

faith in  
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# discern ment

# Contents

Discernment	3
Wanted: Discernment	5
What does a lack of discernment prove?	8
Outward focus NZ move prompts 'deep regret' and Bishop Curry and his Royal Sermon	11
Letters from New Zealand	14
Why Islam's rise has caused atheists to urge West not to abandon Christianity	19
Books in focus	21

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# Editorial

On Friday May 25<sup>th</sup>, the Republic of Ireland voted overwhelmingly by referendum to overturn the abortion ban. The referendum resulted in what the media call a landslide win for the repeal side.

This morning (May 27<sup>th</sup>) on Radio New Zealand, a member of ALRANZ: Abortion Law Reform Association of New Zealand, seemed emboldened by the Irish result and indicated that the same would probably happen here in New Zealand. The discussion focused on women's health and the undesirability of the current law in New Zealand for those seeking an abortion. Which brings me to my point.

I think that we very much live in an age where evil is considered good and good evil (Isaiah 5:20). And anyone who opposes the majority view is marginalised and considered with hostility.

Our society once had the ability to discern right from wrong, but now, post-Christian New Zealand and other western countries have moved further away from the Lord and as a consequence, society's view of what is right and wrong has changed. It is no longer absolute, but relative.

In the abortion debate, one will hear about freedom of choice and a woman's right to do with her body what she wishes. There is no mention of the worth of an unborn human being, created in the image of God. In our age, there is no fear of God. There is no right and wrong, there is only MY RIGHTS!

Nations, their leaders and law-makers, educators and even some churches have lost their way. They fail to discern truth from error, and accept the lie – the easy and the broad road to destruction.

May the Lord's people continue to discern good and evil, right and wrong according to His revealed will.

Mr Daniel Wilson investigates how to grow in discernment.

Mr Andrew de Vries looks at what discernment looks like.

Mr Tim Challies writes about what a lack of discernment reveals about a Christian.

Mrs Sally Davey shares some current comment on recent church-related events.

We share some amusing and serious snippets as written by the late D. G. Vanderpyl some decades ago.

*Focus on home* includes gleanings and pictures from the Ministers and Wives Conference and brunch in Silverstream RC.

Mr Jonathan van Maren (from The Bridgehead <https://thebridgehead.ca/>) writes how Islam's rise has caused atheists to urge the West not to abandon Christianity.

Book reviews are: *The Majesty on High: Introduction to the Kingdom of God in the New Testament* by S. M. Baugh, reviewed by OP pastor Jonathan Moersch; *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* by James E. Dolezal, reviewed by OP minister Brian T. Wingard.

The opinions expressed in this magazine are not to be considered the official position of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand unless they expound the Biblical system of doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, or the Westminster Confession of Faith, or reflect the successive Acts of Synod of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. On the other hand, care is taken to ensure that articles and opinions do not directly contradict the official position of the Reformed Churches as contained in the above sources without attention being called to that fact.

**NB:** In line with common publishing practice *Faith in Focus* reserves the right to publish the names of all contributors with their articles, unless compelling reasons are given to the editor for not doing so. This applies to both print and online versions.

# Discernment

**Daniel Wilson**

*Heaven is for Real, The Shack, Your Best Life Now...* These are the titles of books which illustrate the enormous need for a revival of Christian discernment in the modern church. Some of you have read these books, and sadly, some of you may not have seen anything wrong with them. Not everything which quotes the Scriptures is actually Christian or even founded on the Word of God! If you even slightly want to defend any of the three titles that I just mentioned, please keep reading. It is my given task to discuss how we can grow in discernment, while others will define what it looks like and how dangerous it is not to have enough of it.

In the modern church, this idea of discernment is gravely lacking! I believe this is so because of a HUGE deficit in how much truth people are receiving in their personal devotional life and corporately in the church. There are a handful of verses in the Bible which seem to address the general need for discernment. The first one is 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, "But examine everything carefully; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil." This verse makes it clear that not only do we need to test and examine ideas with discernment, but discernment also demands a decision. We are to hold fast to what we find to be good, and we are to abstain or avoid every form of evil. The second classic discernment verse is 1 John 4:1 "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Here we see that this examination and decision process of discernment is a spiritual battle. In 1 John 3, John identifies Christians by the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. In chapter 4, John is careful to warn believers that there are counterfeit spirits around. We must be careful to ensure that we are following the real Holy Spirit. John gives us the Gospel test in vs.2-3, and explains that

the Holy Spirit will always lead us back to the Gospel of Jesus Christ – that He literally came in the flesh to save sinners. The Spirit of Truth is the key to discernment according to John (see 4:6).

So, how do we cultivate a closer walk with this Spirit – the third person of the Trinity? I love how the Lord describes the Holy Spirit elsewhere in Scripture, particularly Ephesians 6. In the classic passage about the armour of God, we find that the Christian's sword is the "sword of the Spirit – the Word of God." How remarkable that the Word of God – the Truth of God – is the sword of the Spirit of Truth. The best way to be "Spirit filled" as a Christian is to be full of Scripture. It is sad that the Holy Spirit is too often neglected in conservative churches – especially when we are actually very Spirit centred whenever we open the Word of God! We should consciously acknowledge that every time we read the Word, sing the Psalms, or preach the Word in a sermon – we are encouraging people to embrace and be close to the Holy Spirit. We are pointing people to the Spirit of Truth as we examine His sword.

That centrality of the Word of God is the key to discernment. If you want the Holy Spirit to be active in your heart, mind and conscience, then give Him the ammunition in which He delights – the Word of God. Read the Word. Meditate and ruminate on the Word. Memorize the Word. Read the Word some more and pray over it. The more of the Word that is in you, the more you will be



“Parents, you need to teach your children discernment through teaching them the truth. Perhaps you think they are too young to understand the truth; however, that doesn’t mean they are too young to hear it!”

armed with the Spirit of discernment and wisdom. Now, perhaps you are thinking that I have gone off on one of the three typical preacher tangents – read more, pray more, give more. But that isn’t what I am doing at all. Instead, I am pointing you to the most effective way to spot counterfeit theology, counterfeit doctrine and counterfeit spiritual experiences. The key is the Truth of God!

My sister worked for a bank for some years while she studied in university. And I still remember my dad talking about how she was trained to recognise true and false currency. It has become quite a cliché that bank tellers are only shown true bills so that when they finally find a counterfeit it just doesn’t feel right. And the funny thing is, that is essentially true. You can follow this mini-link to the first of two articles by Tim Challies on this topic (based in Canada): <https://goo.gl/kzvKWx>. Federal agents and bank employees around the world are taught the key points about a genuine bill, so that false bills become evident much faster. It isn’t true that they are never shown counterfeits – they are shown them, so they learn the difference between the crisp precision of the true bill against the shoddy workmanship of the false. That is what the church is called to do with the truth of God. We are to train God’s people to know the highlights and the key points of doctrine about Christ. You are to know how to tilt, feel, and test the truth so that you can see all the marks of genuine doctrine or spot the fake! And that discernment begins with learning the truth very well.

Too often, people get bored with doctrinal sermons and they ask, “How does that apply to my life?” Truth informs your thinking, which affects your life. Not every Bible reading or sermon can be drilled down to an application that affects the way you shop or the music you listen to, but every reading and sermon will ultimately teach you about God’s Truth. God’s Truth is infinitely practical because it prepares you to detect and avoid counterfeits and false doctrine!

Proverbs frequently calls on the young to learn wisdom and discernment, and young adults all too often show a great need for more wisdom. But they cannot learn it on their own. I never realized how much my parents sheltered me until they began to slowly remove that shelter as I grew older. When I was young, my parents were very quick to remove any bad books or influences, and they often repeated the basics of the truth. I

was taught the catechism, and trained in the basic truths of the faith. While a teenager, my parents allowed me access to a great deal more (different books and music). By the time I was in university, they had completely removed any parent imposed shelter. They were always ready to talk about things or warn me about things, but they did not really block me from anything anymore. The funny thing was this – I never really noticed the removal of restrictions until later. They had trained me when I was very young to learn only from the best – the Word of God, and the most trusted resources (ie. solid Reformed authors and older works which had stood the test of time). I wasn’t allowed to buy much of anything from the local Christian bookstores (called “Christian stuff shops” by my dad – “because there aren’t very many good books in there anymore!”). While I was in highschool, my parents would allow me to look at other Christian books or read about other types of theology, but they would warn me to be careful and restrict what I could buy. My dad was always keen for me to understand where a given book was coming from – what its worldview and theology was founded upon. By the time I was in university, I knew that I didn’t want to waste time reading just any popular Christian book, because there was a fundamental difference between the solid meat of the Biblical authors and the watered down drivel of so many today. The theology and Christian foundation that was laid when I was younger enabled me to almost sense when something was wrong. I remember bringing a book to my dad and asking him about it. I couldn’t explain what was wrong about it, but I knew that it didn’t feel or sound right. My dad was able to explain that the particular author was using familiar terms with different definitions – thereby twisting the truth into something new, exciting and heretical. In other words, while I hadn’t learned about every doctrine and heresy on the market, I had been taught a certain level of discernment. I had been taught to recognize the truth and to question what didn’t match the truth of the Word of God perfectly. The key was the fundamental familiarity with the truth. I had heard the truth repeated so often, that error just didn’t “sound right.” You see, the truth is the basis of discernment!

We learn so many things when we are too young to understand, but eventually

we do understand. You can take any two, four or seven year old child and drop them in a foreign culture where they will never hear their native language again, and within a year or so, they will fluently speak that other language. How? Because that is how God designed them! Don't be afraid to read the real Bible to your little ones. They will learn what the truth is and they will begin to speak and think "Bible language." Teach your children the truth and guard them from bad influences. If they do imbibe things from other cultures or other churches, be sure to show them the differences

between what the Bible teaches and what they are hearing. As your children get older, slowly remove those filters and simply keep them accountable for what they hear and watch. But most of all, keep feeding them the truth of God all the time. In this way, you will prepare your children to be discerning about all manner of influences which they might encounter. You will prepare them to spot the genuine and avoid the counterfeit.

I keep saying this, and I hope it is sinking in: The Key to discernment is to know God's Truth in His Word in dependence on the Holy Spirit. So, when

you read the Word, pause to pray and ask for God to bless you with understanding and discernment through the Spirit's guidance. We do the same before sermons, and we know that God hears and answers every faithful prayer for wisdom and discernment (James 1:5-8). Therefore, if you desire discernment, prayerfully commune with the Holy Spirit through your study of God's Word – and the God of peace will be with you!

*Mr Daniel Wilson is the minister in the North Shore Reformed Church.*

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## Discernment

# Wanted: Discernment

### Andrew de Vries

I must give the readers a trigger warning as we begin. I am going to use words that may offend some readers. Words like 'judgement'. Words like 'discrimination'. Words like 'exclusiveness'. Because the subject matter at hand actually requires the ability to discriminate between two options and make an exclusive choice of one over the other. We are talking about discernment. And there can be no discernment without judging, discriminating, and excluding certain courses of action or opinions! Whilst some may have problems with those words, hopefully not too many of us have problems with the idea of discernment.

When we are discussing discernment, we are dealing with a word from the realm of wisdom. Often when we think of wisdom today, we think of some guru who sits under a shady tree on a mountain top. You go to him with the complex questions of life and he dishes out mysterious and often incomprehensible answers. But wisdom in the Bible is not the domain of the guru. It is something that each Christian ought to possess and cultivate. Wisdom in the Bible is not some abstract, theoretical ability, it is an attribute that is intensely

practical, allowing a person to navigate through life making the best choices. So discernment is an indispensable skill that each Christian needs to develop and cultivate in order to live in a hostile and challenging world.

So what precisely is discernment? It is the mental ability to make good and godly judgements about a teaching, situation or course of action. These good judgements require the ability to look at things more deeply than at the surface level. The problem that we immediately run into here is that the effects of the fall have rendered us incapable of discernment when it comes to spiritual things. Our judgement is impaired, and instead of making the correct judgement that Christ is the most precious and desirable person who ought to be loved and trusted and adored, by nature we make the incorrect judgement that he is unnecessary and uninteresting. We require the spirit of God to give us discernment of spiritual things (1 Cor 2:14)<sup>1</sup>.

This does not mean that non-Christians can't exercise a measure of a discernment. Many non-Christians have the ability to make wise and judicious assessments of certain teachings or situations. But it does highlight the fact that here we are talking about 'Christian'

**"When a Christian assesses certain activities or actions, the moral standard which guides them is God's standard."**

discernment. Discernment that is at its heart **God centred**, or in the language of Proverbs, it's discernment that begins with the fear of the Lord. So when a Christian exercises discernment about what is true and what is error, they are being guided by the word of God. When a Christian assesses certain activities or actions, the moral standard which guides them is God's standard. So there is a sense in which the closer we come to know Christ, who is the way the truth and the life, the better equipped we will be at exercising discernment in the Christian life.

### **Discerning the right thing to do**

The first area where we need to exercise discernment is in our actions. Being able to choose the course of action that is going to be most pleasing to the Lord is exactly why we need discernment. It was King Solomon himself who sought this form of discernment. Solomon recognised his own weakness and inability to rule the people wisely, and when God gave him *carte blanche* to ask for anything he wanted, he asked: 'give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong' (1 Kings 3:9). The words translated 'discerning heart' literally read a 'listening heart' or a 'hearing heart'. When we think of the word listening, we think of our auditory faculties. But when the Bible speaks of listening, it means more than exercising your auditory fac-

ulties, it means obeying. So discernment is not primarily about being an astute observer of culture, or having an enormous IQ. It's about hearing the Lord's ethical demands and obeying them in the nitty gritty of daily life.

Discernment is easy when the choice is between that which is moral and that which is immoral. 'Do I worship the Lord on Sunday with his people?', or 'Do I go on the school sports tournament?' is hopefully not a difficult question to answer when it comes to what is most honouring to the Lord. However, discernment really comes into its own when the choice is between two morally acceptable actions. You've got a nice quiet moment on Sunday evening, and you have to decide between reading a book and watching a movie. Or perhaps you're weighing up which school to send your kids to, and you have to choose which school will be best for them. Or perhaps you have two job offers and you need to weigh up which one you will take. Discernment in these cases also includes being able to judge which option is the best<sup>2</sup>.

So in these cases, discernment involves the capacity to weigh up each option on a number of different levels. There are questions that need to be weighed on the spiritual level: how will this affect me spiritually and how will it impact on my walk with the Lord? What are my motivations for pursuing each course of action? There are questions that need to be asked on a personal level: which choice seems best suited to me, or which choice will stretch me and make me grow. There are the questions that we need to ask at a corporate level: How will each of these choices affect my family, or my church family? Which choice sets a better example for others to follow? There are questions we need to consider regarding potential outcomes: what are some of the likely results and consequences of the respective options? It should be clear that for some of the more complex choices we make in life, discernment will involve a high degree of thoughtful analysis. This kind of discernment needs to be bathed in prayer and can also be submitted to the wisdom of those who've been exercising discernment a lot longer than we have.

### **Discerning truth from error**

The other area of life where discernment is required is where we need to make judgements between truth and error. As



those who have been given the good deposit of the gospel, we need to be able to identify the counterfeit gospels that surround us in the world today. This is not something a Christian can leave to the discernment experts. There are people who are very willing to give you their list of authors you can't read, and preachers you shouldn't listen to, and ministries you should avoid. To be sure, there are authors you shouldn't waste your time reading, and preachers you should spend your time listening to. You should listen to your pastor and elders when they warn you about false teachers or the errors that some popular preachers may teach.

However, it is the responsibility of each Christian to cultivate the ability to discern truth from error themselves. First Thessalonians 5:21 exhorts us to 'test everything, hold on to the good.' The apostle John exhorts us in a similar fashion saying: 'Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world' (1 John 4:1). Paul pleads with us to 'watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned' (Rom 16:17). We all need to be discerning that the teaching we are exposed to is in accord with the teaching of the Scriptures.

Given the accessibility we have today to all kinds of instruction in cyberspace, it is imperative that we have the spiritual nose able to sniff out the 'off' teaching that lingers around. The best way to do this is to be familiar with the 'teaching you have learned'. To put it another way, we need to be experts in the gospel, because gospel experts can easily sniff out that which is false. When people are being taught to identify counterfeit currency, they are not given a whole load of forgeries to look at and study. They are given real bank notes to handle, touch, smell, and become intimately familiar with. We need to be so familiar with the truth that the false is instantly recognisable to us

Most of us Reformed folk have pretty sensitive heresy meters. However, discernment is more than just sniffing out heresy. Sinclair Ferguson describes discernment like this: 'True discernment means not only distinguishing the right from the wrong; it means distinguishing the primary from the secondary, the essential from the indifferent, and the permanent from the transient...<sup>3</sup>'. At the

risk of getting myself in trouble with the editor, who may receive a flood of letters, I'm going to suggest to you that this is an area where we need to grow. In my experience in Reformed circles, we don't do well in distinguishing the primary from the secondary, or the essential from the indifferent. We have a tendency to major on things which are minors.

The emotional intensity of some of our debates about issues that are clearly secondary are evidence of this. I wonder how many of the letters we discuss at Session meetings are about matters indifferent, rather than things that are essential to the faith and life of the church. Discernment is not nit-picking. Discernment is being able to identify what a key issue is, and what issues you can let pass through to the keeper. When talking to my fellow office bearers who are itching to have a discussion about a particular issue, I will ask them: 'is this a hill to die on'? A discerning person knows that not every matter of church polity or musicology or liturgy is worth dying for. Perhaps before you tackle your elder on some matter at your next home visit, you need to ask yourself the question: is this matter secondary or primary? Is this something essential to the faith or something relatively indifferent? This, too, is an essential, and perhaps a more difficult part, of what it means to be a discerning Christian.

- 1 'The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned.'
- 2 Paul prays that the Philippians might 'be able to discern what is best...' Phil 1:10.
- 3 <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/discernment-thinking-gods-thoughts/>

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**“True discernment means not only distinguishing the right from the wrong; it means distinguishing the primary from the secondary, the essential from the indifferent, and the permanent from the transient . . . .”**

# What does a lack of discernment prove?

In addition to defining discernment and illustrating what it looks like in action, it's also important to consider what a lack of discernment might represent. This is what Tim Challies has done in his book, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*. What he explains in this extract is worthy of some serious reflection. Ed.

### 1) Lack of Discernment Is Proof of Spiritual Immaturity

In the closing verses of Hebrews 5, the author of this great letter warns his readers against apostasy, against straying from the faith:

*About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb. 5:11-14)*

The author of Hebrews has much he would like to tell the recipients of this letter. There is much knowledge he would like to impart to them, so many important things they need to learn. Unfortunately, what he wishes to communicate is “hard to explain” not because it is obscure or difficult to understand, but because the people have become “dull of hearing.” They are not stupid people and are not intellectually inferior, unable to grasp such truths. The reason he cannot relay these important truths is not because of what these people are by nature, but of what they have *become*.<sup>2</sup> There is much the author would like to say, but he cannot and will not because of the spiritual immaturity of the people to whom he writes. They lack understanding, and they lack discernment.

The recipients of the letter to the Hebrews are not new Christians or recent converts, for the author says that by this

time they ought to be teachers. This is not to say that they all ought to be ministers or preachers, but that they should all be sufficiently mature so they are able to understand and to teach others the basics of the faith. Sadly, though, they still have not understood the basics themselves.

They do not have the *childlike* faith Jesus so values but a *childish*, immature faith. In this way they are like so many Christians since them. Richard Phillips writes:

The recipients of this letter were like many Christians today who think that theology is a waste of time. What difference does it make, people ask, whether God is a Trinity or not, whether Christ's righteousness comes by imputation or infusion, and whether regeneration comes before faith or after? What is important, they say, is that we get along with each other. Then they cite passages commending a *childlike* faith, as if that were the same thing as a *childish* faith, that is, one that is indifferent to or ignorant of the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

We live in an age where too many who profess to be Christians rarely consider their spiritual maturity – an age when many consider spiritual immaturity a mark of authenticity, and when people associate doubt with humility and assurance with pride. Far too many people consider sound theology the mark of a person who is argumentative and proud. Far too many people are just like the audience to whom Hebrews is addressed. This letter draws a clear line connecting a lack of discernment with spiritual immaturity so that those who lack discernment are those who are spiritually immature. Scripture makes it plain: if you are not

a person who exhibits and exercises discernment you are not a mature Christian.

My wife and I have been blessed with three children and often marvel that they have survived through infancy, for we have seen them put the most horrible and nauseating things in their mouths (things my editor will, wisely no doubt, not let me mention in this book!). Children have no understanding of what is good for them and will sample anything. Their mouths are constantly wide open, eager to taste and to eat anything that looks good to their untrained eyes. It is only with maturity that children learn what is truly good for them and what is not. Only with maturity will children learn that what looks good may not truly be good. Children need to learn to differentiate between what will hurt them and what will make them healthy.

Eventually they learn to discriminate; they learn to discern. In the same way, mature Christians have learned to differentiate between what is pleasing to God and what is not, between what is consistent with Scripture and what is not. The Bible places great emphasis on spiritual maturity because, like children, immature believers are prone to sample anything. They are attracted to what looks good to their untrained eyes. Only as they grow in maturity are they able to differentiate between what pleases God and what does not. Because of this there can be no growth without discernment.

My wife and I have learned something else about children: children hate to be called children. Babies hate to be called babies. They don't like to be known as immature or childish, even when they clearly are. Every little boy wants to be a big boy. Every little girl wants to be a woman. God has somehow built into us a desire to mature. Every person wants to feel mature and grown up. When the author of Hebrews describes his readers as children he is not paying them a compliment, and he knows that they will be insulted. He hopes to show them their desperate condition and to impress upon them how serious their spiritual condition is. God demands and expects maturity, and maturity is inseparable from discernment. A Christian cannot have one without the other.

## **2) Lack of Discernment Is Proof of Backsliding**

A lack of discernment is given as proof of spiritual immaturity, but this is not all. Those who are not discerning may also

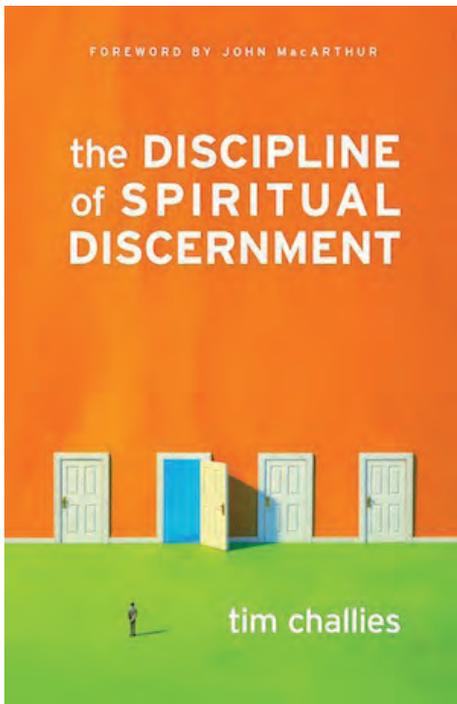
be those who are backsliding, whose faith is diminishing rather than increasing. "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child" (Heb. 5:12-13). While the subjects of this letter should have been growing in their faith, progressing from milk to solid food, they were instead moving backwards, returning to baby food.

As children grow and mature, they begin to be able to eat and digest solid food. Most children are weaned quickly and encouraged to enjoy food more substantial than mere milk. Even while they are still tiny, children long for substantial food. It is good and natural that they desire that which will sustain them more than milk. We would not consider a child healthy who, at six years of age, still drinks only milk, for that child would be weak and sickly. The same is true in the spiritual realm. A person should pass quickly from spiritual milk to solid foods, from the basics to what is more advanced. A person should hunger to quickly learn and understand what is elementary and should soon long for what is more advanced. This is a sign of maturity and the mark of one who has been truly saved. On the other hand, a person who regresses from solid food to milk is a person who is desperately unhealthy, and who will soon wither away and perish.

The recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were regressing rather than progressing in their faith. There had been a time when they were able to hear what the author was so earnest to share with them now. Sadly, they are no longer at such a place. Their lack of discernment has caused them to lose ground. They are moving backwards rather than forwards. They are backslidden.

Solid food is a long way off from these people, for "solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14). Until these people learn to practice discernment and to do so constantly, they will not be able to handle solid food. Until they practice discernment and learn to distinguish between what is good and what is evil, they will continue backsliding. Thus a lack of discernment is not only

**"A person should pass quickly from spiritual milk to solid foods, from the basics to what is more advanced. A person should hunger to quickly learn and understand what is elementary and should soon long for what is more advanced. This is a sign of maturity and the mark of one who has been truly saved."**



a mark of spiritual immaturity, but also a mark of those who are backsliding.

### 3) Lack of Discernment Is Proof of Spiritual Death

Those who have professed faith in Christ cannot backslide indefinitely. Sooner or later it will become clear that they are not believers at all and surely never were. The Bible does not tell us if the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews continued to fall away or if God graciously used this letter to draw them back to him. But Scripture tells us elsewhere what happens to those who harden their hearts against God, rejecting his good gifts. Romans 1:28-32 is a damning indictment of the unregenerate human heart. It shows with terrifying clarity the evil of which humans are capable. These verses make plain the extent of the sinfulness of those who have rejected the true God in favor of false gods of their own making:

*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. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's*

*decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*

These verses ought to strike terror in the heart of all who forsake God and ought to cause us all to pause and acknowledge the depth of the evil that inhabits the hearts of men. As men turn from God, he gives them up to do those things their hearts, filled with evil, cry out to do: envy, murder, hatred, gossip, boasting, and all manner of evil. And in the midst of this list is one word that seems almost unexpected.<sup>4</sup> God gives people up to *foolishness*. Most Bible translations render this word as “without understanding.” One, the New King James Version, translates it as “undiscerning.” Regardless of how it is rendered in English, this word points to a type of moral foolishness that should not be present in the life of one who considers himself a Christian. It points not only to the sinfulness of a lack of discernment, but to the inevitable conclusion that a lack of discernment, utter foolishness, is a mark of one who is spiritually dead and bankrupt.

A complete lack of discernment or lack of concern for the discipline of discernment is a mark of spiritual death. It is categorized with sins that somehow seem far more serious. That a lack of discernment appears in this list seems shocking, but it shows just how much God values discernment. An absolute lack of discernment and a lack of concern for discernment is sure proof of spiritual death.

We see also in 1 Corinthians 2:14 the dire consequences of ignoring discernment: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” Those who are unsaved, who do not have the Spirit of God within them, are unable to be discerning. The ways of God and the truths of God are utter foolishness to such people.

To lack discernment is to sin against God. It is an inevitable result of turning from him. It is easy to look at those who have turned from God and to look at their lustful and angry hearts and affirm that this is the result of their sin. When a Christian falls into moral sin he may well examine his life to determine how he has turned his back on God, but is the same true when he exhibits a lack of discernment? A wise pastor writes,

“to willingly neglect the truth and to live with our eyes closed shut while good and evil stare us in the face is to sin against God, ourselves, our families, and our church ... Again, this is worth stating over and over again. It is the responsibility of every Christian to learn, to be disciplined in the Word, so that we can know how to be discerning. To fail to discern is to walk in darkness.”<sup>5</sup>

This is the bad news. Scripture portrays those who lack spiritual discernment in three ways: they are spiritually immature, they are backslidden, and they are dead. Those who lack discernment or do not care for it will fit into one of these three categories. These are the dangers of ignoring discernment.

But there is good news, too. The Bible declares that there are many benefits stored up for those who desire discernment, those who seek after it and practice it.

**(You may be interested that Challies goes on to explain what the exercise of spiritual discernment indicates, in contrast to what its absence implies.)**

2 Phillip Hughes, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 189.

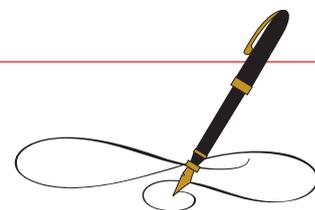
3 Richard Phillips, *Hebrews* (Phillipsburg, NJ: F8CR, 2006), 177.

4 I am indebted to pastor Phillip Way for his series of articles called “Learn to Discern” (<http://pastorway.blogspot.com/2006/06/failing-to-discern.html>).

5 Phillip Way, “Failing to Discern” (<http://pastorway.blogspot.com/2006/06/failing-to-discern.html>).

Tim Challies, *“The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment”* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, 2007), pp. 22-7.

Challies.com. Used by permission



There are a couple of recent events that have generated significant comment, both online and in various print media. The first was the decision of the General Synod of the Anglican Church in New Zealand to offer blessings for same-sex unions. The second was the royal wedding, at which a much-quoted sermon was preached. Reprinted below are two comments. The first is from the blog, Anglican Ink, noting the response of the Sydney Anglican Diocese to the New Zealand decision. The Sydney Diocese regrets this decision and offers support to those within the New Zealand church who opposed the decision. The second piece is an article appearing on The Gospel Coalition (Australia Edition) website, which reflects on Michael Curry's sermon at the recent royal wedding. Because this sermon has aroused such interest (and even positive comment from some evangelical Christians) I thought it may be worthwhile to reprint the article here. (Note that Michael Curry is the leader of a denomination that is sanctioned by the wider Anglican communion for its position on same-sex marriage).

## NZ move prompts 'deep regret'

### Russell Power

A move by the Anglican Church in New Zealand to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions has led to a strong statement from the Diocese of Sydney.

The Synod of the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia (ACANZP) passed a resolution known as "Motion 29", which although affirming that the Church's teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman, calls for changes to the constitution to allow for "a non-formulary service" to bless same-sex relationships.

The Diocese of Polynesia will, however, not implement the change. Members of the Synod of Polynesia are opposed to the blessing of same-sex relationships and the countries which make up the Diocese - Samoa, Tonga and Fiji - do not recognise same-sex unions.

At its first meeting since the decision, the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Sydney passed a motion which "notes with deep regret that the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia has amended its Canons to allow bishops to authorise clergy to bless same-sex unions".

The Committee also conveyed to the Primates of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia that it 'notes with regret that this step is contrary to the teaching of Christ (Matt 19:1-12) and is contrary to Resolution I.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference."

Further, the Diocese expressed "support for those Anglicans who have left or will need to leave the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia because of its abandonment of biblical teaching, and those who struggle and remain; and prays that the ACANZP will return to the doctrine of Christ in this matter and that impaired relationships will be restored."

At the same time, there have been two separate statements on the issue of same-sex blessings from the Church of Ireland and the bishops of the Anglican Church of Australia.

The Irish statement said there was "little appetite" among congregations to continue discussing issues of human sexuality.

Speaking on behalf of the House of Bishops, Bishop Pat Storey announced that the church's marriage service "remains unchanged" due to a lack of consensus in General Synod, the House of Bishops and the church.

"Thus... marriage may be solemnised only between a man and a woman," the statement reads. "No liturgy or authorised service is provided therefore for any other situation."

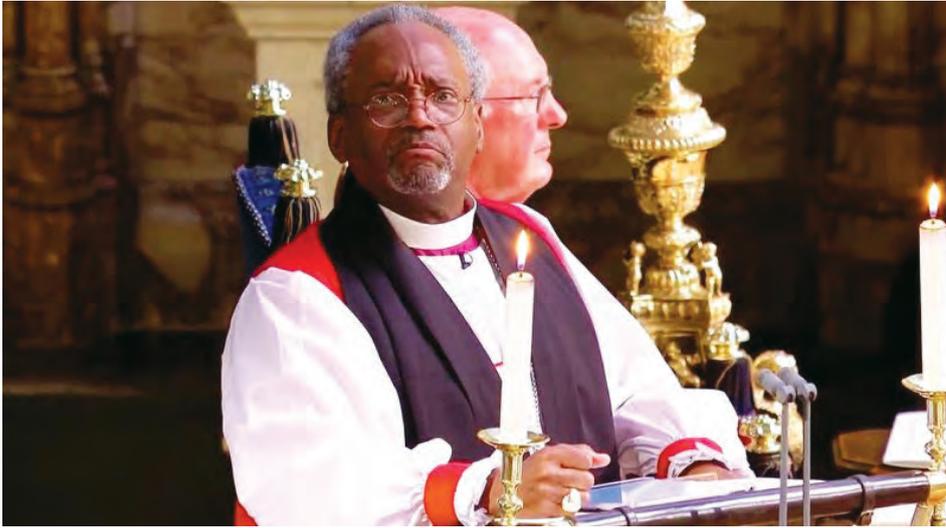
In Australia, a bishops meeting had earlier made a similar statement.

The bishops affirmed that "The doctrine of this Church is that marriage is a life-long union between a man and a woman."

The statement the bishops committed to act within the framework of the Constitution and Canons of the Church, and to encourage those under their episcopal oversight to do so.

"At this time there is no authorised liturgical recognition for a same-sex marriage (under the Marriage Act 1961) or for the blessing of a same-sex union." the Australian bishops said. "In light of this Church's doctrine of marriage, it is not appropriate for church buildings and halls, and chapels owned by Anglican schools and other Anglican organisations to be used as venues for same-sex marriages."

<http://www.anglican.ink/article/nz-move-prompts-'deep-regret'>



<https://soliddrip.com/the-most-inspiring-speech-bishop-michael-curry-royal-wedding-address/>

## Bishop Curry and his Royal Sermon

**Murray Campbell**

*“Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.” (John 14:23-24)*

Michael Curry’s royal wedding sermon has been the hot topic of conversation over the last two days. Newspapers, television shows, and social media are alight with opinions over the bishop and his sermon.

I have heard people speak favourably of the preacher because of his energy and enthusiasm.

Some people are admiring Michael Curry because in their opinion, he has broken with royal convention and stuck it up at English tradition.

There were voices praising how this is a sign of dismantling white privilege and power.

Others were warmed by Curry’s message of love.

Others again, were annoyed because he spoke too long.

Some people, including Christians, thought he preached an amazing

Gospel sermon, while others have criticised Curry’s message for being Gospel absent, perhaps even implying an alternate gospel.

In other words, there are many very different reasons why people have responded positively and negatively to this wedding sermon.

My reaction? I was partly pleasantly surprised, and also profoundly concerned.

Did Michael Curry say some things that were true and helpful? Yes. Did he speak too long? For a wedding, probably yes, but every preacher knows that temptation. Was it positive to see an African American preaching at a royal wedding? Absolutely. Maybe in the future we’ll see a Chinese or Persian Pastors preaching the Gospel at such an auspicious occasion. Did the bishop say anything unhelpful or untrue? The answer is, yes.

One Anglican Minister made this astute observation:

*“Here’s the biggest problem I have with it: The Archbishop has made our love of others the driving force of the renewal of the world.*

*“Dr. King was right: “We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love.*

*And when we discover that, we will be able to make of this old world a new world. Love is the only way.”*

*According to Archbp Curry, Jesus dies to save us, but it’s ‘our love’ of the other, including in marriage, that ultimately renews creation.”*

If this is the case, then there is a significant theological problem with the message.

The one comment that I did share on social media Saturday night, wasn’t about the sermon or about Michael Curry’s ethnicity or personality, but one glaring point that was being overlooked. As someone who has the joy of marrying couples, I found it ironic, and sad, that the invited preacher doesn’t believe in the definition of marriage that was articulated in the wedding ceremony. I can’t imagine a church inviting someone to preach at a wedding service who doesn’t accept the understanding of marriage being declared, and who is also known publicly for their errant views.

The view of marriage that was read out loud at the start of service comes from the Anglican book of common prayer, and it is a beautiful expression,

**“Yes, it is great to see people talking about love and especially God’s love. Yet Michael Curry is partly responsible for leading an entire Christian denomination away from the Bible, and in so doing, is fracturing the Anglican Communion worldwide.”**

theologically rich and Biblically sound. The wording is so clear and helpful, that many other Christian denominations use the language themselves. As another friend noted, 'it almost makes one want to be Anglican!'

Yes, it is great to see people talking about love and especially God's love. We should pray that it will cause people to seek out a Bible believing and Jesus loving Church, and even to open a Bible for themselves to discover this extraordinary God who loves so much that he sent his only son into the world to atone for our sin. We cannot however ignore the fact, that despite his proclamations of love, Michael Curry is partly responsible for leading an entire Christian denomination away from the Bible, and in so doing, is fracturing the Anglican Communion worldwide.

Michael Curry has not shied away from his belief in same sex marriage. He has publicly acknowledged that his views are out of sync with conservative Anglicans, and he has insisted that his American churches would not be returning to an orthodox view of marriage.

Many leaders in the Anglican Communion, including from Australia and especially from Africa and Asia, have explained their considerable concerns over Bishop Curry's teaching and how it is causing harm both within the American Episcopal Denomination, and among Anglicans globally. The problem is most poignant for thousands of Anglicans in America who love God and his word, but who now face losing their church property and financial security, should they not conform to the newly fashioned views on marriage. Indeed, this is already happening.

My understanding is that in 2017, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, agreed to the wishes of the International Primates, and so sanctions were imposed on the American Episcopal Church, whose presiding bishop is Michael Curry.

The decision made by the American Episcopal Church is not insignificant; our view on marriage has important corollaries including how we understand the cross, sin, the Bible, ethics, and many other matters. This is unsurprising given the connection the Apostle Paul made between sex, sound doctrine, and the Gospel (1 Timothy 1:9-11). Relevant to the running theme of love, it is worth grappling with Paul's logic in 1 Timothy ch.1 and how love is integrally tied to what is taught. Love is not without def-

inition and intent, but promotes truth.

*"3 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer <sup>4</sup> or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work – which is by faith. <sup>5</sup> The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. <sup>6</sup> Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. <sup>7</sup> They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. <sup>8</sup> We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. <sup>9</sup> We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, <sup>10</sup> for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine <sup>11</sup> that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me."*

This matters because both love and truth matter, and to deny one is to reject the other. Without God's truth, what remains is a sentimental religiosity, powerless to change and save.

When it comes to weddings, couples are of course free to ask for someone outside the local church to marry them or to preach at their wedding. The presiding clergy however have the right and the responsibility to say yes or no to that request. Given the present suspension over the American Churches, which the Archbishop of Canterbury had agreed to follow, it is difficult to fathom how this decision came about. No doubt, there were many closed door conversations and internal pressures, but at the end of the day, was the decision so impossible to make?

The sheer volume of excitement over Michael Curry should at least make us ask the question, why is the media and the public so enamoured by his message? Is it because the message of love is universal and it hit the right spot? Is it because his message of love was broad that most people found nothing offensive about

it? Maybe, a bit of both. Perhaps I'm a little skeptical, but I think Jesus was also skeptical about the world loving him and his Gospel.

Will the decision to invite Michael Curry help heal the deep wounds within the Anglican Communion, or further alienate evangelical congregations and confirm to them that her leaders lack the courage to stand on their own doctrinal positions?

These are very difficult times for Anglicans worldwide, especially for our brothers and sisters who live and serve in Dioceses that are moving away from the Gospel. Is it helpful for the rest of us to be praising a preacher who is leading his denomination away from Scripture, and in so doing, straining and even dividing the Communion?

We can be grateful for things said that were true, but let's be slow to join the Michael Curry facebook fan club. The issues at stake here are far greater than a wedding sermon. The excitement and enthusiasm will soon disappear from news headlines, but the word of God remains, and I reckon it's better for us to keep believing God and not getting swept away by a few moments in Windsor.

First published at <https://murraycampbell.net/>

Murray Campbell lives in Melbourne with his family. He has served as Lead Pastor at Mentone Baptist Church since 2005. Formerly, he was a classical pianist. You can follow Murray on twitter @MurrayJCampbell.

Murray is a member of the TGCA editorial panel and co-oversees the Current Events channel.

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## Letters from New Zealand

D. G. Vanderpyl

### April 1980

We had a glorious holiday up North; for three weeks we lazed about, ate and slept and read a box full of books and managed to loose three kilos of fat. The best part was the complete absence of interrupting phone calls. Oh, what bliss. But it cannot and must not last forever. The last few days before returning home an irritable restlessness came over me and, according to my wife, I took on the sprinter's attitude, ready to fly at the word "go."

Some wise guy noted that when one is exasperated by interruptions, one must try to remember that their very frequency may indicate the valuableness of that person's life. Only the people who are full of help and strength are burdened by other people's needs. The interruptions which we chafe at are the credentials of our indispensability. The greatest condemnation that anybody could incur – and it is a danger to guard against – is to be so independent, so unhelpful, that nobody ever interrupts us and we are left comfortably alone. So much for that wise guy.

Some girls like reading Mills and Boon's novels for romantic entertainment. Some mothers scan the announcement columns on the back page of *Trowel & Sword* to see "who got who." Well, I've got a good story for you.

The scene is our annual Family Camp at Christmas time. Bert Kuipers, pastor of the Palmerston North church, young and single, is one of the youth leaders. On the scene comes Ria Verkerk, a young widowed mother of three. The camp week comes and goes and we all go our separate ways. Bert travels on to Auckland for the weekend to then catch the plane to Australia to visit relatives. Ria also goes to Auckland to visit her brother. On arrival in Auckland Bert phones Ria and invites her out for dinner. Ria accepts the invitation. They court during the entree, Bert proposes during the main course and the date of the wedding was fixed while they ate their dessert! The marriage took place three score and ten days after the conquest, give or take a day!

The Tokoroa congregation has entered

the new decade with a zest and zeal to own their very own church building. After 15 years of worshipping in other buildings, they have now poured the foundations of their church and with a nice loan from the Synodical Committee for Church Extension, and plenty of local "muscle" they hope to worship there some time later this year. The home mission work in Auckland is being greatly blessed. Rev. Richard Flinn, our church planter, has been very busy with his group of elders. A good year ago they began with a nucleus of four families and now they are already at the stage of instituting a new church, the Reformed Church of the North Shore, Auckland. At our last presbytery meeting, the Mangere session asked Presbytery to agree to the institution and to set the date for it. The new church is already planning to establish a satellite mission station about 8km from the present place of worship.

At our family camp where romances are secured as mentioned before, the main topic of discussion was eschatology and we listened and studied the post-, pre- and a-millennial views of Christ's return. I was told that the supporters of the pre-millennial view of Christ's return use car stickers in the USA which warn all car drivers following behind them: "Warning, in case of rapture, this car will be unmanned." Stickers seem to be the in thing there now. Just take your pick from the following: "Did you hug your kid today?", "America, love it or leave it", "I found it"; "Born twice, die once as, "I am redeemed with the blood of Jesus", "Jesus is guilty of love in the first degree", "Your passport to heaven is Jesus", "You are in good hands with Jesus", "Faith or fear, make your choice now. " And the best sticker? What about: "Make sure that your last friends are the angels"

### June

A year or two ago I attended a weekend seminar on evangelism, sponsored by the local Lay Institute for Evangelism. At its conclusion, the leader of the seminar told me: "And now Dick, go after all the Dutchies in the country; there are plenty of them outside the church." I looked at

him somewhat annoyed and said: "We want to be a New Zealand church and not a Dutch church." He shook his head. "Like attracts like," he said, "you have too many barriers for the locals to cross. You're asking too much, too soon." I was indignant, the very idea was preposterous and plainly unacceptable. But... I started to look around me, in our own and other Reformed churches. Indigenous people came in but did not stay and that has not been restricted to the pews only Bucklands Beach was a New Zealand church but gradually the local content disappeared and at the moment only the Dutch section has remained faithful to this church.

Then someone sent me some study papers from the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation. One study dealt with the homogeneous unit principle, and it was quite an eye opener to read this report. In explaining the term "a homogenous unit," it defined it as "a section of society in which all members have some characteristic in common." In other words, the common bond may be geographical, ethnic, linguistic, social, educational or a combination of several of these and other factors. It is some common characteristic that makes them feel at home with each other and aware of their identity as "we" as opposed to "they."

Following the definition of the term, the paper then continues to deal with this principle in connection with the work of evangelism. I'd like to quote part of this section: "...that people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers. That is, the barriers to the acceptance of the Gospel are often more sociological than theological; people reject the Gospel not because they think it is false, but because it strikes them as alien. They imagine that in order to become Christians, they must renounce their own culture, lose their own identity, and betray their own people. Therefore, in order to reach them, not only should the evangelist be able to identify with them, and they with the evangelist, not only must the Gospel be contextualized in such a way that it communicates with them, but the church into which they

are invited must itself belong to their culture sufficiently for them to feel at home in it. It is when these conditions are fulfilled that men and women are won to Jesus Christ, and subsequently that churches will grow."

Before I give you my opinion, for what it is worth, I'm quite sure that many will wholeheartedly disagree with me, but that does not matter. Let me first cite you one more example of the practical acceptance of this principle. Not far from where I live, on the way to my own church in Mangere, we pass an "Islander's Church." People who worship there emigrated from several small islands not so far from New Zealand shores. They all look alike, they have the same coloured skin, the same facial features, wear almost identical dress, but... they differ in culture and language. There are Samoans, Nuie Islanders, Cook Islanders and some others too. What strikes me is the fact that the large notice board in front of their church announces that on each Lord's Day the following worship services are held: at 9am in the Cook Island language, at 10am in Nuiean and at 11am in Samoan, while in the evening it is a combined worship service. I used to think this very odd until I reluctantly started to agree with this homogeneous unit principle. To say that this idea over-joys me very much, however, would be far from the truth.

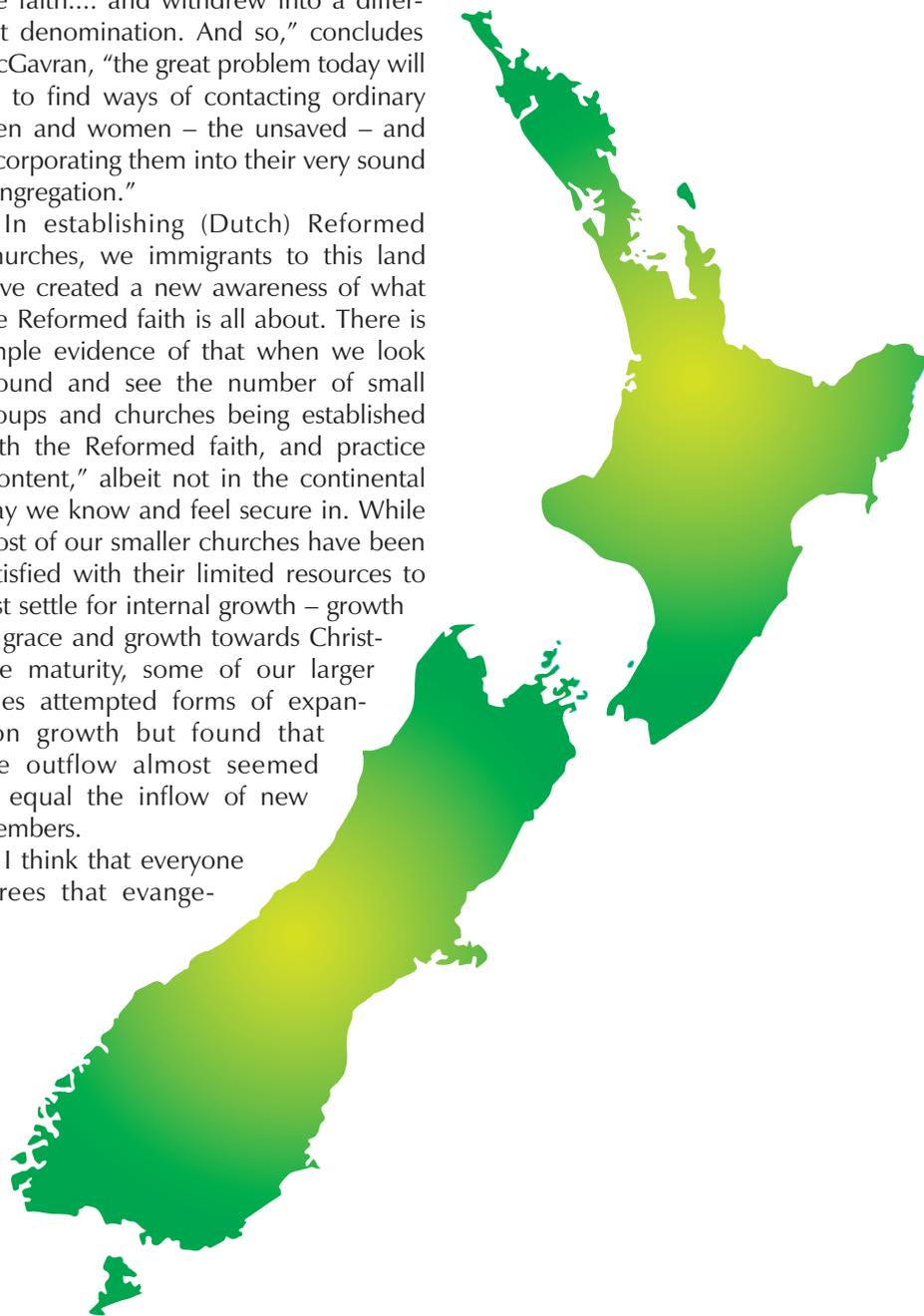
But let's be realistic about it. Our church in Mangere started a mission station on the North Shore with an indigenous pastor and eldership. Results: phenomenal church growth and the institution of the first Reformed (Presbyterian) Church on the North Shore, just over a year since being established as a mission post. Most members are locals who probably would never have joined one of the Reformed Churches otherwise.

Donald A. McGavran, in his book *Church Growth Principles*, cites some examples of churches with problems in the area of church extension. For instance, he mentions the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church of America with their Dutch background and strong Calvinistic faith, which makes it difficult to incorporate into themselves people of other homogeneous units. He also explains the lack of growth in the Reformed Presbyterian and the Orthodox Presbyterian Churches. Why didn't they grow? The reason given is, "Because they did not begin by taking in publicans and sinners. They took the very best Presbyterians they could... the most sound in

the faith.... and withdrew into a different denomination. And so," concludes McGavran, "the great problem today will be to find ways of contacting ordinary men and women – the unsaved – and incorporating them into their very sound congregation."

In establishing (Dutch) Reformed Churches, we immigrants to this land have created a new awareness of what the Reformed faith is all about. There is ample evidence of that when we look around and see the number of small groups and churches being established with the Reformed faith, and practice "content," albeit not in the continental way we know and feel secure in. While most of our smaller churches have been satisfied with their limited resources to just settle for internal growth – growth in grace and growth towards Christ-like maturity, some of our larger ones attempted forms of expansion growth but found that the outflow almost seemed to equal the inflow of new members.

I think that everyone agrees that evange-



lism across cultural barriers is usually the most difficult type of evangelism. We need people who can identify themselves with the culture, who will succeed in communicating the Reformed faith to them. For our churches, the only real growth could well be by way of extension when a church plants a daughter congregation in their own cultural context. This planting could even be in the immediate vicinity of the church and use the church's own meeting facilities for the time being. I have thought about it a lot, maybe you have too.

**Abridged**

# The Ministers and Wives Conference 2018

## John and Harriet Haverland

The Ministers and Wives Conference this year was held in the Silverstream Retreat Centre from the Monday evening of the 30<sup>th</sup> April till the Saturday morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> of May. The organisation for these conferences rotates around the Presby-

teries every three years. This one was organised by the ministers and wives of the Auckland Presbytery and was the largest conference we have ever had, with a total of 54 people being present. We had an age range (minus baby) of 29 to 81 years old.

These Conferences were first held at various Reformed churches around the country, and the ministers and wives were billeted out to members of the congregation, much like the Synod meetings. Since 1991 the conferences have been held at camp sites, and for the last three times at the Silverstream Retreat Centre, which is a fine venue for these occa-

sions. Having this time together, from morning till evening, allows for much interaction and continues to be a blessing to all of us. The mornings and evenings are devoted to lectures and discussion, and the afternoons are left as free time for walking, talking and socialising (and the occasional denominational meeting!).

You may wonder why we have these conferences. They are invaluable for fellowship and building relationships, which in turn assists in creating unity and harmony within the denomination; they are often the only opportunity for the wives to be able to meet each other; and they are an occasion for growth and



*Top images: Aaron and Audra Warner, Braam and Jaimee Jansen Van Rensburg*

*Line two: Joshua and Hannah Flinn, David and Emma Stares, Michael Willemse, John Rogers*

*Bottom: Time for some amusement. Dr Phillip Scheepers*



enrichment for all those present.

We were very blessed to have Dr Phillip Scheepers speak to us. He is the lecturer in missions and church history at the Reformed Theological College. At our request he spoke to us about the Reformation, focusing on the times of the Reformers, their marriages, homes, illness and suffering, and missions. He is a very gifted and able speaker and wove art, poetry and literature into his presentation, giving all of us a deeper and richer understanding of those times, and their application to our ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He focused particularly on the lives of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. He

also gave us two sessions on Mission to Muslims, where the depth and breadth of his knowledge was again evident. Ministry to Muslims is a particular area of interest to him and his talks were of much help to all of us.

One evening Rev John Rogers shared his reflections on his many years of ministry. On another evening Revs Ryan Sparks and Graeme Zuidema introduced a discussion on church planting, and on the final evening we had a time of reflection and prayer.

We also had lighter moments with Rev Ryan Sparks and his wife Jenni leading us with ice-breakers one evening, then

ten-pin bowling one afternoon, and another afternoon getting a guided tour of the War Memorial in Wellington. The avid golfers once again went to a local course and this time the "Pastors Masters Trophy" was won by the Rev. Graeme Zuidema; and three keen fishermen spent an afternoon by the river.

It was a great privilege to meet once again, to renew the bonds that bind us together, and to form new relationships. We want to express our thanks to the denomination and our churches for providing us with this valuable time together and we are looking forward to the next one!

*Top images: Alan and Odette Douma and Graeme and Amanda Zuidema*

*Bottom: Attendees at the Ministers and Wives Conference*





# ANZAC Day brunch in Silverstream, 2018

Members of the Social Committee in Silverstream hosted a brunch/breakfast on ANZAC Day in the church hall. We were encouraged to bring friends and neighbours. The hall was decorated with poppy posters and sprigs of rosemary. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee was inviting on our arrival and the food and service was enjoyed by all. The photos speak for themselves.

Some of our members had attended the Dawn Service in Upper Hutt and could enjoy the breakfast. We thank God for the men and women who, to this day, serve our country here and overseas.

**Maria Holtslag**



# Why Islam's rise has caused atheists to urge West not to abandon Christianity



Photo by Grace Zhu on Unsplash

## Jonathon Van Maren

On March 21, the famously angry atheist Richard Dawkins tweeted out a report from the Guardian with a reaction that made me do a double take: “Before we rejoice at the death throes of the relatively benign Christian religion, let’s not forget Hilaire Belloc’s menacing rhyme: ‘Always keep a-hold of nurse, For fear of finding something worse.’”

The Guardian was noting (as I did in this space in 2016) that Christianity in the UK was completely collapsing: Well over half of Britons no longer pray or attend religious services, and a staggering

70% of those between the ages of 16 and 29 do not subscribe to any identifiable religion.

Dawkins seems to have changed his tune somewhat. After all, this is the same man who once argued that the state needed to shield children from religious parents who were “indoctrinating them,” essentially dismissing the fundamental concept of parental rights as so much nonsense. Enlightened atheists running the state were far better equipped, in Dawkins’ opinion, to decide what was best for children than their own parents.

Dawkins’ sudden nostalgia for Christianity is not a mere outlier these days.

“While post-Christian churches apologize loudly for the sins of Christendom, many prominent unbelievers are pointing to the value of Christianity and some are even advocating for a reconsideration of faith in a society that has largely chosen to abandon it.”

Increasingly, atheists are realizing that the choice facing most Western nations is not the choice between the secularism of the Enlightenment or the Judeo-Christian traditions of Christendom. Rather, as Christianity collapses, the void is being filled with the religious traditions of incoming migrants, immigrants, and refugees.

For most countries, that is Islam. As the culture clashes in Europe grow, Dawkins has gone from referring to Christianity as something children need to be protected from to something “benign.” As LifeSite reported, he actually defended Christianity: “There are no Christians, as far as I know, blowing up buildings. I am not aware of any Christian suicide bombers. I am not aware of any major Christian denomination that believes the penalty for apostasy is death.”

That is a case that Bill Maher, the atheist HBO host who made an entire documentary that mocked Christianity, has been making often lately. He thinks Christianity is stupid, but he has realized that Islam poses a far greater threat to people like himself. Maher has gotten regularly pilloried and faced accusations of “Islamophobia” for making the explicit case that Christianity is, as Dawkins put it, benign while Islam poses a threat to the West. It has been strange to watch Maher defend Christianity on TV – and enjoyable to see the somewhat bewildered expressions on the faces of his interviewers.

Another famous atheist, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, became a long-time critic of Islam after a childhood in Somalia where she underwent brutal genital mutilation and fled to Europe in the face of a forced marriage. She has made the case that one viable solution to the ongoing cultural crisis is for Christians to begin proselytizing Muslims. When I mentioned my surprise at Ali’s proposal in an interview with Mark Steyn, he chuckled and responded that the only reason I was taken aback was that an atheist was sounding like a more muscular Christian than the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The brilliant British philosopher Sir Roger Scruton, who joined me on my podcast to discuss traditionalism and the collapse of Western Civilization last month, has also battled through his unbelief. The Judeo-Christian tradition, he told me, is a fundamental foundation – without it, you don’t have a Western Civilization. He himself has been creeping back, inch by inch, towards faith, and even urges young people to return to church.

Dr. Jordan B. Peterson, who is still grappling with the Christian faith and has not yet decided whether he believes in the historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, is nevertheless firm in his belief that Christianity contains fundamental truths that our culture cannot survive without.

Douglas Murray, who joined me several weeks ago on my show to talk about his magnificent book *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam*, also spoke of Christianity as a positive thing and although he remains an atheist, he has taken to calling himself a “Christian atheist.” As he researches what he calls the “crisis of cultural confidence” in Europe, he too has realized that perhaps some of what was abandoned over the last half-century was important in ways we are just now beginning to understand.

It seems that many are realizing that when we decided to throw out Christianity, we perhaps did not realize what we were trashing – and what it protected us from. It is a curious thing that as Steyn noted, many atheists are sounding like more muscular Christians than main-line Christians do. While post-Christian churches apologize loudly for the sins of Christendom, many prominent unbelievers are pointing to the value of Christianity and some are even advocating for a reconsideration of faith in a society that has largely chosen to abandon it.

One thing is for certain: When even some atheists and agnostics are warning that we abandon Christianity at our peril, we should all be paying very close attention.

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## Books in focus

### ***The Majesty on High: Introduction to the Kingdom of God in the New Testament***

by S. M. Baugh

Create Space, 2017. Paperback, 168 pages, \$12.95 (Amazon)

**Reviewed by OP pastor Jonathan Moersch**

Reading the Gospels, one comes away with the clear impression that Jesus spoke at length concerning the kingdom of God (occurring over one hundred times). But what exactly is the kingdom? A topic of such magnitude is difficult to define in a succinct, yet comprehensive manner. After many years of study and reflection on the topic, Dr. Steven Baugh offers this very simple definition of the kingdom: it's the New Creation.

This definition of the kingdom helps to correct the misunderstanding that amillennialists "spiritualize" the nature of the kingdom, reducing it merely to the moral reign of God in the hearts of the elect. On the contrary, understanding the kingdom to be nothing less than the new heavens and new earth – which the New Testament repeatedly affirms is more lasting, permanent, and unshakable than things seen on earth (2 Cor. 4:18; Heb. 11:10, 12:28) – offers the most concrete, tangible kingdom im-

aginable. And yet the amazing news of the gospel is that this kingdom of God is at hand (Matt. 4:17)! As Baugh points out, Christ has truly inaugurated the kingdom of God at his first coming, but we await the full consummation of it at his second coming.

As the subtitle implies, this book is merely an introduction to the kingdom of God. While it does not address all aspects of the kingdom, it enables the reader to gain a solid foundation for future studies, such as the kingdom and the church, the kingdom in the world, and kingdom ethics.

In order to gain greater appreciation for how exactly the kingdom of God has been already inaugurated and how it will be finally consummated in the future, Baugh considers the following elements of the kingdom: the King, his kingly dominion, the realm, the subjects of the realm, and covenant as kingdom constitution.

Each chapter of the book is a careful study of a biblical passage that demonstrates these elements. These passages include Revelation 4 and 5, John 3, 1 Corinthians 15, and Matthew 5. For chapters 7 and 8 of the book, Baugh brings out several passages that explore the connection between the kingdom and covenant, namely, that a covenant establishes or legally constitutes a kingdom.

This book is written in a non-technical style, so one does not need to know Greek or theological jargon to benefit from it. That being said, it is not overly simplistic, and it does require careful reading. Although intended for the layperson, I suspect pastors and scholars alike will glean from these pages. Baugh brings his wealth of knowledge of Greek and of Greco-Roman culture to illumine the text of Scripture.

The Majesty on High is recommended for any who would like to gain a greater understanding of the kingdom of God and an appreciation for what it means to be a citizen of it.

*New Horizons, March 2018*

### ***All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism***

by James E. Dolezal. Reformation Heritage, 2017. Paperback, 176 pages, \$10.00.

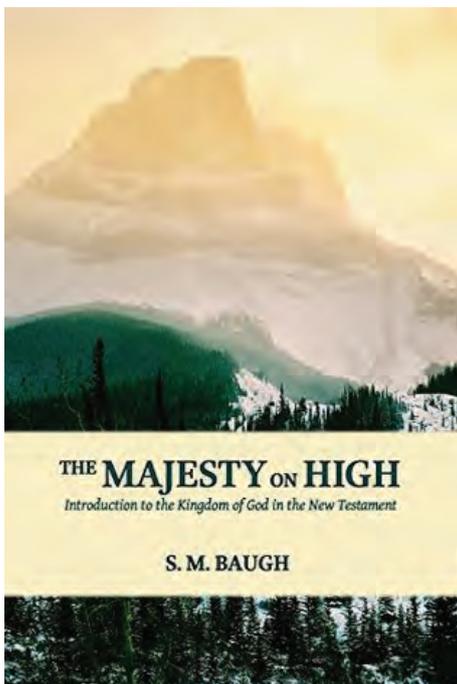
**Reviewed by OP minister Brian T. Wingard.**

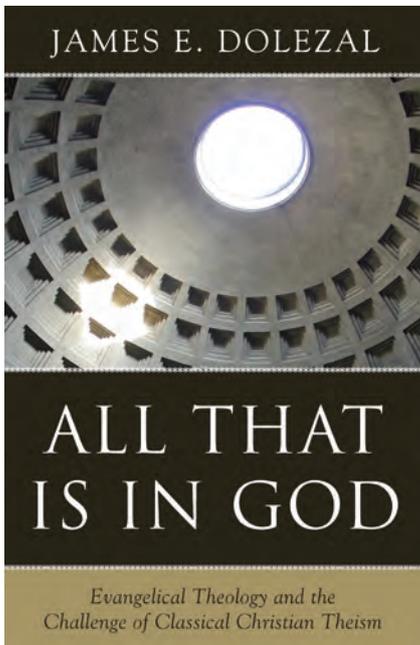
Dr. Dolezal has produced a book that takes one to the rarefied heights of philosophy and theology proper. To complete the statement from which the title comes, "All that is in God is God" (Anselm of Canterbury, 1300s). The subtitle indicates the author's belief that this classical view of God, found in the Early Fathers, medieval theologians, the Reformers, and the Puritans, has been lost by much of contemporary evangelicalism, including Calvinists. At issue is the doctrine of God's simplicity, i.e., that God is not a composite being of the sum of his constituent parts. The book may be considered a defense of the famous description of God as being "without body, parts, or passions" (WCF 2.1).

The opposing view Dolezal calls mutualism, which states that in order to be a true person, God's relation to his rational creatures must be one of "give and take." In one scholar's words, God's love must be "a vulnerable love that feels pain" (24). While the more radical forms of mutualism are found in process theology and open theism, Dolezal believes the greatest danger is with its milder forms, like that found in the writings of Bruce Ware, an avowed critic of open theism.

The book begins with an overview of models of theism, focusing mainly upon classical Christian theism and mutualism. From there Dolezal proceeds to focus on the doctrines of immutability, simplicity, eternity, and the Trinity, respectively, before giving his conclusion.

The focus on simplicity encompasses two chapters, one outlining the doctrine and a second detailing its contemporary loss. Dolezal states that the doctrine has been lost in one of three ways: by ignoring it, denying it, or distorting it. It may be surprising to some, as it was to me, to be reminded that Charles Hodge is among those who denied the classical understanding of the doctrine. These





chapters contain what is, perhaps, the most controversial portion of the book. Dolezal insists that classical theism teaches that in God every attribute is identical. This has led many to object that power is not the same as wisdom or justice, or any of the other attributes. The author counters that the language of theology is not of attributes as they are known by God, but analogously as they are spoken of by human beings. Furthermore, Dolezal helpfully states, God is omnipotent simply by virtue of being God, and the same is true of all his other attributes. The concept of deity is not a genus of which the attributes are species, but God is simply God. A man, conversely, is not powerful by virtue of being human but by virtue of possessing a certain trait of "power."

I recommend this volume to any pastor in the OPC who intends to teach in depth on the subject of theology proper. The book is not without its flaws, but they are in matters of omission, beyond the scope of this review. *New Horizons, April 2018*

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“Let self-righteous men praise themselves, but he who has been made righteous by grace renders all the praise to the Lord.” C H Spurgeon

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