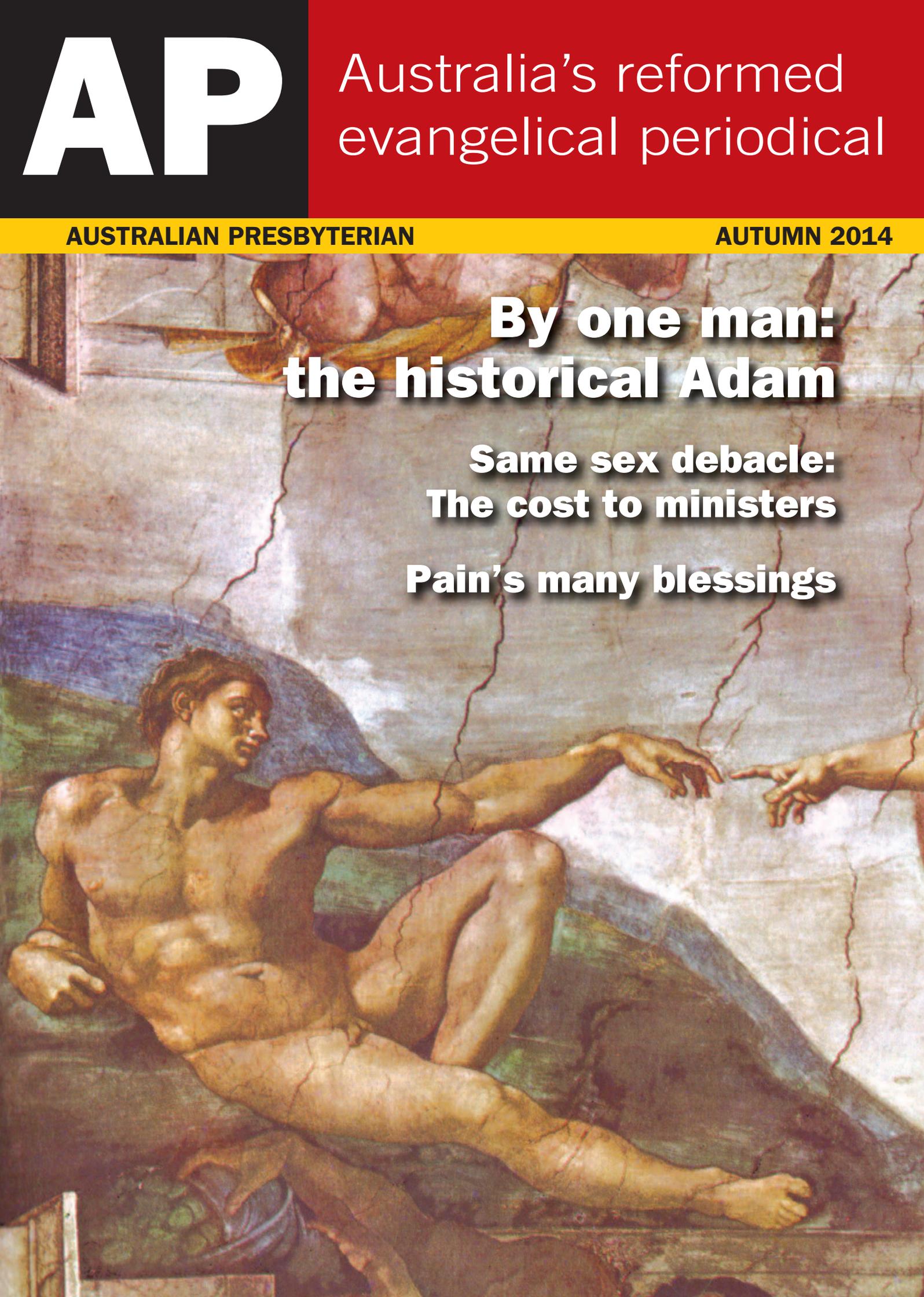


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AUSTRALIAN PRESBYTERIAN

AUTUMN 2014

The background of the cover is a reproduction of Michelangelo's famous fresco, 'The Creation of Adam'. It depicts Adam reclining on the left, his body stretched out, reaching towards the right. On the right, the hand of God is visible, reaching back towards Adam. The space between the two hands is filled with a sense of tension and divine spark. The fresco is shown with some cracking and wear, particularly along the right side and bottom, which adds a sense of age and history to the image.

By one man: the historical Adam

**Same sex debacle:
The cost to ministers**

Pain's many blessings



Editorial

At an English dinner party in the 1950s, the topic was raised as to whom one would like to meet in heaven. One guest suggested Shakespeare while another suggested the apostle Paul, but C. S. Lewis said that he would like to meet Adam. He waxed eloquent: “Adam was, from the first, a man in knowledge as well as in stature. He alone of all men ‘had been in Eden, in the garden of God, he had walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire’. He was endowed, says Athanasius, with ‘a vision of God so far-reaching that he could contemplate the eternity of the Divine

Essence and the coming operation of His Word’. He was ‘a heavenly being’ according to St. Ambrose, who breathed the aether and was accustomed to converse with God ‘face to face.’”

Helen Gardner, a church-goer with a deep interest in the 17th century English metaphysical poets, ventured to suggest that Adam, if he existed, would be a Neanderthal ape-like figure whose conversation would hardly be interesting. Apparently, Lewis responded in a gruff voice: “I see we have a Darwinian in our midst.”

If Adam is not a real man, the human race has no logical unity. Indeed, that is why we often hear about various races. Biblically, there are many nationalities but only one race. We all – Greeks and barbarians, Jews and Gentiles – go back to one man, and so belong to the same race.

How crucial is it to believe that Adam is a real man? There are plenty of confessing evangelicals who think this is a non-issue. However, the Bible teaches that the Fall is a real event in history. Adam is treated as the ancestor of all humanity (Gen. 5). The New Testament regards the Fall in the same historical way that it regards redemption. “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor. 15:21).

Romans 5:12-21 tells us that Adam brought sin, death and condemnation to the human race, but Christ brought grace, justification and life. Adam is as real as Christ, but not as powerful, for the gospel declares, in Isaac Watts’ words:

*In Him the tribes of Adam boast
More blessing than their father lost.*

Peter Barnes

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No middle man

Adam was the first man, not a stepping stone.

Jared Hood talks to Peter Hastie

Dr Jared Hood is lecturer in Old Testament and academic dean of the Presbyterian Theological College of Victoria. He holds Master's degrees from the Australian College of Theology and Westminster Theological Seminary in New Testament and Theology and a PhD in Old Testament from Melbourne University. He is married to Cassie and they have five children.

Jared, scientists have recently claimed that the latest genetic research has thrown doubt on whether there was a historical Adam. What has led to these claims?

Well, there have been a number of reports in the press recently about certain similarities between the DNA of monkeys and humans that have raised the question whether a being such as Adam ever existed. Also scientists are claiming that while there might have been someone nicknamed "Adam" in our ancestry – one person from whom

“Unfortunately too many biblical scholars treat Genesis 1 as a car wreck. They see themselves as the Fire Brigade turning up with their ‘jaws of life’.”

we are all descended – this Adam himself was not the first man.

Some researchers are now saying that some of the different types of hominids may have interacted with one another. Of course, I'm not a scientist so I can't offer any detailed commentary on these sorts of things.

But do you think these claims by biologists have any substance or not?

It's very hard for me to answer that question. From my perspective, I don't like it when scientists attempt to do biblical exegesis and tell me how I ought to interpret an ancient text, especially when I work in this field all the time. I often see them make amateur mistakes when they try to comment on Hebrew texts. Thus, I feel somewhat reticent to comment on scientific matters, especially when I have no particular expertise in their area.

Of course, all of this comes in the broader context of the discussion of the age of the earth. We need to remember that the present discussions about whether there was a historical Adam are taking place in a context where modern scientific assumptions about a very old earth prevail. We can trace this back to the 18th century when a fundamental anti-theistic shift occurred because people didn't want to have to deal with God. It was a philosophical shift and consequently science went off in its own direction. This is just historical

commentary. I am not discussing the particular science that's being debated at the moment. Nevertheless it is legitimate to point out the philosophical context in which this science is being done. Personally, I think that if this philosophical decision had not been taken, modern science would be in a very different place from where it is now.

How have evangelicals responded to these claims about whether there was an historical Adam?

In a sense, you could argue that not really much has changed – this debate has been going on for more than 100 years; we're all familiar with it. There have been several approaches to it. Of course, you've got the creationist response that affirms what seems to be the teaching of Scripture on the doctrine of creation. Some ridicule this view as "a head in the sand" response even though it is a more natural reading of the text.

Others have responded by trying to pry open the biblical text, in particular Genesis 1, to try and fit Darwinian evolution into it. The question then becomes "where can we find billions of years in Genesis 1?" Many Christians have taken this approach because they think that they can somehow force Darwinism into an ancient near-eastern text. The Biologos foundation has chosen this particular route. It was founded in 2007, just when the new atheism was gearing up. It was an

attempt to show that Christianity was reasonable and could accommodate itself to the new science, even though the science itself was rooted in anti-theistic assumptions. In a sense, this was Christianity on the back foot.

Those who have gone down this path believe that God speaks to us in the Scriptures and also reveals Himself in the creation. They are aware that the scientific interpretation of the universe is contrary to the Scriptural understanding. So then, taking science as established, they believe that we ought to re-examine the way we read the Scriptures to see if we have interpreted them correctly. John Lennox and Tim Keller are two significant figures among Evangelicals who have gone down this line. They are both convinced of the need to allow the biblical narrative to accommodate evolution.

Are there other responses?

Yes, there are. I think a more interesting one has come from another group of scholars who are not so interested in

accommodating evolution within the biblical text. Their major concern is to read the Genesis account on its own terms as an ancient near-eastern document. This is a more thoughtful approach because it's not really valid to "read" Darwin into such a text. Scholars such as John Walton, a Biologos advisor, Tremper Longman and Peter Enns have adopted this approach and, to a lesser extent, John Dickson.

What they say is much the same thing, although there are individual variations. John Walton is saying that since Genesis 1 is a text that is written from an ancient perspective, we should accept it as that and not try and read evolution into it.

Tremper Longman and Peter Enns have argued that we should look at Genesis 1 as an intentional ancient near-eastern myth. They think it belongs to a family of other ancient near-eastern creation stories. The writer's intention in using this genre was simply to make the point that God is the Creator, not that Genesis 1 is actual history.

Do you think there is value in approaching Genesis 1 as an ancient near-eastern text?

Yes, I do. It's important that we read it on its terms and not as a document from the 19th century into which we read a Darwinian account of origins. Unfortunately too many biblical scholars treat Genesis 1 as a car wreck. They see themselves as the Fire Brigade turning up with their 'jaws of life' – they think they have got to pry the car open to save whatever is left inside the vehicle. Well, we've just got to stop doing that. It is an ancient text that has to be read on its own terms. So I think what they've done is helpful at that point.

However, in my opinion, both Longman and Enns have taken a wrong turn when, having correctly identified Genesis 1 as an ancient near-eastern text, they go on to say that it is a creation myth that isn't trying to assert anything literal or historical about the origins of the world. I think they make the wrong genre call with regard to Genesis 1-2.



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What are your specific concerns with their approach?

I am concerned that they teach that Genesis 1-2 should be understood as an intentional myth. That raises a number of issues. The first that comes to my mind is the concept of a genre of intentional myth. Do we realise that people within these ancient near-eastern cultures did not regard their creation stories as myths? They actually believed them! The modern secular mind may regard them as intentional myths but that's not how they were regarded in their cultural context. People saw them as valid explanations of reality. I know many scholars regard the story of Jonah as a myth, but I don't agree with that either. What you see in the Old Testament is a firm belief that God acts within history. That's what He's doing in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 – and it makes perfect sense that the ancient Israelites sincerely believed that God created the world in six days.

The second matter of concern is that if Genesis 1-2 is an intentional myth as they suggest, then it can't be the true creation story or cosmology of the ancient Israelites. If the Israelites believed it was a deliberate myth, that would leave them without any real cosmology, which is actually contrary to what we see in the other cultures of the ancient near-east. Are we really willing to believe that the ancient Israelites didn't have a true cosmology?

My third area of concern is Longman's analysis of the language of Genesis 1-2. He not only claims that it is intentional myth, but he advances all the usual types of arguments that it is really poetry, or poetry-like. He does this despite the fact that the writer of Genesis 1 constantly uses a grammatical device known as the *waw* consecutive, which is only used in historical narrative. Those who think that Genesis 1 is poetry need to read it much more closely.

What is the evidence that Genesis 1 is poetry? One of the main features of Hebrew poetry is parallelism, which is where the first line is repeated in the second one with some variation. If you read the Psalter you'll see it's replete with parallel lines. Now, do we see this



Dr Jared Hood

device in Genesis 1? Not really. The closest we get to it is in Genesis 1:26, 27, where the expression the 'image of God' appears. However, the problem here is that we have three rather than two lines about man being made in the image of God, which is atypical of Hebrew poetry.

Again, in the verses about God creating the lights in the expanse of the sky (1:14-18) we've got the 'lights to rule...' verse – the greater light, the lesser light. But just as you think you're going into a parallel, you've suddenly got 'and the stars'. It just sits there on the end in a sentence fragment. That's what my grammar checker would call it – and that's really unpoetic.

What about repetition of phrases?

That's the big feature that people point to - the repeated expressions like, "there was evening and morning...and it was good". However, before we get too excited about this feature, we should remember that it is not a particularly common feature of Hebrew poetry. For instance, it's not a common feature of the Psalms. Some Psalms have it, but it's not the primary feature of poetry.

Where else in the Old Testament do we see "stylised narrative"? The closest parallel is in Numbers 7. Here Moses deals with the dedication of the tabernacle, where the 12 tribes, on days one through to 12, bring their gifts. So we read, so-and-so brought his gift on

the first day, so-and-so brought his gift on the second day, and so on. And apart from Numbers 7 we also find stylised narrative in the legal sections of the Pentateuch. For example, we see it in the Decalogue, which begins, "And God spoke all these words" (Ex 20:1) which has strong allusions to the God who speaks in Genesis 1. So Genesis 1 is stylised narrative, most closely paralleled with Numbers 7, and the introductory section to the law codes of the Old Testament. The point is that these sections of Scripture, though stylised, are not poetry; they are just a particular form of narrative writing.

Actually we don't need to go to other ancient near-eastern cultures to determine the genre of Genesis. We just need to read it in the context of the canon.

You mentioned John Dickson's proposal for interpreting the Genesis account. Do you think it's viable?

No, I don't. Dickson isn't saying much that others haven't said. He concludes that Genesis 1 is poetry and therefore not to be taken literally. He notes that verse 1 of Genesis 1 has seven words in it; verse 2 has fourteen words, although it is probably made up of two sentences, one of eight and one of six words, so the pattern breaks down. He then claims the word "heaven" appears 21 times. I checked this myself and his arithmetic is wrong. Just to make sure, I ran it through my computer and confirmed what I had originally thought – it does not occur 21 times. But it doesn't matter anyway because groups of seven would only indicate that we are dealing with stylised narrative.

Incidentally, even if it is poetry (which I don't think it is), this doesn't mean that it is necessarily ahistorical. Have we forgotten that the Psalter talks about many of Israel's historical experiences in a poetic manner?

"Evolution makes God responsible for every genetic malformation, every car accident, and so on."



The other thing that Dickson does is to focus on ancient near-eastern creation story parallels – especially the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* – as though Genesis 1 is written in the light of it and as a reaction to it. I think that’s invalid. The Genesis account predates *Enuma Elish*, as far as we can tell, and I think the whole thing of subordinating the text of Scripture, or of Genesis 1, to these parallels is a dangerous hermeneutic.

Is Adam a real person?

Yes, absolutely.

Why?

I think the writer of Genesis 1-2 is very clear that God created the world in just six days – not billions of years. Genesis 2:4ff explains how humankind arrived in the Garden of Eden. It refers to issues that had to be dealt with in the beginning – the lack of rain and plants. Then Adam was created. So I think the text of Scripture is definitely saying that Adam is the first man. Hebrews 11:3 says, “By faith we believe that God,” not only formed, but *perfected* the world. The Greek word means “to perfect”. God made it very good and suitable for man.

Does it matter if Adam wasn't the first man? What impact will this have on theology?

It’s a very serious issue. I think most Christians want to keep Adam. However, what we need is not just an historical Adam but an Adam who is the first human being. He needs to stand at the head of the human race. What happens

if such a person doesn't exist?

First, it will affect our approach to biblical interpretation. The rest of the Scriptures rely upon the original story in Genesis. So what do you do with Paul when he’s talking about Adam? Peter Enns says that Paul simply accepted the common belief of his day that Adam was a real person, but he was wrong. This means that as I read Paul I’m thinking, “I know better than Paul”. And when Jesus talks about Adam as the first created man – “Well, I know better than Jesus now!” Our whole outlook on the Bible is affected.

It also affects our doctrine of God. Once you discount Genesis as providing historical facts it’s easy to import evolution into the creation narrative. Once you do that it makes God the creator of the universe with all its flaws. God created this dog-eat-dog world of evolution. Try and explain that to the parents who have just lost their young child. Tell them that the death of their child is just natural selection and wait for three seconds until they say, “Well, then I hate God”. Evolution makes God responsible for every genetic malformation, every disease, every car accident, and so on. Christians who believe in evolution have to ask what kind of God is this that would do such a thing?

If we deny that Adam was the first man

we lose the doctrine of the fall. “In Adam we all sinned and died” – well, that’s gone. So where did sin come from? Peter Enns says he doesn’t know, which is extraordinary. I mean, this is pivotal doctrine of original sin, and he makes no claim to have an answer. On this basis you have to wonder, what are we being saved from? What is the work of Christ all about? He died on the cross; we know that, but why? If it wasn’t for sin, was it just to set us a moral example as some liberals believe? For what purpose?

Denying that Adam was the first man means that we also lose the doctrine of the atonement. There are two families in history. You’re either in Adam or in Christ, as Paul says. By what right does Christ die on my behalf? Because He dies on behalf of the people that God has given Him. Take away this Adam-Christ matrix, and you lose that. The atonement is undermined.

It also affects the doctrine of the last things too. The Bible is clear that there’s a better world coming. I wonder what that better world would be if this is the good world that God created. Is it just the current world with a better health-care plan? If the first world, that incorporated the suffering and death of evolution, was said to be “very good”, what hope do we have that the perfect world to come will necessarily be any better?

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A divine declaration

But the heavens need
some help to reveal
the divine Creator

Mark Harwood

The heavens declare the glory of God” pronounces the Psalmist, “the skies proclaim the work of His hands” (Psalm 19:1). Few of us have not been in awe of the stunning beauty of the clear night sky with its myriad points of light showing a subtle diversity of colours and intensities ranging from brilliant to imperceptible. Faithfully predictable, the heavenly bodies have guided mariners, indicated the seasons, served as timepieces and fascinated astronomers for centuries.

But do the skies proclaim the work of His hands in ways other than their sheer beauty? After all, we are told these days that the whole of creation can be accounted for in terms of unguided random processes over mind-numbingly vast spans of time. Can such beauty be accounted for through randomness? It is not until we turn our astronomical instruments to the heavens to measure their physical characteristics that we are confronted with the unmistakable signs of design and not the anticipated evidence of randomness.

We discover the galaxies seem to be arranged such that they are at a series of equi-spaced preferred distances away from us and the same pattern is observed in every direction we look. The simplest explanation is that the majority of galaxies lie on the surfaces of concentric spherical shells, with the Milky Way galaxy, our home, at or near the centre. Hardly the stuff of random explosions in the cosmos! A Divine hand has “stretched out the heavens” and arranged the galaxies in an unmistakable pattern which declares

the glory of the Creator.

Driven by the belief that we are the results of random accidents, evolutionary scientists have been searching the heavens for signs of extraterrestrial life. After all, they reason, if life evolved on earth, why not elsewhere in the vastness of the universe? The search for planets outside of our solar system capable of supporting life has thus far revealed an extraordinary variety of planetary systems which orbit other stars in other parts of the Milky Way galaxy.

“A Divine hand has ‘stretched out the heavens’ and arranged the galaxies in an unmistakable pattern.”

Many of these are wild inhospitable places with Jupiter-sized planets hurtling around their stars in a matter of days or terrestrial planets tidally locked to their stars, searingly hot on one side and frozen on the other, quite unsuitable for life. None of the planetary systems discovered to date have a planet cosseted in a safe friendly environment and capable of supporting life such as our earth in its ideal location in the solar system. An earth-sized planet inside the habitable zone of a sun-like star has yet to be discovered. Our solar neighbourhood bears all the hallmarks of having been optimally

designed for life on earth! The uniqueness of our planet and its neighbourhood declare the glory of the Creator.

When we turn our gaze to the wonders of living things, we are confronted with the most staggering complexity which confounds the comprehension of man. Once thought to be an amorphous blob, the living cell is like a vast complex city with communication networks, transportation systems, factories and assembly lines, an energy supply system – and the list goes on.

But unlike a city, the living cell is capable of reproduction, a process that is governed by the unfathomable complexity of the coded instructions written on the DNA molecule. These instructions control the assembly and function of every biological component in the cell, including the very machines which read the code on the DNA, but these machines themselves cannot be assembled until the code is read—a closed cycle defying naturalistic explanations for its origin.

Moreover, the multi-dimensional coded information written on the DNA molecule is not a function of the physics and chemistry of the base pairs. Just as the information imparted by the letters printed on a page is not the product of the ink and paper, but rather is the product of the mind of the author of the text, so too the information coded on the DNA is not a product of the physics and chemistry of the DNA molecules, but rather is the product of the mind of the Author of the coded

instructions inscribed thereon. The incredible complexity, beauty and variety of living organisms, all reproducing after their own kind, are testimony to the glory of the Creator.

Brilliant nature documentaries captivate our imagination through stunning photography with none so spectacular perhaps as those presented by Sir David Attenborough. “Why don’t you give credit to Almighty God?” Attenborough was once asked, to which he replied: “When creationists talk about God creating ... they always instance hummingbirds, or orchids, sun flowers and beautiful things. But I tend to think instead of a parasitic worm that is boring through the eye of a boy sitting on the bank of a river in West Africa, [a worm] that’s going to make him blind. And [I ask them] ‘Are you telling me that the God you believe in ... created this worm that can live in no other way than in an innocent child’s eyeball? Because that doesn’t seem to me to coincide with a God who’s full of mercy’.”

Attenborough makes a good point. Although he is wrong about the life cycle of the worm, which can live in

other places than human eyeballs, he rightly observes that the natural world, along with spectacular beauty and incredible intricacy, also reveals a world full of suffering and death. Does this aspect of creation reveal the glory of the Creator—the all-powerful, all-knowing, loving God as revealed in Scriptures?

The dilemma of ‘natural evil’, as it is often called, highlights the need for a direct and special revelation from God as to His true nature and this is what we find in His word, the Bible. The natural world is in a fallen state, having been cursed as a result of Adam and Eve’s rebellion in the garden. Consequently, the natural world cannot be a 67th book of the Bible, as some have posited, with equal revelatory power as God’s special revelation of Himself in the other 66. Although Romans 1:20 tells us that God’s eternal power and divine nature can be discerned from nature so that man is without excuse, nature has been marred by sin and is in bondage to decay (Romans 8:21) which prevents it from perfectly revealing the true character of God.

It is only when we understand the

“The dilemma of ‘natural evil’ highlights the need for a direct revelation from God as to His true nature – the Bible.”

Genesis account of creation to be actual sober history and not myth or allegory that we can make sense of why the world is the way it is and, most importantly, why God came to this earth in human form to redeem fallen man.

Hebrews 1:3 tells us: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word.” Yes, the creation does reveal the glory of the Creator, but only in part. Full understanding can only come from Scriptures and only then when the reader has encountered the person of Jesus, the perfect manifestation of the Father’s glory.

Dr Mark Harwood is a scientist who works with Creation Ministries International

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Same-sex debacle

If same-sex marriage is legalised, Christian ministers must hand in their marriage licenses

Campbell Markham

In June 2013 I surveyed Australian Presbyterian ministers about same-sex “marriage”, and most thought that the definition of marriage in our Commonwealth Marriage Act would change within the next five years. Five years is now looking sanguine.

This confronts us with a serious issue. Ministers are registered as marriage celebrants under the Act. And so if things keep going the way they are, we will become registered celebrants of a different definition of marriage from the one we are registered under now. What should we do if and when the legal rug is shifted beneath our feet?

Before we get to that question, we should review the arguments against same-sex marriage, which are many and plain and well known:

First, it implicitly sanctions homosexual practice, which is explicitly condemned in the Bible (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:10; Jude 1:7).

Second, it perverts Jesus’ definition of marriage: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Mat. 19:5).

Third, it undermines the God-given family structure: one man and one woman with any children that they have conceived, or adopted.

Fourth, it breaks the prima facie right of children to know, and be raised by, their natural parents. The right to marry is a compound right, which includes the right to bear children. A homosexual couple can only procure children with the assistance of a third-party gamete donor. This means conceiving children with the prior intention of removing them from either or both of their natural parents. This is manifestly unjust, and contradicts the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990).

“Perversely, same-sex marriage legislation will normalise the very practice condemned by these apologies.”

Article 7 of that convention says: “The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.” And Article 9 states: “A child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child.”

Recently a number of Australian parliaments have apologised for forced adoptions, not only to mothers, but also to the children who were taken unnecessarily from their parents. Perversely, same-sex marriage legislation will normalise the very practice condemned by these apologies.

Donor-conceived children are also beginning to rail against the injustice of

this practice. Numerous painful testimonies are recorded in chapter 6 of the 2011 Australian Senate report *Donor Conception Practices in Australia*, as well as the Anonymous.Us.org project.

Fifth, it will open the Pandora’s box to other perversions of marriage, including polygamy, polyamory, and incestuous marriages.

Sixth, it will strengthen the attack on religious freedoms. The moment same-sex marriage laws were passed in New Zealand, the Charities Commission notified the Family First Christian lobby group that it would be deregistered and lose its tax-exempt status, because it promotes “a point of view about family life that does not have a public benefit, (including) the view that the union of a man and a woman through marriage is the fundamental social unit.”

Seventh, it mutilates one of the clearest and most beautiful pictures of the Gospel. Many Christians say that they won’t protest against same-sex marriage because “it is not a gospel issue”. But God gave marriage to be a picture of the gospel (Eph. 5:25-27), and so a perversion of marriage is a perversion of the gospel.

Same-sex marriage is an immoral institution that will bring incalculable harm to our nation. That’s why we must pray hard that our political representatives will not succumb to it (1 Tim. 2:2), and tell them why we think it is wrong.

In any case an altered Marriage Act will advocate a particular view about marriage and sex and family. If it is changed to accommodate the practice of homosexual relationships, same-sex parenting, and third-party donor surrogacy, then it will reflect the legitimisation of these



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practices. Social legitimacy is in fact a core reason why homosexual activists want same-sex marriage.

And so what should our ministers do if marriage is redefined to embrace the evils of same-sex marriage? The survey showed that most intend to retain their registration and go on marrying people “as normal”, so long as they are not compelled to “marry” same-sex couples. They draw a line not at the point of redefinition, but at the point of compulsion.

In August I wrote a paper for General Assembly of Australia 2013 arguing that we ought to resign our marriage registration at the point the law is changed. There are two aspects to my argument.

On the one hand, although I may feel that I can maintain my registration without personally endorsing the evils endorsed by the Act, how will this not cause outside observers to assume, by my formal allegiance, that I think the changed Act is acceptable?

No gospel minister is compelled to register under the Marriage Act. It is something we freely choose to do. If

you freely join the St Kilda Football Club, then you should expect to be seen as a supporter of that club. Likewise it is impossible to see how a freely registered marriage celebrant of the Marriage Act would not be counted as someone who endorses the Act.

And so in *Quadrant* in June 2013 Christopher Akehurst argued that, in the event of marriage redefinition, Christian ministers should “withdraw from acting as a delegate of the state in conducting wedding ceremonies. To continue to do so would imply... acceptance of the new state-imposed definition of marriage”.

If this scenario parallels that of “eating meat sacrificed to idols” in 1 Corinthians 8, and I think it does, then love would compel us to give up our freedom to conduct marriages under a changed Act, so as not to “become a stumbling block for the weak”, and so as not to “wound their weak conscience” (1 Cor. 8:9,12).

On the other hand, Christians must not only not commit evil, we must not even associate with evil. If a redefined Marriage Act represents the legitimisation of the evils of homosexual practice, same-sex parenting, and third-party donor surrogacy, then as a Christian I will want nothing to do with it, and will separate myself by resigning my celebrant’s registration. As Psalm 26:4

“I would allow the couple (Christian or not) to register at a government office, and then I would conduct a Christian wedding service.”

says, “I do not sit with deceitful men, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked.”

How then will I marry people? In many nations, such as Singapore and France, Christian couples register their union with a civil servant for legal purposes, and then get married by a minister in a worship service. This is what I intend to do if the Marriage Act is changed. I would allow the couple (Christian or not) to register at a government office, and then I would conduct a Christian wedding service. I should add that I would not require a couple register at a civil office. For they may well feel that by doing so too are endorsing the Marriage Act and the evils it will represent. I would leave this decision up to them.

In any case, I am urging my brother ministers to form the same intention to resign from the Act if it is redefined. Like baptism, we can use our own rites, keep our own records, and issue our

own certificates. We would do this for the ultimate good of marriage and family, and for the reputation of Jesus’ church and His gospel.

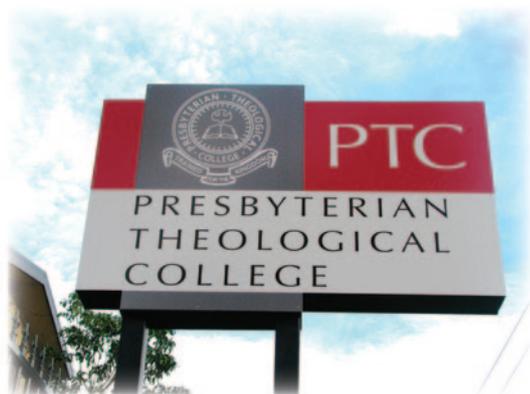
Campbell Markham is a Presbyterian pastor and church planter in Hobart who has sought to reach out to the homosexual community.



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World news

Jesus – history's top figure

He has many titles – Prince of Peace, Son of God, Shepherd of Souls – but now Jesus has one more: the biggest name in human history – ever – according to a new book, *Who's Bigger: Where Historical Figures Really Rank*.

It's a work of "culturometrics", or quantitative data analysis applied to individuals in society the same way pundits aggregate polls in elections, and algorithms rule computer search engines.

The book is a complex collection of lists and rankings, but none is more provocative than its Top 100: Jesus is No. 1, Adolf Hitler is No. 7, everyone is overwhelmingly white and 97 are male, and Americans are heavily represented.

But "bigger does not mean better," said

co-author Steven Skiena, a computer science professor at Stony Brook University. The top 10 names, in order, are Jesus, Napoleon, Muhammad, William Shakespeare, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Adolf Hitler, Aristotle, Alexander the Great and Thomas Jefferson.

Down the list, Protestant reformer Martin Luther (17) is just above Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, Elvis Presley (69) is between Socrates and William the Conqueror and King Arthur (85), who may be a myth, tops Michelangelo. The only women are Queen Elizabeth I (13), Queen Victoria (16), and St Joan of Arc (95). President Obama barely missed the top 100, coming in at 111, but ahead of the Virgin Mary (127).

Religion News Service

Monastery becomes mosque

What was once the largest Byzantine monastery in Istanbul will become a mosque in 2014, a leading Turkish newspaper reported.

The Monastery of Stoudios, founded in 462, was destroyed by Crusaders in 1204, rebuilt in 1290, and largely destroyed by Ottoman Turks in 1453. In time, the monastery became a mosque and has been a museum since 1946, according to *Hurriyet Daily News*.

The report came less than a week after Turkey's deputy prime minister said that the famed Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul should again become a mosque.

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Anglicans fear extinction

The Church of England is “one generation away from extinction”, the former Archbishop of Canterbury has warned. Lord Carey, 78, said churchgoers should be “ashamed” of themselves for failing to invest more in young people and called for urgent action before it is too late.

The outspoken archbishop said unless more was done to attract new worshipers then every one of the 43 dioceses could be wiped out within 25 years.

He also expressed fears that the modern church was too old fashioned and “not the most exciting place to meet new people”. The retired Anglican bishop was making a keynote speech at Holy Trinity Church in Shrewsbury, as part of the Shropshire Churches Conference 2013.

UCA

Driscoll cleared of plagiarism

Tyndale House Publishers has released the conclusions of a three-week investigation into allegations of plagiarism against Seattle megapastor Mark Driscoll that drew widespread attention,

while Driscoll has also addressed the controversy for the first time.

“Pertaining to his Tyndale book, *A Call to Resurgence*, Tyndale believes that Mark Driscoll did indeed adequately cite the work of Peter Jones. ... Tyndale rejects the claims that Mark Driscoll tried to take Peter Jones’s ideas and claim them as his own,” the publisher said.

Regarding a 1 Peter and 2 Peter study guide that InterVarsity Press has said did not qualify as fair use, Driscoll states: “The error was unintentional, but serious nonetheless. I take responsibility for all of this. In order to make things right, we’ve contacted the publisher of the works used in the study guide, offered an apology, and agreed to work with them to resolve any issues they had. Mistakes were made that I am grieved by and apologise for.”

Christianity Today

Women priests revealed?

Newly restored Italian frescoes have revealed what could have been women priests in the early Christian Church. The frescoes, dating back to between 230 to 240 AD, are housed inside the

Catacombs of Priscilla of Rome and have been unveiled by the Vatican.

Proponents of a female priesthood have said that the frescoes prove there were women priests in early Christianity. The Vatican, however, has responded by saying that such assertions are sensationalist “fairy tales”.

Daily Mail

Kiwis desert faith

For the first time in over a century, fewer than half of New Zealanders call themselves Christians. According to details of the 2013 census released recently, Christians now only make up approximately 47% of the four million-strong population who gave details of their religion (1.93 million people), dropping from 56% in 2006 (2.03 million).

Anglicans have lost almost 100,000 members in the space of six years, down from 0.55 million in 2006 to 0.46 million in 2013, making Catholics the single largest Christian denomination in New Zealand for the first time. But their numbers are down too (0.51 million in 2006 to 0.49 million in 2013).



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Evangelicals have grown from approximately 13,800 followers in 2006 to 15,400 in 2013. Adventists were numbering approximately 16,200, and are now 17,100, while “no religion” including atheists comprise nearly 40% of the population. This makes New Zealand one of the most secular nations in the world.

Christian Today

Risk of genocidal war

In October, more than 100 Christian leaders of the Central African Republic (CAR) warned the world of the increasing risk of a “genocidal interfaith civil war”. Soon after their Bangui Declaration, issued from the capital city of Bangui, fighting between largely Muslim and Christian militias in Bangui killed between 400 and 1000 people.

To stem the escalating conflict, the United Nations, led by France, has sent thousands of soldiers to the CAR, long known as “the worst crisis most people have never heard of”. Since Islamist rebels seized power in the largely Christian nation in March, a new fault line has emerged: religion.

Self-proclaimed president Michel Djotodia has ordered “Seleka” fighters, including mercenaries from neighboring Chad and Sudan, to disband. But renegades continue attacking Christian villages and churches—and Christian militias known as “anti-Balaka” are retaliating. But their actions have been condemned by the Church leaders in CAR, who call for peace, the disarming of all armed groups and national reconciliation.

Christianity Today

Hindus complain at conversions

At the behest of a Hindu organisation, police in the south-western Indian state of Karnataka are investigating the “forced” conversions of more than 1000 Adivasi families to Christianity, according to *The Hindu* and the Fides news agency. “Adivasi” is a term that embraces various tribal groups in India.

An official of the Hindu organisation asked police “to take steps to ‘protect’ the culture of the Adivasis, which had deep roots in nature and ancestor worship,” *The Hindu* reported.

Mandela recognised

Calling Nelson Mandela a leader with hard-won wisdom and maturity unparalleled in our time, the World Council of Churches (WCC) general secretary gave thanks to God for Mandela’s life, which he described as a gift to South Africa and the whole world.

A renowned anti-apartheid activist and Nobel peace laureate who served as South Africa’s first black president, Mandela, aged 95, passed away on December 5, 2013, at his home near Johannesburg.

“He will be recalled as the leader who acted to unify a nation once deliberately divided along the lines of race,” said the Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, the WCC general secretary. He added that Mandela was a “liberator who by force of his remarkable personality raised the dignity of Africans after centuries of colonialism, oppression and discrimination.”

Ekklesia

Cook emulates Jonah

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COMPANY

did Harrison Odjegba Okene, except he was in the belly of an upturned tugboat.

For the Nigerian cook, it was some verses his wife had sent him earlier that day that helped him endure his ordeal on the seafloor of the Atlantic Ocean: “Oh, God, by your name, save me ... The Lord sustains my life.”

Okene’s tugboat capsized during a storm off the coast of Nigeria, but he found a pocket of air to breathe as the ship sank 100 feet to the seafloor below. The 11 other seamen aboard the tug *Jascon 4* died.

Christianity Today

Welby praises Pope

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby has called for closer relations with the Pope. “We need to start walking together with a deep love for one another, accepting our respective differences. But walking means getting up and embarking on a journey together, not waiting for all doctrinal questions to be resolved before doing anything,” the Anglican leader said in an interview with an Italian magazine, *Jesus*.

“There are various things we are working on together but I cannot reveal these yet as they are confidential, he told journalist Luca Attanasio.

The two Churches interpret theological and ethical issues differently. But Welby is adamant he has found in Francis a spiritual leader of great merciful openness who really knows how to listen and engage in dialogue.

Pope meets Muslim leader

December 13 marked the first time for a Pope to meet with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation’s Secretary General to discuss relations between Christians and Muslims around the world.

Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu and Pope Francis met in the Vatican City, where they each expressed the need for greater efforts to foster respect between religious groups. Church relations with Islam have so far been positive under Pope Francis’ leadership. In his apostolic exhortation he underlined the importance of Catholic-Muslim

relations, and highlighted their common Abrahamic roots.

“We Christians should embrace with affection and respect Muslim immigrants to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of Islamic tradition. I ask and I humbly entreat those countries to grant Christians freedom to worship and to practise their faith, in light of the freedom which followers of Islam enjoy in Western countries,” the Pope said.

The significance of the meeting between the two leaders is increased by the escalation of conflict in Syria, and the rising persecution of Christians in the Middle East.

Christian Today

Prince Charles defends Christians

Christians are being “deliberately targeted” in the Middle East, says Prince Charles. The Prince of Wales said during a meeting of leaders of churches from the region that he is “deeply troubled” by stories of persecution in the Middle East.

Accompanied by Prince Ghazi of Jordan, Prince Charles visited the Coptic Orthodox Church Centre and the Syriac Orthodox cathedral in London, where he learned more of the escalating violent conflict in the Middle East. Religious minorities are especially vulnerable to attack in the region as extremist Muslim groups have seized power in many areas.

Christian Today

Muslim terror spreads

Reports of Christians attacked in central and northern Nigeria receive more attention, but in more southerly Benue state Islamic extremists killed at least 205 Christians in the last six months alone, sources said.

In the south-eastern part of Nigeria’s middle belt, Benue state’s Agatu Local Government Area saw deadly attacks on Christian farmers by Muslim, ethnic Fulani herdsmen from May through November that displaced an estimated 10,000 people, Christian leaders said.

As in attacks in Plateau state, several of the assailants appeared to be

mercenaries from outside the area rather than herdsmen, and locals questioned how the Fulani became so heavily armed. Christian leaders said they had no doubt the Muslim assailants aimed to demoralize and destroy Christians.

Christian Today



Church fits the bill

A church has become an internet sensation after hundreds of people have flocked to see the face of a chicken within its walls. With its large round windows resembling two eyes and roof tiles appearing as a beak, the so-called “chicken church” is attracting an expanding fan club online.

The congregation at the Church by the Sea in Tampa Bay, Florida, say they regularly see passers-by stopping to get a memento of the unusual-looking building. Its birdlike appearance is completed by the roof that spreads out like red wings.

Vatican job losses

Some Vatican officials expect a major reduction in the staff of the Roman Curia, with priests who are now serving on the Vatican staff being returned to their diocese.

An unidentified Vatican source told the *Catholic News Agency* that the Congregation for Clergy will be the first Vatican dicastery to see significant personnel losses. Four priests who worked at that Congregation have already returned to diocesan assignments.

Another unidentified source said that Pope Francis plans reforms that would reduce the size of Vatican departments, giving more authority to local diocesan bishops.

Pain's many blessings

Pain is both one of God's great gifts and a theological problem.

Pain is what makes us stop walking and take stones from our shoes before they damage our feet. It's what takes us to the doctor before a problem becomes too serious. And the fear of pain is often what stops us doing really stupid things. Pain is one of God's precious gifts and without it we would very soon be ill, injured ... or dead. But pain is also sometimes what disables us, what keeps us awake at night and what gets between us and our lives. And pain is a theological problem.

It is not always possible to point to the source of pain, but sometimes it is. It can be the result of our own personal sin, the sin of another person that has impacted on us or it can be more generally due to our fallen nature and the sin-sick world in which we live. I have always experienced discomfort in walking, and that became more serious and disabling nearly 30 years ago. Since then I've lived with varying degrees of pain and walked with the aid of crutches.

Pain concentrates the mind, and those who live with pain (everyone does at some point, and others do for much of the time) have to learn to work out their priorities. We do that in big things. The woman who suffers severe

back pain makes plans to have a rest at some point during the day of her daughter's wedding in order to enjoy that great family occasion. The man who is plagued by migraine headaches is especially careful what he eats and does on the day before an important meeting at work.

Having to prioritise makes us look for life's blessings and plan how best to enjoy and use them. Christians in pain have to learn to prioritise day by day, and that gives them the opportunity to look for and recognise their blessings (Heb. 12:1). I keep a blessings book in which I record little and big blessings; sometimes I read it just to encourage myself. Our grandmothers were right to teach us to "count our blessings, name them one by one".

“Having to prioritise makes us look for life's blessings and plan how best to enjoy and use them. Christians in pain have to learn to prioritise day by day.”

How we react to what happens to us makes us what we are. A story is told of a Jewish man in a concentration camp. Terrible things were done to him and to his loved ones. His response was, "You can choose what you do to me and mine, but I will choose how I react."

While at first pain does seem to run our lives, we very soon come to a point when we need to choose how we react to it. And it is a choice. If that's where you are at, just look around at some of those who you know live with pain. There will be those among them who use pain to make them the centre of attention and those who use their pain to deflect attention from themselves. The first have few friends and the second have many. The first focus inside themselves; the second focus outwards and upwards. We each have to make that choice for ourselves.

When we are under pressure (and pain certainly counts as pressure) the first thing to go is our creativity. We're in pain so the roses don't get pruned. It's sore when we stand for a long time so we eat microwave meals. Sitting is awkward so I'll buy a card rather than make one.

But we reflect the image of God when we are being creative. Our first parents

“Until Christ comes or calls it is our lot in life to experience pain. When it is, we need to remember that He has done so before us.”

were gardeners and what can be more creative than that? When we are in pain, if we find ways in which we can be creative, however small, we will feel better because we will more closely reflect God.

Many years ago a young woman visited me. She was going through a tough time. As she left she said, “I’ll go home and throw a meal together.” I talked for a few minutes about creativity and then she left. Later she phoned. “Thanks so much,” she said. “I made the same meal I was going to make but I put it on the plates nicely and put a flower on the table. The kids thought they were having a party and we had a great time.” The devil will use pain to steal our God-given creativity if we give him half a chance.

It is my settled view that the pain and disability I have lived with for many years has been the means of opening doors to people’s minds and hearts in a way that nothing else could possibly have done. I walk with the use of crutches and people can see I have a problem. Somehow that gives them permission to talk about their problems, to be real about their lives. It is only after I became disabled that I

started writing biographies because those whose stories I have written have graciously shared their lives, and their pain, with me.

Living with pain is not fun; nobody would choose to do it, and certainly nobody would choose to live with intransigent pain that comes and forgets to go away. But even those Christians for whom that is life have the sure and certain hope that their pain will come to an end. Scripture tells us that God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Of course, we look forward to heaven in order to see our Saviour face to face, but there is absolutely nothing wrong in also looking forward to being pain-free. We look forward to human promises being fulfilled; surely we can look forward to that great and wonderful day when God’s promises will all be fulfilled. Just think what it will be like: “He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven” (Psalm 107:29-30).

Until Christ comes or calls it is our lot

in life to experience pain. When it is, we need to remember that He has done so before us. When the boy Jesus ran and fell, the skin came off His knees and He bled. When His friend Lazarus died, He felt the pain of bereavement along with His anger against death, and He wept.

When His mother and brothers thought He was out of his mind, Jesus knew the pain of being misunderstood by His nearest and dearest. In Gethsemane He underwent the pain of anticipating the horrors to come and the agony of being abandoned by His friends. On the cross our Lord and Saviour went through such pains as we cannot imagine. So, when we are called to go through pain of whatever kind, we know that He remembers and He understands.

The only pain of which He has no understanding is the pain of guilt, and that pain which He does not know personally, He offers to remove completely through His substitutionary death at Calvary.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose” (Romans 8: 28).

Scottish author Irene Howat’s books include Pain, my Companion. Her latest venture is an on-line story club for seven to 13-years-olds, which can be found at www.story-a-month-club.org.uk



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Books

Counselling the Hard Cases

Stuart Scott and Heath Lambert

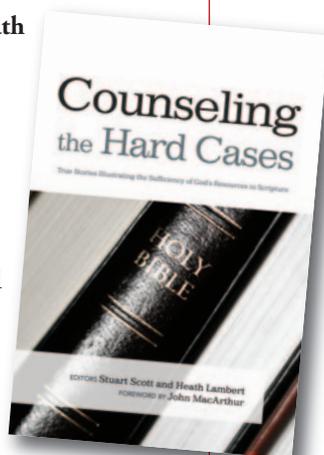
B&H Academic, 2012

Mark Powell

They say that you should never judge a book by its cover (and I would add also by its title) and that is definitely the case in this particular instance. The cover is pretty uninspiring and the title sounds like it's going to be a hard work to understand let alone be edified by. Thankfully though, the content of the book could not be more different!

This is one of the most edifying works on biblical counselling I have read. The subjects range from cases involving adultery, postpartum depression, bipolar, obsessive-compulsive disorder, homosexuality, severe anxiety, paralysing fear, surviving childhood sexual abuse and even dissociative identity disorder. What unifies all the various authors who contribute to this excellent volume is the commitment of each one to the sufficiency of Scripture. If that last sentence makes you nervous then you'll particularly benefit from the opening chapter of the book by Heath Lambert which specifically addresses the issue.

I was especially struck by the wisdom and compassion that the authors demonstrated in relaying how they walked with the person they were counselling through whatever particular issue was being faced. Each one constantly refers to the importance of



prayer and to how crucial the interconnected relationship of the Spirit and His inspired Word is for seeking to bring about true, lasting change.

What I found the most encouraging and challenging aspect of the book was how all of the authors constantly warned of the danger of simplistic answers – a stereotype that is ironically often levelled at people in the biblical counselling movement.

Each person emphasised the need to view people and their situation holistically, working in close consultation with medical practitioners as well as pastors and lay people in the local church.

This is a terrific book that deserves a wide readership. If you read only one book this year on the subject of “how people change”, it should be this.

Mark Powell is part of the ministerial team at Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, Strathfield, NSW

Engaging with Keller

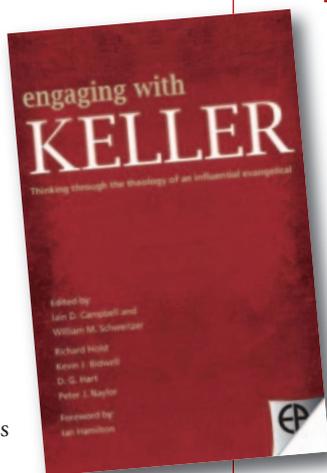
Edited by Iain D. Campbell & William M. Schweitzer

EP Books, 2013

Michael Prodigalidad

This is a thoughtful collection of essays by leading Presbyterian ministers reviewing the theology of Tim Keller. The authors have faithfully avoided a polemical or adversarial approach, and demonstrated a winsome and

fraternal spirit in their critique. In an age of political correctness and relativity, this is a welcome work demonstrating how one can genuinely appreciate the ministry of a peer and yet maintain some reservations about doctrine promoted.



The most compelling chapters review Keller's doctrine of sin and divine judgement. While the authors applaud Keller's desire to faithfully present orthodox doctrines to a postmodern audience, there are concerns about his rebranding of sin as “robbing us of wholeness” rather than robbing God of glory. This unhelpful refocusing from God to man is also seen in discussions around Keller's doctrine of hell. God's active role in condemnation is minimised and replaced with mankind's choice, which is more palatable to postmoderns but deviates from biblical truth.

Essays on the Trinitarian “dance” remind us that human analogies on the Godhead always fall short, and “justice” is questionable as the church's mission. The last chapter questioning Keller's interdenominational activities seemed a little parochial and out of step with an otherwise winsome book. This work will challenge readers to remain faithful to Scripture as we communicate objective truth in a relativistic world, and the constant need for a gracious spirit in all dialogue.

Michael Prodigalidad is pastor of Stanmore Baptist Church

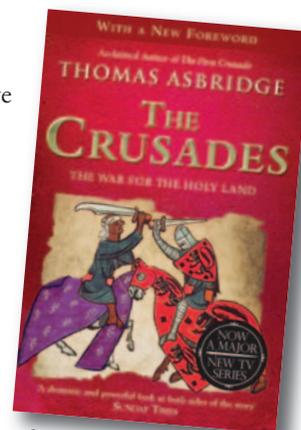
The Crusades: The War for the Holy Land

Thomas Asbridge

London: Simon & Schuster, 2012

Paul Barnes

This comprehensive book by University of London Medieval Professor Thomas Asbridge examines one of the most romanticised and darkest chapters of church history. The Crusades were the wars fought for “the



Holy Land” between the Roman Catholic Church and Islam from Pope Urban II’s call in 1095 to the Fall of Acre in 1291. Although they were originally called to defend persecuted Christians and to reclaim Jerusalem, the Crusades quickly became a war between Christianity and Islam. This became evident when the First Crusaders reclaimed Jerusalem and killed most of the Christians they were supposed to be liberating.

Although it is often difficult for many today to understand how the church could launch such brutal wars, it is important for modern Christians to have an understanding of the Crusades. Until recently in Western society the terms Crusade or Crusaders were used for anything from a person with a passion for a particular topic to New Zealand rugby teams. However, in the Muslim world the terms stir deep emotions, and stories of the heroes and villains are still retold in townships across the Middle East. Christians need to be aware that for many Muslims today’s Christians are (mistakenly) seen

as successors to the Christians of the crusading era.

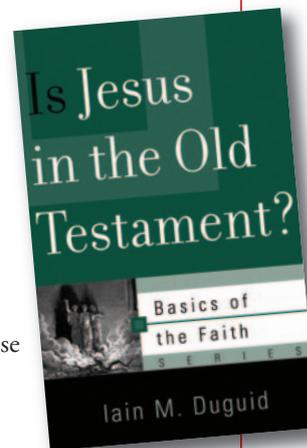
Also, given the lack today of any substantial knowledge of Christianity and the lack of discernment between different Christian groups, as well as the common assertion that “religion is the cause of all wars”, it is important for Christians to have an understanding of not only the events of the Crusades but also the twisted theology and reasoning behind them. Any Christian with an adequate understanding of the Scriptures will be able not only to refute the many false teachings of the Crusades, but highlight the Christian belief in not taking life from others but giving our lives for others.

Asbridge is keen to avoid judging the beliefs of either religions that drove the

Crusades, as well as minimising the impact the Crusades have had on the modern world, particularly the modern terrorist movement.

Asbridge is a gifted writer and this book will keep its readers’ attention to the very end.

Paul Barnes is a Christian schoolteacher in Newcastle



Is Jesus in the Old Testament?

Iain M. Duguid

Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2013.

Peter Barnes

To many professing Christians, the Old Testament is not much more than a series of disconnected stories which somehow evolved into the purer message of Jesus. Duguid lists some of the errors that may result, usually along the lines of allegory or moralism or a mixture of both. He tells of one Christian author who stated that

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the tent pegs of the tabernacle were partly in the ground and partly out of the ground in order to teach us that the gospel is about the death (in the ground) and the resurrection (out of the ground) of Jesus. Maybe they were just to keep the tent secure.

This is a short 40-page introduction to the Old Testament as a Christian book, as that which points clearly to Jesus and prepares readers for His coming. Without being definitive, it is very helpful.

Peter Barnes is editor of AP

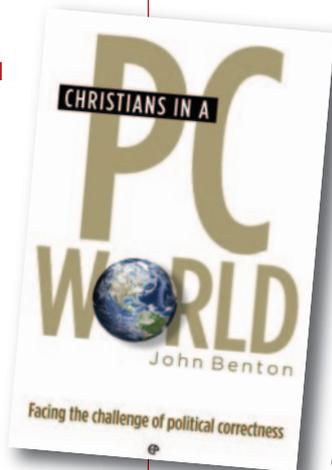
Christians in a PC World

John Benton

EP Books, 2013

Stuart Bonnington

Benton describes political correctness as a way of thinking that classifies certain groups of people as victims of society who should be treated differently from other people in order to correct perceived injustices and to shield them from being offended. In many ways, this can be seen as an



admirable aim. When people are real victims who have suffered true injustice we ought to be seeking to do something to put things right. The living God who has revealed Himself in Christ is a God of justice (Deut. 32:4). But at this point the shift in our society toward atheism comes into play...without God (or at least an agreed meta-narrative for our civilisation), there can be no agreed moral framework. This is what postmodernism insists upon. But without a moral framework the whole

concept of justice, what is right and fair, is up for grabs. It is malleable...in seeking to "protect" those it deems victims, PC is quite willing to treat others unfairly as part of its process.'

The rest of the book explores the massive challenge, philosophically and morally, the PC mindset presents to Christianity in the areas of human sexuality, multiculturalism, pluralism

and feminism. His chapters on topics are models of clarity and brevity. Benton also places the popularity of *The Shack* and *Love Wins* in the proper context, revealing their compromise with the PC culture.

Christians in a PC World makes for sobering reading. It shows how far we have drifted in the West from the Bible. It clearly intimates that those who adhere to a consistent Christian worldview will increasingly clash with political correctness. This book will help unmask the challenge we face and help us prepare for the intensification of the battle which is upon us.

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Love's little triumphs

Little things count and the lowly can accomplish much

We habitually look for the remarkable events in life, which we are convinced make a difference. Hence there are many things that we view as rather trivial. God is no moral nit-picker (Mt. 23:23), so He does regard some things as relatively unimportant. Yet He is also the God who uses the lowly person (1 Cor. 1:26-28) and often lowly means.

Even the ardently moralistic anti-Christian novelist George Eliot glimpsed something of this when she wrote of Dorothea Casaubon in *Middlemarch*: “[The] effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

The Bible has a way of turning our assumptions upside down. It is true that there are significant figures in history who seem to make a greater impact than others, and there are, to cite Mark Noll, turning points in history. Yet Jesus puts with the prophets those who give even a cup of cold water to little ones (Mt. 10:42). He also went out of His way to commend a poor widow who gave two copper lepta – worth a few minutes’

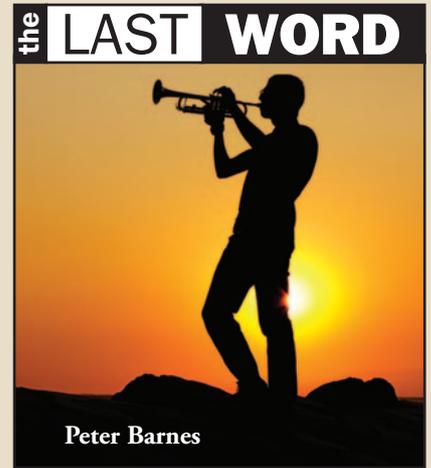
“Naaman wanted to be treated like a great man who happened to be a leper, but Elisha treats him like a leper who happened to be a great man.”

work for a farm labourer – to the temple offering box. Her giving was sacrificial; that of the wealthy was not (Luke 21:1-4). When Mary of Bethany poured expensive ointment over Jesus before His arrest, some of those present, including Judas, were critical about the waste. Not so Jesus who defends her simply: “She has done what she could” (Mark 14:8). J. C. Ryle writes that “the praise of Christ, at the last day, will more than compensate for all we suffer in this world from unkind tongues”.

The principle behind all this is found in the parable of the 10 minas. Here Jesus says to one servant: “Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little thing, you shall have authority over 10 cities” (Luke 19:17). Little things can be used by the Lord to do greater things. A cloud as small as a man’s hand can be the herald of drought-breaking rain (1 Kings 18:41-46).

It is the same with people. Charles Spurgeon’s conversion in 1850 came through a Primitive Methodist tailor or shoemaker who only spoke because a snowstorm had kept the assigned preacher from being there. The man was ill-prepared and all he could do was repeat and apply Isaiah 45:22. Spurgeon was convicted and convinced, and put his faith in Christ. Again, it was enough.

The contrast between the captured Israelite slave girl and Naaman, the Syrian commander who contracted leprosy, drives this home. God used a humble believer, in this case a servant girl who knew of Elisha, the man of God (2 Kings 5). While the physicians of Syria could do nothing for Naaman, God used a little girl to humble him.



What could this little girl do? A stranger in a strange land, she seems more helpless than most:

*The fields are all white,
And the reapers are few;
We children are willing
But what can we do
To work for our Lord in His harvest?*

What can little lips, little eyes, and little hearts accomplish? Much, if God be present. Take out the little girl, and nothing happens. Her role is lowly but vital.

When Naaman finally comes to Elisha’s place, the prophet does not even come to the door to see him, and does not make a fuss of this great man at all. At first, Naaman is furious when he is told to wash seven times in the dirty Jordan River. His pride is hurt; this is too demeaning. Alexander Maclaren says that Naaman wanted to be treated like a great man who happened to be a leper, but Elisha treats him like a leper who happened to be a great man. We find that God’s ways are simple, unexpected, and offensive. Only when Naaman believes like a child can he be healed (Matt. 18:3).

Nothing is too simple, too lowly, too unimportant for God. When the roll is called up yonder, it may well be that not only will the first be last and the last be first, but also that many small acts will have greatly enhanced the work of the kingdom and many acts acclaimed in both church and society may in fact have achieved little. Publicity distorts; the celebrity cult degrades; but the little things done with faith and love are momentous.

Peter Barnes is editor of AP

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