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“ It has become almost a cliché to assert that being a disciple means being a ‘disciple-maker’, but most people in most churches don’t really buy it. It’s not something that features in their vision of the normal Christian life. ”

Contents

EDITORIALS

- 5** Welcome to Vine Journal
(Tony Payne)
- 9** In praise of circles
(Samuel Freney)
- 13** **Is every disciple a disciple-maker?**
What Peter's first letter teaches us about the Christian life
(Colin Marshall and Guan Un)
- 23** **What is the gospel?**
In the face of current alternatives, can we be clear about our message?
(Mark Thompson)
- 33** **Exposing the darkness**
How the Christian life brings the hidden to light
(Samuel Freney)
- 41** **The troubled conscience**
What does the Bible say about those pangs of conscience we all feel?
(Tony Payne)
- 53** **Reproductive Bible reading**
How to help our friends listen to the voice of God for themselves
(Peter Blowes)
- 59** **Making meetings effective**
Ministry means meetings (so it seems). Can we do them better?
(Craig Schafer)

ABOUT VINE JOURNAL

Vine Journal is published three times a year in both digital and print form by GoThereFor.com, the digital ideas and resources division of Matthias Media. Like Matthias Media, GoThereFor.com exists to explain and promote a Bible-based, Reformed-evangelical vision of Christian life and ministry, and to equip Christians everywhere with resources to be disciple-making disciples every day.

Vine Journal's contribution to this aim is to provide rigorous, fresh, Bible-based essays that bring theology and practice together. We want to look at practical ministry questions with a view to the theology behind them, and likewise address biblical and theological issues with a view to their practical ministry implications.

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Welcome to Vine Journal

TONY PAYNE

I F THERE'S ONE THING I've learned from more than a quarter of a century in publishing, it's that sweeping generalizations about the future of media and communications are always wrong.

This is because (like my opening paragraph) they tend to take a perfectly good insight and push it that smidgeon too far.

I can't count how many times since about 1995 some tech guru futurist has solemnly declared that the book is dead, that print is dead, that newspapers are dead, that long-form is dead, that journalism is dead, and that generally our civilizational brain is dead. (I wasn't around then, but I'm assuming that the same sorts of guys were saying with the advent of TV that radio was dead and cinema was dead.)

New technologies seem to breed this kind of over-the-top triumphalism or catastrophizing (depending on which side you're on). The reality usually ends up being considerably more complicated, more interesting and more pregnant with possibility.

Which brings me to what some might regard as a rather brave move in our fast-paced, Twitterverse world. Alongside the launch of the new GoThereFor.com platform, we're also launching a new journal featuring long-form content, published in both digital and print editions three times a year.

We're launching *Vine Journal* because we're convinced that the Christian community needs long form arguments and essays—like we all need at least one substantial meal a day, like a house needs solid foundations, like a church community needs its regular sermons. Short, light, snackable content is enjoyable and often nutritious—but there are some subjects and ideas and arguments that we need to chew over, and that just can't be adequately covered in a Facebook update, a video clip or a short blog post of 600 words.

The aim is to challenge and deepen our biblical convictions, and to increase our understanding of how those truths work out in practice in our ministries.

This is especially true if we want to do the time-consuming but vital task of thinking both theologically and practically about the issues before us. Every biblical or theological question we might consider will have some sort of practical outworking in our daily lives and ministries; likewise, every pressing practical issue will have some biblical or theological underpinnings that have to be thought through and applied. And this essential process—of thinking our way back and forth between the Bible’s theology and its practical application in ministry—just takes some time and space.

That’s the kind of time and space that *Vine Journal* is seeking to carve out. Each edition of the journal will feature around half a dozen essays of between 2000 and 5000 words, and occasionally longer. The aim in all of them is to do what Reformed-evangelicals have always done: to keep asking “What does the Bible say?,” and to apply the theological insights thus gained to the everyday challenges of living for Christ and ministering in his name.

This first issue exemplifies the range of different questions or topics *Vine Journal* will be open to addressing:

- » thoughtful advice on reading the Bible one-to-one with other people;
- » a challenging and important essay on that most basic question “What is the gospel?”;
- » an examination of what ‘conscience’ really is, and what place it has in our Christian lives;
- » an insightful look (using the book of 1 Peter as a lens) at whether and how all Christians should be involved in the Great Commission;
- » a close reading of a remarkable passage in Ephesians 5 that has important implications for our relationship with the non-Christian world;
- » some practical help on how to run better meetings.

The aim in all of these, and in the multitude of articles and essays we hope and trust will follow, is to challenge and deepen our biblical convictions, and to increase our understanding of how those truths work out in practice in our ministries. It’s to achieve what the whole GoThereFor project is striving to achieve: “to see the fruit of the Great Commission in our lives and churches; to see Christ’s disciples go out with urgent love to the communities and peoples around them, to make new disciples and to teach them to obey all that Christ has commanded” (see gotherefor.com/manifesto).

It’s to see the gospel of Jesus grow like a spreading vine all over the world, with all its different leaves and branches (and yes, with the optimal ‘trellises’ supporting and facilitating that growth).

Who is *Vine Journal* for?

As we’ve been preparing this first edition (and planning the ones

to follow), we keep thinking about three kinds of readers around the world:

- » keen Christians who may not have undertaken formal theological education but who want to read and think and deepen their knowledge as disciple-making disciples;
- » interns, trainees and theological students who are thinking about both ministry and theology, and how the two constantly interconnect;
- » full-time pastors and ministry workers who have been out of theological college for five (or 50) years, who want to keep abreast of the issues and keep being stimulated and encouraged;

For all these readers, we want *Vine Journal* to be accessible but not simplistic; theologically-rich but always with an eye to the implications for disciple-making; and of course well-written and designed.

Please get in touch and let us know what you think of this launch edition—we're very keen to hear your feedback. And if you'd like to respond to any of the articles, drop us a line. If we get some good correspondence, we might even revive that classic old school feature of good journals everywhere: 'the letters column'. ▣

Tony Payne

HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY? LETTERS AND ARTICLES ARE WELCOME.

Want to respond to something that you've read in *Vine Journal*?

Drop us a line. We'll prioritize the publication of letters that are:

- Thoughtful and godly in tone
- Constructive when critical
- Enjoyable and helpful to read in their own right.

We're also glad to receive essay submissions that:

- come from a Reformed-evangelical viewpoint
- dig into the Bible and its theology
- have a helpful application to life and ministry
- are between 2000 and 5000 words (or possibly more)
- make you want to keep reading.

To send in a letter, float an article idea or submit a finished essay, contact vinejournal@gotherefor.com.

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In praise of circles

SAMUEL FRENEY

“**T**HAT’S A CIRCULAR ARGUMENT” is one of those phrases that, on the internet, serves to end a discussion. Once you’ve gone and crossed that particular stream, in the eyes of a great multitude of commenters you’ve got nothing else useful to say. Rarely, however, are so-called ‘circular arguments’ as bad as all that. More often than not what we’re talking about is *iteration*, where one process of thought will lead back to another allowing you to revisit that first process much better. Designers do this all the time; tech companies make their livelihood by doing this; good pastors and theologians do it well too. We want this journal to be a place where we can help each other iterate in our knowledge of God: thinking through theology that enriches pastoral practice, which then allows us to think about theology in new and useful ways. We’re aiming for something that’s more virtuous spiral than vicious circle.

This ability to integrate and keep reforming in our theology is important for all of us. As an example, let’s think about how we read Scripture, because as we approach God’s Word and listen to what he is saying in it, we find ourselves (in a good way) going in circles.

Approaching

None of us come to the text of Scripture (or, indeed, any text) as a blank slate. Backgrounds, pre-conceptions, prejudices, and more compound to make each individual’s approach to a text different. We all have a web of interconnected ideas—a ‘system’—about the text(s) we read. In the case of Scripture, we approach the text with our existing knowledge of God in mind; our whole current ‘system’ of who God is, and what his purposes are in Christ. We should

recognize that our system is imperfect and incomplete and open to adjustment, but we can't leave it 'at the door' when we come to the Bible to read it.

In fact, one aspect of our system is very important as we approach Scripture—we want to be people who read Scripture *as Scripture*; as the “word of God, which is at work in your believers” as Paul reminds the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:13). This is a theological presupposition, but it's a good one to have. We ought to seek for our understanding to be conformed, as much as is possible, to what is revealed in Scripture of God's own perfect self-knowledge. For by the Spirit we have the mind of Christ; God has revealed his secret plan for the ages to us in Christ; having been chosen in Christ our good is to be conformed to his image. Our goal is to know our creator better, and to know ourselves better.

Hearing

We approach Scripture, then, with a set of starting assumptions. We come clothed with pre-existing theological garments. But we also must come trembling and ready to hear, trusting that God will speak to us and change us and our thinking by his Spirit. We come with 'faith seeking understanding', ready to attend to the details of the particular text in front of us—to see how our understanding might be challenged, confirmed, corrected, deepened, restored or even overturned.

But it's not enough to just approach the text properly, we've got to read it well once we get there. This is the point at which all of the available literary and historical tools can and ought to be used to understand the Scriptures. We need to attend to the form, genre, grammar, syntax, context, and every other literary element, not just to understand it for its own sake, but to read the text as well as we are able. This is a life-long inductive process of listening well to Scripture, using all the tools and methods of reading at our disposal.

Constructing

An awareness of the canonical context, and the contribution each particular passage makes to the overarching storyline of the Bible (or at least where it sits in that context) is not a straightjacket that forces a particular interpretation, nor a requirement to find Jesus in every sentence of the Old and New Testaments, but a guide to keep remembering the story and progression the Scriptures themselves make clear.

Why? Without this kind of overall story-line integration it is easier to indulge in exegesis that looks only at what a text said at a particular time with no sensitivity (or care) for how that relates

to the rest of Scripture. This can be either of the form of “the post-exilic Israelites would have thought X; end of story”, or the similarly insensitive “what are the Goliaths in your life?” On the systematic end, elaborate crystal palaces can be built on, for example, considering what a hypothetical perfect being might be like, with no particular reference to Scripture, moving from there to realms unknown.

Biblical theology is what centres everything on Christ. It is a theological integration of the component parts of Scripture into a unified whole, acknowledging the diversity of Scripture, but discerning carefully its unity and progression towards the climax: Jesus himself.

Understanding

Some people are suspicious about systematizing theology—like the person who says “Just read the Bible, and do what it says”. But doctrine is both absolutely necessary and unavoidable (no blank slates, remember), so we might as well think about how we end up with a decent system rather than something that puts us on the wrong foot.

In constructing a biblical theology in the terms and categories provided by Scripture, we inductively begin to form a systematic web. The doctrinal relationships emerging from salvation history can then be articulated more clearly, using the language of the Bible (with an eye to the context, which we have paid special attention to in the constructive phase above). This means that we can use categories that are not explicit in the Bible, but helpfully explain what we have come to see across the shape of divine revelation: Trinity, the doctrine of Scripture, and so on.

Biblical theology helps to shape and reshape our system. Reading and hearing Scripture and developing a sense of the overarching biblical narrative from what we have read will reform whatever ‘system’ we started with to be closer to the text of Scripture. Systematic theology is, as I see it, a provisional end-point of the processes of exegesis and biblical theology. It is an end-point in that, to properly understand and describe God and his works, we need to do more than quote individual verses or say how they’re understood in their own context. Integration is necessary. But it is provisional in that an *evangelical* systematic theology must remain thoroughly reliant on Scripture, and therefore on the process of careful reading and canonical context. As soon as the systematic web of interconnected truths has been established, we read another portion of Scripture, now with a slightly modified set of backgrounds and assumptions. These are then at least in principle open to modification by the next text we read, and so on, till death do us part.

Some people are suspicious about systematizing theology—like the person who says “Just read the Bible, and do what it says”.

(As a side-note to this circular process, historical theology is an important counterpoint, but it's not part of the regular read-integrate-repeat cycle. The witness of the church throughout history constitutes examples at every level of understanding, from morphology/syntax/etc. through to systematic relations, providing for us Christian witness to the work of the Spirit in hearing God's voice. They are not authoritative as the Scriptures are, but are a cloud of witnesses that are worth paying attention to as examples of exegetical and systematic understanding. The person sitting next to me at church is similar: she's not an *authority* on how I ought to live my life under God, but she may well be an example to me, or someone I might respectfully and fruitfully disagree with.)

I suspect most of us as we read Scripture usually do something akin to this approach-hear-construct-understand cycle. It's useful for us to reflect on it, because we go in similar (good) circles elsewhere in our lives. As we're involved in ministry, theological reflection helps us to see how to live and serve more clearly. Similarly, practice in how theology plays out in particular circumstances and in addressing certain questions gives us fresh questions to ask as we go back to the Scriptures. This iterative process has its own possibilities and dangers—but again, it's well worth reflecting on. I'm looking forward to doing this with you in this issue, as well as those to come. ▣

Is every disciple a disciple-maker?

COLIN MARSHALL AND GUAN UN¹

It has almost become a cliché to assert that being a disciple means being a ‘disciple-maker’, but most people in most churches don’t really buy it. Whatever ‘making disciples’ means—and they’re not too sure—it doesn’t feature in their vision of the normal Christian life. Rather than going back to Matthew 28 to discuss this, Colin Marshall and Guan Un take a different tack in this essay: they examine the vision of the Christian life presented in Peter’s first letter, and see what it has to say about the ‘disciple-making disciple’.

DOES GOD ENABLE all his people to make disciples? If we turn to the classic text in Matthew 28:16-20 to answer this question, many people see a problem:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Here’s the problem: who is this talking to? On the surface level, Jesus is talking to the eleven disciples. We know, of course, that it was written for us: if it was meant to be just to the eleven disciples, then we would have no written record of it. However, there are parts of it that don’t sound applicable to the majority of us. After all, Jesus talks about ‘teaching’ and ‘baptizing’, and those aren’t activities that most of us are involved in, most of the time. If that’s the case, we could put the question another way: is every disciple a disciple-maker?

Many people in churches would either explicitly say no, or implicitly say no; many people simply don’t expect God to use them to make disciples—either in the sense of reaching out those around us to see them become disciples; or in the sense of helping existing disciples to grow in obedience to all that Christ has commanded. In the minds of many

¹ Colin Marshall is the director of Vinegrowers. He is the author of *Growth Groups* and (with Tony Payne) *The Trellis and the Vine*. Guan Un is a freelance writer and editor.

Christians, and many churches, the ‘disciple-making’ task is limited, for all practical purposes, to the pastors and staff, and to a few super-keen members.

Now, there are strong arguments to suggest that Matthew 28 is in fact talking about all of us being disciple-makers, and not just the ministry professionals and the ultra-committed, but the focus of this essay is not to rehearse those arguments.² We want to approach the question slightly differently. If Jesus in Matthew 28 was indeed commanding (and envisaging) that all his disciples would engage in the Great Commission, do we see that reflected in the rest of the New Testament? Is a ‘disciple-making ethos’ observable in Acts and the Epistles? Do we see Christians in general (not just pastors or people with specific roles) engaged in disciple-making activities? And are Christians in general urged, commanded, exhorted or in any other way encouraged to be involved in such activities?

In this essay, we will focus on just one New Testament letter—the first epistle of Peter—and see what it reveals.

Disciples in 1 Peter?

The first thing to observe is that there aren’t any disciples in 1 Peter— that is, the word ‘disciple’ or ‘make disciples’ does not exist in the letter. In fact, these words don’t occur in *any* of the Epistles of the New Testament. This shouldn’t bother us too much. Names and labels for things shift and change for many reasons, some of them significant, some of them not.

It’s clear enough that the *phenomenon* of being a disciple of Christ is all over

the New Testament (including in 1 Peter) because a disciple is essentially a ‘learner’— someone who devotes themselves to teacher, in order to learn and imitate and follow them in their teaching. In this sense to be a Christian is to be a ‘learner’ devoted to Jesus Christ—someone who has heard and learned the gospel of Christ (as the Colossians did from Epaphras, for example in Col 1:7), and in response has turned from our former way of life and is now devoted to understanding and obeying all his teachings.

Turning to 1 Peter, we find that it is addressed to just such as these—to people who have heard and responded to the gospel of Christ, and now live a new life entirely devoted to him and his teaching. What does 1 Peter say about the nature of this new life? And in particular what does Peter say about the role his readers should play in the Great Commission of making ‘learners’ out of people from every nation?

The letter was probably written to newly planted churches in far-reaching places, hence the address to “elect exiles of the Dispersion” (1:1), after the onset of major persecution in the early 60s AD.³ This persecution was probably not universal, state-run oppression, but occasional and specific attacks against these followers of Christ.⁴ Not that this is any mere thing. Peter describes how they have been “grieved by various trials” (1:6), and are facing a hostile world, in which they are suffering for being Christian (4:12-19).

Against this backdrop, what is Peter’s goal for them?

2 For a concise statement of the argument that Matthew 28 does indeed refer to all Christian disciples, see C Marshall & T Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, Matthias Media, Sydney, 2009, pp. 11-14.

3 PT O’Brien & AJ Köstenberger, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: a Biblical Theology of Mission*, Apollos, Leicester, 2001, p. 237.

4 EG Selwyn, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 2nd edn, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1981, p. 55.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy”. (1:14-16)

Despite the difference of 2000 years, here are the similarities to us and for us: here is a letter to people in churches in vastly different places, struggling with suffering and persecution, and how to grasp onto a message of being holy in a world that is striving to interrupt that holiness.

The promise and the journey

To get 1 Peter, there’s an image that we have to understand first, one that Peter weaves through the letter to help the recipients understand themselves.

He says that they are ‘exiles’. This is a particularly strange thing to call someone, especially when you’re trying to provide comfort. It’s akin to starting a motivational speech by addressing the audience as ‘homeless’. It’s disorienting, to say the least. In 1:1, he calls them the “elect exiles of the Dispersion”. In 1:17, he says to “conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile”, and in 2:11, he addresses them as “sojourners and exiles”.

In doing so, Peter is trying to tune them into a particular reality of the Christian life, and he does so by using Old Testament imagery. Israel were sojourners in Egypt and wandered as refugees in the desert before God kept his promise to bring them finally to the glorious land of promise; and Israel was dispersed and thrown into exile by Assyria and Babylon because of their sin, and received the promise through the prophets that God would one day bring them back to a glorious future in Zion. The theme of ‘exile’ is massive in Israel’s history.

Why does Peter use that metaphor here? It means that even though they are not yet home, the destination that awaits the recipients of the promise is sure and is glorious. Hence, Peter points toward their “living hope” and incorruptible inheritance (1:3-4), the “salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1:5) and the “outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1:9). Just as the Israelites could look forward to a sure salvation in the promise of God, just as it was certain that they would eventually make it (back) to Zion, kept by God in their time of sojourn, so too our destination is sure. Despite the years it may seem like we are travelling with nothing definite; despite age, mental or physical illness, job insecurity, relationship stress; despite how difficult it can be to be faithful in the place that God has put us, yet, our destination is still sure. It is sure because of Jesus.

‘Exile’ is a strange thing to call someone, especially when you’re trying to provide comfort.

Hence Peter reminds his readers of the promise of the gospel, which they have heard and understood and embraced, and by which they have been born again (1:23, 25): the gospel of the universal lordship of Christ, who not only redeems but is to be obeyed (1:2). He is pre-existent and will return (1:7, 11, 13, 20). He has been elected by God, and rejected by men (2:4), and he has borne sin and is bringing us to God (2:21-25; cf. Isa 53). Vindicated in the resurrection, he now sits at the right hand of God with angels, authorities and powers in subjection to him (3:18-22; cf. 4:13). He is the Lord, unique and universal. There is no other. As the Lord, he is the only fit judge. And when he judges, he judges as the Lord of all. Every person will come before his throne of judgement, before the throne of this Lord (1:17; 2:23; 4:5, 7, 17; 5:4-6).

Just like Israel, only a vastly more glorious scale, these ‘sojourners and exiles’ are on a journey. Behind them is a cataclysmic redemption through the blood of a Lamb; ahead of them is the promise of a glorious inheritance.

We might also notice that like Israel, they are all in this together. Peter’s words are addressed to all of them, without distinction. His instructions and teachings and encouragements are not for a specific subset, but for all the exiles, all the people who have heaven as their destination, all those who are now spiritually at odds with the world, all those who will suffer on account of their identification with Jesus.

Following Jesus into suffering

Peter calls his readers to be devoted, obedient servants of Jesus *where they are*, whether they are subject to rulers, or whether they are slaves serving masters, or whether they are husbands or wives (2:13-3:7).

This kind of ‘discipleship’ is to happen particularly when it involves suffering that is unjust: “For to this you have been

Behind them is a cataclysmic redemption through the blood of a Lamb; ahead of them is the promise of a glorious inheritance.

called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (2:21). The example of Jesus suffering on the cross is both a way to live and a pattern to

follow. His disciples live in such a way that we do not shy away from suffering, but continue trusting “him who judges justly” (2:23), just as Jesus did. And unlike the world, we do not fight suffering by inflicting further suffering. Instead we endure, and in doing so we “die to sin and live to righteousness” (2:24), noting

the echoes of Jesus’ call to lose our life in Mark 8:34-35.

It’s striking though that the abuse described is largely verbal, rather than physical. There are those who are “speaking against [them] as evildoers” (2:12), despite their good behaviour in Christ. They will be ‘slandered’ by those who “revile your good behaviour in Christ” (3:16). They will be ‘insulted’ because of the name of Christ (4:14).

Whatever the manner of abuse and persecution, we are called to follow Jesus and not to retaliate. Jesus was the servant, as silent as a sheep in his sufferings (Isa 53:7), silent before all the evil of his accusers and refraining from insults and threats. This is our calling too, to do good in speech and actions in the face of hostility. By such actions, we can “put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” (2:15).

It’s always tempting to justify our sin with explanations of how and how much we’ve been wronged. We’re tempted to gossip because someone else has been saying things about us, boasting because someone else has just been telling stories about what they’ve done, lying because someone else has.

However, Peter reminds us that we have been removed from that cycle of retribution. Instead of succumbing to sin, we look to Jesus. We can follow in his footsteps because “he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness”, healed by his wounds (2:24; cf. 1:2, 19).

The Christian life is never passive. It is a faith that is active in repentance, dying to sin and living for righteousness. This is not instantaneous, but it is continual in the Christian life. We follow Jesus, and because of where he has gone we are “done with sin”, not in terms of living perfect lives now, but in terms of the aim of our lives (4:1-2).

Proclaiming the gospel in words

Peter says that though we live as exiles and sojourners, we do so as God's chosen special people, as a royal priesthood who have been called "that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (2:9b).

The context of this extraordinary statement helps us put it into perspective. Peter describes his readers as living stones constituting the *temple* (cf. 2:6-8) and *priesthood* (cf. 2:9-10) of Israel. They may be exiles from their heavenly home, but not from their God, who has called them into his spiritual house through faith in the cornerstone (2:5-6).

Historically this has been called the 'priesthood of all believers', a concept radically expounded by Martin Luther. The holy priesthood here is made up of *every one of us that has come to God*. As this new priesthood, we have a new purpose: "to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:5).

What does it mean to offer spiritual sacrifices? The sacrifices we offer are only acceptable to God *through Jesus Christ*. Just as the temple is a spiritual and not a physical house, made up of the believers of Jesus Christ, so too the sacrifices that we offer are spiritual. Peter puts it like this: we have been chosen "for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood" (1:2). Part of our spiritual sacrifice, then, is the holiness and good deeds that flow from our salvation (e.g. 1:13-15; 2:1, 11-12).

The 'that' in 2:9 introduces a distinctive vision for the disciples that make up the new Israel: they are to proclaim the praises of God who called them from darkness to light. The words of the proclamation are to be accompanied by deeds (cf. Heb 13:15-16). The strongest possible language of Israel's covenant

status is radically applied to this new covenant people of God: "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession".

The content of the proclamation, the *excellencies*, are the wonderful and mighty deeds of God in bringing them from darkness to light (2:9b)—namely the gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. 1:2-5, 11, 18-21; 2:22-25; 3:18ff.).

However, proclamation doesn't work in a vacuum. Proclamation isn't much good if nobody hears the announcement. Some have argued that these excellencies are directed to God, as we worship him, in terms of worship in church on Sunday. Perhaps this way of reading the verse has been influenced by the NIV's translation of the Greek *aretas* in verse 9 as "praises", which to our modern minds connotes the singing of songs in church. But there is no connotation here of singing or of church services—the word simply means excellence or merit, either of character or of action (or both). The role of the holy nation, the royal priesthood of God, is to announce and declare in the midst of the nations, the manifold excellencies of God. There is, of course, strong Old Testament background to these ideas.

The content of the proclamation is the mighty deeds of God in bringing them from darkness to light.

When God first gathered Israel together around himself at Mt Sinai, he declared that his purposes for them as his own nation, his treasured possession, was for them to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6)—to represent him, as it were, to the nations. This vision, never very successfully fulfilled by national Israel, is taken up against strongly in the prophets—such as in Isaiah 42, where the servant of Isaiah's prophecy will be a light to the nations to

open the eyes that are blind (Isa 42:6-7). Now, in Jesus, this ministry of the servant has arrived and the “new thing” has been accomplished in the gospel (42:9). This new thing results in a “new song” to the “end of the earth” (42:10).

That is, just as in Isaiah, to “proclaim his excellencies” refers to the constant speaking of the great gospel deeds of our saviour, whether as encouragement to one another or in evangelism and worldwide mission.⁵

As the sojourners and exiles journey to their glorious inheritance, they don’t keep quiet about it. They constantly declare the great and marvellous deeds of the God who has redeemed them.

This is also why this verse comes sandwiched as a contrast between believers and those who disobey the word (2:6-8), and an ethical discussion about conduct among the Gentiles (2:11-12). Concerning the former, we proclaim his wonderful deeds despite those who disobey his word. Concerning the latter, we proclaim his excellencies so that others might have the chance to see his goodness too. To put it in familiar terms, to proclaim his excellencies is to participate in the discipling of all people—whether we shepherd, remind, and encourage other disciples already walking the path, or we are calling others to be disciples with us.

The testimony of holiness

Immediately upon establishing their purpose as God’s people to proclaim the excellencies of the gospel, Peter turns to the necessity of holiness. The proclamation of God’s excellencies must

be undergirded by honourable (good) behaviour. Holy living is directed both inwards and outwards, to the Christian community *within* and to the hostile world *without*.

Inwardly, community life is to be nourished by: sincere brotherly love; putting away malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander; feeding on the word of God; and ultimately by coming to Christ and experiencing the kind of mercy that builds community (1:22-2:10). Outwardly, Peter speaks of living “among the Gentiles”, that is, holiness in the sphere of existing societal relationships.

We can think of holiness among the Gentiles as a lifestyle apologetic. However, just as the proclamation of the gospel will be met with different reactions from our hearers, so also our holy living will meet with different reactions. Some will continue to slander or malign us (2:12; 4:4-5), even though they will discover in due course that they were on the wrong side of history. Peter says that they will “glorify God on the day of visitation” as a result of our behaviour (2:12), and will “give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (4:5). The “day of visitation” is the eschatological day when God will visit to judge (1:17; 4:5, 7; 5:4; cf. Luke 1:78). In Philippians 2:11 we read that this will be the day when, under God’s searching judgement, every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

However, elsewhere in 1 Peter, the godly behaviour of Christians can be a stepping-stone on the path of non-Christians becoming disciples of Jesus. This is what we see in 3:1-2. Here wives are referred to as winning over husbands through “respectful and pure conduct”. Such is the emphasis on the evangelistic power of good behaviour that Peter can say that these husbands may be “won without a word”. Of

5 Incidentally, this aspect of proclamation and confession is in fact very closely tied to what ‘praise’ is in the Bible. M Harding, ‘The Biblical Concept of Praise’, in BG Webb (ed.), *Church, Worship and the Local Congregation*, Lancer, Homebush West, 1987, pp. 27-44.

course, in the context of being called to declare the excellencies of the gospel (2:9), Peter is not advocating a ‘lifestyle only’ policy for evangelism. The heart of the gospel is hearing that Jesus Christ is Lord, and deeds without words glorify man rather than God.

So we must then ask, how are we living? When non-believers look at our lives, our behaviour and our actions, are they able to see clues to the excellencies of God? Do our lives present a bright contrast of praise in comparison to the dark unthankfulness and despair of so much of the world?

The witness of hope

Believers are persecuted because they live differently to the rest of the society in which they live: “they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you” (4:4). In doing so, we follow the pattern of Jesus, who suffered despite doing no wrong.

Peter then is preparing the church not only to endure persecution, but to take the opportunity to witness. Christians are called not to retreat into ghetto communities of like-minded Christians, but to participate in the institutions of society with boldness and integrity. They will only be bold to do this if they exchange the fear of men for the honour of Christ in their hearts (3:14-15a).

It is both distinctive and counter-cultural when believers do good in response to evil, when they love in the face of hatred and persecution. The world simply cannot understand the motivation of verses like “do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing” (3:9). This kind of Christ-like behaviour puts slanderers to shame (3:16).

This way of love also prompts people to enquire about their hope, giving disciples opportunity to speak of Jesus, their “living hope” (1:3). Thus, Peter explicitly instructs his readers to give a verbal defence (*apologia*) of the gospel:

But in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect. (3:15)

We need to prepare ourselves to answer the questions of others. This is not as difficult as it sounds, because actually people tend to have a grab bag of similar questions: “Why does God allow suffering?”, “Aren’t all religions the same?”, “How can we believe the Bible?” The best way to get a feel for what questions people would ask is to take the step of asking non-Christian friends what questions they have. You don’t need to have all the answers, but in reading or in consulting with other wise Christians, you might be able to come up with astute answers that point to Jesus.

What is just as important as the content is the manner of our defence—that what we say in response is underlined by gentleness and respect, not

aggression or defensiveness. Even though we may be under attack, we are not to respond in kind; just as Jesus did.

Christians are called not to retreat into ghetto communities of like-minded Christians, but to participate in the institutions of society with boldness and integrity.

Mutual love and service

The journey of the exiles should not be lonely. For some believers, the institutions of society—government and

the household—are environments of harm and fear, especially when authorities are unjust (2:13-18, 3:7). As aliens and strangers in the world, the persistent slander and the anticipation of a more fiery trial awakens fear (2:11-12, 3:14, 4:12). We need each other. Peter addresses the nature of community life, governed by his conviction that “the end of all things is at hand” (4:7-11). All disciples are to have love for each other, thus covering over a multitude of sins.

Love is the governing principle here; mutual hospitality and ministry are simply concrete expressions of mutual love. Each one in the community has received a gift and they are to use their gifts to serve one another, whether in speech or general service of one another.

Since God is the source and end-point

of their community life, this gift is not self-derived but received according to grace, which demands that the ministry be exercised faithfully as good stewards. To not use the gifts of God’s grace is ungodly

wastefulness. Those who speak should do so as speaking the very words of God; those who serve (and this may not be a mutually exclusive group with ‘those who speak’) should do so out of God’s strength. The picture here is of a rich and variegated community, gifted by God, who speak to each other and serve each other, all to God’s glory.

In addition to their mutual ministry to one another, there are also distinctive ministries, based on seniority. Peter says “it is time for judgement to begin at the household of God” (4:17), and so exhorts the elder and the younger in the household (5:1-5). Just as Christ is

the shepherd, so he calls upon elders to shepherd the “flock of God”, so that when the chief shepherd appears “you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (5:2, 4). These under-shepherds of God’s sheep are to be examples of willing, selfless service—the very opposite of any images we might have of dominating dictators.

After a brief word urging those who are younger in the congregation to defer to the elders’ authority (as slaves defer to masters or wives to husbands), Peter comes back to the theme of mutual love: “clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (5:5). He then sums up his call to discipleship with words echoing the teaching of Jesus: “humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you” (5:6; cf. Luke 14:11, Matt 23:12).

The key to following Jesus, doing good and bringing glory to him in the midst of suffering, is submission to God. This implies submission to one’s believing companions who are also pilgrims on the journey to heaven. Disciples love one another, speak God’s word to one another, serve one another and forgive one another. All the members of the body of Christ are needed—we cannot walk the path alone.

Conclusions

Let’s sum up and draw some conclusions. Firstly, *all* Christians—all disciples—are exiles on a journey in which the destination is as certain as Jesus’ death and resurrection. The work we do together to gather in others to join us on this journey is not the work of a few select people on Sunday; it is not simply

The picture here is of a rich and variegated community, gifted by God, who speak to each other and serve each other, all to God’s glory.

the work of the ministry staff. Part of our very identity as God's redeemed people is that we "proclaim his excellencies" to Christian and non-Christian alike. (Or to put it another way, all disciples are disciple-makers.) We are motivated to this by our calling. To continue to proclaim his excellencies, we must continue delving into how excellent he is.

Secondly, the work of all disciples is the same in purpose but *different* in scope and context. We are not all called to proclaim in the same way. Some, like Paul, Peter, and Timothy were called to start new work in new territories, just like missionaries and church planters today are called to different areas, countries and ministries. However, the mission of disciple-making for all disciples is that we are called to attend to the pattern of relationships and institutions and households that God has placed us in, day by day. Whether church planter or single mother, whether carpenter or executive, it's the same activity: speaking the gospel of Jesus Christ, his Lordship, his mercies, his wonderful deeds and works—in every sphere of our lives (2:9-10).

Thirdly, as we speak the gospel, we

adorn it with the holiness of our lives. According to Peter, there's a simple test as to whether we are living godly lives. Godliness will provoke one of two responses in other non-Christians: they will revile you because you are Christian, or they will ask you for the reason for your hope. When you examine the day-to-day direction of your life, is there reason for others to think that you are a disciple of Christ? Or is the direction of your life essentially the same as that of your neighbours, besides a few hours on Sunday?

Fourthly, *all* the members are to build the body of Christ up in love. Making disciples is both an individual and corporate task. There is no corporate witness if individuals are not living holy lives and speaking boldly. This means both strengthening and winning new disciples. Within the church community, there is a diversity of gifts—of speech and service—to strengthen one another in the journey of discipleship. This means elders might be set aside for the specific task of shepherding the flock to eternal glory, as under-shepherds of the chief shepherd, who calls us to make disciples. ▣

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What is the gospel?

MARK D THOMPSON¹

When certain people came to the Corinthians bringing a different Jesus, a different Spirit and a different gospel, Paul damningly says that they “put up with it readily enough”. We need to be very careful, Mark Thompson argues, that we do not do the same today, but instead fix in our minds very clearly what the gospel really is.

REMEMBER, MORE than 20 years ago now, an international visitor to Sydney being asked this question. Throughout the week he had been here, the speaker had appealed to the gospel many times. In a part of the world well-known for the strength of its evangelical witness, such an appeal was clearly essential if he was to get a hearing.

But the appeal had not been convincing, and it had become increasingly obvious that at this most basic level our guest had a very different idea of what exactly it was that he was repeatedly appealing to. So some brave soul—someone braver than me—publicly asked him the question. What is the gospel?

He hesitated for a moment. I suspect he feared a trap of some kind. The young man asking the question did not back off, but quietly waited. Then the speaker who had been appealing to the gospel all week replied, “I don’t think I could define it yet. I’m still learning more and more what

it means and what should be included in it. I’ve got a way to go yet.”

At one level his answer came across as humble and gentle and appropriately Christian. It provided cool relief from the bold, even strident, claims he and others had made from the platform that week. Who among us has it all together and nothing to learn? Who hasn’t got a way to go yet? Nevertheless, not being able to articulate in a simple and clear way what it is that lies at the heart of the Christian message—especially when the person concerned is presenting themselves as a Christian teacher—struck many of us as not just sad but alarming.

This reticence when it comes to proclaiming and explaining the gospel message seems light years away from the attitude of the first Christians. The apostle Paul could even exclaim “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16). He urged Timothy to do the work of an evangelist, a gospel-speaker (2 Tim 4:5). To do that, he would have to have been clear about what the gospel is.

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A variety of gospels

Clarity about the gospel is all the more urgent at the moment, because of the variety of ‘gospels’ on offer.

The gospel of inclusion has swept through many parts of the United States. According to this gospel, there are no grounds on which anyone could be left outside the kingdom. No matter the background, belief or behaviour, all must be recognized as already in the kingdom because no-one is excluded.

The grain of truth in this view is the simple fact that according to the New Testament the gospel does cross what many in the first century considered insuperable barriers, and so includes the outcast, the marginalized and the foreigner in the blessings first promised to Israel. All who come in repentance and faith are welcomed. But this is not everyone, and the gospel does not disregard persistence in immorality of any kind. In the end, this view of the gospel requires some imaginative exegesis of vast swathes of the New Testament (not to mention the Old Testament). How does it square with the picture of the end, where amongst those outside the city include “the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (Rev 22:15)? Not everyone is inside. The gospel excludes those who, tragically, will not come (Matt 25:41-46; Mark 4:11-12).

The gospel of unity is another popular offering at the moment. We are told the gospel is unity and unity is the gospel. In a slightly more nuanced form, we are simply told the gospel is intrinsically about the unity issue. The gospel brings people together, and so anything that separates people is against the gospel. Now clearly unity between Christian brothers is a wonderful gift of God (John 17:20-23). It is a very good thing (Ps 133:1). It is

something given but also something we are called upon to maintain and protect (Eph 4:3). The divisive person is described by Paul as “warped and sinful” and “self-condemned” (Titus 3:10-11). Yet the gospel of unity goes a step beyond valuing unity highly. It *defines* the gospel in terms of unity.

The ecumenism of the early-to-mid 20th century made much of this, and so have postmodern approaches at the end of the 20th century and into the 21st. No matter how serious you may think a theological issue is, no matter how convinced you may be that a particular person or group has wandered from the biblical gospel (with dire consequences for them and others), unity is more important. To criticize another’s behaviour or another’s teaching, no matter how justified that criticism might be, is disallowed because it is an assault upon unity, and ultimately an assault upon the gospel. More nuanced contemporary forms would not go that far. They would still leave a place, at least formally, for repudiating false doctrine. But by making the gospel intrinsically about unity, they are in reality more reluctant to engage in that repudiation themselves, and suspicious of those who do. In some circles the only heresy that remains is intolerance. Truth and unity are still valued highly, at least in theory—but unity trumps truth almost every time.

Yet immediately at least three issues arise. Firstly, Scripture does, of course, give us very important guidelines on what to do when we find ourselves scandalized by the behaviour or departure from the truth by one who has the name of a brother: speak to him or her face to face (Matt 18:15); correct with gentleness and with a view to their repentance rather than their condemnation (2 Tim 2:25); but also, ultimately, if they will not

listen, disassociate from them (1 Cor 5:11). Paul could certainly envisage this within a properly functioning Christian community—disassociating from a Christian brother (he stresses the person he has in mind is not an enemy but a brother) in order to bring him to repentance (2 Thess 3:14-15). So we must beware, lest an appeal to the priority of unity becomes a device to shield us from criticism and from the godly rebuke envisaged in the Scriptures for our good.

Secondly, a description of the gospel message as unity confuses the gospel and a critical *consequence* of the gospel. Paul's confrontation with Peter at Antioch was a gospel confrontation, not because unity is the gospel and the gospel is unity but because, given the gospel (that all people, Jew and Gentile, are set in the right with God in exactly the same way, by God's grace through faith in Christ, not by works of the law), it was entirely inappropriate for Peter to separate from the Gentile Christians because they were uncircumcised. Unity between Jews and Gentiles is a critical consequence of the gospel—but the gospel is not first and foremost about unity, but about what God has done in Christ to save both without reference to their works. This is why Paul deals with the issue of salvation and its basis in Ephesians 2:1-10 *before* spelling out the consequence of this in the unity of Jew and Gentile in Ephesians 2:11-22.

Thirdly, unity is properly what philosophers call an incomplete predicate. We are bound to ask, "Unity in what?" The New Testament answer is "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph 4:13), and "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). We are to "all have the same mind" (1 Cor 1:10; Phil 2:2), and we gain this common mind when we understand

that we are in Christ Jesus, that he has become to us "wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption", and so we give up boasting in ourselves but boast instead in the Lord who saved us through the foolishness of the cross (1 Cor 1:30-31). Our fellowship is, therefore, not an abstraction, not something that exists for its own sake, but rather "our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

The gospel of cosmic renewal has its contemporary advocates as well. Picking a sometimes-neglected biblical theme, they insist that we should be talking about the new creation and not just the salvation of sinners. Of course this is true, and, though occasionally overlooked, it has not at all been forgotten by evangelical preachers and writers over the years. The bringing of all things together under the headship of Christ (Eph 1:10), the hope of "a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet 3:13)—these are biblical themes in which we rejoice. Yet serious issues arise when the new creation itself becomes the gospel.

Sophisticated versions of this approach sometimes appeal to the resurrection of Christ as the affirmation or vindication of creation, allowing advocates to stress the continuity between this creation and the new creation. Insufficient attention is given to the fact that the New Testament explicitly points to the resurrection as the affirmation or vindication of the crucified Messiah first and foremost, and that this creation stands under the shadow of the cross. The created order seeks its redemption in the redemption of the sons of God (Rom 8:21), and is yet to go

We must not let an appeal to the priority of unity become a device to shield us from the godly rebuke envisaged in the Scriptures for our good.

through both destruction (2 Pet 3:10-12) and transformation (Rev 21:1).

Other versions of this approach rely on the rather inflated view of common grace associated with certain influential figures in early 20th century Dutch Calvinism. The enduring value of our cultural achievements is seen as a sign of the grace of the God who

Salvation is the centrepiece at the end as it has been all the way through the Bible.

“makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt 5:45). Our work in the world is presented, oddly in my view, as the glory

John speaks about in Revelation 21:24 (“By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it...”). The end result is that our hope is redirected from the future to the present, from God’s great triumph at the end to what we are able to achieve in this world now. (Sadly, a century later, we cannot help but conclude that the use of the doctrine to energize serious cultural engagement has not been particularly successful in transforming Dutch society in a Christian direction.)

At the centre of the creation in Genesis 1 is the humanity God has made and the word of blessing he has given to them (Gen 1:27-30). At the centre of the new creation is the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev 22:3; the Lamb spoken of in 5:6 as standing “as though it had been slain”), and the vast crowd of those who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb who cry out “Salvation belongs to our God” (Rev 7:9-14). The new creation is indeed a fulfilment of God’s plan from the beginning, but its significance is as the arena in which redeemed men and women gather eternally around his throne—those whose tears have been wiped away, and who no longer suffer

death or crying or mourning or pain (Rev 21:4). The goal to which all things has been heading is not a new heavens and a new earth, as if these things alone suffice, but the glory given to God by redeemed men and women in a new heavens and a new earth. Salvation is the centrepiece at the end as it has been all the way through the Bible.

The gospel of social justice was very popular in the early 20th century, and is currently undergoing a revival in some circles. According to its advocates, the imperatives of the gospel are not simply to repent and believe, but the relief of social, economic and even political inequality. We should be seeking to realize kingdom values now in line with the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer.

Undoubtedly much of what is done in the name of the social gospel is good and right and appropriate for Christians. It arises quite clearly from the obligation to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matt 22:39). A spirituality that has no regard for physical need is empty and useless (Jas 2:14-16). The Pharisees were busy tithing mint and rue and every herb but they neglected justice and the love of God (Luke 11:42). In contrast Jesus, even after declaring that he had come to preach rather than conduct a healing ministry, interrupted this priority in order to attend to the concrete physical need of the leper who pleaded, “If you will, you can make me clean” (Mark 1:38-42). The love that flows out of the gospel sees the person it addresses as a whole, with spiritual, physical and emotional needs that each require attention. It also takes into account the impact of larger factors, such as unjust structures or political decisions and seeks to right them. Wilberforce’s work for the abolition of the practice of slavery, which finally

succeeded after 43 years in 1833, was a model of faithful Christian perseverance in social action.

However, problems arise when the pursuit of social justice is presented as the message of the gospel itself. Once again there is a confusion of content and consequence. As Martin Luther famously put it, freed from the misapprehension that we must do good works in order to gain God's favour, we are able to do good works in order to "serve and benefit others in all that [we do], considering nothing except the need and the advantage of [our] neighbour".² In the wake of the gospel our love can be truly disinterested, in the best sense. We serve for our neighbour's sake and not our own. But this is only possible because in the gospel we are freed from the need to justify ourselves, since we have been justified in Christ by faith.

The gospel of social justice tends also to confuse life in the interim between Jesus' resurrection and return with life at the end. While love most certainly cannot rest satisfied with a passive acceptance of injustice and cruelty and deprivation, the gospel of the crucified and risen Lord generates hope as we wait for the day when all wrongs are set right, all tyranny overthrown and every tear wiped away. The sufferings of this present age will eventually give way to incomparable glory (Rom 8:18). The kingdom of God is not something we can realize on earth, but something that will come—a gift to be given to us by God himself. It awaits the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10-11). Only at the end will Christ deliver the kingdom to

God the Father, after destroying every rule and every authority and power (1 Cor 15:24). Our commitment to act in love, especially towards those who are suffering or vulnerable is right and proper and real. But the kingdom of God can never be our accomplishment. According to the gospel of the king, it is God's gift at the end.

What is the gospel?

So what is the gospel as the New Testament presents it? Let's unpack it in four steps.

1. The gospel is a message. When Jesus came into Galilee, following his temptation in the wilderness, he came "proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel"" (Mark 1:14-15). The gospel is something to be proclaimed. It is a message that confronts, challenges, informs and gives hope. It transforms lives and turns the world upside down. But it is a message that is proclaimed before all else. "This gospel of the kingdom", Jesus made clear, "will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14). The book of Acts describes how this begins, as first Peter and John (8:25), then Philip (8:40), and then Paul and Barnabas (14:7) "preach the gospel". It is something that is heard (Rom 10:14-17; Eph 1:13; Col 1:5).

The gospel is not something we do but something we first hear and then pass on to others.

This means that the gospel is not something we do but something we first hear and then pass on to others. We cannot take any credit for the gospel or suggest we are superior in any way

2 M Luther, 'The Freedom of a Christian', *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1957, p. 365.

because we have been given the gospel to take to the ends of the earth.

2. The gospel is God's message. The letter to the Romans begins with the apostle Paul insisting that he had been “set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1). It is critical to recognize that this gospel message is not *our* message (Gal 1:11). It is not a human theological construct, the product of our thoughtful reflection upon what God has done in Jesus. It is God's message addressed to us. It is his announcement of what he has done and the difference it makes. It has its source in his purposes and his love for the world of human beings lost in sin (John 3:16).

This of course means we have no right to tamper with it. We are not at liberty to redefine it for a different age or introduce a ‘full gospel’ as if the gospel as it was preached by Jesus and then by his

apostles was deficient in some way. We have no authority to omit part of it for any reason, least of all because we are uncomfortable with it. We have a responsibility to pass on what we have received, undiluted and

unaugmented. It is not our message; it is God's message to us.

3. The gospel is God's message concerning his Son. At the heart of this message from God is what he has to say about his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 1:3). In fact, it is often described in the New Testament as “the gospel of Christ” precisely because it is the gospel concerning Christ (Rom 15:19; 1 Cor 9:12; Gal 1:7; Phil 1:27; 1 Thess 3:2). It is not first and foremost a message concerning the church, though what is said about Jesus Christ has an enormous

impact on the church. The church is a creature of the word. It is not first and foremost a message concerning humanity, though necessarily what is said about Jesus enables us to understand ourselves and our future from God's perspective. It is not first and foremost about creation, though the Son of God the gospel presents to us is the same Son through whom and for whom all things were made, and in whom all things hold together (Col 1:15-17). It is about Jesus—about who he is and what he has done. It is not too much to say that you cannot avoid talking about Jesus and still be talking about the gospel. In him all the promises of God are ‘yes’ (2 Cor 1:20).

This is critical in the current environment, where the gospel has become for some a theological cypher, a principle or determining concept rather than a message about a person. Quite a few contemporary articles and books on the gospel are preoccupied with the function of the gospel rather than the content of the gospel. But what the gospel *does* must flow out of what the gospel is, and at its very heart it is a message from God about God's Son.

4. The gospel is God's message concerning his Son and the salvation he has won for us. The first mention of ‘the gospel’ in Paul's letter to the Ephesians speaks of it as “the gospel of your salvation” (Eph 1:13). Early in Romans Paul wrote, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16). While the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing, to those who are being saved God “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:1-6). We cannot and must not leave ‘salvation’ out of our proclamation

We have no authority to omit part of the gospel for any reason, least of all because we are uncomfortable with it.

of the gospel. The Jesus who is proclaimed in the gospel is both Lord and Saviour. He proclaimed the gospel during his earthly ministry and his disciples proclaimed the gospel after his resurrection, so that people might hear and be saved. “There is salvation in no one else”, they insisted, “for there is no other name under heaven... by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Of course this raises a number of important questions that fill out any faithful explanation of the gospel. Salvation from what? The very idea of salvation implies a danger from which we are saved. What is that danger? Paul makes it crystal clear in two places in particular. To the Greeks at the Areopagus he declared:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

And to the Thessalonians he could write:

... our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction ... they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thess 1:5, 9-10)

The salvation the gospel brings is salvation from the judgement and wrath of God before all else. All other things—social disintegration, ecological catastrophe, political tyranny, economic loss, dashed hopes in so many areas—all

other things pale in the light of salvation from the judgement and the holy, justified anger of the living God. We are not simply the passive victims of sinful structures and forces outside of us; we are sinners who are active and responsible for the sins we have committed. The absolutely right and just and pure wrath of God at sin is exactly what we all deserve. Yet because of Jesus and his death and resurrection, those who are his are delivered from “the wrath to come”. That is the good news of the gospel. That is the point made so often in the New Testament that we simply cannot avoid it (Matt 3:7; John 3:36; Rom 1:18, 2:5, 8, 3:5, 5:9; Eph 2:3, 5:6; Col 3:6; 1 Thess 1:10; Rev 6:16 etc.). Hearing this message, and responding to this message in repentance and faith, brings the forgiveness of sins and the present and future reality of eternal life.

The language of salvation also raises the question, “Salvation for what?” We have not only been rescued *from* something but *for* something. Once again it is the apostle Paul who helps us answer this question. God has both “delivered us from the domain of darkness” and “transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:13). We now live within an entirely new context, one where sin and the condemnation of the law do not reign but where instead Christ reigns (Rom 6:5-14). Yet Jesus’ death and resurrection do more than just make a difference to the arena in which we live. This salvation changes the entire course and purpose of our lives: “he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor 5:15). The good news of the gospel is that we have been forgiven and saved so that we can now live a new life in service of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Just as significant is the question of how this gospel contains the dynamic of both news and summons. The call to repentance and faith is intrinsic to the gospel. From the very first New Testament preaching of the gospel, by Jesus himself, the message of what God was then about to do, and now has done, included a summons to repentance and faith (Mark 1:14-15). The logic is spelt

The gospel cuts across the fabric of our lives, exposing the danger we are in because of our sin and God's judgement, and presenting us with the one who is our only hope.

out in Romans 10. The word is proclaimed, it is heard and believed, and it is confessed—for “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved’... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:10-17). The gospel is not simply a piece of information

that can be comfortably integrated with other information we have acquired over the years. It cuts across the fabric of our lives, exposing the danger we are in because of our sin and its inevitable consequence in judgement, and presenting us with the one who is our only hope and the work he has accomplished that can change the future forever. It is a call to turn back and bow before the Christ who has died for our sins, the one who is both a saving Lord and the lordly Saviour.

The gospel is God's message concerning his Son and the salvation he has won for us. And so we are led to Paul's summary in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

Not a bad summary of the gospel, that. The long-promised Messiah has come. He died for our sins. Yet he triumphed over death by rising on the third day. This is the heart of it. Of course there is much more to say, though we cannot afford to say less. We could reflect on how crucial was Paul's observation that his message was “in accordance with the Scriptures”. The gospel did not just emerge *ex nihilo* with Jesus' preaching ministry in Galilee. It has always been in God's mind, right from the beginning and the promise in the midst of the curse in the Garden (Gen 3:15). We could reflect on how the gospel relates to the idea of God's kingdom, especially in Matthew's Gospel, where to speak of “the gospel of the kingdom” was possibly more necessary because of the particular audience he had in mind (and more particularly, their expectations). We could reflect on just how many themes from the Old Testament converge on Jesus and what he has done—the sacrifices, the covenant, the kinsman redeemer, the suffering servant, the last Adam, and the firstborn of all creation. ‘Messiah’, especially when applied to Jesus, is a very big idea indeed. But while each one of these things will undoubtedly add richness and texture to the picture, none of it should displace the central figure, Jesus, and the central idea, salvation.

Conclusion

In a world confused by a range of different gospels and in churches where both clarity and boldness are all too often absent, it is good from time to time to ask ourselves this most basic of questions: *what is the gospel?* We have no business preaching any other gospel than the one given to us by Christ and his apostles.

Sadly, the distorted but popular gospels I mentioned at the beginning all in the

end underplay the seriousness of sin and how it relates to salvation. The gospel of inclusion and the gospel of unity both underestimate the lordship of Jesus and the need to repent of our sin before him. They leave room for us simply to stay as we are or unite as we are, as if sin and error do not really matter before the one who is the risen king and righteous judge.

The gospel of cosmic renewal and the gospel of social justice, on the other hand, displace the saving death and resurrection of Jesus from the centre and put the consequences arising from

these events in their place. In contrast, the biblical gospel is God's message concerning his Son and the salvation he has won for us.

This is the message we should present plainly and unaltered, in all its cross-centred glory, to a world so desperately in need. As the apostle Paul put it: "We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:2). ▣



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Exposing the darkness

SAMUEL FRENEY¹

When we become Christians, it is like a transfer from darkness to light. Continuing to walk in that light means not only shining out as a positive example of the transformative power of Christ; it also involves shining the light into some dark corners. Samuel Freney takes a close look at some intriguing verses in Ephesians 5 to understand how Christians should expose “the unfruitful works of darkness”.

MY WIFE BECAME a Christian in high school, through the testimony of other students. What made an impression on her was both the way they lived their lives as well as the things they said—they treated her differently than other people did because of what they thought about Jesus, which was profoundly influential. This kind of story isn’t uncommon, of course; Christians’ patterns of life and speech are obvious, and make a difference.

There are two sides to this influence, though, aren’t there? The lives of these girls and the way they treated my wife were positive examples of what she now recognizes as the fruit of the Spirit. But they also exposed the lack of charity in the way others treated her, and in various

ways the shortcomings of her own life as well. Light isn’t just bright in itself, it also shows up what was previously hidden. I’m sure you can think of a dozen different examples of how this plays out in other areas of life, where positive examples and encouragements to gospel living are not only praiseworthy in themselves, but also make us realize our own greed, anger, improper desires, lack of self control, and so on. Light exposes what was in darkness.

Knowing that, however, sometimes makes being the positive example harder. Once we realize that speaking about Jesus or obviously following his example might cause relational difficulty or discomfort, it is sometimes easier just to blend in. We back down. For me, this is due to a combination of self-imposed lack of opportunity, fear of rejection and ridicule, and a degree of tongue-tiedness due to simple lack of practice in being explicit about the gospel. Your reasons might be

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different. Whatever our particular reasons or issues, the solution is the same for all of us: to turn again humbly to God and his Word, praying that he would change us by his Spirit. And that's what we're going to do in this essay, by taking a close and careful look at a small portion in chapter

of the name of Christ (4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15).

The switch to 'light and dark' imagery comes in chapter 5:

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

*“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”
(Eph 5:6-14)*

Paul's use of 'light and dark' language helps us see the renewal of Christians' lives more clearly. In particular, by walking as "children of light" believers ought to "expose" the "unfruitful works of darkness" (5:11).³ But precisely which works or deeds are we meant to expose?

One of the more useful debates about this passage is over who is doing these unfruitful deeds—is it back-sliding Christians, or the wider world outside of Christ?—and therefore what it means to expose them. In other words, is this passage about what happens inside the church (rebuking stumbling Christians) or is it about mission (exposing the sinfulness

By walking as children of light believers ought to expose the unfruitful works of darkness. But precisely which works are we meant to expose?

5 of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It's a section that on first read almost feels like it's been lifted out of John's Gospel, with all its imagery of light and darkness to describe the new life to which believers have been called, and in which they now walk. What I want

us to do together is mine this section for encouragement in living bold Christian lives in a dark and hostile world.²

Insider or outsider?

It's pretty well known that Ephesians falls roughly into two major sections. The second section is the 'ethical' portion of the letter, where the magnificent truths of the cosmic plan of God (the first section) are worked out in some of the details of believers' everyday lives. God's plan from before time began has been brought to fulfilment in our Lord Jesus Christ: to bring everything under his headship (Eph 1:9-10). We have been included in that plan and included in Jesus' kingdom, entirely by grace, and are reconciled not only to God, but to one another too, Jew and Gentile alike. And so Paul says repeatedly in the second half of the letter that we should walk in a manner worthy

2 This is something we hope to do on a regular basis in this journal: take a Bible passage and do some close reading of it, including, where relevant, some of the scholarly discussion. The aim is both to understand it better and see how it plays out in life and ministry.

3 Καὶ μὴ συγκοινωνεῖτε τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς ἀκάροισι τοῦ σκότους, μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ ἐλέγχετε. I'll refer to the Greek in footnotes throughout, which you can safely skip if you don't know it. If you've learned Greek but are a bit rusty, here's your chance to brush up a bit.

of the world)? If it's the former, then this paragraph or two is mainly about the personal and collective holiness of the church. If it's the latter, then we *also* need to be concerned about the darkness of the world around us, and how we ought to think about, interact with, and counter it.

Working out this issue (along with closely related ones, such as how the "Awake, O sleeper" quote in verse 14 fits with the point Paul is making) requires more than looking up a word in a lexicon. We need to read the passage carefully, and look at the flow of its thought.

A new kingdom

Paul loves to remind us that we've been transferred from one kingdom to another in Christ. Thus far in this letter, he has spoken of his readers as having once been dead in their transgressions and sins, in the way they previously *walked*⁴ under the domain of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, now saved by God in Christ (2:1-6). Christ has brought the Gentiles near, despite them being once far off and alienated from God's people and the Messiah (2:13). They have taken off their former way of life and put on the new self (4:22-24), imitating Christ in their new life (5:1-2).

Now, in this section, a contrast is drawn once more between what the Christians once were ("for at one time you were darkness") and what they are now ("but now you are light in the Lord").⁵ The life of those in darkness, characterized in the opening verses of chapter 5 by sexual immorality, impurity, and the idolatry of greed, has no place amongst those who are light.

This contrast leads to the primary command of the paragraph: "walk as children of light".⁶ Skipping over the side-line comment of verse 9, there are three related clauses after this imperative: "try to discern..." (v. 10), "take no part..." (v. 11), and "but instead expose them" (v. 11).⁷

*Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and **try to discern** what is pleasing to the Lord. **Take no part** in the unfruitful works of darkness, **but instead expose** them. (Eph 5:8-11)*

The "try to discern" clause, although usually translated as an imperative, is what the Greek nerds among us call an adverbial participle. That means it tells us *how* we go about this task of walking as children of light: "walk ... discerning what is pleasing". This language of 'discerning' or 'approving' what is pleasing to the Lord echoes the kind of radical life-change that Paul has been talking about in the preceding verses (e.g. "Be imitators of God... but sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you"

Eph 5:1, 3). This is the only fitting way to live for those who now belong to Christ.

In light of this single-minded

commitment to God,

the parallel commands of verse 11 ("take no part", "expose them") outline the negative aspect of what is demanded. The lifestyle of ungodliness ("unfruitful works") is something that Christians cannot take part in. Note, however, that the objects of exposure are the unfruitful

Sexual immorality, impurity, and the idolatry of greed, has no place amongst those who are light.

4 'Walking' is a key term throughout the letter. In this case: περιπατέω, 2:2.

5 ἦτε γάρ ποτε σκότος, νῦν δὲ φῶς ἐν κυρίῳ, 5:8.

6 ὡς τέκνα φωτός περιπατεῖτε, 5:8.

7 δοκιμάζοντες...; καὶ μὴ συγκοινωνεῖτε...; μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ ἐλέγγετε.

works or deeds, rather the people who do them. This leads us to our question: whose deeds are they—Christians or the ungodly?

As an aside, I recommend two in-depth commentaries on Ephesians. Harold Hoehner's massive work gives you lots of detail on the Greek text, and works that up to theological and practical integration with the passage and book as a whole.⁸ (This is a nice feature for those of us whose Greek is now a little rusty.) Peter O'Brien's commentary in the Pillar series is excellent, with astute textual and theological work throughout.⁹ These two are well worth having on the shelf—but they take opposite lines on this question. Hoehner argues that the context is about believers. He says that it is clear some believers were not acting as they should, and that Christians don't have the prerogative to judge the world—and so therefore the command is about rebuking a brother or sister. O'Brien thinks that Paul is urging them to live

have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (v. 5):

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. (Eph 5:3-5)

That is, the actions that are too shameful to mention in verse 12 sound very similar to what characterizes people outside of God's kingdom in verses 3-5. In fact, there are several contrasts being made in these verses that reflect the fundamental opposition of light and darkness: the sons of disobedience vs. the children of light; the unfruitful works of darkness vs. the fruit of light; the wrath of God vs. pleasing the Lord.

It seems we should identify these "deeds of darkness" with a lifestyle that ought to now be utterly foreign to the people of God. They are what people do when they're aliens and strangers to the covenants of promise, hopeless, and without God in the world (Eph 2:12).

Now, it is not as if Christians will never fall into these sins, or that if they do they are then barred from the kingdom of God—the very reason Paul is warning them not to do such things is evidence that they are real temptations. However, in the broader context, this is a lesser issue bound up in a greater one. Repenting of individual instances or patterns of coarse joking, for example, is an entailment of being convinced that a Christian cannot be 'one who jokes coarsely'.

We should identify these "deeds of darkness" with a lifestyle that ought to now be utterly foreign to the people of God.

the kind of changed life that an outsider will see and be rebuked by. So as children of light, do we look outwards or inwards at this point?

The context helps us tease this out. Verse 12 says these things done

in secret are shameful even to mention, which sounds very similar to the deeds that are out of place and should not even be named among the saints (vv. 3-4). Paul's earlier command to not walk in this way is tied to the dire warning that those who are characterized by such sins will

8 HW Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2002.

9 PT O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999.

The important aspect here is the focus on *others* and their lifestyle, and of not being characterized by or identifying oneself with such immorality. The language of partnership and participation is important, just as it has been in Ephesians more broadly:¹⁰ believers have been united to Christ, raised with him (2:6) and seated with him (2:6), are fellow citizens in God's household (2:19), and are joined together as one dwelling for him (2:22). They are now urged not to partner (5:7) with the sons of disobedience, and not to participate (5:11) in the unfruitful works of darkness. Just as death and life were the metaphors for two realms of existence in chapter 2, light and dark are the same dichotomy here. Exposure of such deeds is therefore not so much about calling to repentance Christians who err and sin (although it can certainly include that); the emphasis is more on distinguishing the new self from the old, and exposing the latter for what it really is. Walking as children of light, and considering what is pleasing to the Lord, involves identifying with one realm and not the other.

The body of believers, the church, are to demonstrate that evil is evil by living godly lives, having been enlightened by the Spirit of God (1:18), shining as a beacon in the surrounding darkness.¹¹

This is familiar territory for the church. At least part of the role of Israel in the ancient world was to be a holy nation and kingdom of priests (Exod 19:5-6), to demonstrate to the nations that Yahweh was God. This is also part of

the function of the church in Ephesians: as Christ's body, God declares through the church his wisdom to the heavenly rulers and authorities (1:21-23, 2:7, 3:10). That is, by the church simply being the church, it demonstrates to the surrounding darkness the glory of having been transformed into light in the Lord, and God's wisdom and grace in doing so. The unity of the body shows the wisdom of God in making one new man out of two (2:15). The godliness and unity of the church exposes the darkness for what it is: disobedience, idolatry, estrangement, and opposition to God.

We're not just talking about actions, as if they were divorced from speaking.

Word and deed

The context of the letter, however, pushes us to say something more here. We're not just talking about actions, as if they were divorced from speaking. As we look through the ways that Paul calls us to live as children of light, walking in the way of the Messiah, we keep seeing *both* action and speech. As a church we declare by our existence to the powers and authorities that Christ is the summation of all history. The way the gospel came to each of us is that we "learned Christ", as we heard and were taught the gospel and its transforming power (Eph 4:20ff.). Individually, we're to speak the truth to one another in love, saying what is good for building one another up (4:15, 25, 29). We're to get rid of bad speech, and speak to one another in thanksgiving, and in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (4:29, 5:4, 19-20). (As an Australian living in the US Midwest, I'm even more acutely aware of my habitually unhelpful speech, which I've unwittingly soaked up as part of Australian culture.) Part of our armour

¹⁰ In particular, the *συν*— vocabulary throughout: *συνεγείρω*, 2:6; *συγκαθίζω*, 2:6; *συμπολίτης*, 2:19; *συναρμολογέω*, 2:23; *συμμέτοχος*, 5:7; *συγκοινωνέω*, 5:11.

¹¹ JM Lunde & JA Dunne, 'Paul's Creative and Contextual Use of Isaiah in Ephesians 5:14', *JETS*, vol. 55, 2012, pp. 87-110, 102.

in our fight is the word of God, the sword of the Spirit (6:17). To be sure, it's not the only thing that we do as disciples, and the primary focus of all of this is the building up of one another for the benefit of the whole church. But when it comes to

Pursuing the fruit of light and repudiating evil demonstrates the transformative power of the light of the Messiah, and exposes the darkness for what it is.

how we witness to those outside the church, why are we so quick to remove the speaking element, and focus exclusively on the good deeds? Being light in the darkness is about living authentically Christian lives, walking as Jesus would have us walk, which includes

both reformed action *and* reformed speech. That's certainly Paul's outlook as he asks for prayer in proclaiming the gospel, "that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak" (6:20).

The quotation at the end of this short passage helps us see the power behind such a view of Christian living, encompassing both actions and words. Witnessing to and exposing the darkness is all about the power of Christ in the gospel, and the hope we have in it bearing fruit all over the world.

Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." (Eph 5:14)

Once again, there's debate about where exactly this material comes from—whether it's from Isaiah, elsewhere in the Old Testament, an early Christian baptismal hymn, or some combination.¹² In the end it doesn't matter all that much, because we want to know how it's used *here*. The force of these lines seems

to indicate conversion, especially (given the language of death/life in chapter 2) the phrase "arise from the dead". Hearing this, we remember the power of God in Christ that saved us—and if that miracle is true, then he has the power to do the same for others.

The commands are best understood as referring to a non-Christian: 'sleeper', 'wake up', and 'rise from the dead'. Again, the internal view of repentance in the church has some merit—this fragment could be about awaking from spiritual sleep and rising from the path of death—but the outward-oriented view appears to better fit the original and present context. Although heavily edited and not matching neatly to the Old Testament, the original content of these lines derives from Isaiah 26:19 and 60:1-2 (regardless of whether it came by way of a pre-Pauline hymn or Paul's own construction):

Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. (Isa 26:19)

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. (Isa 60:1-2)

Looking at the context of these prophetic passages, they dovetail neatly with Paul's concerns in Ephesians. Despite the failure of Israel to mediate God's blessing to the nations, God himself will bring life through resurrection from the dead (Isa 26); Israel was to be transformed into a shining light to the nations, redeemed by God from sin and his approaching wrath

12 If you're interested in an overview of the arguments for source, see Lunde & Dunne, p. 89ff.

(Isa 60).¹³ Christ mediates God's blessings to all people, whether Jew or Gentile, and transforms what was darkness into light in the Lord. Both the Isaiah and Ephesians contexts push us to see the realm of darkness, death, and sleep as being separate from Christ, and the light of the Messiah shining as the reversal of that pre-Christian state by virtue of union with him in his resurrection.

The inclusion of this fragment of a hymn here in chapter 5 therefore makes us remember our own conversion, and the power of God to effect this monumental change of allegiance. Given the way that Paul has been talking, this power is directed towards those beyond the church—the ones who practise the sorts of things it will not do even to speak about—who could yet be transformed from darkness into light.¹⁴

The ethical commands in these verses, therefore, ought to be understood in their broadest perspective. Paul is painting a broad contrast between light and dark, and the realms they represent. Believers used to be part of the latter, but now through union with Christ they are not only *in* the light, but *they are light themselves*, having the Spirit of Christ working within them to enlighten the eyes of their hearts. As Paul puts it in Colossians, they have

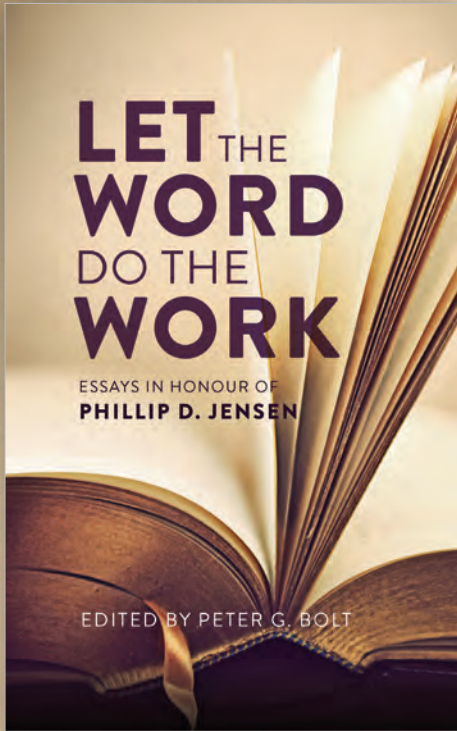
been transferred from one kingdom to another (Col 1:13). This is the fundamental reason why these works of darkness are to have no place among them: they are characteristic of a realm that is diametrically opposed to Christ.

Furthermore, as believers put on the new self and live in unity with one another, imitating their Lord Jesus as dearly beloved children, they highlight this basic contrast between light and darkness. Pursuing the fruit of light and repudiating evil demonstrates the transformative power of the light of the Messiah, and exposes the darkness for what it is. Christians have the conviction that even those who practise these unfruitful works of darkness can, like the Gentile Christians themselves, also be enlightened and included in the kingdom of Christ.

This is the power behind speaking and living as Christians in the midst of a world that does not know Christ. Walking as followers of Christ includes changed actions and reformed speech, both demonstrating the power of the gospel. You never know which quiet 14-year-old girl will be watching and listening, and by the Spirit be convicted and raised to life by the Messiah's power. ▣

¹³ For more on this background, see Lunde & Dunne, pp. 94-99.

¹⁴ O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, p. 377.



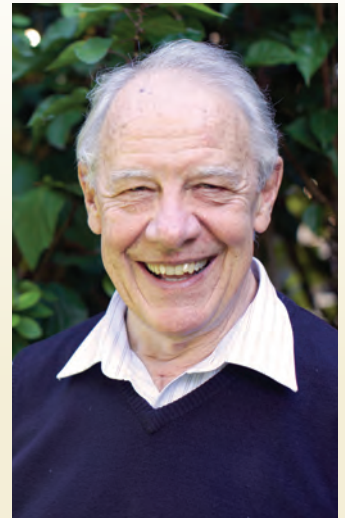
A remarkable collection of essays written in honour of Phillip D Jensen

At the end of 2014 when Phillip Jensen stepped down from his role as dean of Sydney at St Andrew's Cathedral, it marked the beginning of a new phase of Phillip's remarkable service of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In recognition of the occasion, and to celebrate the four decades of his ministry—as Anglican chaplain at the University of NSW, rector of St Matthias Church, dean at the Cathedral, and founder of Matthias Media and *The Briefing*—friends from around the globe offer brief, thoughtful essays in Phillip Jensen's honour.

The essays in Part 1 of this book consider aspects of 'preaching the word'. Those in Part 2 reflect on various aspects of Christian ministry, with some paying special attention to ministries fostered by Phillip Jensen during his many years of preaching the word and letting it do the work in people's lives.

Let the Word Do the Work contains essays by over 20 authors, including Don Carson, Paul House, William Taylor, Kent Hughes, Tony Payne, Mark Thompson, and Peter Jensen.



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The troubled conscience

TONY PAYNE¹

We all know the feeling of a pang in our conscience. But how are we to understand what ‘conscience’ really is, and what place it has in our Christian lives? Tony Payne looks at both how our society misunderstands conscience, and at the liberating biblical vision of a clean and healthy conscience.

THERE’S A STORY in the book of Samuel that beautifully captures the universal human experience we call ‘conscience’.

Saul and his soldiers are hunting for the once-beloved but now renegade David. Saul goes in to a cave to see a man about a dog (as we might say), not realizing that this is the very cave in which David and his small band of men are hiding. Deep in the cave, David’s men point out the obvious—that David will never get a better chance than this to kill the corrupt and deranged king that Saul has become.

David creeps up quietly to Saul, no doubt with conflicting thoughts and emotions. But he cannot bring himself to kill him. He just cuts off a corner of Saul’s robe, presumably while Saul is busy doing what he is doing. Afterwards David feels terrible even for having done this, for

dishonouring Saul in this way. And the King James Version records his feelings like this: “And it came to pass afterward, that David’s heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul’s skirt” (1 Sam 24:5).

His heart smote him.

This is something we have all felt. As we creep up on something that we know in our guts we shouldn’t do, there comes a pang, a pain, a hotness, a flush of shame, a sense of guilt. Our heart smites us.

But of course, as often as not, we will still go ahead and do that thing we felt bad about. The flush of shame and guilt only intensifies as we do so, but then it fades after a time. We might even go back and do that thing again, and more than once, and find that the pang of guilt seems to diminish, almost as if we were desensitizing ourselves to it. By the time we’ve done that thing we felt was wrong half a dozen times, we tend not to feel so bad any more. As Mr Bennett says in the BBC’s *Pride and Prejudice* after realizing what a neglectful father he has been: “I’m heartily ashamed of myself, Lizzy. But don’t despair, it will pass... and no doubt more quickly than it should.”

¹ Tony Payne is the CEO of Matthias Media and director of the Centre for Christian Living at Moore College. This essay is adapted from an address given at a Centre for Christian Living public event in Sydney on May 26, 2015. For video of this address (and Peter Bolt’s address at the same event), go to moore.edu.au/ccl/event-talks.

What is that feeling when our heart smites us? Historically it has been described as our ‘conscience’, as a kind of inner moral umpire that blows the whistle and tells us that we have done (or are about to do) the wrong thing.

In one sense, that seems simple enough to understand, and we have all felt it.

But grasping what the conscience really is, and what place it has in our Christian lives, is not quite so simple. This is partly because we ourselves are complicated creatures. Some of us have ‘things on our conscience’ that seem to hang around, even after we know we have been forgiven; some of us have very tender or over-active consciences that

smite us at the smallest provocation; and some of us have consciences that are alarmingly hard to wake up.

The other reason that ‘conscience’ is a slightly tricky subject is that modern Western culture

has taken a particular turn of mind on the subject of conscience over the past 200 years or so that has proved to be confusing, and a bit of a dead end.

In fact, before we look at what the Bible says about ‘conscience’, we should take some time to understand the confusion that our society experiences about conscience, and moral choices generally. It’s part of the air we breathe, and we can’t help but be infected by it.

Can the conscience vote?

Nothing exemplifies the state of our society’s thinking about morality generally, and ‘conscience’ particularly, more aptly than the phenomenon of the

‘conscience vote’. This is where members of political parties are given leave to vote according to their ‘consciences’ rather than having to vote along party lines. (As I write this, there is a push underway within the Australian parliament to allow MPs a ‘conscience vote’ on the subject of same-sex marriage.)

What does a ‘conscience vote’ imply? It must mean that each of the politicians has some inner sense of right and wrong, some form of moral intuition, that deserves to be heard and that might in some way be restricted or violated by being forced to toe the party line.

Why this personal sense of morality should only be allowed to shape a politician’s vote on some issues I am not sure. Surely there are *many* political questions about which individuals might have strong moral feelings. Does this mean that politicians have to ignore their consciences most of the time (which hardly sounds healthy, let alone right or consistent)?

It’s also hard to figure out how a *vote* should be the best method to determine a way forward on legislation that is a matter of ‘conscience’. If all the politicians have their own personal moral feelings about a particular issue—feelings that don’t run along party lines—how is toting up the number of people who feel one way rather than another a rational or fair way to determine what would make for the best policy?

The disturbing issue underlying the strange phenomenon of the ‘conscience vote’ is the confusion our culture experiences when having to work out whether *anything* is right or wrong, or good or bad. And this confusion—this loss of any sense of moral certainty—goes back a long way.

What does a ‘conscience vote’ imply? That each of the politicians has some inner sense of right and wrong.

Losing touch with upstairs

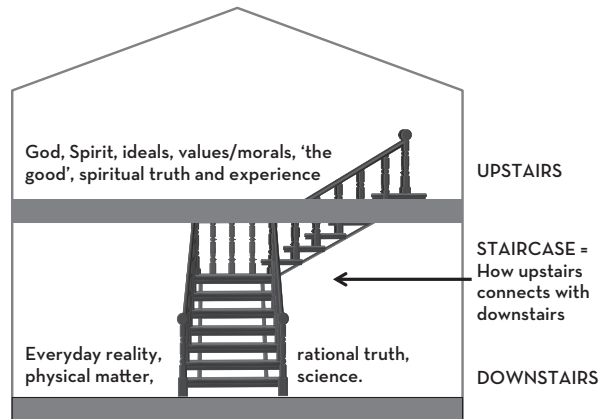
Just over 200 years ago, there began a massive shift in the way Western society thought about most of the big questions of life, including morality and conscience. The consequences of that shift are now so totally normal to us that we tend not to realize how significant they are, nor how far we have drifted from the way people have thought about morality for most of human history.

To explain this change, I'd like to use an illustration that I first learned and adapted from Francis Schaeffer,² and which I have recently used elsewhere to discuss how our society deals with the question of religion and faith.³

For most of human history, people have thought of all of reality as being like a grand house, with an upstairs and a downstairs and a staircase between the two.⁴

'Upstairs' was the realm of God and all things spiritual and ideal. It was where 'the good' was to be found, and where moral virtues derived their character. 'Downstairs' was the world of nature, of physical matter and everyday reality, of human thought and rationality. And between the two was a broad 'staircase', whereby what was upstairs was related to what was downstairs.

Now different philosophies and religious faiths have offered strikingly different accounts of exactly what was 'upstairs', and what was 'downstairs', and how the two were related to one another (that is, what the staircase consisted of and how it worked). The account



provided by the Bible is very different from the version supplied by, say, Platonic philosophy or by Islam.

In the theistic view, God created the downstairs. He gave it its character and nature based on what was upstairs—that is, on his own character and person—and he continued to act downstairs by his Spirit to sustain all that he made, and to communicate with downstairs in various times and different ways.

In Islam, the Quran and Muhammad are the key elements of the communicative staircase. In Christianity, the staircase *par excellence* is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, whose word and will are revealed in the words of the Bible.

However, dating from the 18th century, the thinkers of the Enlightenment (and those that followed them) began to doubt whether there really was anything or anyone upstairs, *and in particular whether there was any reliable staircase*. They decided to stop using the staircase—which for them meant the Christian staircase of an authoritative Bible—and to try to work everything out from what they could see and experience and think about downstairs.

This emerging worldview, which we might call 'secular humanism', operated on the assumption that even if there *was* an

2 See particularly his *Escape from Reason*.

3 T Payne, *Can we speak about Islam?* (a free ebook available to members of GoThereFor.com).

4 Like all metaphors and illustrations, this one is by no means perfect or able to accurately convey every aspect of the concepts under discussion (particularly with respect to how God is to be thought of in relation to his creation), but I hope it is nevertheless useful for understanding the main point I'm making.

eternal creator God up there somewhere, we had no access to him. The only true and reliable knowledge was what we had access to here and now in this world and this age (which is what the word ‘secular’ means). Rather than looking to the Church or the Bible for authoritative answers, it was up to us to figure it out. Humanity was in charge of the quest for true knowledge, not God or some religious authority (and so, ‘humanism’).

For secular humanism, this world and ourselves was all that we could truly and rationally know.

This shift in thinking had massive consequences. It meant, for example, that all religions were really just human ‘leaps of faith’—valiant (but ultimately doomed) attempts to bridge the gap that the demolition of the staircase had created.⁵

It also meant that morality and ‘values’ (or ‘virtues’ as they would have put it) were untethered from any divine or absolute reference point. Right and wrong were no longer objective realities, determined by God, woven into the character of ‘downstairs’, and taught to us via the staircase. Morality was now a do-it-yourself exercise—something that we needed to work out for ourselves, based on rational thought about the nature of things, or intuition, or perhaps on what produced the best results.

Now, for many people then and since, this abandoning of an objective ‘upstairs’ reference point for morality had the smell of freedom about it. At last, there was no God in heaven telling me what to do or how to behave. Now I could chart my own course, live by my own lights, do what I want.

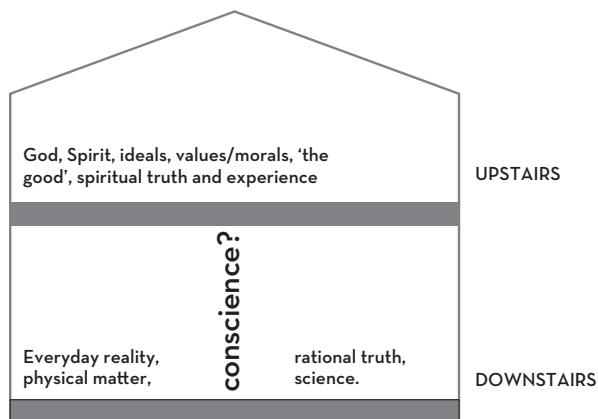
However, this ‘freedom’ didn’t turn out to be a freedom from all forms of morality, because the phenomenon

and experience of morality stubbornly continued to exist. People continued to sense—very strongly—that certain things were good and others evil; that certain things were right and others wrong; that certain character traits were praiseworthy and others contemptible.

The only problem: How, in the absence of any objective reference point, could the ‘good’ and the ‘right’ and the ‘virtuous’ be determined? If there is no accessible God upstairs who determines the goodness (or otherwise) of things here downstairs, then how can even the categories of ‘good’ or ‘evil’ or ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ have any meaningful, universal content?

One of the answers that emerged was to reframe what was meant by ‘conscience’. In the absence of any absolute or objective knowledge of good and evil (that is, with no access to ‘upstairs’), the best we could do was to “follow our conscience”. In the absence of a map or set of instructions issued from above, the conscience came to be seen as an inner moral compass.

Some viewed this moral compass in rational terms, as an aspect of our ability to think things through. By virtue of us being rational beings, and perceiving the value of certain actions as good and desirable, we could construct a framework of moral principles and justice that made rational



5 I explore this consequence in the ebook mentioned above, *Can we talk about Islam?*

sense. The ‘conscience’ was regarded as that part of our rational faculties that interfaced with these moral principles and policed our adherence to them.

Others saw conscience more as being based in feeling, intuition and personal choice rather than in rational thought. The inner moral guide *felt* (rather than thought) its way towards truth and goodness, and chose for itself what would constitute morality. This choose-what-you-feel Romanticism is very prominent the modern conception of conscience. It is beamed into us as we bathe in the screen-light of every rom-com, sit-com and offering of the Disney corporation.

Neither of these conceptions of conscience or morality have been particularly successful or consistent in solving the dilemma. The rationalist approach tries to arrive at universally applicable principles of human rights, but finds that these rights constantly conflict with one another. In the absence of any objective order of ‘good’, who is to say that your right to do a certain thing (e.g. the right to determine what I do with my body) should take precedence over the rights of others (e.g. the right of a 20-week-old foetus not to be killed)?

The intuitional or voluntarist approach likewise struggles to deal with the problem of conflicting feelings—if you strongly feel that you ought to be able to do a certain thing, what if I strongly feel that you shouldn’t? Whose feelings win when the proposed actions come into conflict?

All of this leads to the confused moral landscape we now find ourselves in, where, on the one hand, no-one is allowed to tell anyone what to do (it’s all just personal choice based on what my conscience feels to be right), but on the other hand, certain causes or issues have become absolute moral principles that everyone must agree with on pain of

persecution (like same-sex marriage).

In sum, whether emphasizing head or heart or some confusing combination of the two, ‘conscience’ in modern Western culture has come to be seen as *a personal, autonomous moral guide*; as a somewhat hard-to-nail-down faculty that gives us access to what is good and right, in the absence of any objective morality derived from ‘upstairs’.

It’s important to be aware of this dominant train of thought in our society, because we can’t help but be shaped and influenced by it. It’s the currency of our personal day-to-day lives, and the lives of our neighbours and friends—because all of us still experience the personal wounding pain that comes with going against ‘conscience’. Even if most people in our culture aren’t really sure what conscience is, or how it relates to what is ‘right and wrong’, they still experience the hurt and shame that afflicts us when we go against our principles. The pain can be intense, and people go to quite extraordinary lengths to make it go away—to drown it, or soothe it, or in some way atone for it. But sadly, in the weird personalized world of ethics we now inhabit, there is no-one to forgive you when you fail to live up to the moral standards you’ve crafted for yourself. As many people keep discovering, forgiving yourself turns out to be much easier said than done.

As many people are discovering, forgiving yourself turns out to be easier said than done.

Four heart-changing truths

Into this chaotic walled-off mess we’ve made for ourselves ‘downstairs’, the true God who made us and everything still speaks.

What does the God who created us with a conscience have to say about it?

Let's look at it under four headings.

a. God's world has a moral shape

It is no accident or trick of our senses that the world seems like a moral place. The Bible says that the world does indeed have a moral shape and order to it, because God made it that way. The world that God has created has his own character and wisdom woven into its very fabric. As Proverbs 8 puts it, the wisdom of God—which encompasses his love of righteousness and hatred of evil—was with God at the very beginning “like a master workman” when he created the heavens and the earth (Prov 8:22-31). This is the basis upon which Proverbs continually calls people to seek wisdom via the fear of Yahweh, because a good and flourishing life in God's world will never be possible unless we understand the character and will of the one who made us and everything.

In other words, the Bible insists that what is ‘downstairs’ has indeed been shaped and ordered by what is ‘upstairs’; that morality is a real and objective element of the created order, not something that we impose upon it. Morality is not something

that God has arbitrarily imposed on the creation—as if he might just as easily declared stealing to be right and good if he had felt like it at the time. The moral order is not an artificial matrix overlaid on the

brute raw material of creation. It is part of the way the world actually is (which is why it can be observed by anyone, at least to some extent).

Just as there are certain regularities that we observe in nature and call ‘laws’,

so there are laws or patterns of behaviour within the world that either conform to the way the world was created to be, or not.

The first is that we can see that some things are right or wrong, or good or bad, simply by thoughtful observation of their consequences. This is (in part) the message of the wisdom literature. Prudence and hard work are good; carelessness and laziness are bad. It doesn't take divine revelation for us to see the truth of this ‘wisdom’, because the effects of the different forms of behaviour are so obvious. The same can be said of adultery versus delighting in your own wife; or gentle and apt speech versus malicious or gossipy speech. The goodness and rightness of one kind of behaviour is obvious by its pleasant, satisfying, life-giving consequences (and vice versa).

However, this form of observation and the general moral truths it might reveal only go so far—which is in fact another truth that the wisdom literature insists upon. The world is also often confusing, opaque and impossible to fathom (as Job and Ecclesiastes in particular remind us). We cannot see the whole, nor understand all that is good or right. For that we depend on God's own speech to us about himself and the world: at many times and in various ways through the prophets (that is, in the Old Testament), and finally and completely through his Son Jesus Christ (in the New Testament). Paradigmatically in the law and the prophets, and finally and completely in the person, word and works of Christ, we see the created moral order revealed, explained and exemplified.

There is a staircase, in other words. There is a reliable, trustworthy and readily available means of knowing what is ‘good’ and ‘right’ (and ‘evil’ and ‘wrong’) because God has made it known: in creation itself, through Israel and finally through Jesus Christ.

We cannot see the whole, nor understand all that is good and right. For that we depend on God's word to us.

b. We are morally aware people

Every human culture experiences the impulse to label some actions or attitudes as ‘good’ or ‘right’ and others as ‘evil’ or ‘wrong’. This shouldn’t surprise us, because we ourselves are part of the moral order that God has created. We are morally aware beings. The categories of good and evil make sense to human beings everywhere, and this too is part of the way God has made us.

By rejecting God and his order, humans manage to get themselves terribly confused about what constitutes right and wrong, and about how we should determine the content of morality. And of course, we also by nature have a powerful impulse to rebel against God and all that he stands for, including his moral will for our lives.

However, whatever moral code or framework we have—and everyone has one—when we go against it we feel an inner pang or pain. ‘Conscience’ is actually a common word the Bible uses to describe the part of us that experiences this hurt.⁶ The pain of conscience is the tearing sound of our moral principles and our actual moral choices parting company.

In this sense, conscience in the Bible is like a judge that passes sentence on us, and punishes us emotionally because we’ve gone against our moral principles. And, like a judge, conscience is only really active when a crime has been committed. Judges don’t roam the streets shaking people’s hands when they do the right thing. Conscience is also like that—we don’t tend to feel it when we’re just motoring along, doing fine, and acting in accord with our moral values. We only sense our conscience becoming

active when we go against our standards of what is right and wrong. Otherwise, our conscience leaves us alone, and we say that ‘our conscience is clear’. (See Rom 2:15 and 9:1 for a couple of examples of the word being used in this way, both positively and negatively.)

It is important to note, then, that according to the Bible our consciences don’t *make* the law, any more than a judge does (the recent actions of the US Supreme Court notwithstanding). Our conscience is more like a judge than a lawmaker. Conscience doesn’t discover what the good is, or what constitutes right and wrong. It just pronounces against you when you’ve broken whatever you perceive the law to be, or gives you a pass if you don’t.

Now this of course is partly why our society is so confused about morality and conscience. We have this inner judge that accuses us, and that continues to remind us that we are moral beings and that moral actions matter to us. In some cases we can even observe and perceive the moral order implicit in the creation—although not consistently or accurately, because of our own blindness and prejudices.⁷ However, having cut all ties with God, and without any sort of objective lawmaker or morality, our inner judge has no consistent lawbook. It’s as if the judge goes to consult the law and the shelf where the books are supposed to be has been largely cleared out. In its place is a confused jumble of half-truths and personal preferences that are in constant flux, some of which may be accurate and some of which are all over the place.

Even so, we still feel pain when we transgress against these principles we’ve

⁶ It is not as if every description of this phenomenon in the Bible uses the word ‘conscience’. Passages which speak of shame, guilt, sorrow, grief, remorse, and so on are also very relevant.

⁷ For example, nearly everyone in our culture would morally recoil at the cold-blooded murder of a two-week old baby, but a significant number of people in our community no longer recoil at the cold-blooded murder of that same baby at 26 weeks *in utero*.

constructed for ourselves (or that have been constructed for us through social convention, the education system, and the influence of our family and peers). And we're uncertain what to do with these feelings. We feel divided against ourselves. Even though our culture keeps telling us that we are free to be and to do whatever we want to be and do, we keep bumping up against the painful reality that we can't even consistently be the people we've decided that we want to be.

Now this understanding of what 'conscience' is—the judge who afflicts us emotionally when we transgress our principles—is broadly the meaning that the everyday Greek word *suneidesis* (usually translated 'conscience') had in the literature of New Testament times.⁸

But the Bible introduces a quite revolutionary and liberating idea—that it might be possible to have a good or cleansed conscience.

c. A good or clean conscience is now possible

In the Bible, the first step to a good conscience is to gain a thoroughly bad conscience.⁹

It all starts when, by the work of God's Spirit, our mind begins to get in touch with moral reality. We hear God's word

and it dawns on us that it is true—that God is indeed the creator of the world and our lord and maker; that he is good, loving, righteous and holy; that he has made us to live a certain way; and that we have consistently chosen to ignore him, to go our own way, and to flout the way he says we should live in his world. We realize not only that there is a moral order, but that everything about us tends in the opposite direction. We perceive not only that there is such a thing as 'bad', but that being bad is our natural *modus operandi*.

When this hits home, our conscience smites us. It accuses us as never before, and rightly so. We feel grieved with a deep sorrow, not only that we have done wrong things, but that our whole lives have been lived 'in the wrong'. We have rebelled against the totality of God and his moral order.

This realization, and the awful pain in the conscience that it causes, are the first steps in a most wonderful liberation. The same Word that tells us just how much in the wrong we are also declares that God has done something to put us in the right—to obliterate our guilt and shame by providing complete forgiveness of sins through the death of his Son on the cross.

Through what Jesus has done, an extraordinary and unheard of possibility opens up—that of a genuinely clear conscience:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb 10:19-22)

8 CA Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*, SCM, London, 1955. Pierce's classic work has its shortcomings, but his basic insight about the nature of *suneidesis* in Greek literature, and the way the New Testament takes up this use of the word still stands. For a more nuanced account that builds on Pierce, see C Maurer, 'suneidesis', in G Friedrich (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1964-74, VII, p. 914ff.

9 For a thorough and excellent discussion of how God awakens and afflicts our consciences as we become conscious of our sin, before cleansing our consciences through the Spirit-applied gospel, see chapters 5-7 in Christopher Ash's *Pure Joy*. The whole book is worth reading.

The gospel is the news that the messed up divided self we have—that can't meet even our own standards let alone God's—can now be healed and cleansed and made whole again. We can now have a conscience that is fully informed of how much we have transgressed, and yet stands fresh and joyful before God, because that same God has removed our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west.

d. Heads and hearts are changed

The new relationship we have with God through the gospel puts us back in touch with moral reality—with what the world really is like, what we are really like, where everything is going and what everything is for. By the Spirit opening our eyes and overturning our rebellious heart, we find ourselves in a new moral landscape; or rather in the one that was always there but which we failed to see.

As we see more of that reality, and as the truth of it penetrates and transforms our mind, so too our hearts and desires change—falteringly, never perfectly, but with unmistakable power. We start to want different things. We start to realize what truly is good and right and, rather than our hearts running from that realization, we find ourselves wanting to embrace it.

Our conscience still afflicts us, because we still fail. But the liberating possibility that the Bible holds out is of a cleansed and rightly educated conscience. We no longer have to put up with a blundering inner judge who only has a jumbled and distorted set of laws and principles to go by. We can now have a conscience that rightly excuses or rightly accuses us, according to the moral reality that is really there.

Conscience and Christian living

What place does the cleansed and renovated conscience have in the ongoing Christian life?

There's far more to say than there is space here to say it in, but let's look at three aspects of how conscience functions in daily Christian living.

a. Respecting conscience

If our minds and hearts and consciences have been liberated by the Word and Spirit, why do Christians still have differing consciences? And what do we do with this? Should we just ignore conscience (since it's more of a feeling than an objective moral truth) and just plough on?

Paul deals with this issue in 1 Corinthians 8-10 (and in Romans 14, although without using the word 'conscience'). In both instances, the problem was over which foods Christians could or should eat. In both instances, Christians felt differently on the question at the level of conscience. And in both instances Paul differentiates between the objective moral truth—that in reality all foods are clean and able to be eaten—and the different experiences of conscience that Christians have.

(Some could eat anything without a care in the world; others had real pangs of guilt or conscience if they ate certain foods.)

Paul's clear advice in both cases is that we shouldn't go against our consciences. This is because we're all at different levels of maturity in our understanding of what is good and right and true in God's world. Our inner judge may now have access to God's 'lawbook', but our grasp of that lawbook

The liberating possibility that the Bible holds out is of a cleansed and rightly educated conscience.

is never perfect. We all have a way to go in educating our consciences; some of us have further to go than others.

So in the case of the Corinthian and Roman Christians, those who had figured out that all foods were indeed clean had a truer grasp of the moral reality of things than those who still labored under the restrictions of various food laws. Nevertheless, Paul encourages those who genuinely believed that certain foods were forbidden not to go ahead and eat and offend their consciences, because to do so would be to act faithlessly and disobediently in their hearts towards God. And correspondingly, he urges those whose consciences gave them no trouble when eating certain foods to be considerate and caring of the ‘weaker brothers’.

It’s important to note that Paul is talking here about issues that don’t constitute sin in themselves. You can celebrate a day or not celebrate a day; or eat certain foods or not; or drink certain drinks or not. These things aren’t righteous or unrighteous in themselves,

Our conscience hurts the first time we transgress, but we may find it hurts a little less the second time.

and we should be considerate of one another’s differences on such matters. However, we wouldn’t be able to say the same thing about adultery or stealing or greed or same-gender

sex—as if we might agree to disagree about whether such things were acceptable, and leave room for one another’s consciences. In fact, just a few chapters earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul warns his readers not to be deceived about those who practise such things. His warning is very blunt indeed: they will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10).

Now, might it be possible for people to engage in such unrighteous behavior, and for their consciences to give them a

pass? Is it possible for the mind and the conscience to become darkened or faulty?

b. Don’t always trust conscience

Like every other part of us, the conscience isn’t perfect. Sometimes (as we’ve just seen) it can be poorly informed or educated. But sometimes, like most parts of us, the conscience itself can be faulty.

i. The seared conscience

We all know the experience of becoming too accustomed to doing that thing we know we shouldn’t do. Our conscience hurts us the first time we transgress, but if we ignore that grief and suppress it, we may find it hurts a little less the second time, and still less the third, and so on. (This of course is where we need one another to issue a note of warning or rebuke or admonishment. The voice of a concerned brother can be just the thing we need if we are ignoring the voice of our conscience.)

If that pattern of beating down our conscience continues long enough, the conscience may effectively become desensitized or, as the Bible puts it, “seared” (1 Tim 4:2) It becomes numb. It no longer feels the pain. It is able to bear with the hypocrisy of believing one thing but doing another, and no longer be grieved by it.

This is one all-too-common variety of faulty conscience, but some people suffer almost the opposite problem.

ii. The tender conscience

Some people have a conscience so sensitive and tender that the smallest transgression causes real anguish. People with tender consciences can experience intense shame and guilt even if the crime is very minor, or even if no crime has really been committed at all.

The tender or over-active conscience

will sometimes refuse to believe that it is possible to be forgiven; or else it may acknowledge the truth of forgiveness but feel little of its relief.

As with most emotional difficulties, the causes of an overly tender conscience are complex, and often bound up in wounds experienced in our family life (especially in our upbringing).

But as with all human weaknesses, God can heal and strengthen the tender conscience—if not totally in this life, then at least in part. With good teaching and prayer and patient reassurance in loving fellowship, the frail conscience can become more robust.

c. Don't ignore conscience

As Christians, our consciences will keep operating, will keep blowing the whistle on us, will keep grieving us, and for very good reason—because we will keep doing the wrong thing. In this sense, the conscience is like a God-implanted alarm bell that we ignore to our peril.¹⁰

Now sometimes it may be a false

alarm (because our conscience is still ill-informed), or perhaps the alarm might be too weak or too loud.

But the alarming pain that comes from our conscience in most instances presents us with a choice. We can respond to the sorrow of having done the wrong thing by repenting, or we can ignore or drown the pain and continue on in sin, with all the dreadful consequences that follow.

As Paul puts it:

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. (2 Cor 7:9-10)

The Christian response to a grieved conscience is first to check that our conscience is not deceiving us. But then it is to repent, to turn back, to put our trust (once again) in the Lord Jesus Christ, and to experience (all over again) the joy and liberation of a cleansed conscience. ▣

¹⁰ I am grateful to Christopher Ash for this image.



CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIAN
LIVING

BRINGING BIBLICAL ETHICS TO EVERYDAY ISSUES



The Centre for Christian Living (CCL) aims to bless the Christian community by providing high-quality input on the everyday Christian living issues that we face in the 21st century—everything from what forgiveness looks like in our relationships, to how we should think about and talk about Islam in our community, to how we can strive for 'unity' in our churches and between churches, to the challenging social issues of domestic violence and same-sex marriage.

Led by its director, Tony Payne, and utilising the world-class scholarship of the faculty of Moore College, CCL runs regular public events in and around Sydney, and publishes the content of these events worldwide (as video and in most cases also as text). See our website for more details.

Upcoming Events

Redefining Sex and Marriage: how to think, live and speak as Christians when the world heads in a different direction

Speakers: Sandy Grant and Tony Payne
▶ 26 Aug 7:30pm at Moore College

How the Gospels shape Christian living

Speakers: Peter Bolt and Tony Payne
▶ 22 Oct 7:30pm at St Michael's Wollongong
▶ 28 Oct 7:30pm at Moore College



The Centre for Christian Living is an activity of Moore Theological College.

Reproductive Bible reading

BY PETER BLOWES¹

Hearing God speak to us through the Bible is too rich and fruitful an experience to keep to ourselves. How might we help others hear God's voice through reading the Bible with them? Peter Blowes writes from years of experience in doing just that.

BIBLE READING WITH ready ears and an open heart is engaging and fruitful. There's something fresh about letting God speak for himself, especially when you search the Bible yourself, making the effort to hear.

But why do it alone? Why not help your friends and neighbours listen to the voice of God for themselves? They may hear him speak too.

I know lots of great approaches to Bible reading—but let me give you some ideas from my personal experiences in using the Swedish Method for reading the Bible with someone else.²

Here are some tips to get started.

Invite

Just say: "I would like to invite you to read the Bible with me". Speak with the confidence of your convictions—you *would* like them to read the Bible with you, wouldn't you? Don't start with the 'lame duck' question "Would you like to read the Bible?" In some cases people may, but the status quo is more likely to prevail, and it's far safer for people to say no, because they don't know what they're getting themselves into or where it might end up, and people are often wary of getting caught up with religious weirdos.

There is no need to describe the get together as a Bible study; many people won't know what that means, or they may assume it is a lecture of some sort.

Ask

When you meet to read the Bible, do it. Read a passage—that's what you said you would do. There's no need to give complex instructions about what you are going to do, and how you are going to do it. Get on with things and read it.

1 Peter Blowes has worked for many years as a CMS missionary in Argentina.

2 To the best of my knowledge, the Swedish Method of Bible reading is so named in recognition of the anonymous pastor in a rural congregation who developed it in the locality of Vasteras, Sweden. It was later used by the IFES-affiliated Swedish student movement Credo, and popularised by Intersarsity/IFES staff worker Ada Lum.

Then try the question “What impacts you from this passage?” and sit back and hear what God has been saying to them! You may be surprised at the light bulbs that come on.

Then it’s your turn to say what impacts you; for example: “Something that impacts me from this passage is that

Christians are often so quick to jump in with answers (usually to explain hard passages) that we can create all sorts of problems for ourselves.

the author said such-and-such.” If they’re shy, you could give your thoughts first, but keep them simple and short: tell them what impacts you (read the phrase or verse), and why it impacts you. The other person will see you as setting the norm for

what this is all about. If there’s just two of you then you can repeat the question—once, twice, even three times—whatever fits your available time.

Don’t give the answer

But what if there is something they don’t understand? Something that they’re curious about? What if they ask for an explanation?

Whether to answer a question or leave it in the air is one of the most disputed points about the Swedish Method. Most Christians want to answer the question, and most newcomers want their questions answered... but don’t rush in. We want to build confidence in Scripture, and we want to train people in how to read it by allowing it to speak for itself, and by modelling and gently pushing people along in their Bible reading skills. Allow what you do to demonstrate what you believe. We believe that God speaks in Scripture as a coherent whole, so what we need to do is keep reading and looking for his answers to our questions.

Once you start answering questions, it’s hard to reverse that dynamic. If you start modelling by answering questions, your Bible reading friend will probably do exactly the same when they start reading the Bible with someone else—so don’t complain if you hear down the track that they are simply sharing their own ideas more than the Bible.

Christians are often so quick to jump in with answers (usually to explain hard passages) that we can create all sorts of problems for ourselves. We teach people to look to human authorities for the answers. We model Bible reading as dependent on experts. We shut people down and don’t listen to them, out of misplaced enthusiasm and a desire for them to see what we have already discovered. There’s plenty of room for encouraging the most delicate flower to discover the delights of God’s word for themselves, and in the process learn how to.

There’s another risk in jumping in to answer questions, and this is a serious one. We run the risk of simply explaining things from the depth of our own misinformed ignorance, however correct we believe ourselves to be. There’s plenty of room for healthy humility in Bible reading. People see that and appreciate it. I’ll never forget Paul Barnett presenting the gospel clearly to a group of our university friends at an evangelistic dialogue meeting at UNSW, and then listening gently for a whole evening to a bunch of non-Christians. We could have answered most of the questions that he gently side-stepped or protested his limited knowledge about. After he’d left at the end of the evening, our friends told us how wonderful the evening had been, and how helpful, and how they felt they could open up and talk without fear of being ‘pounced on’

by Christians who always seem to have all the answers.

Let's let God speak, rather than feeling we need to explain him or justify him all the time!

I think that, when meeting one-to-one, answering questions is not wholly unproductive, but it is far more motivating for the new reader if they discover that, with a bit of searching using the right tools, they can actually find the answers for themselves. Don't be put off by the fact that they may need to read some more of the Bible, and do a bit more homework—isn't that what we'd like to see? I remember John Chapman saying that you can read the whole New Testament on a wet Sunday afternoon!

When the Swedish method is used in groups (perhaps your friend is so excited by what they're learning that they want to invite someone else to join you to read the Bible), it is very important not to jump in to answer questions, especially if you want them to learn how to conduct this Bible reading approach in turn with their friends later on. We'll only ever reach the whole world with the gospel if we multiply our outreach efforts, and one of the strengths of this method is that it is easily repeatable and reproducible. So please, don't answer questions during the 'formal' meeting—unless they are obvious things, or the answer is somewhere previous in the passage or book under consideration. And even then, help motivate your reader to search for the answer, just like you, or any other commentator, could have done.

Do

Application is crucial. We're not spectators when we read God's word. As believers, we're praying for ourselves and our Christian and non-Christian friends

as we come to read. We are expecting God to speak to us. The application may not always be something I have to do—it may be taking on board a particular Bible truth—however it will likely be something that helps us mature in our relationship with our Heavenly Father under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

We haven't put a whole lot of effort into 'interpretation' of the Bible yet. That can wait until our observation skills have been honed through using the Swedish Method, and until we've learned inductive Bible reading skills inductively, through the observation, question, and application process. However, it is important that we don't end up with an intellectual exercise alone: that is *not* hearing God speaking to us.

"An application expressed in first-person singular" is a bit of a mouthful, but we can simply say: "From what I've read today, I'd like to put into practice in my life what I read in verse XYZ, that I live in such and such a manner. What would you like to put into practice?" This approach to application helps us avoid pointing the finger at others, and letting ourselves off the hook. We can't just throw around third-person arrows, such as blaming Christians for being hypocrites; we need to face up to what Scripture (God speaking) says to us.

Again, we want our actions to be consistent with what we believe. We haven't just read 'Mary had a Little Lamb'. We are reading God's words to us, so what is he telling us today? What difference does that make? I've heard of groups from other religions reading the Bible and asking "What should *we* do about this?" That is a respectful approach to hearing

This approach to application helps us avoid pointing the finger at others, and letting ourselves off the hook.

Swedish method



What strikes me?



What puzzles me?



What should I do?



Who could I tell?

God speak. We are to act according to what we believe. Of course, a group of non-Christians asking the question could almost be described as church planting before the people are converted! But with individuals we are modelling seriousness in hearing God speak.

Share

“Who could I tell?” This is a great question, and is not part of the original Swedish Bible Method. I learnt it from an Indian man (in Cambodia) who was previously involved in the Peace and Reconciliation movement in India that followed the burning of Graham Staines and his two sons in their car by Hindu extremists. He told me of the huge impact that this question has had in church planting in northern India.³

The first time I used this questions was at a conference, with a group of overseas students. The Japanese girls in the group, who were out telling their friends what they had discovered from the first day, became Christians by the end of the week. Imagine their concept of the normal Christian life: it has to do with telling people about what they were reading in the Bible. If we all were doing that, we

would hardly need to train anyone in personal evangelism or disciple-making: we would all be doing it!

It’s so simple: tell someone what we’ve learned or discovered from our Bible reading. Once we get into the hang of it, we’ll find it easier. We’ll find more creative ways, and a wider range of people to talk to, simply through practice. Natural, conversational evangelism and discipleship—straight from God’s word.

Record

Some people like to draw and doodle. I find that that the habit of drawing a light bulb, question mark, arrow, and speech bubble provide a repeatable, predictable structure, as well as somewhere to add personal notes. Making notes also increases the opportunity for accountability, as we report back in subsequent meetings how the Lord has answered our prayers in applying his Word to our lives. It also means that we have a record of the questions, so new discoveries can be tied back to previous questions. It all motivates and helps link the ideas together over time.

Some people prefer to talk rather than draw. My observation is that this usually reflects the preferences and, sometimes, insecurities of the person leading. I encourage you to draw and write, rather than just talk; there is something that engages and commits people in the

³ The current format has been developed in Latin America, with the addition of the speech bubble, following a conversation with Rev Raju Bhagwat about church planting experiences in Northern India (Raju is currently serving the Lord in Cambodia).

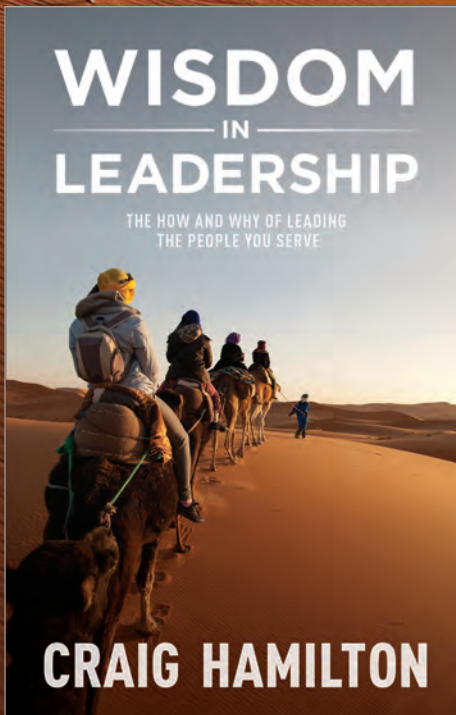
process. Writing things down helps people to own their understanding, and means it's not so easy to just merge with someone else's opinion. You can actually ask them what they have written. Even when people are impacted by the same phrase or verse from Scripture, their reasons as to why it impacted them are often personal and distinct.

Colin Marshall and Tony Payne have helped us see that making disciples is actually about making disciple-makers. Let's do the same with Bible reading. Through what we do in our

Bible readings, we are modelling to and equipping other Bible readers to read with others, who then go out and do the same.

A keen missionary I know simply has the goal of inviting every woman she comes across to read the Bible with her. When I started in student work, my instructions were to go around the residential colleges, knocking on doors and inviting students to read the Bible with me. That's basically been the shape of my ministry since.

Let's do it: motivated, reproducing, applied Bible reading. ▣



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Making meetings effective

CRAIG SCHAFER¹

Do you suffer from ‘death by meeting’? Craig Schafer knows the feeling only too well, from years in the business world and in pastoral ministry. His tips on how to run efficient, effective (even enjoyable!) meetings might just save your life.

BEFORE ENTERING Moore College, I worked for six years as a management consultant for the world’s largest management consulting organization. Life was an endless series of meetings where time was very literally money. If you put six people in a meeting for two hours, you had just spent at least \$3000.

At the same time, I chaired the council of elders for a church during a long, painful period where it dismembered itself over theological differences. This was a time of meetings filled with conflict and passion. It was a time where some people wanted to railroad decisions and others were desperate to avoid making any decisions at all.

But God’s word encourages us to act wisely (Eph 5:15), make hard decisions (Eccl 11:4), take advice (Prov 13:10) and speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15, 29). We want our meetings to reflect the way we are called to live at all times as Christians.

The mistakes I made and lessons I learned from experience form the basis of

what follows. I hope you gain something from my pain!

The problem and some solutions

There is no getting around the fact that parish ministry involves various meetings of the ‘business’ variety. There are leadership meetings, staff meetings, the house party committee meeting, the evangelism committee meeting, the women’s ministry committee meeting...

There is also no getting around the fact that all these meetings seem to somehow consume huge amounts of time that could perhaps be spent more productively (like preparing talks, sharing the gospel with non-Christians, having dinner with the family, going to the beach). Sometimes our meetings just don’t seem to repay all the time we put into them.

We talk round and round in circles about things that are not that important.

We spend ages failing to make decisions.

¹ Craig Schafer is the senior minister of St Mark’s Pennant Hills in Sydney.

We make decisions, and then nothing actually happens... or we spend the first 20 minutes of the next meeting trying to agree what it was that we had agreed on last time.

Some meetings never ever get to the important stuff.

Some meetings just seem to go on, and on, and on...

Sometimes they get ugly as disagreement escalates. Sometimes they start ugly and go downhill from there.

Many of these problems can be somewhat mitigated if we are willing to go back and dust off the two oldest, daggiest, most boring tools that we have available to us:

- » an agenda
- » a set of minutes.

Used poorly, these are a bureaucratic waste of time. Used properly, they are gold for the pastor or leader who wants to make their meetings effective.

Agenda

- » Use this to make sure everyone (including yourself) is clear on exactly what the objectives of the meeting are, and therefore what discussions are appropriate and which belong in other forums.
- » Think about the order in advance, dealing with the things that are most important first.
- » Use the right verbs. I actually think this is our secret weapon in making a meeting effective. You pick the right verb to make it crystal clear what the outcome of the agenda item is (a decision, a list, a plan, a document, etc.) so that you can drive to an end point:
 - » *Agree, decide, determine, prioritise, plan*—these are good verbs because you

know what you need to complete this item (e.g. an agreement, a list of priorities, a set of dates and tasks, etc.).

- » *Discuss, consider, examine, review*—these are death because you can do each of them forever in ever-expanding circles with no clear end point.
- » Consider the approach needed to complete each of these agenda items. It is helpful to have at least thought in advance how to make this decision, how to go about ranking these priorities, etc.
- » Time-check your agenda (can we realistically do all of these things in the time available?), and time-box those items that have the potential to lead to extended discussion. This means allocating a certain proportion of the meeting to that item and monitoring the time during the meeting
- » Circulate the agenda in advance and get agreement from key stakeholders. This increases the chance that people have had a chance to think about the objectives of the meeting and avoids last-minute changes, which can be a hassle.

Minutes

Minutes make sure that effective meetings are followed up by effective actions.

- » Make sure that someone else takes them, because this is simpler and saves time. Make sure that the other person is competent and reliable.
- » Include the date and attendees (no-one can ever remember later).
- » Focus on outcomes and action items. You generally don't need to document discussions, only what you agreed, including what you each agreed to do for follow-up. Every 'to do' item raised in the meeting should be assigned to

someone for action with a completion date. This should happen before the meeting ends, so that everyone has committed to their action items and completion dates. A sample of minutes used for a staff meeting is at the end of the article.

- » Review them shortly after the meeting, and circulate to all team members. Use them as the basis for following-up to see if people are working through their action items.

Facilitation techniques

The effectiveness of meetings can also be improved by adopting some basic facilitation techniques. These can also help to minimise non-creative conflict. There is nothing wrong with conflict *per se* in a meeting; differences of opinion allow ideas to be tested and refined. But, because of our sinfulness, such conflict can often turn in ungodly and unhelpful directions. While people are responsible for their own behaviour, it would be more loving to create an environment with fewer temptations and better outcomes.

The following are just some of the basics to keep in mind when facilitating a meeting.

Think theologically

- » Some people seem to check their theology at the door when they enter a church committee meeting. As leaders we need to take responsibility for ensuring that pragmatics do not squeeze out dogmatics (Rom 12:2).

Use your reflective listening skills

- » This helps people articulate themselves more effectively.
- » This also lets you rephrase things in more diplomatic language when necessary to diffuse potential conflict.

Use a whiteboard

- » This helps keep people focused on the issue at hand and ensure that we are all “singing from the same hymn sheet”.
- » This also helps us poor souls who are ‘visual people’ to stay with it.
- » In discussions where the potential for conflict and passion is high, a horseshoe of chairs focused on a whiteboard also seems to depersonalize some of the discussion, helping to tame conflict.

Know what to deal with in the meeting and what to keep for later

- » For any particular issue, decide which aspects can be effectively dealt with in this meeting and which are best dealt with by specific individuals or a sub-set of the meeting group later.
- » Does the discussion involve all participants, or is it only relevant to a few of them? Don’t use group time for something only a few people are involved in.
- » Do the people at the meeting have the data they need to actually make a decision on this issue? If not, it’s for later.

Keep people focused on the issue

- » Use ‘acknowledge/but’ approaches. This lets people feel heard, but keeps the whole group focused on key issues.
- » Tell people when they are off-track, and pull them back to what the (properly phrased) agenda says they should be discussing.
- » To help get people back from a tangent, ask “Okay, so with that in mind, what do you think is the answer to the question [insert closed question here]”.

Use your negative people

- » There is a temptation to ‘squash’ negative people because the meeting

is over quicker without their endless objections. But quick does not always equal effective. Sometimes your negative people force you to think about things that you would not have thought about otherwise.

Use the right facilitation technique for the meeting objectives

- » For example, you use different approaches for idea generation (maybe a brainstorming activity), evaluation (a pro/con activity, a SWAT analysis, or a devil’s advocate technique) and prioritization (maybe a forced ranking, or simply consult and decide).
- » Sometimes you have different objectives in the one meeting, so you will need to use different techniques.
- » It’s best to have thought through the appropriate approach for each agenda item in advance.
- » Sometimes it is important to facilitate for ‘creative conflict’.

Make use of silence

- » Get used to ‘uncomfortably long’ silences and let someone else fill them. For some people the fear of silence is greater than the fear of being wrong, and they will kick-start the discussion.

To be an effective participant in someone else’s meeting

There are plenty of things you can do to improve the way a meeting runs without being in control of it. Be an encouraging brother or sister in Christ and set the standard for helpful contributions.

- » Be on time.
- » Read the agenda in advance.
- » Resist red herrings (even the enticing ones).
- » Focus on ideas, not people.
- » Ask dumb questions.
- » Be ready to be wrong
- » Use ‘conflict diffusing’ language.
- » Apply your theology to your decision-making. ☑

Sample minutes

AGREED

1. For 2015, review decision not to include an ad for Christmas meetings in the Gazette’s ‘Christmas Church Services’ feature.
2. We need to discuss the viability of a 2016 AFES Mission, given the current planned staffing.
3. We need to confirm Mark Badley’s role in the ‘split’ mission.
4. ADDED TO CALENDAR: The Toulmins are speaking at churches on 15 November (we think?).

ACTION ITEMS

	What?	Who?	When?
1.	Conduct CE review.	VB	14/12
2.	Arrange Julia’s farewell at services.	Pastors	18/12
3.	Write 150 words on ‘5 books that have impacted my Christian life’.	Pastors	30/12
4.	Write church profiles.	Pastors	30/12

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