

A U S T R A L I A N

Presbyterian

THE MAGAZINE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

NOVEMBER 2009



boy
meets
girl

RICHARD PHILLIPS | IDOL FACTORIES | SLOW AHEAD

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E D I T O R I A L

Solomon confessed in the book of Proverbs that one of the greatest mysteries of life was “the way of a man with a maiden” (30:18, 19). If Solomon found this a difficult issue, it should come as no surprise that the subject of dating still continues to tantalise and frustrate us. His point is that there are delicate nuances in a romantic relationship which defy rational explanation. Of course, that may be so, but a further reason why we often feel out of depth when we try to explore the subtle chemistry involved in “boy-meets-girl” is that, in the words of J. B. Phillips, we have allowed the world to “squeeze us into its own mould” (Rom. 12:2). Our problem is that our minds are not sufficiently shaped by the Bible.

But how do we begin to think biblically about dating? One of the first problems that we encounter when we check our concordances is that the word is nowhere to be found. This will be disappointing to many people who quite naturally assume that the Scriptures would have a lot to say about what is really an important subject in human relations. Actually, the problem is quite complicated because “dating” as we know it is really a modern convention. Therefore the challenge we face is to think biblically about a practice that did not exist in its present form in the ancient world.

It is at this point that Christian writers on dating adopt a variety of approaches. Some suggest that the idea of dating carries overtones of self-interest, improper intimacy and a “try-before-you-buy” mentality. They claim that the fundamental assumptions of dating are unbiblical and should be discarded. In its place, they assert, we should reinstate the “courtship” model. Other writers suggest that, whether we like it or not, dating in one form or another is a cultural expectation and that Christians, rather than avoiding it, should seek to reform and rehabilitate it.

In this issue, Richard Phillips suggests that the way to approach this issue is to understand dating as a prelude to marriage. Once we understand the goal, many of the troublesome aspects of modern dating can be corrected. Readers may find many of his comments challenging, but they are profoundly Christian.

Peter Hastie 



Holding hands, holding hearts

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES MAKE BETTER ENCOUNTERS – AND MARRIAGES.

There is a real need in the church today for biblically informed teaching about how men and women should date.

Living in a culture where the ideas behind *Sex in the City* create all sorts of unhelpful expectations and practices, we need a vision of how young Christian men and women can form healthy relationships that will ultimately lead them to a fulfilling marriage. Rev. Richard D. Phillips and his wife, Sharon, have written a helpful book, *Holding Hands, Holding Hearts* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2006) which sets out from the Bible how believers can approach this difficult but exhilarating time in their lives.

Richard Phillips is senior minister of Second Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina. He served previously as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Coral Springs/Margate, Florida, and as minister of preaching at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He also serves on the council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals and as chairman of the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology.

He earned his bachelor's degree at the University of Michigan, a master of business administration degree at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, and a M Div degree at Westminster Theological Seminary. Before entering the ministry, he commanded tank units as an officer in the US Army and later served as an assistant professor of leadership at the US Military Academy at West Point.



Richard Phillips
talks to
Peter Hastie

Richard, since the terms “dating”, “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” can’t be found in the Bible, is it possible to have a Christian approach to dating?

Well, although the modern social convention of “dating” doesn’t appear in the Bible, that doesn’t mean the Bible has nothing to say about it. The truth is that everything the Bible says is relevant to it. Indeed, the approach that my wife and I took when we wrote the book, *Holding Hearts, Holding Hands*, is that we need to look at dating in the light of what the Bible says about the institution of marriage. We believe that the best way to consider dating is to begin by thinking about the purpose of marriage and the nature of the marital relationship.

Once you have done that, you are then in a position to consider whether present dating practices are consistent with the kind of relationship to which they are meant to lead. As far as I can see, dating is a social phenomenon which is a well-established part of our culture. We are stuck with it whether we like it or not. So, it seems to me that Christians need to consider it in a way that’s biblically wise and appropriate to the Bible’s teaching on marriage.

Okay, but if dating is a relatively recent social convention and the Bible doesn’t deal with it specifically, why is it such an

important subject for you to write about?

Well, I am not convinced that saying, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, is a sufficient response in today’s world where dating is a well-established practice. I can understand the book itself and agree with its basic thrust, which is aimed mainly at teenagers. However, I am really writing for young adults, not teenagers. I tell teenagers I don’t think they should be dating because it’s not really appropriate for them to be married in our culture, whereas I tell young adults that they ought to be thinking seriously about marriage and looking for the right partner.

The problem for young adults today is that they are living in an entirely different world to the one of only a generation or so ago. When I was serving as a pastor in Philadelphia, few of our urban singles were from Christian families, and for the most part they were unable to look to their fathers for Christian counsel on this subject. That’s why I argue in my book that I believe that the church needs to step in at this point and provide the social network that families used to offer in the past.

Further, it explains why I’m not prepared to say to young adults that they should abandon dating as some Christian authors suggest. If the social context in the US was quite different, then it would be another story. However, dating is the social convention that exists today and so my aim has been to help young adults to reflect biblically upon it. After all, it’s more or less a necessity in the social world in which we

live. What we want to do is reform the practice of dating so that it will be biblically fruitful. So that's our approach.

Why did you call your book *Holding Hands, Holding Hearts*?

When I was studying at Westminster Theological Seminary I was on the staff of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. I was the singles pastor and we had 200 to 300 single young adults in their 20s to early 40s in our church. We had a Friday night meeting where I would preach as well as co-ordinate small group Bible studies. From that experience I found that we had the need to present biblical teaching on marriage and dating. The book arose out of the seminars that we put together to help our singles.

How we arrived at the name of the book is interesting. We had a good friend, in fact my wife's room-mate when we were dating, and we were talking about the whole concept of a man wanting to hold a woman's hand. We realised that men view this quite differently to women. And she made the comment, "When he asks to hold my hand, I want to know what that means". So we would say, "When you're holding a woman's hand, you're really holding her heart." And that was one of our catchphrases to help men understand what was really going on in a relationship with a woman. So the title became quite a natural introduction to our whole approach. Men are not just holding women's hands; they are also holding their hearts.

What do you actually mean when you say that a guy is holding the heart of a young woman?

What men want in dating is the warmth of feminine feeling and companionship. This is the way that God has made us. It's not sexually sinful to desire feminine warmth. It's a natural, wholesome thing for a man to hold his girlfriend's hand.

However, for the woman, holding a man's hand is not about a fleeting fulfilment of existential needs; it goes far deeper than the pure physical sensation. This means that Christian men need to think very carefully about their obligations to the woman they are dating. One of the themes I major on when I am speaking about dating is the man's spiritual responsibility. The biblical idea of headship means that a

man must accept the responsibility for the effects on a woman of the time she may spend with him. So, rather than just taking hold of her hand because he enjoys it, he must take the responsibility for the emotional and spiritual experience that a woman has when she's with him. So that's the emphasis of the approach we're advocating.

Sometimes, those who write on this subject have a particular agenda. Do you have one? Is your aim to get all singles married or to consider marriage?

Yes, I definitely have an agenda. My agenda is to get Christians to think and



THE BIBLE NOWHERE PROMISES THAT MARRIAGE WILL MAKE US HAPPY. FRANKLY, THAT'S AN IDOLATROUS VIEW OF MARRIAGE.

act biblically about their relationships. In this particular case, I am concerned about the romantic relationships between unmarried men and women. I want Christians to consider how they should conduct themselves in this situation and reform their attitudes and behaviour in the light of Scripture.

Now my agenda is to focus on God's agenda and that means that I need to remind people that marriage is God's regular ordinance for the blessing of men and women. I am not saying that adult singleness is abnormal, not at all. But I do want to say that God's regular pattern is marriage. I know Christians often talk about the gift of singleness, but the reality is that most single adults don't regard it as a gift at all. For most of them it is a trial.

Well, how about you? Was being single a trial for you?

I was a non-Christian in my 20s and I wasn't married until I was 32. I was an army officer and spent most of my time deployed in very demanding physical settings that often involved special

operations. When you are a military commander for six months in an engagement zone, it's amazing how little sex drive you have. You're running off adrenaline all the time; you feel exhausted. That doesn't mean that men deployed in that situation aren't open to temptation, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't.

However, the problem for me was being in a normal environment. Not being married posed a problem for me because marriage is God's provision for a healthy sex drive. And I was not married, so I had that difficulty. And I think all men, whether Christian or otherwise, struggle with sexual desire especially if they are not married. True, some struggle less than others because they have a low sex drive; but most do not. A number of young Christian men who are unmarried have confessed to me that they are engaged in sexual sin, whether it's pornography, masturbation or sexual relations with women. I think this highlights the point that it's not God's regular pattern for adults to be unmarried.

Now I want to acknowledge that there are many Christian singles who really want to get married and have not found a partner. For them, it is a trial and I think we should all understand that. Nevertheless, I am concerned about the model of adult singleness that many Christians seem content with, especially in city churches. I think it's important to remind ourselves that marriage, despite new cultural trends, is the regular pattern. After all, the Lord did say, "It is not good for the man to be alone." God wasn't joking; adult men should desire marriage. I like to say that dating should be with an eye to marriage. Naturally, this doesn't mean that you show up on your first date in a wedding dress or a tuxedo; that's hardly appropriate. Nevertheless, Christians should definitely date with an eye towards marriage, and that's the emphasis in our book.

And so I say to guys, "If you are not seriously interested in marriage, then don't date. And please don't take out the women in my church because I know that they're looking for a husband. And, well they should be."

I know some people think it's rather odd for a woman to be dating with an eye to marriage. I've sometimes heard them say, "Oh, you know, Suzy's only here because she's looking for a husband". And I would say, "Well, I don't think

that's the only reason, but bully for her if she is looking for a husband. What do you expect of a 25 year old Christian woman? From a biblical point of view it's perfectly reasonable for her to want to be married." So rather than this embarrassment over ulterior motives in dating, I want to put it all out on the table and de-embarrass the whole situation by reminding everyone that it's a godly thing for young adult Christians to be seeking marriage. It may not be for everyone; nevertheless, it's God's regular provision and men should be dating with an eye to marriage.

At the moment there are some prominent evangelical leaders in the United States who are encouraging young people to get married as soon as possible. Do you have any advice on that score?

Well, I think we have to be responsible in giving this sort of advice. However, I can understand why some may be giving it. In the US today we have a problem with Christian men. We have plenty of women who really want to get married; it's the men who are the problem. Women are maturing more quickly than men today and they are looking for a husband.

So I want to challenge young Christian men in their 20s or older, "Why are you not stepping up to the plate to be married? Why aren't you ready? Why is your life in a holding pattern? Why are you forestalling what God says is 'good'?" Too often I hear the lame excuse, "Richard, I'm just not ready for commitment." Well, I want to ask guys in their 20s, "Why not? Why are you not developing your Christian character?" Now notice, I am not saying that guys should get married to overcome their immaturity. The immaturity itself is a problem and they need to get to work on that immediately. Obviously, part of their immaturity is their attitude to marriage.

You do realise that we could have thousands of marriages in the Presbyterian Church of Australia as a result of this interview?

I have never done this seminar without somebody getting married. Everywhere I go I meet people who tell me how our seminar led to their marriage. Only last night, here in Philadelphia, a young couple came up to me and said, "We want to thank you for your book and for the seminar you gave

six years ago in Tenth Presbyterian Church. It led to our marriage and here are our children!"

Marriage is God's blessed estate, but it's not a fix for all our needs. One of the things that we constantly mention in our book is that the Bible nowhere promises that marriage will make us all happy. Frankly, that's an idolatrous view of marriage. It is impossible for a spouse to fulfil all his/her partner's needs.

So what is the main issue that concerns you with young adults at the moment?



BELIEVERS OFTEN ASK ME HOW FAR IS TOO FAR? AND I SAY, 'YOU'VE ALREADY GONE TOO FAR IN ASKING THE QUESTION.'

It's people who say to me, "I want to date, but I'm just not interested in marriage." When they let me know what they're thinking, I usually say something like, "Well, don't ask out any woman in our church; or if you do, make it clear where you stand. The likelihood is that she will say, "No."

Men today need to realise that the women in our churches are not just there for their emotional "feel good" experience or their convenience. That's selfish. Our men need to embrace biblical manhood which involves nurturing and protecting women. One of Adam's tasks when he was placed in the garden was to tend and protect the things in his care – and that included his wife. If a man is living biblically, then he should make sure that those around him feel cared for and safe. No Christian woman should feel vulnerable in a relationship. She must never feel exploited or uncertain of a man's intentions. She must feel secure.

When I went out on a date with my wife who, incidentally, I met through Tenth Church, I was up-front with her from the beginning. After we had been out together for a while and things

looked promising, I said to her, "Would you mind if we talked about our relationship?" Actually, she really appreciated that I took this initiative. I said, "Sharon, I want you to know that I really admire you and find you very attractive. If you are willing, I would be happy to continue our relationship in the hope that it would lead to something more. We're not there now, and it's only early days, but I would like to continue our relationship because I believe it could lead to something permanent. Is it okay if I continue to date you with an eye towards marriage?" How do you think she felt about that? Well, I can tell you; she was thrilled!

When I tell people this at seminars the women usually fall out of their seats and say, "Richard, I think I would die if I went out on a date and a guy said that to me." Naturally, I have to put it into the context of where Sharon and I were at that particular time, but my basic point remains: it's a man's duty to make a woman feel safe and protected. He needs to be sensitive to her feelings and place her emotional and spiritual well-being ahead of his own. When men date they need to practise "Love your neighbour as yourself."

So how soon did you get engaged?

We were engaged within three months of dating. But, bear in mind that I was 31 years old and she was 25, and I was ready to be married. Now I want to sound a warning here. People should be wary of getting engaged too early. I am certainly not claiming that what happened to Sharon and me is meant to be normative for everyone else. There were certain circumstances in our relationship that led us to get serious earlier than many other couples. Our relationship got serious more quickly than many others because I was soon going to finish graduate school and leave the area, so we had some constructive pressure on our relationship.

On the other hand, I don't think it's helpful for men to want to delay marriage indefinitely. The problem is that men today are in a society that is not encouraging them to embrace the duties and responsibilities of adulthood. However, it is good for them to do that, and nothing will have that effect more than marriage. Marriage is a very sanctifying influence and men do not prosper spiritually, emotionally and sexually outside of marriage as they do when they are husbands.

So tell me, how did you develop a doctrine of dating? You said you worked back from the institution of marriage. Why did you do that?

We started with marriage and worked back because marriage is God’s design for the exclusive love relationship between men and women. Our aim was to identify the biblical dynamics of that relationship and then back-track them into dating.

For instance, marriage involves a lifelong relationship that is bound by a covenant. Therefore a dating relationship needs to progressively build commitment and trust. When you’re on a first date, the level of commitment is low and needs to be explicitly so. But then as you develop a more exclusive relationship there needs to be greater clarity and definition. For instance, as the relationship deepens I need to tell my girlfriend that from now on I don’t intend to take out other women and that I am trying to get to know her better and build more trust between ourselves. I think men need to lead in this regard.

However, the problem men face is that they want intimacy – another dynamic in the relationship – and they tend to give only as much commitment as necessary to get the intimacy they crave. Obviously, this is terribly destructive for women.

Women, on the other hand, want the commitment, and they give the intimacy to the extent that they have to to gain commitment. Now the Bible teaches that the intimacy level needs to be appropriate to the commitment level. I really believe there should be no real sexual intimacy short of marriage. I cannot see a biblical case for what Americans call “making out”. It’s a desire for intimacy in ways that are entirely inappropriate to the level of commitment. We should realise that expressions of sexual love between a man and woman are designed to be a positive feedback loop that leads to intercourse.

Would you be upset if your daughter kisses a guy?

I don’t think it’s a wise thing to do; I really don’t. I think we are better to be chaste. Christians today need to practise biblical purity. Believers often ask me how far is too far? And I say, “You’ve already gone too far in asking the question.” Sexual intimacy is for married couples, period. Young Christian couples will end up having sexual intercourse if

they begin making out and petting. It’s the way God designed it.

You mean it’s like a jumbo aircraft going down a runway. The more speed you build up the harder it is to stop?

Exactly! If you take Step 1 and it leads to Step 2, then Step 3 is more likely. This is the way God designed sexuality. You will also find that when dating couples become sexually intimate they short-circuit the process of their emotional and intellectual growth together. They become less concerned about communicating with each other because they have sex on their minds all the time.

When my wife and I were dating, we



TO ME, MALE HEADSHIP IN DATING IS SPELLED ‘RESPONSIBILITY’. A MAN MUST PLACE HIS GIRLFRIEND’S WELLBEING ABOVE HIS OWN.

would go from the restaurant to the park and sit there and talk about all kinds of things. We’d even talk about people walking past us, you know, and say things like, “Look at those shoes!”, and laugh about it. We would also talk a lot about the Bible and our attitudes to a large number of issues. None of this would have happened if we were just having sex together. Instead, we would have gone straight from the restaurant, through the park, and been in the bedroom in five minutes. All that wonderful banter we had in the park would never have taken place. We used to memorize Scripture together, talk about Dr Boice’s sermons, laugh together, and tell our stories. It was a wonderful way to grow together intellectually and emotionally.

A man needs to lead in this process. Women have such a great desire to secure commitment that they can be tempted to sell intimacy to get it. However, if a woman does this it changes everything; it certainly affects

the way she relates to the man from then on. When a Christian man says to a woman, “You know what, you are a precious child of God and I am going to bring out the very best in you and develop our commitment. We are going to wait for the intimacy,” the woman feels completely secure and loved. This is a thrilling and blessed way to date; and it’s biblical.

What are the key ideas of marriage that should establish the parameters for the dating relationship?

Genesis 2 sets out three fundamental dynamics for marriage – commitment, intimacy and interdependence – which will necessarily have some bearing on the dating relationship.

First, marriage is a relationship that is defined by its covenant commitment. This means that in a dating relationship the level of commitment that leads to marriage needs to be proactively managed as the couple move forward in their friendship. I believe that there should be clearly defined levels of commitment as you are dating. A first date is a first date. That is what it is. We are at dinner getting to know each other. The man needs to specify that. There should be no intimacy. A woman who goes out to dinner with a man twice should not be making meals for him, right? She should not be sewing for him. She should not be coming over to his apartment to clean it. This is completely inappropriate. She is being exploited by her God-given desire and God-given right for commitment from a man. The level of commitment needs to be properly managed during the dating process so that it is not exploited.

The second dynamic is intimacy. Intimacy should correspond to the level of commitment. I don’t think that couples who have been on a date once should get together for intimate prayer and open up their hearts to one another. I don’t think it’s wise to share your inmost thoughts with someone who has not yet made a deep commitment to you. As the commitment in a dating relationship increases, there will be more open sharing of past history, heart attitudes, and hopes for the future, along with an increased amount of time spent in shared interests.

The third dynamic is interdependence; the building of a shared life. For instance, when my wife and I were dating, and we had a fairly long engage-

ment, I would come and stay with her and her parents. She also began to take an interest in my life. She started following the sports I have followed and I started to develop an interest in the things in which she was involved. I got to know her circle of friends, and our lives began to overlap. So, there needs to be a development of commitment, intimacy and sharing of interests. And one of the things that I point out in our book is that the man has to take the initiative in opening the way for progress in each of these areas.

Why is the man meant to be the initiator?

He's the initiator because that's the pattern that God establishes when He created the man and the woman for each other. It all goes back to the blueprint in Genesis 2. Adam is given responsibility to care for everything. Eve is his helper, but the primary responsibility is his. Now it's important to realise that while a man has a certain authority in the marriage relationship, this does not extend to dating. The Bible does not command girlfriends to submit to their boyfriends. If a woman says to me, "I went on a date last night with a guy and he told me to submit to him, what should I do?" My advice would be, "Run! It's totally inappropriate in a dating relationship." To me, male headship in dating is spelled "responsibility". A man must place his girlfriend's wellbeing above his own. He must ask himself at all times: "Am I acting in this woman's physical, spiritual and emotional best interests at all times?" His job is to care for her; not command her.

How does a guy do that on a date?

In Ephesians 5 Paul says that Jesus purifies and perfects His church through His word. This means that Christian men must speak to their girlfriends (and their wives) in ways that build them up. I am always troubled when I hear of men who are dating women and they are critical of the way a woman looks and dresses. My immediate reaction is: "What is this guy going to be like in marriage?" Again, some men are demanding or demeaning of women. That doesn't fit in with the biblical image of marriage, where the man is supposed to minister to the woman's heart.

Women have a special role in dating too. The woman was made to be a helper for the man. I think this means that in a dating relationship the woman should

be asking herself, "How can I help him, especially if he feels awkward in social settings?" Well, here's the woman's opportunity to help him out so that he is better able to cope.

But there are limits in dating. A man does not have authority over a woman while he is dating her, although he does have responsibility for her welfare. Again, women are not called to submit in dating, but they do have a responsibility to help their boyfriends in ways that will encourage them. The point is that when a couple is dating there will come a time when it will be appropriate to look for-



WOMEN HAVE SUCH A GREAT DESIRE TO SECURE COMMITMENT THAT THEY CAN BE TEMPTED TO SELL INTIMACY TO GET IT.

ward to marriage. And when that happens, the dynamics of the marriage relationship will have more and more influence in the way their relationship develops.

Should a Christian man ever date a girl who doesn't share his faith?

No.

Why not?

Well, when a Christian man dates he should have an end in view, which is marriage. If a man has no intention of marrying a woman, he shouldn't be dating her. Dating is a modern social construct that is meant to lead to marriage. Men should not be having exclusive emotional relationships with women who are not their wives or with women who they are not seeking to make their wives. If you don't want to marry a non-Christian, then do not date one. Women, particularly, should not date non-Christian men. I know non-Christian men are sometimes more attractive and appealing, but it's a matter of faithfulness to the Lord.

In what ways does the reality of sin

make it difficult for a man and a woman to have a helpful dating experience?

The fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 has had different effects on men and women. When they fell into sin they suffered alienation from God and alienation between themselves. God cursed them both in different ways.

The curse on the woman took the form of a wrongful desire towards men. God said, "Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you". That curse, which God has imposed on women, has the effect of them having an unwholesome infatuation with men. The actual word, "desire", (teshuqa) is also found in the Song of Solomon, and there it means infatuation. However, the same word is used in Genesis 4:7 where God says to Cain, "Sin is crouching at your door and it desires to master you". In this case it refers to a desire to control or master. I think what this means is that sin affects women in such a way that they become unwholesomely infatuated with men and possess a desire to control them. This is one of the reasons why the New Testament tells women to submit to and respect their husbands. Submission in Christ is the remedy for this pattern of feminine sinfulness.

Now the man has a different set of problems due to the curse. God curses the ground because of his disobedience. This means that men's struggles are directed outside of themselves to the world around them. They have an infatuation with things in the world external to their relationship with a woman.

Let me give you an example: what is every woman's magazine about? That's right, men! They are all about how to have better sex, how to look more beautiful, how to be thinner, how to make better food etc, etc. And what is the subtext of all these magazines? How to catch and control a man!

Now, think about men's magazines. What are they about? Almost every man's magazine is about stuff out in the world: computers, money, cars, mountain biking, sailing and business. If women feature in these magazines, it's almost always as possessions or objects. So, the effect of God's curse because of sin is that the male-female relationship has been corrupted terribly. God has designed marriage from the fall so that marriage is absolutely impossible without Him. My heart goes out to non-Christian people who are desperately trying to stay married. They can't pull it

off successfully without being reconciled to God and asking him to overcome these tendencies in their hearts.

How does idolatry affect the dating relationship?

It only intensifies the tremendous struggles that are already taking place between the man and the woman. We all have this tendency. Pastors see it a thousand times over – a husband who is neglecting his wife’s emotional needs who, in turn, is nagging and trying to control him. He then pulls away from her because of her desire to manipulate him. I call it the death spiral of a relationship. It is God’s curse on the sinful patterns in both their lives. The only solution to the conflict is for both of them to submit to Christ and fulfill His desires for them both within marriage.

Now idolatry puts this solution beyond them both because, instead of yielding to Christ and living for His glory, the idolater says to the other party, “Hey, you have to serve my god!” Now let’s say a man worships prestige. How will this play out in the relationship? Well, the man is going to do whatever it takes to get the woman to follow his god. He will pressure her, cajole her, even threaten her so that she will follow his desires. She is going to have to act and look a certain way in public. Why? To serve his idol, of course.

Again, what happens if the woman worships the idol of pleasure? Well, she is going to insist that he has to make more money to keep her happy. She needs amusements, better clothes, and more expensive holidays to feel fulfilled. And this spells trouble down the road...

What are you going to say to your two sons about whom to date?

When Sharon and I were doing the book, we did a chapter on attraction from Proverbs. And you know what we discovered? Men are attracted by a woman’s beauty and sensual appeal. But a man needs to be wise and realise that marriage is more than having an outwardly beautiful woman to whom he can make love. The character of the woman is the chief thing. She should have the inner beauty of godliness. So, she needs to be a growing Christian who manifests many of the biblical virtues such as kindness and generosity. Proverbs talks about these qualities a lot. Watch out for the sharp-tongued woman, right?

What else would you suggest?

I would tell him to check out whether she works hard and has a heart for ministry. Does she have a well-controlled tongue? Does she carry herself well – is she a noble woman? If she is physically beautiful, that’s fine. I have to tell you, though, that American women who are beauty queens are often monsters because they have been treated like queens their whole lives. So being attracted to one as a future spouse could have a serious downside.

Christian men often get themselves into trouble when looking for a wife because they approach the issue the wrong way. They say, “Here are the women that I am most attracted to phys-



CHRISTIAN MEN OFTEN GET THEMSELVES INTO TROUBLE WHEN LOOKING FOR A WIFE BECAUSE THEY APPROACH THE ISSUE THE WRONG WAY.

ically”, and then they start to look for Christian virtues. I say reverse that. Take the pool of women who have the most Christian virtues, and then ask, “Of these women, which one am I most attracted to?” I am not denying the physical chemistry; I’m just saying let’s get everything in the right order. Does she have integrity? Is she godly? Is she industrious? Is she kind? Does she relate well to people? Do you trust her to raise your children well? Will she handle your finances faithfully? Then I’d tell my son, “You’d better prioritise these things. Look for the group of women who are the most virtuous and then ask out the prettiest one.”

What are you going to say to your daughters?

I will tell them that this man’s spiritual leadership is going to be the key thing in their family life so they need to know about his life and doctrine. Is he a committed, doctrinally sound Christian? Is he growing in the Lord? Or is he someone who makes a profession

of faith, goes to a worldly mega-church, and whose life shows no real difference from unbelievers?

If they say, “But Dad, he’s a Christian”, I’ll say, “Unless he is showing real biblical commitment and is growing in Christ-likeness, don’t marry him!” I regularly say to the women in our church, “Don’t date someone who is not doctrinally sound. If you date someone who doesn’t believe in God’s sovereignty and our absolute need for grace, that’s going to affect the way you raise your family.” I mean that. It is also important to make sure that the man you date has biblical virtues like self-control, kindness and industry. The problem is that women are usually attracted to confident men. That’s fine, but let’s start with men who are committed Christians, who are doctrinally sound and who manifest the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Once you have established that he is a man with all these characteristics, then you can pick the most handsome or confident one among them.

I would tell my girls that the reason why they need to choose a godly man is that he is the husband to whom they will have to submit. If they marry a man who is an inconsistent Christian (even though I have cautioned them about this), they need to understand that after they are married I am going to tell them that they need to submit to him. There are good Christian women who make this mistake all the time. They are so keen to get married that they start dating a guy who has made a false profession of faith or is an immature Christian. Then when they are married they come to me and complain. And I have to say to them, “Now you need to submit to your husband.” Remember, this man is going to be the father of your children. You need to be able to rely on him to provide for you. Whatever you do, don’t marry some guy who is happy-go-lucky and a fun person who is not moving forward and doesn’t have the capacity for hard work. ap

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Father to son

TEN THINGS I'D LIKE MY SON TO KNOW BEFORE HE STARTS DATING.

Mark Powell

The book of Proverbs begins with a father giving practical advice to his son about what he wants him to know about life and love. This is profoundly important since fathers, in particular, are told in Scripture to bring their children up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (Col. 3:21; Eph. 6:4).

When it comes to the subject of relating to girls and women, what should I be encouraging my sons to do? Well, in this "open letter" to my son (if it were to my daughter it would be similar, but not exactly the same), I would like to suggest the following words of advice:

1. It's worth the wait! There's no doubt about it, physical intimacy is one of the Lord's choicest gifts (outside of salvation of course). However, the Scriptures constantly remind us that the best way to enjoy intimacy is to experience it strictly within the covenant framework of marriage. This is the main point of Solomon's Song of Songs – since the refrains "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" form a thematic backbone to the entire book (i.e. Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4).

2. There is always a fresh start with God. One of the great dangers when it comes to this particular topic is that we can feel defeated by the tragedy of our own sin. While I don't want to detract from my exhortation for him to be morally pure and holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16), I want him to recognise that some of the Lord's greatest servants have fallen into sexual temptation (eg, David and Bathsheba). But that is not the end of the story. There is always the possibility of forgiveness and restoration following true and heartfelt repentance (Psalm 51; 1 Tim. 1:15).

3. Get off the couch and go to war. I believe that David got into trouble long before he saw Bathsheba bathing upon her roof. David erred when he stopped



**RESISTING SEXUAL
TEMPTATION REQUIRES
ONLY ONE BASIC RESPONSE
– TO RUN AWAY.
THIS MIGHT SEEM SIMPLE,
BUT IT TAKES ENORMOUS
COURAGE AND STRENGTH.**

doing the good works he was supposed to be doing. The writer of 2 Samuel says, "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men... But David remained in Jerusalem" (11:1). That is, when real leaders were fighting the Lord's battles, God's man had stayed at home and was sitting around on his couch (2 Sam. 11:2). This inactivity made him all the more susceptible to falling into sin. As a Christian friend once said to me, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop."

4. Be good at running away. Resisting sexual temptation requires only one basic response – to run away. Joseph's example in Genesis 37 and Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 6:18 come down to the same thing: "Flee!" While this might seem quite simple, it actually takes an enormous amount of courage and strength. Plus, it's what the Lord God Almighty says is our only course of action!

5. God's will for you is... to be HOLY. One of the things that really tripped me up when I was single was the question of which particular person the Lord wanted me to marry. I hate to think how many hours I wasted fretting over this partic-

ular question. Then one day I came across 1 Thessalonians 4:3 and I realised that the Lord was more concerned with *how* I was relating to members of the opposite sex than necessarily *who* I should spend the rest of my life with.

Don't get me wrong. Choosing a spouse is the most important decision you'll ever make, apart from placing your trust in Jesus. But what we find here is one of the few places in the Bible where the specific expression "God's will" is used. The text tells us that God is supremely concerned that our behaviour with members of the opposite sex is above and beyond reproach. We need to be holy and treat a woman with respect and honour.

6. Go to confession. As Protestants, confessing our sins to a priest is something that we rightly avoid. However, I wonder whether we have inadvertently thrown the proverbial baby out with the bath water. For James 5:16 is very clear that if we're struggling with sin then we should confide in another Christian who is walking closely with the Lord. We should share our struggles with him and make ourselves accountable. It's a humbling thing to do, but it's the means through which James says the Lord will bring healing, which I understand to be spiritual as well as physical.

7. You can't fool God. There are two things in particular that I want to say to my son here. First, God knows everything about us – even what is going on in the recesses of our own hearts. I want him to know that if he believes that he can secretly cherish lust in his heart towards a woman, then he shouldn't expect the Lord to listen to any of his prayers (Psalm 66:18). Second, he needs to realise that just because the Lord is merciful and forgiving it doesn't mean that He won't chastise us when we stray. In fact, the exact opposite is the case! We're told in Hebrews 12:4-13, "The Lord disciplines those He loves". Elsewhere, the apostle Paul reminds us

that while there is always forgiveness for sexual sin, we should not presume that we won't experience unpleasant and painful consequences if we break God's commandments in this area (1 Thess. 4:3-8; Heb. 13:4 as well as 2 Sam. 12:13-14).

8. Make a covenant with your eyes. While Job raised this particular point almost as an aside (Job 31:1), it's a vital precaution in the battle that every man faces against sin. The Lord Jesus went even further and said that we should cut off whatever part of our body leads us into sin (Mt. 5:27-30). Obviously, the problem is ultimately not with the body part itself but arises from our hearts and the environment around us. Internet pornography is certainly a challenge these days, and if my son is to be pure he needs to police his use of the internet and take every precaution not to succumb to this particular vice, even if it means that he locates his computer in a common area of the house or stops using the internet entirely.

9. It could happen to him. One of the dangers of being raised in a strong Christian family is that it is very easy to develop a self-righteous attitude towards those who fall into sin. However, what I want my son to realise is that falling into sexual sin, or any sin for that matter, can happen to us all. So, as Paul says, "...if you think you are standing firm, be careful lest you fall!" The book of Proverbs also tells us that

pride comes before a fall and a haughty spirit before destruction (Prov. 16:18). Therefore I want my son to always appreciate the truth "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

10. When you are tempted, take God's "exit". The Bible says that temptation is not so much a matter of "if"; it's



RATHER THAN BEING A LEGALISTIC 10-POINT PLAN, I WANT TO RELATE MY CONCERNS TO HIM IN THE CONTEXT OF A RELATIONSHIP BASED ON LOVE AND GRACE.

more a question of "when". The thing that I want my son to remember, though, is that God will always provide a way out when he experiences temptation. 1 Corinthians 10:13 is helpful in this regard. It says that he will only be tempted by things everyone else has been tempted by before – he's not

unique – and that God in His sovereign providence always provides of means of escape if he will but look for it and take it.

Obviously, there is much more that I would like to tell him before he goes out on his first date. But I believe that these 10 points are a good foundation upon which to build a discussion that prepares him for the spiritual challenges that he will face.

What's more, rather than being a legalistic 10-point plan, I want to relate my concerns to him in the context of a relationship based on love and grace. It is precisely because my son is forgiven and restored through Jesus Christ that I want him to live this particular way; it's not as though he has to do these things to make himself acceptable to God or even me. As the Lord Jesus does so perfectly, I want my son to gain encouragement and strength from the fact that he should live this way out of *grateful response* to what has first been done for us. It is only when we see our lives in the light of the cross that we can have the freedom to live in the way we were originally designed. ^{ap}



Rev. Mark Powell serves as one of the ministers of Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, Burwood, Sydney.

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To my daughters

THE DISTILLATION OF A LIFETIME'S WISDOM ON LIVING AND LOVING.

Sheryl Sarkoezy

My lovely girls! In no time at all, it seems, you have grown into young women. It brings me so much joy to know that you have welcomed Jesus into your life; that you love Him and want to live in obedience to Him.

As Christians we are marked by the way we love and care for one another: it is the same way Jesus loved us. This way of living is distinctly different from the rest of the world. In all our relationships His Spirit works in us to help us be obedient to God and to minister to one another, building each other up in our walk with Christ. This other-centredness is the starting point for what I want to say to you about dating.

Dating is wonderful. It's exciting and special to be spending time with someone you are attracted to, getting to know them better and falling in love. God made men and women to live in relationship with Him and also with each other, and marriage is part of His plan for the lives of most of His people. In our culture dating is seen as anything from a casual fling to the search for Mr Right, but I'm convinced that Christians ought to regard it as part of the journey to marriage. What the Bible says about marriage, then, will help you understand



LOOK FOR A MAN WHO SHARES YOUR HEART FOR GOD, BECAUSE ONE DAY HE MIGHT SHARE YOUR HEART WITH GOD.

what God expects of you in a dating relationship.

First, as a Christian woman, you should date a Christian man: a man who trusts and follows Jesus, who is prayerful and is developing a sound knowledge of the Bible, and who regularly serves others in his church. Look for a man who shares your heart *for* God, because one day he might share your heart *with* God.

When you begin regularly spending time with him you can discover more about his character. Galatians 5:16-26 is the finest list of character traits I know against which to compare the man who

might become your husband. Ask yourself what sort of fruit he bears – the fruit of a sinful nature, or the fruit of the Spirit – and let that help you decide whether you should continue dating him.

Some people talk about the importance of “compatibility” in dating and marriage, and how they think it's essential to find someone who likes the same things as you. Remember that what really matters is a shared faith in Jesus, a desire to obey God, and a willingness to help each other grow as Christians. After that, it's a matter of wisdom as to whether you enjoy the same sport or movies or music. It might be that the likes and dislikes become quite unimportant in your relationship!

My advice is that you don't begin a dating relationship unless you are interested in it leading to marriage. Of course, not every relationship will lead to marriage. But you should expect that it might, as you grow closer in your commitment to each other and as your lives become more entwined. So wait until you are, in age and character, mature enough to marry before you start dating. And when you have reached that point in your life, remember that to begin a relationship

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with no real intention of growing in commitment – what we call, “playing the field” – is heartless and doesn’t demonstrate the love that God wants you to show toward a Christian brother (for that is what he is until he becomes your husband).

For now, God has placed you in the care of your father. When you marry, that responsibility will be passed to your husband. You can show your respect of this by seeking your father’s consent and blessing before you begin dating, and allowing him to meet the man and get to know him.

Once you are dating and growing in commitment to this man, remember the Bible is very clear on the place of physical intimacy between men and women: it belongs in a marriage relationship. This is so out-of-step with the way the world views physical relationships between men and women; in our society, not only is sex outside of marriage permitted, it is often encouraged. You know this from what you see in the media every day. It will be difficult to resist the pressure of our culture in this area of your life. This is another reason why you should date a Christian man – he will have a shared

understanding of God’s purpose for marriage, and the blessing of physical intimacy within it, and you will be able to help each other act in a godly way.



THINK ABOUT WHO WILL BE ATTRACTED BY THE CLOTHES YOU WEAR AND THE WAY YOU BEHAVE – AND MAKE SURE IT’S THE RIGHT SORT OF MAN!

Steer clear of tempting situations when you are with a man, whether you are in a relationship or not. The obvious thing here is to avoid being alone together in secluded places, but also be aware of how the hormonal changes in your body each month affect the way you respond to a man’s touch. Find a trusted,

Christian, female confidante to whom you can be accountable about the level of physical contact you have with your boyfriend.

Dress and speak and act modestly. Think about who will be attracted by the clothes you wear and the way you behave – and make sure it’s the right sort of man! This is important both when you are dating and when you are not, and particularly if you are out on your own, or at night, or somewhere unfamiliar. If you are dating, take care not to tempt your Christian brother to sin because of the way you dress or act. And, by the way, expect him to show the same respect and concern for you.

Finally, show how beautiful you are by your speech and behaviour. Mirror the love of God to all those around you, building them up in the Lord. Trust in Him to work out his good purposes for your life in *all* things. I know He will! ^{ap}



Sheryl Sarkoezy serves on the staff at a Christian school in Sydney’s West and is a part-time student at the Presbyterian Theological Centre, Sydney.

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letters

A GOOD MEAL

Thank you for your excellent magazine. It continues to feed me and connect me to a larger Presbyterian community. I particularly appreciated the issue on death and beyond, informative and empathic.

I would like to encourage all regular subscribers to give gift or new subscriptions to fellow believers while the special discount offer is still available. It's the kind of gift that truly builds up the brethren. Once again, thank you for your work.

*Mrs Dale Sypott,
Mudgeeraba, Qld*

INADEQUATE FARE

Generally I find *AP* informative and helpful, but I was underwhelmed by the approach taken in the articles under the banner X-ianity (September). Specifically I refer to the interview with Michael Horton, and the article by Peter Jones.

In the debate over the nature of the gospel message and the individual (vs) communal understanding of salvation, it would be helpful to read an affirmative and educative dissertation on the stance of the Presbyterian Church, a more balanced critique of the various theological positions, or an exhortation to deeper examination of the truths of the Gospel, perhaps through a guided study of the whole Gospel message of reconciliation.

Instead I was offered some writings of mediocre academic and journalistic standard (e.g lack of contrast and use of pejorative language) that roundly criticised and even mildly ridiculed a particular stream of evangelical belief and practice and certain practitioners.

The tone of the articles and the lack of an articulated and evidenced alternative position implies that the church endorses the use of unclear (possibly deceptive?) language devices and personal attacks against beliefs and people with whom it disagrees, including fellow evangelical believers on a different mission. It also implies that the theological position of the Presbyterian Church is the polar opposite of the position that is criticised – in other words, all focus on the “good news” of individual salvation, and not the “good news” of God’s kingdom and what that means for the poor and the oppressed.

I do not see how these articles assist the readership to a deeper understanding of the whole gospel, and would argue that they make an inelegant contribution to further polarise an already divisive discussion.

*Leon Ankersmit,
Maclean, NSW*

DEATHLESS PROSE

The letter from Spencer Maddrell (*AP*, October) seems to imply that God created a world which, by its very nature, was “death-less”. He apparently believes that death could not exist in the original creation of Genesis 1 because God had declared it to be “very good” (Gen. 1:31). While the Bible is clear that death for *mankind* was a result of sin (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23) it is not so clear that the same is true for the animals. The psalmist praises the goodness of God to whom the lions look for their prey (Ps. 104:21). What is meant by “very good” is not something we should read into the Bible but out of it, and it would surely include the notion of “exactly as God intended”. It does not necessarily imply the absence of animal death. It is worth noting that the world which God declared to be “very good” contained the serpent which was the instigator of Adam’s fall into sin.

Deathlessness was also not part of

man’s original nature but was a gift from God and was appropriated by eating from the tree of life (Gen. 2:9, 17). When Adam sinned God did not kill him there and then but banished Adam and Eve from the garden so they might not “take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (Gen. 3:22). Whether animals had access to the fruit from the tree of life we simply do not know.

We need to be careful that a desire to counteract the real dangers of evolutionary naturalism does not lead us to distort Scripture to serve our own purposes. Neither I nor those with whom I might disagree are immune from this tendency.

*Colin Gauld,
Kiama Downs, NSW*

EVOLUTIONISTS’ NON-GOSPEL

John Calvin said of Genesis 1, “Hence the folly of those is refuted who imagine that unformed matter existed from eternity”. Calvin is here expressly denying any such concept as evolution, for the eternity of matter is inextricably tied to evolution.

Theistic evolution is a contradiction in terms. One is things by design, the other is things by chance. It is either one or the other and foolishness to combine the concepts.

I think Calvin would say, “John Buchanan twists my words to his own advantage.”

Nevertheless neither Calvin, Warfield, Shedd, Hodge and Orr or Alan Harman are gods and Calvin would agree. Their word is nothing if it contradicts God’s. The fall cannot be accounted for in theistic evolution? Hence sin cannot be. If there is no accounting for sin, there is no accounting for a Saviour. Theistic evolutionists therefore bring another gospel. If an angel from heaven preaches another gospel let him be accursed (Gal. 1:8).

The Presbyterian Church is doing well in looking again at Calvin but the others could be thrown on the refuse heap with a serious attempt also made to improve Hebrew scholarship in the Australian Presbyterian Churches.

The leadership of the church has repented in the past and revival has come. They need to repent of the blasphemy of liberalism and evolution. They are one and the same, both denying the veracity of God’s Word.

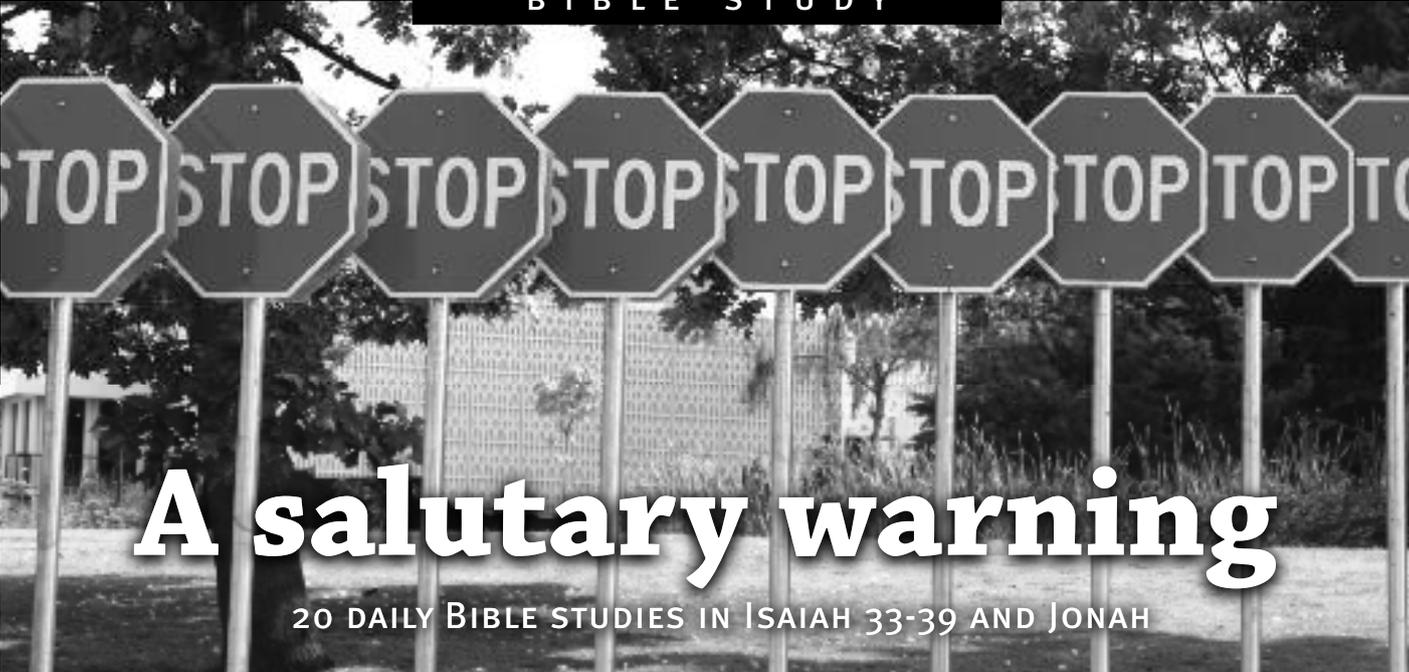
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A salutary warning

20 DAILY BIBLE STUDIES IN ISAIAH 33-39 AND JONAH

In spite of our strong Christian heritage, our society continues to reject God's ways which are so clearly revealed in His Word, the Bible. We reject each of the Ten Commandments in some way by the lifestyle we adopt; and in some cases we even bring pressure to bear to legalise our actions. Abortion as a rejection of the Sixth Commandment is a case in point. And we totally ignore the implications of the Seventh Commandment when we make decisions about sexual relationships. Across the whole board, from dating to marriage and ongoing faithfulness, we too easily allow the humanistic thinking of the world around us – bombarding us on a daily basis through newspapers, magazines, films, television, the internet, etc – to mould, and excuse, our thinking.

These chapters in Isaiah are a salutary warning against a society flying in the face of God's revealed will. They contain not only warnings to God's chosen people Judah/Israel, but also to the surrounding nations which are ultimately answerable to the one true God of creation who has revealed Himself in the Scriptures. In addition, they give comfort and encouragement to those who continue to walk in God's ways in the face of external opposition and ridicule. May they encourage us today.

The message of Jonah is a reminder that there is no blessing in disobedience to God's will (and the same principle applies to our romantic relationships!), and a reassurance of the extent of His forgiving love offering us a second chance – whether we have gone the way of Jonah himself, or of Nineveh.



Bruce Christian is a former Moderator-General of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

DAY 1

A sure foundation for our times

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 33:1-6

THE POINT Chapters 36 and 37 deal quite specifically with God's judgement on Sennacherib, King of Assyria, when he arrogantly attacked Jerusalem during Hezekiah's reign in Judah. Perhaps Isaiah has this particular piece of history in mind when he writes chapters 33-35; but his language points rather to God's reminding His people that He is the Lord of all nations, and that the outworking of all history is in His hands. In fact, it also shows his looking beyond any specific event to the final Judgement Day when He will wind up human history and call all nations and men to give account before His own anointed, risen King, Jesus (cf Acts 17:31). How much better it is to fly to Him now for salvation!

THE PARTICULARS

- It often seems that the wicked can continue in their wickedness unchecked; but God declares that this will eventually end and they will reap what His justice demands (1, 3-4; cf Ps. 37).
- When things are out of hand we should look (and cry out!) to our gracious, just and righteous God alone to help us (2, 5).
- "The fear of the LORD" is the key by which we gain access to the vast treasury of the salvation and wisdom we need for life (6).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Read verse 6 in the light of Colossians 2:2-3. Where alone does "the fear of the Lord" start for us? Are we telling people this?

DAY 2

A day of reckoning

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 33:7-13

THE POINT Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome... Man has made many attempts to set up kingdoms on earth that dismiss God's rightful rule and replace it with his own greatness and autonomy. Even in our own day, in spite of the obvious historical evidence of God's hand at work in the Christian heritage of our nation, we see secular humanism, and its offspring, godless materialism, taking over our whole culture to an alarming extent. Isaiah saw God's Church of his day facing the same forces at work, not just from the pressure of the surrounding nations, but also from the eroding effects of its own sinfulness. The LORD must intervene!

THE PARTICULARS

- When God comes in judgement, applying the declared principles of His justice and righteousness, all Man's boasted achievements of courage (7a), tolerance (7b), trade/commerce treaties (8), yes, even environment protection policies (9!), will count for nought. Established contracts and understandings will be as durable as chaff or straw before a bushfire – ignited from within (10-12)!
- Despite the lengths to which Man goes to eliminate God from his plans, all men and nations, far and near, will eventually have no choice but to recognise God's sovereign power (13).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is God central to the planning of every part of your life?

DAY 3

The sinners in Zion

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 33:14-24

THE POINT A problem that has plagued the people of God throughout all ages – Israel, the Jews, the Church – is complacency, being "at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1). Knowing our God as a forgiving God can lead to a false sense of security, and a trivialising of what it will be like when God's anger against sin is demonstrated in Judgement. Perhaps we should reflect more often on Jesus' warnings in Matthew 7:13-29 and 24:15-22! Yes, the inhabitants of "Zion" will be safe, but only those who are walking humbly and honestly in the Lord's ways, sharing generously with the poor.

expressed clearly in consistent godly living (14-16; cf Psalm 15; James 2).

- When God establishes His King in Zion all the pretenders, the traffickers of confusion and terror, will be removed (17-24).
- The becalmed boat in vs 23 could be either Judah herself – who would, by God's grace, yet recover; or it could be a threatening nation like Sennacherib's Assyria which was rendered powerless by the LORD's miraculous intervention, thus becoming easy prey to plundering even by crippled Judah (cf 2 Kings 19:35).

THE PARTICULARS

- Our trust in God leads to great blessing but it must be

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How does Jesus fulfil the claims/promises of verses 22 and 24?

DAY 4

Time to listen; the Lord is angry

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 34:1-8

THE POINT God makes the rules; He judges, our duty is but to listen and do what He requires, to let Him be God! (cf Ecc. 5:1-2)

THE PARTICULARS

- Isaiah confronts us with a side of God's character that modern Man has real trouble coming to grips with. The Lord is angry with the endemic sinfulness of Mankind – that is why He sent His own dear, beloved Son to die on a cruel cross to absorb this anger for us. All who refuse to take refuge in the shelter of this gracious provision must bear its full impact themselves (1-3).
- Individual expressions of God's wrathful judgement at various times and places in history are but warning shots fore-

shadowing the final Judgement Day when Jesus returns and the whole cosmos is thoroughly purged of the effects of Man's sin. One such expression was the judgement on Edom for taking advantage of the Babylonian invasion to attack the Judean remnant (4-5).

- "Zion's cause" is the covenant of grace the LORD had established with His people through the shedding of blood, first the blood of animals, and then the only acceptable, once-for-all Sacrifice to which they ultimately pointed. If Man persists in refusing to acknowledge all this, God will take up the sword Himself (6-8).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are we concerned about warning people of God's Judgement?

DAY 5

Second cousins... once removed...!

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 34:9-17

THE POINT The prophesied judgement on Edom now becomes more specific. The Edomites were Esau's descendants, and so were Israel's cousins. Two things made them the particular targets of God's judgement: "genetically" they'd despised the covenant (cf Genesis 25:29-34; Hebrews 12:16-17); historically they had not only failed to assist the Israelites during their time of wandering in the wilderness (Numbers 20:14-21), but would again act ruthlessly as noted yesterday.

It was now time for God to act justly on behalf of His covenant people – Edom's sin must be punished.

THE PARTICULARS

- Edom's destruction would be like that of Sodom and

Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24-29), perhaps indicating that there were other sins as well, and it would be final (9-10; cf Heb. 12:17).

- The picture Isaiah paints of the fate awaiting Edom is one of absolute abandonment and chaos. When God withdraws His restraining grace and leaves Man to reap the fruits of his own humanistic ideas, chaos inevitably follows (cf Romans 1:18ff). The wildlife described as taking over the cities and countryside are all feral, symbolising desolation – life without God (11-17).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Were Esau and his descendants guilty of committing the "unforgivable sin" of Matthew 12:31-32, despising the Spirit's voice?

DAY 6

Special Covenant... once restored!

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 35:1-7

THE POINT Just as the blessing of Jacob contrasted sharply with the cursing of Esau, so the portion of Israel/Judah would contrast with the fate of Edom. God is faithful and just and He will vindicate His chosen people. When we are going through testing times His covenant promises should give us strength and courage (4), and in the light of this certainty we should reassure those whose faith might be weak (3; cf Hebrews 12:12). Isaiah 35 has been a great source of encouragement to God's Church in every age.

THE PARTICULARS

- Contrasting landscapes provide an ideal way of symbolising spiritual health. God's creation of the world to suit Man was

perfect (cf Genesis 1:31); it was only Man's sin and rebellion that messed it all up. We look forward to the "New Creation" when Christ will "make all things new" (Revelation 21:1-7) (1-2, 6-7).

- Hezekiah would have drawn great encouragement from these words of Isaiah, experiencing in his own healing the fulfilment of the truth of what God was promising (3-4; cf 2 Kings 20:1-6).
- The promises are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus who Himself refers to verses 5-6 to reassure John in prison (Matthew 11:4-5).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you taking hold of God's covenant promises today?

DAY 7

...and a highway will be there

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 35:8-10

THE POINT In a world in disarray as a result of Man's rebellion against his Creator, we often struggle with the outworking of God's providence in our lives. Life is like a maze and we feel hemmed in, confused and frustrated, not sure of which path to follow as we seek, not only to know God's will, but to do it. In God's "new creation" the road will be a well-defined and clearly sign-posted "highway", reserved for those who are committed to obeying God's Word, and to living a life fully devoted to Him. At present we wrestle with the tension between the "old world" in which we live and the "new creation" to which we belong.

THE PARTICULARS

- "Holy" means totally "separated" (to God); a "Way of

Holiness" is a lifestyle set apart uniquely and fully for God's purposes (8).

- The Bible equates wickedness with foolishness (8; Psalm 14:1).
- The path to God is not open to those who blatantly reject (or even just fail to embrace) the God of Creation who has revealed Himself in Jesus and in His written Word (8, 9b; cf John 14:6).
- In the "new creation" Satan (the lion; cf 1 Peter 5:8-11) is a defeated foe – we are fully protected from his vicious attacks (9).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you ransomed and rejoicing on the highway to heaven (10)?

DAY 8

Name-calling does hurt

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 36:1-10

THE POINT The next 4 chapters of Isaiah (36-39) are an almost verbatim parallel to 2 Kings 18:13, 17 – 20:19, and a summarised account is recorded in 2 Chronicles 32. The events are a very significant part of Judah's history and are captured so graphically in Lord Byron's epic 1815 poem, "The Destruction of Sennacherib". As He did at the Red Sea, the Jordan, Jericho, etc, God intervenes miraculously yet again on behalf of His covenant people, and by including this narrative in his prophecy at this point Isaiah provides an excellent introduction to the powerful message of God's future hope for His covenant people in chapters 40-66.

THE PARTICULARS

- Sennacherib certainly had runs on the board to justify his open intimidation of Hezekiah; just from a human point of view the King of Judah was in no position to defy his opponent's terms.
- Assyria tried to call Judah's bluff concerning any thought of forming an alliance with their other enemy, Egypt (4-6, 8-9).
- Sennacherib's ultimate insult to Judah was to deride the special sacred name, the LORD, by which their own covenant God had revealed Himself (7, 10; cf Ex. 3:14, 20:7). God would soon act to defend His name, but for now it was hard for Hezekiah.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How do you cope with attacks on your beliefs and witness?

DAY 9

... and a time to be silent...

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 36:11-22

THE POINT There is little doubt that from a human point of view Judah stood no chance against the mighty Assyrian war machine. The field commander's confident boasting was well founded. But in war, one can never be sure, so Sennacherib's men thought a bit of sledging would not go astray! Hezekiah's three high-ranking officials were also well aware of the damage this would do to the already low morale of the people besieged inside Jerusalem.

THE PARTICULARS

• Aramaic is a Semitic language not vastly different from Hebrew (Daniel 2-6 was written in Aramaic and the Jews of Jesus' day spoke it), but it was a different enough dialect for

the anxious Judeans on the Jerusalem wall not to understand it fully (11).

- King Hezekiah was God's representative among the people; to doubt his word was to doubt God. Satan has been active in encouraging people to doubt God's Word and offering them a more sensually attractive option ever since Genesis 3:1 (12-20)!
- "Cistern" = "well"; the option at the end of 16 is not the same as the option at the end of 12 – but you can't be sure with Satan!
- At times, Church history can be quite discouraging (18-20)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Should our nation be silent and repentant before God? (21-22)

DAY 10

Do not be afraid...

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 37:1-13

THE POINT Isaiah's response to Hezekiah's desperate plea here contributes to the definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1-2. He asked the King to believe something that was humanly impossible, that flew in the face of all the evidence.

Sennacherib was moving through the whole region like a juggernaut so his conquest of Jerusalem seemed inevitable. In situations like this God says to us, "Do not be afraid"; or in the words of the psalmist (46:10), "Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." We, too, need this sort of faith!

THE PARTICULARS

• Hezekiah's heart was in the right place; his natural reaction

to devastating news was to turn to his God as an act of faith and trust, in an attitude of humility and repentance, and with a real desire for the honour of God's holy name to be upheld (1-4).

- For us, the equivalent of Hezekiah sending his helpers to Isaiah is to open the Scriptures and to take hold of the promises God has given us there, and to involve our friends in this process (2).
- Our God is in full control of all the events of human history; He can direct circumstances to achieve His purposes. It seems that, despite sensing this, Sennacherib still tried to "talk big" (5-13).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you like Hezekiah or Sennacherib in the face of difficulty?

DAY 11

Hezekiah's humble prayer

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 37:14-20

THE POINT There is something quite powerful and symbolic in Hezekiah's spreading out Sennacherib's actual letter before the LORD in the temple. This wasn't just a formality, a ritual, like our prayer so often is; it was a deliberate and specific request placed before a God with whom he had a personal, intimate relationship, a God who not only cared about the welfare of His people and His cause, but who was able to act with authority and power to deal effectively with the request.

Hezekiah was praying in the bold, persistent manner encouraged by Jesus in Luke 11:5-13.

THE PARTICULARS

• Hezekiah's prayer consisted of:

- recognising God's person: omnipotent; the LORD who has a covenant relationship with His people Israel centred on the ark of the covenant with its mercy seat between the cherubim; the absolute ruler of the world; creator of the universe (16);
- accepting the reality of their dire predicament, and asking God to identify with them in their desperate situation (17-19a);
- acknowledging that the battle is ultimately a spiritual one, and therefore that Assyria's man-made gods are useless (19b);
- asking specifically for God to show His power to save (20).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do you show Hezekiah's boldness when you pray?

DAY 12

Because you have prayed...

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 37:21-29

THE POINT Here we have a good example of how the Bible holds in tension two important truths: God is absolute sovereign over all that happens in history; and He answers prayer! Nothing can ever divert Him from His eternal purposes, "ordained from long ago" (26), yet in some unfathomable way His action on Hezekiah's behalf, as much as His revealing of it to the king, constitute His merciful specific response to the desperate cry for help (21).

THE PARTICULARS

• God loves and protects His covenant people, His virgin daughter, His Bride, His Church, and it is the honour of His holy name that is at stake when she is threatened; He will act

for her (22-23).

- The God who created all that is, and who has revealed Himself in Scripture, is also the ruler of His world, and He will brook no pretender to His throne, intervening decisively to punish proud, arrogant men who insult and blaspheme His name by claiming to have become great by their own power and might. They must realise that even their own conquests are His work (24-27).
- God will bring just judgement on all who oppose Him (28-29).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- The sceptic's question, "If God is sovereign, why pray?" is best answered with the point: "If God is not sovereign, why pray?"

DAY 13

185,000 woke up dead

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 37:30-38

THE POINT This is one of the most moving accounts of God's supernatural intervention on behalf of His people in the Bible. They are in an impossible siege situation facing certain death by sudden attack or slow starvation, but either way there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Then in a few short verses Isaiah gives them a very optimistic view of their future, followed by a simple matter-of-fact statement of God's silent wiping out of the whole Assyrian army in one night – no gory details; the Hebrew text just says, "... and when they got up early in the morning, behold, all of them, dead corpses"! (36) Byron captures the pathos of this situation so beautifully in "The Destruction of Sennacherib".

THE PARTICULARS

- "This will be the (miraculous) sign for you, O Hezekiah" (30). God will act in such a way as to leave no doubt in the King's or anyone else's mind that it is He alone who will save His people and bless them. The desert will blossom spontaneously (cf 35:1-2, 7), just as the enemy forces will pass away without a fight.
- God's clear promise to David must hold good even if sometimes in history it is only hanging on through a surviving remnant.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Does the Church sometimes develop a "siege" mentality? Are you trusting Jesus today to keep His promise in Matthew 16:18?

DAY 14

Another miraculous sign

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 38:1-8

THE POINT The points of the last two days are now reinforced. Yes, the unchanging sovereign LORD does "change His mind" in response to the humble prayers of His people – it is how He loves to operate (cf Matthew 7:11)! And, yes, He does do miracles – He is God!

THE PARTICULARS

- Difficulties that threaten us are often a wake-up call from God, causing us to seek Him more earnestly. God used Isaiah to make sure Hezekiah got the right message concerning his illness (1)!
- Hezekiah's belief in God's sovereignty led him to plead more earnestly for healing, not settle for fatalistic resignation (2-3).

- Our faithful God is compassionate, and answers prayer (4-6).
- God does have absolute control over "laws" that "govern" the universe He has made; He is free to do whatever He wants with the stars and planets He set in place. To help us, they normally move in regular, predictable patterns, but it doesn't have to be so! God intervened temporarily as a sign for Hezekiah (7-8).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is it wrong to pray earnestly for healing of a terminal illness? With what attitude are we to do this? (cf Mark 14:35-36) Is it better to say: "I believe in the power of prayer", or to say: "I believe in the power of God, and therefore I pray"?

DAY 15

Are you a 'stranger' here?

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 38:9-22

THE POINT This diary entry of Hezekiah is a reflection on the meaning of life we can all identify with. We have a clearer view than he did of our heavenly hope, because we look back to Jesus' death and resurrection; yet somehow, like Hezekiah, especially when we are young, we seem to prefer an earthly tent to a heavenly mansion! The King had tasted the goodness of his God who had healed him miraculously. This whole experience had reminded him vividly of the temporary nature of this life, but it also made him appreciate it more, giving him greater resolve to use all his days to praise the LORD and tell of His faithfulness to others.

THE PARTICULARS

- There is nothing more powerful than a near-death experience

to focus the mind on what really matters in life (cf Matthew 6:33).

- Hezekiah realised the transitory nature of his earthly life (12); and this also showed him how dependent he was on God (13ff).
- Hezekiah's sole confidence was in the LORD who had so graciously given him another tangible sign of His goodness (20-22).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you more like Paul (cf 2 Corinthians 5:1-10) or Hezekiah in your thinking? Do you "nightly pitch [your] moving tent a day's march nearer home" ('Forever with the Lord' – J. Montgomery)?

DAY 16

Pride comes before a fall

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 39:1-8

THE POINT Sometimes, perhaps often, we fail to make wise use of a blessing God gives us. In the weakness of his flesh, Hezekiah used the extra fifteen years God had so graciously given him (38:5) to do something stupid – he "showed off" his treasures to his potential enemies! Sadly, it would be more accurate to say he showed off the LORD's treasures to those outside the covenant of grace.

THE PARTICULARS

- Hezekiah, flattered by the attention of Babylon's little known king who reigned for less than 2 years, and looking for support against the ever-present threat of Assyria, sought refuge in a

human alliance instead of trusting the LORD. Isaiah had to warn him about the consequences of such lack of trust, just as he had had to do in the case of his father, Ahaz, in Chapter 7.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Have you ever thought (or perhaps even experienced!) that God withholds something we earnestly seek in prayer because He knows the mess we will make of it? Can you identify with the poem: "He loves, He cares, He knows; His love, though never dim, can only give the best to those who leave the choice with Him."?
- Are you always careful in your stewardship of God's gifts?
- What is wrong with Hezekiah's reply to Isaiah in verse 8?

DAY 17

Down in the mouth?

THE PASSAGE

JONAH 1:1-17

THE POINT Jonah appeared on the stage of history soon after the death of Elisha and during Jeroboam II's 40-year reign in Judah in the middle of the 8th Century BC (cf 2 Kings 14:25). Jonah differs from the other 11 Minor Prophets in that it is the story of the prophet's ministry rather than the setting forth of his message – we learn from his life rather than his words. The historicity of the details of this story is affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 12:39-41. The main point of the story is made in this 1st chapter: God had a job for Jonah to do; Jonah ran away from doing it; God used supernatural means to deal with his disobedience, and at the same time rescued him from his sinful self. He is a great God!

THE PARTICULARS

- Jonah's taking off in the opposite direction was as clear and deliberate as was God's instruction to him; there appears to be no breakdown in communication, just plain disobedience (1-3)!
- God has full control over everything He made, and He knows how to attract our undivided attention when He needs to (4-6).
- God rules; we go to great lengths to deal with the consequences of our sin, but in the end we are in His hands at His mercy (7-17).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you trying to deal with wilful disobedience in your own way? Is God using circumstances to challenge you about it?

DAY 18

Grasping grace

THE PASSAGE

JONAH 2:1-10

THE POINT Disappointments or disasters in life can either drive us further away from God or draw us closer to Him; we can either keep on shaking an angry fist in His face, or we can humble ourselves before Him with a contrite and submissive heart. Which of these two options we choose depends largely on how well we know Him on a day-to-day basis. Our commitment to regular times of Bible reading and prayer prepare us for getting it right when the waves break over us and seaweed wraps around our necks.

THE PARTICULARS

- In the depths of despair, at the receiving end of God's harsh but just punishment, Jonah can still cry out in prayer to "the

LORD", his merciful, covenant-making-and-covenant-keeping God (1-2).

- Jonah was in no doubt whatsoever that it was his sovereign LORD who had orchestrated the predicament he was in (3-4a).
- Jonah was also convinced that his holy God was his only hope for salvation, therefore his prayer was to Him alone (4b-10).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do you see God's sovereign hand at work in every part of your life, the adversities as well as the blessings? Do trials bring you closer to Him through repentance and trust, or do you "forfeit the grace that could be [yours]" by clinging to other things?

DAY 19

The sign of Jonah

THE PASSAGE

JONAH 3:1-10

THE POINT Jonah's "resurrection" was probably the most significant factor in bringing the Ninevites to genuine repentance before God. No doubt the news of Jonah's miraculous deliverance would have spread quickly, possibly reaching Nineveh before him, and his own appearance would have provided the necessary proof. In Matthew 12:40-41 we find Jesus making two applications of the the story of Jonah: that the duration of the prophet's "death" inside the fish prefigured the time interval between His own death and resurrection; and that, in the light of Nineveh's wholehearted repentance, Israel would stand condemned before her God because of her continued rejection of her risen Saviour. Paul

gives a similar warning to the whole world in Acts 17:31!

THE PARTICULARS

- Our God is the gracious, loving God of the "second chance" (1f).
- In spite of the vast size of Nineveh, and the length of time needed to run a one-man effective evangelistic campaign, the amazing spiritual revival marked by genuine, life-changing repentance, began almost immediately and spread throughout the city (3-9).
- The sovereign God of history does respond to human input (10).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you obeying Jesus' great commission (Matthew 28:18-20)?

DAY 20

Sobering reflections

THE PASSAGE

JONAH 4:1-11

THE POINT Two of Jesus' parables bear out the lesson of Jonah: the 2 sons in Matthew 21:28-32; and the 2 sons in Luke 15:11-32. In the first: Nineveh is like the son who refuses, then later responds, while Israel is like the son who says "yes" but does nothing. In the second: Nineveh is like the repentant prodigal, while Jonah resembles his 'nose-out-joint' older brother. Or perhaps Jonah is like the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35 who fails to show mercy to others when he himself has received greater mercy. But, as noted yesterday, the ultimate lesson is that the repentance and sparing of Nineveh provides a backdrop for God's final judgement on his own covenant people Israel in 722 BC, and

on Jerusalem, the temple worship and Judaism in 70 AD.

THE PARTICULARS

- Perhaps the main reason for Jonah's anger was not that God's sparing of Nineveh made a mockery of his message of judgement, but that he had been hoping the destruction of Nineveh would be a salutary warning to Israel about her complacency (1-3).
- Jonah had to learn that God cares greatly for every creature He has made, and especially mankind, made in His image and likeness; He never executes His judgements lightly (4-11; cf Ezekiel 33:11).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How concerned are you about the moral state of our society?



news

LEADERS OPPOSE BILL

NSW Moderator Chris Balzer represented **Moderator-General Robert Benn** at a meeting in Canberra late last month about the proposed **Freedom of Religion Act**. **Rev. David Palmer, convener of the PCV Church and Nation Committee** also attended, along with about a dozen heads of churches and both the **Federal Attorney General** and the **Shadow Attorney General**.

All the heads of churches present, as well as the **Australian Christian Lobby**, which organised the meeting, were unanimous in opposing the idea of a Charter (or Bill) of Rights, although the **Uniting Church of Australia** supports the idea.

However, the **National Human Rights Consultation** committee of inquiry chaired by **Fr Frank Brennan** has recommended one, and the Government is expected to act soon to get the matter out of the way well before next year's scheduled election.

Mr Benn urged Presbyterians to sign the online petition at www.makeastand.org.au and, for those in Labour electorates, tell the local member of their opposition to a Charter or Bill of Rights, or any back-door mechanism to achieve the same ends.

NON-BELIEVERS' CHRISTMAS

Encouraged by the success of their campaign which proclaimed "There's Probably No God, Now Stop Worrying" on the side of London buses, some of Britain's most prominent atheists have come together to publish a book released just in time for the upcoming Christmas season.

According to *The Guardian*, *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas* features contributions on the theme of Christmas and God by scientists **Richard Dawkins**, **Simon Singh** and **Adam Rutherford**, advice columnist **Claire Rayner**, pop star **Simon Le Bon** and illusionist **Derren Brown**.

Writer **Ariane Sherine**, who initiated the atheist bus campaign on a *Guardian* "Comment is Free" post, said she was daunted by the idea of writing a

book by herself, so enlisted the help of friends and supporters.

Assist

PRESAID TARGETS CHOSEN

Three causes have been chosen for the support of the **2009 PresAID Christmas Appeal**. They are in Myanmar, to provide food for the famished **Irrawaddy Delta** area; in India, for building hostel accommodation at **Darjeeling Hills Bible School**; and in Zambia, to complete building **Chesefu Theological College** with office and housing for lecturers.

"These are three very worthy causes which will have a long lasting effect on Kingdom building in our three sister churches, and the PresAID Committee is praying and believing for a generous response from our people all around Australia," said PresAID convener **Bob Thomas**.

HINN REFUSED ENTRY

Controversial healing evangelist **Benny Hinn** was denied entry into the UK last month for a special service. **Border Agency** officials turned him back after landing by private jet because he had failed to bring a valid sponsorship certificate from his church, required under rules introduced last November.

The Pentecostal preacher, who was due to perform at a three day event, flew on to Paris, and attempted – and failed – to regain entry.

MUSLIM 'INSULTED'

The Christian owners of a hotel in Liverpool, England, face a \$10,000 fine and criminal record after a Muslim guest complained she had been insulted. The unnamed woman accuses **Ben** and **Sharon Vogelenzang** of suggesting the **Prophet Mohammed** was a warlord and the hijab was a form of bondage during a conversation at the couple's hotel.

The Vogelenzangs have run **The Bounty Hotel** for six years and are members of the **Bootle Christian Fellowship**. They deny the allegations and insist that they were merely defending their faith when challenged about their Christian beliefs.

Police have charged the couple under the Public Order Act 1986, which makes it a crime to use "threatening, abusive or insulting words" that are "religiously aggravated". It was originally passed to

root out abusive behaviour on the streets.

Christian Today

CHRISTIAN RELEASED

An Egyptian Christian arrested in Cairo for handing out gospel leaflets and held in prison illegally for four days has been released. Copt **Abdel Kamel**, 61, was arrested on September 23 in Cairo for handing out copies of a Christian leaflet.

Police told Kamel it was "unlawful" to hand out religious information on public roads. When Kamel countered that Muslims commonly hand out Islamic literature, police told him it was "more unlawful" for Christians. Kamel also didn't have his identification card.

While in police custody, Kamel said, he remained in handcuffs for hours, was thrown to the ground, spat upon and threatened.

Compass Direct

WOMAN SHOT OVER BIBLES

Islamic militants in Somalia have killed a woman who led an underground Christian movement in the war-torn country.

A leader of Islamic extremist **al Shabaab** militia in Lower Juba identified only as **Sheikh Arbow** shot 46-year-old **Mariam Muhina Hussein** on September 28 after discovering she had six Bibles.

Arbow sent his wife to her house to confirm the presence of the Bibles. Next day he told her he was looking for "Christians who have defiled the Islamic religion." He shot her three times.

Compass Direct

TROUBLE IN EGYPT

State Security Investigations forces in Egypt arrested, abused and then extorted money from a Coptic Christian for rescuing his daughter from her Muslim husband, who was holding her against her will in Alexandria, according to sources in Egypt.

Security forces also arrested 10 people in Alexandria and tortured them in an attempt to find all those involved in the rescue. They pressured **Gamal Labib Hanna** until he agreed not only to hand his daughter back, but also to give the husband several thousand dollars.

"Cases like this are very common,

they happen every day," said **Rasha Noor**, an Egyptian human rights activist and journalist living outside of Egypt. "That's usually what happens when families try to rescue daughters from their kidnappers."

Compass Direct

MUSLIMS CONDEMN EXTREMISTS

Muslim organisations have condemned a planned demonstration by extremists who are calling for sharia law in Britain. Parts of the media have also come under fire for implying that the extremists are representative of British Muslims generally.

The demonstration, involving a march from Parliament to Trafalgar Square on 31 October, was organised by the fringe group **Islam4UK**, who support "the full implementation of sharia law in the UK" and say that they "have had enough of freedom".

However, the **Muslim Council of Britain**, an umbrella body for Muslim organisations, said that they deplored the march and expressed their firm support for "the value of free speech in Britain". A spokesman for the **Islamic Society of Britain** told the *Daily Telegraph* that "99.999 per cent of Muslims despise these people. This only serves to fuel racial tensions".

Ekklesia

INDIAN CHRISTIANS SUFFER

Christians in the Indian state of **Madhya Pradesh** have suffered increased attacks since the Hindu nationalist **Bharatiya Janata Party** came to power six years ago. Before the BJP took office the state recorded two or three attacks against Christians per year, according to Christian leaders, but **Jabalpur Archbishop Gerald Almeida** said that in the past five years 65 baseless charges of forceful conversion – commonly accompanied by mob violence – have been registered in his diocese alone. The state is not able to control these groups, he added. In fact the police are often complicit.

Rev. Anand Muttungal, spokesman for the **Catholic Bishops' Conference of Madhya Pradesh**, said growing attacks on Christians were a symptom of fear among Hindu extremists that the Catholic Church's influence is spreading. "The Church as an organization is doing very well in many fields," Muttungal said. "It causes those fundamentalists to worry. It could be one of the main rea-

sons for the continuous attacks on Christians."

OBAMA PRIZE 'INSPIRATIONAL'

The awarding of the **2009 Nobel Peace Prize to US President Barack Obama** should inspire younger generations to become "bridge builders for understanding and reconciliation", says the **General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation**.

"President Obama has helped generate a tidal wave of hope around the world," said **Rev. Ishmael Noko**.

Obama "has begun to restore broken relationships, including across faith boundaries", said Noko, a theologian from Zimbabwe. "These are very significant contributions to progress towards peace and security and important foundations for facing the global crises we must face."

Ekklesia

MURDERED OVER VEIL

Three masked members of a militant Islamist group in Somalia last month shot and killed a Somali Christian who declined to wear a veil as prescribed by Muslim custom, according to a Christian source in Somalia. Members of the comparatively "moderate" **Suna Waljameca** group killed **Amina Muse Ali**, 45, on October 19 in her home.

Ali had told Christian leaders that she had received several threats from members of Suna Waljameca for not wearing a veil, symbolic of adherence to Islam.

CHRISTIANS 'RECONVERTED'

Hundreds of tribal Christians and adherents of aboriginal religion from villages in India's **Maharashtra** state were reportedly "reconverted" to Hinduism last month in the Mumbai suburb of Thane at a ceremony led by a Hindu nationalist cleric. **Swami Narendra Maharaj's** goal was to "reconvert" 6000 Christians in the so-called purification ceremony, reported *The Hindustan Times*, which put the number of "reconversions" at around 800.

Hindu nationalists believe all Indians are born Hindu and therefore regard acceptance of Hinduism by those practicing other religions as "reconversion." A Hindu cleric known for opposing proclamation of Christ, Maharaj has allegedly led anti-Christian attacks in tribal regions.

GAY WEDDINGS IN SWEDEN

The General Synod of the **Church of Sweden** has approved a recommendation that the Swedish Church should conduct weddings in church for both heterosexual and same-sex couples.

From November 1, no individual cleric will be obliged to perform such a service, but every parish will be required to make provision for the liturgy, and to use visiting priests if necessary.

In May, new civil legislation repealed the separate provision for registered partnerships which had been in force since 1995. It provided that same-sex couples should now have the same legal marriage status as mixed-sex couples. Existing civil partners are able to convert their relationship into marriage if they wish.

Church News

PAKISTAN VIOLENCE

Another Christian family has been attacked by Islamists in Murree, near Islamabad, for refusing to convert to Islam, according to **International Christian Concern**.

"**Rafiq Mashi Bhatti** and his family had lived in peace and harmony with their Muslim neighbors for years. However, in the past few months, they received anonymous phone calls and letters warning them to convert to Islam, leave their home or die," said an ICC spokesman.

In one of the letters, the Christian family was told, "You Christians are agents of US led forces. Therefore it is our religious duty to wipe out all Christians from Islamic Holy land of Pakistan."

The family reported the death threats to the police but the police were unable to prevent the attack. The police are investigating the attack but the unknown assailants remain at large.

Assist

POLICE CHIEF REMOVED

The head of Turkey's police intelligence department has been removed amid allegations that he failed to prevent the murder of the Christian editor of an Armenian weekly and the slayings of three Christians in this city in south-eastern Turkey. **Ramazan Akyurek** is also accused of withholding evidence in those cases and improperly investigating the murder of a Catholic priest in 2006.

After a Malatya trial hearing on Friday, prosecution lawyers in the case commended the removal of Akyurek for negligence but he has already moved. Before the January 2007 murder of **Hrant Dink** of the Armenian weekly *Agos*, Akyurek reportedly received a report about the orchestrated plan to kill the editor. That clearly implied that he was one of the masterminds behind the murder, according to **Erdal Dogan**, one of the prosecuting attorneys in the Malatya case.

While heading the investigation of the Dink murder, Akyurek allegedly not only withheld intelligence but also tried to affect the outcome of the trial. Dogan said the same happened with the Malatya massacre.

GAYS SUPPORT FREE SPEECH

Supporters of gay, lesbian and bisexual people's rights have expressed support for the freedom of those who criticise them, casting doubt on claims by a Christian group who suggested that gay rights activists are trying to stifle free speech.

The **Christian Institute** accused the "homosexual lobby" of trying "to shut down any criticism of homosexual conduct". The comments were made following a police investigation into a Norwich resident who expressed allegedly homophobic views.

However, several gay rights campaigners have themselves responded to the incident by affirming their support for free speech.

Ben Summerskill of **Stonewall**, which campaigns for lesbian, gay and bisexual people's rights, said that "her views are pretty offensive, but nevertheless this is disproportionate".

Meanwhile, gay human rights campaigner **Peter Tatchell** said that he believes that "freedom of speech is important and must be defended".

Ekklesia

CHRISTIANS ORDERED: CONVERT

International Christian Concern has learned that on October 6 members of the Taliban sent threatening letters in Sargodha, Pakistan, warning Christian leaders to convert to Islam or face dire consequences.

A copy of the letter obtained by ICC warns Christians to convert to Islam, pay Jizya tax (an Islamic tax imposed on religious minorities) or leave the coun-

try. If Christians refuse to accept the choices given to them, the letter explains that they "would be killed, their property and homes would be burnt to ashes and their women would be treated as sex slaves. And they themselves would be responsible for this."

Rev. Zaheer Khan, pastor of **Maghoo Memorial Church**, **Rev. Aamir Azeem**, pastor of **United Christians Church** and **Rev. Zafar Akhter**, pastor of **United Presbyterian Church** each received a copy of the threatening letter, as did Christian schools, a hospital and university.

Assist



SPREADING GOOD NEWS

By Barney Zwartz

Australia has a new national newspaper with a difference — it's free and it concentrates on good news. The catch is, you have to go to church to get it.

Born of frustration about mainstream media coverage of Christianity and a sense that Christians are drifting apart, *Eternity* has been launched by two Sydney Anglicans to provide good news about the Good News, to encourage Christians and perhaps entice new ones. The new monthly has a start-up circulation of 100,000 — not far short of *The*

Australian — and has been distributed to churches around the country to give to worshippers.

Eternity is the labour of love of former **Fairfax** art director **John Sandeman**, now editor, and **David Maegraith**, who looks after the commercial side.

"I don't see the news stories of people becoming Christians in the news media. People become Christians all the time, or there would be no church by now. Missionaries are marginalised in the media, though Christians in social justice might make a story," Mr Sandeman said.

The first issue, out last month, looks at church planting, and concludes that 1000 to 1500 new churches have been planted nationwide in the past decade, ranging from mainstream churches in new suburbs to niche churches based around a women's refuge or an op shop, according to Mr Sandeman.

Former **South Australian Premier Lyn Arnold** argues Christian schools are too exclusive, and there's a debate about whether Australia needs a bill of rights, with **Australian Christian Lobby** head **Jim Wallace** arguing the no case and Melbourne Anglican **Angus McLeay**, founder of *Isaiah1*, putting the affirmative.

The Age

PAINFUL PROGRESS

By Michael Ireland

On the 60th anniversary of the Communist Party's rule in China,

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ajp162@bigpond.net.au—(02)9522 9152 after 6pm
Postal address: PO Box 29, Sylvania Southgate NSW 2224

ChinaAid president Bob Fu says that while some progress has been made, persecution of Chinese Christian believers goes on.

Fu writes: "As a Chinese native-born citizen who was forced to flee my home country 12 years ago, I am conflicted by the events of China's National Day celebrations.

"While I, too, celebrate the history and traditions of China with the people from my motherland and acknowledge the progress and positive changes in many areas of Chinese society, such as economic prosperity and freedom of movement, I cannot forget the pain and suffering inflicted upon persons of faith in these 60 years of communist rule in China."

He says China imprisons more people of faith and conscience than all the countries in the rest of the world combined, and the number of deaths caused by starvation, persecution and execution since the Communist Party took power in 1949 may be estimated at 80 million or more.

He says that from 1950 to 1955 alone more than two million people were executed in China. Thousands of Protestant Christians, Catholics, Falun Gong practitioners, Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists and other faithfuls have been executed or tortured to death in the past 60 years.

"At the same time, millions of them were detained, kidnapped, arrested and sentenced to re-education through labor arbitrarily, without any due process. Hundreds of thousands are still being held illegally today and corrupt local governments deny their citizens' basic rights."

MESSIANIC JEWS HARASSED

Israel is using an ultra-Orthodox group to crack down on **Messianic Jews** — who believe that Jesus is the Messiah — and prevent them from staying in the country, officials have told *The Times*.

The Messianic Jews have been accused of Christian missionary activities and complain of harassment and intimidation by the state.

An official at the **Interior Ministry** said that an anti-assimilation group called **Yad L'Achim** was working with the ministry to prevent Messianic Jews — known as Jews for Jesus — from being allowed to live in Israel, which they consider their spiritual home.

Jews have an automatic legal right to settle in Israel. **Yad L'Achim**, which opposes any form of assimilation between Jews and other faiths, said that it was defending the faithful from missionary efforts by what it terms a Christian organisation.

A report in the Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz* suggests that dozens of cases of harassment exist. Under Israeli citizenship laws, any person with Jewish grandparents is eligible to move to Israel and qualify for citizenship.

"The title Messianic Jews is a false statement," **Rabbi Dov Lifschitz**, the chairman of **Yad L'Achim**, said. "There is no such thing. These people are 100 per cent Christians ... They are trying to present themselves as a stream in the Jewish nation, so they can stay here and carry out their mission to convert as many Jews as possible into Christianity."

QUEEN BACKS CATHOLICS

When **Pope Benedict** visits Britain next year, he is expected to stay at Buckingham Palace as a guest of **Queen Elizabeth**. According to informants quoted in *The Catholic Herald*, the Queen has "grown increasingly sympathetic" to the Catholic Church over the years while being "appalled", along with the **Prince of Wales**, at developments in the Church of England.

The usually well-informed newspaper adds that the Queen, who is the **Supreme Governor** of the **Church of England**, is "also said to have an affinity with the Holy Father, who is of her generation".

In July, *The Sunday Telegraph* disclosed that the Queen had told the heads of a traditionalist group, formed in response to the liberal direction of some parts of the Anglican Communion, that she "understood their concerns" about the future of the 80 million-strong global church.

One leading evangelical said: "We found the letters very supportive." Her intervention was said to have surprised many because the group, called the **Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans**, was feared by some to be a divisive force and one of its senior figures was accused of being homophobic.

The then **Bishop of Rochester, Dr Michael Nazir-Ali**, called on homosexuals to repent. He said the Church of England must stick to the Biblical teach-

ing that marriage should only be between a man and a woman.

Telegraph

BLEAK FOR SUDAN'S CHRISTIANS

By Elizabeth Kendal

In July 2002, with a very powerful and angry post-9/11 USA breathing down its neck, Sudan's ruling **National Islamic Front** somewhat reluctantly signed the historic **Machakos Protocol**, putting Sudan on the path towards a comprehensive peace agreement.

The regime's Islamic backers were strongly opposed to peace on anyone's terms other than their own — and they were demanding the full Islamisation of all of Sudan. The signing, on December 31, 2004, provided hope for the predominantly Christian African Southerners who had spent decades fighting Arabisation and Islamisation.

The agreement gave the southerners a 2011 referendum on secession, but the north never intended just to let the south secede as most of Sudan's oil reserves are in the south.

The regime's aim is to secure (albeit fraudulently) an absolute majority in the new assembly so they can re-write the terms of the agreement and scuttle the referendum. With the elections ruined and the referendum under threat, Southern leader **Pagan Amum** has warned that the south might be forced to declare independence unilaterally, something the Islamist-regime in Khartoum has described as a 'red-line'. There is much concern that Sudan is heading towards a war that would lead to disintegration, chaos and a humanitarian catastrophe of unprecedented scale.

Meanwhile, Khartoum is believed to be behind the massive escalation of violence in the south. Some 2000 people have died and more than 250,000 have been displaced across southern Sudan since January — more than in Darfur! Moreover, the belligerents are using sophisticated, high-powered weapons and are targeting women and children, developments that are unprecedented in inter-tribal violence. Notoriously, the Arab-Islamist regime in Khartoum is earning massive funds exporting agricultural produce to Arab states while most non-Arab Sudanese are starving and dependent on foreign aid.

WEA Religious Liberty

Idol factories

IDOLS MUST BE RECOGNISED BEFORE THEY CAN BE TORN DOWN.

Murray Capill

Effective and powerful ministry goes to the heart. Whether you think of a Bible study, a sermon, a counselling session or evangelism, the best ministry is ministry of the Word that impacts people's hearts. That's because the heart, in biblical thinking, is the centre of our being. It is not just the emotional centre, but the centre of our thoughts, actions and affections. It is the core of our being from which everything else flows.

Paul Tripp, in his excellent book, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, helps us think about heart ministry in counselling, but what he says applies much more broadly too. He reminds us that the human heart is not in good shape and right at the heart of our heart problems lies the problem of idolatry. Our hearts were made to love and worship God, but since the fall humans have turned away from God and replaced Him with a thousand substitutes.

When we turn from God we do not stop worshipping. We can't. We are hard-wired to worship. The human heart is made to reach out beyond itself. So, as G. K. Chesterton said, when people reject God they do not worship nothing, they worship anything. We easily and readily erect idols in our hearts. Calvin rightly said our hearts are "idol factories". We will serve the god of image, or the god of possessions, or the god of sexual lusts, or the god of the stomach, or the gods of pleasure and entertainment – in fact almost anything.

Effective ministry needs to understand and address this compulsive idolatry of the human heart. Tripp reminds us, for example, that we need to understand that idolatry is subtle. Seldom do these idols look like idols. We are not so blatant as to carve idols out of wood and stone. Rather, we carve them out of our passions and desires, subtly moving away from finding our hope, security and purpose in God alone. These subtle idols of the heart can live alongside a



IDOLS MOSTLY DON'T LOOK LIKE IDOLS – THEY LOOK LIKE LEGITIMATE PASSIONS AND PURSUITS. THE THINGS WE PURSUE ARE OFTEN NOT WRONG IN THEMSELVES.

seemingly decent Christian life. So subtle can idolatry be that we can even make an idol of gospel ministry, of church growth, or of effective preaching.

Idols mostly don't look like idols – they look more like legitimate passions and pursuits. The things we pursue are often not wrong in themselves. The problem is they have assumed a wrongful place in our lives. They have become God-substitutes, so that our sense of well-being, joy and purpose is found in these things rather than in God. No matter how much we confess the right theology, God has been shunted out of central place.

We also need to understand that idols always demand sacrifices. Idols take time, money, focus and attention. As we serve our idol, we cheat God. If money has become our idol, we accumulate wealth and spend lots of time and energy thinking about how to gain and/or spend money, instead of how to invest in the work of the gospel. If entertainment is our god, we spend far too much time watching movies, listening to music and surfing the internet, and far too little time with God. If image is our god, we spend far too much time and focus on how other people perceive us

and what they think of us, and far too little time focused on what God thinks of us. Tripp says idolatry is therefore always "moral thievery". It takes from what is rightly God's and gives it to someone or something else.

A third thing about the idols of our hearts that we need to understand is that idols grow. It is very hard to keep an idol down to size! Our appetite for pleasing an idol grows over time. That's why it is so dangerous to give an idol a foothold in your life. Give an idol a millimetre and it will take a kilometre. The guy who begins with a little pornography is soon gripped by it and wants more and more. The woman who finds some solace and comfort in eating, finds that it becomes harder and harder not to eat. Just as God should become greater and greater in our lives, so God-substitutes become greater and greater. Yet if we know the substitutes to be wrong, they will force us to go underground even as we sacrifice to them more and more. We become deceptive, furtive, covert.

One final thing worth noting about idols (though there are many more we could add): they always fail us. Idols promise much but deliver little. Strangely, that is why we go back for more. They don't satisfy. Food doesn't satisfy the deep longings of our heart; neither does golf, or sex, or money, or success. The heart has been made for God, not for lame substitutes. So no matter how much of our idol we get, we never get enough to feel it is really good. The thrill is fleeting. The sense of satisfaction is only momentary. And often the after-taste is appalling. We are left feeling empty and cheated. But the sinful heart is foolish enough to go back for more! We think that next time it will be more satisfying. Or we think that momentary pleasure is enough.

These are heart realities we need to understand – for ourselves and for those to whom we minister. But how do we

address the issue of idolatry? How do we speak to this most entrenched sin of the human heart? It is not enough for us to simply throw the word idolatry around a few times. We need to do more to help people understand, face and dispense with their God-substitutes.

First, we should speak often about what people desire, love, serve, chase after, treasure, enjoy and delight in. The most powerful forces of the human heart are our affections. We should therefore constantly probe the passions of people's hearts. What excites them? What motivates them? What gives them a reason to live? What would break their heart if it were to be taken from them? We live in a world that constantly appeals to our affections. The advertising industry, for example, seldom presents factual, rational appeals for us to buy a given product, but sells to us a lifestyle, a dream, a passion, a desire. People need to learn to sift rigorously their own desires and passions and take an honest look at what is driving them.

Once people are thinking about their deepest affections, we need to expose the imminent danger of idolatry. We will often point out the kind of truths addressed above. We will show that things that are not wrong in and of themselves easily assume a wrongful place in our lives. We will remind people that the joy of sex, or food, or material gain, or fame or anything else in this world is temporary and fleeting. We will warn people about the grip such things can gain in our lives. We will show how easily they rob God of His place in our lives. We will demonstrate that idols always leave us short-changed, never delivering what they promise.

The point of such teaching is to bring conviction of sin. People must see idola-

try for what it is. Without such conviction there will be no incentive to change. With such conviction, the call to repentance gains traction. This is our third great task in ministering the Word to idolaters. We must urge true repentance which consists of both confession and change.

Confession of the sin of idolatry is not merely the acknowledgement that something has become an idol in our life. It is owning up fully to the fact that this thing has a grip on us and has effectively de-throned God. Confession must not be compromised by minimisation or blame-shifting, by self-justification or denial. Nor should it be confined to private con-



**ADDRESSING IDOLATRY
REQUIRES A SERIOUS
HEART-SEARCHING
MINISTRY... BUT IT SHOULD
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IS TRUE GOSPEL MINISTRY.**

fession only. Idolatry thrives in secrecy and very often the only way to address it is to tell someone else the idol of our heart and seek help in dealing with it. Confession must also focus on the heart impact of idolatry. We must admit that because of this idolatry we have not loved God as we should but have allowed something else to grab our affections and begin to rule us. We must confess that we have looked elsewhere for love, security, joy, hope and purpose.

We must tell people, however, that even such full and free confession as this is only one half of true repentance. Repentance demands change and that is the hardest part of all. The idolater must turn from the idol back to the true and living God. Worship of the idol must be replaced with worship of God. The idolater needs help to cultivate renewed dependence on the Lord, renewed love and passion for Him, renewed vigour in serving Him and putting Him first. Idolaters must be

trained to focus on Him, rejoice in Him, treasure Him, delight in Him. He must reassume the place the idol has stolen. One of our key tasks, then, is to present a compelling view of the beauty and excellence of God. We need to help idolaters see there is something more precious than what they currently cling to. They need to see not only their own sin but the surpassing greatness of Christ Jesus our Lord. Without leading people to see the supremacy of God and the joy and hope found in Him alone, we will leave them not merely convicted but condemned.

As we help people to reinstate God as King, we must also help them to smash their idols. That will mean different things in different situations. For some it will mean decisive and radical change as they cut off an idol completely. For others it will mean changed priorities, new accountabilities or rigorous self-monitoring. We should reassure them that this is seldom quick or easy. It is a journey on a difficult road. But the road leads to life.

It should be clear that addressing idolatry requires a serious heart-searching ministry, whether in preaching, evangelism, counselling, bible studies or personal conversation. But it should also be clear that this is true gospel ministry. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, to search out sinners, to find those who had turned from God and given themselves over to a thousand other pleasures and treasures.

Christ came and bore in Himself the punishment for the sin of idolatry so that all who turn to Him can be set free not only from the guilt but also the power of idolatry. Christ is in the business of setting people free from idols that bind so that they can serve the living and true God with all their heart. The end goal of a ministry that exposes and addresses idolatry is to see many people, both within and outside the church, freed to serve God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength. No one can serve two masters. The idols of our hearts must go in order that we might set apart Christ as Lord and live all-out for Him. ap

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Murray Capill is principal of the Reformed Theological College, Geelong.

Slow ahead

THOUGH THERE ARE REEFS, RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS STILL NAVIGABLE IN VICTORIA.

David Palmer

The Victorian Government has antagonised its left wing, secular humanist cohort as well as surprised Victoria's churches and independent Christian school movement by setting aside the options presented by its own advisers for watering down the religious exception clauses contained in the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995.

Since all Australian states have legislation comparable to the Victorian legislation, and with the ever present threat of religious organisations having to defend their membership, employment and other policies against complaints lodged in the various state anti-discrimination commissions, it is worthwhile to review the Victorian situation, and especially the campaign run by the churches.

Anti-discrimination legislation is relatively recent, with the Victorian legislation first appearing on the statute books in 1986. This legislation gave a blanket exemption to religious bodies from the operation of the act. In 1995 this blanket exemption was replaced in a rewriting of the act to include sections 75-77, spelling out the basis on which religious bodies and individuals might be exempted from the operation of the act. While in theory the additional sections represented a restriction on the freedom of religious bodies to order their own affairs, in practice this has not eventuated. In fact, at present Victoria probably has the most liberal religious exemptions of all states.

However, this was set to change once the Victorian Government signalled its intention last year to undertake a major rewrite of its anti-discrimination legislation.

The review of the exception clauses was placed in the hands of the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee (SARC) of the Victorian Parliament. SARC proceeded by inviting a known advocate of the emasculating of exception clauses, Professor Beth Gaze from the Melbourne Law School, to write a paper setting out



IT HAS BEEN REMARKABLE HOW CATHOLICS, PROTESTANTS AND THE ORTHODOX HAVE BEEN ABLE TO WORK TOGETHER AND ACHIEVE COMMON, BIBLICAL POSITIONS.

the options for amending the exceptions.

This paper presented a range of options extending from "change nothing" to virtual removal of the exceptions, though clearly tilted in the latter direction. Gaze advanced the notion of core and non-core religious activities, with core activities (i.e. what goes on within the four walls of the church) deserving full exemption, while non-core welfare, health and schooling activities should have their exemptions withdrawn or at least severely curtailed. Further, she raised the oft repeated canard of why religious institutions receiving government funding should enjoy any exemptions, thereby failing on the one hand to acknowledge the Government's preference for dealing with such institutions, and on the other avoiding the inconvenient truth that parents sending their children to non-state schools pay twice over for the privilege, thereby lowering the total cost of education to governments.

Now I will describe the campaign by the churches and Christian school movement, then the Government's response.

The churches, in conjunction with the

Australian Christian Lobby and FamilyVoice Australia, ran what was in effect a loosely coordinated joint campaign. It helped that we had already confronted much the same issues in both the Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century project run earlier in the year by the Australian Human Rights Commission and the more recent National Human Rights Consultation. By the time the issue of the Victorian exception clauses came around we were well versed in the freedom of religion issue including its extensive United Nations framework bound by declarations and covenants to which Australia is a signatory.

Victoria was further advanced because in 2007 and 2008 the churches established linkages in fighting campaigns against legalisation of euthanasia, decriminalisation and relaxation of abortion law and more. The formation of the Ad Hoc Interfaith Committee across the Catholic-Protestant-Orthodox divide with Jewish input was pivotal to this close cooperation across churches.

As an aside it has been remarkable how much Catholics, Protestants and the Orthodox, all in their own way confessionally bound, have been able to work together and achieve common, Biblically derived positions on ethical and freedom of conscience and freedom of religion issues.

In due course the churches made their respective submissions to the SARC enquiry. The Ad Hoc Interfaith Committee garnered many signatures across the religious divide to their submission. Many Christian schools and individuals made submissions. Some wrote to MPs, emailed them and generally harassed them in their electoral offices.

The Victoria Church and Nation Committee was greatly helped in the preparation of the church's submission by the Trusts Corporation engaging the services of noted QC Peter Faris.

SARC set aside two days for public hearings, the first day reserved for those groups opposing exceptions, especially it turned out, religious exception clauses.

Fairly typical was the contribution of Michael Gorton, chairman of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.

While Mr Gorton conceded the Equal Opportunity Act had “worked well”, he claimed there had been “a considerable change in public attitudes” and “anti-discrimination needed to be as universal as possible”. Gorton made the contentious and oft repeated distinction that *who a person is* does not imply (determine) *what they do*.

He asserted that there were “some fundamental religious beliefs not acceptable in our pluralist secular society”.

Repeatedly over the first day we heard the refrain, “religion has to justify itself whereas equality doesn’t”.

The second day was largely given to religious groups: the Catholic Church and its health and education arms, the Anglican Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Australian Christian Lobby, Christian school associations plus the Jews, Muslims and Sikhs.

All the Christian groups did extremely well, largely singing from the same song sheet. I was particularly impressed by the

Catholic presentations. Indeed, the contribution of the Catholic Church, both publicly and behind the scenes, not only on their own behalf, cannot be overstated.

As the hearings progressed it became more clearly evident that Government members of SARC were simply going through the motions without any great



**THE REACTION FROM THE
HOMOSEXUAL AND ANTI-
DISCRIMINATION LOBBIES
WAS SWIFT AND FURIOUS.**

enthusiasm and indeed the chairman over coffee expressed doubt that much change was feasible.

In the event we did not need to wait for SARC’s recommendations.

Victorian Attorney General Rob Hulls,

by way of an exclusive interview given to *The Age* on the Sunday following the AFL Grand Final, announced that religious groups would continue to be able to discriminate on the grounds of sex, sexuality, marital and parental status and gender identity, provided such discrimination was in accordance with their beliefs.

Mr Hulls said his legislation would protect the right of religious organisations – including schools, hospitals and welfare services – to refuse to employ or provide services to people who they believe may undermine their beliefs.

In particular he said in relation to employment, “the religious nature of the organisation or school will need be taken into account in determining whether a particular position needs to be filled by someone who adheres to that religion’s beliefs”.

This was a far better outcome than we had been expecting. We, along with the Anglicans, Uniting Church and Christian Lobby received separate briefings before the announcement, including some discussion of the final draft.

The reaction from the homosexual and anti-discrimination lobbies was swift and furious, with gay and lesbian spokesman Rodney Croome declaring “the right to education and employment is more important than pandering to religious prejudice”, while Professor Margaret Thornton said it was a win for fundamentalist religious groups. “In terms of a person’s private life ... their sexual preference or marital status really has nothing to do with their ability to perform a job... (The Government’s decision) is really out of date”.

More defensively, Dr Szoke, CEO of VEOHRC on the day of the Attorney General’s announcement spun the Government’s decision to mean that “religious schools would have to show how belonging to a particular religion is relevant to the job they are trying to fill”. In particular in the case of office staff or the maths teacher, “it would need to be made explicit how religion is relevant to the job”. In my view she was poorly informed or at best hopeful. Some Christian commentators seized on this comment, and a later similar comment by the Attorney General himself, without any warrant in my view, to accuse the Government of “announcing a compromise plan on ridding our equal opportunity laws of religious exemptions”.

Rick Wallace writing in *The Australian* described the Government’s decision as a

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“low key triumph” for the churches, declaring that Mr Hulls’ envisaged reforms had been wound back in “the face of a spirited campaign from religious groups fighting to retain the right to discriminate on the basis of religious belief, sexual preference, marital status and other criteria”. Likewise, Luke Williams writing for crikey.com.au described the reaction of religious groups to the SARC Options Paper as fierce and opined that it was the fear of losing Labor seats in Melbourne’s so-called Bible belt that tipped the Government’s hand.

So what happens next? The Government has said that it will table legislation to replace the Equal Opportunity Act 1995 as an “exposure draft” for public comment before the end of the year. Quite apart from the religious exception clauses, there are other matters such as granting the Equal Opportunity Commission coercive powers that will be of concern. The Government will want to have the legislation passed by Parliament early in the new year, well before the election due late 2010. The churches will need to be extremely vigilant throughout this process.

What are the implications of the Government’s proposals for religious exceptions?

First, those attributes on which religious bodies can discriminate will be reduced, but the ones that concern us will remain as a basis for discrimination: religious belief, sex, sexuality, marital and parental status and gender identity.

Second, in employment policies it will be necessary for religious bodies that seek to discriminate against, say, persons who promote homosexuality or live in de facto relationships or are atheists, to itemise such proposed discrimination as part of the inherent requirements of the job and further, that such requirements must be clearly linked to the organisation’s “doctrines, beliefs and principles”. This requirement will hold true regardless of the nature of employment.

What this means is that Christian schools, as well as local congregations,

will need a clear statement of their respective doctrines, beliefs and principles and then relate any defined discrimination in employment to such doctrines, beliefs and principles.

Any organisation that seeks to discriminate must be consistent in its discrimination. Failure at this point is fodder to litigants.

There is no doubt that the Equal Opportunity Commission will be salivating at the prospect of testing out any revision to the religious exception clauses and indeed any prospect of being able to initiate enquiries on its own



WHILE THE CHANGES MAY BE SEEN AS YET ANOTHER NAIL IN THE COFFIN OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, I FOR ONE WELCOME A SMALL NAIL RATHER THAN THE FINAL NAIL.

authority. Almost certainly there is sadly the likelihood of a repetition of the “Two Dannys” case, this time around the issue of religious discrimination.

In view of the potential danger to ourselves, the Victorian General Assembly last month resolved to seek expert legal advice once the Government declares its intention for a new act.

While it is not unrealistic to see the proposed changes to Victorian anti-discrimination law as yet another nail in the coffin of religious freedom, I for one welcome a small nail rather than the final nail.

Regardless, Christians who fight for the preservation of religious freedom can never forget that they follow in the foot-

steps of our Lord Jesus who when reviled, did not revile in return; when he suffered, did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. We are called to do nothing less. *ap*



David Palmer is convener, Church & Nation Committee, Presbyterian Church of Victoria. The Presbyterian Church of Victoria presentation at the SARC public hearings may be viewed here: http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/sarc/EOA_exempt_except/Transcripts/5%20August%20-%20Presbyterian%20Church%20of%20Victoria.pdf

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books

From Frozen Race to Inner Peace

Stephen T. Young and
John M. L. Young
Reviewed by Stuart Bonnington

From *Frozen Race to Inner Peace: The ex-POW's Journey Toward Healing* is both shocking and inspiring. Originally written by the late Rev. John Young, it has been revised by his son, Rev. Stephen Young, a Mission to the World missionary working at the Henderson Memorial Church in Leederville, WA.

It recounts in appropriately subdued yet graphic detail, a few of the dreadful war crimes of the military forces of Imperial Japan during the Second World War. Even with the increasing distance of time since the Rape of Nanking, the disgusting actions of Unit 731, the rape and slaughter of the British and Australian nurses from the SS Vyner Brooke and other terrible situations recorded in this and many other books, one is still filled with horror as they are recounted.

However the Youngs also record the inspiring story of Kiyoshi Watanabe, the Japanese Christian minister who found himself as a believer in the midst of the unimaginable evil of Japanese POW camps. Watanabe went out of his way to help the POWs at the risk of his own life and he did it because he was a Christian.

Watanabe is of course indicative of the main theme of this book – that the message of the Cross is able to overcome the deepest evils that fallen human beings can be guilty of because of sin. We also read of the way that Lt. Mitsuo Fuchida, the man who led (and sent the infamous code signal “Tora, Tora, Tora”)

the air attack against the US Fleet at Pearl Harbour became a Christian believer (and eventually a Presbyterian minister as well). He said: “I would give anything to retract my actions... at Pearl Harbour but it is impossible. Instead, I now work at striking the death-blow to the basic hatred which infests the human heart and causes such tragedies. And that hatred cannot be uprooted without assistance from Jesus Christ. He was the only One powerful enough to change my life and inspire it with his thoughts.”

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

Come Down, Lord!

Roger Ellsworth
Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009.
Reviewed by Peter Barnes

This is a reprint of a 1988 work which is essentially an application of Isaiah 63:3-64:12 to our own day. It is a vigorous, searching, and heart-warming little work. One minor criticism concerns the headings which are in a contemporary idiom e.g. *We Wait for You* for chapter 3, but the text is in the King James Version. The result is a certain incongruity. However, one ought not to linger on that.

Roger Ellsworth writes clearly and simply, and with passion. One can hardly read this book without meeting with God, and being convicted of the need to pray for revival in these desolate times. Well before we reach the final page, we are moved to cry out “Come down, Lord!” Punchy quotations, especially from Charles

Spurgeon, and questions for discussion at the end of each of the seven chapters enhance the book, and are added reasons for it to be warmly commended to readers.

Peter Barnes is books editor of AP.

The Gospel as Taught by Calvin

R. C. Reed
Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009.
Reviewed by Peter Barnes

Dr R. C. Reed was an American Presbyterian who lived from 1851 to 1925 – precisely the time when evangelical Calvinism suffered a serious eclipse. He seems to have been the most peace-loving and warm-hearted of men. He believed that Five-Point Calvinism teaches an all-sufficient atonement, yet also makes a sincere and indiscriminate offer of salvation to all the world.

He has some telling quotations from John Bunyan's *The Jerusalem Sinner Saved* where he pleads with even the worst of sinners to respond to Christ and gives them every hope in doing so. At the end of the book there is a stimulating chapter on “Calvinism Tested by Fruit”. This is not simply another book on the Five Points of Calvinism, but a broader work, which will do much to commend the Calvinistic scheme of salvation both to its adherents and its detractors.

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Who can tell?

SOME REVEALING JOB INTERVIEWS RAISE A LARGER PROBLEM.

Charles Woodrow

I imagine every Christian, as he goes about his daily tasks, looks for those occasional indications of the divine hand in his affairs to confirm that his work is of the Lord and not merely some scheme of his own.

We are now beginning to build a hospital in Mozambique, and because of the high unemployment rate here our call for 60 construction workers was answered by several hundred applicants. I interviewed them all, hoping to capitalise on this opportunity to become better acquainted with some of our neighbours. I remember a famous preacher and theologian once mentioning in his introduction to a series of messages on the attributes of God that more than anything else, our view of God determines the way we behave and the kind of person we are. So the only question I asked most of our applicants was, "What can you tell me about God? What have you learned about him in this life?"

How do you suppose that question would be answered if you interviewed 400 Westerners? I was impressed that the vast majority here had the same pat answer – in fact at first I wondered if they had simply colluded with one another on their reply since it was so uniform.

From my interviews, I learned that here the standard description of God is: "God is the Father of us all (not entirely in keeping with Christ's statement in John 8:42-44), is all-powerful, and does not depend on us for anything, though we depend on Him continuously for everything, even to get out of bed in the morning and go about our work." That is the Muslim as well as the local Christian mantra about God. And it is not a bad beginning.

Unfortunately, beyond that pat answer hardly anyone had anything else to say. I was hoping to uncover Christians who would break out in a radiant smile at the opportunity to tell



IS RELIGION, EVEN FOR MOST PROFESSING CHRISTIANS, ONLY A CODE OF CONDUCT OR A LIST OF THINGS ENTIRELY DEVOTED TO WHAT WE ARE AND DO?

what God had taught them about Himself through Jesus Christ. I was delighted when that happened, but was surprised it occurred only three or four times in several hundred.

Quite a few were quick to point out they were Christians and like most of the Muslims proceeded to speak of the religious duties and moral code they adhered to. But when I thanked them for that and asked, "But what can you tell me about God?" I was disappointed to find them speechless almost every time.

I began to wonder how much time in religion is actually devoted to thinking about God or learning about Him. Is religion, even for most professing Christians, only a code of conduct or a list of things entirely devoted to what we are and do? Or is it a relationship with someone we can actually know, an infinite yet personal being who has made Himself abundantly knowable through Christ and the Scriptures?

So I was disappointed to net only a couple of good prospects for future hospital employees out of several hundred job applicants. And even with those sincere followers of Christ, when I asked how men could be made right with God,

I was discouraged to hear in each case that one must obey His commands and then hope that in His mercy He will overlook what is lacking. That is no different from the Muslim gospel and no more effective in saving sinners.

In Galatians 5:3-5 Paul urgently warns that any "Christian" who trusts in his works to commend him to God is fallen from grace, cut off from Christ, and without hope in the day of final judgment.

The fact that neither faith nor Christ was mentioned as the means of salvation by any of the church attenders interviewed, and that nothing was said about the atoning work of Christ on the cross, caused me to wonder how we will fill the positions when the time comes to hire the 60-plus employee/evangelists needed to staff this mission hospital. But it does illustrate that despite the growing numbers of professing Christians here, there is a great need for Bible doctrine and scriptural evangelism both in and outside the church. Clearly we are not working in a pseudo mission field already saturated with the gospel.

Please pray that God may raise up from both inside and outside the country more workers for Mozambique, particularly for our future hospital, and ask him if perhaps you might be one he has prepared to minister in this needy field. ap



Dr Charles Woodrow and his wife Julie serve in Nampula, Mozambique, with Grace Missions Mozambique. Dr Woodrow is an American surgeon who belongs to Faith Community Church, Oxnard, California. This article is reprinted from the *Banner of Truth*.