growing theological conservatism? 'No,' I was told. 'It is worse than that. It is about purifying the church'."

"As a woman whose call to ministry has been confirmed by the church that has since called me to be its Moderator, I found that very hard to hear and my heart went out to the women in the Presbyterian Church, ordinary, everyday women who are the backbone of any congregation, and who in their conversations with me were so clearly hurt by the decision of their assembly. And it goes out too to those men whom I met who also struggle with this decision."

Service for Allan Lendon

A service of praise and thanksgiving was held on 12 June at the North Geelong (Vic.) church, following the death of the Rev. Allan Lendon after a long illness.

20 years of service

Presbyterian Social Services (NSW) CEO Colin Llewellyn has celebrated 20 years in the role with colleagues at the church offices in Surry Hills in May. Mr Llewellyn started in the role on 2 May 1988 and has seen many changes during the past two decades.

"Arguably, I have one of the best jobs in the Presbyterian Church," he said. "Helping others in need and being able to make a real difference in the lives of so many is the thing that keeps me focused and energised. The gospel is central to all

that we seek to achieve at PSS. I have been privileged to be able to work with a group of dedicated staff, paid and unpaid, who share the vision of demonstrating in practical terms the truth of God's word."

Burma prayers make paper

When news of the Burma cyclone broke, St Andrew's, Camden (NSW) took prayerful action – their efforts even making the local paper. The Camden youth group sponsors two students, Ram Uk and Ang ta Ang, who are training as native missionaries at a Bible institute in the Burmese capital of Rangoon, while the church has supported a missionary to Burma through Mission Partners.

Interviewed by the *Macarthur Chronicle*, assistant minister David Trounce said he was astonished that not a single death had been reported in the Evangelical Church or sponsored students.

PresAID raises \$22,000

The 2008 Good Friday Mercy PresAID Appeal closed on June 15, with more than \$22,000 raised for Vanuatu and Indonesia. Outstanding donations should now be sent to the PCV Office.

Inventive fund-raising

Presbyterian Social Services (NSW) has reported a positive response to the launch of the Friends of Allowah Children's Hospital and call for donations to the building appeal, including some creative ideas for fundraising. Sponsorship coordinator Ruth Forsayth said she had been heartened at the interest in helping the hospital, which needs to raise another \$3.5 million to fund major extension and refurbishment works.

"People are really looking outside the box," she said. "One parishioner is planning a pearl jewellery party; another is hosting a luncheon for 40 people; the Beecroft PWA collects small change for Allowah. A cakeless cake stall raised \$1200 recently."

Double anniversary

In May the Presbytery of Western Australia marked two important anniversaries. One was the 80th anniversary of the very first flying doctor flight, when the Victory flew Dr K. St Vincent Welsh from Cloncurry to Julia Creek (Queensland) and back as part of the min-

istry of the Australian Aerial Medical Services of the Australian Inland Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Australia. The second was the 35th anniversary of the vote that approved the 1971 Basis of Union.

Peel joins PCWA

The Presbytery of Western Australia has admitted the Peel Christian Fellowship into the PCWA. The Peel congregation meets in the Mandurah district. It is hoped that this work in Perth's far southern suburbs will be matched in due course by the re-establishment of the Presbyterian Church in the Rockingham area as a result of the Moderator-General's Australia-wide appeal for funds for church planting in Perth.

In receiving the Peel Christian Fellowship (and at their request) the Presbytery resolved to re-name it the Peel Presbyterian Church to express both continuity with the past but also speak of the future direction of the fellowship.

New elders

The Fremantle (WA) congregation recently elected two new elders, Mr Malcolm Ivatts and Dr Phil Burcham. Malcolm is a long standing member of the congregation, being baptized by the previous Minister of Fremantle, the Rev. Jim Nocher. Phil, his wife Elizabeth and their daughter moved from Adelaide where Phil served as session clerk at the St Giles (Norwood) church.

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Books help Japanese

Mrs Sarah Young of the Leederville (WA) congregation has written a number of best selling books (*Jesus Calling* and *Dear Jesus: Seeking His Life in Your Life*, published by Thomas Nelson). A fund has been established from the sales to support short-term, part-time voluntary assistance to the ministry of the Japanese congregation. The first helpers, a married couple from Japan were due to arrive in Perth in June to help the **Rev. Steve Young**. They are expected to stay for up to two years. Two other Christian Japanese families have migrated to Perth and are getting involved with the fellowship. The Japanese congregation has four Christian Japanese men now.

New Hope

On 9 March an evening church service began at **Living Hope** congregation (WA). The initial response has been encouraging with attendances of about 12, about half of whom are new people. Some families from Africa have been attending the morning church which has increased the diversity of the congregation.



Around the World

Anglicans change structure

Leaders of the **Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON)** meeting in Jerusalem say that while there will be no formal split from the **Anglican Communion**, permanent structures are being put into place to be true to the Bible, to continue the work of mission and to do so as Anglicans.

The conference comprised several hundred Anglican bishops and clergy unhappy about American churches consecrating a gay bishop and backing gay marriages. It was an alternative to the 10-yearly **Lambeth Conference**, a meeting of all the world's Anglican bishops that many of those in Jerusalem will boycott.

Kenya Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi said that **Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams** and the four Instruments of Unity had "betrayed and abandoned" the Anglican Communion and therefore new structures were needed.

GAFCON leaders, including **Sydney**

Archbishop Peter Jensen, say they will meet again in two years to reflect and expand on the structures.

Virtue Online

World's oldest church?

Archaeologists in Rihab, northern Jordan, say they have discovered a cave that could be the world's oldest Christian church, according to a report posted to the *BBC* website. The underground chapel, dating to the period AD33-70, would have served as both a place of worship and a home.

It is claimed that the site was originally used by a group of 70 persecuted Christians who fled from Jerusalem. These early Christians lived and practised their faith in secrecy until the Romans embraced Christianity several hundred years later.

The cave is located in Rihab, in Northern Jordan, beneath the ancient church of **St Georgeous**, itself one of the oldest known places of worship in the world. According to **Dr Abdul Qader Al-Hassan**, the director of the **Rihab Centre for Archaeological Studies**, the cave site shows clear evidence of early Christian rituals that predate the church.

Other experts say they are cautious about the claim. They want to examine the artefacts and see clear dating evidence. The earliest confirmed examples of churches date from the third century, they say.

WEA leaders meet

Fifteen **World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)** leaders from around the world convened for a two-day conference on the campus of **Olivet University**, a Bible-based institution in San Francisco. The conference centred on the creation of the **WEA Leadership Institute** whose purpose is to meet the organisation development needs of WEA's 128 member alliances.

According to **Dr Jonathan Lewis**, director of the Leadership Institute, the institute has its historic roots in the work that **Dr Jun Vencer** carried through with WEA alliance leaders during his long tenure as WEA International Director from 1992 to 2001.

"We are developing tools that will help us analyse the specific needs of each alliance, and provide case specific training in the following areas: unifying evangelicals in voice and action; association leadership, governance, and management; sustainable funding; representation before

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government; servicing constituencies; and partnership development,” said Dr Lewis. The institute will be officially launched at the **WEA General Assembly** in Thailand in October.

Coin evangelism upsets Muslims

The US Army has suspended a Marine for distributing coins quoting the gospel to Sunni Muslims, an incident that has enraged Iraqis who view it as the latest example of American disrespect for Islam.

The Marine, stationed in Fallujah, handed out silver-coloured coins this week that said in Arabic: “Where will you spend eternity? (John 3:36).” The other side read: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).”

“We are sorry for this behaviour,” said **Mike Isho, a US military spokesman** in Anbar province, which includes Fallujah. **Mohammed Amin Abdel-Hadi**, the head of the **Sunni Endowment** in Fallujah, an institution responsible for overseeing the sect’s mosques, criticised US troops, whom many in the city view as occupiers, for acting like Christian missionaries. The coins were part of a pattern of insensitivity towards Muslims, he said, citing the outcry this month over a US sniper in Baghdad who used a Koran for target practice.

Washington Post

Clamp down in Algeria

In the past six months Algeria has begun enforcing a restrictive 2006 law resulting in jailed Christians and closed churches. Reasons for the crackdown are varied. Local experts said the pressure could stem from top-down efforts by government officials to restrain Christian activity or from bottom-up populism against Christians inflamed by Arabic press accounts.

Some point out that **President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s** gambit to change the constitution to allow him a third term in 2009 will require the support of Islamist political parties. Still others hold that the issue of Protestant church growth may be intended to distract Algerians from pressing domestic concerns such as a national housing shortage and inflation of staple goods prices.

Christian leaders believe that the increased persecution comes less because Islamists are growing in power than because Christian converts are increasing

in number, thanks to Algerian church planters and Christian satellite TV. “They are afraid about what God is doing in Algeria,” said **Farid Bouchama**, a France-based Algerian televangelist.

Compass Direct

Copts seek protection

Egypt’s Coptic church is calling on **President Hosni Mubarak** to guarantee Christians’ safety after a violent attack on a monastery in which four Copts were injured. **The Coptic Ecclesiastical Council** called on Mubarak to stop “more armed attacks on monks”, and “insults to the cross”, Egyptian newspapers reported.

AFP said the move follows a land dispute involving a historic monastery which turned violent on 31 May, leading to the death of a Muslim man who was reportedly attacking the monastery. Four Copts, including two monks, were injured in the attack on the **Abu Fana Monastery** near the southern city of Minya.

Egypt’s Copts – the largest Christian community in the Middle East – account for an estimated six to 10 per cent of the country’s 76 million inhabitants. They complain of systematic discrimination and harassment.

Assist

Muslims jailed

In a snap ruling that surprised local Christians, an Ethiopian court has sentenced three Muslim men to life imprisonment for a deadly machete attack on two churches last March. At the initial hearing on March 26, the **West Arsi Zone Higher Court** handed down four sentences – life in prison for three attackers, and a three-month suspended sentence for an accomplice – for the 2 March assault in south Ethiopia that killed one and injured 17.

The victims’ families said they had been told the hearing would take place on 25 April and only learned of the sentencing after their right to appeal had expired. Of another 17 people initially arrested for the attack, six remain in prison while the rest have reportedly been set free. Local Christians said they have been refused information regarding whether these people will be tried.

Three local Muslim officials arrested on suspicion of involvement in the attack are now back in their government positions even as a separate investigation against them continues, local Christians said.

Compass Direct

Pastor’s daughter gang-raped

Muslim villagers in Mymensingh district eager to rid the area of the Christian work of a local pastor have gang-raped his 13-year-old daughter. **Pastor Motilal Das** of **United Bethany Church** said that at around 3am on 2 May the villagers sexually assaulted his daughter, **Elina Das**, and left her unconscious in front of his house in an attempt to drive him and his Christian ministry out of Laksmipur village.

Local residents have long been angry with him for his ministry and evangelism, he said, and he has received death threats. “I did not pay attention to any of the threats or hindrances – I continued evangelical and pastoral activities with prayer,” Das told *Compass*. “When nothing stopped me, then they wanted to leave me scarred for life, so that I would be upset and not be able to show my face to the society for shame, and therefore I would leave the village.”

Olympic glare reveals persecution

What potentially could have been China’s proudest moment has turned into something of a public relations minefield as world media probe China’s human rights gains and abuses ahead of this year’s Olympic Games.

Among key issues raised is religious freedom, with China watchers reporting ongoing restrictions on freedom of worship, particularly for unregistered church groups, arrests, detention in labor camps and confiscation of Christian literature. The government has stepped up an official campaign against human rights activists and lawyers in recent months – and increased its suppression of religious believers, particularly members of unregistered Protestant and Catholic groups.

Compass Direct

Don’t execute murderer: church

Iraqi church leaders have spoken out against the death sentence given to the alleged murderer of a Chaldean bishop kidnapped in northern Iraq in March. The **Iraqi Central Criminal Court** charged **al-Qaeda in Iraq** member **Ahmed Ali Ahmed** with killing Mosul’s Chaldean archbishop, a government spokesman said.

Archbishop Paulus Faraj Rahho’s corpse was found in a shallow grave in Mosul on March 13 after gunmen snatched him from his car two weeks earlier.

Speaking from Baghdad, **Auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni** said that Ahmed should be punished for his crime but that executing him would be pointless. "If somebody is killed I think there is no use in it for the Iraqi people," the Chaldean church leader said. "Our principles are love and pardon and reconciliation."

Nigerian blasphemy tensions

The Supreme Court of Nigeria has confirmed the death sentence for **Abdullahi Ada** and others involved in the murder of **Abdullahi Umaru**, condemned for "blasphemy" of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, in Kebbi state in 1999. **Justice George Oguntade** ordered that Ada be hanged until confirmed dead.

With sharia in force in Kebbi and 11 other states in northern Nigeria – though supposed to be applied only to Muslims – the high court judgment has further prompted Muslim calls for legislation against "blasphemy". The **National Assembly** is amending the 1999 constitution, and Muslim leaders in northern Nigeria's Kano state have called for a national law against "blasphemy", leaving Christian leaders fearful that Islamic law could be used to arbitrarily put Christians to death.



On the Agenda

Barbarism in Lebanon

By Elizabeth Kendal

Since the 2003 fall of Baghdad, ascendant Iran has been spreading its tentacles and flexing its muscles. Iran's Shi'ite dictators are moving to replace the Sunni Arab dictators as the leaders of the Muslim world and to replace the US as the dominating power in the Middle East. One key element in this strategy involves waging a genocidal war/jihad to eliminate Israel.

Iranian influence and military power now extends in a crescent from Tehran through Iraq and Syria into Lebanon where Iran-sponsored **Hezbollah** is re-arming, re-organising and rebuilding right on Israel's northern border. Meanwhile, Sunni but Iran-sponsored **Hamas** threatens Israel from Gaza in Israel's south. Whilst the eradication of Israel is the ultimate goal, the present flash-point is Lebanon, home to a vulnerable Christian minority of over one million.

Lebanon is split between two diametrically opposing forces: a ruling **Sunni**,

Druse, Christian, pro-Western coalition; and a pro-Syrian, Islamist, mostly **Shi'ite**, Hezbollah-led opposition. The Lebanese Army is similarly divided. The Christians too have been split, with the pro-Syrian **Free Patriotic Movement** of Christian leader **Michael Aoun** backing Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's main allies however are the state's various Shi'ite and Palestinian militias, along with Syria and Iran. The main ally of the pro-Western government is the US. The government envisages Lebanon as a modern, secular, liberal, democratic sanctuary on the Mediterranean, while the opposition envisages Lebanon as an Islamic citadel in the front-line of the jihad against Israel. The government controls the north and west whilst Hezbollah controls the east and south.

Hezbollah does not want to take control of Lebanon as it does not want the burden of government. What Hezbollah demands however is total freedom to re-organise, rebuild and re-arm for war without interference. On 6 May the government boldly banned Hezbollah's Iran-built independent telecommunications network. It also fired Beirut airport's security chief, who is linked to Hezbollah which is accused of compromising airport security.

FROM THE MODERATOR – GENERAL IN REGARDS TO CHURCH PLANTING IN PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA



'The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for 1) the numerical growth of the Body of Christ in any city, and 2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in a city. Nothing else – not crusades, outreach programmes, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes – will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting.' (T. Keller)

Perth is currently growing at an unprecedented rate. People are moving to the Capital of Western Australia from all over Australia and the world. The West Australian General Assembly has developed a METRO-WIDE STRATEGY which seeks to respond to this growth and has as a key component, the planting and establishment of at least five new congregations. The West Australian General Assembly has declared that under the METRO-WIDE STRATEGY, the next area for church extension work will be in the Rockingham district, half an hour drive south of Fremantle on the coast. The Presbyterian Church in Western Australia is marshalling its own resources to launch a new effort in church planting but it also needs the help of the wider Presbyterian Church in this great task. (More details on the METRO-WIDE STRATEGY can be obtained from the Clerk of WA Assembly, Mr. Glenn Muskett on 08-9339 9400 gmuskett@bigpond.com.au)

I would invite you to pray especially for a suitable church planter to be raised up and for a suitable, committed and supportive core group to come together.

The 2007 General Assembly of Australia authorised the Moderator-General to coordinate an annual appeal during 2008, 2009 and 2010 to raise funds from across the Presbyterian Church of Australia to provide for the opening, staffing and development of a new church planting congregation in metropolitan Perth. The new church (the Lord willing) in the Rockingham district will be the recipient of the funds raised. Gifts can be sent to 'GAA WA Church Planting Appeal' c/- PO Box 2196, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012 with cheques made out to 'Presbyterian Church Funds'. A covering letter should state that the gift is for the 'WA Church Planting Appeal'. The GAA WA Church Planting Appeal will be placed before the Lord's people in our Church in a number of different forms.

Thank you for taking time to read this Communication. I would ask that we work together to ensure a very generous response to this call for gospel partnership with the Presbyterian Church in Western Australia.

ROBERT BENN, Moderator-General

Hezbollah's response was "swift, furious, disproportionate and bloody" (Jonathon Spyer). While the Lebanese Army watched on, Hezbollah blockaded all the roads to the airport and forced the pro-government media off the air. It burned the offices of the pro-government newspaper and seized control of western Beirut, laying siege to the homes of **Prime Minister Foud Siniora** and Sunni leader **Saad al-Hariri**. After demonstrating its strength, Hezbollah handed its gains over to the Lebanese Army, which is reportedly working to restore order.

So Lebanon teeters on the brink of a civil war: primarily a sectarian war of Sunnis v Shi'ites; a war between US-backed, pro-West, Sunni-dominated forces and Shi'ite Iran-backed barbaric forces intent on genocide. If Lebanon does descend into war then it will actually be a regional war (like Iraq) fought by proxies and exploited by terrorists. The future of the Middle East is increasingly precarious.

World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission

Witches come to Christ

By Michelle A Vu

In a central African nation with a dark history of witchcraft, the gospel message is breaking through and touching the hearts and lives of villagers, including witches.

Screenings of *The Jesus Film* in the **Central African Republic** has led to tens of thousands of commitments for Christ, dozens of churches planted, and witches being freed from dark forces, according to **The Jesus Film Project**.

Central African Republic, which neighbours the highly-troubled nations of Chad and Sudan, has struggled with what some might consider an epidemic of witchcraft. Local witches reportedly have the power to kill and cause excruciating physical pain, leading to great fear among villagers. The government routinely imprisons accused witches, but has found that prison walls cannot contain their power.

When witches saw *The Jesus Film* – which follows the life and teachings of Jesus Christ – in their own language, many reportedly were convicted by the Holy Spirit. They repented of their sins, were freed from their spiritual bondage, and committed their lives to Jesus Christ, **The Jesus Film Project** reports.

In the Bossangoa area in western CAR,

people have dubbed *The Jesus Film* "The Miracle Film". The region's governor has personally called the "Jesus" film team to thank them for the "miracles" the movie has done on the witches in his area.

The next project for the "Jesus" film teams is to reach those speaking the **Gbeya** language in CAR. There are some 176,000 people in the country that speak this language.

Christian Today

Protect Christians

By Ethan Cole

The **European Union** should do more to protect Christians worldwide, a representative of the **Russian Orthodox Church** has told European Union officials. **Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria**, the Russian Orthodox Church representative to the European Institutions, spoke up for persecuted Christians during a meeting between EU officials and some 20 European religious leaders in Brussels, Belgium, in May.

"Tolerance should not cause detriment to Christians, who still make up the majority of the European population," said Hilarion, according to Russian news agency Interfax. "Phobia and discrimination of Christians should be condemned officially."

He reminded officials of Europe's Christian heritage and called on the EU to help preserve the continent's history. "[Christian] churches are being ruined and thousands of Christians are homeless and banished in Kosovo," the bishop said.

He added, "This is also the case of the Cypriot area illegally occupied by Turkish forces. Churches are destroyed and Christians are suffering there."

In a recent *Christian Today* interview, Cyprus' ambassador to the United States, **Andreas Kakouris**, talked about the more than 530 churches and monasteries that were pillaged and destroyed in northern Cyprus after Turkish forces took over the land in 1974.

Under Turkey's watch, one-of-a-kind historic Christian artifacts from churches have been stolen and auctioned off around the world. It is estimated that more than 60,000 ancient artifacts have been illegally transferred to other countries, according to the Republic of Cyprus.

Bishop Hilarion said: "The European Union administration could do more for the protection of Christians outside Europe, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and many other Islamic countries."

The European religious leaders meeting on Monday included Christian, Jewish and Muslim European heads. The main focus of the meeting was to call on Europe's religious leaders and their congregations to be more engaged in climate change.

Christian Today

Islam will 'fill vacuum'

By Jennifer Gold

The **Bishop of Rochester** has warned that the demise of Christianity is leaving Britain with a "moral vacuum" that radical Islam is ready to fill. Writing in political magazine *Standpoint*, **Dr Michael Nazir-Ali** quoted an academic who pointed to the failure of church leaders to prevent Christian values from being substantially eroded in society during the social and sexual revolution of the '60s. Christianity began to fall to the wayside just as more people of different faiths were starting to settle in Britain, the Pakistani-born bishop added.

"It is a situation which has created the moral and spiritual vacuum in which we find ourselves. Whilst the Christian consensus was dissolved, nothing else, except perhaps endless self-indulgence, was put in its place," he said.

Whereas Marxism failed to take hold in British society, he went on to question whether society could counter radical Islam with the same success. "We are now, however, confronted by another equally serious ideology, that of radical Islamism, which also claims to be comprehensive in scope," he said. "What resources do we have to face yet another ideological battle?"

Bishop Nazir-Ali answered that only Judeo-Christian values could stand up adequately against the threat posed by radical Islam.

"It remains the case, however, that many of the beliefs and values which we need to deal with the present situation are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition," he said.

Earlier in the year, Dr Nazir-Ali claimed that multiculturalism had failed and that radical Islam was turning some areas of Britain into no-go areas for people of different faiths. He appeared to reiterate his position in the *Standpoint* article, declaring that the "newfangled and insecurely founded" doctrine of multiculturalism has created communities of immigrants that are "segregated" and "living parallel lives".

Christian Today

New Earth, old error

Christians are being seduced by a new Oprah-endorsed Gnosticism.

When Oprah Winfrey declared a few weeks ago that “this is the most exciting thing I’ve ever done,” she wasn’t referring to a new charitable project, her endorsement of Barack Obama, or even her new reality TV show.

She was referring to an unprecedented, 10-week Web broadcast to discuss spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle’s latest bestselling book, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose*. Millions have joined this “webinar”, which concluded on 5 May.

It’s not hard to see why. It appeals to many disaffected believers because it claims to liberate us from old, ideological, “I am right; you are wrong” religious beliefs. It offers a new spirituality that supposedly lies at the hidden centre of all religions.

It has thus generated great confusion, and a serious backlash among those who see in the Tolle-Oprah juggernaut a pernicious teaching. “The Church of Oprah Exposed” video clip on YouTube has been viewed more than 6 million times.

Mr Tolle’s book is not, like *The Secret*, just another glitzy, profit-driven work of self-help literature. It comes across as an earnest attempt to meet our deepest spiritual needs. Who *doesn’t* want to experience freedom from anger, depression, resentment, bad habits, and emotional pain? Indeed, a new earth – a new life – has been the fervent hope of all who have experienced sin, sickness, and suffering.

The Bible and “A New Earth” at first seem very similar, because Tolle’s teachings are often presented in a quasi-Christian framework and affirmed by Oprah as consonant with Christianity.

Tolle’s book cites the Bible about 20 times, without the reader feeling that texts have been wrenched out of their context. It describes our situation of dysfunction and anxiety, of man’s inhumanity to man, and our selfishness. It identifies inauthentic attempts to gain meaning through physical possessions or manipulative relationships. It finds no worth in secular humanism and the consumer society. And it encourages a



Peter Jones

spirit of forgiveness, citing the words of Jesus on the cross.

There are also parallels with the benefits associated with Christian conversion – phrases such as “new birth”, “joy and peace”, and “grace” are sprinkled throughout the text.

But here is where the similarities end.

On the issue of the nature of God and humanity, and the way of salvation, the apparent agreements give way to fundamental contradictions.

At bottom, one approach is rooted in God’s grace. The other is rooted in man’s vanity.

At bottom, one approach is rooted in God’s grace. The other is rooted in man’s vanity.

For Tolle, echoing the teachings of the ancient Gnostics,

the chief error is ignorance of our true self. This leads to the rise of “egoic mind patterns”, a false consciousness that causes distress. This ego also mistakenly sees as real the “forms” and “content” of everyday life and the distinctions we see therein: right and wrong, creature and Creator.

The spiritual truth, according to Tolle, is that much of what the ego calls reality is merely – as the Hindus say – maya, illusion. Since the basic human problem is ignorance owing to illusion, the solution is the knowledge of how to attain a transformed state of human consciousness.

True consciousness, and thus salvation, involves what Tolle calls “presence”. We attain knowledge of “presence” by becoming aware of the “inner body”, actively eliminating distinction-making thought, conscience and all forms of physical reality. By doing this, we can’t overcome disease or suffering, which he advises us to accept, but we can see that we are an integral part of the world of

“true being”, not a separate “ego”.

For Tolle, “knowing self and knowing God become one and the same”. The millions who’ve turned to Tolle might naturally conclude: I am the “I Am”. Sound familiar? It should. According to the Bible, such “knowledge” springs from the oldest error of all: man’s desire to be “as gods”.

The Bible teaches that humanly conceived “enlightenment” is actually idolatry, the worship of the human self, a creature, as the equivalent of – or in place of – God, the only Creator. Such idolatry is moral rebellion against “our Father”.

The Bible declares that the basic problem is not ignorance, but sin. Thus the solution is not self-realisation through esoteric knowledge, but the grace that flows from the depths of God’s love. As we receive God’s gift of salvation by believing in Jesus Christ, we become, not gods, but “new creatures”.

On the webcast, a woman asked Oprah how she reconciles Christianity and “A New Earth”. The Baptist-raised Oprah said she could because she had opened her mind to Tolle’s way of thinking and, earlier in life, freed herself from church rules and doctrine. In so doing, though, Oprah – and her millions of followers – are accepting the rules and doctrines of another system, Tolle’s Gnostic view.

We face a choice of ultimate importance. We can stand with “the truth” of Tolle-Oprah and a long tradition of mystics who suggest that man is God and that “God” is merely a human creation. Or we can stand with Jesus Christ, who proved that he was “the way, the truth, and the life”, and affirm that God is God, and man is God’s creation.

As contemporary humanity seeks to create a global community, some sort of “new earth”, the age-old challenge that Joshua issued to Israel is placed before us with added urgency: “Choose this day whom ye will serve” – the gods or God – because, in the global community, as Bob Dylan rightly observed, “you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

Dr Peter Jones is director of Christian Witness to a Pagan Planet.



Dying to go

Christians are the last safeguard against a calamitous trend.

Euthanasia is again in the spotlight. At the present time the Australian Senate has before it a Bill on euthanasia, Rights of the Terminally Ill (Euthanasia Laws Repeal) Bill 2008 sponsored by Greens senator Bob Brown, while in Victoria the Legislative Council has before it Ms Colleen Hartland MLC's Medical Treatment (Physician-Assisted Dying) Bill 2008.

Perhaps indicating that she may need to do more work in building the numbers for her bill, Ms Hartland has requested that the third reading be deferred to the next available sitting day, 30 July.

Senator Brown's bill is "a first step" bill that seeks to repeal the Euthanasia Laws Act 1997 which prevents the Northern Territory and ACT Legislative Assemblies from legalising voluntary euthanasia.

I will approach the subject of euthanasia by way of considering Ms Hartland's Bill, drawing as well on her eloquent second reading speech.

The issue of dying, whether from a terminal condition or advanced incurable disease, is always something that tugs at our heart strings, particularly for family members and close friends. It is deeply distressing to hear a dying mother or father, son or daughter say "I want to die".

The preamble to the bill speaks of a mentally competent adult person "suffering intolerably from a terminal or advanced incurable illness to exercise their right to end their life ..."

In an ideal world this may sound a compassionate thing, though to argue about "a right to end life" is to presume the thing desired. Not only that, but there is no historical precedent for such a right. None of the United Nations human rights instruments contain a "right to die". They are all about the flourishing and development of each human individual, not the deliberate and orchestrated ending of an individual's life.

In her second reading speech, Ms Hartland acknowledges the value of palliative care but dismisses it with the unsubstantiated assertion that "the medical literature suggests that even the best modern palliative care is simply unable to



David Palmer

relieve the suffering of those near the end of life". This claim was ably refuted in an opinion piece appearing in *The Age* by palliative care consultant Dr Adrian Dabscheck.

Dr Dabscheck says there is much that he can do, very effectively, "to make my patient's lives as free from pain and suffering as humanly possible". Furthermore, "in extremely rare cases, a patient may, with consent, be sedated at the end of life".



A 2005 study showed that at least 50 per cent of patients killed under the Dutch euthanasia program were suffering from depression.

Ms Hartland spoke of the virtues of the State of Oregon legislation but failed to mention that from 1994 to 2007 there were 89 proposals in the USA to legalise euthanasia in 22 states, and none succeeded. Oregon is the only state in America allowing legalised physician-assisted suicide. That this is so is partly due to the well-recognised under-funding of Oregon's health system. To commend the virtues of the Oregon legislation after only 10 years of operation, and as the solitary state permitting euthanasia in the USA, is unwise, to say the least.

A far more appropriate example to quote is Holland where euthanasia has been openly practised since 1973.

Overall, in Holland in 2005, about 12,660 deaths, or 9 per cent of the total, were caused intentionally. A 2005 study showed that at least 50 per cent of patients killed under the Dutch euthanasia pro-

gram were suffering from depression. A 1991 study showed that an average of three people a day underwent euthanasia without their knowledge or consent. Studies in 1991 and 1995 showed that, despite Dutch law requiring physicians to report physician-assisted death, the majority of deaths went unreported.

While Ms Hartland's bill limits euthanasia to adults 18 years and older, in Holland children up to the age of 12, including newborns, may now be killed by lethal injection with parental consent. Liberalisation of the law due to presenting cases is inevitable over time. This is precisely the Dutch experience.

Is this what Australians, including their parliamentarians desire for their nation?

Could these parliamentarians pass Ms Hartland's Bill and guarantee that none of these things now happening in Holland – a country where many elderly sick people are afraid to seek medical help because they fear being euthanased without their consent – would not happen in Victoria?

In truth, in Australia the restrictive prohibitions of abortion, such as the Menhennit ruling in Victoria, did nothing to prevent the rate of abortions ballooning to one abortion to every three live births.

Australia, like all Western nations, is undergoing a demographic shift with an increasing proportion of the population being elderly. Will euthanasia become a cost-effective method of medical treatment for the elderly?

To guard against such an outcome, this bill – whatever form it takes – should not be approved.

There are more specific arguments against the bill. Consider these.

The focus in care should always be upon the patient and not upon family and friends, no matter how distressing the patient's situation appears to be to them. In particular, while relatives may wish to impose their "quality-of-life" judgments upon the elderly and chronically ill, the person concerned may take a very different view.

In 2003, the *New York Times* printed a remarkable article by disability rights

lawyer Harriet McBryde Johnson recounting her debate with and reaction to Peter Singer, over his contention that parents with a child suffering the kind of disabilities that Ms Johnson herself suffers – and, as she describes them, they are truly horrendous – should have the right to kill them. Ms Johnson says she was outraged by Singer’s argument, describing his prejudice as “an ultimate evil, and him a monster”. In fact she says, “I enjoy my life. (People like me), we take constraints that no one else would choose and build rich and satisfying lives with them. We enjoy pleasures other people enjoy, and pleasures peculiarly our own. We have something the world needs.”

At the very least, even allowing for the different circumstances of the dying, this story reminds us that the interests of the elderly and chronically ill take precedence over those of family, friends and euthanasia enthusiasts.

Second, the statistics on physician-assisted suicide for persons suffering depression ought to sound a clear warning bell. Euthanasia is not an appropriate response to depression.

Third, a major concern is that towards the end of life people can become anxious about being a burden, not being valued. They are vulnerable to pressure from others, even family members, who from motives that may well be kindly meant, promote euthanasia to the vulnerable elderly.

Ms Hartland quoted Newpoll statistics that 80 per cent of Australians sup-

port euthanasia and only 14 per cent oppose it. But the results of polling are highly dependent upon who is polled, the information provided and the actual wording of the questions. That poll should be taken cautiously.

One particular factor that needs to be remembered is that people who indicate when younger that they support euthanasia can and do change their minds as to whether euthanasia is for them. A very interesting poll, if polls now decide how

People who indicate when younger that they support euthanasia can and do change their minds as to whether euthanasia is for them.

we should act, would be a poll of the elderly and those chronically ill and facing death in the not too distant future. I suggest such a poll would not produce a figure of 80 per cent, nor even 20 per cent for that matter.

A final point concerns the

nature of the doctor-patient relationship. Doctors are meant to preserve life, not end it. If the role of a doctor is redefined from that of life preserver to include life terminator, that precious doctor-patient relationship will be potentially jeopardised.

In making the above observation and plea, I am not seeking to be somehow heartless or ignorant of the issue of great pain and suffering. The entire Christian

Church in all its varied and localised manifestations, including the Presbyterian Church, has been involved in the care of the elderly and chronically ill throughout its existence. People have been suffering and dying throughout that period. Individuals today are not unique.

We Christians worship a God who we believe creates, sustains and protects the capacity for all human relationships and communities to function harmoniously and effectively. The commandment not to murder not only asserts who ultimately has the rights over all life, but also establishes a boundary condition for the flourishing of all human relationships and communities.

If our politicians truly care, then for the sake of, and for the dignity of our elderly and chronically ill, they should not allow any of these euthanasia bills to pass. At the very least they need to give some thought to what our society might begin to look like once humans are allowed an active power of death over others, for this is what euthanasia legislation will set in train should it be passed.

It may be that MPs do not allow either bill to pass. Such an outcome will be due in no small measure to the pressure applied by the Christian constituency. It is a very sad thing to realise that the only group in the broader Australian community prepared to campaign on pro-life issues is the church – and even then not all of it.

Euthanasia is an issue that will not go away, given the fading Christian understanding in the broader Australian community. There exists what one euthanasia advocate describes as “a small but significant number of determined patients, generally having strong personalities and a history of being in control, who are unlikely to be deflected from their wish to end their lives”. When we also remember that for the typical Aussie pagan – despite occasional bravado – death is the grim reaper with no hope-filled prospect to follow, we remind ourselves of the enormity of the task to defend the right to life and to die a good death in God’s time and in a God honouring way.

May God have mercy upon our nation.

David Palmer is convener of the Victorian Church and Nation Committee. Part of this article formed the basis of a letter that committee sent to every member of the Victorian Upper House and also for an article posted on OnLine Opinion (<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=7543>).

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The widow's might

My husband's death forced me to change in ways I never wanted to.

I am part of the fastest growing demographic in the United States. We are targeted by new-home builders and surveyed by designers. We are a lucrative niche for health and beauty products, and financial planners invite us to dinners. It's no wonder the marketers are after us: 800,000 join our ranks every year.

Who are we? We are the invisible among you—the widows.

Studies show that widows lose 75 per cent of their friendship network when they lose a spouse. Sixty per cent of us experience serious health issues in that first year. One third of us meet the criteria for clinical depression in the first month after our spouse's death, and half of us remain clinically depressed a year later. Most experience financial decline.

One pastor described us by saying we move from the front row of the church to the back, and then out the door. We move from serving and singing in choir to solitude and silent sobbing, and then on to find a place where we belong.

With my husband Bob's exit to heaven, my daily life has changed: my calendar, my chequebook, the thermostat, the contents of my refrigerator, and even the look in my children's eyes when they step through the door on holidays. My living space is more cluttered. I seldom use makeup. I am now familiar with the smell of car oil as I sit in Lube Right waiting for an oil change. There are other changes so private and personal they cannot be shared. Loneliness and solitude are not descriptive enough of the space that becomes the cocoon of the widow.

Had I been faced with these facts five years ago, I would have stated, "It can't be so! In the community of believers, we support each other." But I look back on my own responses to women who had become widows and realise how little I understood, how little I empathised, how seldom I walked beside them.

Yet because of our shared experience, we have an incredibly strong bond that links us to each other. We discover we are vulnerable as we have never been before. I learned this one evening as I walked through the city, hunched over into the wind with my hood up on my long black



**Miriam
Neff**

coat. In my haste to the train station, I passed only two other people as I hurried over the dark waters of the Chicago River. "I've never done this before in my life," I thought. Widows experience so many firsts that we stop counting.

At 19, I embarked on my journey with Bob that lasted 41 years, 2 months, and 21 days. It began soon after the first day of my college career.

"May I walk with you?" The soft hazel eyes of a gentleman looked down into mine. It was a warm September afternoon on the campus of Indiana University. Singing Hoosiers rehearsal was over and the baritone soloist was asking to walk with me! Sixteen months later, this 18-year-old freshman who had never been to Chicago or heard of Moody Bible Institute married a man who knew his life calling was to serve God through Moody Broadcasting.

Together we finished degrees, moved from the farm to the city, had children, adopted children, sang in church choirs, offered hospitality, and traveled to 40 countries. I became an educator—a teacher and counselor in public high schools—a working mother. As Bob followed his calling, he expanded the MBI network to 36 owned and operated stations. He successfully negotiated with the Federal Communications Commission and began a satellite ministry that at times has served 600 affiliates. We parented our children to adulthood, unquestionably the greatest challenge of our marriage. We enjoyed the marriages of three—including two receptions in our own yard. No smile was broader on either Bob's or my face than

while watching our three incredibly handsome African American grandsons grow up.

In an exceedingly productive season of his life, while serving as vice president of Moody Broadcasting, treasurer of the National Religious Broadcasters, and a board member for HCJB (Heralding Christ Jesus' Blessings, an international broadcasting group), Bob fell. The inconvenience and pain of a dislocated shoulder began the journey from doctors to disease, all the while sorting through our theology, to face the bleak reality: Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, an untreatable, fatal disease, had gripped Bob's body.

Less than three years after that fall, Bob entered heaven willingly; I gave him up with more than reluctance. Our oneness was now ripped in two. My unarguably better half was gone and the gaping wound created by his exit had every nerve ending screaming — even though I was supposed to be numb.

While every widow's story is different, we all share the understanding of a loss that is final beyond description. Watching the gardener gently work the grass seed into the fresh dirt on my husband's grave set me apart forever from the life I once had.

Widows gain a fresh perspective on Scripture. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, I am reminded that no one can comfort a widow like another widow. In turn, we are moved deeply when we see another woman enter this experience, and we want to comfort her in her grief. With desperation we study the 103 Scripture passages referencing widows. And we find we are not invisible to God. With gratitude we discover that we are not only close to God's heart, but that He measures others by how they treat us (James 1:27). This is both a comforting and sobering insight. Widows, orphans, prisoners—the voiceless—God chooses to speak for us.

He instructs that our needs be met through the church's tithes if necessary (Deut. 14:29; 26:12; Acts 6:1-4). He instructs that in our vulnerability we be given legal rights (Isa. 1:17). He

Loneliness and solitude are not descriptive enough of the space that becomes the cocoon of the widow.

commends one widow for her sacrificial giving (Mark 12:42-44). He tells our story in His Word: the widow at Zarephath and her generosity (1 Kings 17:9), the widow with her pot of oil, faith, and obedience (2 Kings 4:1).

As I studied Scripture on widows, these themes emerged:

To the widow: Be generous regardless of the quantity of your possessions; no one's "stuff" is their own anyway. Be filled with faith: you can't help but be when you see how special you are to your Creator and new Husband.

To the church: The significance of your church is not in its numbers, but that its priorities match God's. The character of your leaders is not measured by their popularity or power, but by their attention and care for the powerless and voiceless among them.

Taking care of widows can be complex for several reasons. Churches today are varied in size and resources, and the experiences and needs of widows also vary widely. There is no model of service for all to follow, though the early church clearly made it a priority by appointing church leaders to oversee the care of widows (Acts 6:1-7). I would also recommend that leadership groups related to widows' ministry have a leading member who is a widow. Without such a leader, churches' decisions on how to serve us often miss the mark.

While the needs for financial support and help with our homes' upkeep are common, the need for connection is most pressing. Often, personal connections with the church are broken upon becoming a widow. This time is the widow's most painful, lonely, and vulnerable part of her journey, a time when she needs believing friends near her.

As a widow, I have learned that we all change. And much of the change is good. We become faith-filled because we cannot face the day any other way. We become

strong because we have no other choice. We are compassionate because our heart has been broken. As I listen to other widows' stories, I am awestruck by what they have learned and accomplished.

One of my own turning points occurred in Africa. Following in Bob's footsteps, I traveled to a place I had previously been unable to visit. I was connecting with believers whom Bob had assisted in broadcasting. Before my trip, I

We become faith-filled because we cannot face the day any other way. We are compassionate because our heart has been broken.

received an email asking me to speak to widows' groups there. Of course I would. This would be a way for me to give as Bob had.

The result: I spoke to seven groups of widows, ranging from 20 to 200 listeners each. At one church

service, the men were the predominant note-takers. I spoke to one assembly of five churches, and I delivered my message with five pastors sitting behind me in large, impressive chairs. After listening intently to my teaching, one pastor issued a pronouncement: "It is good."

I can only say, simply, that I was changed. I remembered Bob encouraging me to accept my first speaking engagement after my first book was published. I was hesitant. He said, "Honey, they want to hear the person behind the book." So I reluctantly went. This was different. A different woman emerged in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. With my Bible open before hungry learners, I was energised and embraced the opportunity.

A second turning point came in the Dominican Republic. I was treasuring a week of rest and relaxation after four of the hardest years of my life. It was my

first trip alone. While I had expected to rest and read, I found myself signing up for any and all activities: snorkeling, horseback riding, and learning to sail a catamaran. Being the only single woman to sign up for solo sailing lessons, my instructor eyed me with little enthusiasm and told me where to plant myself on the canvas. My eager attitude was soon deflated. "You can't learn this. I'll take you for a ride, and we'll go back."

"Wrong," I thought.

On my fourth lesson (and after my requested change of instructors), my new instructor said those delightful words: "You can dump me now." I was on my own.

There are no words to describe being alone on that canvas, gripping the rudder, feeling the wind at my back, and racing out into the Atlantic. "Honey, can you see me?" I shouted to the sky. It was as if he answered, "You'll do this and more, sweetheart, and I'm not surprised."

Back home, after I described my adventure to my family, my grandson asked, "Nana, weren't you afraid?"

"No," was my definite answer. "If I failed and drowned, I'd see God and Grandpa. If I succeeded, I'd have sailed a catamaran—solo. Nana has nothing to lose."

Yes, we have changed. Widows believe Romans 8:28 with a new tenacity. We have new and relevant gifts to offer, not in spite of, but rather because of our loss. We are bold because we have already faced death in a part of ourselves. We laugh at things many people fear and count blessings among the mundane events of an ordinary day. Invisible? Let's change that. Welcoming widows reflects the heart of God.

Miriam Neff is the author of several books and the founder of Widowconnection.com. This article is reprinted from Christianity Today magazine.

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Letters

Out of tune

During the early days of the Hawke Government, the “powers that be” in Canberra decided that our constitution needed updating, and a constitutional amendment should be put to the people. One part in particular, “Freedom of Religion”, caught the attention of Christian activists because the fine print indicated that what was actually intended was freedom *from* religion. Theological principles were not to be taught in any public place, including private schools.

A small number of concerned Christians, scattered throughout the community, marshalled their resources, and the regular meetings soon became large enough to fill a big hall. A somewhat ambitious plan was put together to letter-box the whole Perth metropolitan area, and many country towns as well.

Fortunately for the campaign this writer had recently retired, and had taken up printing as a hobby. The carport soon became filled with boxes of paper, as people from an area of many square miles around exchanged a boot-load of blank paper for an equivalent amount of pamphlets.

In the middle of all this frantic activity, a neighbor, whom I knew to be a church-goer, asked what was going on. When I sought to recruit him, he replied adamantly: “No... NO... I can’t possibly get involved in all this.” Pressed for a reason, he became somewhat agitated. “No, no, I can’t. I sing in the church choir,” he said.

Dumbfounded? So was I... and then the penny dropped. He had found an “out”. And isn’t this the way it is with most of us? There are many things we know we should do. Our conscience is telling us. We pray constantly for our politicians, that God will give them wisdom and that they will do the right thing when a controversial issue arises, but the idea that we should write a letter and tell them our opinion and what we believe they should do, or what they are doing wrong, is totally “beyond the pale”. We find an “out”, and the sad and tragic truth is that, in far too many cases, any old “out” will do. Isn’t it hypocritical to pray for things which we could, by combining

with our like-minded friends, do ourselves?

Of course the referendum was defeated, and it was the vote in WA that tipped the scale, but most certainly with no thanks to the wider church-going public.

*R. B. Dewar,
Samson, WA*

Scripture, not history

Colin Gould (*AP* May 2008) says reformed interpretation of Scripture is based upon an approach called “historical grammatical” which attempts to understand the text of the Bible as it would have been understood by the original hearers and therefore requires as much knowledge about the cultural and linguistic context of those readers as we have access to.

This is a half truth. Firstly we are told that these things are not written for his (Abraham’s) sake alone but for us also (Rom. 4:24) and concerning Moses “all these things happened to them for examples *to us* and are written for our admonition” (1 Cor. 10: 11). If then they are written for us, whose culture is more important, theirs or ours? The answer is that all that is necessary to be known of those past cultures is given in the Scriptures.

Secondly, our understanding of the language of the original texts pre-eminently comes from the texts themselves, not from archaeologists. Although all languages decline, neither Greek nor Hebrew was ever a lost language. Archaeology and linguists can verify the bible as in Ramsay’s confirmation that the early Christians did indeed turn the world upside down and by examining recent texts such as the Isaiah scroll; but they can also be corrosive. Better Greek scholars rejected texts such as the Alexandrian text but moderns accept it. Corrupted texts produce corrupted churches. Did the Alexandrian text produce Islam? Is the NIV doing the same today? Are modern bibles, one new one a week, fraudulent?

*Neil Cadman,
Norman Park, Qld*

Ban alcohol ads

On the assumption that many of *AP*’s readers are concerned about many of the bad outcomes from the current misuse of alcohol may I suggest that there is one thing they can do fairly easily to help in the mitigation of this problem?

It is now recognised that there are 3000 to 4000 alcohol-related deaths annually including the death of one young person a week in an acute situation. The number damaged by alcohol misuse is very, very much more, placing huge demands on our health, law enforcement, legal and other services. There is commensurate family tragedy.

Many helpful measures have been called for recently but over and above these, I believe, a powerful circuit breaker is needed to initiate reversal of the culture of intoxication that pervades so much of our culture. This needed circuit breaker, I maintain, is the cessation of alcohol advertising on TV. Such a dramatic and high profile step will put the responsible use of alcohol and how to achieve it high on the community’s agenda.

The easy thing to do will be to contact your state’s Senators in Federal Parliament urging them to support Senator Steven Fielding’s Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007 which includes such a proposal. He is aiming for a 9pm to 5am ban but I believe a total ban would be more effective in achieving the above goal of culture reversal. The names and contact details of Senators can be readily obtained from the website www.aph.gov.au.

*John Woods
Winnalee, NSW*

*Visiting
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Books

Soul-Depths and Soul-Heights

An Exposition of Psalm 130

Octavius Winslow

Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006.

Reviewed by Peter Barnes

Octavius Winslow preached at the opening of Spurgeon's Tabernacle in London in 1861, so he was highly regarded in his day. This work dates from 1874, and might be compared with John Owen's 325 pages on the same Psalm in volume 6 of his works.

Winslow is punchier in style. For a start, he knows what a full stop is, and knows the difference between a paragraph and a chapter. This makes Winslow's work an invaluable treatment of a most vital Psalm. Luther called this one of the "Pauline psalms". It speaks clearly of God's free grace as the remedy for our sins.

There are apt illustrations all through the work, such as the words of the pardoned criminal to Philip Doddridge, as an illustration of verse 4b. There are also a number of very appropriate citations of hymns. This is preaching that is faithful to Scripture, and warming to the human heart.

Peter Barnes is books editor of AP.

**On Being Presbyterian
Our Beliefs, Practices and Stories**

Sean Michael Lucas

Presbyterian and Reformed: 2006.

Reviewed by Stuart Bonnington

This is a very attractive handbook which has been produced to introduce the Presbyterian Church to new people joining it in the USA. It also serves Presbyterians anywhere who are interested in what Bible-based Presbyterianism

believes (chapters 1-5), how it functions in terms of piety, worship and church order (in an American setting of course – chapters 5-8) and its history (again focusing in the end on conservative Presbyterianism in the USA – chapters 9-13).

There is much to be learned, noted and, as God leads, that could be put into practice by Bible-loving Presbyterians anywhere. Each chapter has a good set of questions for discussion and a substantial list of further reading.

Stuart Bonnington is minister of Scot's Kirk, Fremantle.

Sketches from Church History

Student Workbook

Rebecca Frawley

Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2007.

Reviewed by Mignon Goswell

The publishers of this book inform us that one survey on Amazon.com placed S.M. Houghton's highly readable book *Sketches from Church History* third on a list of useful books for homeschoolers. I read Houghton's *Sketches* with great delight soon after it was published in 1980. It covers the march of Christ's church on earth up to the end of the 19th century.

It is with pleasure that I note the publishing of this student workbook to accompany Houghton's *Sketches*. It is spiral-bound for ease of use, basic black and white in its presentation apart from the covers, and contains space for short answers. The chapters of the workbook easily correspond with the original text and each chapter gives a book (and even the occasional movie) for further research by the interested student

The workbook contains a variety of tasks from straightforward questions to answer, to maps to fill in, to crosswords and to essay topics. There are also three tests included as well as an answer key. The book suggests it can be completed in 18 weeks, three classes a week, so one semester is the time frame envisaged,

though of course this is up to the individual parent or school using the course. For mid to senior high school students it is a wonderful first read into church history. For those older readers who may never have been introduced to the wonder of church history, here is an ideal starting point.

S.M. Houghton was a history teacher himself and a man who contributed greatly to the Banner of Truth's work. It is a wonder that this student workbook has not been written and published before now!

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

**The Promise:
Daily Bible Readings
Introducing the Christian
Message**

Alec Taylor

Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006.

Reviewed by Peter Barnes

This is a book that should have been written a long time ago. It provides the new Christian or the earnest inquirer with a most helpful introduction to the Bible. Thirty-one biblical texts are reproduced, and simply explained. The creation, the Fall, the covenants, and major prophecies such as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 are dealt with, as well as an outline of the New Testament message.

Some more historical detail might have been useful and, while there are four days devoted to the incarnation, no example is given of Jesus' miracles (apart from His own resurrection) or parables. Also, some of the applications are a bit predictable – e.g. "Will you be there in heaven?"

For all that, this book is an ideal introduction to the message of the Bible, and to the practice of regular Bible reading. Christians should buy some copies to give away.

All books reviewed are available from the Reformers Bookshop – Phone: (02) 9569 9857 or visit www.reformers.com.au



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His Lordship first

Acts, our paradigm for evangelism, never mentions love.

The book of Acts reveals to us how the gospel was made known to people who were, initially at least, not Christians, be they Jews or Gentiles. The epistles, however, were written to churches or people who at least professed faith in Christ. Therefore, it should be clear that in order to learn how to present the gospel to unbelievers, we ought to turn first to Acts rather than the epistles. If we do so, we learn some startling things.

The starting point is not the love of God but His Lordship. In most churches, the evangelist starts with the love of God. Billy Graham tells us in his autobiography that he went into a pub in a Roman Catholic section of Ireland on a Sunday morning to tell patrons "how much God loved them". That is hardly the starting point of the apostle Paul.

When Paul was preaching in Athens, he began by telling the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers: "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:24-25).

Since God is the creator of all, He is Lord of all, including you and me, whether we believe that or not. Strangely enough, the word "love" is not found in the book of Acts at all, although Paul does tell the people of Lystra that God is good to all (Acts 14:17). This means that God is good to those who are not good and who do not acknowledge Him.

This leads to the Lordship of Christ which is proved by His resurrection. Chronologically, the crucifixion naturally comes first, then the resurrection, but in presenting the gospel, the apostles pass over the crucifixion quickly in order to emphasise that Jesus rose from the dead and lives forevermore.

To the Athenians, Paul says that the day of judgment, which is to come, is proved by the resurrection of Jesus,



Peter Barnes

which is past (Acts 17:31). In presenting the gospel to those who were steeped in the Old Testament, Peter briefly mentions the fact of the crucifixion (Acts 2:23) before demonstrating from Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 that Jesus has risen from the dead and is now seated at God's right hand (Acts 2:24-35). This means

The crowd condemned Jesus, but God reversed that verdict. The court on earth got it dreadfully wrong; the court in heaven got it wonderfully right.

Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again, is accepting that Jesus is Lord over all things, including death. He has defeated death, the last enemy, the one whom we cannot defeat. Why believe in Jesus of Nazareth and not Buddha or Mohammed? One of the first reasons has to be that Jesus is alive now, but Buddha and Mohammed are dead.

Therefore, we are accountable to Him in the judgment. If the man Jesus is the risen Lord, then obviously I need to be put right with Him. The crowd condemned Jesus, but God the Father reversed that verdict and vindicated Him. The court on earth got it dreadfully wrong; the court in heaven got it wonderfully right.

This Christ is the judge. God has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed (Acts 17:31). Chronologically, Jesus died, then rose

again, then ascended to heaven, and now rules from there from where He shall come to judge the living and the dead. But as the Spirit of God grasps the sinful human heart, it almost works in reverse. It is His Lordship that should grip us first. The Lordship of Christ is not tacked on to the message of the Saviour. In the book of Acts it is there in the original presentation.

Because of this, we need to repent of sin and put our faith in the Lord as Saviour.

Today we are told to invite Jesus into our hearts or to make a decision for Him. In Acts we are told to repent and believe in Christ Jesus (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30). The good news that is proclaimed to the sinner is that the Lord is also the Saviour.

Again, we work backwards. The one who is the risen Lord and judge of all the earth is the very one who died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin. The message is not "Jesus died for everybody, so you need to make Him your personal Saviour", but "Jesus the Lord died for sinners, and you as a sinner need to cast yourself on His mercy".

Peter Barnes is minister of Revesby Presbyterian Church, NSW.

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