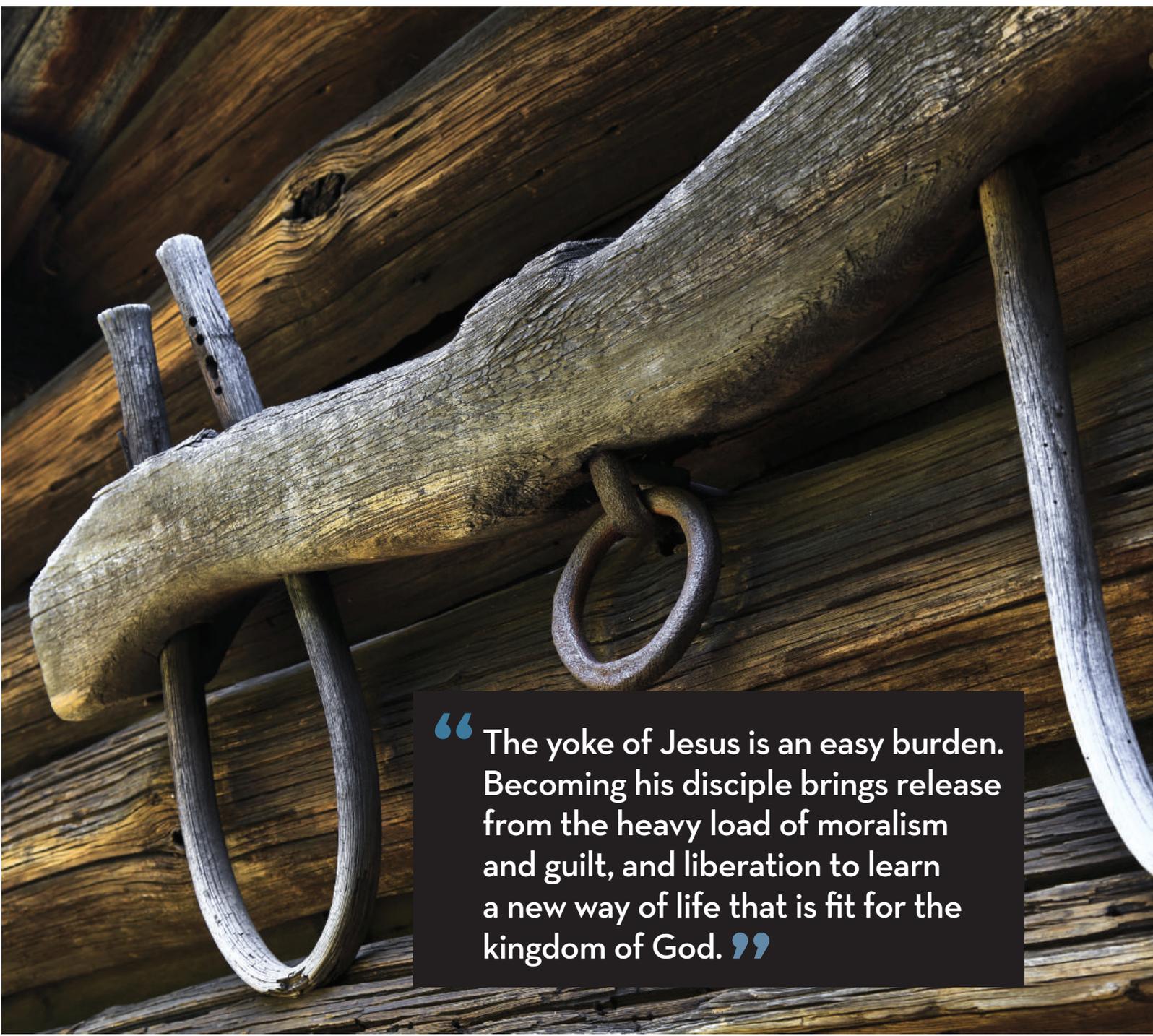


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A close-up photograph of a wooden yoke, a traditional agricultural tool. The yoke is made of dark, weathered wood and features a prominent metal ring in the center. It is resting on a wooden surface, possibly a table or a workbench. The background is a blurred wooden wall.

“ The yoke of Jesus is an easy burden. Becoming his disciple brings release from the heavy load of moralism and guilt, and liberation to learn a new way of life that is fit for the kingdom of God. ”

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Which comes first?

TONY PAYNE

WHICH COMES FIRST: apologetics or evangelism? This might seem a strange question, because it is often not only hard to answer but seemingly unimportant. In a gospel conversation with a friend over coffee, apologetic-style questions and gospel proclamation are often all mixed together (and Kel Richards gives some fine advice about navigating these conversations elsewhere in this edition). Who can predict or determine which comes first, and why would it matter?

However, the *principle* of whether apologetics or evangelism comes first does matter, and will affect our practice and activities—especially those we plan in advance, but even those that happen on the run.

I want to suggest that evangelism should be regarded as prior to apologetics, both logically and in the emphasis of our outreach. I have a number of reasons for saying so, but here I want to focus on just one—the nature of the gospel we proclaim.

The gospel is essentially a piece of news. When we ‘evangelize’ we announce that certain momentous events have taken place in history, the meaning and significance of which radically change the state of affairs and require a response from every person.

Evangelism is rather like what Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies did in 1939 when he made the following announcement: “Fellow Australians, it is my melancholy duty to inform you officially, that in consequence of the persistence of Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her, and that, as a result, Australia is also at war”. Certain momentous events had taken place, the meaning of which meant that the situation for everyone in Australia had radically changed.

The gospel is like that. It’s the announcement that a man has died and risen from the dead, and that this means something now for our world—notably, that God has appointed this dead-and-risen Man (his own Son) as the Lord and Judge and Saviour of all, and that entry

into his kingdom via repentance and the forgiveness of sins is now available to people from every nation in the world.

This is what we broadcast, and (like Menzies’s broadcast) it doesn’t need much introduction or preamble, nor very much effort to establish a common interest in the importance or relevance of the message. If this momentous news is true, then it quite obviously changes everything for every person in the world. We all now live in a world ruled by the man who rose from the dead.

Mind you, what was said by Menzies may well have generated questions from his listeners: Is Menzies telling us the truth? If Germany is still invading Poland, why is this prompting Great Britain to declare war? Should Australia be part of this war? And so on.

In much the same way, the news about Jesus will also generate questions: Is it possible or plausible that someone should rise from the dead? Who is the God who has crowned him as Lord and Judge and Saviour? Why is repentance and forgiveness necessary? What does this mean for me? And more, no doubt, besides.

We’ll find ourselves answering all sorts of questions about the announcement. We will do all we can to persuade people that the announcement is indeed true and faithful, that as a result it is hugely significant, and that a response is therefore imperative.

Some of these questions we may anticipate as we make the announcement and explain its meaning. But logically and conceptually and ideally in practice, the apologia (or defence) follows the announcement, and is shaped by the announcement.

If our message was not an announcement of news—if it was something else—then this may not be the case. If our message, for example, was a qualitative claim that Christianity as a religion is beneficial or satisfying, and thus worth believing and following, then a great deal more preparatory and ‘apologetic’ work (if that is the right word) would need to be done. We would need to establish what constituted “beneficial and satisfying” (in terms that resonated with our hearers); we would need to deal with any of Christianity’s beliefs that were radically inconsistent with the beliefs of our hearers (for example, regarding science or sexual ethics); we would need to defend the actual record of Christianity from attacks that it had not, in fact, been beneficial or satisfying; and so on.

The qualitative superiority or desirability of Christianity is something that we would need to argue *towards*—and (in my observation) an increasing amount of Christian outreach activity has this character.

By contrast, the gospel is something we argue *from*—that we proclaim as momentous news, and then defend and explain.

Here then is the question that this brief reflection raises: What would be different about our personal and corporate evangelistic activity if we prioritised the gospel announcement, and let apologetics follow along behind? ▣

We all now live in a world ruled by the man who rose from the dead.

God has a name, and he's given it to Jesus

SCOTT NEWLING

RECENTLY SAW A TABLE of world religions that listed the name(s) of “the divine” in each religion. While I was heartened to see it listed God’s name in Judaism as ‘Yahweh’, I was disappointed (although not surprised) that Christianity’s name for God was simply listed as ‘God’.

Functionally, I suspect this is exactly the way many in our congregations think of our god. Just look at the way we pray. Occasionally we might sing to Yahweh (or Jehovah), but for many the idea that our god has a name doesn’t really cross our minds. And it’s completely understandable: since our god is the only god, when we speak of ‘God’ we refer to a unique being. Furthermore, in the New Testament—on the surface at least—we search in vain for any reference to the name Yahweh. In fact, in most of our translations, we search in vain for the name Yahweh in *any* part of the Scriptures.

Nevertheless, God does have a name—Yahweh (which means “I will be who I will be”, Exod 3:13-15)—and it is the name that is above every name precisely because it is *his* name. God’s name is bound up with the revelation of his glory—his nature, being, character and greatness (Exod 33:18-23, 34:5-7). It is a name unique in all creation, and were it to be given to another it would stir God’s jealousy since that would detract from his holiness and glory (Isa 42:8).

And yet the claim of the New Testament is exactly that: Jesus Christ now bears the name Yahweh. And rather than detract from God’s glory, confessing Jesus as Yahweh *magnifies* it.

It takes a little bit of work to see this, however. The name Yahweh occurs thousands of times in the Hebrew Old Testament, but in

English Yahweh is translated as LORD. This is due to a tradition in Judaism (still practiced today) of avoiding using the name of God. When the text said Yahweh, it would be read out loud as *adonai*, the Hebrew word for 'lord'.

When the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek, the translators made no distinction between Yahweh and *adonai*: they were both translated as *kurios*, 'lord'. And understandably so: there is no Greek equivalent for Yahweh. Our English Old Testaments also use lord for Yahweh, although we're able to identify the word as Yahweh since it is printed in small caps: LORD. In the New Testament, however, there is no differentiation; it's up to the reader to figure out whether 'ruler' or 'Yahweh' lies beneath each occurrence of lord. Realistically, this can only be done with confidence when the Old Testament is being quoted, since then we have an objective point of comparison.

All this background information comes home to roost in Philippians 2:5-11, verses that are so familiar to us. Here we're told that Jesus has been given the name that is above every name. There is only one name that is above every name, Yahweh, and Jesus has inherited it (cf. Heb 1:1-4). In our translations it sounds like the name Jesus has been given after his resurrection and ascension is Jesus, which makes no sense. But when we have the translation peculiarities of Yahweh in our minds, we see something else at work: an allusion back to Isaiah 45:23. Read in its context (several chapters affirming Yahweh's uniqueness), this verse affirms Yahweh as the one *alone* to whom all shall bow down. And yet, according to Philippians, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that *Jesus* is Lord: Yahweh! The Father has given him the name above every name, and, rather than being blasphemous, it glorifies the Father.

But notice the connection—both here and in Hebrews 1:1-4. The name Jesus has been given is a direct consequence of his nature: he has the name Yahweh because he *is* Yahweh, and reveals Yahweh perfectly in his incarnation, suffering, and glory. As he returns to the glory he had in the beginning, the difference is *not* that the Son has *become* Yahweh (he is Yahweh from eternity), but rather the Father, in the economy of salvation, has now *revealed* Jesus as Yahweh, and God as Trinity.

Once we grasp this reality at work in the New Testament, we read Old Testament quotes about Jesus in a new light. Consider the very opening of Mark's gospel. We are told that someone would come (who turns out to be John the Baptist) who would "prepare the way of the Lord". In its original Old Testament context, the verse is saying that someone would come to prepare the way for Yahweh. But who is it John prepared the way for? *Jesus* is the one who comes.

It's an audacious claim to say that Jesus is God, and a reprehensible blasphemy were it not true. And yet, to acknowledge Jesus as Yahweh makes the audacity of the claim that much greater. There is a man in

The name Jesus has been given is a direct consequence of his nature.

creation who bears God's personal name. There is a man in creation who is worthy of our worship as Yahweh. The stakes are as high as they get. And yet, as we have seen in Philippians, such a claim does not detract from God's glory, but enhances it. Jesus can bear the name of Yahweh because he is Yahweh: God the Son, incarnate; God as man revealing God to man. And through the revelation of Jesus as Yahweh we come to understand God as Trinity. "I will be who I will be", Yahweh, reveals himself in Jesus in a way that no mind could imagine. And God, Yahweh, is glorified as a result, as his triune nature is displayed.

Many of us will be familiar with the translation peculiarities of Yahweh that I've just outlined—although I suspect fewer will have made the connection of how the New Testament regularly applies Old Testament verses about Yahweh to Jesus. In my experience, however, Christians are by and large unaware of the richness of God's name throughout Scripture. Our responsibility as disciples calls for us to grow our brothers and sisters in their knowledge (and hence love) of God.

It might be as simple as encouraging people to spend ten minutes reading the preface of their Bible translation—this information is literally at our fingertips each day. It may involve working through some key examples with Bible study leaders and their groups, unlocking the profound richness behind such a simple shift in reading. It will involve us taking the time to be deliberate in our vocabulary choices as we teach and preach (that is, to let our close exposition reflect the vocabulary of the passage we have exegeted) and, as we consider our churches' diet of teaching across a year, to be intentional about the explanatory tangents we choose to pursue (or not). Occasionally it will involve us stepping back and focusing on a biblical theology of Yahweh. In any event, it will involve us being intentional about how we choose to communicate the depths of God's name as we expound Scripture. And as our God becomes that much more magnificent in the eyes of all, we will offer our praise to him, to his glory. ▣

Let us be intentional about how we choose to communicate the depths of God's name as we expound Scripture.

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Know your own mind

PETER BOLT

Which is more important: what we think or what we actually do? And if both are important, how does one relate to the other? Peter Bolt explains how coming to know Jesus Christ helps us to see everything differently, including understanding our own minds and bodies.

WE KNOW WE have a mind. We know we have a body. But how do the two get on? How do mind and body work together to bring about the harmony we call human life?

In order to live well, thinkers ancient and modern have long recognized the importance of the slogan, “know yourself” (*gnōwthi seauton*, γνῶθι σεαυτόν).¹ Many of these same thinkers have puzzled over the relationship between mind and body, and this continues to be a live issue today. Take, for example, the present day advances in brain science. Perhaps the prevailing view over the years has been that “how you think effects what you do”. It is easy to see how the mind controls what you do with your body. However, in the last thirty to fifty years, our brain scientists have come up with some amazing results that help us to also reverse that equation to “what you do effects how you think”. The body also controls the mind.

¹ This is one of the maxims inscribed in the forecourt of the temple to Apollo at Delphi (Pausanias 10.24.1). The maxim was particularly important to Socrates, according to Plato, who discusses it in six of his dialogues. It is also found in Aeschylus, Xenophon and Aristophanes. In a famous example from Christian theology, Calvin’s *Institutes* is structured around knowing God and knowing yourself.

When we turn to our Bibles, God’s word agrees with the ancient slogan “know yourself”, but it adds a very important difference: you know yourself by firstly knowing the God who made you and who sustains you as you live in his world. So then, as you know your God you know yourself, and you come to know your body, and you come to know your mind. Jesus Christ helps us to see all things differently—our minds, our bodies, our selves—and this transforms the way we live in this world.

In what follows we will look at three parts of Paul’s letter to the Romans that speak of the mind (Rom 1:28, 8:5-8, 12:1-2, as well as 7:18-23). Each of these passages also helps us to understand the relationship between our mind and our body.

Corrupt mind = corrupt body

We begin with Romans 1:28:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

Paul has already pointed out that there is more than enough evidence for God's powerful existence in his creation surrounding us, if only we want to see it. But instead of recognizing from creation that there is a creator, human beings suppress this truth and tell themselves all kinds of other stories about the world, the universe and themselves (1:18-20).

This refusal to recognize God ruins our ability to think straight about him, or about his world, or about ourselves—

This refusal to recognize God ruins our ability to think straight about him.

about anything and everything (1:21-23).

God's judgement is very fair. He gives us what we want. If we say there is no God, he gives us over to a life without God. This is actually a dreadful state of life, because we were made to live in God's world God's way. But no matter how dreadful it may be, we can't say God is unfair. It has been called God's greatest tribute to human freedom. If we want to reject him, he lets us reject him and go it on our own.

But what a mess that makes of life! Notice three times the dreadful phrase, "God gave them up" (1:24-25, 26-27, 28). Notice also, in verses 21 and 22, how our rejection of God leads to distorted thinking and distorted minds concerning God, ourselves, our own bodies, other people, and about how life ought to work.

In very recent days we have seen the rise of a group known as the New Atheists (not that there is anything new about atheism, just read Psalm 14). New Atheists, or in fact atheists of any vintage, will often claim that it is their reason that leads to their rejection of God. But, no, it is actually around the other way! Their rejection of God leads to their distorted reasoning about his world.

In fact, as we pride ourselves on thinking so clearly without God, we only

gain a *rejected mind*, a corrupt mind (1:28).

There is a pun going on here, a play on words. It is quite difficult to bring it out in English, but let me try. The two words used here are related: 'did not see fit' and 'debased'. The word family they belong to is related to the testing of precious metals, where the quality is *tested*, or *proven*, usually by heating the metal in a flame. If the metal is *proven*, or *approved*, it is kept; if not, it is *rejected*, or *disapproved*. So in this verse, if we try to bring out this connection so we can hear it, we might translate the verse: "since they did not *approve* of God", or "since they tried him out and *rejected* him", so "he gave them over to a *disapproved* mind", or "a tried and *rejected* mind".

This corrupt mind then leads to a corrupt body, because thinking wrongly about life leads to doing all kinds of wrong behaviour in our bodily life. Here Paul mentions two examples of the corruption of our bodies that comes from our corrupt minds.

Firstly, idolatry, with all its wickedness (1:23), worships the creation not the creator (just like the materialist, a secular version of idolatry).

Secondly is sexual immorality (1:24), which is dishonouring our bodies by a misguided expression of our sexual desires. Sex is the wonderful gift of God to be richly enjoyed only in the context of the marriage of one man and one woman. By simply following the desires of our bodies we can express our sexuality without even realizing that men and men, or women and women, are not made to go together sexually, and we can go about our sexual practices with absolutely no clue that this is against God's created order (1:26-27).

But this is just part of a long list of distortions to bodily life that corrupt thinking leads to. At the end of the chapter Paul rattles off many examples—and he

could have even listed more (1:28-31).

We human beings reject our creator, suppress the knowledge about him that is all around us in his creation, and as a result we have a corrupt mind. We disapprove of God, and gain a disapproved mind. We reject God, and gain a rejected mind. We don't think straight about God, and we don't think straight about ourselves either. Our inability to think clearly about life leads to chaotic, corrupt behaviour, and so chaotic and corrupt society. Our corrupt minds lead to corrupt bodies, as our distorted thinking leads to all kinds of distortion in our bodily life.

Now, sometimes, some of us, in our better moments, *can* actually realize something is wrong here. In Romans 7 Paul speaks of the moral Jew, or perhaps the moral person more generally. Here we have someone who actually knows in their mind the right thing to do, and yet keeps on seeing themselves doing the opposite in their bodily life. Here is someone of troubled mind, because their bodily life seems to contradict what their mind tells them is the right way to live (7:18b-23).

Well aware of this struggle between mind and body, Paul cries out:

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom 7:24)

Notice the strange and significant point that Paul's cry shows us. What is needed to overcome this tension between mind and body is *a whole new body*. When faced with this struggle, in order for any change to occur, this "body of death" needs to be dealt with.

Without blinking an eye, Paul also goes straight to the solution. There is good news here, for "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:25). Jesus Christ has brought the solution to our problem.

This leads us to our second point.

When we come to Jesus Christ, our life changes so that it can be described as...

Not minding the body but minding the Spirit

Our verses here are Romans 8:5-8:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Paul outlines two kinds of minds. It is sort of a before and after picture, although not exactly because both are always in tension until the future resurrection day.

So, one of the things that we can set our minds on is the flesh, where flesh refers to our mortal body (some Bibles prefer "the sinful nature", but this is not the best translation).

In the ancient Greek world, the body was regarded as a bad thing, an encumbrance to the soul, a 'prison house' for the soul. The body (which was bad) kept the soul (which was good) locked up for a lifetime. It dragged the soul down; it stopped us being the kind of people we were supposed to be and that, deep, deep down, we wanted to be. But that is *not* the New Testament view.

The trouble with the body is obvious to everyone. It is wasting away. Some of the ancient Greeks said, "the body is fit only for the manure pile". It is full of illness. It is weak and fragile; it has the stench of death about it all our days. How

can *real* life, the soul, possibly be related to the body? Why would you know yourself by knowing the body? But that is exactly what the New Testament would say we have to do.

The body is mortal. It dies. That is what Paul means by “the flesh”. It is subject to the “law of sin and death” (8:2). It is “this body of death” (7:24 cf. 6:12). The mind set on the flesh is a mind set on this mortal body.

This is the mind that lives for the desires of the body, as if life is all about this world bounded by birth and the grave. It is all about what we eat, drink and wear. It is about our bodily sensations and desires. To live for the desires of the body like this actually means we are controlled by sin (6:12).

The mind set on the body is the way to a corrupt lifestyle, and corrupt patterns of behaviour, corrupt actions. In other words, here is another way of seeing how a corrupt mind leads to a corrupt body. Or, to be more precise, this helps us to see why a corrupt mind leads to a corrupt

Those who are justified and forgiven by putting their faith in Jesus Christ have a new mind.

body: because the corrupt mind is set on the things of the flesh, it operates as if what we can see all around us in this world is all that there is to think about.

Life is confined to the brief timespan between the day of our birth, whenever that was, and the day of our death, whenever that will be.

Notice also what is said here about this mind:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh... For to set the mind on the flesh is death... For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom 8:5a, 6a, 7-8)

There is no future in this kind of mind. This is life controlled by “the law of sin and death”; it is plummeting towards the grave, death without redemption.

But here is the news of victory! When Jesus Christ rose from the dead, his resurrection brought a new perspective on life, through bringing us a new mind. Those who are justified and forgiven by putting their faith in Jesus Christ have a new mind—a new direction and focus that reaches *beyond* the grave—and so a new way of living that is true life indeed.

Consider the second half of the verses quoted above:

But those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit... But to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace... You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (8:5b, 6b, 9-11)

The life of the *Spirit* is the life of *resurrection*. The Spirit raised Jesus Christ from the dead (cf. 1:4), and those who belong to Jesus Christ now have that same Spirit of resurrection already at work in us, dragging us forward to the resurrection day (8:11).

When Paul talks about ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’, he is *not* talking about two different parts of a human being. Some of the Greek philosophers of his day operated with this kind of dualism, and

some of the early Christians did too, which interfered with the way they got on with each other (see Corinthians!).

No, Paul is not setting up a stall at a New Age ‘Mind Body Spirit’ festival in some kind of celebration of the human being, saying one mind thinks about the body while the other mind thinks about the human spirit and all the things supposedly attached to this ‘higher’ part of life (as if the body things were the ‘lower’ part of life). Instead, here it is *our* body but the Spirit is the Spirit of God. Our body is mortal, dying, the body of death from which we need to be delivered; the Spirit of God is the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead—exactly what our death-problem needs!

Note again verse 11:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Rom 8:11)

The Spirit is the spirit of resurrection from the dead. So, Romans 7:24 is the cry, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”, and 7:25a is the victory: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”, therefore Romans 8:11 is the means to that victory, while Romans 8:23 is the result of the victory: “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies”.

There it is, our own resurrection from the dead, our own renewal and renovation of our body, alive again from the dead. That is the Christian hope. That is what the Spirit is taking us towards. To remember and dwell on and shape our life by that future is to operate with ‘the mind set on the Spirit’, Paul’s second kind of mind.

The mind set on the flesh/body is the mind dominated by the desires of this mortal body, which is destined for the grave. The mind set on the Spirit is the mind dominated by where the Spirit of God is taking us to, dominated by the hope of resurrection from the dead, not our bodies being done away with but our bodies being redeemed on the great resurrection day still to come in the future.

Those set free by the Lord Jesus Christ no longer live minding the mortal body and its deathly desires, as if that is all life is about. Instead they live minding the Spirit, hoping for the resurrection day, longing for the redemption of the body, groaning with the Spirit towards that day. And here is a great surprise:

Those set free by Jesus no longer live minding the mortal body.

once our corrupt mind led to corrupt lives (1:28); but as we groan towards that day, so we are being conformed to the will of God (8:29), and there is no corruption there!

This leads us to our next point.

Renewing the mind; renewing the body

The next use of the language of mind in Romans is in 12:1-2:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Look at what Paul urges the Romans to do. Once we know the wonderful mercy of God found only in the Lord Jesus Christ, life begins to change. The mercies of God are the motivation to change, but, even more, in the end it is God's mercy that actually works the change in us. The Spirit of resurrection is at work in us to bring about this change (8:11). In the midst of our bodily life we are now moved by the Spirit of God, and he is the Spirit of resurrection. In God's incredible mercy, we are no longer destined to rot in the grave but will rise again to new life with new bodies on that glorious resurrection day. *That* is our future! That's what the Spirit tells us deep within. That's the destination to which he will inevitably bring us. There is nothing that will stop him getting us there! Nothing in heaven or in earth (8:31-39).

That ought to change us. That *will* change us. There are two sides to this change.

a. Present your *bodies* as living sacrifice, which is your spiritual worship (12:1)

All of bodily life now becomes the place where you worship God. Not in temples, or churches, or holy places; not in religious services, or particular religious activities, or pious practices. Worship happens anywhere and everywhere that your body happens to be. And that is a lot of places! You are worshipping God wherever you are. The holy place where true worship can be offered, and must be offered, is now your bodily life. Your body will rise again from the dead, so live the resurrection life even now (Rom 6:11-12).

b. "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (12:2a)

As we set our minds on the Spirit, as we long for the day of resurrection, as

we groan towards the day of our bodily redemption, our minds are *renewed*, and so in the here and now our bodily life is transformed to be the arena of true worship. So renew your mind!

Look at the results of this renewal of the mind and body: "that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2b). Here is that same word again that we saw in 1:28. Remember, the rejection of God led to a rejected mind; the disapproval of God led to a disapproved mind. And that disapproved mind led to a corrupt bodily life. But now, the mind renewed by God's mercies, the mind set on the Spirit of resurrection, leads to the *approval* of God's will.

Know yourself, mind and body

The Ancient Greek slogan said that you can't live properly unless you "know yourself". Many contemporary philosophies and psychologies would say this is exactly right: true and proper life only arises if you can know yourself.

But sometimes those ancient and modern philosophies put more stock on the mind than the body, the soul rather than the flesh. Sometimes they diminished and despised bodily life, and saw that it was incapable of renovation—all we could hope for is the release from the body into the higher life of the soul, and often it therefore didn't really matter what you did with your body at all. After all, it was destined for the manure pile.

The gospel of Jesus Christ would agree with the slogan "know yourself". But you can only know yourself by coming to know your God, through being embraced by his mercies in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And once you know yourself by knowing your God, you know both your mind and your body.

Firstly we are aware of the negative side. Our bodies are mortal, dying, and so they are drawing us to obey their desires as if that is all there is to life. But this leads us to sin and to corruption. Our rejection of God leads to a corrupt mind and a corrupt body. The mind set on the flesh *will not, cannot* please God, and it only results in destruction of life now and death and judgement tomorrow.

This negative side of life leads to the lament: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

But the positive side comes in the very next verse: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

And then, thankfully and joyfully, there is another so much more positive side to knowing our body and our mind. Jesus Christ promises us resurrection from the dead and redemption of our bodies, and already the Spirit of resurrection is

at work within us, bringing about the life of resurrection in the here and now. The mind set on the Spirit, groaning towards the resurrection day, is life and peace. Our bodily life is transformed, as our mind is renewed, so that, finally and at last and for the very first time, we can approve the things of God’s will, and life is lived just the way it was meant to be, as we await the glorious day of resurrection.

By the renewing of your mind, transform your body.

By the transforming of your body, renew your mind.

Know yourself, mind and body, by knowing God, the God who has poured out his mercies so generously for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our merciful God raised Jesus from the dead and he promises to also give life to our mortal bodies. That is what our minds ought to be fixed upon. ▣

The mind set on the Spirit, groaning towards the resurrection day, is life and peace.



the *Vine* project

What is *The Vine Project*?

Well, it's a book, yes. But to call it a book doesn't quite capture what it is.

It's a process. It has convictions and phases. It has a website.

And it certainly needs more than one person reading it for it to be effective in a church. In fact, it doesn't so much need *readers as leaders*. Collaborators. Fellow workers.

It's a sequel to *The Trellis and the Vine* from Tony Payne and Colin Marshall.

So what is *The Vine Project*?

We hope it's a godsend.

And, God willing, it will be available in May 2016.

The eternal value of work

MICHAEL LEITE

Most people agree that there is an importance, value and dignity to the secular work that the majority of us toil away on from Monday to Friday. But what exactly is that value? How or why is our daily work significant in God's plans? Michael Leite assesses one increasingly common answer to this question.

BEFORE GOING TO college I worked in a secular job for 11 years. In many ways I enjoyed the work I did, but at other times it was just plain hard. However, at the time I never reflected on how the work I did 'fitted' into God's plans for his world. I tried to work faithfully (though failed at times), and I tried to be generous with the wages I received (though I could have been more generous), but I didn't stop to think theologically about my day-to-day work. That is why I am glad for the many helpful books and articles written about the theology of work. It is good and right to think theologically about how our work 'fits'.

However, not all the material being written on the theology of work is helpful. One popular notion that is gaining momentum is the idea that God is building his kingdom through our secular work. What do I mean by that? It's the idea that the work we do *in* and *on* this present creation is all a part of God

building his kingdom as part of the new creation. For example, the building the architect designs and the builder builds will not only be a part of this creation, but also the new creation. The bridge that the engineer constructs, or the painting that the artist paints, will not only be present now, but also in the new creation. All of these things will somehow continue and exist *tangibly* in God's eternal kingdom.

Thus NT Wright comments that:

*What you **do** in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells... **will last into God's future...** They are part of what we may call **building for God's kingdom.***¹

Darrell Cosden in his book makes a similar assertion:

Our everyday work (whether paid or unpaid) actually matters and makes

¹ NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, HarperOne, New York, 2008, p. 193.

*a difference—not just in the here and now, but also for eternity. Work, and the things that we produce through our work, can be transformed and carried over by God into heaven.*²

What is being posited here is the idea that our everyday work has an intrinsic eternal value. That is, our day job is not only about being faithful, providing for

Can we say that our work's fruit is of eternal value and will continue into the new creation?

our basic needs, loving our neighbours, giving to gospel work, being generous, etc., but also about building God's eternal kingdom. What you do, from scrubbing

toilets to painting masterpieces, will last into and continue into the new creation.

However, can this notion of 'kingdom building' be found in the Bible? Can we confidently say that the fruit of our work is of eternal value and will continue into the new creation? To consider this I want us to have a look at the three most influential arguments on this view. But before that we first need to do a little background work.

The question of continuity and discontinuity

Whether or not the results of our work last into eternity raises the broader question of *what* of this creation will last into the new creation. This is a question of continuity and discontinuity—how much will continue and be a part of the new creation (continuity), and how much will cease to be (discontinuity).

This issue has been helpfully addressed by Paul Williamson, who shows that the

Bible is not univocal on the matter.³ There are two emphases, “one that stresses stability, permanence and continuity” (verses like Matthew 5:5), and “another that emphasizes vulnerability, transience and discontinuity” (like Hebrews 1:11).⁴ The problem comes when one is over-emphasized above the other. For example, if discontinuity is over-emphasized then you end up with some kind of platonic dualism. In this understanding, all matter and things ‘physical’ are bad and must be destroyed, while anything that is ‘spiritual’ (non-physical) is eternal. At its extreme this leads to a new creation that is *ex nihilo*—a completely new creation that has nothing to do with what God has already made and done.

However, if continuity is over-emphasized, then suddenly everything that is done *in* and *on* this creation lasts into the new creation. At its extreme this leads to over-stated assertions about the ultimate reason for caring for the environment. In this line of thought, because this creation is the new creation that we will inhabit, we must tackle serious issues such as climate change, for this creation *will be* our eternal home. Environmental issues then become issues of *eternal* significance. God, however, is bigger than any damage we inflict on the creation in our sinfulness.⁵ The Bible is clear that God will release creation from its bondage and decay on the resurrection day (Rom 8:19-22).

2 D Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work*, Paternoster Press, Milton Keynes, 2006, p. 2.

3 P Williamson, 'Destruction or transformation?: Earth's future in biblical perspective', in J Moo & R Routledge (eds), *As Long as the Earth Endures*, Apollos, Nottingham, 2014, pp. 125-145.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 144. For multiple biblical references, see Williamson's full essay.

5 This is not to deny the importance of environmental care. However, theologically this is best understood as part of our responsibility as stewards of God's good creation, and as part of loving our neighbours and future generations.

It is particularly this over-emphasis of continuity that undergirds the notion of our work as a part of God's eternal kingdom building. Thus, as we go on to assess the three most influential arguments for kingdom building, we must keep the question of 'continuity' and 'discontinuity' at the forefront of our minds. We must remember, as Williamson helpfully shows, that the Bible emphasizes both continuity *and* discontinuity, and therefore one must not be neglected over the other.

Three arguments for seeing secular work as part of kingdom building

As we now focus on the three most influential arguments, I will also focus on one theologian for each discussion. This will assist us in clearly understanding each of the arguments. However, it's important to note that all three views intertwine in many ways, as do the theologians. There is much overlap between each argument and their proponents.

Argument one: The creation mandate

NT Wright argues that, from Genesis 1 onwards, human beings are given the mandate to look after, and bring order to, God's creation.⁶ He further explains that people are saved in Christ now, not only for the restoration of their relationship with God, but also for the purpose of saving and restoring the creation.⁷ That is, believers are part of the means by which God saves and redeems the creation *now*, which is an outworking of the creation

mandate. So, as we go about our day-to-day work, we are in the work of building God's eternal kingdom.

This is a point that Wright argues primarily from Romans 8.⁸ He argues that because we know the creation *will* be liberated and redeemed when God's children are revealed, then those who are in Christ *now* are to begin that work of liberation *in the present*. In this way, the future liberation and redemption of creation is partly the outworking of believers *in the present* as "agents of the transformation of this earth".⁹ Indeed, as we have already seen, this is part of the reason God has saved people:

*Faced with his beautiful and powerful creation in rebellion, God longed to set it right, to rescue it from continuing corruption and impending chaos and to bring it back into order and fruitfulness... [God] wanted thereby to rescue humans in order that humans might be his rescuing stewards over creation. That is the inner dynamic of the kingdom of God.*¹⁰

Thus, for Wright, God gives us the creation mandate, and saves us (in part), for the purpose of being rescuing stewards of creation.

It should be noted how Wright's strong sense of continuity (coming back to our prior discussion) shapes his view here. For Wright, because we know that this creation *will* be transformed, therefore we must be contributing to that transformation *now*. What believers do *now*, in light of the continuity of creation to new creation, is actually the building of the kingdom.¹¹

6 Wright, p. 199.

7 Ibid., p. 200.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p. 201.

10 Ibid., p. 202.

11 Ibid., pp. 207-212.

So in thinking of our work specifically, in Wright's view Christians should realize that the fruit of their work *on* and *in* this creation will last into the new creation, for they are currently building the kingdom of God. This for Wright is an outworking of the creation mandate. However, is Wright correct?

Paul Grimmond explains that it is ultimately *Christ* who fulfils the creation mandate.¹² What we actually see today is humanity's *inability* to fulfil the creation mandate. Since the Fall, sinful humanity has been unable to rule positively as God commanded. Grimmond argues that Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8 (the other great mandate passage) need to be understood in light of Jesus and the New Testament. Pointing to Hebrews 2, he writes:

*The words of Psalm 8 [in Hebrews 2]... are not primarily words about all people everywhere; they are particularly about Christ... God's word to humanity in the beginning... was a word of promise; a word of promise that awaited its fulfilment in Christ.*¹³

Thus it was always intended that *Christ* would fulfil the mandate of Genesis 1:28, not humanity in its fallen state. It is only as we look forward to the new creation that we see humanity reigning rightly under Christ. As Grimmond helpfully continues:

One day we will share in the rule of Christ over the new heavens and the new earth (2 Tim 2:12; Rev 22:5). People like you and me were made to rule the world! But that rule awaits the return of Jesus.

Similarly, David VanDrunen argues from Romans 5 that Christ, in being the last Adam, fulfils the task of the first Adam. In this way humanity is no longer to see itself as fulfilling the creation mandate: "Christians are not called to pursue cultural activities as a way of attaining the world-to-come, nor should they expect the products of their cultural labors to survive into the new creation".¹⁴

So in coming back to Wright's argument, instead of seeing Christians as the rescuing stewards of creation, we see Jesus as the One who is the last Adam and fulfils the creation mandate. In this sense, Christians are *not* redeeming creation or building for the kingdom. Our work, as important and significant as it may be, is not an outworking of the creation mandate to establish God's eternal kingdom. We cannot use Genesis 1:28 and the creation mandate to build a strong biblical case for our daily work as part of God's kingdom building.

Argument two: The work of the Spirit

Instead of arguing from the doctrine of creation and the creation mandate for the eternal significance of work, Miroslav Volf argues pneumatologically—from the doctrine of God the Spirit. Volf does this firstly by arguing within an eschatological (end times) framework.¹⁵ He asserts that because we see from Romans 8:19-22 that God will not annihilate this creation but rather liberate and redeem it, God is therefore about transforming the creation (continuity) not annihilating it (discontinuity). In this way Volf is

12 P Grimmond, *God's Plan for Work*, Matthias Media, Sydney, 2014.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

14 D VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*, Crossway, Wheaton, 2010, p. 71.

15 M Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 89-102.

similar to Wright. However, instead of looking to the doctrine of creation primarily for this transformation (like Wright), Volf sees the Holy Spirit as the primary agent of this transformation. Furthermore, the Spirit will not only do this work of transformation at the end, but he is currently, and has been from the beginning, doing this work. In his work, “the Holy Spirit leads the realm of nature towards its final glorification in the new creation”.¹⁶

Additionally, the Spirit calls, inspires, and gifts people *in the present* to do this transforming work.¹⁷ So in that regard “in their daily human work human beings are co-workers in God’s kingdom, which completes creation and renews heaven and earth”.¹⁸ Christians then, through the Spirit, are transforming this creation towards new creation and are *co-workers* in building God’s kingdom.

Again, like Wright, Volf’s strong sense of continuity impacts his understanding of the kingdom—because there is transformation and continuity, therefore Christians must be building the kingdom now. The fruits of our work therefore last into the new creation, for by the Spirit Christians are co-workers with God in his transformation of this creation towards new creation. However, is Volf right?

While Volf is right to see continuity and transformation, especially when considering Romans 8 (specifically verses 19-22), is it right to say that this transformation is happening now? Furthermore, is it right to say that the Spirit is the agent of this transformation now? To support his case, Volf points to passages that speak about the Spirit as a ‘seal’ and ‘guarantee’, drawing specific

attention to Romans 8:23.¹⁹ Yet these passages refer to believers and their bodily resurrection, not the creation. Moreover, Romans 8 seems to paint the opposite picture to Volf’s present transformation. In Romans 8 the picture is of the creation “waiting with eager longing”, not of the creation *currently* becoming better, or healthier, or somehow being transformed.

Volf also seems to confuse God’s providential care and salvation. If Volf is saying that the Spirit is the agent of God’s provision for the creation and humanity, then this can be agreed upon. But to say that this work of the Spirit is a work of salvation of the creation is not a move that Scripture makes. However, this does not overly concern Volf, who claims:

The picture is of creation “waiting with eager longing”, not becoming better.

The silence of the New Testament about any broader significance of work than mere sustenance depends ultimately on the nature of New Testament eschatology. For the significance of secular work depends on the value of creation, and the value of creation depends on its final destiny. If its destiny is eschatological transformation, then, in spite of the lack of explicit exegetical support, we must ascribe to human work inherent value.²⁰

For Volf, because there is transformation, and because it is *this* creation that will be transformed, therefore this work of transformation must be occurring now. Yet this is a jump that should not be made. Admitting the lack of exegetical support is no reason to justify the conclusion. It is unconvincing then to

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 100.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 94.

use the work of the Spirit as an argument for our human work as a part of God's kingdom building.

Argument three: The resurrection

Darrell Cosden, like NT Wright, is reacting against platonic thinking when it comes to the resurrection. He wants to show that Jesus', and humanity's, resurrection is a bodily resurrection, not some non-physical existence. This much can be agreed upon. However, Cosden then wants to use Jesus' bodily resurrection as a prototype for the coming new creation.²¹ In the same way that Jesus is resurrected and transformed,

God will ultimately resurrect and transform creation.²²

To make his case, Cosden points to the holes in Jesus' hands and side. In the same way that the effects

of 'human work' can be seen on Jesus' body, thus the effects of human works on creation will be seen in the resurrected new creation. For Cosden "that this transformation [of creation] includes our work on creation, just like it did our 'work' on Jesus, naturally follows".²³

To further build his argument, Cosden turns to 1 Corinthians 15:58 and asserts that here Paul is referring to 'all work' (not just works of proclamation and edification). He gives two reasons for this assertion. One is that Paul doesn't state otherwise. The second is because of Paul's

comment in 15:27 concerning God putting "all things" under Jesus' feet.²⁴ It is because *everything* will be put under Jesus' feet that Jesus' resurrection must point *not only* to the resurrection of people, but to the resurrection of everything.²⁵ Thus "that this 'everything' that exists will include what we have added to creation through our 'working' seems evident".²⁶

However, is Cosden right about 1 Corinthians 15:58? And is he right about Jesus' resurrection being a prototype for the resurrection of *creation*? In response to the first, Peter Orr claims 'work' in 15:58 is not 'all work', but specifically the work of "evangelism and edification".²⁷ After completing a comprehensive study on the phrase 'work of the Lord' in Paul, Orr concludes: "in exhorting the Corinthians to abound in 'the work of the Lord', Paul is calling on them to give themselves to the specific work of proclaiming the gospel and building the church (i.e. evangelism and edification)".²⁸ Therefore Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 15 is that "because there is a resurrection and those who are 'dead in Christ' will be raised to bear glorious bodies like Christ, believers must give themselves to the work of calling men and women to faith in Christ and to the work of ensuring they remain in Christ".²⁹

Furthermore, Gordon Fee notes that Paul in verse 27 is referring specifically to death, not to some notion of everything being resurrected and put under Jesus' feet. Fee writes, "in raising Christ from the dead God has set in motion a chain of events that must culminate in the final

24 Ibid., p. 65.

25 It is to be noted that Cosden does stress that everything must be 'purified' first.

26 Ibid., p. 65.

27 P Orr, 'Abounding in the work of the Lord (1 Cor 15:58): Everything we do as Christians or specific gospel work?', *Themelios*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2013, pp. 205-214.

28 Ibid., p. 213.

29 Ibid.

21 Cosden, p. 59.

22 D Cosden, *A Theology of Work*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, 2004, pp. 90. See also O O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 2nd ed, Apollos, Leicester, 1994.

23 Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work*, p. 60.

destruction of death”.³⁰ While it must be agreed that everything will be subject to Christ, there is nothing in the text that suggests that Paul had the *resurrection* of everything in mind. Overall then, Cosden’s understanding of 15:58 is not convincing.

And finally, in regards to Cosden’s comments concerning Jesus’ scars, Cosden is far too strong in his conclusions. It could just as easily be argued that the scars on Jesus’ resurrected body are unique only to Jesus, not as a prototype of resurrection. Jesus’ bodily scars could act as a glorious reminder for all eternity of the “lamb who was slain” for us. This is the picture of praise that we see in Revelation 5:12 and following. Cosden’s conclusion regarding the resurrection of all things on the basis of the human work left upon Jesus’ resurrected body is too speculative. Cosden’s argument fails to convince that our secular work is a part of God’s eternal kingdom building. Biblically it is difficult to make a case for the resurrection of *everything*, including the resurrection of all our works *in* and *on* this creation.

Concluding remarks

The arguments presented above are by no means all the arguments put forward in favour of seeing work as ‘kingdom building’.³¹ However, they are three of the most influential. Furthermore, each of the theologians surveyed begin their discussions with an over-emphasis on the continuity between this creation

and the new creation. The assertion they make is that because there is some continuity between this creation and the new creation, God must now be using his people as part of building the new creation. The Bible however does not make this conclusion. Nowhere does the Bible teach that the fruits of our daily work will last into eternity. This is not to say that our daily work is of no value. The Bible talks about the value and purpose of our work in regards to sustenance, providing for family and others, being a part of God’s common grace and providence, sharing with others generously, and providing for gospel ministry (amongst other things). But it never talks about the fruit of our daily work lasting into eternity, or having eternal significance.

What the Bible is clear about is the eternal continuity of people. This is Paul’s argument throughout 1 Corinthians 15. People are eternal, and the dead will be raised, so all our efforts in sharing Jesus with people (regardless of whether we are in full-time ministry or not!) is of eternal importance. What we can say for sure is that those who are in Christ will be raised on the last day and praise him for all eternity.

Another central question to ask is why so many Christians are desperate to find some kind of eternal significance and value in their daily work. Isn’t our value and self-worth found in Christ (regardless of whether or not we are in full-time ministry)? Jesus is where we find our value and contentment, not our work. If we want to talk about the eternal significance of our work, then we need to talk about faithfulness. What matters is pleasing God as we work. This has an eternal value. As Con Campbell helpfully notes:

³⁰ GD Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 759.

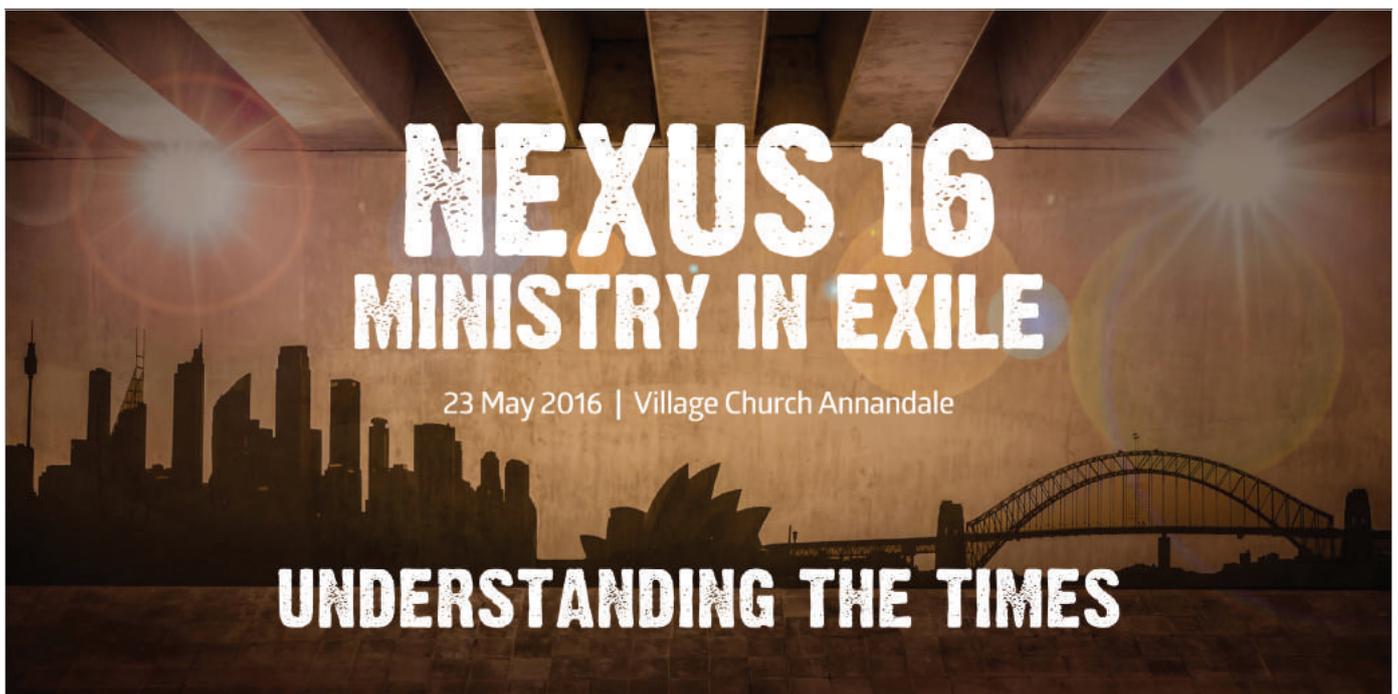
³¹ Another popular argument that is not considered here is Revelation 21:24. To see how this verse is speaking about worship in particular and *not* the eternal continuity of the works on and in creation, see GK Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998, p. 1095.

THE ETHERAL VALUE OF WORK

Even if the fruit of your work does not last for eternity, the important thing is whether or not your work pleases the Lord. In Heaven, what could be more valuable than hearing the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” from the Lord of all? Does it really matter if that bridge you built is not needed in the new creation, when the Lord of creation praises you for faithfully building it anyway?³²

³² C Campbell, ‘Ministry and your day job’, *Henry Center for Theological Understanding*, 5 May 2015 (viewed 7 January 2016): <http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2015/05/the-work-of-the-lord-and-why-other-work-matters-too/>

While it is important and good for us to think theologically about the purpose and significance of our daily work, we must be careful of the views we adopt. As valuable and meaningful as our daily work might be, we cannot attribute to it an eternal significance. What we can say however is that God is concerned with our faithfulness and godliness. As Christians we find our purpose and value in serving Christ in all that we do, including our daily work. No matter what we do, there is nothing more eternally significant than hearing these words from our Lord on the last day: “Well done, good and faithful servant”. ▣



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What is a disciple?

COLIN MARSHALL & TONY PAYNE

Everyone seems to be interested in ‘making disciples’ these days, but what is a ‘disciple’ exactly? Some clarity on this issue would help not only in our churches and ministries, but in our own walk as a disciple of Jesus.

DISCIPLINES, DISCIPLES, DISCIPLES, discipling, disciple-making. These words are such an established part of conversation about ministry and church life that we rarely pause to consider what we actually mean by them.

Take this collection of recent quotes:

- » “While listening to Dr Hendricks speak, I sensed that discipleship might be something I could do, unlike more public types of ministry because you didn’t have to preach or do anything public.”¹
- » “What would happen to the church of Christ if a majority of those who claim to follow Christ were nurtured to maturity through intimate, accountable relationships centered on the essentials of God’s word? Self-initiating, reproducing disciples of Jesus would be the result.”²
- » “Discipleship is all about living life together rather than just one structured meeting per week.”³
- » “Many churches have used various types of small groups as part of their discipleship strategy (home groups, life groups, fellowship groups, community groups, etc.).”⁴
- » “Mark calls the Church to abandon its imperialistic dreams on the one hand, and its passive noninvolvement on the other, and to become for the world what Jesus was for the world. That is what discipleship, following Jesus, really means.”⁵
- » “We need more of the engine that Jesus used to change the world, the engine he instructs us to use. This engine will not create perfect churches, but it will

1 D McCallum & J Lowery, *Organic Discipleship: Mentoring Others into Spiritual Maturity and Leadership*, rev. edn, New Paradigm, Columbus, 2012, p. 15.

2 G Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2007, p. 9.

3 F Chan & M Beuving, *Multiply: Disciples Making Disciples*, David C Cook, Colorado Springs, 2012, p. 11.

4 R Pope & K Murray, *Insourcing: Bringing Discipleship Back to the Local Church*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2013, p. 107.

5 NT Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994, pp. 51.

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

create *effective* churches.
It's relational discipleship."⁶

These quotes are representative of much of the conversation that swirls around 'discipleship' today, including the many discussions we've had with pastors in the six years since *The Trellis and the Vine* was published (and we became unlikely and accidental 'discipleship' gurus). Our abiding impression has been that, although many people use the language of discipleship and disciple-making often, not many people are particularly clear what they mean by it.

Generally speaking, most people assume that discipleship is a personal, relational or intimate kind of thing: something that happens in our private lives or in small groups, perhaps in contrast to other aspects of church life that are more public or programmatic. Most tend to roughly equate being a 'disciple' with a general idea of 'following Jesus'. And

The thing with words—like 'disciple' or 'discipleship'—is that they shift and morph over time.

nearly everyone agrees that effective discipleship and disciple-making are hugely important and are a (or the) vital factor in rejuvenating churches and changing the world.

But why 'disciple' is the category or language to talk about these things is not so obvious, and certainly not when we see how the New Testament uses the word (which we'll come to below).

Of course, the thing with words—like 'disciple' or 'discipleship'—is that they shift and morph over time as we use them in different ways and with reference to different things-in-the-world. This is not a problem. It's just the reality of language as a living, dynamic gift of God.

But it can sometimes be a problem when we use a Bible word—like 'disciple'—in a different way from how the Bible uses it, or to mean something other than what the Bible means by it. It's a problem not because absolute precision in language is such a virtue in itself, but because it can lead us to miss out on the riches of what the Bible is actually saying. We see a particular word in our English Bibles (like 'disciple') and the meaning, references and connotations of how we currently use the word in English come to our minds. We naturally assume that this is what the Bible is talking about at this point—but it may not be. The biblical author may have a somewhat different set of things in mind, and so we miss the force or implications of what is being said. Worse, we can misread what is being said, and bring all the weight of a biblical imperative or norm to bear on something in our church experience that is not necessarily what the Bible is talking about at all.

All of which means that a vital step in clarifying our convictions about discipleship and disciple-making is to clarify what we mean by these important terms.

What is a disciple?

There's not much controversy or difficulty about the meaning of the word translated as 'disciple' in the New Testament (the Greek word *mathētēs*). It basically refers to a learner or student, to someone who is apprenticed to a teacher to learn from him.⁷

Put simply, a disciple is a learner; discipleship is 'learnership'.

6 J Putman, B Harrington & R Coleman, *DiscipleShift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2013, p. 22.

7 This is reflected in the origin of our English word 'disciple' in the Latin *discere*, 'to learn'. It's fair to say that the essentially pedagogical nature of being a 'disciple' has faded somewhat in the way we use the word today.

We see this clearly enough in the way the Gospels use the word. A disciple aims to learn the ways and practices and wisdom of his teacher:

And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.” (Luke 5:33)

A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher. (Luke 6:40)

Whether it’s the disciples of John, the Pharisees or Jesus, the basic point is the same—that the learners stand in relation to their teacher or teachers, whose way of life and practices they seek to reproduce.

There is certainly intellectual content involved and conveyed, a way of thinking and perceiving the world, a body of knowledge and understanding. We often see Jesus teaching his learners this content in the Gospels:

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them... (Matt 5:1-2)

But in the case of Jesus’ disciples the outcome of this learning was not simply the mastery of a certain body of knowledge—what we would today associate with classroom or academic learning. What the learners were learning from Jesus was a way of life based on an understanding of certain truths about reality (as for that matter were the disciples of John or the Pharisees). The goal was not only for them to know what their teacher knew, but to be like their teacher, to walk in his ways. They weren’t learning a subject, they were learning a person, if we can put it like that—his knowledge, his wisdom, his whole way of life.

This is in part why learners often followed their teachers around. They not only listened to the teacher’s words, but saw his words in action in his life, and sought to learn that way of life by being with him constantly. Following him and being with him was also the routine way that the teaching was conveyed and mastered. We see this in the Gospels as the learners often ask Jesus questions, pose dilemmas, and get him to clarify or elaborate on his public teaching.

What the learners were learning from Jesus was a way of life based on an understanding of certain truths.

Perhaps this is one reason that the concept of ‘following’ has come to dominate most people’s thinking about discipleship. If asked to give a simple definition of what a disciple is, many would answer, “Someone who follows Jesus”. From what we have seen so far, it would perhaps be more accurate to say, “Someone devoted to learning Jesus”.

However, even though discipleship is not identical with following, the two are closely related in the Gospels—for at least two reasons.

The first is connected to the kind of learning that the ‘learners’ were committing themselves to. You could hardly learn from the teacher and adopt the way of life the teacher taught and exemplified if you weren’t with him, watching and observing regularly and listening and asking questions. Jesus wanted his learners to walk with him, and to learn to be like him.

But the significance of following Jesus goes a bit deeper than that in the Gospels, because of who Jesus is and where his learners were following him to. Jesus repeatedly tells people that following him is an exclusive, life-and-death commitment. To go with him means to leave everything else behind, including

your very life. As he puts it so starkly in Luke's Gospel: "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my [learner]" (Luke 14:33).

To 'learn' Jesus, to submit yourself to his teaching, to walk in his ways, will mean leaving behind all your current loyalties and commitments. It will mean walking the road to Jerusalem with him,

and facing up to the cross that is waiting there.

Following Jesus in the Gospels is very like repentance. It is abandoning my current

existence and heading off in a new direction, to learn a whole new life from a new master, to be part of the new kingdom that he will bring.

The people Jesus calls to be learners don't have a blank slate.

Two potent symbols

This is perhaps why baptism is such an appropriate symbol for initiation into being a learner. Baptism was how disciples were typically 'made', as John's Gospel shows us in passing: "Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John..." (John 4:1).

Baptism was a symbol of repentance, of washing away the old and starting afresh. A new learner was baptized as a vivid way of declaring that he had turned away from his old understanding and his old life, and had now embarked on the new life that he would learn from his teacher.

Of course, in the case of being initiated into learning Jesus, that repentance was not just a turning away from one's former life but a recognition that one's former life had been lived in selfishness and rebellion towards God. Repentance was also a plea for forgiveness—for a washing clean of

all those thoughts, actions, attitudes and character traits that were contrary to the new kingdom that Jesus embodied and taught.

Jesus is not just any teacher, and in repenting and following him you are not becoming just any learner. To become a learner of Jesus requires a repudiation—a radical unlearning—of our former rebellious way of life. It means being forgiven for the offence that it has been before God, and submitting ourselves to a divine Teacher who speaks the very words of the Father.

This may be somewhat different from how we have learned to think about 'learning'. We tend to see learning through the lens of modern education, in which we move from a state of ignorance or lack of knowledge to being 'educated'—that is, acquiring information or knowledge or skills we previously lacked. The problem that learning addresses is a lack of knowledge, almost as if there is a blank slate needing to be filled.

The people that Jesus calls to be learners don't have a blank slate. Their slate is very full—of foolish, darkened, enslaved thinking that is opposed to learning Jesus at every point. Becoming a learner of Christ therefore requires a repentance, a dying to the web of lies that our lives once were built on. It's not really a surprise, then, when we arrive at Matthew 28, that baptism is an integral part of Jesus' grand commission to make learners of all nations.

The other potent symbol of becoming a learner is the yoke. We see it in Jesus' words in Matthew 11:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt 11:27-30)

To ‘take the yoke’ is a metaphor for service and submission and obedience, for accepting the authority of another—like oxen who are yoked together to plough in the service of their owner, or slaves who bear the yoke of their master.

‘Taking the yoke’ is a way of talking about learnership—to submit yourself to learn from and follow the ways of a master or teacher.⁸ This is essentially what a disciple was in New Testament times: someone who submitted to the authority of a teacher, in order to learn from him and become like him.

Jesus gives two reasons in this passage why he is the obvious person to learn from. The *first* is the stunning claim that all things have been handed over to him by the Father—that he is the Son and heir of God. He and only he has exclusive access to the foundational knowledge of all things. He is the only one who knows the Father and can therefore reveal the Father to others. If you want to learn what God is really like—in fact, if you want to get to know God the Father himself—the Son is your only option as a teacher.

Now, a claim like this doesn’t sound like the words of someone who is “gentle and lowly in heart”, and whose yoke would be easy and light. And yet that is the stunning and confounding contrast that Jesus constantly presents,

and which the scribes and Pharisees so comprehensively fail to grasp. The all-conquering, kingdom-bringing, Father-revealing Son of God is born in a backwater, in a stable, and grows up in obscurity. He comes not with sword or military might, but with teaching and healing and compassion. He enters Jerusalem not on a warhorse but on a donkey. And when he is finally lifted up in his great hour of glory, his throne turns out to be a cross on which he dies a forsaken death for the sins of his enemies.

He comes to bring rest and peace and salvation. This is why his yoke is a blessed relief from the hard and heavy burden that the scribes and Pharisees placed on the shoulders of their learners. Theirs was a school of grinding external self-justificatory law-keeping, based on the traditions of men rather than true knowledge of the Father.

This is the *second* reason that taking on the yoke of Jesus is so attractive. It’s not a school where you pass on merit. Or rather, it’s a school where the pass mark is 100% but where the final exam is done by the teacher.

The yoke of Jesus is a total submission to his authority as the Teacher. But it is not a burden; it

is liberation. His yoke brings a paradoxical freedom: freedom from the heavy burden of sin through forgiveness; and freedom to now learn a whole new way of living that is fit for the kingdom of God.

These two symbols—baptism and the yoke—say a lot about the kind of learning that the learners of Jesus were undertaking. It required a radical break from the past and initiation into a new relationship with the Teacher; it was a form of service and submission that was in fact rest and freedom; it involved a

The yoke of Jesus is a total submission to his authority. But it is not a burden; it is liberation.

8 The Greek word for ‘learn’ (*manthano*) in verse 30 is the verbal form of the noun we normally translate as ‘disciple’. Someone who learns (*manthano*) is a disciple (*mathētē*).

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

whole new way of life in learning to be like the Teacher.

Perhaps we could sum up what we have seen so far by saying that a disciple is someone engaged in ‘transformative learning’.⁹

This is a kind of learning where the student’s understanding of reality is changed and keeps changing, leading to a transformed experience and life. Our understanding and life changes decisively as we repent and submit ourselves to a new Teacher, who reveals the Father to us, and reveals ourselves to us. And it keeps being renewed continually and gradually over time, as our understanding deepens and widens and begins to be expressed in our actions and lives, as we unlearn old ways of thinking, and as we continue to rearrange our mental furniture in light of the new Owner who has come into the house.

We need to notice that the effect of this transformed understanding

The effect of this transformed understanding is a corresponding transformation of our whole person.

is a corresponding transformation of our whole person—of our identity and experience and life and action. Being a learner of Jesus necessarily involves learning truth and content conveyed

in words, but it must also involve the learning of a new way of being and living.

The Great Commission itself reminds us of this. The eleven first learners are charged by Jesus to make learners of all peoples, initiating (or baptizing) them into relationship with Father, Son and Spirit, and teaching them to keep all of Jesus’ commandments.

We often don’t notice that little word ‘keep’. The subject to be taught to the learners is not only to know the commandments of Jesus. The ‘learning outcome’ is that they keep or observe or obey the commandments of Jesus. They are to learn the new way of life that the Lord Jesus Christ commands his subjects to live, which is summarized and encapsulated in the ‘love’ commandment—to give ourselves sacrificially for the benefit of others, as Christ has done for us.

In fact, whereas we often think of learning in terms of our personal growth and advancement—of becoming a better me in some way—to learn Christ is to be increasingly focused on others rather than ourselves. It’s to lay down our lives for others, as Christ laid down his, in weakness and suffering and death.

This is what a learner of Jesus is learning: a transformed existence based on a transformed understanding in Christ.

It hardly seems necessary to point out that ‘disciple’ (or learner) is therefore just another name for ‘Christian’—for someone who has renounced the lie that used to be at the centre of their lives, who has recognized the dark and lost state they were living in, and who has turned to Christ in faith as their Master, Saviour and Teacher—to learn to be like him, to learn to keep all his commandments, and to live out that commitment daily and weekly and yearly for the rest of their lives.

In this sense learnership cannot be thought of as a subset of the Christian life, or a stage in the Christian life. It is simply one way to describe the totality of the Christian life.¹⁰ To be a learner of this kind is simply to be a Christian.

The same is true of church. Church can very fruitfully be thought of as a ‘transformative learning community’—

⁹ This is a term used in educational theory, and about which there is some debate. In borrowing the term, we certainly don’t intend to enter that debate (it is not our expertise).

¹⁰ Not the only way, of course, but a very useful way.

that is, a gathering of people who are all learning Christ together. Making learners of Christ is not something that a church takes care of by putting on a Wednesday night program, or by encouraging people to meet in one-to-one Bible reading pairs—although of course both of these activities may indeed help people to learn Christ. *Everything* we do as God’s gathered people (as ‘church’) should be an exercise in the transformative learning of Christ.

The disappearing learner?

One of the curious little mysteries of the New Testament is that there seem to be no ‘disciples’ after the book of Acts.

Throughout the Gospels and in Acts, the noun *mathētēs* (‘disciple’ or ‘learner’) appears often as a description of those who have devoted themselves to being learners under Christ. But after a final mention in Acts 21:16, the word promptly disappears. In all the remaining 22 books of the New Testament, no one is described as a learner or disciple.

Now this is a bit odd, not least because Jesus specifically told his learner/disciples to go and make more learner/disciples. And it’s not as if they get to Acts 21 and then give up on the task. It’s obvious from the epistles that what the apostles did to make learners in Acts (i.e. to preach the gospel in the power of the Spirit, to baptize people into Christ and to teach them to keep all his commandments) was what they and the whole apostolic band continued to do everywhere.

In fact, the verbal form of ‘disciples’ (*mathētēs*)—*manthanō*, ‘to learn’—does appear quite often in the epistles, in connection with the gospel truth that Christians have learned, and the lifestyle or action that goes along with it. Here’s a sampler:

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the teaching that you have been taught [learned]; avoid them. (Rom 16:17)

*For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may **learn** and all be encouraged. (1 Cor 14:31)*

*What you have **learned** and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:9)*

*Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have **learned** in whatever situation I am to be content. (Phil 4:11)*

*Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel... since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you **learned** it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. (Col 1:5-7)*

*They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you **learned** Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:19-24)*

*And let our people **learn** to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful. (Titus 3:14)*

Perhaps Christians as learners didn’t disappear from the rest of the New Testament after all.

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

It is very striking how these few brief quotes line up with what we see of learnership in the Gospels and Acts. It clearly involves content—that is, words being spoken and taught, and then received and learned. But it also involves learning from a teacher’s actions and example, and seeking to do likewise (as in Phil 4:9). It involves being taught not just information but a new way of life—to kill off the old and with a renewed mind embark on a whole new existence (as in Eph 4:19-24).

And of course, in looking at these few occurrences of the word ‘learn’, we haven’t surveyed the multiplicity of other terms and phrases that convey the same concepts—that the Christian life is a matter of understanding and embracing a new vision of reality, a new truth, a new word that has been announced, proclaimed, taught, modelled and passed on; and that it is also a matter of responding to that liberating word in ongoing repentance and faith that is lived out in every sphere of our lives.

‘Learning Christ’ is a reality that the New Testament attests to repeatedly and powerfully.

However, now that we have this understanding of being a learner, it is worth asking whether learnership has waned (if not disappeared) in many

modern churches. And by this we *don’t* mean that there is less one-to-one ministry than there should be, or less small group ministry, or that every church should have a ‘learnership pastor’.

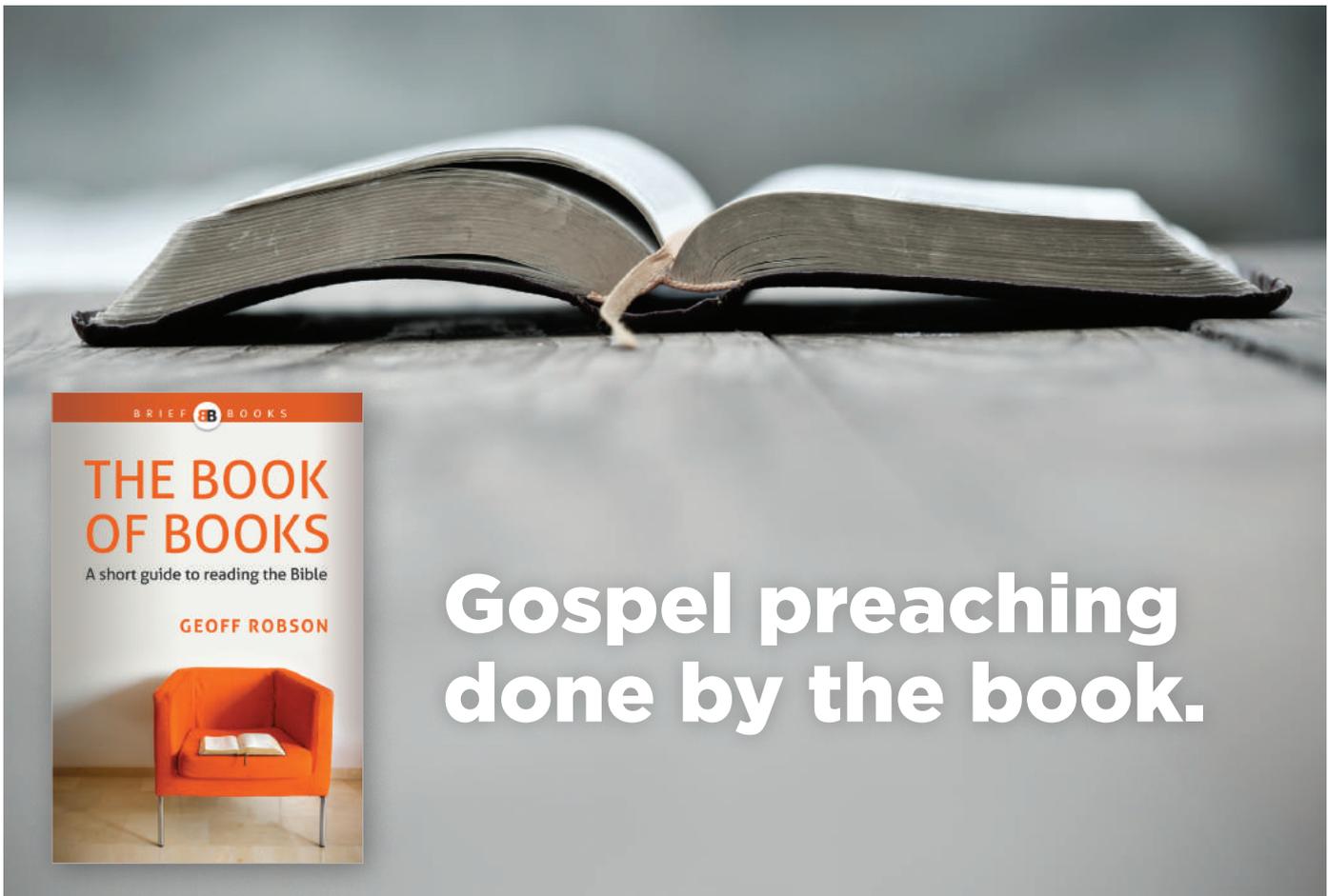
What we mean is that—in our observation of churches, and in our conversations with pastors all over the world—the *culture* that exists in many churches is no longer a culture of transformative learning—if it ever was. The whole “way we do things around here” (if that is a convenient definition of ‘culture’) is not focused on transformative learning through the Word of God in the power of the Spirit of God.

Would you describe your church’s culture in this way?

Would you describe your own life in this way, come to that?

Christ’s call to learnership is personal as well as corporate. It’s what he bids our lives be about, in every sphere and corner of them. It’s what he bids our churches be about, in every ministry, in every group, and on every Sunday that we gather in his name. ▣

This essay is adapted from *The Vine Project*, a forthcoming book by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne due to be published in May 2016.



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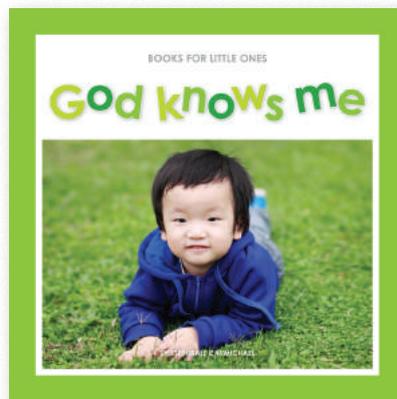
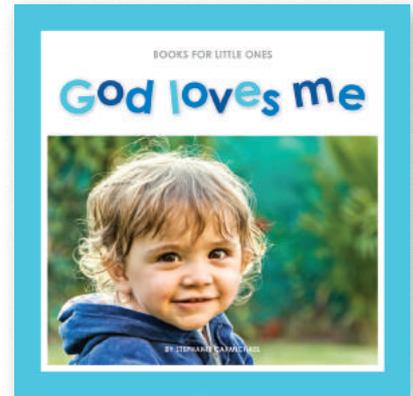
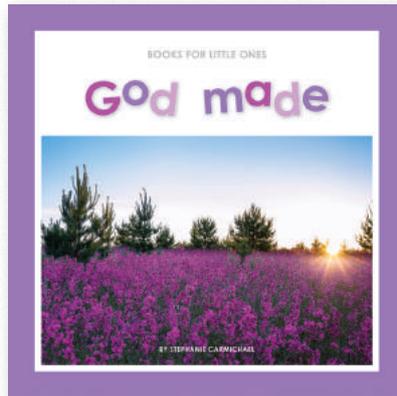
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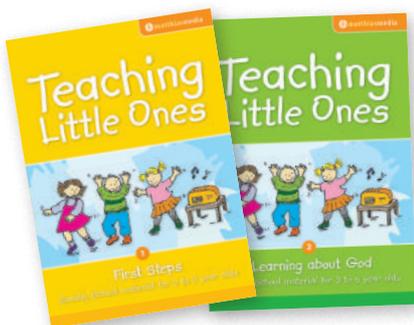
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The shifting front-line

KEL RICHARDS

Kel Richards argues that the front-line in the battle for the gospel is shifting, and we need to re-think our tactics and our strategies in the light of this.

THERE SEEMS TO be widespread agreement amongst evangelicals that we live in a ‘post-Christian’ age, but few stop to ask what difference this makes in how we reach out with the gospel message. If there really has been such a major cultural shift then we should look at the nature of that shift and how we can respond.

For starters, we need to be clear about what we mean by a Christian age and a post-Christian age. My suggestion is that western civilization has just emerged from a long (very long!) period during which what might be called a ‘Christian consensus’ held sway. During this lengthy epoch the Christian worldview (however badly understood, or even misunderstood) was widely endorsed and assumed to be true, and the Christian ethos (however badly understood, or even misunderstood) was similarly endorsed and assumed to be the right way to live.

The truth of this is obvious to anyone who is old enough. As an Australian child in the 1950s and teenager in the 1960s, I can remember that kind of cultural consensus. There is a younger generation of Christians today who have no memory

of Christianity being anything other than a mocked minority point of view, but this cultural consensus did once hold sway. Even as weekly church attendance began to (slowly) fall after the Second World War it was regarded as odd or eccentric to miss out on getting to church at both Christmas and Easter. Weddings or funerals held anywhere except in church were almost unheard of, and practically all children were baptized (or christened or dedicated). Most children were sent to Sunday School (even by parents who themselves stayed home reading the Sunday papers). Every Christmas and Easter the *Sydney Morning Herald* (and most other newspapers) commissioned a clergyman to write the ‘leader’ (the unsigned editorial) for the day. Australian broadcasting laws required commercial radio and television to devote a specified amount of airtime to Christian programming. It was *called* religious programming, but the assumption was that this meant Christian—and the law specifically required it to be shared among the different denominations in proportion to their statistical size in the census. Until the late 1960s the national broadcaster weekly aired a church service. If you doubt

such a Christian consensus once existed, just ask one of the ‘dinosaurs’ around you—but do it before they’re all gone!

And, of course, the history of the last five hundred years teaches us much the same lesson. Can you imagine a European war being fought today over Christian doctrine? But we all know this happened during that period when nations were divided over which brand of the Christian consensus was endorsed. I’m not saying this was a good thing, just that it demonstrates what a central thing the Christian consensus was to western culture. It seems clear to me that we are now emerging from centuries of a (kind of) Christian age—and are moving swiftly into new and largely uncharted waters.

If this was the case, when did this so-called Christian age begin? That’s unclear, but it was well before 1000AD. In that

The Christian age we have just seen die probably lasted for at least a thousand years.

epoch marking year there was widespread fear across much of Europe that as midnight ticked over Christ would return, the final judgement begin, and

the world come to its end. For such a popular view (or superstition) to exist, a Christian cultural consensus must have been well-settled. So the Christian age we have just seen die probably lasted for at least a thousand years. And such an extraordinarily long period of cultural consensus must have shaped our evangelistic tactics and strategies into something resembling habits: unexamined assumptions about who is mainly responsible for this task and how it is to be tackled.

So when did the big cultural shift happen? When did the Christian age end and the post-Christian age begin? The answer is that it happened slowly (as big cultural changes do), so a date can’t

be fixed as to when exactly it gradually crept over different parts of the western world. Peter Jensen has spoken about the “spiritual tsunami” of the 1960s that emptied churches and began the broad cultural hostility to Christianity that has now become commonplace. But of course the seeds were planted long before: in the intellectual gatekeepers who ushered in the Enlightenment (and its ugly child ‘higher criticism’); in the use made of Darwinism by Huxley and others; and in the steady slide into relativism and historical ignorance lamented by CS Lewis in his inaugural address at Cambridge *De Descriptione Temporum* (“a description of the times”). In the years since the planting of those early seeds, the tsunami has swept across the landscape, changing it utterly.

Against that background, where are we now, what does the post-Christian age consist of? The answer to that question is the key to understanding how we need to rethink our approach to our mission as followers of Christ.

Today the Christian worldview (again, understood or not) is widely assumed to be ignorant, unintelligent, narrow-minded and superstitious, and likewise the Christian ethos is widely assumed to be arrogant, bigoted, xenophobic, homophobic and misogynistic.

In other words, we have shifted not just from a broad consensus to a broad rejection of our position—but to active and contemptuous *hostility*. And this problem is exacerbated by a mindset that lumps all religions together in one big box, and refuses to see much difference between conservative Bible-believing Christians and Islamic suicide bombers. The result is a steady pressure trying to drive religion out of the public square entirely and ordinary Christians into self-censoring silence.

In such a climate it may well be wise

to rethink our habits of thought, partly due to this key observation: the front-line gospel work has shifted from clergy to laity.

It was certainly the clergy who were the gospel front-line in the centuries following the Reformation. Luther, Calvin, Knox, Tyndale, Carey, Spurgeon, Whitfield, the Wesleys, Simeon, Bunyan and countless others (the list could fill pages) fought the good fight, defended the faith, and offered salvation in Jesus Christ. They led the charge into the battle for hearts and minds, and their people faithfully followed. They did so in a society in which most (and sometimes all) of the population attended church. Even for much of the twentieth century this approach continued to work. Billy Graham crusades were packed, and Christians brought their friends to hear local evangelist John Chapman.

But look back at my description of this post-Christian age above and ask yourself: do we expect those tactics to continue to work, or do we need to find new patterns for gospel work?

The point is that the laity (those who fill the pews every Sunday) now need to be seen as the front-line. They live with, study with, work with, play with and meet constantly those unbelievers whose cultural conditioning stands as a barrier to attending any Christian function, let alone a church. These lay Christians have daily (and cordial) relations with people whose response to clergy is likely to range from complete lack of interest to deep suspicion, who see ‘professionally religious’ people as not just nut jobs but as potential threats to a harmonious and safe society.

However, the co-worker these unbelievers see every day—the nice guy who is good at his job and pleasant to work with—might be just the one to penetrate the blind prejudice of their cultural conditioning.

Lay Christians now occupy ground that most clergy will rarely reach. It is lay Christians who have daily opportunities to engage in hand-to-hand, mind-to-mind, heart-to-heart combat for the gospel. If we recognize that this is where the front-line is now we are able to find the best approaches for this new situation.

I’m suggesting that we need to stop thinking of laity as church members and instead think of them as missionaries. They are, for most of each week, on a mission field (or perhaps more than one when you add their soccer club and their kids’ school to their place of work) that most clergy will find it hard or even impossible to penetrate (certainly with the same degree of comfortable acceptance).

Every pew-sitting lay Christian can be (and should be, in my view) a missionary in just the same way as, say, a medical missionary in Africa. In that case it is the practice of medicine that gives the missionary the licence to be there—and they must practice medicine, and practice it well, to be accepted and hold their place. But although that will occupy much of their time, they know their real purpose is to share the good news of Jesus Christ—to both show and tell what it means to know and serve Christ. In much the same way the office worker, the teacher, the student, the parent-volunteer at the school, and the soccer coach all have a licence to be where they are doing what they are doing. They need to do it well to be a good witness to Christ, and they need to use the opportunity this creates to witness to the truth about Christ.

How can they do this? How can a lay Christian make the move from being an accountant to being an accountant/

We need to stop thinking of laity as church members and instead think of them as missionaries.

missionary? Well, the answer could fill numerous books and become the content for countless training courses for lay Christians (sorry, missionaries). But let me attempt just a brief sketch of a few things that George the office manager might do if he were to become George the office-manager-and-missionary.

going through a tough time may give us the hint that now is the time for sympathy and support, not for a lecture on the book of Job.

Everyone can learn to listen (role playing in Bible study groups can sharpen the skill)—so *everyone* can do conversational apologetics!

1. Listening

Conversational apologetics cannot be done without serious and careful listening. If a homosexual friend snarls out that “Christians hate gays”, what matters may not be plunging into the biblical doctrine of human sexuality but hearing the anger in the statement.

There is a danger that a Christian who has read a book on popular apologetics may be eager to launch into a condensed version of chapter one at the first hint of a question about faith. What may be needed instead is careful attention to what is *really* being asked, and a brief, nuanced reply.

Often the best first response to a question about Christian faith is another question (Jesus seems to have often responded to questions with questions).

This can clarify the thinking of the person who asked the

first question, and give the Christian a starting point for a sharper, more relevant answer.

Often people will “ask us to give the reason for the hope that we have” not with a question but with a statement. The claim that “science has disproved Christianity” is phrased as a statement, but we need to hear it as a question.

Really listening to someone who is

2. Iceberg-tip concepts

If conversational apologetics is going to be both brief and clear it may often need to consist of the bottom line, leaving out (for the time being) the complex algebra that got us there.

Here’s an example. I was sitting in a radio studio as a guest (about to answer listeners’ questions about words and language). While the commercials were grinding away, the panel operator said, “I can’t see what’s wrong with gay marriage. Why not? Just let ’em do it!”

My short reply went something like this: “Marriage is defined by children. Marriage came into being to give children legitimacy—a foundation and framework so that kids would be nurtured, raised, cared for by their biological parents. That’s where the whole concept came from. One man and one woman make a baby—so that defines marriage as something that happens between one man and one woman.”

To this the panel operator replied, “You’ve changed my mind.” (Whether it stayed changed, or he later forgot about what he heard, I have no way of knowing.)

What I was giving him was the small, easily visible tip of a very large iceberg. The submerged bit that I didn’t give him is all about God’s creation, God’s intention for male and female sexuality, and the responsibilities of families. I could have

Conversational apologetics cannot be done without serious and careful listening.

argued that from step one, but there wasn't time and it probably wouldn't have been heard (unbelievers are good at filtering out religious language).

Did I achieve anything? Well, perhaps I removed one black mark against 'narrow-minded Christians', and thus removed one small barrier to belief.

An open-line caller once challenged me by saying, "If Jesus had really lived he'd be mentioned in places other than just the Bible. If none of the Romans or Greeks or Jews even noticed he was around—he probably wasn't." I replied that Jesus is recorded outside the Bible by Josephus, Pliny, Tacitus and Suetonius, to which he responded "Oh, I didn't know that", and he went away rethinking the historicity of Jesus. He didn't want or need citations or quotations. He certainly didn't need a scholarly account of the extra-biblical material about Jesus that historians would demand. He just wanted the iceberg-tip information.

Similar examples could be given for all of the most frequently asked questions about Christian faith. Ordinary lay Christians need more than lists of "evidence that demands a verdict"—they need the encapsulated iceberg-tip concepts (while understanding the greater iceberg underneath).

Everyone can learn iceberg-tip concepts—so *everyone* can do conversational apologetics.

3. Prayer

Perhaps surprisingly, prayer can be a powerful step in conversational apologetics.

If a non-Christian, non-church-going friend shares a deep anxiety with a Christian, what is the right response? Why not offer to pray for the person?

I've done this on occasions. Usually the offer is accepted. I have sometimes (on the spot, in the office) placed a hand on the person's shoulder and prayed for them out loud. I've only once been rebuffed—by a colleague who had just been diagnosed with cancer (with a cheerful grin he said "You do the praying and I'll do the drinking!") But such an offer is often taken up.

Prayer leaps all the problematical issues in a single bound.

Prayer leaps all the problematical issues in a single bound. To pray to our loving heavenly Father is to step to a level that assumes that (a) God exists, (b) he hears our prayers, (c) he cares for everyone as an individual, (d) he is powerful enough to help, and (e) he is loving and compassionate. That's a lot of obstacles crossed, which is why the offer to pray is something that can change how a non-Christian perceives Christianity and its role and relevance in an individual human life.

And everyone can be trained to pray like this. A good starting point is to encourage Christians to pray for each other—perhaps after the church service each Sunday. This can be brief and simple. If one Christian tells another about an issue they are concerned about, the response can be "Let me pray for you"—and then do so, briefly, out-loud, on the spot.

Much of the fear of reaching out to hurting people with prayer can disappear once vocal prayer becomes a comfortable and familiar practice. *Everyone* can learn this and practice it if trained and encouraged—so *everyone* can do conversational apologetics.

CLEARLY THIS IS STILL a work in progress, but there you have a few starting points for sending a vast army of office-manager-missionaries into a hurting and

hostile post-Christian world. You can't defend something without explaining it, but if the person doing the explaining/defending has been graciously living that truth in a friendly on-going relationship with the unbeliever, then barriers to belief will start to fall.

Under this approach, every church becomes, in addition to being the local body of Christ in that place, a mission

Unless the vital front-line role is made explicit it cannot be embraced.

station, and the senior minister becomes the mission director. In other words, the shift from the Christian consensus to our still newish post-Christian society has had the effect of turning western nations into pagan mission fields. There are some parallels with the early church, but only limited ones. The churches planted by the apostles faced a world hostile to Christianity—and completely ignorant of it. We similarly face an ignorant and hostile world—with the key difference that the hostile pagans around us *think* they know what Christianity is about, and think they know enough to dismiss it as beneath contempt. That kind of smug, superior hostility can best be addressed by well-taught, well-trained, godly missionaries who are living with, working with, and are friends with the hostile pagans they seek to reach.

So what does this do to the role of the minister? Well, changes it, obviously—but it also makes it more important, since the ability of their members/missionaries to function “in the mission field” with all its difficulties, pressures and temptations will depend very largely on their teaching, their training, their support, their inspiration and their encouragement. What might this look like in practice? For a start, it will involve spelling out that every member is a missionary—and not assuming that people will just absorb this

idea by osmosis. Unless the vital front-line role is made explicit it cannot be embraced.

It may change preaching by making practical application a more vital task than ever before. Some ministers have tended to assume that if they just expound the Bible faithfully then their people will work out what to do with it in their lives and conversations—all they need is a hint in the right direction at the end of a sermon. Perhaps it is time to rethink that, and by rethinking I'm not suggesting that sermons should end with long semi-legalistic lists of instructions as to what we must now go off and do. What I mean is that, as we preach, we should help lay Christians understand how the Bible's message connects with, affirms, or (more often) contradicts the common attitudes and thought-forms they encounter in everyday life. How does hearing this message equip me as a missionary in the world? What truth have I learned today that I could share with someone else, and how might I do that? In other words, I'm suggesting that we should regard sermons as opportunities to fortify and equip lay Christians living and working in hostile mission fields so that they are given the best practical biblical guidance for all the moments of life.

It possibly also means adding another strand to church life—alongside the Bible teaching (from the pulpit and in small Bible study groups) there may be a need for carefully designed *training* programs (if teaching provides understanding then training provides skills). There may be a need for an on-going cycle of training courses where lay Christians can learn, practice, and role-play whatever is needed to make them functional on the mission field. The aim will be to produce what I call confident Christians.

It will almost certainly mean that

ministers will have to become brilliant listeners. The truth is that most people are not very good at listening. What we call listening is, far too often, that period of silence while we think of what we're going to say next! Genuinely hearing another does not come naturally—it is a learned skill. Ministers will need to be able to *really* hear what their people are telling them, absorb it, and reflect upon it if they are to keep them equipped, inspired, skilled-up and motivated for mission field work. Perhaps every minister needs to make regular visits to each small group in his church—not to lead the group but to listen to the conversation (both in the group time and over coffee) and listen to the prayer points.

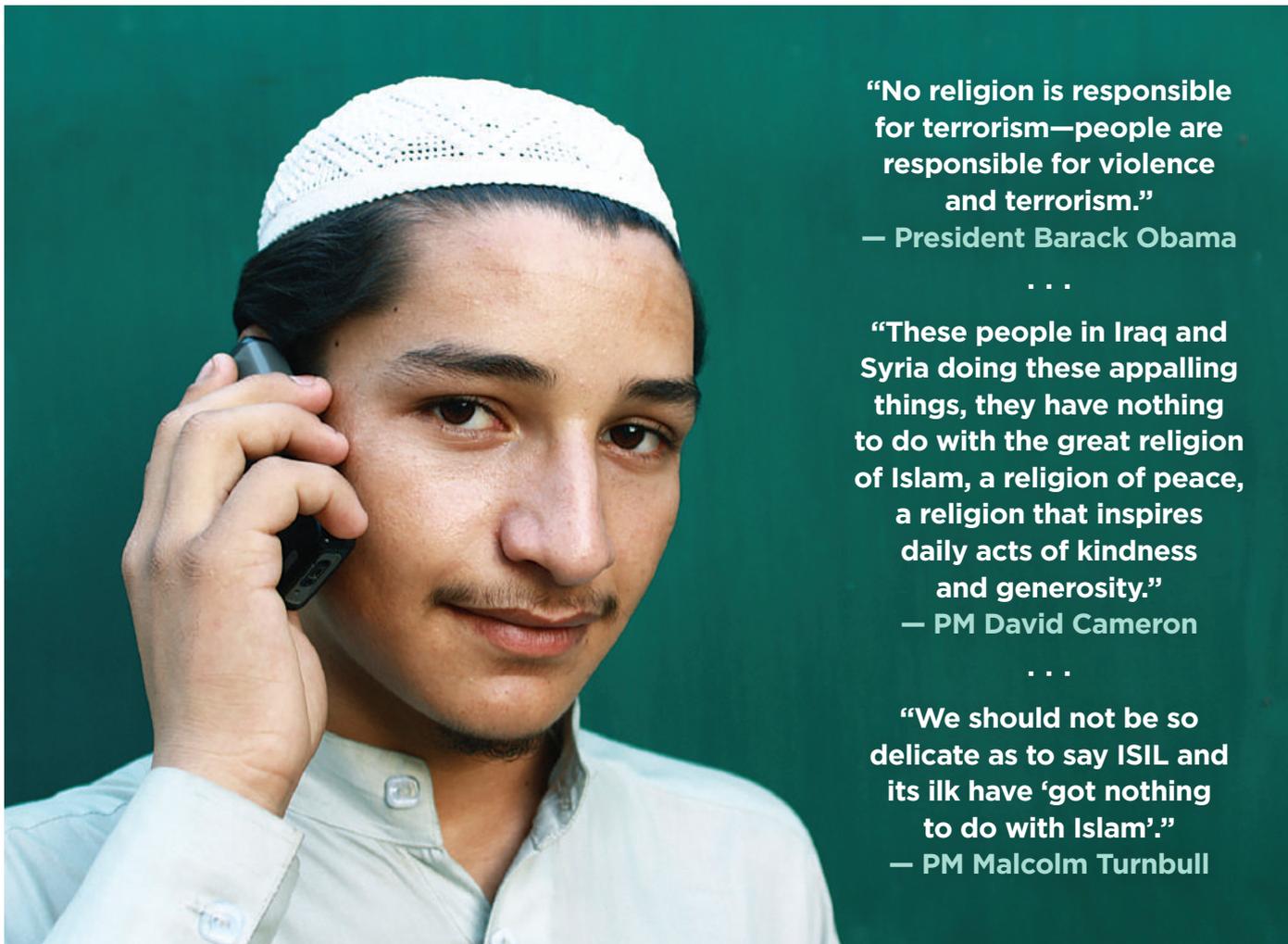
I once heard Richard Coekin appeal for a shift from an older model of ministry to a newer 'team model'. In the older model, he said, it was the salaried ministry team that were viewed as being on the pitch playing the game, while the people, the laity, were in the stands—encouraging, praying for (and paying for) the team on the field. In Coekin's team model the grandstand is empty and *everyone* is on the field—the people and the salaried ministry team all playing the game together side-by-side. In this model, the senior minister becomes a captain-coach and the rest of the ministry team are assistant coaches *and* players.

I am now questioning whether, in this hostile post-Christian age, we need to rethink that image of ministry a step

further. In the lay missionary model I am proposing, the people on the field are the laity—they are the ones who daily have access to the playing field of ideas. In this third model the salaried ministry team are mostly on the benches at the side of the field offering encouragement, tactical ideas, fitness training and physiotherapy for those hurt in the scrums!

Perhaps it's possible to push a single metaphor too far—after all, if the paid ministry staff are not themselves actually involved in the 'game' of missionary work in the world—if they're not mixing with the community on the front-lines, at the very least by evangelizing their neighbours and family—it will be hard for them to train, equip and support the rest of us for this task. But even so, the reality is that salaried ministers live a very different life from most of their people. They are simply not on the front-lines in the secular workplace for 40 or 50 hours a week, as most of their people are.

If this really is the post-Christian age so many people talk about, perhaps—while still contending earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints—we need to abandon some of the assumptions and attitudes of past centuries. Perhaps we need to start seeing clergy as quartermasters, making and supplying weapons and ammunition to the front-line troops—namely, all those eager faces looking up at them every Sunday. ▣



“No religion is responsible for terrorism—people are responsible for violence and terrorism.”

— President Barack Obama

...

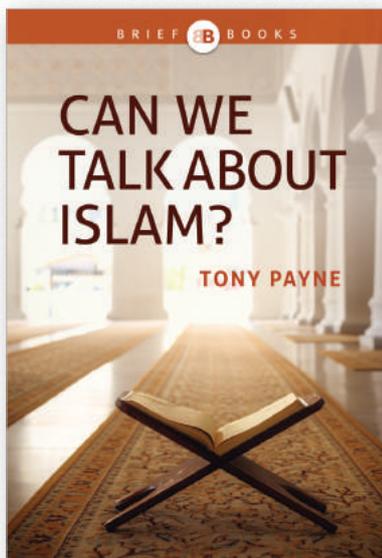
“These people in Iraq and Syria doing these appalling things, they have nothing to do with the great religion of Islam, a religion of peace, a religion that inspires daily acts of kindness and generosity.”

— PM David Cameron

...

“We should not be so delicate as to say ISIL and its ilk have ‘got nothing to do with Islam’.”

— PM Malcolm Turnbull



For many of us, it doesn't seem so long ago that Islam was a remote subject, barely touching our lives. Now hardly a day goes past when someone isn't talking about it in the media, or in our parliaments, or next to the coffee machine at work.

Much of that talk goes in one of two directions. Some want to blame Islam in general for the violence and atrocities being committed in its name (which hardly seems fair). Others insist that Islamic State and other Islamic terrorist groups have nothing whatsoever to do with Islam (which strikes many as being implausible).

Are these our only two options in talking about Islam—to blame it or to absolve it?

In this short 54-page book written from a Christian viewpoint, Tony Payne argues that there is an honest and constructive way to talk together about Islam. It begins with a better understanding not only of Islam, but also of the modern secular worldview that makes talking about any sort of faith so difficult.

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Anyone who follows me must lay down his rights

SAMUEL FRENEY

Nearly every contested ethical dilemma or cause in our world is framed in terms of ‘rights’—whether the right to choose, or the right to die, or the right to marry. But how should we approach the subject of ‘rights’ as Christians?

Rights in conflict

I’ve been noticing how public appeals to ‘rights’ and ‘justice’ are becoming more common. In fact, there seems to be few ways of speaking that are more persuasive than bringing up language of rights, justice, or fairness. The thought that somehow I might end up denying something to someone else—something inherent to their very person—is a powerful way of making a claim to a situation or relationship.¹

*All the great social protest movements of the twentieth century in the West employed the language of rights. They employed other language as well; but the language of rights was prominent in their vocabulary because, in general, it proved the most powerful.*²

This language is not only persuasive, however, but increasingly pervasive. Respect for human rights is “the language of the international community”—despite wide variation in actual observance.³ This tendency very often results in one set of rights being played off against another in public ethical discourse. In this essay I want to investigate the way we as a community use the language of ‘rights’, especially in tricky situations where rights come into conflict. We’ll look at some of the arguments by Christians for and against this way of pursuing ethical discussions, and what a Christian response might end up looking like.

So, on to some of the ways that rights come into conflict. In the abortion debate, for example, the woman’s right to self-determination regarding reproduction is placed in opposition to the right of the

1 Readers of *The Briefing* may remember an article on ‘rights’ by George Athas back in 2013: ‘What’s wrong with rights?’, *The Briefing*, no. 407, 2013, pp. 22–27. That article planted the seeds of this essay for me, although I end up approaching the question in a bit of a different way to Athas.

2 N Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008, pp. 2–3.

3 ED Reed, *The Ethics of Human Rights*, Baylor University Press, Waco, 2007, p. 23.

unborn foetus to life.⁴ The gun control debate is framed on both sides with an appeal to rights, notwithstanding the dubious legal support for such claims.⁵ This framing of moral and political questions is not limited to the US: Australia recently set itself to revoke government welfare for those who exercised their ‘right’ not to vaccinate their children, and introduce legislation allowing childcare centres the ‘right’ to refuse service to those who had done so.⁶

When rights claims are explicitly in conflict, is there a hierarchy we can use to adjudicate?

What is interesting about these examples is that they have a very similar form to the popular expression of the right being claimed.

Regardless of their general political/religious/social position, however, very few people would hold to them all consistently.⁷ On the one hand there is a common thread of the right to liberty: reproductive rights, the right to bear arms, and the right to choose vaccinations are all individual rights that claim freedom to determine one’s own path (often based on protecting oneself and/or family from an external threat to safety or livelihood). The opposite side in each of these cases defends the rights of a third party, generally powerless children, for a public good. Despite these superficial similarities, however, it is rare to find

someone who supports a woman’s right to abort and also the right to bear arms.

Firstly, we need to note that the legal and political debate about rights in general is exceedingly complex, and is only more so in the details of particular situations. Some rights are ‘inalienable’: that is, they are so important that they cannot be denied or limited under any circumstances, even in emergencies.⁸ Others can be restricted to achieve overriding objectives such as public order, national security, public health, the rights of others, and so on, but only for very powerful reasons.⁹ In situations where rights claims are explicitly in conflict, is there some sort of hierarchy that we can draw up to adjudicate between them? This is exactly what takes place in some cases, but is problematic in others.

Regarding the abortion debate, the conversation is often about the validity of the rights being claimed. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was not initially proposed as a legal instrument, but has since then gained acceptance and enforceability through a series of other conventions and documents.¹⁰ There is little consensus on either side, however, about whether abortion is good for women or whether the foetus has moral value.¹¹ The legal decisions in the US have tended to found the right to abortion on the general right to privacy, and the right to personal liberty, although religious freedom has also been sought as a ground by which the government is forbidden from endorsing

4 R Cook & R Pretorius, ‘Duties to implement reproductive rights: the case of adolescents’, in L Dennerstein & M Baltes (eds), *Women’s Rights and Bioethics*, UNESCO, Paris, 2000, p. 175; CR Kaczor, *The Ethics of Abortion: Women’s Rights, Human Life, and the Question of Justice*, Routledge, New York, 2011, pp. 93, 103.
 5 DG Savage, *The Supreme Court and Individual Rights*, CQ Press, Washington, 2009, p. 254.
 6 See, for example, D Robertson, ‘Vaccination is a community responsibility to keep all our children safe’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 2015.
 7 I am again indebted to Athas for pointing out the common ground of the first two of these three examples in ‘What’s wrong with rights?’.

8 RJ Cook, BM Dickens & MF Fathalla, *Reproductive Health and Human Rights*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, p. 157.
 9 PS Wenz, *Abortion Rights as Religious Freedom*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1992; Cook, Dickens & Fathalla, p. 157.
 10 Cook & Pretorius, p. 176.
 11 Kaczor, p. 9.

any religious belief.¹² The religious belief in question here is the personhood of a foetus, before any kind of performance of human characteristics is possible.¹³

The argument being made for abortion is that the human genetic code is a necessary but not sufficient condition for personhood. Personhood itself must be determined on other grounds.¹⁴ To simply assert that personhood begins at conception is a religious argument, which therefore cannot be enforced. The rights of the woman override any presumed rights of the foetus, as the latter is not (yet) a person.

The pro-life side declares that a foetus is indeed a person in its essence, and its right to life trumps any exercise of liberty of the mother.¹⁵ Both sides, therefore, are claiming a hierarchy of rights to further their case. The problem here is that the language of rights has become *the* way to talk about and (hopefully) resolve the issue, removing other ways of approaching the discussion:

*Once one has allowed that rights language is determinative and more basic than all other language then it seems one has very little resource to challenge the logic of those who claim the right to abortion as the kind of freedom good societies ought to provide.*¹⁶

The gun control issue, on the other hand, is commonly phrased as being concerned with legally granted rights, although experts tend to agree that this is a misunderstanding of the

legal provision.¹⁷ The National Rifle Association, for example, “relies heavily on an individualist view of the Second Amendment” in its campaigns for the purpose of arguing that any effort to restrict access to firearms by citizens is an infringement on the Constitution.¹⁸ This is a commonly accepted view of the legal protections of the Bill of Rights, despite the fact that the Supreme Court has repeatedly turned down appeals that cited the Second Amendment to challenge convictions on gun possession charges.¹⁹ The opposition to ‘gun rights’ both question the right itself, and claim a separate set of rights that they argue supersede the personal liberty to own firearms. Stark, for example, argues that the “right to bear arms” is not “fundamental”, so it does not have overriding importance;²⁰ Wheeler bolsters this position by asserting that the right to not be violently assaulted *does* qualify as a fundamental human right.²¹ Here again we have a hierarchy being asserted (fundamental right vs. non-fundamental).

Now to how a Christian worldview may or may not apply. Today’s human rights legislation functions in the absence of any theistic authority, and as we have seen is often hopelessly confused and at odds with itself.²² An ethical framework based on human rights appears to be incapable of resolving tensions between different

12 Wenz, p. 248.

13 Kaczor, pp. 93, 103.

14 Wenz, p. 172.

15 For a summary, see M Hill, *The How and Why of Love*, Matthias Media, Kingsford, 2002, p. 215.

16 S Hauerwas, ‘On the right to be tribal’, *Christian Scholars Review*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1987, p. 239.

17 Note here that this discussion is of a slightly different order to the preceding: it is about *legally granted rights*. One does not have the right to bear arms because of one’s humanity; it is only available to citizens of the United States of America. This right is (arguably) granted by the Constitution, not creation.

18 RJ Spitzer, *The Right to Bear Arms*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2001, p. 73.

19 Savage, p. 254.

20 CA Stark, ‘Fundamental Rights and the Right to Bear Arms’, *Criminal Justice Ethics*, vol. 20, 2001, p. 25.

21 SC Wheeler III, ‘Gun Violence and Fundamental Rights’, *Criminal Justice Ethics*, vol. 20, 2001, p. 19.

22 Reed, p. 3.

sides that claim their position in terms of fundamental rights. What hope do we have of reconciliation between the parties in these discussions? What can Christians say about the rights being claimed?

In this essay I am concerned less in teasing out detailed ethical positions on particular issues (abortion, gun control, vaccination), preferring to use them as a foil for a broader examination of the language of rights itself. Does the New Testament give us grounds for adjudicating between rights claims, or even of making appeal to rights in moral reasoning in the first place? Do we have grounds for offering reconciliation in such a conflict? We will first consider the arguments of two ethicists in particular on the place of rights in Christian moral reasoning, then how the concept weaves through the New Testament. We will then be in a position to say something about how we might approach these charged arguments where rights are in conflict, and, hopefully, say and do something distinctively Christian in response.

Wolterstorff vs. Hauerwas

In order to begin adjudicating whether one set of rights can be placed over another set—if indeed that is something we ought to do—we must carefully consider what a proper framework of rights may be, and if it is right for a Christian to hold to it. Stanley Hauerwas and Nicholas Wolterstorff are two scholars who have written extensively on this subject. Because they come down on opposite sides of whether rights are the best (or even a good) way of pursuing justice, they are useful conversation partners in assessing a rights framework from a Christian perspective.

Wolterstorff sees rights as a critically important moral category, because they enable us to identify wrong and therefore to pursue justice. If we were to lose the language of rights “we would no longer have available to us the language for calling attention to the moral significance of how we and others have been done unto, the language for calling attention to the fact that someone has been wronged”.²³ Drawing on his own Christian background, he takes it as a given that justice is something for which Christians ought to strive, for although Scripture does not explicitly account for its importance it speaks often and emphatically about the need for justice.²⁴ Wolterstorff’s primary thesis is that justice is grounded on inherent rights—other ways of speaking about moral obligations and relationships do not exhaust the ways that we ought to seek justice.²⁵

He’s not unaware of challenges to this, of course. Some of the opposition comes from those who argue from the basis of how social dynamics tend to function. As he puts this objection: “rights-talk expresses and encourages one of the most pervasive and malignant diseases of modern society: possessive individualism”.²⁶ Countering this, Wolterstorff sets up his definition of rights as those goods to which individuals or groups have a claim, in the context of a relationship to another.

In other words, you have the right to be treated a certain way, based on the relationships you have with others. Rights

23 N Wolterstorff, *Journey Toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2013, p. 54.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

25 Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 4.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 3. See also the discussion in O O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 248.

are “normative social relationships”.²⁷

Rights, he says, “have sociality built into them”.²⁸ They are claims to goods in one’s life—that is not to say I have a right to *anything* good, but that a right is a good to which I have a legitimate moral claim.²⁹ And these claims are inherently social, because enjoying what you have a right to, or being deprived of what you have a right to, are social engagements.³⁰

‘Rights’ that are in the category of ‘human rights’ are most easily seen in these terms, although Wolterstorff helpfully shows that this is true of other rights too.³¹ Certain rights are situational or relational, not universal. If I am mugged, I have a right that my possessions be returned, and my attacker face the legal consequences. No-one else has that right in the same way I do. The reason I have that particular set of rights is due to the circumstances and relationships in which I have been placed. This is of a slightly different order to my right to life, or indeed my right to not be physically assaulted in the first place. That right is true of everyone, because of our common humanity.

So rights are those claims a person has *in relation to others*. Because it’s necessarily social, Wolterstorff argues this works against the claim that rights-talk tends towards individualism. This isn’t a given, however. In fact, because of the relational opposition set up (she has a claim against him), the individual character of rights may well be emphasized. Seeing this as a danger, and seeking for a consistent

and solid ground for rights, Wolterstorff argues that they are *best* grounded in the worth of a human being as one who is made in the image of God.³² Jesus, for example, suggests that humans have greater worth than birds; Wolterstorff takes the reason for this to be the image-bearing of God.³³

These different rights (situational or universal) are ultimately treated in the same way, for the same reason: we accord to human beings great respect, because we recognize the worth inherent in being human.³⁴ If we are to do what we all do relatively intuitively—judge that someone has been treated disrespectfully—he argues that we recognize three things: (1) human beings have non-instrumental worth, and by implication they have moral rights; (2) some of our actions have relevance as to whether or not we treat others as being of a certain worth; and (3) those actions may or may not actually fit the worth of the other.³⁵ In other words, we recognize the inherent worth of others, which provides a ready argument for how we should justly treat them: they have rights, as do we. Furthermore, the worth of others is best seen when we consider them as bearing the image of God, co-creations of the Almighty.

Certain rights are situational or relational, not universal.

27 Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 263.

28 Wolterstorff, *Journey Toward Justice*, p. 44.

29 N Wolterstorff, ‘Christianity and Social Justice’, *Christian Scholars Review*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1987, p. 212; Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 5.

30 Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 286.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 137–39, 313–16.

32 What exactly it is that constitutes “the image of God” has long been a contested issue. Is it our created purpose, the authority conferred over creation, our rationality, our relationships, or something else entirely? For our purposes here this is a sideline issue: we share the image of God (whatever it happens to be) and thus our rights are grounded in the worth that is common to all humanity. It may be relevant in considering the rights of humans in relation to animals; for a discussion on this see S Hauerwas and J Berkman, ‘The chief end of all flesh’, *Theology Today*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1992, p. 199.

33 Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 131.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 296.

35 *Ibid.*

Stanley Hauerwas does not disagree that image-bearers of God have inherent worth. He does, however, take issue with the assumptions that ‘justice’ is something that Christians should spend energy pursuing, and that rights are a self-evidently good way of grounding moral action: “It is my contention that the current emphasis on justice and rights as the primary norms guiding the social witness of Christians is in fact a mistake”.³⁶

Part of the problem, as he sees it, is that ‘justice’ is both vague and variously defined—that is, it is a term that is applied to all manner of circumstances, from personal relationships to natural disasters, and the accounts of justice in these various situations rest on a host of political and cultural presuppositions.³⁷ As Forrester puts it:

*It is not really true that “nobody knows what justice is”. The problem is that there are too many different conceptions of what justice is, and many of them are only too clearly ideological weapons.*³⁸

When Christians build their ethic around language of ‘rights’ and ‘justice’, therefore, they are importing philosophical categories that are incompatible with the biblical story.³⁹

“Inalienable rights”, says Hauerwas, are founded on “the false presumption of Enlightenment individualism” and are opposed to a proper theological understanding of what it is to be a

creature, subject to the designs of the Creator.⁴⁰ That is, we are not our own. We don’t believe we have the right to do whatever we want with our bodies—as members of the church we belong to one another.⁴¹ There are no absolutely private acts, nor inalienable rights.⁴² Adopting the language of rights (when they are not framed in terms of duties and goods) has a necessary individualizing tendency, because of the assumptions built into such language.⁴³ He recognizes Wolterstorff’s objection to atomistic rights and the attempt to place them in a social context, but argues that because of our cultural, political, and moral context they cannot help but be captured by individualism: “Contemporary political theory has tended to concentrate on the language of rights, not because we have a vision of the good community, but because we do not”.⁴⁴

So the church, far from being the kind of community that he argues it ought to be, capitulates to the legal-philosophical language of the prevailing culture. Even with theistic presuppositions, Christians pursuing justice on the basis of rights in the public sphere end up with “the contemporary equivalent of a natural law ethic”, arguing that there is some sort of universal ethic in abstraction from the

36 S Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2011, p. 46.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

38 DB Forrester, ‘Political justice and Christian theology’, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1990, p. 12. Hauerwas cites this article approvingly in *After Christendom*, p. 175.

39 Hauerwas, ‘On the right to be tribal’, p. 240.

40 S Hauerwas, ‘Abortion, theologically understood’ in J Berkman & M Cartwright (eds), *The Hauerwas Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2001, p. 608.

41 S Hauerwas & R Bondi, ‘Memory, community and the reasons for living’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 44, no. 3, 1976, p. 447.

42 Hauerwas, ‘Abortion’, p. 609. He quotes a Jewish colleague approvingly: “Any religion that does not tell you what to do with your genitals and pots and pans cannot be interesting”.

43 Hauerwas, ‘On the right to be tribal’, p. 240.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 238.

community of the church.⁴⁵ Because the state has the power to act on issues of perceived injustice, Christians place their confidence in it, not the church.⁴⁶ This step also moves Christians' ethical action away from the gospel message.

In summary, Wolterstorff argues that the worth of another is grounded in the image of God, and that recognition of this worth entails respecting the rights the other has, ensuring we act justly in our relationships. Hauerwas thinks this project tends necessarily towards individualism, the loss of the centrality of the church in Christian life and witness, and that "the first thing as Christians we have to hold before any society is not justice but God".⁴⁷ Both of these constructions are worth bearing in mind as we turn now to select New Testament passages, for while the language of rights and justice is not alien to the New Testament, neither is setting aside those rights in order to pursue a different set of goods in community.

Rights in the New Testament

The two different classes of rights—those that result from circumstances or relationships, and those that are inherent to all humanity—are useful when considering the ways that the concept of rights and justice are evident in the New Testament; we find both.

Considering circumstantial claim-

rights, we have examples such as Paul's word to married couples, that they give to each other their "conjugal rights" (1 Cor 7:3).⁴⁸ In the case of my marriage, for example, my wife has certain rights to my body that no-one else has, because she is in this particular relationship to me. Paul speaks to both the Corinthian and Thessalonian churches of the right he could have insisted on among them to support his ministry (1 Cor 9:12; 2 Thess 3:9). This too is a relationally-bound right: it is not available to anyone without distinction, but only to those who perform a certain role in the context of a particular relationship. Paul's language to Philemon regarding Onesimus, although it does not contain the specific vocabulary of rights, is nevertheless replete with this relationally-bound concept of specific claims. Paul suggests his own relational authority but does not stand on it: "though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake prefer to appeal to you" (Phlm 8-9). He also refers to what Philemon could reasonably demand of Onesimus given their personal history: "If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account" (Phlm 18). In each of these situations, the New Testament allows that the category of claim-rights in particular situations can be valid.

So too for more general or universal rights. First Corinthians 8-10 is an example of rights that are not restricted to a particular relationship. Anyone has the right to eat, for food will not make us acceptable to God (1 Cor 8:8). Paul talks

45 S Hauerwas, 'On keeping theological ethics theological' in J Berkman & M Cartwright (eds), *The Hauerwas Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2001, p. 71; S Hauerwas, 'A Christian critique of Christian America', in J Berkman & M Cartwright (eds), *The Hauerwas Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2001, p. 471.

46 Hauerwas, *After Christendom*, p. 68.

47 Ibid.

48 Interestingly, while the ESV has 'conjugal rights', the NIV has 'marital duty'. Although a considerable amount of debate on rights language is bound up with whether rights always have concomitant duties, in this case there is clear relational reciprocity. See Wolterstorff, *Justice*, pp. 264-84.

about “this right of yours” (1 Cor 8:9; cf. 1 Cor 9:4), which is not contingent on a particular relationship or state of affairs. Anyone is free to claim this right.

We can go further in affirming the category of rights from the New Testament in tracing out the worth of humanity in God’s sight. Our redeemed humanity is foundational to the worth we accord to one another: the rights we claim for ourselves and others are founded on our identity in Christ. We can begin sketching this picture with the egalitarian nature of the gospel—not that we are without any difference, but that we have an equal dignity in the redemption of humanity by the cross. Despite having all been dead in our sins, God raised us up with Christ (Eph 2:1-6). And this is not an exclusive gift to Israel: those who are Gentiles by birth, formerly excluded from the covenants of promise, without God and hope in the world, have now been

Our redeemed humanity is foundational to the worth we accord to one another.

made one with Israel (Eph 2:11-12, 14, 19). We begin to see here the astounding dignity afforded to us by God—citizens and family members who are given every blessing in Christ, the one who is himself the very image of God (Eph 1:3; Col 1:15). This gift and worth is not based on status or race, on personal history or family ties. There is no distinction, for all fall short and are justified in Christ by faith (Rom 3:22). Our new identity in Christ is founded on our *common and redeemed* image of God, so that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Gal 3:28). We have been given the right to become children of God (John 1:12) not because of gender, ethnicity, status, or circumstances, but through receiving and believing in the Word of God, the incarnate Christ.

This brings to a head the story of justice that has woven its way through the history of God’s people. The prophets’ incessant demands on Israel to show justice to the downtrodden, to show mercy to the widows and orphans, to show kindness to the alien and stranger—these were not simply because they reflected God’s love for humanity, and not simply because they were the right thing for them to do under the law (although both are true). Justice for the oppressed was an act of remembering God’s salvation of Israel, for they were once in the same position in Egypt (Deut 10:18-20). The dignity of humanity in God’s sight and the justice that ought to be observed by God’s people is therefore because God considers his people worth saving, shown nowhere more clearly than in the sacrifice of Christ for us (Rom 5:8; 1 John 4:9-10).

This brief sketch demonstrates that we can reasonably talk about the worth of another human being, and the respect that we therefore ought to accord to them, on the basis of the dignity of their created-ness. Wolterstorff’s formulation is correct at this point: whatever rights we accord to another, it is because of the worth they have as image-bearers of God. Yet his construal is not quite full enough as far as the scriptural witness goes, for the redemption and vindication of humanity is in the true image of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. This doesn’t preclude those outside the church from having dignity and worth—the *telos* of humanity is redemption, vindication, and transformation in the death and resurrection of the Son of God.⁴⁹ True moral knowledge is therefore “in Christ”—that is, understanding the end for which we were created—but ignorance

49 O O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 2nd edn, Apollos, Leicester, 1994, p. 56.

of that good goal does not make the objective reality of the created order and God's plan in Christ any less true (cf. *all things* on heaven and earth are being brought together in Christ, Eph 1:9-10).⁵⁰

We are not done, however, with our examination of rights in the New Testament. For while these types of rights are *recognized*, they are not always *applied* in the way they are in modern discourse. When it comes to rights that we actually have (as opposed to rights that we ought to have but are denied), the picture is striking. Almost every instance of claim-rights surveyed above results in the waiving of those rights, at least for a time.

Paul does not insist on his right to be provided with help, but freely proclaims the gospel so they might hear and have a model to imitate (1 Cor 9:12, 15, 18; 2 Thess 3:9). Although he is a free man, Paul makes himself a slave to all in order to win as many as possible (1 Cor 9:19). Far from insisting on his rights, he disregards them entirely. Rather than making use of his right to assert his authority over Philemon, Paul prefers to appeal on the basis of love (Phlm 8-9). He recognizes the right of the Corinthians to eat, but warns that the free exercise of that right ought not be a stumbling block for those of weak conscience, and to waive that right if this is a danger (1 Cor 8:9, 10:24, 32). Philippians 2 is a useful summary of this line of thought: if we do indeed have unity in Christ, then even the rights we ourselves have because of our humanity and identity in Christ can be set aside. We ought to consider others as more important than ourselves, for Christ did not consider his equality with God something to be grasped, but became a servant, obedient even to death

on a cross (Phil 2:3, 6-8). Although there are valid rights we can claim, we ought to seek not our own good, but the good of others (1 Cor 10:24). The consistent pattern in the New Testament is one of setting aside valid rights for the good of another.

There are times, of course, where Paul *does* stand on his rights. In Acts he appeals to his status as a Roman citizen, ultimately appealing to Caesar to determine if he had done anything deserving of death (cf. Acts 21:39, 22:25, 23:27, 25:11). Setting aside his rights in this instance would not have been a comparable case to the others just considered, as it would not have been an instance of seeking their good over his own. In fact, insisting that they not flog him and kill him enables him to continue to proclaim the gospel to everyone involved—Paul is holding out God in Christ before his society.

This suggests that not only does the New Testament provide grounds for rights-language, but also that there are times when it is appropriate to make use of rights and argue for them in the face of hostility. Grounding human dignity and respect for others in the way we have sketched here means that the language of human rights is at least based on a valid foundation—the New Testament witness does not destroy rights as a moral category. We have room, in other words, for recognizing the legitimate claims of image-bearers of God in certain situations to rights that are being denied. The civil rights movement in the US, for example, was not about a *conflict* of rights, as our examples earlier are. It was an entirely legitimate claim on the part of African-Americans to the right to be treated as human beings, with the same respect as white Americans:

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

Some of the Southern slave owners of the nineteenth century appear to have believed that their slaves had few if any rights; it was quite okay to deal with them entirely in terms of expediency. Many of the Nazis thought of the Jews the same way. Stalin seems to have thought of most Russians this way.⁵¹

That is, the oppressors in the situations above tended to de-humanize their opponents, denying them the dignity and worth they ought to have given. Now, whether or not those rights have properly been recognized, or whether legal recognition of rights was the best path to follow is not the issue; the salvation history of the Scriptures, focused on the redemptive work of Christ in fulfilling the goal of our creation, gives us ground for declaring that recognizing another's dignity and worth is *right*.

In many situations, however, the pattern of the New Testament suggests we might best lay down our rights for the good of the other. The instructions to married couples in 1 Corinthians 7 has principled reasons for *both* laying down and standing on one's marital rights. It may be appropriate to waive the right each partner has to the other's body for the sake of their godliness—i.e. that they might devote themselves to prayer. Yet this is a temporary measure, and again for the sake of godliness they should not forsake the rights of the other, so that they will not burn with lust. In this case both the setting aside of rights and the proper claiming of rights is done for the good of the other and the relationship. Our attitude to rights needs to be a principled one, with the good of the other in light of the gospel of Jesus as the motivating factor.

⁵¹ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 318.

Love in conflict

We find in the New Testament, therefore, warrant both for recognizing and claiming rights, and also for waiving rights we already have. The moral vision of the New Testament is bigger than the claims of rights, for their existence is not the only determinant of action. This means that language of rights, in and of itself, is insufficient for Christian social ethics—we need a more encompassing explanation.

In one sense this is self-evident from the situations where rights clash: a larger framework is required to at the very least adjudicate between conflicting claims, if not to change the grounds of the debate to something more fruitful. In any case, there is no *necessary* reason why evangelical ethics must be expressed in the language of rights—it may well be useful at times, but there is no binding commitment to the language coming from the theology of the New Testament.⁵² Jesus's death and resurrection, however, is the event that provides us with just such a larger framework for evaluating rights claims. For in his sacrifice we not only see the dignity and worth bestowed on humanity by God in redeeming us from sin and shame, but also the example *par excellence* of laying down one's rights for another. The self-giving love of God, evident in Christ, is the pattern of self-giving love for the good of the community. Fairness is not enough: justice as fairness must be placed in a framework of justice as loving generosity, marked by mercy and forgiveness.⁵³ Love is a better foundational principle for justice than individual rights.

⁵² Reed, *Ethics of Human Rights*, p. 40.

⁵³ DB Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 233–234.

In cases of conflicting rights claims, we may do well to say that the language of rights fails us (in that there are unresolvable conflicts) and that the pattern of love provides a way forward. The case of abortion rights in opposition to the right to life of the unborn is an interesting case to consider here, because the right to life of the foetus is not actually ours to waive. We can, however, lay down other rights for the good of others (such as legal rights, and the right to privacy), and to therefore demonstrate and argue that love for another is a better foundation for the debate, and a better pattern for everyone to follow. What would the situation look like, for example, if Christians throughout the country (and the world!) said to any and every family considering an abortion that they would forgo their own financial advancement and security, and their rights to privacy, and open their homes and lives to these families? That they would sacrificially support the mother in every way they could, and the unborn child before and after birth in whatever situation ended up eventuating? That they would lay down their own 'rights' to live their lives in the manner of their own choosing, and welcome others into their lives because they were radically committed to the good of the other person?

This is short on detail, partly because it is subject to an almost infinite number of circumstantial variations. The pattern of ethical behaviour given for us in the New Testament, however, allows for us to exercise our moral imagination, and to be creative about the ways that we extend

love to the communities around us.⁵⁴ The difference between this conception and the current situation is one of community involvement, and of shifting the conversation away from the adversarial language of rights. Rather than insisting on legal (and political) rights in the public sphere, we would extend love in personal relationships. In particular situations it may well be little different—these are not necessarily mutually exclusive options—but the primacy of love in our moral reasoning ought to be determinative of our action.

What this approach does is shift the discussion from the rights an individual has to the kind of life a community ought to have when it is shaped by mutual love. After the pattern of Jesus, who took the station of a servant in sacrifice, we as the church can demonstrate that there is a better way of seeking justice than only having recourse to rights language. The requirement for this to happen, of course, is that actual communities need to seek to love real live individuals—this takes it from the realm of abstract concepts, or nationwide legal codes, to the particulars of community relationships. In other words, it will be a difficult road for the church to follow, but one that champions the dignity of humanity, demonstrated by the salvation wrought for us in the sacrifice of Jesus. Setting aside our claims to individual rights in order to better love others follows the pattern of the one who died to redeem us, and who was raised to give us lives to live in service of one another. ▣

54 K Cronin, *Rights and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 19, 115.



The public reading of Scripture is a pretty standard part of most church services—or at least it *should* be, according to 1 Timothy 4:13.

But ‘pretty standard’ doesn’t mean ordinary or insignificant. Indeed, the apostle Paul thinks it is *so important* that he urges Timothy to be “devoted” to the task.

What about your church?

If a visitor came to your church would they conclude that you take the Bible readings pretty seriously? Or would they perhaps walk in and notice someone frantically scanning the Bible passage for the first time just before church starts, desperately hoping there is no reference to Onesiphorus or Mephibosheth or the region of Shittim?

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Freedom in a gender-confused world

CANDICE BERGAMIN

It's easy to respond with incredulity or distaste to claims of gender plasticity, but Candice Bergamin argues (and demonstrates) that by far the better response is to go back to the Bible and think theologically.

THE ISSUE OF gender identity is becoming increasingly prominent in western society. Biological sex and socio-cultural expressions of gender (masculinity and femininity) have traditionally been understood as correlating in discrete categories. Men are men, and women are women. However, this belief is being challenged. The experience of gender dysphoria is a distressing and often unwanted experience described as a “deep and ongoing discomfort” with one’s gender identity.¹ But proponents of queer theory have moved from this phenomenon to deconstruct the traditional view of gender on the basis of radical self-determination. Gender plasticity (or fluidity) is the view that gender can’t be constrained by a person’s sex or by society’s expectations and norms.² People may identify with the opposite sex to their biological state, or

prefer to identify between or apart from gender labels. Gender is taken to be a choice of the will, and so should not be imposed by others.³

In order to understand this issue, we will examine the philosophical underpinnings of queer theory, and then respond by addressing gender and identity from God’s word. At the same time, it’s important to acknowledge the pastoral complexity of gender identity and the need for sensitivity in addressing people who have experienced gender dysphoria in any of its diverse forms.

The philosophical underpinnings of gender plasticity

Queer theory is a relatively new area of philosophy that has grown in prominence since the 1990s.⁴ Its overt aim is to challenge and ‘play with’ the status quo of

1 MA Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2015, p. 19.

2 P Sanlon, *Plastic People*, Latimer Trust, London, 2010, pp. 13-14.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 26.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.

society.⁵ Its social aims centre on giving a voice to minorities who are believed to be silenced and oppressed by societal norms, which include heterosexuality and the binary view of gender.⁶

Queer theory is essentially relativistic. The nature of reality, including ethics, is not bound by order or norms.⁷ Rather than a static 'being', reality is described in terms of a more fluid 'becoming'. Accordingly, there is no substantial reality for gender expression based upon biological sex. Gender is simply a series of acts of the will.⁸ In the words of prominent gender theorist Judith Butler:

*Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.*⁹

This is not to say that the physical world is rejected. Queer theory aims to challenge what is accepted as fact, but does not seek to deny everything absolutely. Instead, it seeks to question presuppositions and discover new possibilities.¹⁰

Queer theory is strongly experiential in how it arrives at knowledge or truth.¹¹ It began from attempts to understand the experiences of people with gender dysphoria, and their testimonies are a valued source of knowledge.¹² Sexual feelings or experiences are seen as particularly important in understanding

one's identity.¹³ Gender is found within experiences and desires rather than biology or culture.¹⁴

This is thought to enhance the freedom of the individual to define their identity autonomously.¹⁵ Freedom is therefore equated with self-determination.¹⁶ Since gender and sexuality are made central to a person's identity, the idea that another may define or constrain gender is received as a threat to one's most fundamental freedom and an attack on the self.¹⁷

Responding theologically

Doctrines of creation and anthropology

The Bible introduces humans as creatures made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). Humanity cannot be understood in isolation from God and his purposes. Importantly, both male and female are created in God's image (*imago Dei*). Male and female are of the same generic order in relation to God, one another, and to the rest of creation; they are of one 'kind'.¹⁸ What it is to be *imago Dei* has long been the subject of debate. Calvin locates it chiefly in the soul, which is to 'shine forth' God's glory (*Institutes*, 1.15.3). The nature of humanity as God's image is best understood through its fulfilment in Christ, to whose image the restored humanity is conformed (*Institutes*, 1.15.4). Renewed humanity is restored to true righteousness, holiness, and knowledge, meaning that the *imago Dei* is chiefly about moral perfection (*Institutes*, 1.15.4; cf. Col 3:10). Males and females are

5 Ibid., p. 8.

6 Ibid.

7 E Storkey, *Created or Constructed?: The Great Gender Debate*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 2000, p. 107.

8 Ibid., pp. 13-19.

9 J Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, New York, 1990, p. 191.

10 Sanlon, pp. 17-19.

11 Storkey, p. 45.

12 S Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, Equinox Publishing, Oakville, 2010, pp. 5-6, 22, 125.

13 MA Yarhouse & LA Burkett, *Sexual Identity: A Guide to Living in the Time between the Times*, University Press of America, Lanham, 2003, pp. 9-12.

14 Cornwall, p. 143.

15 Ibid.

16 R Highfield, *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 2013, p. 107.

17 Cornwall, pp. 121, 130; Highfield, pp. 38-39.

18 O O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 2nd edn, Apollos, Leicester, 1994, p. 32.

equally called to holiness in Christ. Yet people do not exist in isolation from one another, and the image is always expressed through relationship.¹⁹ The complementary and asymmetrical nature of humanity as male and female is a critical element of humanity's fitness to bear the image of the Triune God.²⁰

Genesis 2 expands on the binary nature of humanity introduced in Genesis 1, and develops the nature of the relationship between male and female. This passage defines the ordered male-female relationships and gives the grounds for the proper expression of gender in the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor 11:2-16; 1 Tim 2:12-15). The order in relationship and role proceeds from the temporal order of creation.²¹ Male and female are not exactly the same, nor interchangeable. Their difference in sex is a fundamental distinction, and an integral part of their identity. It is determinative of how they are to understand themselves in relation to one another, and how 'righteousness and holiness' ought to be expressed differently by each in the context of society. Gendered identity and behaviour must stem from God's design for humanity as his image-bearers.

The significance of the gendered nature of humanity in God's purposes becomes more explicit as redemption history unfolds. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is particularly pertinent: the proper expression of gender is related to reflecting the glory of God as he has revealed himself in the gospel.

Verse 3 demonstrates the basis for

understanding the relationship and distinction between men and women. Paul speaks of an order in the relationship between men and women who differently imitate Christ.²² As he leads and loves the woman, man reflects Christ in his love for the church. As the woman submits to the man, she reflects Christ's submission to the Father in the economy of salvation. The male/female relationship is analogous to an aspect of the intra-trinitarian relationship as it is revealed in the gospel.²³ God is best understood as referring to the Father. This does not diminish Christ's divinity, as it is a comment on the relationship of the persons of the Trinity rather than a distinction within the shared essence of God (cf. 1 Cor 8:6, where Christ's divinity is also clearly upheld; this view was also accepted by most early church Fathers).²⁴ The relationship between male/female and Father/Son is analogous, not univocal. Man and woman do not share a single being in the way that God does, so relationships between human persons are also vastly different from intra-Trinitarian relationships.²⁵ Nevertheless, God has so ordered humanity as to point to an aspect of himself as he is revealed in the gospel. This gives great importance to gender distinction as an issue of godliness and morality.

In reflecting God's nature, man and woman glorify God.²⁶ Paul expounds Genesis 2, emphasizing the way in

The order in relationship and role proceeds from the temporal order of creation.

19 RC Doyle, 'Sexuality, personhood, and the image of God', in BG Webb (ed) *Personhood, Sexuality and Christian Ministry*, 1st edn, Moore Theological College, Sydney, 1986, p. 46.

20 Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission, *Human Sexuality and the 'Same Sex Marriage' Debate*, Anglican Press Australia, Sydney, 2015, p. 71.

21 C Sandom, *Different by Design*, Christian Focus Publications, Fearn, 2012), pp. 46-48.

22 D Rurlander, '1 Corinthians 11:2-16', presented at the Pricilla & Aquila Conference, 2 February 2015: www.moore.edu.au/paa

23 Doyle, pp. 53-55.

24 P Bolt, 'Three heads in the divine order: The early church fathers and 1 Corinthians 11:3', *Reformed Theological Review*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2005, p. 156.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

26 Rurlander.

which man and woman are created as necessary complements to one another. 1 Corinthians 11:11-12 shows the mutuality and complementarity of male and female in creation. The similarity and interdependence of the relationship between male and female is emphasised by 'just as' and 'in this way'. But there is asymmetry, not equivalence; they depend on one another for their gendered identity in a way that is complementary.²⁷ The man was made first, and woman *from* man (v. 12, cf. Gen 2:21-24). Man is not independent of woman, but is *through* woman. Natural birth is not in view here; there is no verb to suggest such a reading. Rather, Paul looks to the narrative in Genesis 2, which is concerned with relationship rather than procreation. It is not good for Adam to be alone, but he finds his complement when God creates the woman as his fitting helper.

The issue of head coverings is concerned with making visible the order that God has created in the world, made for his glory.²⁸ Their unity and complementary expressions of godliness

Distinction between men and women bears witness to God's glory to the world.

enable them to be the image of God and to fulfil the creation mandate of filling the earth and subduing it, in righteousness and holiness (Gen 1:26-

28; Col 3:10). This rightly reflects God's design and the asymmetrical roles of the persons of the Trinity. Right ordering and distinction between men and women thus bears witness to God's glory to the world (and to the watching angels, 1 Cor 11:10, cf. Eph 3:10). What to postmodern western culture seems an arbitrary and archaic rule is concerned with maintaining order for the sake of the glory of God. To

blur or disregard this order fails to honour God's design and end for humanity. Far from being a minor cultural issue, gender distinction is one of the means by which God's glory is revealed.

Autonomy: Doctrine of sin

Genesis 3 describes the sinful breakdown of the ordered relationships in creation. God reinstates the order, but it is cursed and painful. The Fall affects the particular responsibilities of man and woman, and their relationship with each other. Romans 1:18ff also traces the movement from rejection of God's glory to the distortion of sexuality. All people are guilty of rebellion against God; gender plasticity is just one expression of this.²⁹ Furthermore, individuals do not live in isolation, and culture is significant in shaping the particular expressions of sin committed by individuals.³⁰ The experience of gender dysphoria is multifactorial and not well understood, and the fallenness of the world and its cultures mean that some people experience feelings of gender dysphoria who do not wish to embrace it.³¹

But at the heart of queer theory is radical autonomy. Freedom of the self is found within, through internal will and experience rather than external referents, including from God's word.³² Queer theory asserts that freedom must include the right to define identity and gender on one's own terms.³³ Freedom is seen as the power to designate rather than discover reality, and live well within it.³⁴ In this view, God is seen as imposing upon and constraining freedom, an attitude reminiscent of the

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.

29 Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission, p. 91.
30 Ibid., p. 92.
31 Yarhouse, p. 60.
32 Highfield, p. 18-21.
33 Cornwall, pp. 121, 141; Sanlon, pp. 15-17, 37-41.
34 O'Donovan, p. 52.

kings in Psalm 2:2-3. But the result is what O'Donovan calls "unfreedom".³⁵ Divorced from its true end, humanity cannot make right decisions in line with God's design and purpose and so rob God of his glory. Human relationships that fail to express proper gender distinction fall short of what they should be.

The freedom offered by gender plasticity is a false freedom. It refuses to locate individuals in communion with God and others, and rejects ontological truth as determinative for behaviour.³⁶ A person's identity is thus insecure, subject to their actions and feelings, and vulnerable to perceived threats to these.³⁷ It is also worth noting that this sense of threat and corresponding experience of shame may be unfairly exacerbated by rigid stereotypes, which themselves are cultural rather than biblical (e.g. the muscular Christianity of the early twentieth century).³⁸ While there are appropriate constraints on the expression of sex through gendered behaviour, it is vital to work at discerning these from God's word rather than enforcing unrelated cultural expectations.

Freedom: Doctrines of grace

The Bible presents a much richer understanding of the self and freedom. Humans are given their being as God's image-bearers. Biblical anthropology is also not individualistic in the postmodern western sense.³⁹ Individuals are important and responsible, made by God and required to give an account to God for their own life (2 Cor 5:10), but are always located in community (Rom 12:5;

1 Cor 12:27).⁴⁰ They are to understand themselves and their actions in relation to God and to others, and as people who exist by God's will and for his purposes (cf. Rev 4:11). Rather than using experience to understand the self, it is a biblical understanding of the created self that interprets experience, including experiences of gender and sexuality.⁴¹

Gender plasticity refuses to locate individuals in communion with God and others.

Males and females are both responsible before God for their sin. Both face God's wrath and are in need of the Saviour. And both males and females are saved in the same way and to the same inheritance, through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:28; 1 Pet 3:7). Spiritual union with Christ does not obliterate individual identity; God knows his people by name (John 10:3; Rev 2:17, 3:4).⁴² But union with Christ, the image of God, restores and directs a person's identity to be what God intended, and calls and equips them to live out that reality.

The freedom of the gospel is in the dignity and status of being children of God (Rom 8:21).⁴³ Identification with Christ means that Christians are transferred out of the realm of Adam, and into Christ, receiving righteousness through faith in him (Rom 5:12-21; Col 1:13-14).⁴⁴ Believers spiritually participate with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:1-22). Dying and rising with Christ means Christians are no longer slaves to sin, including their sinful desires (Rom 6:1-22).⁴⁵ Union with Christ means that,

35 Ibid., p. 109.

36 Sanlon, pp. 39-41.

37 Yarhouse & Burkett, pp. 9-12.

38 Yarhouse, p. 56.

39 BC Dunson, *Individual and Community in Paul's Letter to the Romans*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2012, p. 176.

40 Ibid., p. 179.

41 Highfield, p. 184.

42 BS Rosner, 'Known by God: The meaning and value of a neglected biblical concept', *Tyndale Bulletin*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2008, pp. 218, 224-225.

43 Highfield, pp. 183, 188.

44 CR Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2012, pp. 337, 413.

45 Ibid., p. 413.

while individual identity is maintained, an individual cannot understand themselves apart from Christ and his body. God is concerned for individuals and creates much diversity in the body of Christ (John 21:22; 1 Cor 12:4-30; Gal 2:19-20), but his plans for their righteousness and holiness do not tear down his own created order; rather, they uphold it.

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Queer theorists recognize that gender is an important aspect of a person's identity, as they make the choice of one's sexuality critical to a person's dignity and freedom of self-expression. But despite their focus on gender, they degrade it by failing to recognize its role and purpose. Gender does play a significant purpose in human relationships. But the primary relationship that determines a person's relationship with others and the world is their relationship with God.⁴⁶ Significance and a secure identity is not self-designated by individual human wills, but is a gift from God born out of his love.⁴⁷

An accurate understanding of identity (who you are) provides the basis for ethical behaviour (what to do). Deeds do not cause one's identity, but they should express it.⁴⁸ Scripture's ethic is not voluntarist, but teleological, living out the identity given to us for the glory of God. This is true freedom, not in licentiousness or autonomy, but freedom from sin to conform to Christ's image and rejoice in God (Rom 8:28-30). In terms of gender, this includes understanding and

valuing our sexuality and genderedness according to the distinctions and commonalities taught in Scripture (e.g. 1 Cor 11:2-16, 14:33-35; Gal 3:28; Eph 5:22-33; Col 3:12-17; 1 Tim 5:1-2; Titus 2:1-6; 1 Pet 3:1-7). While some expressions of gender will vary between cultures, it is necessary for distinction to be maintained and the created order to be upheld. The place of gender is an important element of identity as part of our created human sexuality, but it must not be absolutized or made subject to the will of the individual.

The freedom found in Christ is not experienced in full until his return. In the meantime, the struggle with sin and suffering continues (Rom 7:7-25). For some, this may manifest in gender dysphoria. God's plan for gendered relationships continues to be difficult to put into practice. But God is at work to conform his people to Christ's image through all things, including suffering and endurance in the battle against sinful desires (Rom 8:28-30; Heb 12:1-2).

Conclusion

Advocates of gender plasticity hold out the idea of autonomous freedom, cut loose from the created order in terms of God's designs in both biology and relationships. But this 'freedom' from God is an expression of humanity's rebellion against God. Far from being a system of oppression, the gospel offers true freedom by finding one's identity in Christ. Human sexuality is indeed important, as a reflection of the glory of God as revealed in the gospel. Gender identity should be received and lived out as a good gift from God. People living in a gender-confused world need to hear of the freedom to be who they are created to be through the redemption and restoration that is found only in Christ. ▣

46 BS Rosner & L McLean, 'Theology and human flourishing: The benefits of being "known by God"', in M Miner, M Dowson & S Devenish (eds), *Beyond Well-Being*, Information Age Publishing, Charlotte, 2012, pp. 65-83.

47 Highfield, p. 191.

48 O'Donovan, pp. 109-112; Campbell, p. 377.

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