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editorial

I suspect that one of the reasons why modern evangelicals show little interest for reform in areas such as worship and church government is that the Christian community is largely imbued with the spirit of individualism. Iain Murray, in *Evangelicalism Divided*, traces this influence to Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who placed individual religious experience on a pedestal at the expense of doctrinal Christianity.

It is this emphasis on individualism which is the mark of our own age and which theologians such as Ed Clowney and Donald Bloesch warn us against. They see it as an obstacle to the reformation of the church. Bloesch has said: "We must be alert to the peril of individualism in which the quest of the solitary individual for union with the eternal eclipses the biblical vision of a community gathered together to hear the Word of God and to minister to the needs of the saints."

In today's culture, where mention of "spirituality" provokes far greater interest among Christians than the place and role of the church, it is perhaps not surprising that the idea of church reform has slipped off the evangelical agenda. Previous generations of Christians were keenly aware of the importance of the church in the fulfillment of God's purposes. They realised that the church had to be healthy if it was to undertake its role in an effective manner. Christians today have become too self-absorbed to see this.

Paul uses two images of the church that remind us that the issue of reformation remains a top priority. In 1 Timothy, he refers to the church as the "household" or "dwelling" of the living God and "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (3:15). In the Old Testament, the fact that God lived amongst His people meant that nothing unclean or indecent was to be found among them. And the fact that the church was a "pillar of the truth" meant that it was God's vehicle to lift up the truth to a watching world. Both these images remind us that the church has an ongoing responsibility to faithfully transmit the gospel and to guard its moral life. In short, the church must be committed to continual reformation.

Peter Hastie 

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Faithfully renewed

The gospel first, last and always for a healthy church.



Dr Mark E. Dever serves as the senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. He is also the executive director for 9 Marks (formerly The Centre for Church Reform, CCR) in Washington, D.C. 9 Marks encourages pastors of local churches to look to the Bible for instruction on how to organise and lead their churches.

Dr Dever has written several books. Perhaps his best-known is *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 2000, 2nd ed., 2004). He has also published *A Display of God's Glory — Basics of Church Structure: Deacons, Elders, Congregationalism, and Leadership*, *The Deliberate Church — Building Biblically in a Haphazard Age* (2005), which he co-wrote with Paul Alexander and *Promises Kept — The Message of the New Testament*, and a companion volume on the Old Testament. His passion for evangelism is seen in his book *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* published by Crossway Books.

Dr Dever received his Doctor of Philosophy in ecclesiastical history from



Mark Dever
talks to
Peter Hastie

Cambridge University, his Master of Theology from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Master of Divinity from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

He and his wife Connie live and minister with their son, Nathan, on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. His ministry website can be found at www.9marks.org

Is the idea of reforming the church biblical? For example, is the Reformation in the 16th century simply one aspect of a recurring theme that we find throughout the Scriptures?

What we see in the Bible is that God brings new life to people and transforms them by addressing them with His Word. This is a pattern in the history of Israel as well as in the New Testament. If we look,

for example at the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, we find that this is the way that God shapes His people. Ezra and Nehemiah gathered the people and read and instructed them in the Word of God. This is one very clear example of what happens on many different occasions in many different places. It means that your average Christian minister, who believes the Bible, must work again and again to preach the life-giving Word, then strive to reform and refashion the people of God according to that Word. Our claim is that the Reformed church must always be in the process of being reformed by the Word of God (*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*).

Ministers are the people who are charged with the frontline responsibility for the study and preaching of God's Word. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 that "all Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Isn't that interesting? Paul assumes that a minister can be

equipped for every good work that is part of his calling by the study of Scripture. I imagine that that would be a revelation for many ministers today.

Further, he goes on to say, "In the presence of God and Christ Jesus who will judge the living and the dead and in view of His appearing in His kingdom I give you this charge; preach the Word. Be prepared in season and out of season. Correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction." This command defines our ministry. Our fundamental calling is to preach the Word. We begin with our families and extend this ministry to the people within the church. And just as we remind our kids (sometimes 10 times over) of certain truths, so we patiently explain and apply the Word to our congregations. Further, we do it continuously because we know that God needs to address us time and time again. It requires great patience, but after all, God is very patient with us.

Do we see the principle of reformation at work in church history?

Yes, we certainly do. Perhaps the best-known example of it goes by the same name – "The Reformation" – which was a work of spiritual renewal in 16th century Europe. I know there are now quite a few scholars and church leaders who don't regard the Reformation in a positive light; they see it as an aberration. However, I want to say right off that the Reformation was not a mistake. It was an expression of an important biblical truth and it's definitely not over. God wants it to continue.

The Reformation was a period when the Holy Spirit awakened the sleeping church and taught it some vital lessons about God, the nature of salvation and the importance of biblical worship and ministry. It was a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit that reminded the church that the ministry of preaching was not conferred at the hands of a bishop – as though bishops stood in some special line of apostolic succession – but was a gift of the Holy Spirit given according to His will. We don't need a bishop to consecrate us to be effective preachers; what we need most of all is God's Spirit and the gifts that He supplies for the task. The Reformation was a time when people recovered that understanding.

I am convinced that the Reformation is a model for us of God's kindness and grace that we must never forget. Incidentally, there is a superb book coming out soon on this subject. Michael

Reeves has written a book for IVP UK called *The Unquenchable Flame*, which is a wonderful new history of the Reformation. This is the best thing on the Reformation I have read in recent memory. It is an incredibly well-written introduction to an important phase of world history. There are chapters on the background of the Reformation, Luther, Calvin, the Church of England, and then a kind of postscript. He presents the Reformation as a conflict over the nature of the Gospel and its recovery in the 16th century. He is a very astute historian.

If it's a biblical principle, is there a problem if the words "reformation" or "revival" are hardly used in the Scriptures? Does that mean that the ideas lack sufficient biblical grounding?

No, the ideas of reformation and revival are definitely biblical concepts. I think it's quite clear that we see a pattern of new life and formation in Scripture, which is followed by a period of falling away, and then God's people experience renewal and reformation. We have a dramatic picture of this process in Ezekiel 37, where the prophet gives us a vision of a valley of dry bones which suddenly come back to life. Actually, the biggest "re-" word that we have in the New Testament is "regeneration" or being "born again". Essentially, we are talking about people receiving spiritual life who have been unresponsive towards God. So I think the words "regeneration", "revival" and "reformation" are certainly biblical concepts. They describe a pattern that we can discern throughout the course of biblical history.

If there is a pattern of regeneration, decline, revival and reformation in biblical history, how should we expect to see it played out in our personal experience and the life of the church?

First of all, I think we need to avoid a mechanical view of this pattern. For instance, I don't think you and I will necessarily see each of these phases played out during our lifetimes. We certainly see

the pattern repeated in Scripture and in the history of the church, but it's difficult to point to such a process in any one individual's life.

What this means, as we see supremely in the book of Revelation, is that we should not be discouraged by setbacks in the church and evidence of decline. Of course, we should grieve when these things happen but we shouldn't lose heart. The reality is that God's work in this world may look small but it will grow. God can bring new life and reform to a church which appears to be dead. We know that from God's word.

If there is a pattern of spiritual decline and renewal that we find constantly repeating in the Scriptures, do you think that it's understood by church leaders today?

Some see it, but many don't. The basic pattern is that we find ourselves in bondage to sin; God sends an evangelist to us with His message of redemption; we listen to that message as it is patiently taught; and then the Spirit, who owns and inspires the work, changes our hearts and gives us the gifts of repentance and faith. This leads ultimately to the transformation of our lives and the community in which the church finds itself. Of course, the degree of change will vary, but I am continually encouraged by the many stories I hear of God bringing revival and reformation to the church.

Incidentally, Iain Murray has written a book that I highly recommend called *Revival and Revivalism*. He has another one dealing with similar issues, *After Pentecost*. In *After Pentecost* he argues that revival is the extraordinary blessing of God on the ordinary means of grace. I think that's a good way to look at it. In America we have been highly affected by a revivalist way of doing Christianity which became popular through the influence of Charles Finney and Iain looks at how this happened in *Revival and Revivalism*. Although the book deals with a period of history that is unknown to many readers, if you don't get hung-up over some of the names and focus instead on the themes, then you'll find the book very profitable.

I know that there are some scholars in Reformed circles who claim that a focus on revival and reformation has a tendency to make us overly concerned with our own spiritual state. I recognise that it's possible for this to happen, but I don't think it overcomes the legitimate concerns of the Puritans and theologians like

Jonathan Edwards who encouraged believers to engage in proper self-examination. After all, the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves." I think Edwards and the Puritans were right to invite us to test ourselves to see if the genuine marks of the Holy Spirit's presence can be seen in our lives.

Is it fair to call the letter to the seven churches in the book of Revelation a call to revival and reformation? The risen Christ says, "Remember from where you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first".

I am not sure that we have a definition as such, but we certainly have several examples of it. One interesting point about these seven letters is that only two of the churches avoid Christ's criticism. Some of His criticisms of the other five churches are quite severe. However, Christ regards none of these churches as beyond hope. That's why He writes to all of them. Renewal and reformation are always possible.

Yes, but He does warn that if they fail to act they will lose their "lamp stand". That sounds pretty serious. Does this mean that pastors must be

constantly seeking spiritual renewal and reformation as a vital part of their ministry?

Yes, it does. However, pastors need to be careful that they do it in a biblical way. This means that our starting point is that we assume that everyone needs to be delivered from sin by confessing it and trusting in Christ continually. Therefore pastors need to be evangelising all the

As a pastor I need to be on the job all the time. The gravitational pull of sin is always there.

time and feeding the congregation with the gospel. We need to be faithful in using the means that God has ordained. It's the work of the Holy Spirit to use those means to bring about new life and repentance. I am conscious as a pastor that I need to be on the job all the time. The gravitational pull of sin is always there. This means that there's a tendency for us all to fall away from our first love of God. This is something that we will all experience until we reach glory. It's a part of the Christian life that we have to deal with until then. Paul

tells us about his daily struggle with sin in Romans 7, so it's a live issue for us all. There is always a need for revival and reform. Both you and I will face this issue at a personal level as pastors. We will need to keep a watch on ourselves. But there will never be a church that you and I will pastor that will not need to hear the gospel and the constant call to repentance and faith. We all need reviving, reforming and refashioning.

What, then, should a pastor's attitude be to the status quo?

Thankful for all that is good in the church and in people's lives and for what God has done thus far. At the same time we need to recognise that God's plan for us is to grow more and more into His likeness and this is a real possibility, even over the space of a year or two.

Since this is so, church members need to be taught consistently in the Scriptures and shown how they apply to our lives. This is unending work for pastors and we need to keep at it until people move on or are called home. John Bunyan captures the idea well in *Pilgrim's Progress*. The Christian life is a journey. The second section of the book, which is not as well-written as the first half, deals with the journey of his family. In this part of the book, Greatheart, the pastor figure, plays a prominent role throughout in helping them to complete their journey. When they finish it, he goes back to the gate again and picks up another band and takes them on their journey. That is our work, isn't it? It's never done this side of heaven, but it's always glorious.

Is it ever wise to leave the church altogether or should we stay in it and try to reform it?

Well, by leaving the church I am assuming that you mean the local church. And there are several questions here that would need to be asked. Is it because the church is no longer teaching the gospel? Is it something to do with the leadership or the pastor? There are a lot of questions that need to be raised.

Whenever we get somebody coming to join our church from another local evangelical church, it raises a lot of flags. If their church has changed its doctrinal position, or if they find that they are more comfortable with our understanding of the gospel, or our church's practices, then that may be okay. But even in that situation, we want to be very careful about their relationships with the members of the church to which they already belong.

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Sometimes people are running from sin in their personal relationships.

I don't know about Australia, but in America where we have a lot of poor teaching on the church, Christians tend to flit about from church to church. They act like consumers and go church-shopping. That's hard on the church and on them too. When they run from a situation, they often forfeit the opportunity to grow in their discipleship. You know, when you hang in on some finance committee that has a lot of difficulties, it's amazing how much you learn in terms of understanding people and serving them. When you stay there for the long haul, you get a better understanding of how God is patient and long-suffering with you and your own sin.

On the other hand, I certainly don't want to encourage someone to stay in a liberal church where the Bible is not taught. I take very seriously the warning in 2 Timothy 4:3: "The time will come when men will not teach sound doctrine but instead to suit their own desires they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what itching ears want to hear." It is very interesting that Paul blames not just the false teachers but the people who pay them. I, for one, would not want to be a member of a local church where the gospel is not being taught and where a false gospel is being peddled. I would feel that is wrong. If Christ died for me, and I am living my life for Him, then the last thing I want to do is to pay Satan on the side.

In view of the spiritual decline that we see around us in many places, what should be our response?

In Revelation 6:9, when the fifth seal of God's judgments is opened, John says, "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God and their testimony. And they called out in a loud voice, 'How long Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?' Then each of them was given a white robe and they were told to wait a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed was completed."

There is a lot to think about in those words. John is clearly talking about martyrs. It's interesting, I think, that even the martyrs have to be given a white robe of righteousness. They don't earn it by their deaths. But the point that I really want to make is this: as these people who witnessed for Christ cry out, God urges them

to be patient. He tells them to wait because there is more to unfold in God's plan. There is more suffering to come. It is not yet complete.

A little later, in Revelation 8:3, we see that the prayers of God's people will be answered. God will end the downward, gravitational pull of sin upon the world. But until it ends, we are called to endure with faith and hope as Christ endured the cross. He did that for the joys that were set before Him. This means we must never despair over the state of the church. God has a plan and He will deal with the problems in His own time.



If we are discouraged we need to refresh ourselves in God's great promises and mighty acts recorded in the Word.

Calvin, in his commentary on Titus, says Paul left many things unfinished in Crete and makes the point that it is not a short task to reform the church. What sort of attitude should Christian leaders have?

First, we must be assured that the church will win. Jesus has promised victory in Matthew 16:18. The church is not in mortal danger and its future is not in our hands. It's in the hands of Christ. So we need to take a deep breath of the air of non-alarm, of confidence and of triumph. That's where we start.

Second, we need to remember that a local congregation isn't the same thing as the universal church. In the mystery of God's ways He has closed down many congregations already. Further, if He takes a long time to return, there will undoubtedly be many more. In a sense, we need to disconnect ourselves from associating the apparent success of our local congregation with the certain success of the universal church that Jesus founded.

Third, we can also be confident of the spiritual safety of all those that God has chosen to glorify. So we don't have to worry about the ultimate safety of those we are shepherding. We want to care for them and we certainly feel great empa-

thy and urgency at certain moments in their journey as Christians. But it's with that calmer perspective, knowing that God is sovereign over all that He is doing in our local church, that we undertake our work.

Further, in 1 Corinthians 12-14 we learn that God the Holy Spirit is sovereign over the way He gifts His church. This helps me as a local pastor to feel confident and joyful even if I find myself in a pastoral situation that looks like a disaster. At least I know what to do. I am called to love God and love His people, to teach God's Word, and to leave it up to God as to what happens. I want to see people saved; I want to see people grow in Christ-likeness and I will work tirelessly to that end, although I know it is ultimately God's work. He owns it and He finishes it. This, I think, is the right combination of confidence and urgency that we are meant to have.

Should a pastor ever get discouraged at the pace of biblical change taking place?

Well, it's quite natural to get discouraged. We certainly see Jeremiah getting discouraged as he watches things getting worse and worse. Ezekiel must have been very frustrated that he was prophesying to a people who would not listen to him. That is not an encouraging call, is it? We trust that God was glorified in it. However, if you or I were in the same position, no doubt we might feel rather low. But that shouldn't lead us into despair.

If we are discouraged we need to refresh ourselves in God's great promises and His mighty acts recorded in the Word and we need to pray for His help. I think it also helps to talk to ministerial friends. Don Carson has a great perspective on this in his book, *How Long O Lord*. Martin Lloyd-Jones's book, *Spiritual Depression*, is also helpful at many points



too. Another book on the same subject that is well worth a look is John Piper's *How to Fight for Joy*.

Was Israel's request for a king during the days of Samuel typical of the main problems of spiritual decline that we face today such as the church's desire to be successful in the world's eyes?

Yes, it was. Israel wanted to be like the powerful nations around them. They wanted to be able to trust in something visible rather than make the invisible God their hope. We see the same tendency in the church today where people want immediate and visible signs of success. For example, they want to have impressive church buildings and celebrity leaders. I think it's an unhealthy emphasis where people want to rely on visible leaders rather than God Himself, or on apparent visible success rather than the spiritual work that is going on. Those are just few ways that I can think of.

The Bible tells us that Solomon was very successful as a king and was admired for his wisdom, even though he was following other gods. Is it possible to have a "successful" church and still be following the spirit of the age?

I am sad to say that it is. You know, you can have a growing church in a number of immediately apparent ways, but it may not be growing healthier as a whole. God, in His kindness, may be growing a few saints in such a place but it will not be a good environment for spiritual growth long-term. The people there will be like the boys in Daniel 1 who ate the bad food instead of the boys who ate the Hebrew food, the good food. They might have some signs of being well nourished in the short-term, but they

will only be healthy long-term if they eat the right things.

In what ways does Solomon show us that spiritual decline is often associated with our choice of marriage partners?

Well, there is no doubt at all that your marriage partner will have a significant influence on the expression of your personal faith. The Bible tells us that spiritual adultery and idolatry are closely related.

Proverbs contains all kinds of warning about the influence that other people can exercise over us. Solomon tells us about

I always tell people that what I was looking for in a wife was somebody who loved Jesus much more than I did.



the kind of friends we should keep around us. In a lot of ways you can tell what a person is going to be like next year by the friends he has this year. Well, it's the same with a marriage partner.

So, I always tell people that what I was looking for in a wife was somebody who loved Jesus much more than I did. And I always prayed for a partner who'd keep me on the straight and narrow if I was ever tempted to turn aside. And that's what I got with Connie. We have been married 27 years and she has been a wonderful wife to me. She loves the Lord and she loves me. And, you know, she has

really helped me to grow as a Christian and has represented the Gospel better than I have to our children. That's what you want in a wife: someone who will provoke you every day by their love and good deeds to love the Lord more fully. And that's what the Lord gave me in Connie.

What sort of priority do you give to preparing people for marriage in your ministry at Capitol Hill?

Well, because our congregation is quite young it's pretty important. We have a Sunday School class that meets from 9:30 to 10:30 on Sunday mornings and for two months of the year we schedule this topic as one of the options. We also have one-off lectures that we give to the single guys as well as the single girls in the congregation, and that usually happens once a year.

What sort of topics do you cover?

We cover the purpose of gender; the purpose of friendship; the purpose of sex; how to conduct a relationship with another woman or man honourably; how to move from friendship to marriage as well as how not to do it; how you can wrongly lead another person along and the unkindness involved in that; and finally, the specific privileges you should leave for marriage. They're just a few of the things we touch on.

Calvin says in his tract on reforming the church that there are two main areas where we have to get it right – understanding the gospel accurately and worshipping God. Do you agree?

I do, but we need to remember that Calvin was writing in a context where the worship of the church was corrupted by the teaching of the Mass. Getting the gospel right and changing what the church did when they gathered for worship was essentially the same problem in the Roman Catholic setting of late medieval Geneva and France.

For us, in evangelical churches, we supposedly have the gospel. Therefore, the question for us is, "How much do our services of public worship reflect that?" Sometimes I think we forget how God is present with us through the gospel. Evangelical services often give the impression that we somehow have to "rev up" God's presence by getting excited. If we understand the gospel properly we will realise that this is something that we don't have to do.

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There is another area, too, where we need to consider what is appropriate in worship. It's in the area of novelty. There is a certain sense in which we have a responsibility to do new or fresh things. "Sing to the Lord a new song!" Ministers have to preach fresh sermons and pray under the direction of the Spirit. However, the fact remains that we do a very poor job of understanding the place of repetition in public worship. Have you noticed how children love to hear their favourite stories told over and over again? Peter, when you and I are on our death beds we will be singing a hymn that we know, not one that we have just learned.

What, like *Jesus loves me* or *Amazing Grace*?

Yes, or *It Is Well With My Soul* or *When I Survey*. New is often good, but repetition is also good and that is the half that evangelicals don't seem to understand very well. When I conduct a wedding, a funeral, a baptism or the Lord's Supper, or when we set apart new elders, we always use the same words. A lot of the words I use have been borrowed from people like Thomas Cranmer. These words have been in English for a long time. They represent biblical truth, and I have been using them at this one congregation for 15 years now. The repetition of these words is really the equivalent of catechising the congregation, especially when I use the words of the Ten Commandments or the Apostle's Creed. It is a good thing for Christians to do.

Also, we need to remember that in our sermons it is far more important that we emphasise what God has done for us through Christ than concentrate on our responsibilities and obligations that we have as believers. Naturally, we mustn't omit this important element. I am a Puritan at heart; I love applying the Scriptures, but the most fundamental thing that I must do as a preacher is to put the stress on what God has done for us in Christ and not on what I am required to do.

Paul wrote to the Galatians to arrest a sudden spiritual decline in their church. What was it that led to such a rapid collapse in their spiritual life together; and to what extent was false teaching to blame?

False teaching was very much to blame. It is always dangerous, especially when it undermines the grace of God and makes our own works part of the salvation equation.

In the first chapter of the letter it becomes clear that they had fallen for a "different gospel" and now believed that their actions had become the grounds for their right standing with God. At this point, Paul says that they had departed from the gospel and he wanted to be quite clear about this. It is interesting how he deals with the problem. He was very theological in chapters 1-4 but by chapter 5 he is saying, "Look, you can tell this false gospel has had an effect on you because you are acting in ways that indicate that you are not being led by the Spirit. You are obviously being controlled by the flesh. However, if you act in this other way, then it will be clear that the Spirit is producing His fruit in you." So, looking for the presence of the fruit of the Spirit was a part of how God, through Paul, was instructing these Christians to do a spiritual self check-up.

An increasingly influential group within evangelicalism believes that the Reformation in the 16th century was a mistake or is no longer relevant.

Is the modern evangelical church in danger of losing the gospel? Do you see disturbing trends across the common scene at the moment?

There are worrying trends in the wider

evangelical movement. I don't have any unusual comments to make that haven't already been made by people like David Wells, James Davidson Hunter, Os Guinness and Don Carson. I am concerned about the extent to which modern evangelicals are trying to conform to our culture. It's almost as though many evangelicals are afraid to stand apart from it.

Another concern that I have is that there is an increasingly influential group of people within evangelicalism who believe that the Reformation in the 16th century was a mistake or is no longer relevant. Today we have well-known Christian leaders, publishers, campus ministries and organisations which were founded 50 to 70 years ago to preach the gospel that the Reformers preached of God's free grace through faith alone in Christ alone.

However, these leaders and organisations are now saying we will drop the "alone". "Rome has always said through faith so be satisfied with that." They are sounding more and more like Roman Catholics. While I certainly think that many individual Roman Catholics can be saved, the only way they can be saved is by believing the Bible and not what their own church teaches. They must be trusting in Christ alone if they are to be saved, and Rome has specifically anathematised what we understand to be the gospel. It is for this reason that I am concerned too about increasing numbers of people who are attracted to the New Perspectives views of scholars like Tom Wright. ap

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No soft soap

The gospel is confronting. Compromising on that is a betrayal.

Recently, the 11th edition of the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary was published. The reprint included 10,000 new words – words that will bring us all up to date. Words like “phat” (excellent), “dead presidents” (paper currency), and “McJob” (low paying, dead-end job) are among the entries that will finally help us communicate with our teenagers.

How did those words make it into the updated dictionary? There is one criterion: usage. A word qualifies for the new edition based on how widespread its usage has become. While I can't imagine how phat, McJob, and dead presidents will find a place in America's pulpits (e.g., “The love of *dead presidents* is the root of all kinds of evil?”), there is one phrase borrowed from the computer industry that has spread into mainstream usage in the church – its impact has been monumental.

“User-friendly” was first used to describe software and hardware that is easy for the novice to operate. Applied to the church, it describes churches that offer a decidedly benign and non-challenging ministry model. In practice, it has become an excuse for importing worldly amusements into the church in an attempt to attract non-Christian “seekers” or the “unchurched” by appealing to their fleshly interests. The obvious fallout of this preoccupation with the unbelievers is a corresponding neglect of true believers and their spiritual needs.

If you want to know how user-friendly



John MacArthur

a church has become, the emphasis, or de-emphasis, on biblical preaching is the yardstick. A church that buys into the new paradigm sidelines provocative and convicting sermons for music, skits, or videos – less confrontational mediums for

The obvious fallout of this preoccupation with the unbelievers is a corresponding neglect of true believers and their spiritual needs.

conveying the message. Even when there is a sermon, it is frequently psychological and motivational rather than biblical. Above all, entertainment value and user-friendliness are paramount.

I once read through a stack of newspaper and magazine articles

that highlight a common thread in the user-friendly phenomenon. These observations from newspaper clippings describe the preaching in user-friendly churches:

“There is no fire and brimstone here... Just practical, witty messages.”

“Services at (the church featured in the article) have an informal feeling. You won't hear people threatened with hell or referred to as sinners. The goal is to make them feel welcome, not drive them away.”

“As with all clergymen (this pastor's) answer is God – but he slips Him in at the end, and even then doesn't get heavy. No ranting, no raving. No fire, no brimstone. He doesn't even use the H-word. Call it Light Gospel. It has the same salvation as the Old-Time Religion, but with a third less guilt.”

“The sermons are relevant, upbeat, and best of all, short. You won't hear a lot of preaching about sin and damnation, and hell fire. Preaching here doesn't sound like *preaching*. It is sophisticated, urbane, and friendly talk. It breaks all the stereotypes.”

“(The pastor) is preaching a very upbeat message... It's a salvationist message, but the idea is not so much being saved from the fires of hell. Rather, it's being saved from meaninglessness and aimlessness in this life. It's more of a soft-sell.”

So the new rules may be summed up like this: Be clever, informal, positive, brief, friendly, and never, *never* use the H-word.

The pastors and leaders in the church-growth movement certainly wouldn't portray their own ministries in that way. In fact, they would probably laud their success in drawing people into the church without compromising the message. But they fail to understand that by decentralising the Scripture and avoiding hard truths, they are compromising. “For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels” (Luke 9:26, emphasis added). If the design is to make the seeker comfortable, isn't that rather incompatible with the Bible's own emphasis on sin, judgment, hell, and several other important topics?

The gospel message *is* a confrontational message. When you remove the confrontation – or soften, downplay, or bring it in through the back door – you have compromised the message. The modern pulpit is weak, not for a lack of

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witty messages, but because men fear to speak the hard truths of God's Word powerfully and with conviction.

The church is certainly not suffering from an overabundance of forthright preachers; rather, it seems glutted with men-pleasers (cf. Gal. 1:10). But, as it was in the early church, when men are faithful to preach God's Word with boldness, God will give the increase. "And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching... then fear came upon every soul... and the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42, 43, 47).

When a sinner wanders into the church and sits through skits, mimes, interpretive dances, and the like, and yet never hears a clear, convicting message about his dangerous and tenuous spiritual situation – that he is a depraved sinner headed for an eternal fire because he is a daily offence to a holy God – how can that be called successful? You could achieve the same level of success by sending a cancer patient to receive treatment from a group of children playing doctor. A sinner must understand the imminent danger he is in if he is ever to look to the Saviour.

CH. Spurgeon, facing a similar mindset in his day, once said: "I fear there are some who preach with the view of *amusing* men, and as long as people can be gathered in crowds, and their ears can be tickled, and they can retire pleased with what they have heard, the orator is content, and folds his hands, and goes back self-satisfied. But Paul did not lay himself out to please the public and collect the crowd. If he did not save them he felt that it was of no avail to interest them. Unless the truth had pierced their hearts, affected their lives, and made new men of them, Paul would have gone home crying, 'Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?'

"Now observe, brethren, if I, or you, or any of us, or all of us, shall have spent our lives merely in amusing men, or educating men, or moralising men, when we shall come to give our account at the last great day we shall be in a very sorry condition, and we shall have but a very sorry record to render; for of what avail will it be to a man to be educated when he comes to be damned? Of what service will it be to him to have been amused when the trumpet sounds, and heaven and earth are shaking, and the pit opens wide her jaws of fire and swallows up the soul unsaved? Of what avail even

to have moralised a man if still he is on the left hand of the judge, and if still, 'Depart, ye cursed,' shall be his portion?" ("Soul Saving Our One Business," *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 25, London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1879.)

That is precisely my concern about




The modern pulpit is weak, not for a lack of witty messages, but because men fear to speak the hard truths of God's Word powerfully and with conviction.

today's pragmatic church-growth trend. The strategy focuses on attracting and keeping the unchurched. For what? To entertain them? To get them to attend church meetings regularly? Merely "churching" the unchurched accomplishes nothing of eternal value.

That is where their strategy seems to end.

What's worse is when seeker-focused churches baptize the masses with their watered-down gospel, assuring them that positive decisions, feelings, or affirmations about Christ equal genuine conversion. There are now multitudes who are not authentic Christians identifying with the church. The church is literally invaded with the world's values, the world's interests, and the world's citizens. It isn't an invasion prompted by overt hostility; people are simply responding to a survey that came in the mail. Ironically, Satan isn't sowing the tares; church leaders are.

As you set your strategy for church ministry, you dare not overlook the primary means of church growth: the straightforward, Christ-centered proclamation of the unadulterated Word of God. If you trade the Word for amusements or gimmicks, you will not only find that you have no effective means to reach people with the truth of Christ, but you will find yourself working against the Lord Himself.

Noted evangelical writer and minister John MacArthur is pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in California. 

"THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL. BUT THE LABORERS ARE FEW"

MATT. 9:37

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IN THE LORD WE TRUST

Letters from Jesus

Reformation will come only through rediscovering God's Word.

Imagine if the Lord Jesus Christ had appeared in His glory to one of His apostles, with letters to be delivered to several of His churches. These letters would deal with local situations, but would also convey general and universal principles to all Christians. If Jesus had done this, and if the letters were preserved in the New Testament, surely they would wield vast influence among Christians and churches of all times.

In fact, Jesus did commission the apostle John to provide letters to seven churches in Asia Minor, and these letters are recorded in chapters two and three of the book of Revelation. Yet, surprisingly, these letters exert little influence on the thinking of Christians today.

There is no reason to think that their message is any less relevant, nor Christ's mandate for reformation any less authoritative, now than it was in the late first century. If the writer of Hebrews was right in saying that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8), then it is imperative for churches to embrace Christ's ancient call to reformation and heed the warnings he issued to his churches of old.

The seven letters of Revelation 2-3 are preceded by the vision of Christ in chapter 1. Here, Jesus appears in His majesty as Lord, bearing His emblems of sovereignty, glory, and power. John was brought to his Master the way that Moses was brought to Mount Sinai, with a trumpet blast summoning him to divinity (Ex. 19:16, 19; 20:18); like Ezekiel, the voice he heard was "like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army" (Eze. 1:24).

Jesus' voice, so often heard at John's side during His earthly life, comes forth now as the voice of the Almighty. Jesus is "one like a son of man" (v. 13), an allusion to the vision of Daniel 7, and dressed in the robe and golden sash of the true high priest (Ex. 28:4; 29:9). He is the Great Prophet, with "a sharp two-edged sword" coming from His mouth (Is. 49:2). John worships Him as the high and holy king, falling down like Isaiah for the sense of his own defilement. Jesus is the Lord Almighty, reign-



Richard D. Phillips

ing in power in His threefold office of prophet, priest and king.

This vision also highlights Christ's present relationship to the church. John sees Him standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands. In His right hand are seven stars which "are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands

Jesus' interactions with His ancient churches should disabuse us of the possibility of neutrality when it comes to matters of truth.



are the seven churches" (v. 20). The seven letters that follow are each addressed "to the angel of the church" in that place. Jesus probably means a guardian angel charged with protecting God's people in a certain place (see Dan. 10:12-13). The stars and lampstands also indicate the function of the churches. Dennis Johnson writes, "Stars and lampstands both speak of the churches as reflecting the light of their King, but the lampstands highlight His presence and the stars emphasize His protective possessiveness."

Here, then, is the picture: the exalted Christ is Lord Almighty of the church, among which He himself walks, which He possesses and protects, and in which He seeks the display of His own glory and light.

Jesus' appearance anticipates the content of the messages He will send. From His mouth comes the sword of God's Word, and this He expects to see pro-

claimed, defended, and applied in the church. His appearance and clothing speak of priestly holiness, and these he seeks in those who follow him. As He holds the churches as lights in His hand, He looks to them to shine the light of the gospel in the world. Since He holds, as He tells John, "the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18), so He speaks to the church as One who can enforce His commands and reward those who remain faithful.

First, the seven letters highlight the importance that Jesus attaches to *upholding the truth* in His church. His first letter praised the Ephesians for testing those falsely claiming to be apostles, as well as for opposing the heresy of "the Nicolaitans" (2:2, 6). Just as Moses charged the Israelites with testing a supposed prophet for his conformity to the Scriptures (Dt. 13:1-5), so all teaching in Christ's church is to be assessed for its biblical fidelity. Jesus thus praised the Ephesians because they "tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false" (Rev 2:2).

Today, those who test doctrines and challenge false teaching are despised as being narrow-minded and uncharitable. But Jesus praised those who carefully guarded the truth within His church. According to Dennis Johnson, the politically incorrect and intolerant Ephesians merely "reflected Jesus' intolerance of poisonous lies and of liars who prey on his sheep."

Jesus took a similar stance towards the church at Pergamum, which held to the truth in the face of deadly persecution (2:13). Nonetheless, they came under His criticism for permitting false teaching that encouraged licentiousness (which seems to be the point of "the teaching of Balaam") as well as the Nicolaitan heresy (2:14-15). It is noteworthy that while only some people had gone in for these false teachings, the whole church was charged by our Lord for permitting it. Similarly, the church in Thyatira was charged for permitting a figure Jesus identifies as "that woman Jezebel", whose false teaching led to sexual immorality and idolatry (2:20).

Jesus' interactions with His ancient churches should disabuse us of the possibility of neutrality when it comes to matters of truth. There are good reasons for us to avoid controversy; we should neither seek it nor love it. But Christ charges His church to reject neutrality when it comes to the truth of His Word. There is fidelity to Christ and there is friendship with the world. Faithful churches, which receive His commendation and blessing, are those that fiercely stand against the worldly currents of errors and lies.

Christ's call to single-mindedness is also revealed in the second theme of His seven letters: His urgent insistence on *holy living*. False teachers in Pergamum led believers to "eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality" (2:14), and the "Jezebel" in Thyatira is condemned for "seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols" (2:20). Jesus is urgently concerned, then, over His peoples' sensual sin and involvement in idolatry.

These warnings are coupled with severe warnings. Jesus makes clear that trials suffered in the church are His response to their gross immorality, a warning many evangelical churches ought seriously to consider today (2:21-23). Jesus holds churches responsible for the dissolute among them, and He treasures those who have pursued purity. To Sardis, He writes, "Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy" (3:4).

The third theme that dominates these letters is Jesus' unflinching zeal for *gospel mission*. He emphasises both the witness of the church and its ministry of mercy and justice. Ephesus is called back to the works of her first days, when together with Paul and his associates they "turned the world upside-down" (Acts 17:6) by their ministry of word and deed. Works of ministry are emphasised in the letters to Sardis and Laodicea, both of which have substituted a false glory for the true glory of gospel mission.

What does Jesus demand of His churches? According to the letters to the churches in Revelation, the exalted Lord demands a zeal for Scriptural truth (seen in testing and opposing false teachers), holy living (especially sexual purity and the rejection of cultural idols), and gospel mission (through the witness of both word and deed). To uphold these mandates is to conquer: "The one who conquers," He concludes, "I will grant him to

sit with Me on My throne, as I also conquered and sat down with My Father on His throne" (3:21). But to churches and professing Christians who refuse the Lord's reformation call, He warns: "If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you" (3:3).

As Almighty Lord, Jesus calls His churches to triumph and persevere in the world, in spite of the fierce opposition to true and saving Christianity. He depicts our situation in stark terms that few are willing to conceive of today. Those who will not reform will have their lampstand removed from its place (2:5) – a judgment history records as being visited upon these seven churches, which now consist only of mounds of rubble. Against those who fail to guard the truth Jesus "will come... and wage war against them with the sword of my mouth" (2:16). To those who will not repent of unholy living, He promises to "give to each of you as your works deserve" (2:23). To those who burn neither hot nor cold for His gospel, Jesus says, "I will spit you out of My mouth" (3:16). The Sovereign Lord calls all Christians to reformation: "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent" (3:19).

So what would Jesus have us do in order to reform our lives and churches? First, he urges us, to *remember*. Twice in these letters, Jesus gives this call: "Remember therefore from where you have fallen" (2:5); "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard" (3:3).

This means that if our churches are going to experience reformation today, it will be through a rediscovery of God's Word. James Montgomery Boice identified a lack of confidence in Scripture as perhaps the chief problem in the church today. He wrote, "It is possible to believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and yet to neglect it and effectually repudiate it just because we think that it is not sufficient to today's tasks and that other things need to be brought in to accomplish what is needed."

Jesus never merely threatens, but he also woos his bride with sweet promises, and these ought especially to enliven us today.

Because of a neglect of Scripture, churches today are increasingly governed by the principles of the world – therapeutic psychology, secular business practices, and even New Age mysticism – rather than the rule of Christ. He calls to us with the double-edged sword of his mouth: "Remember."

Coupled with the call for the church to remember is an urgent mandate to *repent*: "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first" (Rev. 2:5). "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent" (Rev. 3:3).

Jesus never merely threatens, but He also woos His purchased bride with sweet promises, and these ought especially to enliven us today to Christ's call to reformation. To those who press on in truth and in love, He says, "I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (2:7). Those who follow Him to the end "will not be hurt by the second death" (2:11). Jesus adds His gift of "the hidden manna... and a white stone" (2:17). He promises authority to those who conquer, "and I will give him the morning star" (2:28).

Having sprinkled His seven letters with these marvelous incentives, Jesus concludes His reformation charge with the greatest incentive of all: Christ's gift of Himself: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with Me on My throne, as I also conquered and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (3:20-22).

Richard D. Phillips is senior minister of Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina.

ap

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Our best day

The Puritans understood that, for believers, death is no calamity.

Most people think about their own death as a fearful prospect, but the title of a famous Puritan funeral sermon offers a pleasing alternative: a believer's last day on earth is his or her best day.

The Puritans of the 16th and 17th centuries produced a wealth of writing that can be read devotionally. They were at their devotional "best" in a genre that falls into the category of "best kept secrets", namely, funeral sermons. By the time a Puritan funeral sermon found its way into print, it had often been expanded into a small book. Puritan funeral sermons announce a single Bible verse at the outset, but as the sermons unfold they almost always become a mosaic of evocative verses on the subjects of death, heaven, and immortality. Some of these sermons are small anthologies of choice Bible verses.

When Thomas Brooks preached a sermon at the funeral of Mrs Martha Randall at Christ's Church, London, on June 28, 1651, he chose a title that is a stroke of genius. By calling a believer's last day on earth his or her best day, Brooks at once demolished the conventional view of death as an earthly calamity. The following excerpt brings together a few key passages from the sermon.

Death is a believer's coronation day and marriage day.

Death is a change of our imperfect and incomplete enjoyments of God, for a more complete and perfect enjoyment of Him. As no believer has a *clear* sight of God here, so no believer has a *full* and *perfect* sight of God here. In Job 26:14, how little a portion is heard of him — speaking of God — and of what is heard, ah how little a portion is understood! It is an excellent expression that Augustine has: "The glorious things of heaven are so many — that they exceed number; so precious — that they exceed estimation; so great — that they exceed measure!" Bernard says, "For Christ to be with Paul was the greatest security — but for Paul to be with Christ was the chief happiness!"

...
When death shall give the fatal stroke,



Leland Ryken

there shall be an exchange of earth — for heaven; of imperfect enjoyments — for perfect enjoyments of God; then the soul shall be swallowed up with a full enjoyment of God; no corner of the soul shall be left empty — but all shall be filled up with the fullness of God. Here in this present world, they receive grace — but in

Death is another Moses: it delivers believers out of bondage, and from making bricks in Egypt. It is a day or year of jubilee to a gracious spirit.

heaven they shall receive glory. God keeps the best wine until last; the best of God, Christ, and heaven — is beyond this present world. Here we have but some sips, some tastes of God; fullness is reserved for the glorious state. He who sees most of God here on earth, sees but

His back parts; His face is a jewel of that splendour and glory, which no eye can behold but a glorified eye.

The best of Christians are able to take in but little of God; their hearts are like the widow's vessel, which could receive but a little oil. Sin, the world, and creatures do take up so much room in the best hearts, that God gives out Himself little by little, as parents give sweets to their children. But in heaven God will communicate Himself fully at once to the soul! Grace shall then be swallowed up of glory! ...

Death is another Moses: it delivers believers out of bondage, and from making bricks in Egypt. It is a day or year of jubilee to a gracious spirit — the year wherein he goes out free from all those cruel taskmasters which it had long groaned under ... Death is a believer's coronation-day, it is his marriage-day. It is

a rest from sin, a rest from sorrow, a rest from afflictions and temptations, etc. Death to a believer is an entrance into Abraham's bosom, into paradise, into the "New Jerusalem," into the joy of his Lord...

Christians! what is your whole life — but a day to fit for the hour of death? What is your great business in this world — but to prepare and fit for the eternal world? It was a sad speech of Caesar Borgia, who being on his deathbed said, "When I lived, I provided for everything but death! Now I must die, and am unprovided to die." Ah, Christians! you have need every day to pray with Moses, "Lord, teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom," Psalm 90:12 ...

See that Christ be your Lord and Master, ... and then your dying-day shall be to you as the day of harvest to the *farmer*, as the day of deliverance to the *prisoner*, as the day of coronation to the *king*, and as the day of marriage to the *bride*. Your dying-day shall be a day of *triumph* and *exaltation*, a day of *freedom* and *consolation*, a day of *rest* and *satisfaction*!

Leland Ryken is professor of English at Wheaton College. The text of Thomas Brooks' sermon can be found at http://www.gracegems.org/Brooks/a_believers_last_day.htm In the six-volume Works of Thomas Brooks, published by Banner of Truth Trust, the sermon appears in volume 6 (pages 339-408).

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One of the factors that sparked the Protestant Reformation nearly 500 years ago was the discovery that the God of the Bible was a God of grace who revealed the depth of His love and mercy in the gift of Jesus His Son. The church had been able to manipulate people's lives by keeping them in bondage to fear, preaching a message that made heaven a reward for good deeds, and made punishment in purgatory for bad deeds an inevitable part of the process for getting there! The Reformers' liberating "good news" of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, was gladly embraced by humble, God-fearing people who longed for peace in their hearts – a peace that their loving heavenly Father intended them to enjoy.

We are faced with the opposite problem today. The common theme in churches at the beginning of the 21st century is an emphasis on God's love and mercy that virtually refuses to acknowledge anything to do with His anger at sin, His eternal rejection of all who spurn His offer of salvation, and His promised coming in judgement when Christ returns.

Of all the reformers, John Calvin is probably the one who got the balance right. His focus on both the sovereignty of God and the gospel of His grace, not letting either diminish the other, is one that the church must capture again. Isaiah's prophecy helps us to do that. Isaiah was given the formidable task of declaring God's pending judgement on a rebellious people who ignored His covenant requirements while taking His covenant love for granted! We are in danger of making the same grave mistake.

Bruce Christian ▶

DAY 1

Chariots... horses... God

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 21:1-10

THE POINT In chapters 13-20, under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, Isaiah has been revealing to God's covenant nation His plans to bring judgement on the wickedness of the surrounding major powers which presented a constant threat to their security, peace and prosperity. There he had targeted Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Syria, Cush and Egypt. He now intensifies his message against that great godless nation that becomes the symbol of the ultimate demise of every arrogant authority that sets itself up against God's rightful rule in His world (cf Revelation 18).

THE PARTICULARS

- "Desert by the Sea" was perhaps a derogatory term for

Babylon, drawing attention to the land's parched terrain in spite of the proximity of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea (1).

- God gives Isaiah a glimpse of future events to share with Judah to warn and encourage them (10). Why seek aid from Babylon whose powerful rise would be short-lived and who would face inconceivable destruction even in the midst of their victory celebrations (5)! Assyria, Babylon, Media ... kingdoms will rise and kingdoms will fall – but only as the sovereign LORD directs.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is the Church today too ready to depend on human resources and methods rather than trusting God to give us His victory?

DAY 2

Big picture thinking

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 21:11-17

THE POINT We sometimes despair of the situation in the Middle East as we see no solution to the problem. The different Semitic peoples are forever at war over things for which no compromise position exists, or is even possible, in spite of the urgent need for peace and the cessation of bloodshed. It is good to be reminded: God still rules and all these skirmishes are a part of His big picture.

THE PARTICULARS

- Israel's cousins – Dumah, in Ishmael's line (Genesis 25:13-14), and the inhabitants of Seir, descendants of Esau/Edom, were excluded from God's covenant line, and so would be a constant thorn in Jacob/Israel's side. God would lead His

Church, His people through seasons of darkness (night) and times of blessing (morning, cf Psalm 30:5), and this will continue throughout all history until Jesus returns in power. We should keep waiting on God, listening to His voice, and trusting Him alone (11-12).

- Other descendants of Abraham listed in Genesis 25 (Dedan, 3; Tema, 13; and Kedar, 15) are also subject to God's sovereign working in history on behalf of His chosen people; we must hold on tightly to His covenant promises, and trust, and wait (13-17).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Do you let relatively small problems rob you of God's peace?

DAY 3

Valley of no vision

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 22:1-13

THE POINT Jerusalem was the home of God's prophets, the place where He revealed His will and His ways to His people through His chosen delegates. It should have been in reality a Valley of Vision. But instead there was only chaos and confusion. Soon Isaiah will say: "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it." (30:15) Sadly, but typically, God's people were not willing to take up His gracious offer, preferring rather to continue in their own rebellious ways and reap the disastrous results. Any comfort to be had from God's promised judgement on their wicked, godless neighbours, Babylon, Edom and Arabia, is completely lost while ever they try to solve their own

problems independently of Him.

THE PARTICULARS

- How foolish it is when God's people worry themselves into inactivity and defeat when God's help is so close at hand, and especially when His power to help is already proven (1-4)!
- Jerusalem's destruction is inevitable; but its residents are only "crying out to the mountains" (5; cf Psalm 121:1-2), shifting the deckchairs (6-11a), and having one last big fling (13), instead of seeking the LORD their Maker in repentance and faith (11b-12)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What is your vision for God's Church? Do you pray or worry?

DAY 4

The Key of David

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 22:14-25

THE POINT Ultimately, the rejection of God's saving grace cannot be atoned for (14; cf Hebrews 2:3; 6:6; 10:26-31). Shebna's function in the court of Hezekiah was like Joseph's in Pharaoh's court; but unlike Joseph, Shebna used his position for personal advantage, using the dwindling national resources to build a memorial to himself, and failing to acknowledge the sovereign rule of "the LORD Almighty". He would therefore be quite unceremoniously tossed from office, and replaced by someone who would fill the role appropriately. Eliakim would be this person, and in this sense would prefigure Christ, the "Servant" who would be the "true Israel" which the nation itself (depicted in Shebna) should have been (20-24; cf

Revelation 3:7). But, in spite of the relative stability Eliakim would bring, he too, like any human leader, will fail, making way for God to send His own Messiah, Jesus, to be the true and only Saviour for the world in disarray (25).

THE PARTICULARS

- God's Word is final in the spelling out of human history as it progresses to its culmination in the sending of a Saviour. The fact of Man's helpless plight in need of grace is non-negotiable!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Why is it that fallen humanity continues to remain deaf to what God declares, thinking it can work out its own salvation?

DAY 5

Pride comes before a fall

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 23:1-18

THE POINT Jesus was consistent with the message of the whole of Scripture when He spoke out strongly against the evil associated with the acquisition of wealth (cf Luke 6:24-26; 16:13-21). Tyre and Sidon were prosperous seaports, benefiting from the free flow of the Mediterranean shipping trade between Egypt, Tarshish (Spain), islands like Cyprus, and the Middle Eastern nations. Like any such port, its prosperity made its people proud and arrogant, with a feeling of security and self-sufficiency that had no place for God. But Isaiah was given the task of announcing its demise, a downfall to be directed by the LORD Almighty (the God of hosts, Israel's God) as He worked out His Plan in history (8-9). God's

instruments would be Assyria's Sennacherib in 701BC and, 130 years later, Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar. It is an important lesson to nations of all ages, especially our own!

THE PARTICULARS

- Tyre and Sidon's complacency about the sea's ongoing ability to "bear" them a fruitful economy is about to be crushed (1-12); even the great Babylon had fallen previously to Assyria (13)!
- Unscrupulous commerce can become no better than prostitution, and God distributes the earnings (14-18; cf Ecclesiastes 2:26)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What is God saying to us through the present financial crisis?

DAY 6

No respecter of persons

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 24:1-13

THE POINT God has been unfolding His Plan as it affected the fate of the different nations individually. He now turns our attention to the ultimate destiny of all people as the earth heads towards His final judgement against Man's sin and rebellion in accordance with His often repeated warnings and against the background of His justice. There will be a day of reckoning; Man continues to despise the everlasting covenant, and the consequences are inevitable. Here the prophet's message becomes apocalyptic and universal – he is talking about the devastation of the end-times!

fate of the present created order (1, 3) as we anticipate the creation of the new heavens and earth (cf Joel 2:28-32; Mark 13; etc).

- God makes no distinction among sinners (2; cf Acts 10:34).
- The demise of our world is the direct result of Man's rebellion (4-6; cf Genesis 3:17-19; 6:5-7, 13; Romans 5:12; 6:23; 8:20-22).
- Our own society tries to ignore God's serious warnings about where we are heading; but if we were honest we would see the clear signs around us of the truth of His Word (7-13; cf 22:13).

THE PARTICULARS

- God has never kept us in the dark concerning the ultimate

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Read 2 Peter 3. Are we concerned enough for the lost today?

DAY 7

To God be the glory

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 24:14-23

THE POINT We see TV coverage of earthquakes, tsunamis or tornadoes that destroy life and property in a way that's hard for us to process. We struggle with the question, "If God is good, why does He let such things to happen?" Here Isaiah gives us a glimpse of what it will be like on Judgement Day; and, amazingly, although our worst earthquakes will pale into insignificance by comparison, no one will be asking that question! Instead, all peoples will be shouting praise to God, singing, "Glory to the Righteous One." It will be obvious to all that God is just in His judgement (cf Psalm 51:4), and only the godly remnant like Isaiah will be lamenting the treachery of the wicked in having deceived so many (16-18).

THE PARTICULARS

- People from every corner of the world will "acclaim the LORD's majesty" and "exalt the name of the LORD, the God of Israel" when He comes in power to judge (14-16a; cf Philippians 2:10-11).
- The end of the world will be sudden and cataclysmic, this being the just consequence of its rebellion against its Maker (18-20).
- God will rule in glory with His Church; all heavenly and earthly powers and dominions will submit to Him (21-23; cf Ephesians 1:18-23).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you looking forward to, and preparing for, Jesus' Return?

DAY 8

O LORD, you are my God

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 25:1-12

THE POINT Having described powerfully the more dramatic side of the Day of Judgement, God is now able to let us be more reflective about what it means to share in, and be protected by, His salvation on that Day. Our God is a righteous, just and powerful God, but He is also a faithful, loving, caring and merciful God, a "refuge for the poor ... and needy" (4).

3, 5).

THE PARTICULARS

- The powerful, sovereign Lord of creation and history is the God whom humble, poor believers like you and me can know personally, and who always remains faithful to His word (1, 4).
- God will not only defeat all His enemies; they will acknowledge His right to rule over them and they will honour Him (2-

Isaiah gives us a glimpse of heaven, the feast we will share in the unveiled presence of God, made happy and whole and perfect for all eternity (6-8; cf 1 Corinthians 13:12; Revelation 21:1-4)! In contrast, those too "clever" in their own eyes to look to God to save them, will spend eternity swimming in manure (10-12).

- The focus of our salvation is not on how we have lived or what we have achieved; it is on the God in whom we have trusted (9).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What do you anticipate you will enjoy most about heaven?

DAY 9

Reflecting heaven?

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 26:1-11

THE POINT Isaiah gives us a picture here of what it would be like to have a society where God's people walk faithfully in His ways so that even unbelievers see and enjoy the blessing this brings, and are left without excuse for persisting in God-denying wickedness.

THE PARTICULARS

• Isaiah longs for "that day" when God's power to save, to make people thoroughly whole in every part of their lives, is the norm and not the exception for a community – keeping faith, enjoying peace, trusting steadfastly in God's Rock (Jesus), the level path of right-living and right-relationships underpinning everything, deeply desiring God's honour in all

things, at all times (1-9a).

- A hard but important lesson for God's people to learn is that His Kingdom is an upside-down kingdom, where the highest status is given to the insignificant poor (5-6; cf Mark 10:35-45)!
- When God's ways are seen in the lives of His people it impacts the whole society (9b-11; cf Matt. 5:13-16; 1 Pe. 2:11-12).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is this a picture of what the Church on earth, now, ought to be? (We might be the only glimpse some people ever get of heaven!)
- What influence is the Church having on our society? Are we so compromising that unbelievers remain comfortable in their sin?

DAY 10

In Christ alone

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 26:12-21

THE POINT When all is said and done, for Isaiah only one truth stands firm: the God who has revealed Himself in history and in His Word is the only true God, to whom we owe everything. He is the source of all life; He gives and takes away; He blesses and punishes in a perfect balance of mercy and justice. This passage reminds me of Harriet Auber's lines: "And every virtue we possess, and every victory won, and every thought of holiness, are His alone."

THE PARTICULARS

• The one thing God's people ever have to learn and own is that the LORD (Yahweh, Jesus) is the only God, all things are in His sovereign hands, and to Him alone belongs all the glory (12-15).

• Jesus' sobering words in Luke 17:10 reflect Isaiah's sentiments here; none of us (not Mary, not saints) can ever gain credit with God; our prayers are but groans (Romans 8:26-27); it is God alone who saves – we can have no "notches in our gun" (16-18).

• But the issues of life and death belong to our God (cf Deuteronomy 32:39) and He is able to raise us up from the depths of this dust of death to share eternal life and joy in His presence (19).

• Wait patiently for His vindication (20-21; cf Revelation 6:9-11).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Reflect on the outworking of God's grace throughout your life.

DAY 11

Restoration

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 27:1-13

THE POINT Isaiah looks forward again to the restoration of God's people, Israel, His Church. He sees it in their return from exile; he sees it in God's ongoing protection; he sees it in her prosperity and growth; he sees it in the dealing with her sin; he sees it in the doing away with false religion and the establishment of healthy worship practices. There have been periods in the history of Israel and the Church where these things have been evident to a greater or lesser degree; but Isaiah is also looking beyond these to "that day" when all will be restored in the "New" Jerusalem.

THE PARTICULARS

• Leviathan depicts Satan's attacks on the Church (cf Revelation 12-13, 17), through hostile nations or opposing ide-

ologies (1).

• The Church is God's vineyard that He will continue to protect and care for so that it bears fruit for Him (cf 5:1-7). Yes, He must destroy anyone who opposes this, but His first desire is for all to be part of His people and enjoy His peace and blessing (2-6).

• Israel's exiles are part of God's process for purifying her. In the end, He will "exile" His own Son (cf Mark 15:34) to provide the ultimate, perfect atonement for, and removal of, her sin; then an open invitation will go out for all to return, on His terms (7-13)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Does the Church today need drastic refining? (cf 1 Pet. 4:12-19)

DAY 12

Proverbs 14:12/16:25

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 28:1-15

THE POINT Ephraim's problem, and Isaiah's exposure and denunciation of it, provide a good backdrop for understanding Jesus' problem with the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. God's people had become intoxicated, literally as well as metaphorically, by the ways and ideas of the world, but they didn't realise it. Worse still, it was coming from the top – from the priests and prophets, the very people who should have known better. Their loose living led to confused teaching, the laying aside of justice, the legalistic performance of empty and meaningless ritual, and a compromise of the truth that gave them a false sense of God's protection from the eternal consequences of sin and death! Jesus' language in the debates He had with the Jewish leaders (cf Mark 7:5-13; John 8:31-59)

reflect Isaiah's prophecy against Ephraim.

THE PARTICULARS

• God has the power to deal with all man's pride and passion (1-4).

• God's Church will always succeed, even if it is a remnant (5-6).

• The world's empty wisdom and foolish ways lack substance and depth. Although Himself a Jew, Jesus' words of comfort (eg Matt.11:28-30) were like a foreign language to the Jewish leaders, so they were left with their impotent rule book (7-13)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Do people today rely on a false "covenant with death" (14-15)?

DAY 13

Cornerstone... sure foundation

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 28:16-29

THE POINT Isaiah foresees the coming of one who will be the foundation and key of everything God is doing among His people (16). He will provide the stability and orientation/direction/purpose to everything God is doing to establish His Kingdom among men. In the NT both Peter (Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:4-7) and Paul (Romans 9:33; 10:11) tie this verse in with 8:14 and Psalm 118:22 and apply it to Christ. In fact, Jesus Himself had alluded to the same connection (Mark 12:10). So we are not surprised to find this part of Isaiah's prophecy so relevant to the coming of Jesus.

THE PARTICULARS

• Jesus is the only basis for a stable, fulfilled and purposeful life (16); He is the standard against which all else is measured

(17a).

• Israel had often experienced God's power to defend His people (21a); now God will use that same power in judgement against them: for their injustices and lies, their complacency concerning death and eternity, and their mocking of God's ways (17b-22).

• God's coming in judgement will be appropriately measured to achieve His positive purposes for His people, just as the farmer is careful not to thresh and beat everything aimlessly (23-28). In all things He is a powerful, understanding & wise LORD (29).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• If Jesus is your rock, can you trust God to discipline you well?

DAY 14

The Lion in the fire

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 29:1-12

THE POINT Isaiah's attention again focuses on Jerusalem. It is ever under fire because of its sacred significance as the tangible expression of God's dwelling among His people. Assyria, Babylon, Rome, ... – and it is certainly not a city of peace (Salem/shalom) in our own day. But Isaiah needs to remind the inhabitants that the problem is not "persecution for righteousness' sake", but God's rod of discipline for their failure to read and heed God's Word.

THE PARTICULARS

• It is clear that Ariel refers to Jerusalem (cf the reference to Zion, 8), but it is not clear why. "Ariel" sounds like the Hebrew for "altar-hearth", and Jerusalem is where the sacrifices

were made; or it could mean "Lion of God" referring to Judah's city (1-2, 7).

• God's people should speak in a clear voice to a godless world (cf 1 Corinthians 14:8), but often fail to do so even while giving the outward appearance of spiritual vitality (1-4).

• God is able to protect His Church, as He did so amazingly in 701 BC in Sennacherib's case (5-8; cf 37:21-37; 2 Kings 19:20-36).

• Spiritual blindness is our major problem (9-12; cf Rom. 11:8).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Is the Church today facing the possibility of God's judgement? Could it be because of our failure to read and heed God's Word?

DAY 15

Walking humbly before God

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 29:13-24

THE POINT It is not surprising that this passage is cited in various places in the NT. It gets right to the heart of man's underlying spiritual problem: we cannot understand God's nature/ways because sin has blinded us; but instead of realising this we try to be God and we redefine our spirituality in a way to suit ourselves!

THE PARTICULARS

• Jesus quotes 13 to describe the blatant hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders of His own day (Mark 7:6-7) – it is a real warning to us!

• Paul quotes 14 to show how human wisdom can never explain or understand the message of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:19).

• Paul quotes 16 to substantiate God's sovereign right to choose whomever He will to inherit eternal life while at the same time holding all men accountable for their sin (Romans 9:20-21).

• God's salvation will be swift, and its day marked by abundant prosperity for His people, His opening deaf ears and blind eyes to understand His Word, and the establishment of justice so that the humble oppressed will be glad and tyrants removed (17-21).

• Abraham obeyed God without questioning; if he is our role-model we can impact the lives of our children and others (22-24).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Is the Church in danger of repeating Israel's mistakes today?

DAY 16

Trafficking with the world

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 30:1-17

THE POINT Joachim Neander wrote: "Pride of man and earthly glory, sword and crown betray his trust; what with care and toil he buildeth, tower and temple, fall to dust." The kings of Judah were all too ready to look to the surrounding nations for help when their policy should have been: "All my hope on God is founded"! We never seem to learn the lesson of history that using the world's methods and resources "brings neither help nor advantage, but only shame and disgrace" (5b). We forget that God is the ruler of all history, and that it is futile not to commit everything to Him.

THE PARTICULARS

• God described His people as behaving like obstinate children in refusing to listen to Him, trust Him, and be led by His Spirit

(1-5).

• There is no future in discounting God's revealed Word (6-14).

• The very simple key to life is to turn from our rebellious ways and rest in the salvation our God, the "Holy One of Israel", has provided for us in Christ (cf Mark 1:24); to rest quietly in Him, trusting Him, and leaving everything safely in His sovereign care (15; cf Matthew 6:19-34). If only we could all always do this!

• The final outcome of every battle belongs to God alone (16-17).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

• Are you committed to the Bible regardless of human opinion?

DAY 17

Mercy and judgement

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 30:18-33

THE POINT The record in Luke 13 of Jesus' strong words about judgement (1-9), mercy (10-17), the kingdom of God (18-21) and discipleship (22-30) as He faced the cross, culminate in His passionate words of concern for Jerusalem itself (34-35). He could have had this passage in Isaiah in mind as He balanced mercy with judgement. Isaiah expresses great hope as he looks from his vantage point, beyond the City's rejection of her Messiah, to God's promises to His Church. The salvation and blessings He will give in the time of Hezekiah, coupled with judgement upon all who would harm His chosen people, are but a foretaste of the final Judgement and the appearing of the New Jerusalem described in Revelation 21!

THE PARTICULARS

- Compassion and justice are satisfied in the death of Jesus; there is salvation for all who in faith call on Him (18-19; cf Joel 2:32).
- Isaiah joins with Jeremiah 31:31ff and Ezekiel 36:24ff in pointing to the New Covenant Paul spells out in 2 Corinthians 3 (20-22).
- The language of the remainder of this chapter (23-33) returns to the apocalyptic style of chapters 2 and 24. "Assyria" becomes a symbol of all who continue to oppose God's rule or His people.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What difference does our having the Scriptures make (20-21)?

DAY 18

The arm of flesh will fail you

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 31:1-9

THE POINT After his little more apocalyptic discourse, Isaiah returns to the situation at hand. The continued threats from the north and north-east made it very tempting for Israel to look to the south and south-west for help. The nation was not unaware of its own vulnerability at the geographical centre of all the political vying for power, and so it was natural to seek out protective alliances. Sadly, no matter how much experience they'd had of the fickleness and unreliability of these alliances, or of God's supernatural power to intervene on their behalf, and in spite of God's many warnings through His prophets, they continued to act foolishly. All God asked of them was a childlike faith that looked to Him in trust as their

faithful, covenant-keeping LORD.

THE PARTICULARS

- The LORD pleads with His people to put all their trust in Him as He is both willing and able to help them, whereas the feeble human resources of places like Egypt are neither (1-5; cf 2 Kings 6:8-23 as a practical example of how He had shown this before).
- God is always ready to forgive and help repentant rebels (6-9).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Where does your true security lie? How does this show itself in your daily life in times of financial hardship? ... serious illness? ... broken relationships? ... opposition and conflict?

DAY 19

God's true King

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 32:1-8

THE POINT The reference, "a king will reign in righteousness" could be to Hezekiah who stood out among the others as a king who sought God's ways in all he did. However, Isaiah must also be looking beyond Hezekiah to the later true Messiah in this Davidic line (cf Matthew 1:10), because he is describing characteristics and circumstances unlikely to be achieved by any "ordinary" king.

THE PARTICULARS

- The "king" in God's theocracy was His resident representative among the people (cf Deuteronomy 17:14-20). It was therefore essential for the king to reign "in righteousness" and "with justice" (1). Very few, of course, came anywhere near it; it

was only when Jesus came that the office was fulfilled perfectly.

- Like God, the king was to be the protector of the people (2).
- The king was to reveal God's character and ways to the people in a way that enabled them to "see" and "hear" Him clearly (3-4).
- All impostors and pretenders in high positions will eventually be exposed and seen for what they are in their stupidity, heresy, ungodliness, evil, self-serving, deceit and unjust practices (5-7).
- "Noble" has the idea of "generosity of spirit" towards others (8).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What aspects of Jesus' life show Him to be God's true King?

DAY 20

Till the Spirit is poured on us

THE PASSAGE

ISAIAH 32:9-20

THE POINT God's earnest desire is for His people to live in prosperity and peace, and for homes to be places where everyone feels secure and confident, resting quietly under the mantle of His grace. The difficulty is that such conditions are no sooner established than God's people become complacent, enjoying the blessings so much that they forget the one who gave them. It is this situation Isaiah had to address, warning them of the judgement God was about to send to humble them and turn their hearts back to Himself.

THE PARTICULARS

- In a stable, comfortable society it is easy for the women to let worldly interests and pursuits occupy their attention to the

exclusion of spiritual disciplines. Isaiah had to tell them how God was going to strip them of all their finery, humbling them in sackcloth. The reference to the failure of the grape harvest in 10 reflected on their propensity for wine (9-13; cf Amos 4:1ff).

- What is really needed for any society to enjoy God's blessing of peace and prosperity is the outpouring of His Holy Spirit (14-15).
- A direct relationship exists between justice/righteousness and peace/blessing/confidence/security/quietness/rest (16-20).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you praying earnestly for a genuine spiritual revival here?



News

PTC's new principal

The Presbyterian Theological Centre, Sydney, has a new principal. Vice principal and academic dean **Rev. Dr Ian Smith**, who has been working at PTC for the past 14 years, most recently teaching New Testament and Greek, was formally appointed by the 2009 NSW General Assembly in July. Dr Smith takes over the role following the departure of the **Rev. Dr John Davies** after 23 years as dean and principal.

PTC lecturer **John McClean** says the appointment of a new principal for the college is a once in a generation event. "It has a big influence on the Presbyterian Church in NSW," he says, "and we look forward to having Ian at the helm."

The Pulse

Encouragement in Myanmar

Devastating cyclones, bitter ethnic wars, and human rights abuses have all had a part in contributing to the poverty and spiritual darkness that characterises Myanmar, which was formerly known as Burma. Despite this opposition, the church in Burma is gaining ground, according to **Christian Aid**.

Christian Aid assists a number of ministries in Burma, which remain unnamed for their security, who submitted reports concerning their various strategies for spreading the gospel.

"These are fiery times for testing their faith," said one leader. "The government has put high restrictions on work among the cyclone victims. They presume that what we are doing is for political purposes."

Even Buddhist monks and laymen, interested in helping victims, are being persecuted. Some were caught and sentenced to very long jail terms — 45 to 65 years!

Assist

Apostasy penalty revoked

A member of Iran's Parliament has reportedly revealed that the country's **Parliamentary Committee** has struck the mandatory death penalty for those who leave Islam from proposals for an amended penal code. Citing a **BBC**

Persian news service report, United Kingdom-based **Christian Solidarity International** announced on June 26 that a member of Iran's Legal and Judicial Committee of Parliament, **Ali Shahrokhi**, had told the Iranian state news agency of the decision to eliminate the mandatory death penalty amendment.

The Parliamentary Committee had come under intense international pressure to drop clauses from the **Islamic Penal Code Bill** that allowed stoning and made death the mandatory punishment for apostates.

Compass Direct

India bans rights team

The Indian Government is silent on why it refused visas to allow members of the **US Commission on International Religious Freedom** to visit troubled **Orissa** state, but there are indications that it was ducking protests from Hindu nationalist groups. The US team was to leave for India on June 12, but the Indian embassy in Washington did not give them visas in time, the religious panel said.

The atmosphere in Orissa's Kandhamal district has remained tense since a spate of attacks began in December 2007 that killed at least four Christians and burned 730 houses and 95 churches. The attacks were carried out to avenge an alleged attack on a **World Hindu Council** leader, **Swami**

Laxmanananda Saraswati. Violence re-erupted in Kandhamal in August 2008 after the assassination of Saraswati by a Maoist group, though non-Marxist Christians were blamed for it.

Had the US team been able to visit Kandhamal, Christian leaders said, it would have found the situation far from normal even eight months after violence reportedly ended.

Compass Direct

Atheist camp launched

An atheist summer camp for children set up in the United Kingdom offers a "god-less alternative" to religious camps. The 24 places on **Camp Quest UK (CQUK)** near Bath, Somerset, have already been booked, according to organisers.

Organisers said the purpose of the camp was "to encourage critical thinking and provide children with a summer camp free of religious dogma". The camp, supported by anti-religion crusader **Richard Dawkins**, plans to expand after receiving hundreds of inquiries.

The event has been set up by **Samantha Stein**, a postgraduate psychology student from London. She said: "It is not about changing what they think, but the way that they think. There is very little that attacks religion, we are not a rival to religious camps. We exist as a secular alternative open to children from parents of all faiths and none."

Assist

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Two boys beheaded

Islamic extremists have beheaded two young boys in **Somalia** because their Christian father refused to divulge information about a church leader, and the killers are searching Kenya's refugee camps to do the same to the boys' father.

Before taking his Somali family to a Kenyan refugee camp in April, 55-year-old **Musa Mohammed Yusuf** was the leader of an underground church near Kismayo in Somalia. Militants from the Islamic extremist group **al Shabaab** entered his village and interrogated him. He fled and the next day the extremists returned and slaughtered two of his sons.

Compass Direct

Methodists banned from BNP

The **Methodist Church** in Britain has passed a motion at its annual conference banning members from joining the far-right **BNP**. The motion bars members of the Methodist Church from joining any political party "whose constitution, aims or objectives promote racism", but especially the **BNP**.

The motion was proposed by the **Rev. Sylvester Deigh**, who told the conference that racism was "a denial of the gospel". "An openness to all people, regardless of nationality, is at the heart of Methodist identity," he said.

The **Church of England** passed a similar ban at its **General Synod** in February. It came after a list of 12,000

BNP members leaked onto the internet last year was found to include five clergy, one of whom was a retired Anglican priest.

Acid attacks scar Christians

About 600 Muslims have used petrol bombs to attack at least 117 Christian homes in **Bahmani Walla**, a village in Punjab, Pakistan, and threw acid at Christians as they fled. At least nine women and four children were injured.

The violence was seemingly caused by an incident on Monday night, in which a Christian man driving a tractor requested that a Muslim man riding a motorcycle allow him to pass. The request was refused and a disagreement ensued. News of this was spread along with allegations of blasphemy against Islam. In the next few hours a mob of about 600 Muslims congregated in Bahmani Walla and began to attack the Christians living there.

Barnabas Fund

New name for Baptists

Australian Baptists last month launched a new national name and logo, signaling a renewed commitment to evangelism, mission and ministry around the nation and around the world.

The three-circles logo replaces the traditional green and gold image, and the movement will be known as Australian Baptist Ministries. The Baptist Union of Australia will remain the legal name.

Days off for pagan police

Pagan police officers in some areas of the United Kingdom are being allowed to take as many as eight days leave a year for events such as the summer solstice and Halloween.

The **BBC** said the move comes after the **Pagan Police Association** was set up after discussions with **Home Office** officials. The broadcaster reported that **Hertfordshire Police** lets Pagan staff re-allocate the traditional bank holidays to meet their beliefs and has also appointed two Pagan chaplains.

Police Constable Andy Pardy, a Pagan neighborhood beat officer in **Hemel Hempstead**, Hertfordshire, outside London, told *Police Review* magazine: "Paganism is not the new age, tree-hugging fad that some people think it is. It is not the clandestine, horrible, evil thing that people think it is."

Assist

Tone it down: FIFA

World soccer governing body **FIFA** has sparked controversy after disciplining the **Brazilian** team for overt displays of Christianity during a match.

Stars including **Real Madrid** forward **Kaka** and captain **Lucio** revealed T-shirts with devout slogans such as "I Belong to Jesus" and "I Love God" during the recent **Confederations Cup** final last month.

Daniel King wrote in Britain's *Daily Mail* that FIFA risked accusations of being anti-religious by reminding Brazil of its guidelines banning players from

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making displays of a personal, religious or political nature on the football pitch.

Assist

York's ancient service

An English church has celebrated Mass as it would have been performed 600 years ago thanks to a partnership with the **University of York**. PhD student **Eleanor McCullough** pieced together the Mass used in York churches in the 14th century based on manuscripts from the period held by **York Minster** and the **Bodleian Library**.

Ms McCullough spent nine months researching the Mass. She said: "Recreating the Mass was a complex task as in this period there were different elements for special feast days, and instructions for use were not always written down since priests were expected to know them.

"In addition, each diocese had its own special hymns and prayers for the feast days and sometimes only the opening lines were given so other sources had to be consulted to find the prayers in full.

"This may well be the first time that a York Lady Mass has been reconstructed and performed from the medieval manuscripts here in York since the Reformation."

Christian Today

Scotland tries virtual ministers

To stem a nationwide shortage of full-time clergy, the **Church of Scotland** is considering the use of "virtual ministers" who would preach over a live video link to congregations that do not have a permanent minister.

"Preaching by live video link to vacant congregations is one of many radical changes being proposed by the **Ministries Council** in consultation with the **Mission and Discipleship Council**," **Gordon Bell**, media relations officer with the Church of Scotland, told *Ecumenical News International*.

There are 21 congregations in **Orkney** presbytery, spread over more than 10 islands. Initially four congregations in **Rousay, Shapinsee, Flotta** and **Hoy** in the archipelago will be linked.

There are presently an estimated 190 full-time vacancies for clergy across Scotland, which has a population of 5.1 million. Under the proposal, churches would be linked by technology similar to that used in video conferencing.

Kenyans oppose polygamy

Kenyan church leaders have become embroiled in an argument about a draft marriage law because of a clause on polygamy. But civil rights activists say that the bill could end a range of abuses and that church practice should not be imposed on the whole of society.

Church leaders in Kenya say they reject a draft law due to be debated in parliament that would authorise polygamous marriages, outlaw compulsory dowries and recognise cohabitation.

"The law will confuse citizens. It will cause chaos in families," **Anglican Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi** said. "It should be rejected."

The draft marriage law prohibits compulsory dowries, a key principle in African marriage. It also recognises cohabitation as equivalent to marriage for heterosexual couples who have lived together for at least two years. The measures also seek to eliminate child marriages by raising the age of marriage from 14 to 18 years and makes it no longer necessary to prove adultery or cruelty for divorce.

Ecumenical News International

Nationalist dissuaded

In a bizarre show of Turkish nationalism, a young Muslim here took a Christian Turk at knife point, draped his head with the national flag and threatened to slit the throat of the "missionary dog" in broad daylight last month.

Yasin Karasu, 24, held **Ismail Aydin, 35**, hostage for less than half an hour on August 3 in a busy district on the Asian side of **Istanbul** in front of passersby and police who promptly came to the scene. Karasu threatened to slit Aydin's throat if anyone came near him and commanded those watching to give him a Turkish flag. Within minutes, Aydin told Compass, bystanders produced two flags.

Karasu, who has known Aydin for a year, wrapped the larger of the two flags around Aydin's head, making it difficult for him to breathe in the heat. "Do you see this missionary dog?" he yelled at the crowd. "He is handing out gospels and he is breaking up the country!"

Police managed to convince Karasu to put down the knife and release Aydin, telling him that if he killed the convert Turkey would be ridiculed around the world, and that as a last resort they were authorized to shoot to kill him.



On the Agenda

Christian-Muslim guidelines

The first ever set of guidelines giving advice for Christians and Muslims who want to share their faith in an ethical way was launched in June at **Islamic Relief's** headquarters in London.

The guide, which contains 10 points of advice, has been produced by the **Christian Muslim Forum**, a national body set up in 2006 to improve relationships between the two faiths.

Forum youth specialist **Andrew Smith** was a key speaker at the launch. He has been working for **Scripture Union** in inner city Birmingham for the past 14 years and has been active in promoting his own faith whilst at the same time seeking

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to listen to and understand his Muslim neighbours.

“Speaking with local Muslims and sharing my faith has been fascinating, stimulating, even fun, but at times it has become competitive, aggressive and has left a nasty taste in my mouth. I was left feeling frustrated and defensive and with no wish to do it again,” he said.

“Talking to others I realised that this was a common experience, so the idea of a set of principles that would help both faiths avoid this, seemed to me an obvious way forward.”

Another key speaker was **Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra**, interfaith spokesman for the **Muslim Council of Britain**, who recognises that this is a controversial and sensitive area

“Islam and Christianity are two world religions that are missionary – and therefore are ever vying with each other for converts,” he said. “But we should be able to speak of our faith honestly and with conviction, without demeaning or ridiculing others. There is no place for coercion or manipulation and when a person does convert from either faith that decision should be respected.”

Christian Today

Blasphemy ‘illegal’

Irish President Mary McAleese has signed into law the **Defamation Act**, which includes clauses that create the offence of “blasphemous libel”. Civil rights campaigners are predicting outrage.

The effect of the new law is to make it technically a crime in Ireland to produce or say anything “that is grossly abusive or

insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby causing outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion; and he or she intends, by the publication of the matter concerned, to cause such outrage”.

Committing the offence could incur a fine of up to 25,000 Euros. Human rights and free speech advocates, humanists, atheists and non-conformist Christians have spoken out strongly against the law – which is likely to be tested shortly.

Critics say that the Irish parliament seems to have been acting under pressure from Catholic bishops in particular. The Catholic Church has seen its moral and spiritual authority massively undermined by abuse scandals and is seeking to fight back against those it perceives as attacking it. Ms McAleese is a Roman Catholic.

The group **Atheist Ireland** have already pledged to put out a blasphemous statement, offensive to all religions in Ireland, in order to test the law.

Simon Barrow, co-director of the religion, society and politics thinktank **Ekklesia**, which argued for the abolition of blasphemy laws in Britain, commented: “This is a very sad day. Criminalising religious offence – whether it is in Ireland, Pakistan or anywhere else – is an offence against religion, as well as an abuse of human dignity and freedom. Christians, in particular, should remember that their own founder was executed on a charge of blasphemy. Yet he told his own followers to love their enemies, not to persecute them. It is to be hoped that this law will be challenged both morally and, in all likelihood, in the courts.”

Ekklesia

Rape victim ‘converted’

The Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement, an advocacy agency for persecuted Christians, is calling on the Pakistani Government to ban forced conversions after a group of Muslim men raped a 14-year-old Christian girl and forced her to convert to Islam.

The case of schoolgirl **Shaj Taj** was referred to **CLAAS** by **Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan** and comes as a nine-year-old Christian girl was reportedly gang-raped before being killed and dumped in a canal. Outrage is growing amid reports that Pakistani police, as so often, are failing to follow clear evidence to charge Muslims for violence against Christians.

In that case, **Nisha Javid** was walking close to her home when she disappeared. Her body was found in a canal not far from the Javids’ home in **Essangri** village in **Faisalabad**. A post mortem revealed she had been gang-raped and had died after repeated blows to the head.

In the first case, **Shah Taj** said **Talat Rizwan**, **Mikael But** and **Faisal Butt** bundled her into the back of a car while she was on her way to school on December 5, 2008. They allegedly took her to a hotel where she was raped by Mikael before being forced at gunpoint to add her thumb print and signature to documents declaring her supposed conversion to Islam and marriage to Mikael.

Shah Taj was freed from her abductors by police after being held for around one month and a case was filed against the three men. The perpetrators then allegedly tried to prove their innocence by presenting the forged documents as legitimate certificates of marriage and conversion to Islam. Police have detained two of the attackers, but a third is still on the run.

CLAAS Co-ordinator **Nasir Saeed** made an urgent appeal to the Pakistani Government to pass legislation banning forced conversions. He said: “The forced conversion of a non-Muslim minor to Islam is a trend that is spiralling out of control, especially since the recent imposition of Sharia law and the increasing Talibanisation of Pakistan.”

Christian Today

Stand by us: bishop

Jerusalem Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan has appealed to leaders of churches in Europe to stand by Christians in the Middle East in their struggle for justice and peace by remembering how injustice was fought in South Africa.

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Friday 14th August, Gold Coast

To make an appointment on one of these days, please contact Dr Carner at the Presbyterian Church of Victoria; Email ministry@pcvic.org.au or phone (03) 9702 0548 or mobile 0419 780 810



"I ask you as our brothers and sisters in Christ, do not leave us alone, do not leave us alone in the struggle," Younan told the once-every-six-years assembly of the **Conference of European Churches** meeting in **Lyon, France**.

"Do you know how the apartheid system collapsed? It is because the churches in the world accompanied the churches in South Africa," said Younan, who heads the **Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land**. "As long as you accompany us as churches in Europe, there is hope that peace and justice will come to the Middle East."

About 300 delegates from CEC's 120 member churches – principally Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant – and 500 other participants attended the assembly in late July.

Younan said he would never lose hope for peace and justice in the Middle East despite circumstances such as the region's declining Christian population.

As a sign of hope, he pointed to the formation of a council of religious institutions in the Holy Land which includes local Islamic and Christian leaders and Israel's two chief rabbis and meets every two months.

One project of the inter-religious council has been to carry out a review of textbooks used in schools, which instead of promoting justice and reconciliation, Younan said, "are teaching hatred against the other".

Another project has been to commission Palestinian and Israeli communication bodies to monitor the public utterances of religious leaders.

Ecumenical News International

Christians persecuted in UK

By Dan Wooding

Former speaker of the British House of Lords **Baroness Caroline Cox** and **Conservative MP Dominic Grieve** have hosted a consultation in Parliament on the persecution of Christians in the UK.

Baroness Cox said that Christian students in Britain had a spiritual vacuum. They did not know the names of the gospels or the disciples of Jesus, and felt uncomfortable when they were asked about the "Crusades" by their Muslim peers.

Baroness Cox added that she was of the view the Christian students would not be ashamed if they knew of the "400 years of Islamic aggression" leading up to the Crusades.

She called for an end to giving concessions to Muslims in Britain. Terming the Cross as "our heritage", Cox categorically condemned incidents involving forced removal of crosses and pictures of Christ.

Criticising the establishment of **Sharia courts** in Britain she said: "They are operating in the country without any particular public debate or discussion on the issue." She alleged that mosques where polygamous marriages have been performed are not even registered in Britain.

She praised **former Australian Prime Minister John Howard** for telling Muslims that they were free to live and build mosques in Australia but there was no room for Sharia law.

Andrea Minichiello Williams, director of **Christian Concern for Our Nation** and the **Christian Legal Centre** said: "In recent years we have seen our legal culture change from one where there was a clear accommodation, protection and endorsement of Christian principles – sanctity of life, marriage, freedom of speech, conscience and religion – to a system based on human rights which ironically is attacking these principles".

Those who gave testimonies of the persecution they had faced in the United Kingdom, included **Caroline Petrie**, a community nurse, **Gosia**, a Polish social worker, **Ashar Mall**, former TV evangelist, **Nobel Samuel**, a pastor and TV presenter, and **Kwabena Peat**, a Jamaican educator.

'Use the media'

By Jenna Lyle

The head of British broadcaster **Channel 4**, **Andy Duncan**, has said that Christians need to engage more with the media and keep up-to-date with new media technologies in order to further promote their cause.

Duncan, who attends a Baptist church in London, also said that TV programs about religion often did not have high audiences, reports the *Baptist Times*.

Speaking at a seminar at the **Baptist Assembly** entitled "God and the media - an unholy alliance", he said that churches needed to do more to become aware of changing media technology and the effect it has on younger people.

He said, "The media world is changing very fast for the younger generation. The first thing my 14-year-old daughter will do when she comes home from school is go to the computer, ahead of the television."

"It's really important for churches to be media savvy, to understand the importance of things like social websites for the younger generation."

On religious programming, Duncan used the example of the recent **Channel 4** series **History of Christianity**, which had around one million viewers an episode.

He said while that was a significant number of people, given that the programme was aired in a peak time slot it could have easily had a lot more viewers, had it been a different program.

According to Duncan, Christians were not "engaging" as much with the media as people from other faiths. He claimed that following the conflict in **Gaza** both Jews and Muslims were keen to put forward their side of the story in a way that Christians seem reluctant to do.

He said: "On occasions we get a lot more contact from other faith groups, who stress their side of the debate pretty heavily ... Are Christians engaging enough?"

Duncan was quoted by the *Baptist Times* as saying, "There are fewer programs on religion than there used to be ... There are far less money and resources. If we carry on the current trajectory, there will be even less about religion, including Christianity, which I think will be a real shame."

Despite the various shortcomings of the media, Duncan said that he was "absolutely convinced" that media could be "a force for good".

Christian Today

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All of life

Christianity belongs in the public square – and everywhere else.

Any AP reader who strays into the letters to the editor page of the nation's broadsheets or roams the blogosphere is all too aware that our secularist opponents would have all Christians – actually persons of any religious faith, but especially Christians – driven from the public square and locked up behind church doors.

At present in Victoria, already alluded to in the article *Here we stand* in the May AP, a parliamentary committee is reviewing the exceptions and exemptions in the *Equal Opportunity Act 1995* that permit faith-based institutions to discriminate in their employment policies. There are powerful forces which seek to remove these freedoms from faith-based institutions. An options paper has been produced which recommends curtailing the exception clauses in the act on the basis that a distinction can be drawn between “internal” and “external” aspects of freedom of religion.

The options paper takes the view that core “internal” aspects of freedom of religion are worthy of protection, that religious adherents should be free to adopt a religion and set of religious beliefs, but that “external” aspects of freedom of religion, namely the manifestation of those beliefs, should be subject to regulation by the state, which may restrict the freedom of religious adherents to live according to those principles.

This distinction becomes a convenient ploy, by way of example, to reject a faith requirement for teachers and other staff at

David Palmer and Ben Saunders

a school expressly set up according to Christian principles and catering to the preferences of Christian parents.

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria, in its submission to this review, asserted that it must be understood that there is no public/private distinction in Christian teaching. Christianity is all of life: once a person embraces the Christian religion,

The church has always been to the forefront of education and the provision of health and welfare services.

this has implications for the whole of that person's life. This is premised on the fact that God is the maker and Lord of everything, and as our Lord, we are bound to live our whole lives to His glory: “whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

No one expressed this attitude better than the Dutch pastor, professor, educator, newspaper editor and party political leader Abraham Kuyper, founder of the Free University and Prime Minister of Holland from 1901 to 1905, who famously said: “There is not a single square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not cry, ‘Mine!’”

Christian teaching extends to every aspect of our lives, and lays down specific rules which govern family relationships, church relationships, relationships between employers and employees, behaviour in the public sphere, etc. Thus there is a distinctively Christian way for Christian employers to behave towards their employees, and likewise for the way in which Christian employees go about their work.

Accordingly, true freedom of religion

requires that we have the freedom to manifest our religion in public as well as private. To deny Christians the right to manifest our religious beliefs externally is essentially to deny freedom of religion to Christians.

There were two points we made in our submission:

Our religion requires us to engage in public works in a manner consistent with Christian teaching – we bring Christ with us into the public realm. Our Christian profession is therefore not confined to private life, but pervades all of our lives, both private and public.

This involvement in public life has been part of the Christian tradition for the past 2000 years.

The foundational Christian principle by which individuals relate to each other is the golden rule: “whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them” (Mt. 7:12). Rather than enforcing one's rights, we should be prepared even to sacrifice our rights for the sake of others: “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Mt. 5:39). Thus the Apostle Paul gives the following direction: “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4).

The imperative concern for neighbour is reinforced for the Christian by the linking of the command to care for the neighbour with the command to love and serve God, with the clear implication that this shall be for every compartment of life, whether private or public. Thus, Jesus summarised the Old Testament law in this fashion, making it binding on His followers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:30,31).

We therefore affirm that looking out for the interests of others must most certainly include every appropriate effort to stand up for those who suffer specific

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injustices, especially at the hands of the more powerful.

The Old Testament prophet Micah expresses this truth in the following way: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

This foundational principle to do good to others and meet their needs is expressed in numerous practical ways, including:

Performing acts of mercy and charity;

Speaking out on public issues;

Establishing schools, hospitals, aged care facilities, welfare organisations, chaplaincy and prison ministries.

Historically, from the earliest days of the church, Christians cared for their fellow citizens. The noted sociologist Rodney Stark, in reviewing the historical evidence for the growth of the church to a position of pre-eminence in the ancient world by the fourth century, concluded that it was due in large measure to the care of the Christians for their own as well as for their pagan neighbours during the devastating plagues of the second and third centuries. Whereas the pagans fled from the cities and towns leaving the sick behind, the Christians remained and cared for the sick, in this way demonstrating both love of God and love of neighbour. The Emperor Julian (known as Julian the Apostate) said, "atheism (i.e. Christian faith!) has been especially advanced through the loving service rendered the stranger and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well, while those that belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them".

This has been the pattern ever since, and even now continues despite the rise of the modern state. The church has always been to the forefront of education and the provision of health and welfare services. It is as true in Africa and all those other former colonies of Christianised European countries as it is in Australia.

The fact that church and other faith-based institutions continue to exist and expand despite the additional cost to parents in the case of schools bears eloquent testimony to the value placed on these institutions with their clearly defined religious foundation by parents, clients, patients and residents.

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria

traces its lineage back to the Reformation of the 16th century and especially to the Genevan Reformer, John Calvin. The culture of Scotland and Holland in particular was profoundly influenced by Calvin, but also that of England and America, the latter through the Pilgrim Fathers. Henry van Til writes: "Calvin saw the church and state as two independent entities, each having received its own authority from the sovereign God. In this conception the state is never secular.

"According to Calvin, church and state must live at peace and must cooperate together in subjection to the Word of God. Each is to have its own jurisdiction.



Some may see religion as a tired old superstition, but it does provide our most caring and ethical adults.

The state has authority in purely civil and temporal matters; the church in spiritual matters."

The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 includes a chapter (Chapter 23) on the role of the "civil magistrate". This chapter makes clear that the role of civil government has been established by God "for His own glory and the public good" and further that it is "lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto: in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, accord-

ing to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth."

That is, in discharging public office, or performing public services, Christians are to do so in accordance with Christian principles and teaching.

The way in which the Calvinistic reformation percolated through all spheres of life in Scotland is seen in matters as diverse as the practice of establishing schools for the education of all children alongside the village Kirk; the role of church elders in promoting morality; and the promulgation of town mottos such as that for Glasgow, which still remains the case today: "Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of His word and the praising of His name."

From the earliest days of European settlement in Australia, Presbyterians arrived establishing their churches, and often schools, wherever they settled. One of the prime areas for Scottish settlement was Victoria's Western District where, in town after town, our Scottish and Irish forebears settled, entering fully into the life of growing local communities, being farmers, storekeepers, school teachers, town councillors, with men like Robert Menzies entering politics and serving their nation.

The Rev. James Forbes (1813-1851), the first full-time Presbyterian minister in Melbourne encapsulated in himself the concern for others. He was first minister of Scots Church, visited prisoners, helped establish the Stranger's Friend Society for the benefit of needy people, founded the Ladies Benevolent Society, was one of several to help establish the Melbourne Hospital. The plight of the indigenous people upset him considerably leading him to petition the Government on their behalf. He established a total of four schools, one of which is today's Scotch College. His biographer, Dr Mairi

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Harman, writes: "James Forbes was a highly public person who participated in all the activities he thought were for the good of the people of Melbourne."

In time not only were schools and societies formed, but also a multitude of health and welfare institutions established, such as St Andrew's Hospital, East Melbourne, homes for destitute women, children's homes, men's hostels, rest homes, and mission stations among Australia's indigenous peoples – the latter taking place during a time when the Aborigines were held in low regard by the settlers. The Royal Flying Doctor Service was started by the Rev. John Flynn, Presbyterian minister from Victoria and Superintendent of the Australian Inland Mission. Both Francis Ormond, benefactor of many institutions including RMIT and Ormond College at the University of Melbourne, and H.V. McKay, inventor and producer of the first successful combine harvester, were notable Presbyterian laymen. In more recent times, Professor Graeme Clark, inventor of the bionic ear, has been a Presbyterian elder.

In 2007, *The Age* newspaper reported, "A study at Monash University showed that religion is strongly identified with positive life outcomes. Andrew Singleton, in the School of Political and Social

Inquiry, writes, "The religiously active are more prone to have positive civic attitudes, display high levels of social concern and be actively involved in community service. Active Christians, for example, do far more hours of volunteer work per month than do secular youth. On a measure of the extent to which a person holds positive human values – favouring an ethical life, justice for all and having an orientation for the common good – we also found that the religiously active were streets ahead... Well what about the young atheists? Most secular-minded youth are

If put to a choice, our loyalty will be first and foremost to our Lord Jesus Christ.

more self-oriented because there is no widely understood or shared ethical paradigm on which to model their lives ... Perhaps the vociferous anti-religious types could afford to be a little less triumphalist. Some may see religion as a tired old

superstition, but it does produce our most ethical and caring adults – believe it or not."

Today, following the 1977 formation of the Uniting Church, the Presbyterian Church of Victoria – while being a smaller body, with most of its health and welfare agencies having passed into the Uniting Church – has nevertheless commenced three new schools, Kings College, Warrnambool, Belgrave Heights Christian School and St Andrew's Christian College, Burwood. Additionally, chaplains have been placed in most hospitals, mainly on a volunteer basis, as well as in a number of police stations and prisons.

The above analysis demonstrates that Christianity cannot and never has been confined to the home and the church. Christianity is a religion involving all of life. The Presbyterian Church, both corporately and more especially through its members, will continue to involve itself in public life. Indeed, partly because of the continuing if not accelerating decline in the nation's welfare and public life, it is likely that the Christian voice and presence in practical ways in the public domain will only increase in future years.

That this should be the case is fully in accord with Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and

Political Rights, to which Australia is a signatory:

Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions (such as religion) and without unreasonable restrictions:

(a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;

(b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors;

(c) To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country.

Finally, it needs to be pointed out that in times past in the West, just as today in many parts of the world, Christians suffer persecution and even martyrdom at the hands of the state. In the history of the Presbyterian Church we have just such a heritage. In the so called "killing time" of the 1680s, 18,000 Scottish Presbyterians were killed, exiled, imprisoned or tortured, such persecution only ceasing with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 which brought William of Orange and his wife Mary to the throne. We remember our history.

Those 18,000 Presbyterians were not persecuted as private believers but as citizens refusing the religious claims of the state over them. They suffered in the public domain, in what might be described as a sometimes gentle but always determined and a strangely loyal defiance of the state's claim on their ultimate allegiance. We trust that we might not be entering such a time again, but if we are, then it needs to be understood that if put to a choice, our loyalty will be first and foremost to our Lord Jesus Christ.

David Palmer and Ben Saunders are members of the Victorian Church & Nation Committee. This article has been adapted from the submission of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria to a review of the exceptions and exemptions in the Equal Opportunity Act 1995 being conducted by the Victorian Parliament. It benefited considerably from the contributions of Mr John Ballantyne, Rev. Dr. Peter Barclay (members of the Victorian Church & Nation Committee), Rev. Neil Benfell, principal of Kings College, Warrnambool, Rev. Dr Peter Barnes, Church historian and Rev. Dr Michael Jensen, lecturer at Moore Theological College. The actual submission with sources for quotes may be found here: http://candn.pcvic.org.au/media/pdf/articles_2/PCVSubmissionExceptionsExemptions.pdf

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Letters

Commission, not creation

While in his second paragraph Neil Cadman (*AP*, June) seems confused over the role of a pastor and congregational members, it is his third paragraph that concerns me the most. Neil appears to be saying that those of us who do not believe in six-day creationism are causing denominational decline.

But Calvin did not take Genesis 1 literally and many of Presbyterian's greatest theologians (Warfield, Shedd, Hodge and Orr) accepted evolution. Today most evangelical commentators on Genesis warn against linking chapter 1 with science. Perhaps our most respected Australian Presbyterian Hebrew scholar is Research Professor Alan Harman and in a small volume titled *Learning about the Old Testament* he writes "Nowhere does the Bible fix the length of days and in Genesis 1 and 2 the word 'day' is used in at least four different senses." We Presbyterians are not here to defend the literalistic creationist prophesies of Ellen White and the Seventh Day Adventists. So what could be

the cause of decline and why are we here? Perhaps the reason why some of our churches are in decline is because their pastors and members are hung up on peripherals and not focused on what Jesus has commissioned *all of us* to do. All of us (not just pastors) are to prayerfully and obediently make disciples. As Christ's ambassadors *all of us* are to make Jesus attractive and Christianity relevant to those around us, and as we fulfil our role of honouring his son by obeying the only commission he has given us, so God will bring others to a saving faith in Jesus.

John Buchanan,
Randwick, NSW

Not all the same

I read with interest the replies of Stan Gliszczynski and Neil Cadman to my letter (*AP*, April). To Neil Cadman I state: I did not condemn anyone but made the valid point that you cannot simply tar all churches with the same brush. To Stan Gliszczynski I state: To accuse me of departing from Scripture as a reply to me simply advising you to be more considerate in your blanket criticism is a pretty low position to stoop to. You know absolutely nothing about my faith or where I stand with God. If you both belong to the Presbyterian church then why are you still

in it if it is as bad as you both seem to think. I do not want to use this good magazine to conduct a religious slanging match but I felt compelled to speak up against what I see as some pretty destructive comments from Stan and Neil about the church in general and Stan's comments about my departure from Scripture which I believe unfounded. I have spoken on this matter for the last time.

Steve Davis,
Menai, NSW

More diversity please

Unfortunately I find *AP* very arid and conformist. Presbyterians are reformers who continually challenge the attitudes of those in power in the church to guard against any unfaithfulness. No one can claim to have spiritually arrived, even St Paul strained towards the goal (Phil. 3:12-14). There is sufficient admonition in the Scriptures to challenge every believer to constantly review every aspect of their pilgrimage.

I would expect to see a great diversity of opinion evident in any Presbyterian publication, as believers strive together to ensure the church's witness fully accords with the Word.

William J. Fraser
Duffy, ACT

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prayer

AUGUST 2009

- 21 Presbytery of the Hastings, NSW north coast – 7 charges and 2 home mission stations totaling 16 congregations with about 1435 c&a (communicants and adherents), and 335 yf (younger folk – Sunday School and youth) and 4 retired ministers. John Rooimans clerk.
- 22 Southern Cross charge, East Lismore, northern NSW (near SC Uni.) with about 390 c&a, 140 yf and 5 e; Steve and Rosaline Cree, Peter Thompson.
- 23 Moderator General Robert Benn ministering in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian in Malawi and Zambia.
- 24 General Assembly of our partner church, the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu at Mela village, Port Vila. Philip Burns representing our Moderator General.
- 25 Thank God for 100 years of ministry in Clifton home mission station Qld with about 60 c&a, 30 yf and 3 e; John and Carolyn Sybenga. Pray for the ongoing work .
- 26 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Mullumbimby charge northern NSW with about 65 c&a, 15 yf and 3 e; Jon and Ruth Nuttall.
- 27 Richard and Bernadette Axon new *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Moruya and Narrabri areas NSW to serve in Papua New Guinea with Missionary Aviation Fellowship.
- 28 Camden charge NSW with about 145 c&a, 30 yf and 9 e; Warren and Julie Hicks, David Trounce.
- 29 Peter and Annie *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Dalby, Qld in East Asia with Pioneers involved in everyday witness.

- 30 Gold Coast Korean charge Southport, Qld. Ted Myoung Hun Moon.
- 31 Presbytery of Ballarat, Vic. – 7 charges and 2 home mission stations totaling 17 congregations with about 445 c&a, and 75 yf, 1 retired minister and 2 under jurisdiction. John Woodward clerk.

SEPTEMBER 2009

- 1 North Adelaide charge with about 65 c&a, 15 yf and 6 e; Chris ten Broeke.
- 2 Upper Blue Mountains charge NSW comprising Wentworth Falls and Blackheath with about 60 c&a and 8 e; Keith and Patricia King.
- 3 Carusbrook-Castlemaine home mission station Vic. (2 congregations) with about 65 c &a, 12yf and 3 e; John and Rosalie Gething.
- 4 Toukley charge north of Sydney with about 85 c&a, 3 yf and 5 e; Rex and Beverley Swavley.
- 5 The work of the Presbyterian Theological College Gazipur, Dhaka, Bangladesh with 36 students, Subash Bala, Principal and also regional Discipleship Training Centres. *Mission partners* (APWM) assist with visiting teachers. In this very poor nation 86% of the population of about 152 million are Muslim, 12% Hindu and only 0.72% professing Christians.
- 6 Condobolin charge including Ootha, western NSW with about 35 c&a and 5 e; Michael Eleveld.
- 7 David and Lalit Clarke associate *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Camberwell, Melbourne in Phnom Penh, Cambodia involved in “grass roots evangelism” through English classes, bible studies etc.
- 8 Western Blacktown charge outer western Sydney comprising Doonside and Glenmore with about 100 c&a, 30 yf and 5 e; David and Caron Balzer, Peter and Caroline Williamson.
- 9 Pray for members of all our parliaments to act with wisdom and integrity and for Christian members to give an effective witness.
- 10 Murray (Queanbeyan) charge NSW next to the ACT with about 60 c&a, 15 yf and 3 e; Andy and Anne McConaghy.
- 11 Presbytery of the Central Tablelands (formerly Bathurst) NSW – 8 charges and 2 home mission stations totaling 21 congregations with about 1060 c&a, and 180 yf and 3 retired ministers. Heather Barr clerk.
- 12 Living Hope charge Marangaroo, northern Perth with about 35 c&a, 20 yf and 4 e; Darrell and Margaret Thatcher.
- 13 Andrew and Michelle Blumer *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Parramatta City church NSW in Vienna, Austria with Pioneers involved in local church ministry.
- 14 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Walcha charge including Woolbrook northern NSW with about 95 c&a, 7 yf and 11 e.
- 15 Bob and Deb McKerral *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Creek Rd church Brisbane, in a variety of service with Australian Indigenous Ministries.
- 16 Macquarie Chapel charge Eastwood, northern Sydney – near Macquarie Uni. – with about 355 c&a, 70 yf and 20 e; Richard and Wendy Quadrio, Duncan Robinson.
- 17 Seymour-Nagambie charge (2 congregations) with about 36 c&a, 7 yf and 2 e; Rob Myers.
- 18 Coffs Harbour congregation NSW which suffered flood damage earlier this year.
- 19 Julie Lawrence *mission partners* (APWM) worker from Epping, Sydney in Peru with SIM International involved in English teaching.
- 20 St Andrew’s charge Canberra including Weston Creek with about 625 c&a, 20 yf and 43 e; Joy and Arnold Bartholomew; celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the building (close to Parliament House) with the Moderator General preaching.

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Books

The Essence of the Reformation

Kirsten Birkett
Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2009.
Reviewed by Peter Barnes

This work is an ideal introduction to the Reformation. The first third gives an overview of medieval Europe, the onset of the Reformation, and the changes it brought. The last two-thirds give a taste of the writings of Martin Luther (on freedom), John Calvin (on prayer), and Thomas Cranmer (on salvation). The style makes for easy reading, and it could be read even by those with little background in the subject.

I suppose any reviewer is expected to pick up something to argue with. Kirsten writes: "Erasmus was not a Protestant; he was an exceptionally good Catholic." There is no arguing with the first part of the proposition, but the more doctrinaire Catholics object to Erasmus' indifference to certain Roman dogmas and practices. A man who wrote a satire on Pope Julius II's being excluded from heaven and who managed to get his works placed on the Papal Index of banned books might not easily be regarded as "an exceptionally good Catholic".

Leave that to one side, this is a helpful work, and it is to be commended, especially for those with little grasp of the issues of that great movement of 500 years ago.

Peter Barnes is books editor of AP.

Fearless Pilgrim The Life and Times of John Bunyan

Faith Cook
Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2008.
Reviewed by Mignon Goswell

John Bunyan lived in days when it was a costly thing to be a Christian," writes Faith Cook in her preface to this new, thorough biography of this great preacher and writer. John Bunyan is best known as the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the greatest allegories in Western Literature. Faith Cook, however, brings to us much more of the man and his times

than simply focusing on his most famous work.

There is great detail about his life, his writing and the tumultuous period he lived in. We are shown what he was like before his conversion, the people who were his early Christian influences, those who printed his works and aided his ministry and the faithful wives who bore and raised his children. Extensive use is made of Bunyan's diaries, revealing to the reader the process of his conversion and showing his wrestling with doubts and issues of faith. This backdrop places the reader in a better position to appreciate his writing.

We are shown that those who are greatly used by God have often lived through turbulent, difficult years. As well as the personal background, Cook gives us considerable detail of the historical facts of the period, including influential and powerful state figures and vital Christian leaders and writers. The vehement hatred of some state figures for the Nonconformist cause in general, and for Bunyan in particular, is described.

The books Bunyan wrote are explored in detail – not just *Pilgrim's Progress* and the autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, but also other lesser known and smaller works. This biography will help the reader to find Bunyan's books and read them, not just for their literary merit but for the spiritual encouragement they give. Cook reminds us in her preface that one day we may find, as in other parts of the world today, persecution and imprisonment to be *our* lot as well.

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

The Expository Genius of John Calvin

Steven J. Lawson
Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2007.
Reviewed by Peter Barnes

2009 marks the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth, in Noyon in France in 1509. Calvin is known as a theologian and a commentator of the first rank, but he deserves to be better known as a preacher. In this little work, Steve Lawson gives us 32 summaries of features of Calvin's work as a preacher. Calvin himself declared: 'I have observed ... a simple style of preaching ... I have felt nothing to be

of more importance than a literal interpretation of the biblical text.'

Not everything that Calvin did in the pulpit ought to be imitated by the modern preacher. His sermons lack something in structure, and he relied overmuch on his extraordinary memory. Lesser mortals would be advised to prepare more and give their sermons a more obvious outline.

Yet Calvin was a warm-hearted preacher, who used all means, including that of vivid imagery, to proclaim the Word of God clearly and accurately to ordinary people. In this he succeeded, and we can learn much from him. Lawson's work will further our education in this regard.

God Is

Mark Macleod
ABC Books, 2009
Reviewed by Sheryl Sarkoezy

This beautifully illustrated book was written to introduce primary school children to ideas of God, and attempts to present a spiritual alternative to materialistic values. Macleod poses the question "Where is God?" and answers by describing a god that can be found in the waves at the beach, in the light of the moon, in laughter and friends – in every moment and every living thing around us – except in Jesus Christ.

Despite his suggestion that we can have a big view of God (each page ends with the words "and more") the author has, in fact, reduced God to something far too small – things and feelings and experiences. Macleod has made the error condemned in Romans 1:25, that of substituting creation for the Creator. His god is in everything, and so becomes nothing; is immanent but never transcendent; omnipresent but not omnipotent.

Macleod's god is not the God of the Bible. The real alternative to materialism in our times will only be found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Anything else, no matter how beautifully illustrated, is a lie.

Sheryl Sarkoezy is a student at PTC, Sydney.

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Right out

What's wrong with a bill or rights? Plenty.

The Bible tells us that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). Therefore, when we hear of moves to press on with legislation in favour of anti-discrimination, freedom of religion, and a bill of rights, we ought to be mindful of what precisely is being suggested.

Christianity teaches us to think in terms of right and wrong, but the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Anti-Discrimination Board, naturally, think in terms of rights. In Christianity it is a sin to bow down to idols, to murder, to commit adultery, to steal, to be covetous or proud, or to break any other commandments. Sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4). There is a fundamental discrimination between truth and error, right and wrong.

But under the "rights" approach, divorced from moral absolutes, it becomes a sin to think in terms of right and wrong. In the Christian scheme of things, the magistrate is to punish evildoers and praise those who do what is good (1 Pet. 2:14). In a system governed by moral relativism, the law is supposedly morally neutral; the one real wrong left is discrimination. Hence it is supposedly wrong to discriminate against people on grounds of sexual preference. This is a ludicrous and dangerous proposition. So far it has usually been interpreted to mean that one is obliged to pander to homosexuals and transvestites, but logically it means that practices such as necrophilia or pedophilia are above criticism. If these practices can be criticised, then the anti-discrimination approach is self-defeating.

The alarming thing is that those with legal authority apparently wish to impose their definition of sin upon everybody else. In 2004 Britain's Royal Navy allowed the worship of the devil on its ships. That is where this approach leads.

One major problem is that rights and freedoms require definition, and hence there will be more dependence on lawyers rather than on law. Dr Samuel Johnson wisely pointed out: "How small, of all that human hearts endure, That part which laws or kings can cause or cure!"

The 1936 Soviet Constitution was perhaps the 20th century's most liberal



Peter Barnes

sounding constitution, but it was promulgated during the heyday of the brutal dictator Josef Stalin. While Stalin murdered his friends and his enemies in their millions, Soviet citizens were guaranteed all kinds of rights and freedoms. Small wonder that the ancient historian Tacitus made the pithy comment that "The more corrupt the state, the more numerous the laws".

In 2001 the Victorian Labor Government passed the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act. This was supposedly designed to stamp out religious vilification. Instead, it led to a long, drawn-out and expensive case against two Christian pastors, Daniel Scot and Danny Nalliah, who had ventured to criticise the Qur'an in the context of

Judges could allow polygamy or homosexual marriage, and outlaw any church that refused to kow-tow to this approach.

a seminar on Christian evangelism.

The most cogent criticism of this whole approach has come from a former Labor premier of NSW, Bob Carr, a religious agnostic, who has declared, quite rightly, that "more judicial review is the last thing Australia needs". C. S. Lewis saw this decades ago, and commented: "It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies."

The *UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief* of 1981 affirms that "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" (Article 1.1). This freedom is not absolute as it may be prescribed by laws to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others (Art. 1.3). It goes on to declare: "No one shall be subject to discrimination by any

State, institution, group of persons, or person on grounds of religion or other beliefs" (Art. 2.1).

Discrimination between human beings on grounds of religion or beliefs is denounced in the strongest terms as an affront to human dignity, a violation of ... human rights and fundamental freedoms, and an obstacle to friendly and peaceful relations between nations (Art.3). Hence all states are to take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief (Art. 4.1,2).

This may sound all very edifying, noble and self-explanatory, but it is fanciful. There is no clear distinction between Christianity and Satanism, or the Ten Commandments and the practices of suttee (widow burning) or child sacrifice in the Ganges River. Armed with no clear morality and an agenda that makes rights paramount, it would be quite in order for judges to allow polygamy or homosexual marriage, and to outlaw any body, including a church, which refused to kow-tow to this approach.

The discussion paper of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century*, released in August 2008, asks: "How can faith communities be inclusive of people of diverse sexualities?" The question presupposes the conclusion, and it is the wrong one.

Discrimination is not inherently evil. What is so wrong about a Muslim refusing to employ a woman whom he regards as not adequately covered up so far as her clothing is concerned? Why should a Christian publisher be forced to employ a New Ager? Why should the Protestant Churches' Cricket Competition be dismantled? Such situations may prove to be paradise for lawyers and litigants, but the art of manufacturing grievances is not one to be encouraged. What appears to confer rights – or recognise them – may in fact take them away. As George Orwell put it: "Freedom is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

Peter Barnes is minister of Revesby Presbyterian Church, Sydney.

ap