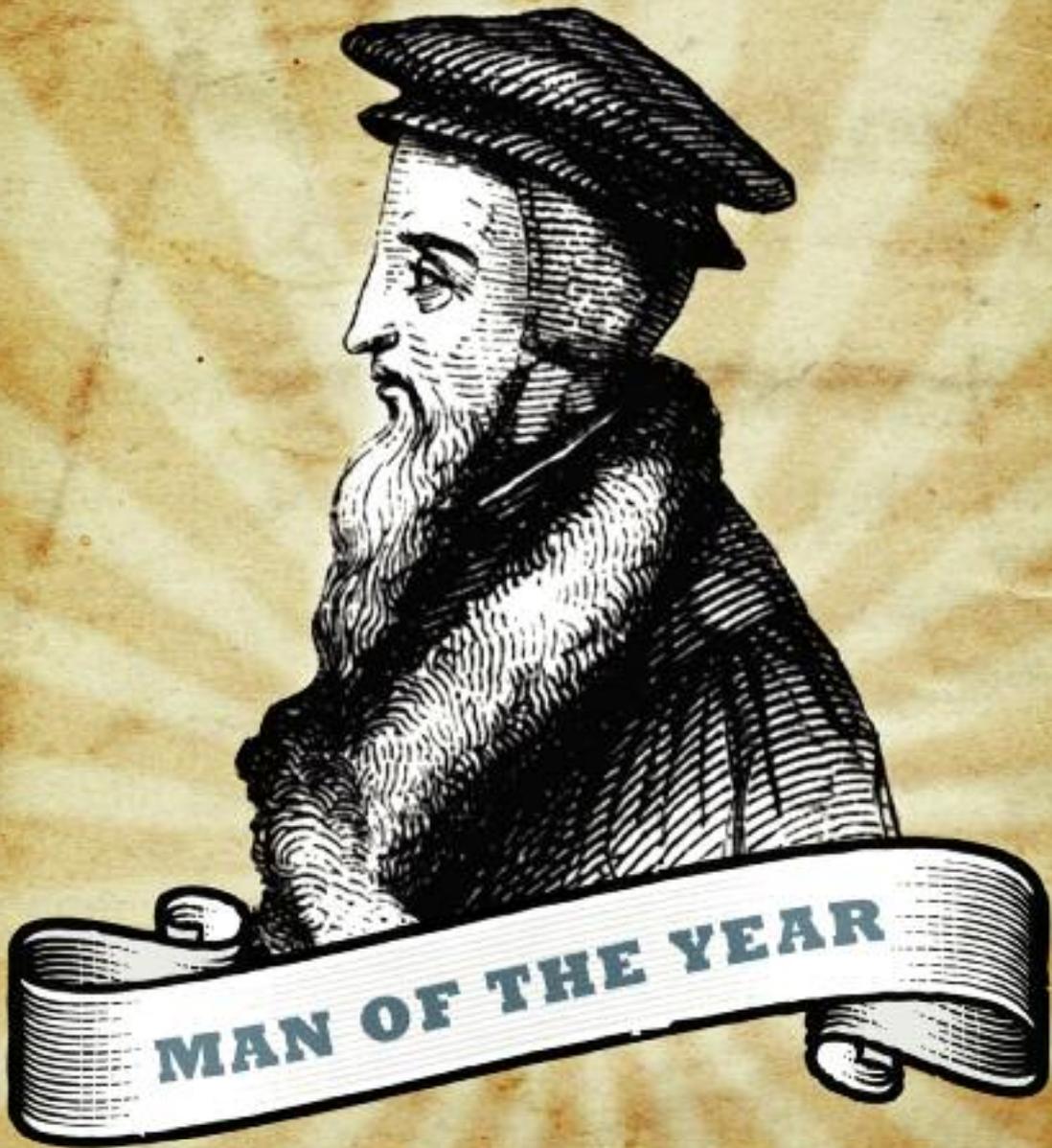


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Presbyterian

THE MAGAZINE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

may 2009



John Calvin

1509-1564

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editorial

In July 2009 Christians in many Protestant churches will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, one of the great figures of the Reformation. That such an event should be the subject of widespread commemorative services raises the question of why Calvin retains such interest after half a millennium. Although Calvin has many detractors, his influence over the contemporary church scene is pervasive. As the managing editor of *Christianity Today*, Ted Olsen, has said of Calvin's theological legacy: "Everyone knows where the energy and passion are in the Evangelical world."

So, why should we remember John Calvin? While social historians will mention such factors as his influence on the Protestant work ethic and the development of representative parliamentary democracy, of greater importance to evangelical Christians are his commitment to rigorous biblical scholarship and his emphasis on the place of expository preaching as the catalyst of spiritual renewal and reformation.

There is no doubt that Calvin made a major contribution to the advance of biblical studies. Few before him ever attained such a detailed understanding of the biblical languages, with perhaps the exception of Jerome. Certainly he had no peer in his commanding grasp of the principles of Scriptural interpretation and exegesis.

It is not surprising that his high view of Scripture translated into a commitment to expository preaching. He believed that when the preacher expounded and applied the text of Scripture he was actually functioning as the mouthpiece of God. His determination to declare God's Word systematically, accurately and faithfully has established an enduring benchmark for preachers.

Of course, his great legacy to the church is his exalted vision of God that permeates every aspect of his magnum opus, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. B. B. Warfield, the Princeton scholar, once opined that no theologian has ever offered a more profound vision of the majesty and glory of God than Calvin.

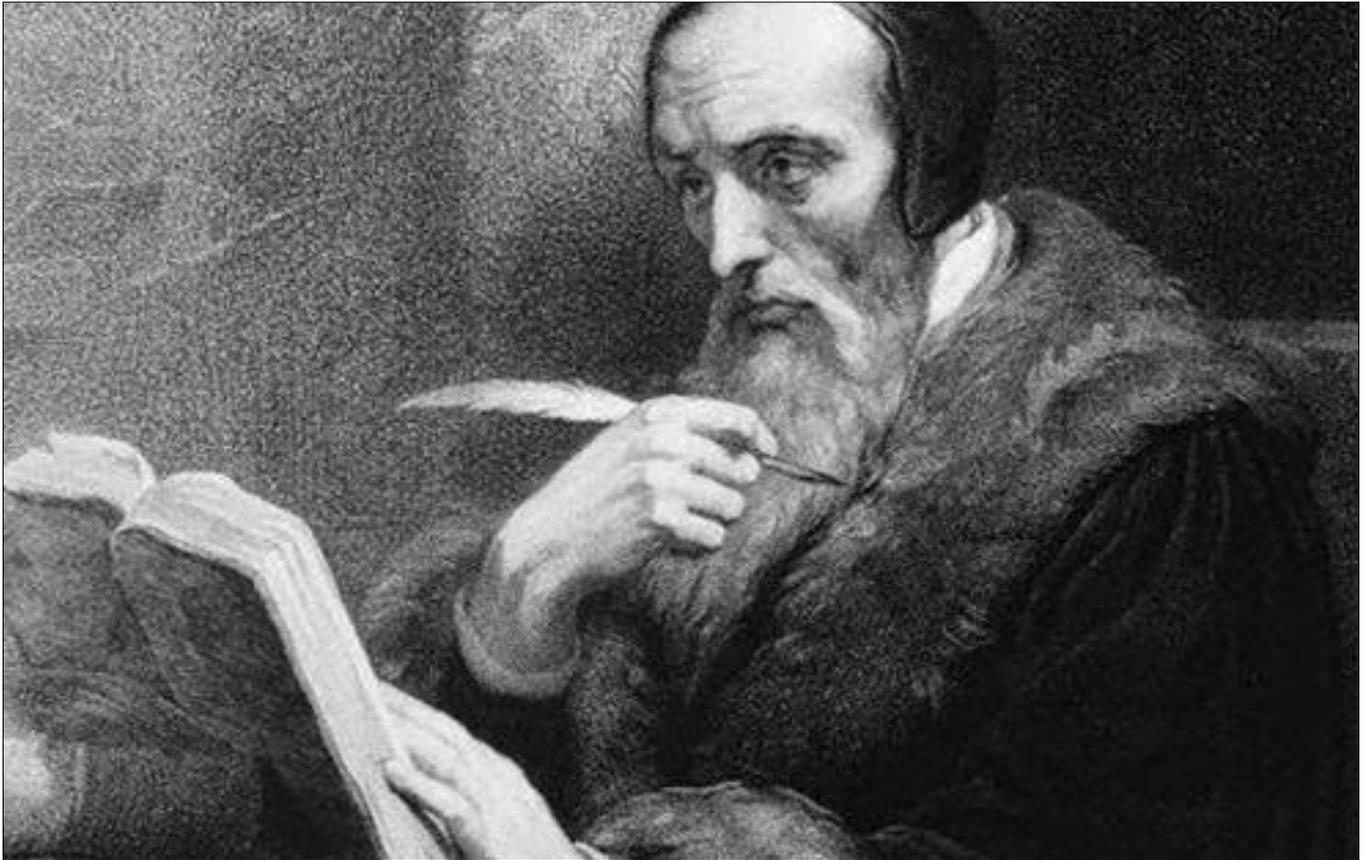
Our hope is that through this issue on John Calvin, our love for God, our devotion to the study of the Scriptures and our commitment to encourage the faithful preaching of God's Word will flourish and grow.

Peter Hastie 

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Calvin the colossus

Pastor, preacher, theologian: Calvin's contribution is incalculable.



PORTRAIT OF JOHN CALVIN 1509-1564, BY ARY SCHEFFER.

Jigon Duncan III is the senior minister of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi. A Greenville, South Carolina, native, Duncan is a graduate of Furman University, has two Masters from Covenant Theological Seminary and a PhD from the University of Edinburgh, New College, Scotland in 1995.

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He is editor of the series *The Westminster Confession in the 21st Century*, and his preaching ministry is followed on television and radio both in and outside of Mississippi and on the internet at www.fpcjackson.org.

Ligon, this year we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth. Will you be writing to the editor of *Time* to suggest Calvin should be the magazine's "Man of the Year" because of his enduring contribution?

Actually, the thought hadn't crossed



**Dr Ligon Duncan
talks to
Peter Hastie**

my mind but it's a great idea. Now that you mention it, it's something that I would like to do.

Why would you nominate him as "Man of the Year" for 2009?

I think Calvin should be nominated for a number of reasons. First, I believe he has written the most important book in the last 500 years, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which, in my opinion, has had a more enduring influence on the world for good than any other book of any kind in the last half millennium.

Second, as sociologists like Peter Berger have observed, Calvin was the genius of the Protestant Reformation, an organisational effort unlike any other that has been undertaken in the modern world. He was an amazing communicator. He was at the hub of a communication sys-

tem that stretched not only throughout Western Europe, but also through Brazil and into other parts of the world and yet he had no laptop, cell phone or Blackberry as he coordinated reforming efforts on a vast scale. Calvin's labours led to the grand coalition of Protestant churches that emerged from the 16th century.

Finally, I would nominate him because many of the liberties that we experience in the modern western world can be directly attributed to Calvin's thinking. It's true that in some respects he continued to be a medieval thinker about church-state relations, but in many ways he also represented a dramatic departure from the standards that existed in medieval Europe. To a large extent the religious and political freedoms which we enjoy today in the West can be attributed to some of the seminal thoughts of Calvin on such areas as authority and church-state relations. So, for all those reasons and more I think he would be a just recipient of the "Man of the Year" award.

Not everyone shares your views.

English historian Paul Johnson, for example, has compared Calvin to Lenin and has suggested that the only things that Calvin is famous for are his ferocity, his passionate self-righteousness and his intolerance. Does Johnson have a point?

Calvin was certainly a man of conviction. Further, he was deeply passionate about fulfilling his beliefs, both in a private and public sense. There is no doubt that people who did not share his convictions found him passionate and unyielding. Many certainly considered him self-righteous. However, I believe that to think of Calvin in the terms that Johnson uses is to be guilty of a narrow, biased and superficial assessment of him.

I am convinced that if Calvin was sitting with us today he would be the first person to acknowledge his imperfections. When he came back to Geneva after his expulsion, he made a number of changes in the way he did things. He had learned from his earlier shortcomings. In that sense, he was genuinely humble and contrite. If we compare Calvin to other men of his generation, I do not think that Paul Johnson's assessment will hold water on historical grounds. Frankly, I think there are many other historians (and I am not just talking about Christians), who would disagree with his assessment of Calvin. Their verdict would be that Calvin was an amazingly creative, energetic, and self-sacrificial genius who devoted his life to the common good and the welfare of the church. He was certainly determined to do what was right at a personal and ecclesiastical level, but that is not inconsistent with him being a large-hearted person who had a generous nature. Johnson's views are wrong.

Calvin was apparently a shy man who suffered from a number of disabilities. Would he have been accepted as a minister today? Are there any lessons here about the essential qualities that we should be looking for in ministers?

While Calvin may have had the necessary theological understanding to be a minister before he had his life-changing encounter with William Farel, he did not have a number of personal qualities which are essential for pastors prior to this meeting.

When he first met Farel he wanted the quiet life of a scholar like Erasmus. Farel challenged him about this attitude. He rebuked Calvin and said to him, "You are thinking only of yourself. You have got to

think of the church too". That was a life-changing moment for him and it fed into his understanding of piety. From that moment onwards, he became aware that Christ calls His people, and especially His ministers, to self-denial. I think we learn from this that ministers must not only be people with gifts and abilities to preach the gospel, but they must also be people who are ready to lay down their lives in sacrifice for Christ and the church.

How important is self-denial in the life of the minister?

It's vital. If a man is pursuing the gospel ministry with his own interests at heart, then he will certainly lose many of the sheep under his care. A pastor once said to me that if you are going to be a servant of the Word then you have to be willing to be treated like a servant. A minister must be prepared to die to his own interests if he is going to serve the church properly. We are there to serve God's Word to people, regardless of their response.

Calvin models this self-denial himself. He had a terrible time in Geneva for the first three years. His enemies hated him so much that they named their dogs "Calvin" and took a perverse delight in kicking them in public. They also gave their children obscene names so that when they were brought for baptism Calvin had to repeat the obscenity in the middle of the worship service. They did everything they could to show their contempt for Calvin. Eventually they ran Calvin and Farel and the other reforming ministers out of Geneva. Calvin was forced to find refuge in Strasbourg where he experienced three years of pastoral peace. Although Strasbourg was not without its difficulties, Calvin had the opportunity to shepherd many of the Christians who had fled there from France. He regarded this period as the happiest years of his life.

Then suddenly a letter came from Farel informing Calvin that the Genevans wanted him to return. Calvin says in a letter at the time, "I would have rather died than go back to Geneva. However, I am

not my own. I belong to God and I will live for Him and die for Him. Therefore, I will go back to Geneva." I think that ministers have to live out that spirit. Good ministry is not easy ministry; it always has its hardships. So, self-denial is one crucial quality that all true gospel ministers must have.

Another essential characteristic of a good minister is that his conscience is ruled by the Word of God. Calvin committed himself to teaching the Word faithfully without fear or favour. He also upheld the authority and infallibility of the Bible. This is something that we must have in our own day and age. We need ministers who will be absolutely committed to the final authority, inerrancy and infallibility of the Scriptures. There can be no surrender at this point. Scripture must be our guiding rule.

There is one further quality that I should mention too – it's our absolute submission to the sovereignty of God. This was the hallmark of Calvin's life. He believed that in the end God was in control no matter what happened. Calvin saw God's hand in everything. He believed that God was working all things for the good of His people and for the glory of His own Name. These commitments enabled Calvin to endure tremendous opposition, deep disappointments and grievous trials. They certainly helped him to face extreme physical suffering; Calvin was a walking medicine cabinet of problems. I don't know what the doctors would have done with him today. He often mentions in his letters that he is suffering from some painful condition. I am sure his illnesses would have immobilised many other men, but Calvin endured these trials because he trusted in the providence of God. I think Calvin is a model minister in reminding us of the three main priorities in a pastor's life – self-denial, a commitment to the authority of Scripture and a trust in the sovereignty of God. These are the qualities we should be looking for in young ministers.

In his commentary of John, Calvin comments on "and you shall know the truth" (John 8:32) in these words, "Whatever progress any of us has made in the gospel, let him know that he needs fresh additions". What are the implications of this statement for constant learning and spiritual vitality in the Christian life?

We are called always to be students in God's school because we are finite beings who serve an infinite God. This means

Calvin was an amazingly creative, energetic, and self-sacrificial genius who devoted his life to the common good and the welfare of the church.

that there is never going to be a point at which we can say that we know and follow it all. Therefore, we must never cease to learn more from God's Word so that we can live more obediently. There is nothing more important than knowing God and living the life that God has called us to live. Therefore we need to be constantly learning. Paul tells us in Romans 12:1, 2 that our minds need to be transformed by the Word of God so that we are not conformed to the world. This means that we have to be more exposed to the Word than we are to the world. The Word must be the determining factor in our lives, shaping our thinking, our desires, our hopes and our ambitions.

How did Calvin's love and knowledge of God's Word affect his study and preaching of it?

First, I believe that Calvin's love and reverence for the Word was at the foundation of his competence as an exegete and preacher of the Bible. He wins the contest hands-down for being the finest biblical exegete in the history of the church. Although I am deeply indebted to modern biblical scholars, especially Reformed ones, I still believe that Calvin's accomplishments in the area of exegesis are in a class of their own.

Of course, Calvin followed in the wake of the Renaissance humanists whose catchcry was "ad fontes" or "back to the sources". He mastered Hebrew and Greek in ways that earlier theologians like

Augustine did not. Augustine, for example, had a poor knowledge of Greek and no knowledge of Hebrew. From the 4th century to the 15th century Latin had become the language of theology. The Vulgate (the Latin translation of the Scriptures) was the primary translation, even over the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. Calvin went back to the original languages and showed remarkable adeptness at understanding the context and the

These commitments enabled Calvin to endure tremendous opposition, deep disappointments, grievous trials and extreme physical suffering.

flow of argument, to the point that, unlike so many commentaries written at this time, his are still remarkably helpful to anyone who is preaching through the Bible. In fact, because Calvin's motto was *brevitas et claritas* (brevity and clarity), sometimes he gets you to the

nub of an issue more quickly than anyone else. He is a tremendous exegete.

Again, he is also a superb preacher because he expounds the Bible so faithfully. If you look at Calvin's preaching, it is not like a lot of modern preaching. There is nothing flashy about it from the standpoint of rhetorical devices. He simply opens up the Word from the point where he had previously finished and then makes pastoral applications of the text in a structured and logical way which is sensitive to the flow of thought in the Scripture itself. He is a model of expounding Scripture.

What were the problems in Geneva and how did they shape his reform agenda? Did he have a particular strategy that he employed in reforming the church?

Calvin and Luther saw that the real problem of the medieval church was a theological one. It was not just a matter of the immorality of the clergy or the defective structure of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther gets at the heart of the problem in his introduction to *Bondage of the Will*. Lots of renaissance humanists had been critical of the Roman Catholic Church for three or four centuries before Calvin and Luther arrived. Geoffrey Chaucer, in the *Canterbury Tales*, was scathing of the clergy. However, what Calvin and Luther rightly understood was

that the problem was not just immorality and corruption; it was about doctrine. So, Calvin undertook a doctrinal reformation of the church. He believed that the worship and discipline of the church needed to be reformed according to Scripture.

The other problem that Calvin faced was the common assumption that the best kind of faith was implicit faith. Implicit faith is the doctrine that you have to accept what the church teaches. "It doesn't matter if you understand it; it doesn't matter if you have never read the Bible. All you need to do is follow the directions of Mother church. Accept what the church teaches and you will be fine." Calvin, on the other hand, says that if we are going to walk with God, then we have to know the God we are walking with. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that our faith is not a mere passive agreement with what the church teaches. True faith must be a personal trust in the God of the Bible. This is why every Christian needs to understand the Word of God.

The result of Calvin's teaching was that thousands of people crammed into churches all over Europe to hear the Word of God expounded consecutively. This had a profound effect on their spiritual experience. They had learned from the reformers that people needed an encounter with the living God through hearing His Word. For the first time in their lives large numbers of people discovered that they could know God personally through reading His Word and trusting in Jesus Christ. This was a revolutionary idea at the time. Since everyone must know the Word, this explains why Calvin taught and preached every day of the week.

Do you think that Calvin should be a guide to us in reforming and revitalising the churches today?

I believe the abiding lesson we learn from Calvin is that true church reform always begins with the Word of God. The Word of God preached is the primary means of restoring a church to health and keeping it healthy and strong.

This means that Scripture must reign supreme in the life of the church, not because it is a dead and static paper-pope, but because it is the active, living Word of God. It is the Word of God that brings life. In Genesis 1 we discover that when God speaks He creates life – He brings new things into being. Again, we learn in Genesis 12 that it is the Word of God that brought Abraham out of idolatry into saving fellowship with the Lord. The whole point of the Bible is that the way that we



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know God and fellowship with Him is by His Word.

Healthy church life begins with knowing God through His Word. Calvin tells us that the way to reform the church is to preach the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit and to study it individually and in groups. As far as Calvin was concerned, we can make no progress in spiritual growth or holiness if we do not prize the truth; and we can only know the truth where the Word of God is faithfully taught.

Would you like to comment on Calvin's practice of exposition of Scripture as a guide and help to us?

Calvin followed the method known as *lectio continua* where he preached on consecutive readings of Scripture. He would take a book and work through it in its entirety. People may not know the famous story that when Calvin had been run out of Geneva in 1538 he was in Matthew 13. When he returned in 1541 he began preaching again at the very next verse in the passage. I think this tells us something about his absolute commitment to getting to the heart of God's message through continuous exposition.

His practice each Sunday was to preach through every portion of Scripture in one part of the Bible. Then, when he finished one book, he would start on another. Is that the only way that a minister can preach? Certainly not! There are other ways to be faithful to the preaching of God's Word without always preaching consecutively through Bible books. You can preach a topical series and still do well, but I think that for the most part a preacher needs to follow Calvin's example because it is so thorough and balanced. If ministers take a leaf out of Calvin's book it becomes a lot harder for them to develop eccentric views and to ride their own hobby horses.

Further, if a preacher engages in exposition he will be forced to deal with passages on subjects like divorce and homosexuality that he would prefer to steer away from. At least he can say on those occasions, "Well, here we are. I didn't decide to stand up and preach on this but this is just where we are in the passage. We are going to let God have His say".

So, I think that expositional preaching actually assists a pastor. It also helps him to share his own discoveries with his congregation with a sense of passion and excitement in his own soul. When the congregation sees him excited about what he has learned during the week they also

become excited about what they are going to learn from him. So, I think that's another reason why Calvin's approach of continuous exposition is a helpful model for us today.

Let's turn to the *Institutes* now. How far would you say that the *Institutes* set out Calvin's own faith and the priorities in his life and work?

The Institutes is the one book to which Calvin devoted most of his energy throughout his life. The first edition was completed in 1536. He would have been just 25 or 26 years old when he wrote the first edition and had only been a Christian



When Calvin was run out of Geneva in 1538 he was preaching in Matthew 13. When he returned in 1541 he began at the very next verse.

for a very short time. Over the next 23 years until 1559 he undertook a major expansion of the work so that it went through many revised editions. Unlike Thomas Aquinas's *Theologica*, Calvin's *Institutes* was not intended as a comprehensive academic theology. Instead, he viewed it as a "sum of piety". It was designed to complement his commentaries and expositions on Scripture. The idea was that as you read through the Word of God you could see the big picture of the Bible and its major themes. Essentially, it was a handbook for Bible study so that readers had a systematic theology to guide them as they read the Bible.

Calvin also saw the *Institutes* as a means for cultivating piety. He viewed it as a way to cultivate an experiential love of God the Father as well as a fear and reverence of Him as Lord. So, studying theology is not some sort of speculative exercise; it is a very practical and pastoral thing. All of God's people in that sense ought to be theologians. The *Institutes* are very important for pressing home that truth. You can't miss Calvin's constant devotional and pastoral emphasis in the *Institutes*.

Let's talk about Calvin's view of God.

A. W. Tozer once said that what we think about God is the most important thing about us. What did Calvin think about God that was so profoundly life-changing for him?

Well, I think that Tozer is absolutely right there. Indeed, he is reflecting a truth that the Reformed tradition has emphasised perhaps more than any other tradition; that is, that what you believe about God is related to everything else and that doctrine has to be understood in light of what God reveals about Himself in the Word. I would say that Calvin believed a lot of things about God but certainly two of his central convictions are that God is sovereign and that all things exist for God's glory. I think those two realities pervade everything he does; namely, that God is in control of everything and that His grand aim in all circumstances is to be exalted over all things. This gave Calvin comfort in the midst of persecution and trial, but it also spurred him on to work with amazing energy because he knew that nothing that he did for God was ever wasted. Somehow God would make it serve His purposes and bring Him glory. I think there is a sense in which Philippians 2:12, 13 encapsulates Calvin's view of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. I continually meet people who think that if God is sovereign then it doesn't matter what we do. That was not Calvin's view. His view of God's sovereignty and providence enabled him to work with real passion.

How did Calvin's understanding of God drive his reform for worship? Did he have any distinctive contributions in this area? Would he be happy with Protestant worship today?

Calvin's starting point is that the human mind is a perpetual factory of idols. The fundamental problem is not atheism – true atheists don't really exist – but idolatry.

Everybody worships something; everyone finds meaning in something beyond themselves. Now that "something" is our god. Some people worship themselves; others worship a product of their own imagination. The Bible tells us that we must only worship the one true God. Essentially, there are two types of people in the world: people that worship the one true God and those who worship something else.

Calvin says that our major problem is our tendency to worship in ways that are not revealed in Scripture. Therefore the only way that we can worship God is

according to His Word. And that is Calvin's most distinctive contribution to the doctrine of Christian worship. This principle has huge implications for how we approach God today in worship. In Protestant churches throughout the western world we suffer from an idolatry of personal preferences in our corporate worship of God. The whole agenda for what we do is dependent on the kind of music that we like, the kind of feeling or mood we want to create and the degree of formality or informality that we want. It's all about what we want – our personal preferences. No one gives a moment's thought about what God requires of us. This is strange in view of the fact that we are coming to meet with God Almighty. Worship is supposed to be about pleasing Him; our personal preferences don't count. The problem today is that if you look at the plethora of worship practices in our churches it all boils down to personal preference. Calvin and the Puritans called this "wilful worship", that is, worshipping according to human preference rather than worshipping in the way prescribed by God.

Let's think about Calvin's training of ministers. A graduate diploma from Calvin's academy in Geneva was a death warrant for many of his students. How does Calvin prepare us for facing death and suffering in the ministry?

After the subjects of self-denial and prayer in the *Institutes* we come to the subject of "cross-bearing". According to Calvin it is in cross-bearing that we reach the heart of true Christian experience. It shouldn't surprise us that the great 19th century Calvinistic missionaries took their belongings with them to the mission field in their coffins. They assumed that they were going to be buried on the mission field. They knew that it was highly likely that their ministry would lead to their deaths.

Calvin graduated his students knowing that many of them would die as a result of religious persecution at the hands of the Roman Catholic Inquisition. Calvin didn't apologise to his students for the danger involved in their callings. It is the essence of what we do as ministers of the gospel to die for God's glory and for the welfare of His people. If we die in the service of Christ, so be it.

John Piper has rung that chime in our own time. I remember hearing John speak about the calling of missionaries in the wake of the attacks in America on 9/11. I must confess that my thoughts were not

very friendly about the Islamic world at the time. Anyway at this missions conference in Jackson he said, "You know, it may be that before we see the Muslim world come to faith in Christ we'll have to send our own sons and daughters to them to be killed." And he said that if we do that, it will all be worth it to see a billion Muslims on their knees praising the love and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ their Saviour. He said that if we have to send our best and brightest sons and daughters to die in witnessing to Muslims, then it will be worth it. And you know what? His words totally

The human mind is a perpetual factory of idols. The fundamental problem is not atheism – true atheists don't really exist – but idolatry.



changed my heart. Until that moment, my heart had been hard. But John rang a Calvinist bell at that point and challenged me. We must realise our call to bear the cross. Calvin said that since we belong to God, we must live for Him and die for Him. So if our ministry leads us to death, we die. And we need to hear that message today.

The term "world view" has become popular in Christian circles. What is it about Calvin's theology that gives rise to such a concept? Does he have a controlling idea, perhaps Romans 11:36, that shapes his whole view of life and reality?

Calvin thinks that creation is the theatre of God's glory. It is in this world that the Christian is to acknowledge Christ's lordship and recognise His absolute right to be worshiped and glorified in every sphere of human endeavour. This means that Christians must not only glorify God in the church, but also in the world.

It is not hard to see why Calvin's views supported the modern scientific enterprise. If this is God's world, then we glorify Him by understanding how He made it. So the whole scientific enterprise is thus enabled as an exercise in bringing glory to God. And I think that in combination with Calvin's unique teaching on

vocation, he sees every calling in life from civil government to street-sweeping as an opportunity to glorify God in what we are doing.

Calvin has been described by B.B. Warfield as a great theologian of the Holy Spirit. Do you agree with that?

I certainly do. Calvinism has the most developed doctrine of the Holy Spirit amongst all the Protestant theologies. I know that the Reformed tradition, especially in the 20th century, has been accused of being rationalist. Sometimes I even hear ridiculous comments like "Reformed theology is afraid of the Holy Spirit". This is nonsense. The fact is that there is no theological tradition in the history of Christianity that has done more to understand the doctrine of the Holy Spirit than Calvinism. Calvin himself is the source of this interest. His doctrine of the person and work of the Spirit is echoed throughout the best of Reformed theology, especially in the writings of John Owen. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is a major emphasis of Calvin and his understanding of the doctrine represents a major advance in our understanding of the Spirit.

Frankly, I can't think of any discourses in either Eastern or Western theology that are on the same scale as what Calvin does on his exposition of the Holy Spirit.

Calvin said justification by God's grace through faith was the hinge on which the Christian faith turned. What did he mean?

I think that Calvin is absolutely right. Calvin faithfully expounds what Paul teaches because his doctrine protects us from sneaking our works in through the back door as the basis of our acceptance by God. This is the great bedrock of the Reformation. It's interesting that Cardinal Bellarmine, the great Catholic apologist, said, "Our fundamental quarrel with the Protestants is with the doctrine of assurance. They believe that Christians can be assured; we believe that you have to have a visitation of God or a special visitation of the Spirit in order to have assurance". Why? Well, because Protestants believe that the basis of our justification is outside of ourselves. Our justification is not dependent on our own works. This means that we can be assured of our salvation. Our Catholic friends, on the other hand, believe that the basis of our justification is inside ourselves. Yes, God's grace is working within us, but in the end it is the righteousness that is in us that makes us righteous.

Calvin makes it clear that, in his view,

our righteousness is outside of us in Jesus Christ, and has been made ours when we receive it by faith in Christ. That is the basis of our acceptance by God. Therefore, we can be assured. If there is anything in me that is the basis of my assurance, I will never be assured. I know inherently that every part of me is still tainted with the stains and remnants of sin and that will be the way that I am until the day of glorification. And the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, helps us make sure that we understand that our acceptance with God is based on something outside of us in Christ which gives us confidence to stand before God fully assured.

Although many evangelicals pay scant regard to the sacraments, Calvin gave a lot of attention to them. Why? In what sense are they special and indispensable?

One passage that is helpful to me in thinking about Calvin and the sacraments is Calvin's exposition of Isaiah 7:14. He spends three pages on the sign of the virgin birth explaining the doctrine of the sacraments in that passage. The other passage that is helpful is in the *Institutes*. And those two passages stress that Calvin viewed the sacraments as important because of the weakness of our faith. Calvin said it's not as if God's word, His promise, is unsure or uncertain. It's absolutely reliable. The real problem is that our faith is weak. And therefore God, in His kindness, condescends to accommodate Himself to our weakness by giving us visible words where He confirms and seals us in the promises that are presented in those visible words.

Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments stems from that idea of God's accommodating Himself to the weakness of our faith. It's not as though we get something in the sacraments that we don't get in the Word. However, the sacraments are given in order that we might get something that we would have gotten in the Word except for the weakness of our faith. As Robert Bruce, a Scottish minister once, said, "The Lord's Supper doesn't give us a better Christ; it helps us to get Christ better." I think his comments reflect Calvin's position well. It's not that we get something from the sacraments that are not offered in the Word; it's that we have conveyed the truth and grace that God has for us in His promise in a way that accommodates the weakness of our faith. And God in His kindness not only speaks His Word and promise in our ears, but He says:

"Taste, smell, see, and touch My promise of salvation in the Lord's Supper."

How did Calvin change the world's attitude toward work? Did it have a global economic impact?

Yes, Calvin's views on work have had a huge impact. I think that Calvin's idea of doing all things for God's glory and his idea of vocation have been enormously influential. Calvin taught that whatever our jobs – whether bakers, boot makers, professors, lawyers, doctors or civil servants – we must work for God's glory and for the well-being of His people. Calvin's teaching changed people's attitudes toward work. In medieval Europe work was something that you did to survive.

It is not exaggerating to say that the modern western view of labour and vocation at its best has its roots in Calvinistic teaching.

Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments stems from that idea of God's accommodating Himself to the weakness of our faith.

Finally, to what extent has Calvin been responsible for modern representative government and the welfare state?

Calvin has had an enormous influence on modern representative republican democracy. Calvin, because he believed in the total depravity of man, was suspicious of concentration of power in the hands of one or just a few. So his governmental theory was unfriendly to absolute monarchy. Many monarchs picked up on that and resented Calvin's teaching. This explains why many of Calvin's followers suffered over the next century. They thought that in view of human sin the more checks and balances you have in government the better off you are. Therefore dividing the government, separating its various branches, was essentially a wise thing to do. Calvin reminded monarchs that no one was above the law. Even the king himself was subject to it.

There is no doubt that whether we live in Great Britain, the USA or in Australia we all benefit from his governmental theory, even if our leaders don't realise the origins of it. The principles of Calvinism are all through our founding documents.

AP is grateful to Professor Douglas Milne and Dr Tony Bird for making this interview possible.

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Mother lode

Acts is a "vast treasure", and no one mines it better than Calvin.

John Calvin's reputation rests on several foundations. One of these is his skill as a biblical commentator. Calvin valued two qualities in any commentator and exemplified these himself: brevity and clarity. This is well illustrated in his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles.

Calvin had known two very different ministries in his own lifetime. The first was in Strasbourg where he enjoyed support and appreciation. The second (though begun earlier) was in Geneva where he died daily. All this varied background experience meant that Calvin brought to his writing on Acts a wealth of personal and public experience of church life.

In his introduction Calvin contextualises the life of the Christian Church in a triple way. First, Acts records the beginning of the kingly rule of Christ through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Although Christ has ascended back into heaven yet "he also remembers his own, and is the perpetual Governor of his Church, because the Holy Spirit has descended for that purpose".

Second, Acts records the incredible power of Christ through the gospel "for in it Christ has furnished clear proof of His divine power, because, through men of no importance and endowed with no skill, He brought the whole world into submission to Himself so easily by the sound of the gospel".

Third, "just as the apostles found out from actual experience that the teaching of the gospel is fire and sword, so we must learn from what they discovered that, due to the inflexible ill-will of Satan, and the fatal stubbornness of men, it will always be the case that the gospel is involved in many attacks and struggles, and that that situation stirs up horrible disturbances".

What are some of the lessons, principles and answers that Calvin finds in Acts?

From the preaching of Peter on the Day of Pentecost about receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness of sins (2:38) Calvin deduces that the best gifts of the Spirit are not miraculous but



**Douglas
Milne**

regenerative. The more miraculous gifts were intended to confirm the truth of the gospel message and the inauguration of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, and were temporary. The supreme gifts were the remission of sins and newness of life; but this was something extra, in order that Christ might show his power in them by some visible gift.

Luke's description of the first Christians devoting themselves to apostolic preaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers (2:42), leads Calvin to find in these the four leading marks of any true church. "Do we seek the true Church of Christ? The picture of it is here painted to the life."

It often occurs that the perversity of men causes delay to God... We keep his hand away from us by obstacles of all kinds.

In Acts 6 the apostles resist the pressure to get involved in the administrative tasks of the church. Instead they choose to devote themselves to the dual ministry of preaching and prayer (6:2, 4). On the one hand "the ministry of the Word is so demanding that it occupies a man entirely, and does not allow him to be free for other occupations". On the other hand "they add prayer, not because they are the only ones who ought to pray ... but because, compared with others, they have special reasons for praying".

From Stephen's speech in Acts 7 Calvin draws attention to the passing of 40 years after Moses first intervened among his people (Acts 7:26-30). "It often occurs again and again that the perversity of men causes delay to God. He certainly is prepared to bring opportune help to His own people, but

we keep His hand away from us by obstacles of all kinds."

That Philip evangelised the Ethiopian eunuch free of charge (8:39) Calvin turns into an example for all true servants of Jesus Christ. Christ "forbids them to be mercenary and work for the sake of gain (Jn 10:12). For their aim ought to be to gain men themselves for God".

When the glorified Jesus calls Saul of Tarsus to His public service He forewarns him about the sufferings and dangers he will experience (9:16). Christ is here reminding us that "the more progress each one has made in his school, the fitter he is to bear the cross. For we struggle against it, and avoid it as the utmost calamity, until he has brought us to a quiet and submissive state of mind".

When the Christian churches experience peace after years of persecution (9:31) this teaches us that the Lord moderates these different conditions in the interests of his people. However, troubled times are possibly more useful than peaceful times. "For as we are accustomed in peacetime to abandon ourselves to a riot of luxury, the churches are for the most part more blessed in the midst of the tumults of war, than if they are enjoying the quietest and most pleasant time they could desire."

Barnabas is sent to Antioch to report on the new work begun there (11:23-25). When he sees the evidence of a work of God's grace there he rejoices. He then sends for Paul to join him in the work. In all this Barnabas is an example to us because "all that he is concerned about is that Christ alone may be pre-eminent, that he may have only the upbuilding of the church in view, and that he may be content with the prosperity and success of the gospel".

The example of the church in praying constantly (12:5) teaches us to respond likewise whenever we hear of Christians being persecuted. "For if we do nothing, and are not made anxious by their dangers, not only do we cheat them of the rightful duty of charity, but we are also treacherously abandoning the confession of our faith ... Therefore as soon as some

persecution arises, we ought to have recourse to prayer.”

The dispute that led to and was resolved at the first general assembly of the church at Jerusalem (15:2) teaches us that disputes should not be lightly entered into, yet the truth must not be betrayed by guilty silence or the fear of insults or dangers. “Peace is certainly a pleasing word; but cursed is the peace that is obtained at so great a cost that there is lost to us the doctrine of Christ, by which alone we grow together into a godly and holy unity.”

The example of the young woman demon-possessed who confesses the name of the true God (16:16) leads Calvin to several pages of the most informative comment on the role of Satan under God in Christian ministry up to our own day.

From Paul’s preaching from the Scriptures at Thessalonica (17:2) Calvin argues that “proofs of the faith are only to be sought from the mouth of God. If there is a discussion about human affairs, then human reasons may have their place, but in the teaching of the faith, the authority of God alone ought to be sovereign”.

Apollos exemplifies the best teachers because “he was inflamed with a holy zeal for teaching” (18:25). Bad teachers are lazy, motivated by ambition, or disturb the church with controversies. “Therefore teaching in which zeal will not be vigorous will be flat. But ... Luke has put knowledge of Scripture first, so that it might have a moderating effect on zeal.”

From Paul’s description of the principles and goals of his own ministry in Ephesus (20:20-21) we learn three things about the most effective pastors. They aim to benefit their hearers; they follow up their public teaching with private and individual counseling; they major in preaching on the two central themes of repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ.

In addressing the overseers of the church at Ephesus (20:28) Paul “gives many reasons to show that they must be diligent and watchful ... The first reason is that they know the faithfulness pledged to the flock ... The second is that they have been called to this office ... by the Holy Spirit. The third is that it is no ordinary honour to rule the Church of God. The fourth is that the Lord bore witness with clear proof, to the high regard which He has for the Church, when He redeemed it with His own blood”.

Calvin also reminds us that “ambition is the mother of all heresies” (20:30).

With the mention of Philip’s daughters who prophesied (21:8-9), Calvin is able to explain the rise of prophecy in olden times, the cessation of prophecy prior to Christ, then the resurgence of prophecy for a short time after His coming, since “by taking away prophecies, God bore witness that their end and fulfillment were present in Christ”. As for Philip’s daughters Calvin argues that “the Spirit of God ruled them in such a way that He did not disturb the order that He Himself ordained”.

In Paul’s account of his own conversion he records the words of Jesus to him, “Saul! Why do you persecute



Nothing sweeter can be imagined for soothing the bitterness of persecution, than hearing that the Son of God suffers, not only along with us, but in us.

Me?” (22:7). In these words Christ identifies with His people in their sufferings. This is of the greatest comfort since “nothing sweeter can be imagined for soothing the bitterness of persecution, than hearing that the Son of God suffers, not only along with us, but in us”.

Paul’s counter question, “What shall I do, Lord?” (22:10), is evidence of a true conversion to Christ “when, having laid aside all our ferocity, we freely put our necks under His yoke, and are ready to undertake whatever He commands. In addition it is the start of the right course of action to ask what God wants”.

When Christ commissions Paul he provides a four-fold summary of the work of grace in a person’s life (26:18). “Therefore this is the goal of the gospel, that, delivered from mental blindness, we may become sharers of the heavenly light, that, snatched out of the dominion of Satan, we may be turned to God, that, having received the free forgiveness of sins, we may obtain a share in the eternal inheritance among the saints. All who desire to make proper progress in the gospel ought to have their senses turned intently towards it.”

When Paul is bitten by a snake on

Malta the local people judge him to be a murderer (28:4). “Now we see how the Maltese were mistaken, namely, because, without inquiring into Paul’s life, they judge him to be a criminal, merely because the viper bit him; and secondly, because they make a hasty judgment without waiting for the final outcome.” After all, Paul survived. There are lessons for all of us here when we make judgments about other people.

These are some samples of Calvin’s judicious comments on the text of Acts. Calvin describes Acts as “a kind of vast treasure” in which Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit “not to teach anything except what was of God, in order that our faith might rest on the firm truth of God”.

Many modern commentators excel Calvin in their technical knowledge of the language, cultural background and textual history of Acts. However, Calvin excels them all in his ability to unravel the meaning of the biblical text as the Word of God. And this is, after all, the main point of biblical commentaries.

Douglas Milne is principal of the Presbyterian Theological College, Melbourne. (Quotations for this article have been taken from the Torrance edition of Calvin’s commentary on the Acts of the Apostles.) 

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Roman adventure

Paul's epistle provides a passageway to profound treasures.

Calvin wrote the *Institutes* to set forth sound doctrine and, at the same time, to expose false teaching. Another reason the *Institutes* were written was to stimulate his readers to read his commentaries. In doing so, Calvin's ultimate purpose was for his readers to reflect deeply on the Scriptures themselves.

This aim of Calvin's can be clearly seen in his words to the reader of the *Institutes*: "Moreover, it has been my purpose in this labour to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling. For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents. If, after this road has, as it were, been paved, I shall publish any interpretations of Scripture, I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions, and to digress into commonplaces. In this way the godly reader will be spared great annoyance and boredom, provided he approach Scripture armed with a knowledge of the present work, as a necessary tool."

Calvin, therefore, regarded the *Institutes* as a "necessary tool" or hermeneutical guide for reading Scripture. In his Latin preface to a



Joe Mock

French edition of the sermons of Chrysostom (a fourth century church father who was archbishop of Constantinople), Calvin emphasised the importance of producing aids to guide ordinary Christians in reading and understanding the Scriptures.

Since the "doctrinal discussion" on

More than 70 commentaries on this important Pauline epistle were written in the first part of the 16th century.



key Scriptural passages is to be found in the *Institutes*, Calvin's commentaries were written in a concise style. They focus at getting directly to the text of Scripture, its meaning and its application. This feature of Calvin's commentary writing style may be illustrated by a

consideration of Calvin's commentary on Romans.

More than 70 commentaries on this important Pauline epistle were written in the first part of the 16th century. These were written by both Protestant and Roman Catholic authors. Calvin's commentary on Romans reveals that he was aware of the commentaries of his contemporaries. He was also aware of the contemporary issues that are referred to by these works.

Calvin particularly praised Bullinger's commentary on Romans for both its scholarship and its clarity: "He (ie Melancthon) is followed by Bullinger who also rightly deserved much praise. For he adds to scholarship the quality of being at the same time easily understood, which he has proven in many works." Calvin's own commentary on Romans stands out for its conciseness and succinctness.

There appears to be a close link between Calvin's understanding of Romans and the *Institutes*. Statistical analysis reveals that in the first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) Calvin cited Romans as many as 162 times. This had increased to as many as 573 times in the final edition of the *Institutes* (1559).

The original Latin edition of the *Institutes* was published in 1536 (Basel) while the final Latin edition was published in 1559 (Geneva). In the intervening years, there were editions in 1551 (Strasbourg) and 1556 (Geneva). Some scholars suggest that Calvin's understanding of Romans influenced and undergirded subsequent editions of the *Institutes*.

In his commentary on Romans, Calvin wrote a dedication to Simon Grynaeus who succeeded Oecolampadius as the professor of theology at Basel. The dedication indicates the high regard Calvin had for the Word of God: "Although I sometimes disagree with other writers, or at least differ from them in some respects, it is right that I should be excused in this regard. We ought to have such a respect for the Word of God that any difference of interpretation on our part should alter it as little as possible.

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Its majesty is somehow diminished, especially if we do not interpret it with great discretion and moderation. If it be considered a sin to corrupt what has been dedicated to God, we assuredly cannot tolerate anyone who handles that most sacred of all things on earth with unclean or even ill-prepared hands.”

In this dedication to Grynæus, Calvin points out that the understanding of Romans opens a passageway to understanding the whole of Scripture. Moreover, in the introductory section of the commentary where Calvin outlines an overview of Romans, he states that, “if we have gained a true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture”. Calvin thus considered the understanding of Romans to be the door and passageway that unlocks the meaning of other biblical texts. This may be illustrated, for example, by the number of times Calvin refers to Romans in his commentary on Genesis.

Calvin’s commentary indicates that he had mastered Greek. On occasions Calvin would offer suggestions for a more accurate translation of the text into Latin

which was the language widely used throughout Europe at the time. Calvin’s desire was that the text of Scripture, and its implications for Christian faith and conduct, be expounded clearly and faithfully.

Calvin considered that the epistle to the Romans could be viewed as consisting of three major sections: chapters 1-8; chapters 9-11 and chapters 12-16. For Calvin the first eight chapters are the heart of the epistle as in these chapters the Apostle Paul explains the doctrine of justification.

Calvin seemed to have his finger on the pulse with respect to theological issues. This is reflected in the following comment of Calvin’s on Romans 10:4:

We ought to have such a respect for the Word of God that any difference of interpretation on our part should alter it as little as possible.

“The apostle here refutes the objection which might have been made against him. The Jews might have appeared to have pursued the right path, because they had devoted themselves to the righteousness of the law. It was necessary for Paul to disprove this false opinion. He does this by showing that those who seek to be justified by their own works are false interpreters of the law, because the law has been given to lead us by the hand to another righteousness. Indeed every doctrine of the law, every command, every promise, always points to Christ. We are, therefore, to apply all its parts to him. But we cannot do this, unless we are stripped of all righteousness, are overwhelmed by the knowledge of our sin, and seek unmerited righteousness from him alone.”

We no longer have access to Calvin’s sermons on Romans. His commentary on Romans, however, continues to stimulate us to work at understanding this important portion of the Word of God.

Rev. Dr Joe Mock, is associate pastor of the Indonesian Presbyterian Church, Randwick, Sydney.

FROM THE MODERATOR – GENERAL IN REGARD 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 ceo@braemarhomes.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

Simply amazing

Saved by grace, we also grow by means of grace.

In Reformed circles, the phrase “the means of grace” has often been used, and its meaning has often been assumed. It is an important phrase, and it is important that we understand what its significance actually is.

The emphasis on grace is a reminder that it is possible for us to have a real relationship with God, and that such a relationship is founded and grounded upon His action toward us. Left to ourselves we would never move towards Him, but He has taken the initiative in establishing a relationship with his world.

Philip Yancey has written a book with the title *What’s so Amazing about Grace?*, reminding us that we should never lose the sense of wonder which John Newton expressed so memorably in his hymn *Amazing Grace*. Every good thing we experience in Christian faith is on God’s express initiative.

Grace means that, although God was under no obligation to move to the rescue of His rebellious creation, He opted to do so, and to meet every contingency of man’s lost condition. To be effective, divine grace must be more than equal to human sin – and its effectiveness is seen in the fact that God is able to address every aspect of our fallen condition, and restore what He did not take away. The severed relationship He heals; the guilt of sin He deals with in atonement; the estranged sinner He reconciles; the dysfunctional soul He re-orders. If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation, and the glory is all to grace.

But grace goes beyond the recovery of fallen man. In his theological treatment of the doctrine of man, Thomas Boston described regeneration as “begun recovery”. Becoming a Christian is only the beginning of the story. In Christ, man is a new creation; but like the old creation, there is a new theatre now in which the glory of God is displayed. Christian living means living in the light and in the grip of grace. That is why I just love James’s assurance – God gives more grace, not less, as our circumstances unfold and our lives develop.

But the Reformed tradition recog-



Iain D. Campbell

nises, alongside its great emphasis on grace, that while we experience that grace personally and individually, we recognise it through particular channels, or “means”. There is a distinction to be made between means and ends – the end that God has in view is the transformation of our human character into the character of Jesus Christ Himself, but He

The sacraments are also effective channels of the grace of God. They portray the same salvation as the Word preached.

chooses ordinarily to effect that purpose through particular channels. He has appointed to that end. This is emphasised in Westminster’s high view of the church, outside of which, says the Confession of Faith, there is “no ordinary possibility of salvation”.

The qualifier is extremely important. The Reformers did not believe that there was no possibility of being saved outside of the church – after all the Reformation was nothing if not a polemic against a theology that made the church and its sacraments indispensable to salvation. But they did believe that ordinarily God uses the church as the channel of His grace, in at least two ways.

First, God uses His own Word as a primary channel of His grace. Through its doctrines, precepts, stories and insights, he makes the Word that He Himself has breathed out, indispensable for our salvation. That is why the classic proof-text for the orthodox doctrine of Scripture – 2 Timothy 3:16 – emphasises that the Bible is both inspired and profitable. It is the word of God and it is the voice of God. It originates in heaven and channels grace to earth.

According to the New Testament,

God has made the church the pillar and ground of the truth. The church ought to be the showcase for the word of God. Through the preaching and proclamation of the Word, rightly expounded and personally applied, God’s grace does its work in the lives of individuals. Remarkably, God’s grace does its work even when the Word is wrongly expounded, and even misapplied. His Word achieves His goal, and flies into the hearts of men and women, with a grace that brings salvation.

Secondly, God uses the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as channels of grace. That was never understood in the reformed tradition to mean that a church ritual or ecclesiastical activity was capable of effecting saving change simply by virtue of being carried out. There was no mechanical or magical way by which the hands of a clergyman could call down the grace of God.

But as ordinances appointed by Christ, and as visible representations of the Word which derive their effectiveness from the Word, the sacraments are also effective channels of the grace of God. They portray the same salvation as the Word preached. They draw the attention of the church to the only means of salvation – the finished work of Christ which remains outside of ourselves.

The Westminster standards, thirdly, make prayer a means of grace, along with the Word and the sacraments.

This may all seem academic, but it is anything but. There is a need to recover the creedal emphases of our faith, with their high view of the way God has chosen to minister His grace into the lives of His people. We have tended to dumb down the idea of the church, and even the need for it. But Christ has appointed it, and, however distasteful the idea might appear to some, outside of it there is no ordinary possibility of our receiving the grace of God at all.

Iain D. Campbell is minister of Back Free Church of Scotland on the Isle of Lewis. This is reprinted from his website <http://creideamb.blogspot.com/>





God's sovereign grace

20 daily Bible studies in
Ephesians

One of the most significant contributions John Calvin has made to our understanding of God, our theology, is his emphasis on the sovereignty of God in every aspect of our lives. The Scriptures reveal to us that sin has affected every part of our being: our intellect, our will, our emotions and feelings. We are “**dead in our transgressions and sins**” (Eph. 2:1), totally unable to make any move towards God without His taking the initiative. The Father therefore has to choose us unconditionally (Eph. 1:3-6). Having chosen us, He sent His Son to die for our sins specifically (Eph. 1:7-8) and to give us the gift of new life in Him (Eph. 2:5); and through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit He brings us irresistibly to Himself (Eph. 1:9-14). Because all this is the work of God’s sovereign grace alone, so that even our faith is the outcome of this grace rather than the source of it (Eph. 2:8-9), the God who chose us wants us to have full confidence in, and assurance of, our eternal salvation (Eph. 2:10). Calvin also saw the importance of the church as the means God has chosen to do His Kingdom work in the world (Eph. 1:15-23).

These central points in Calvin’s understanding of Biblical theology are well covered in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. It is therefore fitting for us to study this part of Scripture as we focus on the life and teaching of the great Reformer. One of the ills of our age is to put Man at the centre of everything – **our** achievements, **our** needs, **our** amusements – and sadly, the church too readily seeks to please men. Calvin and Paul help us to put God back in the centre where He rightfully belongs.

Bruce Christian ▶

DAY 1

Christ the Key to Creation

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 1:1-10

THE POINT God had one purpose in Creation: to buy back a chosen people for Himself and adopt them as children into His family by an act of His grace through the death of His own dear Son, to delight them with His love and blessing, and to demonstrate this clearly to all.

THE PARTICULARS

- Paul, as God’s appointed messenger, was writing to the faithful saints (believers set apart for God) in Ephesus to reaffirm them.
- Jesus, God’s Son, is both Lord (Jehovah= I AM , cf John 8:58-59, Isaiah 44:6+Revelation 1:17-18) and Christ (promised Messiah), in whom we are assured of all the spiritual blessings of heaven.

- As an integral part of His original Plan for Creation God chose us, predestined us, and adopted us as His children in Christ to:
 - be made holy and blameless (set apart in purity just for Him);
 - give Him pleasure, praise and glory because of such love and grace.
- We have redemption and forgiveness through Christ’s shed blood.
- Everything in all Creation will eventually have its meaning and purpose made clear in Christ alone – and we are part of this!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Whom did God have in mind when Jesus died on the cross?

DAY 2

Saved by grace alone

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 1:11-14

THE POINT God chooses us unconditionally on the basis of His own will and for His own glory; we come to participate in His plan when we hear and respond to the truth of the Gospel by believing in Jesus; until the final fulfilment of all things in Christ at the end of the Age, the Holy Spirit secures the promised inheritance in us.

THE PARTICULARS

- God is absolute sovereign; He chooses us – we don’t choose Him; nothing can ever prevent Him from fulfilling all His purposes.
- That all will praise God’s glory is the primary purpose behind

our coming to put our hope in Christ; it is not for our glory.

- Salvation is experienced by those who both hear the word of truth in the Gospel and respond to it by believing in Christ.
- Believers are sealed forever in Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit in them, as Jesus Himself had promised (John 14:16-17).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- My name from the palms of His hands, eternity will not erase; impressed on His heart it remains, in marks of indelible grace. Yes, I to the end shall endure, as sure as the promise is given; more happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in heaven.*
- Can you sing these words with Augustus Toplady?

DAY 3

Prayer for spiritual growth

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 1:15-19A

THE POINT We can never overestimate what God has done, and is doing, in us. All glory and power belong to Him – therefore let us pray.

THE PARTICULARS

- Because the whole work of salvation is God’s work from start to finish and is for His glory, and because Paul had heard that the believers at Ephesus were showing clear evidence of this work among them, the proper response for him was to give thanks to God continually for them in his prayers.
- Paul’s on-going basic prayer for the Ephesians was that they would all come to know God better – the Tri-une God: Father,

Son and Holy Spirit – through the Spirit’s work of showing them, and enabling them to understand, spiritual realities.

- Paul knew that the Holy Spirit’s ministry was essential to give them spiritual eyes with which to see spiritual truths, such as:
 - the positive sense of future hope of which they could be confident because it was God Himself who had called them to it;
 - the rich and glorious inheritance they were to share together;
 - the immeasurably great power available to believers.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do we see this sort of praying throughout the Church today?

DAY 4

The Church – His Body

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 1:19B-23

THE POINT Whatever men might think about the Church, whether from the inside looking out or from the outside looking in, with all its seeming weakness and ineffectiveness, it is nevertheless as powerful and invincible as its Head, the risen, reigning Lord Himself.

THE PARTICULARS

- The power God desires His Church to have is that same power by which Christ was raised from the dead and was established in the corridors of heaven from which the whole universe is ruled.
- Christ is now seated at God’s right hand in heaven. There

does not exist, or ever will exist, any higher power over Him.

- Christ is the only King and Head of the Church. Christ cannot be separated from the Church; as Christ’s Body, the Church is therefore absolutely central to all God’s dealings in time and space. God has no plans apart from His Church.
- It is Christ who holds the whole universe together and gives it meaning and purpose; it is through His Church that He operates.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How should we respond to statements like: “The Church is no longer relevant.”; “I can be a good Christian without having anything to do with the Church.”; “The Church won’t last.”?

DAY 5

*Even when we were dead!***THE PASSAGE****EPHESIANS 2:1-10**

THE POINT It is only God's grace that can save us for eternal life with Him. We receive the results of God's work of grace through faith, but God must make the first step because until He does we are dead in our sins and dead people can't make decisions! Eternal life is God's unmerited gift – we can't even earn it by our faith! The purpose of God's work in us is to join us to Christ in heaven as trophies of His grace, and to enable us to do His good works.

THE PARTICULARS

- In our natural state all of us are dead in sin, totally helpless and unable to do anything about our condition. Unaided we do not even have 'freewill' to put our faith in Jesus to be our

Saviour.

- Without God's saving grace we can only keep on following our natural, self-serving desires and so remain under God's wrath.
- It is only God's abundant mercy that can deliver us from this lost condition and give us new life in Christ. We cannot boast of contributing anything to our salvation – even our faith is given to us as a gracious gift from God.
- We are not saved by good deeds – we are saved for good deeds.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Have you been humbled by discovering these important truths?

DAY 6

*Strangers, in from the cold***THE PASSAGE****EPHESIANS 2:11-13**

THE POINT The message of "salvation by grace alone" is especially relevant to non-Jewish believers. We were not only brought to a living relationship with the living God through the blood of Christ, we were brought from a situation where God had no relationship with us at all, no covenant promises like Israel had had.

THE PARTICULARS

- Circumcision was a physical covenant sign that divided Israel, God's chosen people and race, from every other nation of men.
- Israel was in a very privileged position before God. God had promised, with binding covenant oaths, to send them a Messiah ("Christ" in Greek) who would be their deliverer. Gentiles

had no such promise, no future hope to encourage them in the world.

- Because Jesus' blood-sacrifice of Himself on the cross (as the means of atoning for man's sin and re-uniting him with a holy God) was a demonstration of God's mercy and an act of His unconditional grace, it meets the needs of all – Gentiles included!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Read Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16. How does this help us understand the nature of grace and the significance of the salvation of Gentiles along with Jews?

DAY 7

*One Way for all***THE PASSAGE****EPHESIANS 2:14-18**

THE POINT There is only one access route to God the Father: through Jesus the Son by the ministry of the one Holy Spirit. If the way to God was by obedience to the Law (of Moses) then the distinction between Jew and Gentile would remain. But since Jesus died in the place of sinful man as a blood-sacrifice for sin, the way of Law-keeping is abolished and access to God through faith in Him is exactly the same for Jew and Gentile; all divisions are removed.

THE PARTICULARS

- Jews, because they were God's special, chosen people, could never have a close relationship with non-Jews. The division was decisive and was therefore the cause of on-going hostility.

• Jesus' death on the cross does away with any division between Jew and Gentile. Faith in Jesus unites all people into one because access to God is now the same for all – there is no distinction.

- Jesus came as Prince of Peace to bring peace to all: to those who were already close to Him (the Jews), and to those far removed.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Peace in the Middle East seems to be an unachievable dream. Why is this so? What must happen first if peace is to be gained?
- What evidence is there of broken-down walls in your Church?

DAY 8

*Third Temple being built!***THE PASSAGE****EPHESIANS 2:19-22**

THE POINT God has already begun construction on the Third Temple. It's us! It is no surprise that no work has been started at the Dome of the Rock site in Jerusalem – there never will be. The Second Temple was destroyed in 70AD because God has finished for ever with an earthly temple. His temple now has a better cornerstone, Jesus Christ. It has better foundations, the apostles and prophets (the Scriptures). It is made of better materials, believers from every age and every ethnic background, joined together in one household as one people, and inhabited by the one Spirit.

THE PARTICULARS

- All true believers are part of one family, one household, the citizens of one nation, the Kingdom of Heaven.
- The Church is founded firmly on Jesus the Messiah (cf Matthew 16:18 where "this rock" is Peter's confession that Jesus is "the Christ"), and on the Spirit-inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments ("prophets" and "apostles") that point to Christ.
- There should be no divisions in the Church based on race, etc.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are there any divisions in your Church that ought not to be there – eg worship services for different tastes in music etc?

DAY 9

Awesome breakthrough

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 3:1-13

THE POINT Paul wanted the (mostly Gentile) Ephesian believers to realise the magnitude and significance of what the God of Creation was doing as the one Jewish-Gentile Church of Christ came to life.

THE PARTICULARS

- “Insignificant” Paul was given a special task of making known to Gentiles the mystery of the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ.
- To be able to do this he was given a direct revelation from God.
- A written New Testament, to be added to the Canon of the Old Testament, was inevitable because of the new revelation given by the Holy Spirit to apostles and prophets appointed by

Christ.

- A significant aspect of this new revelation is that Gentiles now stand with Israel as heirs of all God’s Messianic promises.
- By God’s gracious gift and power Paul became a slave to his task, even to the point of imprisonment, a suffering that by association would be glory for the Church at Ephesus (cf Acts 5:41).
- Not even the angels could foresee the brightness of God’s glory that would be shown in the establishment of Christ’s Church.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Reflect on what it means to you to be part of God’s Church.

DAY 10

What is “Church” to you?

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

THE POINT Paul does not see the part of our lives we label “Church” as just an attachment but rather as forming the very essence of who we are in Christ – everything else must fit in around it. It is through His Church, of which Christ is the Head, that God displays His glory to the world. He is able to do this more than we realise.

THE PARTICULARS

- The Church Universal, comprising the Church Triumphant in heaven and the Church Militant on earth, is all one big family (patria) bearing the “family” name of God the Father (pater).
- This encourages Paul to bow in prayer before God, asking

that:

- the Holy Spirit would “genetically” strengthen them from the overwhelmingly wonderful resources of His power;
- their faith in Christ would be at the very centre of their lives;
- individually and collectively they would have a full experience of the measure of Christ’s love and of God Himself, even to the point of knowing the unknowable, sustaining their life by it.

- God can do much more in us than we realise (or even ask)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do you think of the Church the way Paul does? Is membership in God’s family, and therefore of His Church, your first priority?

DAY 11

Unity doesn’t just happen

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 4:1-6

THE POINT Paul knows that by its very nature the Gospel brings into one family people of totally different backgrounds, cultures, gifts and personalities. Given this, peace and harmony are not going to just happen automatically, but unity is so basic to our identity as God’s chosen people that we must not settle for anything less.

THE PARTICULARS

- Following Jesus is serious business. Paul is in prison for it. So he urges us to use our freedom to live lives that reflect truly our high calling in Christ, by God’s grace, as he has described it.
- The first step in doing this concerns our attitude to ourselves

and to each other – knowing we are saved by grace humbles us and leads to a gentle attitude towards others; God’s patient mercy, raising us to life when we were dead in sin, should inspire in us a response where we patiently put up with others’ failings.

- No matter which way you look at it, the Gospel is about unity: we are all given the same confidence, made children of the same Father by the same means through the same Saviour. We are obliged therefore to prove the Spirit’s work by maintaining peace.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Whom don’t you get on with at Church? So what must you do?

DAY 12

Unity enhanced by diversity

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 4:7-11

THE POINT To enable His Church to operate smoothly and well, Christ has dealt out to each of us different gifts of His grace. It is important to remember, therefore, His qualifications for doing this: He is none other than the Eternal Son of God who came to earth, won a decisive victory over Satan, and returned to heaven with the spoils which He now distributes to His Church. Accordingly we must recognise these gifts in each other and ourselves, using them only, not for self gain or glory, but for the good of His Church.

THE PARTICULARS

- Anything we are or have is a gift from Christ, not a gold medal.

- Psalm 68:18 was anticipating the work of Christ for His Church – His incarnation, His humiliation all the way to the hell of the cross, His atonement, His victorious resurrection and ascension (see Philippians 2:5-11 for a fuller explanation of this process).

- Christ is fully qualified to allocate gifts throughout His Church.

- The different gifts include: apostolic authority (The Twelve and Paul); the ability to declare God’s Word; the ability to take the Gospel to the lost; the task of nurturing and feeding God’s flock.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What is really wrong if diversity starts undermining unity?

DAY 13

Church is not a game

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 4:11-16

THE POINT Christ is serious about His Church working in total harmony and He provides all the necessary gifts. We must not settle for less.

THE PARTICULARS

- In our post-Apostolic Church today the functionaries of v. 11 are modified by the fact that the New as well as the Old Testament Scriptures are our infallible Supreme Authority.
- The fundamental task of those gifted to have special leadership roles in the Church is to equip all members to be more effective.
- Christ's aim is for His Body to grow in every way until fully united with Him as its Head. This will be achieved when:

- we become mature, united in our understanding and practice of what we believe, and in our relationship to Him as Son of God;
- we stop acting like naive babies, sucking in everything we are attracted to, showing no discernment as to its helpfulness;
- we get the balance right between sticking to the truth of what God has revealed in His Word and living out His selfless love!
- When a body functions as it should each part helps not hinders.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What aspects of your thinking/life/relationships does this passage require you to modify? Will it matter if you don't?

DAY 14

Old me, new me

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 4:17-28

THE POINT Living for Christ is not about making a few appropriate adjustments to our lifestyle; it involves a U-turn, a whole new mind-set; it is a requirement for all Christians, not just a pious few.

THE PARTICULARS

- Because of the emphasis Paul has given to the unity of Gentiles and Jews in Jesus he can now use "Gentile" to refer to unbelievers.
- Unbelievers cannot think clearly since they do not know God, the source of true wisdom. Their spiritual blindness comes from a hard heart and leads to behaviour motivated by animal appetite rather than a sensitive conscience. We must quit

- all such living.
- Jesus displayed the true life that pleases God. Knowing Christ involves discarding everything to do with the old life with its desires that can never be truly satisfied and dressing in righteousness and holiness with a mind-set towards being like God.
- Such a mind-set involves: honest speech; brotherly love; dealing with anger quickly; confronting Satan; honest work; sharing.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How is a Christian different from someone who just wants to live a good, morally upright life? Is an unbeliever able to please God? How does who we are in Christ make such a difference?

DAY 15

In the world, but not of it

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 4:29-5:7

THE POINT Becoming a Christian is a radical change. Once, we were on our own where bad behaviour hardly even attracted attention. Now, we are children belonging to a God who is perfectly holy and pure – and sin stands out like a sore thumb. We must be rid of every trace of it. Instead, Christ-like love must be our standard.

THE PARTICULARS

- The aspects of our old nature that must be eradicated include:
 - talk that is obscene, frivolous, slanderous or at all offensive (especially to the Holy Spirit who is always there for us);
 - attitudes of bitterness, malice, anger, envy, greed or idolatry;
 - (sexually) immoral actions (or even the thoughts or leanings

- that lead to them – like TV, www.porn, "harmless" flirtation);
- on-going associations that aid and abet any of the above.
- Signs of our new nature that should continue to grow include:
 - encouraging and personally affirming interaction with others;
 - actions inspired by compassion, forgiveness, sacrificial love.
- Christ's sacrificial love must always be our benchmark for life.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How can we keep in touch with our ungodly world for the sake of evangelism yet still avoid being tainted by its evil influence?

DAY 16

Switched-on for Christ

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 5:8-20

THE POINT What Paul writes here is especially relevant to us today. Our society is drifting into increasing moral darkness without being aware of the danger, and in many ways the Church seems to be asleep. It's time to wake up, turn on the light of Christ, and shine!

THE PARTICULARS

- Christ has brought us from darkness to light – we must live as children of light. This is a direction, not just a suggestion and involves reading God's Word to find out what pleases Him.
- We need to test our lives by the light (Is it good/right/true?) and not only refuse to participate in anything that fails the test but expose it for what it is. (What about your TV/Net

- habits?)
- As then, these are hard and desperate days for a clear, Christian witness. We need to be wise, alert, in touch with God's leading, intoxicated with nothing other than the Holy Spirit, and ever ready to use every chance we can get to speak up for Christ.
- Spirit-inspired singing is a great way to encourage each other and express our united praise and gratitude in Christ to the Father.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Think about how essential your fellowship in the Church with other believers is for keeping your own witness alive and bright.

DAY 17

God's view of Marriage

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 5:21-33

THE POINT Paul sees the marriage relationship as absolutely vital to the health of the Church. If we don't get this right we cannot be the children of light we're called to be. Is this why Satan is putting so much effort into undermining the Biblical view of marriage?

THE PARTICULARS

- A healthy marriage relationship is one based on mutual submission to Christ, recognising Him as the true Head of the house.
- Relationships in Christian marriage must serve as a true model for the Church: Wife is to Husband as the Church is to Christ.
- Therefore, the instruction to the wife (stop reading, hus-

bands, it is not addressed to you!) is to submit to her husband as head.

- We might expect the equivalent instruction to the husband to be to rule, but it is NOT there! The only instruction to husbands is to love with the same sacrificial love Christ had for the Church (see Mark 10:35-45 for Jesus' instruction on servant headship).
- Leaving and cleaving is for keeps; settling for less isn't an option.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- I think the reaction of the world (and even many Christians) against God's view of marriage stems from a time when men read RULE where God wrote LOVE. What do you think?

DAY 18

Happy families

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 6:1-4

THE POINT The breakdown of authority in society is directly related to the breakdown of authority in the home. God's commands are clear. It is easy to blame the children but, in a way that's closely parallel to the point made yesterday, the source of the problem is often parents who have failed in their love and instruction.

THE PARTICULARS

- God's clear, unambiguous requirement of children is obedience.
- The Fifth Commandment to "Honour your father and mother..." leaves no doubt that God's continued patience and blessing cannot be relied on by any who choose to disregard

this directive.

- Parents (& the buck stops with fathers as the head of the house) are to encourage obedience from their children by setting a good example and by avoiding doing anything that may make it harder for their children (who still have Adam's fallen, rebellious nature with which they were born – and their parents' genes!) to keep the commandment. This warrants careful self-examination.
- Parents must also provide constant, consistent, godly teaching.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- The old baptismal promise required parents "by prayer, precept and example" to bring up their children. Why are all 3 important?

DAY 19

Workplace Relations

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 6:5-9

THE POINT For Christians, all relationships (husband-wife, parent-child, master-slave – or, for us, employer-employee) must be modelled on His supreme example: submission / obedience upwards, love and consideration downwards.

THE PARTICULARS

- Christian slaves (employees) are instructed to submit to their "calling" and give it their best shot as if their master (employer) was the Lord Himself, ie with sincerity, honour and respect. Peter takes this still further and says it applies even if the master is a tyrant (1 Peter 2:18-21). We may find this hard in the modern context of workplace relations but it's the example set by Jesus.

- At the end of the day, the only rewards that really matter are the Lord's. He's the one to whom we're ultimately accountable.

- Christian masters (employers) must always exercise their authority as if their own Master and Judge, Jesus, were looking over their shoulder. He Himself once said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded..." (Luke 12:48).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do you find it easy to apply these things consistently at work?
- What should we do as Christians if our Union goes on strike?

DAY 20

Spiritual Warfare

THE PASSAGE

EPHESIANS 6:10-24

THE POINT The Church is the expression of God's Kingdom on earth. All the practical issues raised from 4:17 on are concerned with the ongoing struggle the Church will have in the world until Jesus' return. The world will oppose us. It will put constant pressure on us to adopt its value system. This is Spiritual Warfare. In many ways, especially when we look at the Church in the West, the world seems to be winning. We need to reassess our armour.

THE PARTICULARS

- The battle is spiritual, not physical; it needs spiritual weapons.
- The prince of this world, the devil, is an aggressor. With our strength in the Lord, we must take a positive stand against him.

- Our spiritual armour consists of truth, righteousness, peace emanating from the Gospel and its proclamation, faith, salvation, and the Scriptures. Each is likened to a part of a soldier's armour.

- Constant, alert prayer is the principal weapon behind it all.
- Paul knew that the battle is never fought alone. He was aware of, concerned for, and grateful to all his fellow soldiers. Are you?

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Review your spiritual armour. Which of your weapons need the most urgent attention? What will you do about it today?



Across Australia

Victoria 150

Scots Church Melbourne was filled to capacity on 4 April with Presbyterians from throughout Australia to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of the formation of the **Presbyterian Church of Victoria**, writes former moderator **Bob Thomas**. The **Very Rev. Dr Allan Harman** and his wife **Mairi** co-authored a brief history of the denomination, *Reaching Forward: From A Rich Heritage To A Certain Goal*, which draws together past history, present reality and future vision.

Moderator-General Robert Benn, **Victorian Moderator Douglas Robertson**, **Clerk of Assembly John Wilson** and youth worker **Andrew Vines** took part in the service, led by Dr Harman. **Presbyterian Youth Victoria** presented musical items and the **Korean and Samoan Church Choirs** sang.

The highlight was the preaching of **Rev. Dr Ligon Duncan**, recent **Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in America**, professor of theology at **Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, USA**, and minister of **First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi**. Speaking from 1 Timothy 1:1-5 on the theme *The Goal Of Our Ministry*, he demonstrated how the Word of God is the Christian's guide for ministry as to both its message and method. He said that in many places today, too much emphasis is placed on what men want the church to be like, but the important question for the church to answer is: "What does God want the church to be like?"

The day before the Victorian anniversary, Dr Duncan spoke at a seminar in **Donvale Presbyterian Church** for those involved in Christian ministry.

PIM advances

Church services welcoming the four new PIM padre teams have been held at **Toowoomba** for **Roger and Margaret Crane** of the **North Queensland Patrol**; at **Charleville** for **Derek and Joan Douglas** of the **South Queensland Patrol**; at **Warren** for **Stephen and Rosalie Goldsmith** of the **Western NSW Patrol**; and at **Hobart** for **Ian and Michelene Tyson** of the **Mackersey**

Regional Ministry in Tasmania.

The addition of these new workers to the existing PIM team means that the **Presbyterian Church of Australia** has now mobilised the largest ministry force for church and community work in outback Australia through the **Inland Mission** for a generation. The PIM has a growing presence in all states and the Territory.

Mt Gambier camp

Some 50 adults and children, along with 11 day visitors, took part in the 2009 **Mt Gambier church camp**, enjoying two messages by DVD from leading New Testament scholar **Dr Don Carson** on *The Centre of the Bible* and *The Ironies of the Cross*. The **Children's Orchestra** led several hymns and songs.

Boot camp for planters

Several Australian church planters attended a "boot camp" at **Mark Driscoll's Mars Hill Church** in Seattle in March. They included Presbyterians **Steve Chong (Kirk Place-Kogarah, NSW)** and **Mikey Lynch (Crossroads, Hobart)** The camp, organised by **Acts 29 Network**, brought together 800 people – mostly Americans but about 30 from South Africa, England, India, Congo, Uganda, Brazil, Argentina, Canada and Australia.

They received teaching from the Bible about how to know whether people should be church planters, calls to preach

the gospel clearly without the fear of people, and practical advice on the call to endure. Those who attended the US conference intend to form an Australian national network and invite individuals, existing networks, and denominations to join it. After discussion with **Mark Driscoll** and **Acts 29 Director Scott Thomas** it was agreed that the Australian church planting network would be independent from Acts 29 but in partnership with it.

Gathering at the River

The first worship service was held on 22 February of the new outreach congregation in **Southern River of Scots Church, Fremantle**. **Clive Griffiths**, who along with his wife **Doreen**, is heading up the work writes that the first congregation numbered 32, including six children under 16. Five adults were not known to us – they were local residents. Five came from Scots, including elder **Stuart Dunkley** and his wife **Barbara**. The offering was sufficient to cover the rent for the school for the next three months. A gift from the **Perth Korean** congregation has funded a couple of large banners and various direction signs.

Closer ties

Three senior Australian Presbyterians have been visiting East Timor to attempt to establish relationships with a new church, the **Evangelical Presbyterian**

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Church of East Timor. They were Moderator-General Robert Benn, South Australian moderator and Mt Gambier minister Gary Ware, and PIM convener and Darwin minister Rob Duncanson.

The request to do this came from the moderator of the Timor church. East Timor is closer to Darwin than Sydney is to Melbourne.

Modern parenting

The new Meringandan (Qld) congregation is running a seminar series called *The 21st Century Parent*. The material comes from the **Focus on the Family** organisation. Pastor Rob Farr the pastor of the congregation says “We are especially thankful for the blessing of having a young family from the community (who as yet have no affiliation with any church) attending and expressing their appreciation of the seminars.” On the first Sunday of March 2009, there were 21 adults and six children in church.

Kingaroy elders

Robert Cobby and Robert de Vries were ordained and inducted into eldership at Kingaroy (Qld) on 12 October 2008.

A Japanese nativity

The Austria Ballet Company-Tokyo, gave a performance of Mary and Joseph on 22 March in Perth, sponsored by the Henderson Memorial congregation. The leaders of this Japanese group are Christians and came as a mission to Perth, where 250 people, including 50 Japanese, gathered to see a beautiful performance of the nativity story. Rev. Stephen Young spoke about the reason for the incarnation, and after the performance the church provided dinner for 100.

Stephen Young will be in the US for three months, and two members of the Presbyterian Church of Japan will take care of the Japanese ministry. Mr Nagata has the first six weeks, and Rev. Mori the second. Gordon and Celeste Waghorn will minister in the English congregation during the same time.



Around the World

Presbyterians favour fidelity

Efforts to allow sexually active gays and lesbians to serve as clergy in the Presbyterian Church (USA) have once again been defeated, according to votes received so far from 155 of the denomination’s 173 presbyteries.

On 25 April, the 87th, 88th and 89th votes against deleting a “fidelity and chastity” provision in the PC(USA)’s constitution were tallied, effectively giving opponents of the latest efforts the majority needed to overturn a highly contested vote last year.

Last summer, the denomination’s General Assembly had voted to remove the requirement for prospective ministers, deacons and elders to live in “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness”. Such a change, however, needed support from a majority of the denomination’s presbyteries – support that has fallen short for the fourth time in 12 years.

Preaching to pirates

A Christian ministry is reaching out to potential Somalian pirates. Pirates from Somalia have been grabbing headlines in recent months for their hijacking of ships off the east African coast.

Bob Hoskins, founder of Florida-based charity OneHope, said many Somali pirates are actually young boys. Of a captured pirate facing trial, Hoskins said, “They say he’s probably 14, maybe 15 years old; he weighs 85 pounds – just a child!

“Their problem is their environment and the human desire for acceptance and affirmation. It is so deep, that it’ll drive these children to do desperate things, and usually it’s older people who are manipulating them and using them.”

Christian Today

Muslim ensures justice

A Pakistani Muslim has filed charges against six Muslims who raped a Christian girl after police pressured the Christian father to drop the lawsuit. Now four of the six thieves who raped Naomi Rafiq have been arrested.

International Christian Concern

reports the Muslim employer of the victims filed a lawsuit against the suspects, saying he “loves and takes care of” his workers. Muhammad Akram Khan owns a brick kiln called Allah Waris Bricks Company and employs the Christian families that were robbed on Jan.10.

Jeremy Sewall, ICC’s advocacy director, said in a news release, “It is rare to find a Muslim employer who will treat Christian employees well in Pakistan, let alone come to their defence. It is an incredible answer to prayer that police have pursued the suspects to the extent that they have. Unfortunately, this only goes to show how much discrimination Christians normally face from the justice system in Pakistan.”

Assist

Buddhists attack churches

Buddhist mobs have attacked several churches in Sri Lanka last week, threatening to kill a pastor in the southern province of Hambanthota and ransacking a 150-year-old Methodist church building in the capital. On April 8, four Buddhist extremists approached the home of pastor Pradeep Kumara in Weeraketiya, Hambanthota district, calling for him to come out and threatening to kill him.

On April 5, another group of men broke into the 150-year-old Pepiliyana Methodist Church in Colombo after congregants concluded an Easter procession. Witnesses said they saw them load goods into a white van parked outside the church early the next morning. “They removed everything, including valuable musical instruments, a computer, Bibles, hymn books and all the church records,” said the Rev. Surangika Fernando.

Compass Direct

Fears for civilians

The British Catholic aid agency CAFOD has expressed grave concern at the fate of an estimated 100,000 civilians as the Sri Lankan government announced its intention to conduct a “final assault” in the north east of the country as a deadline for the Tamil Tigers to surrender expired.

The ongoing conflict between Sri Lankan government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has left hundreds of thousands homeless, more than 5000 people dead and thousands wounded as a result of heavy fighting, in the so called “safe zone” – a sliver

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of land where the LTTE are fighting their last stand from among tens of thousands of civilians trapped there.

Pakistani rapists freed

Police have declared three Pakistani men innocent of raping a 13-year-old Christian girl despite eye witness accounts and medical evidence indicating their guilt. At a hearing in **Nankana Sahib** district court on April 3, police cleared 40-year-old **Mohammed Shahbaz**, 30-year-old **Waqas Sadiq** and 25-year-old **Yousaf Sadiq** of raping and threatening **Ambreen Masih**.

“In Pakistan it has always been like this – the wealthy person can approach the police and change the course of an investigation,” said prosecuting attorney **Akbar Durrani**. “Regarding Christians, they cannot put any pressure on the police for a fair investigation.”

Saudi Christian released

In a surprise move, a Saudi Christian arrested in January for describing his conversion from Islam and criticising the kingdom’s judiciary on his blog site was released on 28 March with the stipulation that he not travel outside of Saudi Arabia or appear on media. **Hamoud Saleh Al-Amri** (previously reported as Hamoud Bin Saleh), 28, reportedly attributed his release to advocacy efforts by the **Arab Network for Human Rights Information** (ANHRI). The Cairo-based organisation had campaigned for his release along with other rights groups, reported Christian advocacy organisation **Middle East Concern**.

Copts in bold step

In a bold move, Egypt’s **Coptic Church** has issued its first-ever certificate of conversion to a former Muslim, supporting his petition to have his national identification card denote his Christian faith. **Maher Ahmad El-Mo’otahsem Bellah El-Gohary**’s request to legally convert is only the second case in Egypt of a Muslim-born citizen trying to change his religious affiliation to Christianity on identification documents.

El-Gohary has received death threats since appearing in court on April 4 to register an official statement. “I do not leave the house – my life is in real danger and my daughter is in real danger,” said El-Gohary. “The pressure is too much. I am thinking seriously that I should leave Egypt.”

Iranian women jailed

Accused of “acting against state security” and “taking part in illegal gatherings”, two Iranian Christian women have been held in a Tehran prison for over a month in a crowded cell with no access to legal representation. **Maryam Rostampour**, 27, and **Marzieh Amirzadeh Esmacilabad**, 30, who were active in church activities and distributing Bibles according to **Amnesty International**, were arrested on 5 March. They are being held in the detention center of Evin Prison, a facility that has drawn criticism for its human rights violations and executions in recent years.

Historic church demolished

Just hours after the Vietnamese prime minister’s office assured denominational leaders that there were no plans to destroy their Protestant church building, authorities in **Banmethuot** last month demolished the historic structure in the Central Highlands city. Government work crews arrived at the site just after darkness fell on 11 March and quickly demolished the structure belonging to the **Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)**.

Authorities had confiscated the church building in 1975 after the Communist victory and had removed its cross. Church authorities many times had asked for the return of the building.

Easter breakthrough

In what religious freedom advocates regarded as a breakthrough in Vietnam, authorities granted rare permission – three hours before the event began – to unregistered house church groups to hold a large, public Easter-related service. More than 15,000 people gathered at **Tao Dan Stadium** to worship God, proclaim Christ and experience a rare sense of large-scale Christian unity, especially

house church members accustomed to meeting in small groups.

The only other such event granted to unregistered groups was an open-air meeting during Christmas of 2007 sponsored by the **Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship** (VEF, a house church umbrella group). At the event last night, the VEF endeavored to include all house churches, not just its own members, sources said. At the celebration 1200 people indicated they had decided to follow Christ.

Pakistani Christians arrested

At least five Pakistani Christians have been arrested under Pakistan’s controversial blasphemy laws, the *Pakistan Christian Post* has reported. According to the newspaper, **Harrapa** police arrested a Christian man, **Ashfaq Gill**, on April 28 on charges of desecrating the Qur’an.

It also said that police also arrested four more Christians for allegedly tearing up pages of the Qur’an on April 29. Pakistan blasphemy laws are being misused rampantly to terrorise, subjugate, pressurise and intimidate already down-trodden Pakistani Christians.

It is feared that incidences of blasphemy cases as well as all other forms of persecution including attacks on churches, forcible conversion of Christians, abductions, rapes and violence against believers, will escalate after Taliban’s success in enforcing Shariah law in the Swat Valley, an administrative district in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan located 100 miles from Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan.

Taliban threat to Christians

As Taliban control hits pockets of Pakistan and threatens the nation’s stability, Christians worry their province could be the next to fall under Islamic law.

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Violence in April near the port city of **Karachi** – some 1000 kilometers from the Swat valley, where the government officially allowed the Taliban to establish Islamic law this month – heightened fears.

As members of a congregation erased pro-Taliban graffiti on their church in **Taiser** town, near Karachi, armed men intervened to stop them. Soon 30-40 others arrived as support and began to fire indiscriminately at the crowd; among those seriously injured were three Christians, including a child, according to a report by advocacy group **Minorities Concern of Pakistan**.

Policemen and military forces arrested seven suspects and recovered an arms cache of semi-automatic pistols and a Kalashnikov assault rifle. A legal advocacy worker told *Compass* that police stood by as a Taliban-assembled mob attacked the Christians. “The Christians do not have guns, they do not have weapons, but only a little bit of property and the few things in their houses,” said **Sohail Johnson**, chief coordinator of **Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan**.

A representative of the **Muttahida Quami Movement** regional party told *Compass* that after firing on the crowd, Taliban fighters went through Christian houses, ransacked them and burned one down. He said they also burned Bibles and beat women on the street. Reports of two execution-style killings of Christians could not be verified.

Iraqi Christians murdered

Iraq’s Christian community is in shock after the murder on Sunday of three people including a newly engaged man and a woman just a year into her marriage.

Susan Latif David and her mother-in-law, **Muna Banna David**, were killed after armed men knocked and entered their home at around 7pm in Iraq’s eastern city of **Kirkuk**.

At about the same time in another part of the city, **Basil Shaba** was murdered in a similar attack. His brother, **Thamir**, and father, **Yousif**, were injured in the same attack.

After conducting the funeral in a packed **Kirkuk Cathedral**, **Archbishop Louis Sako** told **Aid to the Church in Need** of “the tears and sadness” of a people mourning the deaths of three “innocent loved ones”.

Susan Latif David, he explained, had been married for only one year. Her husband owns a restaurant near the cathedral.



On the Agenda

'Agnostics' accept resurrection

By *Barney Zwartz*

More than four in 10 Australians who don’t consider themselves “born again” nevertheless believe Jesus rose from the dead, while one in 10 doesn’t believe he even existed.

These are two of the surprising results from an independent survey of 2500 Australians, according to noted author and church historian **John Dickson**, co-director of the **Centre for Public Christianity** in Sydney.

The survey, released last month, showed that 42% of Australians believe Jesus had divine powers and 54% believe he rose from the dead.

But even among those who do not identify as born again, 45% believe in the resurrection. Dr Dickson said this number certainly included agnostics and secularists because the total was far higher than the remaining Christians surveyed.

“We are staggered. We thought the survey would show the profound scepticism of Australians,” he said.

“Instead it shows there is a base-level assumption among the Australian public that accepts the Jesus story even if it has no relevance to their lives.”

He said the survey wanted to explore the understanding of non-churchgoers, so the results were produced from those who were non-religious, or from another religion, or who loosely identified with Christianity. The statistics were released in two forms: including all respondents, and another excluding Christians who identified as born again.

Other odd findings included that 31% of Australians believe Jesus lived BC (that is, “before Christ”, or before he was born) and that 57% knew Easter was connected with the death of Jesus but a far higher 87% of Australians knew it concerned the resurrection. What the missing 30% thought the resurrection meant, if not rising from the dead, was not explored. Another 4% confused Easter with Christmas (and Jesus’ birth).

Reassuringly, 90% of non-born-again identified Jesus with Christianity rather than other religions, and 60% knew his life was recorded in the New Testament.

Asked was Jesus a real figure, 11% of

non-born-again said no, 39% said yes but without divine powers, and 50% said yes and he had divine powers.

The Age

Church drops ‘Christian Muslim’

By *Chris Herlinger*

A US **Episcopalian** priest who has been banned from practising as a cleric for claiming loyalty to both Christianity and Islam says she still believes it is possible to have dual religious loyalties.

“I’m sad at the loss of this cherished honour of having served as a priest,” said **Ann Holmes Redding**, quoted in a newspaper interview with the *Seattle Times* after the announcement on 1 April 2009 that she could no longer remain an Episcopalian (Anglican) cleric. The decision was made by **Rhode Island Bishop GERALYN WOLF**.

Redding has said that being a Muslim has made her a better Christian. “Some people don’t need glasses, some people need single lenses. I need bifocals,” she told *CNN* in a television interview.

The statement issued by the Rhode Island diocese said that Bishop Wolf found Redding “to be a woman of utmost integrity and their conversations over the past two years have been open, honest and respectful”.

“However,” the statement concluded, “Bishop Wolf believes that a priest of the Church cannot be both a Christian and a Muslim.” As a result, Wolf imposed what is officially called a **sentence of deposition**, in accordance with the canonical laws of the Episcopal Church.

The announcement ends a nearly two-year process in which Redding had been suspended as a priest in 2007 after her public announcement about embracing both religious faiths and was given time to undergo a process of discernment to determine her faith commitment.

Ecumenical News International

Roman Christians poorer

By *Anne Thomas*

Recent research conducted on the bones of early Christians in **Rome** has suggested they were generally poorer than non-Christian Romans.

Researchers analysed bone samples from 22 skeletons found in the **Catacombs of St Callixtus** on the **Appian Way**, which was used from the 3rd to 5th centuries AD. In total, around half a million tombs are believed

to be housed in the catacombs of Rome.

The researchers looked at collagen in the bones of the skeletons, specifically looking for their carbon and nitrogen stable-isotope content, which helps to indicate the kind of diet people had. The 22 skeletons examined all appeared to come from the same community and indicated that the people shared the same eating habits, the researchers found.

Compared with other Roman and Mediterranean skeletons these bones had higher rates of nitrogen but lower levels of carbon, suggesting that they ate more freshwater fish.

The research team said, "While distancing themselves from Jewish food taboos and generally avoiding meat derived from pagan sacrifices, the early Christians are normally hypothesised to have eaten the same food as their non-Christian Roman contemporaries," reports the Times.

"Within the larger context of what is currently known about Roman dietary habits, the inclusion of freshwater fish therefore comes as unexpected and raises questions about the social origins of Christianity as well."

At the beginning of the 4th century AD, **Emperor Diocletian** attempted to fix the price of freshwater fish at one third of marine fish, allowing the poor to eat it. Freshwater fish in Rome most likely came from the river Tiber and would have been a free or cheap source of food.

Christian Today

China could turn Christian

By Anne Thomas

With the growth of the church in China, one mission organisation is predicting that the communist nation could become

a Christian country in a matter of a decade.

Jonathan Shibley, vice president of **Global Advance** says there has been substantial growth in the number of Christians, especially in Chinese business circles.

"All of a sudden, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of small businessmen fellowships taking place, both within major corporations in China, and within homes," reports *Mission News Network*.

"So businessmen are beginning to get a glimpse of what the gospel looks like, transforming not only their own lives, but transforming the culture around them and becoming salt and light."

Shibley was speaking on the back of attending a **Global Advance Marketplace Missions** conference in China, which was aimed at giving tools to Chinese Christian businessmen to further increase the Christian presence in the country.

He says that while the Chinese government is concerned about the increase in Christians in business, it has done little more than reprimand them for their faith. He believes this is because they know that Christian businessmen are more honest, less corrupt and contribute to the wealth of China.

As a result Shibley said, "China is potentially on the tipping point in the next decade of either becoming a Christian nation or submitting to the god of materialism ... I think what we do to help pour into the godly leaders of China within the next 10 years will greatly determine which way it swings."

Irish abuse warning

The **Archbishop of Dublin** has said a new report will show that thousands of children in Ireland were abused by

Catholic priests over a 30-year period. **Archbishop Diarmuid Martin** warned that a massive investigation of parishes in the Irish capital would find children were subjected to horrific attacks between 1975 and 2004.

The former Vatican aide, one of the Church's most vocal critics of clerical abuse, also said the full horror of years of physical, sexual and psychological torture has not been recognised.

At **Holy Thursday Mass in Dublin's Pro-Cathedral**, attended by priests from throughout the archdiocese, Archbishop Martin said the report would humble the church.

"The Archdiocese of Dublin is facing challenges of a kind that it has not experienced for many years," he said. "The **Report of the Commission on Child Sexual Abuse** will shock us all. It is likely that thousands of children or young people across Ireland were abused by priests in the period under investigation and the horror of that abuse was not recognised for what it is."

The **Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigation** was set up in 2006 to investigate allegations of child sexual abuse involving Catholic priests in or attached to the capital's parishes. It covers the years 1975 to 2004.

Between 1940 and 2008, child sexual abuse allegations have been made against 77 priests of the Dublin Diocese, while suspicions have been raised about another nine, according to official figures. Last November the archdiocese said there were known to be around 400 people who have made a complaint, or are known or suspected to have suffered child sexual abuse by priests. The final number of victims is expected to run to thousands.

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The untouchable topic

Amid politics and polemics, the UN ignores 260 million victims.

There is an untouchable word that appears nowhere in the declaration of last month's UN conference in Geneva reviewing progress on fighting racism. It is Dalit, the self-designation of a South Asian group traditionally regarded as untouchable or of the lowest caste.

"Caste discrimination is one of the most important issues being left out of this conference," said Peter Prove of the Lutheran World Federation. The Australian human rights lawyer has worked with the Geneva-based LWF for many years towards eliminating discrimination against Dalits.

The 20 to 24 April meeting was a cocktail of politics and polemics. Religion and religious groups have played activist roles around the conference that has sought to review progress towards the goals set at a UN conference on racism, held in Durban, South Africa in 2001 and has been dubbed Durban II.

Paul Divakar, the convenor of the Delhi-based National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights told Ecumenical News International, "We are totally excluded. There is not a single word in the declaration even although this is an abominable practice that affects 260 million people." He noted, "The Durban II conference has totally eliminated any mention of caste or discrimination based on work and descent."

Divakar said that in India, a country that prides itself as being the world's biggest democracy, more than 167 million people, or more than 10% of the population, are from the Dalit communities and suffer from caste discrimination.

Some activists said that India had been successful in using its regional might and its position as an ally of Western countries in keeping the Dalit issue off the UN agenda, but none wanted to go on the record saying this for fear of jeopardising their work there.

The first day of the meeting got off to a rocky start on 20 April when diplomats from 23 nations, including Britain and France, walked out of the UN's Palais des Nations in Geneva during a speech by

**Peter
Kenny**

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad when he accused Israel of being "a totally racist government" and in which the original text had words interpreted as Holocaust denial.

The Iranian president's speech was applauded by some nations.

Dalit women refer to a "hidden apartheid" which they liken to a modern-day slavery because they have been born into a marginalised caste.



Ahmadinejad, however, drew strong condemnation from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Navi Pillay, the South African jurist who is the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and who described the Iranian president as "somebody who traditionally makes obnoxious statements".

But by the end of the second day top United Nations officials were congratulating themselves at adoption of "an outcome document, emphasising the need to address all manifestations of intolerance with greater resolve".

US Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he was heartened that all states at the five-day gathering in Geneva had adopted the text by consensus, signalling the international community's rejuvenation of its commitment to implement the Durban Declaration and Program of Action agreed on in 2001.

But the following day, a group of non-

government and religious groups released a statement calling on the international community to take action on caste-based discrimination which violates the rights of 260 million people globally.

The group includes Human Rights Watch, the Lutheran World Federation, Pax Romana, the Tokyo-based International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism, Copenhagen-based International Dalit Solidarity Network, the Delhi-based National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights and FORUM-ASIA.

Representatives from Dalit communities spoke at a Palais des Nations news briefing to explain how they are afflicted. Fatima Burnad and Dibakar Poricha explained how Dalits are subject to violence, rape, inhumane "untouchability practices", and suffer routine discrimination, socially, culturally and politically. They lamented that due to the high level of impunity in cases involving Dalit victims, they have few means to assert their rights through the judicial system.

The women referred to a "hidden apartheid" which they likened to a modern-day slavery because they have been born into a marginalised group or caste.

Rikke Nöhrind, coordinator of the International Dalit Solidarity Network told journalists, "This issue has been skillfully hidden by certain governments and Dalits are simply being treated as lesser human beings and denied justice."

Scores of Dalits travelled to Geneva, saying they are determined to keep fighting for their rights and to try and get the international community to listen. They joined the plethora of side events getting as much attention as the delegates inside the Palais des Nations.

This report comes from Ecumenical News International, reprinted in Ekklesia. Ecumenical News International is jointly sponsored by the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the Conference of European Churches. 

I believe (again)

A famous atheist describes the painful path back to faith.

By nature a doubting Thomas, I should have distrusted the symptoms when I underwent a “conversion experience” 20 years ago. Something was happening which was out of character – the inner glow of complete certainty, the heady sense of being at one with the great tide of fellow non-believers. For my conversion experience was to atheism. There were several moments of epiphany, actually, but one of the most dramatic occurred in the pulpit of a church.

At St Mary-le-Bow in the City of London, there are two pulpits, and for some decades they have been used for lunchtime dialogues. I had just published a biography of C.S. Lewis, and the rector of St Mary-le-Bow, Victor Stock, asked me to participate in one such exchange of views.

Memory edits, and perhaps distorts, the highlights of the discussion. Memory says that while Father Stock was asking me about Lewis, I began to “testify”, denouncing Lewis’s muscular defence of religious belief. Much more to my taste, I said, had been the approach of the late Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey, whose biography I had just read.

A young priest had been to see him in great distress, saying that he had lost his faith in God. Ramsey’s reply was a long silence followed by a repetition of the mantra “It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter”. He told the priest to continue to worship Jesus in the Sacraments and that faith would return. “But!” exclaimed Father Stock. “That priest was me!”

Like many things said by this amusing man, it brought the house down. But something had taken a grip of me, and I was thinking (did I say it out loud?): “It bloody well does matter. Just struggling on like Lord Tennyson (‘and faintly trust the larger hope’) is no good at all. . .”

I can remember almost yelling that reading C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* made me a non-believer – not just in Lewis’s version of Christianity, but in Christianity itself. On that occasion, I realised that after a lifetime of churchgoing, the whole house of cards had collapsed for me – the sense of God’s presence in life, and the notion that there was any kind of God, let alone a merciful God,



A. N.
Wilson

in this brutal, nasty world. As for Jesus having been the founder of Christianity, this idea seemed perfectly preposterous. In so far as we can discern anything about Jesus from the existing documents, He believed that the world was about to end, as did all the first Christians. So, how could He possibly have intended to start a new religion for Gentiles, let alone established a Church or instituted the Sacraments? It was a nonsense, together with the idea of a personal God, or a loving God in a suffering universe. Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense.

It was such a relief to discard it all that, for months, I walked on air. At about this time, the *Independent on Sunday* (an English newspaper) sent me to interview Dr Billy Graham, who was conducting a mission in Syracuse, New York State, before making one of his journeys to England. The pattern of these meetings was always the same. The old matinee idol spoke. The gospel choir sang some suitably affecting ditty, and then the converted made their way down the aisles to commit themselves to the new faith. Part of the glow was, surely, the knowledge that they were now part of a great fellowship of believers.

As a hesitant, doubting, religious man I’d never known how they felt. But, as a born-again atheist, I now knew exactly what satisfactions were on offer. For the first time in my 38 years I was at one with my own generation. I had become like one of the Billy Grahamites, only in reverse. If I bumped into Richard Dawkins (an old colleague from Oxford days) or had din-

ner in Washington with Christopher Hitchens (as I did either on that trip to interview Billy Graham or another), I did not have to feel out on a limb.

Hitchens was excited to greet a new convert to his non-creed and put me through a catechism before uncorking some stupendous claret. “So – absolutely no God?” “Nope,” I was able to say with Moonie-zeal. “No future life, nothing ‘out there?’” “No,” I obediently replied. At last! I could join in the creed shared by so many (most?) of my intelligent contemporaries in the western world – that men and women are purely material beings (whatever that is supposed to mean), that “this is all there is” (ditto), that God, Jesus and religion are a load of baloney: and worse than that, the cause of much (no, come on, let yourself go), most (why stint yourself – go for it, man), all the trouble in the world, from Jerusalem to Belfast, from Washington to Islamabad.

My doubting temperament, however, made me a very unconvincing atheist. And unconvinced. This creed that religion can be despatched in a few brisk arguments (outlined in David Hume’s masterly *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*) and then laughed off kept me going for some years. When I found myself wavering, I would return to Hume in order to pull myself together, rather as a Catholic having doubts might return to the shrine of a particular saint to sustain them while the springs of faith ran dry.

But religion, once the glow of conversion had worn off, was not a matter of argument alone. It involves the whole person. Therefore I was drawn, over and over again, to the disconcerting recognition that so very many of the people I had most admired and loved, either in life or in books, had been believers.

Reading Louis Fischer’s *Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, and following it up with Gandhi’s own autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, I found it impossible not to realise that all life, all being, derives from God, as Gandhi gave his life to demonstrate. Of course, there are arguments that might make you doubt the love of God. But a life like Gandhi’s, which was focused on

God so deeply, reminded me of all the human qualities that have to be denied if you embrace the bleak, muddled creed of a materialist atheist. It is a bit like trying to assert that music is an aberration, and that although Bach and Beethoven are very impressive, one is better off without a musical sense. Attractive and amusing as David Hume was, did he confront the complexities of human existence as deeply as his contemporary Samuel Johnson, and did I really find him as interesting?

Watching a whole cluster of friends, and my own mother, die over quite a short space of time convinced me that purely materialist “explanations” for our mysterious human existence simply won’t do – on an intellectual level. The phenomenon of language alone should give us pause. A materialist Darwinian was having dinner with me a few years ago and we laughingly alluded to how, as years go by, one forgets names. Eager, as committed Darwinians often are, to testify on any occasion, my friend asserted: “It is because when we were simply anthropoid apes, there was no need to distinguish between one another by giving names.”

This credal confession struck me as just as superstitious as believing in the historicity of Noah’s Ark. More so, really.

Do materialists really think that language just “evolved”, like finches’ beaks, or have they simply never thought about the matter rationally? Where’s the evidence? How could it come about that

human beings all agreed that particular grunts carried particular connotations? How could it have come about that groups of anthropoid apes developed the amazing morphological complexity of a single sentence, let alone the whole grammatical mystery which has engaged Chomsky and others in our lifetime and linguists for time out of mind?

As a working blueprint for life, as a template against which to measure experience, the religion of the incarnation fits.



No, the existence of language is one of the many phenomena – of which love and music are the two strongest – which suggest that human beings are very much more than collections of meat. They convince me that we are spiritual beings, and that the religion of the incarnation, asserting that God made humanity in His image, and continually restores humanity in His image, is simply true. As a working blueprint for life, as a template against which to measure experience, it fits.

For a few years, I resisted the admission that my atheist-conversion experience had been a bit of middle-aged madness. I do not find it easy to articulate thoughts about religion. I remain the sort of person who turns off Thought for the Day when it comes on the radio. I am shy to admit that I have followed the advice given all those years ago by a wise archbishop to a bewildered young man: that moments of unbelief “don’t matter”, that if you return to a practice of the faith, faith will return.

When I think about atheist friends, including my father, they seem to me like people who have no ear for music, or who have never been in love. It is not that (as they believe) they have rumbled the tremendous fraud of religion – prophets do that in every generation. Rather, these unbelievers are simply missing out on something that is not difficult to grasp. Perhaps it is too obvious to understand; obvious, as lovers feel it was obvious that they should have come together, or obvious as the final resolution of a fugue.

I haven’t mentioned morality, but one thing that finally put the tin hat on any aspirations to be an unbeliever was writing a book about the Wagner family and Nazi Germany, and realising how utterly incoherent were Hitler’s neo-Darwinian ravings, and how potent was the opposition, much of it from Christians; paid for, not with clear intellectual victory, but in blood. Read Pastor Bonhoeffer’s book *Ethics*, and ask yourself what sort of mad world is created by those who think that ethics are a purely human construct. Think of Bonhoeffer’s serenity before he was hanged, even though he was in love and had everything to look forward to.

My departure from the Faith was like a conversion on the road to Damascus. My return was slow, hesitant, doubting. So it will always be; but I know I shall never make the same mistake again. Gilbert Ryle, with donnish absurdity, called God “a category mistake”. Yet the real category mistake made by atheists is not about God, but about human beings. Turn to the *Table Talk* of Samuel Taylor Coleridge – “Read the first chapter of Genesis without prejudice and you will be convinced at once... The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” And then Coleridge adds: “‘And man became a living soul.’ Materialism will never explain those last words.”

A.N. Wilson is a novelist and biographer, including of Jesus. This article is reprinted from the New Statesman magazine.

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Letters

Support both sides, please

It is difficult to disagree with the request made by our Moderator-General to our Prime Minister that Australia should support the rebuilding of basic welfare facilities destroyed in the recent conflict in Gaza. What I am uncertain of is whether he has done this for other conflicts in the world where innocent civilians have been targeted in military conflict, for example Darfur. It seems to me that when Israel is seen as an aggressor then there is much more indignation in the air than for other conflicts.

The Jewish community in Israel today is under threat of liquidation by its neighbours and the way things are going it may well happen. Does this concern us? That community surely has a right to dwell in the region where it has had a continuous presence for over 3000 years (a great deal longer than many nations established by the presence of Europeans in other parts of the globe.) Like other nations recognised by the UN it has the right to live securely within its borders. Yet it is under unremitting attack from hostile neighbours who not only dispute its borders but also its right to exist. Of course, this does not justify disproportionate responses by Israel but it surely helps to understand them.

I am not aware of what letters have been written to the Prime Minister by our Moderator-General in the past, but I sincerely hope some have been sent to urge him to support the rights of the Jewish community in that area and to deplore the murderous intent of those committed to its destruction. This may

seem like asking the obvious, but Jews need to hear it said, just as a wife needs the reassurance of the words "I love you" from a caring husband. They feel the world is against them and would care little if they disappeared off the map. Christian churches of all groups should be vocal in expressing their support for the security of a community through whom we received the Scriptures and our Saviour.

*Paul Morris,
Field Leader,
Christian Witness to Israel, Australia,
Bondi, NSW*

Evolution's Berlin Wall

Expelled, No Intelligence Allowed is a recently released 95-minute documentary by the American comedian Ben Stein and it has caused an uproar overseas. He has taken up the issue of why those who believe in intelligent design (ID) in the USA have university tenure withdrawn, why editors of peer-reviewed scientific journals are disciplined or fired if they allow ID articles to appear in their publications and why research grants are virtually unobtainable by those who wish to investigate evidence which might lead to a designed world. The film is not restricted to ID but covers numerous

views including God's revealed creation. Although the interviewer/researcher is a comedian previously unknown to me, there is nothing funny about this production.

The film is focused, and confrontational in format. It is played out against the analogy of the Berlin Wall, the analogy being that you can do any research you like so long as it is this side of the Wall and conforms to the evolutionary party line. Chase the evidence over the Wall into creationism/ID etc. and you are professionally dead. The film exposes research into origins and evolution as decidedly selective rather than empirical to great detriment of scientific integrity and to the handling of the whole subject matter.

The film is a very important one for those who accept the Scriptures as the revealed Word of God. Stein lets those interviewed speak for themselves, to the subsequent embarrassment of some like Richard Dawkins. It shows clearly the reluctance of evolutionary scientists to even consider the possibility that we and all around us were created or that evolution might be a fatally flawed theory. It also reveals the agenda of many working in this field and that is to destroy religion, particularly Christianity.

*Ron Green,
Mt Wilson, NSW*

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The Presbyterian Theological College invites applications for appointment to this position. This is a permanent part-time position of 26 hours per week, commencing on 1 June 2009 and working under the direction of the Principal of the College, which is situated in the Melbourne suburb of Box Hill North.

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MAY 2009

- 21 Presbytery of Derwent southern Tasmania – 2 charges and 3 special (home mission) charges with about 520 c&a (communicants and adherents) and 30 yf (younger folk – Sunday School and youth), 1 retired minister. Mr J. Tuit clerk.
- 22 Joy Hill *mission partners* (APWM) worker from Donvale, Vic. in Bosnia Herzegovina with Pioneers involved in secretarial work.
- 23 Pray for the interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Warialda charge northern NSW with about 35 c&a and 1 e (elder).
- 24 Western Blacktown charge, Maryong, outer western Sydney with about 95 c&a, 30 yf and 5 e; David and Caron Balzer, Peter and Caroline Williamson.
- 25 Pray for the moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Eaglehawk home mission station Vic. with about 40 c&a, 2 yf and 1 e.
- 26 Balranald home mission station S W NSW with about 40 c&a, 25 yf and 4 e; Wally and Robyn Johnson.
- 27 Our sister churches and people of Myanmar (Burma) suffering a severe food shortage.
- 28 “Be Nurtured” women’s retreat this weekend at Brookfield, Brisbane.
- 29 Chatswood charge northern Sydney with about 170 c&a, 75 yf and 12 e; Jeff and Carmelina Read, Warren Esdale and Wade Idema, and the large retirement development adjoining.
- 30 Moruya charge NSW far south coast including also Narooma and Tuross Heads with about 100 c&a, 15 yf and 9 e; Peter and Sharon Pallett.
- 31 Praise God for the coming of the Helper promised by the Lord Jesus and pray that He may renew and revive our church and all churches.

JUNE 2009

- 1 Darwin congregation – Rob and Jeanette Duncanson – and cooperation with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, East Timor.
- 2 Pray for the Interim moderator Peter Dunstan, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Abbotsford-Fivedock charge Sydney with 31 c&a, 0 yf and 5 e; needing a minister and new vision.
- 3 Richard and Lisa Cho *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Cornerstone church, Concord, Sydney in Thailand with Overseas Missionary Fellowship involved in work among Buddhist school children and women.
- 4 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Kangaroo Ground charge Melbourne with about 27 c&a, 3 yf and 3 e.
- 5 NSW PY Winter Camps this weekend – Senior Deer Park, Royal National Park, Junior and Year 5-6 The Tops Conference centre Stanwell Tops. Speakers Peter Thompson, Sam Mak and Quizworx children’s ministry team.
- 6 New Life Springfield home mission station, southern Brisbane with about 55 c&a, 35 yf and 4 e; Will and Nerida Henderson.
- 7 Presbytery of Sydney North – 21 charges totaling 23 congregations with about 3620 c&a and 685 yf, 1 hospital chaplain, 10 retired ministers and 3 under jurisdiction. Colin Short clerk. A thanksgiving service for the Centenary of the Presbytery is being held today at St Peters, North Sydney, at which the Moderator General Robert Benn is speaking before ministering in Tasmania for two weeks.
- 8 Warrnambool charge, Vic. – 3 congregations including Warrnambool South and Woodford with about 490 c&a, 70 yf and 18 e; Ben and Louise Johnson.
- 9 Keith and Kathy Benn *mission partners* (APWM) Veteran workers from Creek Rd church, Brisbane with Wycliffe Bible Translators, involved in consultancy and the Proshikkon Short Term Project.

- 10 Pray for the moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Tumut-Tumbarumba home mission station southern NSW with about 110 c&a, 10 yf and 4 e.
- 11 Robyn Davies *mission partners* (APWM) worker from Strathfield, Sydney in PNG with Wycliffe Bible Translators involved with Liz Fritzell in the use of the Ramoaina scriptures.
- 12 The Tasmanian Assembly – Moderator, Clerk, all office-bearers, teaching, fellowship debates and decisions.
- 13 St George-Dirranbandi charge western Qld with about 27 c&a, 10 yf and 3 e; Harold and Heather Wills.
- 14 Dungog charge NSW including Stroud and Clarencetown with about 65 c&a, 5 yf and 6 e; Tony and Shona Archer.
- 15 Barbara Sayers *mission partners* (APWM) worker from Cairns (originally from Gosford, NSW) finding new opportunities for service to the Wik people of Aurukun, N.Qld with whom she began working 50 years ago with Wycliffe Bible Translators.
- 16 Rainbow Korean charge, Carlingford, Sydney with about 70 c&a, 30 yf and 1 e; Chi Woo and Sung Hee Jwa.
- 17 The Leigh charge Vic. comprising Inverleigh, Shelford and Teesdale with about 100 c&a, 30 yf and 7 e; David and Margaret Griffin.
- 18 Rutherford charge, Hunter Valley NSW with about 35 c&a and 4 e; Kevin and Jenny Cooper.
- 19 Presbytery of Benalla, Vic. 7 charges and 2 home mission stations totaling 22 congregations with about 755 c&a and 170 yf. W. Frank Savage clerk.
- 20 Praise God for 200 years witness at our nation’s oldest, existing church building, Ebenezer chapel in the Hawkesbury River, NSW – formerly Presbyterian, now in the UCA.

Correction: Amundale-Leichhardt (May 12) should read “45 c&a” not 70.

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Books

All for Jesus
50th Anniversary of Covenant
Theological Seminary

Ed. Robert A. Peterson and Sean Michael Lucas
Christian Focus, 2006

The Gospel Ministry
Practical Insights and
Application

Ed. Philip Eveson
Evangelical Press, 2005
Reviewed by Stuart Bonnington

The history of the decline of the church in the West is directly related to the tragic departure on all sides and in all denominations of the centres of theological education from a robust commitment to the Bible as God's Word in written form and to the historical Reformed and evangelical Christian faith.

Again and again the same mistakes and problems have occurred, rendering much of what passes for theological education essentially useless to the church. These two books mark significant anniversaries in two of the world's newer theological training institutions which stand against the outgoing tide, being founded and having stood (so far) for the "faith once received by the saints".

Covenant Theological Seminary (founded 1956) and the London Theological Seminary (founded 1977) and the associated John Owen Centre for Theological Study (JOCTS) have had a world-wide impact for the gospel.

Reading *All for Jesus* is like going through a theological refresher course. If you are ministering in a remote, isolated or discouraging situation, reading this book will put you in touch with much help and fresh stimulation in your God-given tasks. As well as marking the anniversary of the CTS, the book also serves as a Festschrift (or collection of articles marking a significant ministry) for three CTS Professors –

R.I. Vasholtz (OT), D.C. Jones (systematic theology and ethics) and D.B. Calhoun (church history).

The keynote of CTS is the grace of God and the need for the conducting of a Christ centred focus in all aspects of the gospel ministry. This comes out just about on every page. Some chapters themselves are worth the cost of the whole volume – *The Necessity for Preaching Grace for Progress in Sanctification* by Bryan Chapell; *Gospel-Centred Worship and the Regulatory Principle* by Mark L. Dalbey; *The Search for Truth in Psychology and Counseling* by Richard Winter; *Grace-Centred Church Planting* by Philip D. Douglass.

The chapters of *The Gospel Ministry: Practical Insights and Application* were originally given at a day of studies held in 2002 on the nature of gospel ministry in the 21st century held at the JOCTS. It serves as a kind of 25th anniversary volume for LTS. With contributions from the like of Philip Eveson (principal of LTS) and Edward Donnelly of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, the reader is led through seven perspectives on the gospel minister – in the Bible; in history; as preacher; as evangelist; as pastor (read the 11 duties of the office of shepherd – page 98 – and see why the Puritans were such outstanding pastors); in contemporary society; and concerning the training of the gospel minister.

The influence of Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones (who founded LTS) is evident everywhere. There is a lot of food for thought, not only on the practice of the ministry but the shape of theological education itself. LTS was founded in reaction to the common evangelical desire to have in theological education, a kind of Bible-based alternative to the "secular" university education model. This has been especially strong in the Presbyterian mindset, led by the example of figures such as J. Gresham Machen, who founded Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia as the "new" Princeton, after the old one was reorganised with liberal theological influence gaining the upper hand from 1929.

These books should not be missed by

church leaders, those in front-line, local church ministries and also those involved in the provision and advance of theological training and education to the glory of God and the health and well being of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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

Let's Study the Letters of John

Ian Hamilton
Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008
Reviewed by Peter Barnes

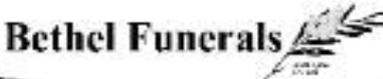
John's three epistles set forth the full-orbed tests of a true faith: the belief that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; love for Christian brothers; and keeping God's commandments. Ian Hamilton proves to be a most reliable guide through these letters. His extensive use of cross references and his vigorous applications make this a clear and challenging piece of work. The reader is pressed to examine himself as to the reality of his Christian walk. Here is Puritan theology distilled for the 21st century. To cite John Owen: "Christian love is to be as unconfined as the sun." Understanding and application go together in the Christian faith and life.

My quibbles are minor. John's salutation in 2 John 3 ("grace, mercy, and peace") does not occur in all of Paul's letters, as it is conspicuously absent in Galatians – for good reason! Hamilton understands what the ESV translates as "keep on sinning" (e.g. 1 John 5:18) not in terms of a prevailing pattern of living, but of definitive sanctification, as in 1 Corinthians 1:2. There are good arguments either way, as the writer well realises.

This is a work that is simple yet incisive and helpful in every respect, and deserves to be widely used.

Peter Barnes is books editor of AP.

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Where the Christian revelation is despised, there will be a consequent decline in our apprehension of beauty, goodness and truth. In other words, ungodliness will lead to moral decay, and the result will be a greater poverty and perversity in how society operates. Life will become coarsened and cheapened, and relationships will be degraded. Whether one turns to the front of the newspaper and reads about the state government, or to the back and reads about the Broncos football team, the story is much the same.

In August 2008 the mayor of Malia on Crete moved to rid the seaside resort of young British tourists on the grounds that their behaviour was simply disgusting: "They scream, they sing, they fall down, they take their clothes off, they cross-dress, they vomit."

Theodore Dalrymple reports on one British woman who had nine children by five different fathers, gleaned \$50,000 in welfare benefits a year, took off to India with eight of her children, and then went on a trip while leaving her 15-year-old daughter in the tender care of a tour guide whom she had only just met. Before long, the girl turned up dead on the beach – raped, and riddled with drugs and alcohol. British child rearing experts in the *Guardian* and *Observer* warned against taking a judgmental attitude to this event as Rod Stewart, Jack Nicholson, and Mick Jagger have all adopted similarly promiscuous lifestyles. Presumably, anybody who is famous cannot possibly be criticised.

The results of this whole approach to life were reinforced to me on a recent train trip back from the city. There was a fellow with a loud voice sitting behind me, next to two girls. I was trying to read a somewhat difficult book on the theology of Athanasius, but the whole carriage was treated to this fellow's discourses on his life of alcohol, drugs, and free sex – all delivered in the coarsest possible language. Finally, the genius found some reason to announce that he had no religion. We have made a radically wrong turn in defining what life is all about. As



Peter Barnes

Dalrymple laments: "Our society has lost the most elementary common sense about what children need."

There are more British children with televisions in their bedrooms than with their biological fathers at home. In 2007 about a quarter of British teachers were assaulted by their students. Pandering to

There are more British children with televisions in their bedrooms than with their biological fathers at home.

perversion has become public policy all across the Western world. In mid-2008 Sydney's Wesley Mission was fined \$10,000 for refusing the application of a homosexual couple who wanted to be foster carers. We have slid

into a highly technical version of the Dark Ages. Morale is low, and there is a massive loss of nerve in every area of life.

Samuel Johnson declared that "the supreme end of education is expert discernment in all things – the power to tell the good from the bad, the genuine from the counterfeit, and to prefer the good and the genuine to the bad and the counterfeit". That is no longer an aim in much of what passes for modern educational theory. One can only lament with G. K. Chesterton: "It is the beginning of all true criticism of our time to realise that it has really nothing to say, at the very moment when it has invented so tremendous a trumpet for saying it." Never has more communication been possible; never has so little worthwhile communication been achieved.

What has gone wrong? Many complicated answers could be suggested, but the Bible says quite simply that people who worship the wrong god end up descending into spiritual and

moral poverty and perversity. At Peor, the Israelites first of all sacrificed to the Moabite gods, then indulged in sexual immorality (Num. 25; see 1 Cor. 10:7-8). In the dark days of the book of Judges, there is a pattern of spiritual decline, moral decline, and then political decay (Judges 17-21). The rot begins when the true God is worshipped the wrong way, by means of a carved image (17:3-4). People still believed in the blessing of God but not His revelation (see 17:5, 13), and the contagion spread. The result is moral decay. Judges 19 tells of sexual promiscuity, selfish and uncaring lifestyles, rampant sodomy, moral cowardice, and the collapse of what has been called ordinary human decency.

This never happens in a vacuum. On 2 November 2003 Gene Robinson, a man who had divorced his wife and left his two children and went on to adopt a homosexual lifestyle, was consecrated as the Episcopalian bishop of New Hampshire – supposedly a successor to Jesus' apostles. One cannot abandon spiritual truth without its having moral consequences.

Judges 20 and 21 tell of social disintegration, where a society is held together only by sordid social engineering. This is the outworking of a failed belief system. Those who worship the creation instead of the creator (Rom. 1:21-23) find not that they have given up God, but – far worse – God gives them up to the lusts of their hearts, to dishonourable passions, and to a debased mind (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).

In 1983 the prize-winning novelist, Alexander Solzhenitsyn (who died in 2008), sought to explain why the communist experiment in what was then the USSR went so barbarously wrong, leading to the murder of some 60 million of its own people. Solzhenitsyn's diagnosis was simple and compelling, albeit not popular with Western liberals: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened."

Peter Barnes is minister of Revesby Presbyterian Church, Sydney. 