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ENGAGING WITH

CULTS,

SECTS and

FALSE RELIGION

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All correspondence regarding editorial content and advertising should be sent to:

The Editor:

Walter Walraven
Email: see contact form on website
website: www.faithinfocus.org.nz

Editorial Assistant:

Mrs Sally Davey

Production Staff:

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Mrs Nicola Wharekawa
79 McLeod Street
Upper Hutt
Email: nicwhare@gmail.com

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Editorial

It has been quite a few years since I have had that knock on the door from those peddling a false religion. It may have something to do with the steepness of my driveway, or maybe they realise they won't make progress at my address with their claims and just put a big X in their address book so that others need not bother.

Last time a couple of members of the Jehovah's Witnesses came to my door, I invited them to a discussion in regard to the truth, authority and correct interpretation of Scripture. I wanted to show them in a friendly way that their understanding of Scripture was deficient, and that as a result they come to wrong conclusions.

I got them to turn to Revelation 7:4-8. In these verses is the number of the sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel, which the JW's claim is them. They claim they are the faithful Christians who go to heaven to rule with Christ in the kingdom of God. And their view does not allow for any more than that number. Then I directed their attention to verse 9, where we read, *"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb"* After reading that portion, I asked them who that multitude before the throne was.

Their response was, that they did not know, and that they wanted to ask their pastor about that point, and then would come back and we could resume our discussion. That was the last I saw of them.

It is not easy to convince either the JW's or the Mormons that they hold to a false view of the Scriptures. They sincerely believe they are right and we who believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God are wrong.

We can easily become annoyed when they come to our door uninvited and at an inopportune moment. However, I think that to close the door on them and say "no thank you" is not going to help them come to the truth and it is going to leave us with a missed opportunity to bring someone the gospel.

Maybe we should feel pity for them instead, because they walk in darkness. I think we have some responsibility to try to bring them to the knowledge of the truth about salvation by grace alone through the Lord Jesus Christ, and that takes effort and time. We need to know what they believe and why, and we need to be able to refute their false doctrine. We need to know our Bibles and rely on the work of the Holy Spirit to testify to His truth to their hearts.

Our contributors share their insights about cults, sects, Mormons and the individual.

Mr Andrew de Vries educates us about cults.

Mr David Stares give us his first instalment by writing on the cult of the Mormons. There will be more to follow later in the year.

Mr John Rogers writes about sects, cults and individuals.

Mrs Sally Davey asks why it isn't wise to be nostalgic about the past.

Mr Graeme Zuidema considers an ideology of fear.

We also have *Letters from New Zealand*, *Focus on faith*, *Books in focus* and *Focus on home* and a letter to the editor.

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 Dort, 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.

Cults for dummies

Andrew de Vries

I'm always interested in hearing the impressions that visitors have who have joined us for the first time in corporate worship. One of the most surprising pieces of feedback I received was from a young lady. After she had been worshipping with us for about one year, she shared with me her initial impression of the church. To my horror she said: 'I thought you were a bit of a cult.' In terror I responded: 'Why'. She replied: 'Because the first time I worshipped with you everyone was exceedingly friendly, they smiled at me, and people were genuinely interested in me'. I was very relieved by this response! But it did highlight a serious deficiency in her understanding of what a cult really is.

So what is a cult?

When I use the word cult, I am not talking about the fact that people might give devotion to a particular thing or person. Like the cult of *Star Trek*, where a person involved centres their life around the wisdom of Spock and 'trekky' conventions. It is important that we also note that a cult is not a reference to a group who simply holds strongly to their beliefs. Some people think being dogmatic about anything, and being dogmatic about the Bible in particular, is evidence of cultish behaviour. However, cults are identified not by the strength of conviction about their teaching, but by the specific teachings they affirm.

One definition of a cult is this: "a group of religious people whose belief system and practices deviate significantly from and often contradict the Holy Scriptures as interpreted by orthodox, biblical Christianity and as expressed in such statements as the Apostles' Creed".¹ So a cult is not simply a reference to individuals holding to unbiblical teachings, it refers to a group that is organised around those novel and unorthodox teachings. In particular in this article, it refers to a

group which self-identifies as Christian, when the reality is far different.

Whilst at times we jest about some of the more outrageous aspects of the beliefs of some cults² the reality is it is no laughing matter. It is in fact deadly serious – both spiritually and sometimes physically. Cults lead people away from Jesus Christ and the salvation that is found in Him alone. Behind it all is the Father of lies who delights to deceive and undermine the truth of God. We read in 1 Timothy 4:1 "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1). We must recognise that behind the cults stands something demonic.

Key features of cults

This article will seek to flesh out the definition of cult to help us see what it actually looks like in practice. Hence the title, cults for dummies. We can identify two areas where the cults diverge significantly from Christianity. The first area is their *unorthodox theology*. What follows is not an exhaustive list, but some key areas of false teaching that are common to all the cults.

Cults find their authoritative standard for belief and practice from a source apart from the Scriptures. The great catch cry of the Reformation was sola-scriptura. This of course echoes the teaching of the Bible on the sufficiency of the Scriptures (Psalm 19:7-11, 2 Tim 3:15-16). The great catch cry of the cults is scriptura plus. An additional special book or body of teaching other than the Bible dominates their belief system. So whilst cult members may affirm their belief in the Bible, another source functions as the real authority. So in Mormonism, the *Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price* are additional books which functionally stand above the Bible. However, the cults don't necessarily need another book to



L. Ron Hubbard, the found of the church of scientology. [pinterest.com](https://www.pinterest.com)

undermine sola Scriptura. The Jehovah Witnesses have the watchtower society which gives the official interpretation of the Scriptures. Again, functionally, it is the Watchtower society that becomes the authority for belief and practice. Beware of anyone coming with an authoritative word of God outside of the Bible. That seems to be a key warning for our times!

Cults also typically have a deficient understanding of the trinity or some aspect of Christology, usually both! In regards to the Trinity, there is typically a denial of the unity of the Godhead and the equality of the persons of the Godhead. So Jehovah witnesses teach that Jesus is the first creation of God and the Holy Spirit is his influence. Put simply, they don't believe in a Trinitarian God. In regards to Jesus, cults will identify him as an impressive example of

faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:20-26, Galatians 2:15-21, Eph 2:1-10). This doctrine was not only under threat at the time the Bible was written, it is undermined by nearly every cult that claims to be Christian. They have a grace 'plus' something else to be saved mentality. It's grace plus certain rituals, or grace plus a certain amount of witnessing, or grace plus baptism. For example, in their Articles of faith Mormons confess "We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel." – Articles of Faith 1:3. Although words like atonement are used, it is clear that what really counts is one's good works to attain salvation. One connected problem this Article highlights, is that cults often use Biblical language, but they mean something far different from what a Christian usually means. When someone from a cult uses words like atonement, salvation, grace, or Son of God, you need to ask them 'what do you mean by that'. Beware any teacher or teaching that has even a hint of salvation by works.

Secondly, there are also *sociological features* that are common to most cults. Domineering and charismatic leaders are the status quo among cults. Most cults are started by an individual who is able to exert considerable influence on his or her followers. These individuals often attain such prominence that in some ways they become the objects of the devotion and even worship of their members! They seek to win their converts to ultimate allegiance to themselves rather than to Christ. The Bible is very clear that a faithful teacher will point people to Christ and to unquestioning allegiance to him rather than self (John 3:30, 1 Cor 2:2). The Bible also recognises the corruption of the human heart and requires accountability for those with spiritual authority in the church. Beware any leader who points followers to himself/herself and who lacks any clear accountability structures.

On the issue of leadership, cult leaders always seem to be self-appointed. They thrust themselves into positions of leadership by virtue of their strong personality or a claim that they've been directly appointed by God. One of the things we ought to be thankful for in Reformed circles is our recognition that a man needs to be called by God through the church into pastoral office. Whilst the idea of ordination is falling on hard times in our egalitarian age, this is a wonder-



The late Neville Cooper, alias Hopeful Christian the founder of Gloriavale.
thecoast.net.nz

humanity, an angel, or as a special being who over time attains to divinity³. In first John the apostle warns that we need to affirm certain truths about Jesus to be Christians. We need to acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22), that he was incarnated in the flesh (1 John 4:2), and that he is the unique Son of God (1 John 4:15). Perhaps the reason that Christians become susceptible to false teaching in this area, is that despite the emphasis on these doctrines in Scripture, there is not a similar emphasis from the pulpit. Beware any teacher or teaching that denies the trinity or subtracts from the deity or humanity of Christ.

The final area where cults have considerable unorthodoxy is in their views about salvation. The Bible clearly teaches that salvation is by grace alone through

ful safeguard. The Bible clearly teaches that leadership in the church is for those who meet the character requirements of Scripture (1 Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1). We do not believe that any man has the right to determine he meets these requirements himself, but the church needs to recognise these men and set them apart for service (1 Tim 4:14). We are to beware of any pastor who is self-appointed.

If we are allowed to refer to 'appealing' aspects of cults, one of the reasons they attract people is because of the strong focus on community. If you have watched the documentaries about our home grown cult Gloriavale⁴ on television, one of the key features of this cult is there strong emphasis on community life. This is certainly in keeping with the biblical command to love one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord (John 13:34-35, Rom 13:8). This is where the church has an opportunity to offer a counter community of genuine love and commitment. The danger of the cultish community is that individuality is often quashed and conformity to certain community standards is required. Long lists

of what is acceptable in terms of behaviours, books that are permitted, or dress requirements will feature heavily. These requirements go beyond the Scriptures and bind the consciences of people. We need to beware of those who take away the freedoms that we have in Christ.

Sometimes we think that cults are only for people who are a little bit foolish. However, cults are not actually for dummies. Millions of people regardless of intellect or education (or wealth or ethnic group) have been lured into cults. So what is the best way to inoculate yourself from becoming part of a cult? Firstly, you need to be alert to the danger. Secondly, you need to immerse yourself in the Scriptures so that orthodox teaching is so ingrained that you can smell cult-like tendencies a mile away. Thirdly, you need to pray. Pray for yourself, and pray also for those in cults that the Lord might open their eyes to the truth and save them⁵.

Notes

¹ *Evangelizing the Cults* by Dr Ronald Enroth, Servant Publications, 1990, p. 11.

² For example, the church of scientology was founded by Science fiction author L R Hubbard. The beliefs of the cult read like a science fiction novel.

³ Some examples: The Christadelphians (John Thomas) "Jesus Christ did not exist as a person from eternity as one of the triune Godhead He did not actually come into being until He was begotten of the Holy Spirit and born in Bethlehem."

Jehovah's Witnesses "The incarnation is scripturally erroneous. Indeed, if he (Christ) had been an incarnate being, he could never have redeemed mankind."

⁴ This cult was formed by Neville Cooper and they used to be known as the Cooperites. Their compound is presently located on the West Coast.

⁵ There is a remarkable story of a cult known as the worldwide church of God (WCG). This cult began in the mid-1930's and had a range of unorthodox beliefs. However, in the 1990's the Lord worked mightily to bring them back to the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. You can read more about this at <https://billmuehlenberg.com/2009/03/04/cults-and-amazing-grace/>.

Mr Andrew de Vries is the minister of the Reformed Church in Bishopdale.

Engaging with cults, sects and false religion

Dealing with false faiths: Mormonism

David Stares

Knock. Knock. Knock. I had just sat down at my desk with my cup of coffee in hand when I heard a knock at the door. So, still in my pyjamas, hair everywhere, I opened the door to two smartly dressed young people. "We want to talk to you about Jehovah," the young man said. This was the first time I had ever

had this experience, and it was the day after I began working on this series of articles. Even so, being caught off guard like that left me grasping for the right passage to turn to.

And so my hope is that I can offer you some help when this happens to you, first of all by giving you some background into the main beliefs of several major faiths and then second, by un-

packing some passages that might help you know where to turn in the moment. We'll start with Mormonism.

Mormonism's teachings

Mormonism, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, was begun in America in the 1820s and 30s. Because Mormonism believes in continuing inspired revelation, they have a number of

additional texts that they hold to alongside the Bible: the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price and others. The Book of Mormon is believed to have been revealed to Joseph Smith on tablets by the angel Moroni.

Now, if you meet a Mormon, and ask them questions about what they believe, you'll find that they use a lot of the same language as us. They will call themselves Christians, they will talk about God and Salvation through Christ and eternal life. Don't be fooled by the fact that they use the same terms we do!

However, when you ask them to explain what they mean by God, you will find they have a very different answer. Quoting from their own text: "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones,

but is a personage of Spirit."¹

And how, you might ask, can God have a human body? Because he started out as a man. As Joseph Smith himself said, "We have imagined that God was God from all eternity. These are incomprehensible to some but are the first principle of the gospel – to know that we may converse with him as one man with another and that he was once as one of us and was on a planet as Jesus was in the flesh."² Did you catch that? God was once merely a human being on a planet, just as Jesus was. This means that when they talk about God, they are thinking of someone very different than we are. God is not a Trinity, one in essence, three in person, but three different beings, who are united in one loving purpose.

This feeds into the way that they understand Christ as the 'Son of God.' Mormons will say that Jesus 'pre-existed' his birth in Bethlehem, but not, of course, as the second person of the Trinity. He pre-existed, they say, but they also believe that every human being pre-existed their mortal body as spirits. "Man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal [physical] body."³ In this way, Jesus did exist, as any other man, before the creation of the world. It was here that another spirit, Satan, became angry when he was chosen as the saviour of mankind and rebelled.⁴

For the Mormons, Jesus was more than just a mere man, and truly the son of God. However, not in the way we understand it, but by a physical act of procreation of the Father with the virgin Mary. As they say, "Thus, God the Father became the literal Father of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only person on earth to be born of a mortal mother and an immortal Father." The result is that Jesus "inherited divine powers from His Father" and mortality from his mother.⁵ Jesus' sonship is not eternal, but is a product of biological reproduction.

And, of course, this misguided view of the person of God and of Jesus has an impact on their view of salvation. In one sense, their view of salvation can be described as universalism. They in fact have 4 different classes of people. There is a small number who received the teachings of the Mormon church and rejected it, these are called the sons of perdition and Mormon teaching is that Jesus "saves all except them."⁶

Cut out and place on your fridge for a ready reference.



Psalm 90:2

– "from everlasting to everlasting, you are God"

Isaiah 43:10

– "Before me was no God formed, and there will be none after me."

Psalm 96:5

– "all the gods of the peoples are idols."

John 8:58

– "before Abraham was, I am." He is the divine "I AM" of Exodus 3:14

Philippians 2:6

– that Jesus did pre-exist his incarnation, but was then in the form of God

1 Corinthians 15:50-53

– we will be changed and will put on immortality.

Philippians 3:1-11

– to see that being righteous means abandoning one's good works rather than hoping in them.

Romans 3:28

– our perfect righteousness is a gift, and doesn't come through works. Adding works to faith robs the gospel of its gracious character.

Galatians 1:6-9

– Because they believe in a different God, a different Jesus, and a different salvation than what the Bible teaches, they are preaching a "different Gospel."

Those who don't fall into the category of 'sons of perdition' can be saved into one of three kingdoms: 1) Celestial – the highest degree of glory for those with faith. These have fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. 2) Terrestrial – for good people who rejected the gospel after death. These only are visited by Jesus. 3) Telestial – for wicked people who didn't receive the gospel. These will only be visited by the Holy Spirit.⁷ Even here you can see that they not only divide the Trinity, but also assign declining value to the persons.

So, on the one hand, just about everyone can be saved, but in order to receive the full benefits of the work of Christ, you need to make a contribution. This is seen most clearly in the scriptures of the Mormon church which teach that "we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do."⁸ At first glance this sounds like we must first put in our effort and then Christ will fill in the gap. Now, many Mormons will contest this understanding, however, the official teaching of the Mormon faith is that "to make His Atonement fully effective in our lives, we must strive to obey Him and repent of our sins."⁹ The full benefits of salvation are not given as a free gift, but are left to us to earn.

And this may be hard for us to imagine: how can the atonement be only partially effective? The answer can be found in the goal of salvation. Salvation in the fullest sense is not eternal life with God, but is to follow the trail that the Father and Jesus both blazed to becoming gods. As Joseph Smith himself said, "You have got to learn how to be a god yourself in order to save yourself – to be priests Kings as all Gods has [sic] done – by going from a small degree to another from exaltation to ex[altation] – till they are able to sit in glory as doth those who sit enthroned."¹⁰ What Jesus gives his people access to is the opportunity to be made into gods through sufficient exertion. This process continues even after death, "But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil [died] before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave."¹¹ The work of becoming a god (exaltation) continues on even after death.

The Bible's response

So, what are we to say to all this? Where do we begin? Well, we can narrow down

the issues to three things: 1) What is the nature of God? 2) What is the nature of Jesus Christ? 3) What is the nature of salvation? And all of these questions have answers from Scripture, a book the Mormons claim to believe in. Hopefully, looking at a few passages will help you if you have a Mormon knock on your door.

First of all, God is eternal, and is not himself a creature. To demonstrate this we need look no further than **Psalm 90:2** which says that God is "from everlasting to everlasting, you are God" This means that any time you would like to choose, God existed, and even more than that, he is divine.

Furthermore, Scripture is clear that there are not a large number of Gods, nor are there more than one, as the Mormons claim. However God speaks clearly in **Isaiah 43:10** that "Before me was no God formed, and there will be none after me." Certainly there are other nations who worship other Gods, but, as **Psalm 96:5** says, "all the gods of the peoples are idols." God claims for himself and himself alone the title of god, meaning that he was not created by another god, nor do others become gods after him.

The Bible is also clear that Jesus' status as the Son of God is not some crass biological fact, but refers to his divine nature. Jesus clearly claimed divinity for himself in **John 8:58** where he said, "before Abraham was, I am." This means that Jesus was more than a pre-existent man, he is the divine "I AM" of **Exodus 3:14**. And the people around Jesus got the reference, which is why in the very next verse they tried to stone him! They knew he was claiming to be God! Paul explains the same in **Philippians 2:6**, that Jesus did pre-exist his incarnation, but was then in the form of God, and had to willingly abandon that glory to take on human flesh. Jesus is the Son of God, sharing in his divine nature from all eternity, not becoming divine after his death.

Mormonism's depiction of salvation is not faithful to Scripture. First of all, we are not made into gods, but in the same way that Christ's human body was glorified, so **1 Corinthians 15:50-53** says we will be changed and will put on immortality. This doesn't mean that we will become gods, but that we will no longer be subject to death, because Christ defeated it! Furthermore, many places in the New Testament make clear that we receive the full benefits of Christ as a gift, and not with respect to our right-



Bern Switzerland Temple statue of Angel Moroni. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel_Moroni

eousness. One need only look at **Philippians 3:1-11** to see that being righteous means abandoning one's good works rather than hoping in them. As **Romans 3:28** states, our perfect righteousness is a gift, and doesn't come through works. Adding works to faith robs the gospel of its gracious character.

So, when you have a Mormon come to your door, they need to be warned with the warning of **Galatians 1:6-9**. Because they believe in a different God, a different Jesus, and a different salvation than what the Bible teaches, they are preaching a "different Gospel." Pertinent to the Mormons, Paul also says that "if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you,

he is to be accursed!"¹² There's a good chance that you won't convince your Mormon visitor of their errors, but they need to hear that their faith is not the Christian faith, it's a false gospel offering false hope.

Notes

- 1 *Doctrine and Covenants* Section 130:22.
- 2 "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton [25]," p. 13 [25], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton/3>
- 3 *Gospel Principles*. 9. *Gospel Principles* is a publication put out by the Mormon church to explain succinctly what they believe. (https://www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/06195_eng.pdf?lang=eng)

- 4 *Gospel Principles*, 15.
- 5 *Gospel Principles*, 53.
- 6 *Doctrine and Covenants* Section 76:43-44; *Gospel Principles*, 273.
- 7 *Gospel Principles*. 272.
- 8 *Book of Mormon*, 2 Nephi 25:23.
- 9 *Gospel Principles*. 62.
- 10 "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton [25]," p. 14 [26], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton/4>
- 11 *Gospel Principles*, 279
- 12 *New American Standard Bible: 1995 update*. (1995). (Ga 1:8). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

Mr David Stares is the minister of the Reformed Church in Masterton.

Engaging with cults, sects and false religion

Sects, cults and the individual

John Rogers

Most likely it was the Greeks who began discussing the question first, it being the Greek genius to pull things apart and then try to understand all the bits and how they fit together; whether they ever got them put together again rightly is another question! Nevertheless, that fine intellectual ability proved very useful in the early church when it came to understanding the Godhead as recently revealed by Jesus and the apostles and the two natures in the one Person of Christ. Hebrew thought, on the other hand, is more holistic, more all-embracing, but not in the sense of crushing the individual by the group. You only have to read the Psalms to see that. The question I have in mind is the age-old question of the one and the many: which is ultimate? The group or the individual? The society – which is not, but too often comes to be seen as, the state – or the

individual? The greater sphere of government or the lesser sphere, the family (and any number of other smaller spheres of authority)? That is the big underlying question behind many of the questions society faces today and unfortunately it is being answered in the direction of the larger, the group, the great One, as the globalists press on with their one-world government agenda, as individual governments claim ultimate authority and competence in every area of life. Witness the forced removal of children (legalised kidnapping in plain language) from their homes in recent years in Germany and one or two Scandinavian countries (and, from all I have read, good, well-rounded Christian families). Their crime: home-schooling. Witness the various, state-sponsored "we are you" movements in response to the Charlie Hebdo killings in Paris, the Christchurch mosque killings – I wonder if that will ever be said about the Sri Lanka church killings. (Or

... where there is very intrusive and micro-control going on, it is plain that the One is seen as ultimate; the group is more important than the individual. If it is a church in question, she is becoming totalitarian and in danger of losing her title to church on that ground.

... where there is little or no church structure, where 'members' come and go with little or no bother by the 'church' leadership and few or no consequences, it is plain that the Many are ultimate.

Easter-worshippers, according to Hillary Clinton; but not Christians. No. That word must not be spoken.)

R J Rushdoony wrote a book on this subject back in the 1970s called *The One and the Many*, in which he traces the development of social and government theory and practice down through the centuries in the light of this question. You would do well to read it; it's not high-fallutin' and is very interesting. He says that the age-old question of how the one and the many should relate is solved in the doctrine of the Trinity, in which both the One (Godhead) and the many (three Persons) are equally ultimate (in themselves, equally important, equally necessary, equally to be loved and adored; none taking primacy, none subjugated to the other two). It came to be beautifully expressed in the *Athanasian Creed*:

And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;

Neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance.

For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son and another of the Holy Spirit.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son and such is the Holy Spirit.

The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Spirit uncreate.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal.

And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal.

As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensibles, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible.

So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty;

And yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty.

So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God;

And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.

So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord;

And yet they are not three Lords, but one Lord.

For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every person by himself to be God and Lord;

So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say: There are three Gods or three Lords.

It should be no mystery that the doctrine of the Trinity solves this riddle, the One and/or the Many?, for every question of life is at root theological and true Christianity is true theology; the God acknowledged in that creed the true God.

With that background, we come to the aspect of this month's subject that I would like to deal with: sects, cults and the individual. I don't want to get too much into the question what is a sect, what is a cult, and what is the difference between them? There are numerous cults in the world and for every cult a thousand sects. Sects are certainly the lesser concerning of the two, embracing any number of groups of what may in many ways be very beautiful and in many respects orthodox Christians, to other groups approaching cults, with serious heretical strands to their teachings. What, to my mind, shows a group clearly to be a cult is the presence of a single leader to whom personal allegiance must be given. Exclusive Brethren get a bit too close to this for my liking; Brian Tamaki's Destiny Church approaches this with its encouragement of personal allegiance to Brian Tamaki and the Brian Tamaki ring; Gloriavale certainly approaches this. All three may be actual cults, but I wish to be cautious. What we can say with confidence is that all three groups are very controlling of their membership and that is a big red flag, for unfortunately, control seems to be the name of the game.

This brings us back to the question I began with: which is ultimate, the One or the Many? For when there are heavy demands being made on people (usually in terms of time and money), where there is very intrusive and micro-control going on, it is plain that the One is seen as ultimate; the group is more important than the individual. If it is a church in question, she is becoming totalitarian and in danger of losing her title to church on that ground. On the other hand, where there is little or no church structure, where 'members' come and go with little or no bother by the 'church' leadership and few or no consequences, it is plain that the Many are ultimate. The individual is ultimate. The church has succumbed to individualism. There is a good deal of that in general evangelicalism today.

This should always be a danger sign to anyone attracted to such groups. Whatever other aspects about them may be attractive, the requirement of 'heavy' subjugation to the group, not to mention

But did Jesus mean us to live like this, in an oxygen tent, with its inevitable suppression of the individual? No, he did not.

the requirement to sign over ownership of one's assets to the group, is absolutely contrary to Scripture and a denial of the structure of social reality as exemplified in the Trinity. My understanding is that Gloriavale requires this (I have seen it also with quite a small group in Lower Hutt years ago); Destiny Church apparently does not, although there is a heavy emphasis on tithing and Brian and Hannah Tamaki appear to have far too much involvement in the church finances; an Exclusive Brethren escapee told me forty years ago that, while he took a fair chunk of his business with him when he left, he had to sign over around another million dollars' worth of assets (\$1m, forty years ago!), and had not seen any of his wider family for several years since then. When you hear anything like this, you should run a mile. Even a whiff of it should be a warning to true church leadership as well.

Please note: I am not speaking about the salvatory status of any individual here. "The Lord knows those who are his; let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from evil" (2 Timothy 2:19). And the Lord appears to have some of his people in the strangest of places at times, for example, Elijah and 7,000 others who had not bowed the knee to Baal in the false church, the northern kingdom with its golden calf worship at Dan and Bethel. The Belgic Confession (Art.29) distinguishes between the church and the individual and does not assess them with the same criteria: it speaks of the marks of the true church on the one hand and then the marks of the true believer on the other. We need to bear that in mind.

Jesus established the One, "my (singular) church" (Mt.16:18) over which he, the Chief Shepherd and only Lord, gave a delegated spiritual authority to the apostles and their successors (Mt.16:19; 18:17-19; Jn 20:21-23; 1 Thes.5:12-13; Heb.13:17; 1 Pe.5:5), whom he commanded to shepherd the flock "according to the will of God," as examples (1 Pe.5:1-4), "with all humility and tears" (Acts 20:17-20, 25-28). When anyone believes he (or she; and following) has been born again by the Spirit of God and is baptised (whether that happens in that order or the other way round), he needs to know that he was also born and "baptised into the (one) body" (1 Cor.12:12-13). Hence, it is our duty as individual Christians to be a member of a real, tangible congregation of the body of Christ on this earth (for the mystical

body of Christ manifests herself tangibly on this earth), and assume all the obligations of serving the church with one's gifts, "weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice" and everything else involved in real fellowship; obeying one's leaders and so forth that that membership entails. The One body is important.

That is what cults always pick up on and emphasise and that is where, among other things, they invariably go astray. For there are limits on the church's authority (as on the state's; indeed, as on parents'). The Many, individuals, must never be subjugated to the One so as to lose their individual identity and character and the freedom to think for themselves. Hence Paul says, "These things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other" (1 Cor.4:6). One sign of a cult, therefore, may very well be a uniform. I like it that the blokes in Destiny Church dress sharp. Some of us could learn at least that from them. But why does their dress-sharpness always seem to come to expression in the same style suits? (Let alone black tee-shirts for their march on Parliament a few years ago. Not clever!) In Gloriavale, they all wear uniforms – and pretty frumpy looking things too! I have no time for deliberate frumpiness. (I say deliberate, because poverty may not allow more and we sure better not defer to prosperity.) I am not very fond of uniforms. (I can see the point of them in the military. I suppose instant, unthinking obedience is necessary on the battlefield and it's useful to know to which side that bloke you're aiming at belongs.) But I don't find very much uniformity in the natural world. What I find is profligate variety and colour. Whereas the Lord seems to promote individuality and beauty, we seem to want to make life as dull and drab as we can – especially cults.

Cults will also pick up very strongly on the fellowship required of Christians – the Oneness. Fellowship and mutual care is required and we need to work at it. Perhaps especially if the Lord has blessed us with being part of a large family, we may need to be more thoughtful and quite deliberate about it. Maybe start with not making coffee after church a family catch-up time. It's perfectly natural, and it's a wonderful blessing to have three generations in one church,

but that is a time when we need to be on the lookout for others who don't have that, especially singles and visitors, people who struggle to feel they belong. But cults will emphasise the One over the individual, perhaps with uniforms, but also with compulsory fellowship, frequent meetings, maybe being required to live together, even in a commune. I read an introductory pamphlet put out by Gloriavale some time ago, which strongly emphasised this, making a great deal of Acts 2:44: "having all things in common." From their website:

... You'll find that we are a practical group of people, bound together by a common faith in God and the hope of salvation. While the Church at Gloriavale exists to help people save their souls, the community provides the physical structure in which that occurs. The provision of work, education, housing and a full social life allows us to create a society that is Christ-centred and working on Biblical principles. Here, the aim is to make a place where it is hard to live a selfish, worldly life, but easy to find God's will and to live in daily service to the Lord Jesus.

We seek to live a practical Christian life that mirrors life in Heaven, where there is perfect obedience to God, complete unity of thought, no self-will, no argument or strife, and no sin. We consider ourselves to have been born again into God's family, and as God's children, we honour God as our father and Jesus as our Lord and brother; in fact, the whole community operates as a huge family.

In terms of overall aims, there is a lot to like there. (In terms of its exact language and what that may or may not mean, there is a good deal of poor word choice, but we shall let that go for now.) Forgetting all the bad press they have received, some of it deserved, it is not quite all as rosy as written. For example, when children are born, they stay with their mothers for a few weeks and are then placed in a nursery while the mothers go back to their assigned task in the community work force. To me, that doesn't sound a lot different from the society they seek to escape. Evening meals are taken communally. That has always been some of the best family time I have ever known, both in

my parents' home and our own. How is a man really ruling his own household (1 Tim.3:4; again, note the singular possessive "own") in this set-up? He doesn't really have his own household. The Many are absorbed in the One.

We may also ask: is it supposed to be "easy to find God's will and live in daily service to the Lord Jesus"? Romans 7 would seem to indicate that the apostle Paul didn't find that to be the case. We can applaud the desire "to seem to live a practical Christian life that mirrors life in heaven, where there is ... no sin." But, without believing every tale told, the whole world knows (their erstwhile leader being exhibit A) that they have been no more successful in that than any other community of Christians whose members mix with the world every day.



But did Jesus mean us to live like this, in an oxygen tent, with its inevitable suppression of the individual? No, he did not. "I do not ask thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, I also have sent them into the world" (Jesus' prayer for the church just before he went to the cross; John 17:15-19). Not only does seeking to flee the world in that sense not work as a preventative of sin, Jesus never intended us to flee the world by literally seeking to go out of it. Neither did Paul. 1 Cor.5:9-10: "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I

Hopeful Christian, Gloriavale, at Dixon Park
westcoast.recollect.co.nz

Wherever one is required to submit to micro-management and whole-life control in the name of “having all things in common,” likewise flee. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolators; for then you would have to go out of the world.” He couldn’t speak like that without meaning that physically removing oneself from the world is not part of the Christian agenda.

The Many are as important to God as the One. The Individual is as important to God as the Community. Individuality is not meant to be suppressed. What does the whole history of Israel show, among other things, but that, despite Deut.4 saying that other nations should be able to look at Israel and say, “What people has a God like this people; what nation has laws like this nation?” (v.5-8), sin is in the heart, every believer’s heart. And no amount of external protection and boundary fences will keep out what is already in. So even in Israel, a church-society, individuality and individual responsibility were not suppressed. Nor privacy. In Israel, a creditor was forbidden from entering a debtor’s home to retrieve the collateral for an unpaid loan (Deut.24:10-11). Think of the numerous Proverbs warning against financial entanglement with others (Eg., 6:1-5; 11:15; 17:18; 20:16; 22:26-27; 27:12-13) – and believe me, there is more than one way to find yourself standing surety (guarantee) for another financially. And if you have been so foolish as thus to “come into the hand of your neighbour, go humble yourself and importune your neighbour. Do not give sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eyelids; deliver yourself like a gazelle from the hunter’s hand, and like a bird from the hand of the fowler.” That is a pretty urgent exhortation to maintain one’s financial independence; and from one’s neighbour, note; one’s fellow covenant member. I don’t think those warnings completely prohibit such, but be careful; do your due diligence; don’t over extend yourself. When the kingdom was established and settled under the Pax Solomona, it is described in 1 Kgs 4:25 as follows: “So Judah and Israel lived in safety, every man under his vine and his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba.” When the prophets wanted to describe conditions that would ultimately prevail under the Great Prince of Peace, they quoted these phrases, if anything strengthening the individuality expressed in them (Micah 4:4; Zech.3:10).

When we come to the New Testament, we find the same thing, notwithstanding the idea of the church

as the family of God coming through perhaps more strongly than in the Old (witness the numerous references to Christians being sons/children of God, Christ’s brethren, the household of God/faith, and so forth); notwithstanding Jesus’ teaching that we must love him more than father, mother, brother, sister (Mt.10:37); notwithstanding that our real (as in ultimate, eternal) family are “these who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21). Yet nowhere, apart from a misuse of Acts 2:44 can any hint be found that Christians are to live in some sort of commune that obliterates the individual or the natural, human family, or one’s responsibility to it. In 2 Thess.3:8-12, Paul reminds the believers in Thessalonika that: “... we did not ... eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labour and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example ... For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.” Similarly, in Eph.4:28, where he adds, “in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.” We must not forget that either, but that is not my concern in this article. In 1 Tim.5:4 and 8, Paul instructs us concerning the care of widows. Among his instructions, he says: “If any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family, and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God ... But if any one does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.” Note the frequent use of the singular possessive pronoun “own” in these passages. There is no holding all material goods, let alone women (and that happens, at least by cult-leaders), in common going on here.

Paul addresses the subject more or less directly in 1 Cor.7. Outward circumstances – whether one is married or unmarried, whether one is a slave or free – are not the main thing; as always, the heart is the main thing. Religious status at the time of one’s calling to Christ is not the main thing either. In fact, by contrast with the heart, circumcision

or uncircumcision are nothing (v.19). Enslaved by man, nevertheless we are God's freemen. Free in respect of men, nevertheless we are God's bond-slaves. Nevertheless, "if you are able also to become free, rather do that" (v.21) "You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men" (v.23). All his instruction in the whole chapter is "to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord" (v.35).

So what do we conclude? Wherever one is required to give up one's

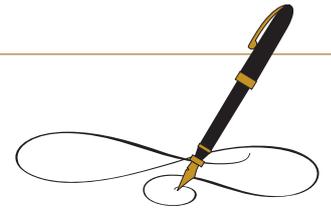
goods and one's independence, one's family independence, take the warning of Solomon (Prov.1:8-15): "My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent." They may not entice you to "lay in wait for blood ... (and) ... ambush the innocent." But if the bottom line is, "'Throw in your lot with us, we shall all have one purse.' My son, do not walk in the way with them. Keep your feet from their path." For it will be very nice for the leader's bottom line and slim pickings

for yours. Wherever one is required to submit to micro-management and whole-life control in the name of "having all things in common," likewise flee. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

Mr John Rogers is an emeritus minister and a member of the Reformed Church in Palmerston North.

Outward focus

Sally Davey



Why were the former days better than these?

This is a question commonly asked by Christians when they contemplate the world around them. It certainly looks as if the Christian church is a less powerful force in the West than it was a few generations ago; let alone centuries ago. Shouldn't we be trying to wrest back control of the culture and restore the respect that churches once had? Some Christians even think that using any means that present themselves, including political, are justified if only we can restore what has been lost. But what has happened to bring about this weakening of the Christian faith, and consequently, the weakening of the fabric of western societies? Those thoughts are surely behind the way modern Christians understand the question posed in Ecclesiastes 7:10.

Gloom about the post-Christian character of our world

There are certainly reasons to lament the passing of Christian influence. There is widespread ignorance of the central

events of the gospel. This Easter, there was almost no mention of Christ, his death or resurrection in public discussion – in the media or elsewhere. The only references I heard were limited to the "sacred music" component of concert radio over the weekend. Most English lecturers will tell you that when teaching literature from previous centuries they have to explain the meaning of every passing biblical allusion. It is a sad fact that few people know even the most basic things about the Bible.

There has also been a steady downgrading of morality in our culture; normalized by entertainment and now officially recognized in legislation. Sexual sin is treated as an increasingly normal "preference", and no one, it seems, dare question the right of others to live in whatever way they wish. Indeed, recent public statements of a few prominent Christians have quickly been labelled "hate speech", a social misdeed to which legal sanctions are increasingly applied. Whether they spoke as wisely as serpents

If trends suggest that things were better in the old days, why are Christians unwise to ask this question?

in the current context is open for discussion; but not a few of us are wondering how soon it will be before the Bible itself is condemned as “hate speech”.

The groundwork for this was laid by postmodern acceptance that any/all behavior is “OK for me” and that no one else dare challenge it. The only indecency is to condemn another’s preference. But, as Don Carson has so rightly pointed out, true tolerance, in its honourable western tradition, means fighting for the right of another to say what they think, even if you personally hate what they think and say¹.

As we have all noticed, there is increasing hostility toward us Christians

position of Christians in our culture – people generally do not sympathise with the suffering of dominant groups. In the West, most have not yet gotten used to seeing Christians as victims.

How were the former days better than these?

On the face of it, the former days were indeed better. There are some obvious facts: in the western world, the Christian church was generally respected, and at least the general outline of Christianity was held to be true. There was considerably more church-going than there is now, and on a typical Sunday, you would see families going to church rather than heading to the shops, the beach, or absorbing the offerings of Netflix.

The behaviour of society was more in line with biblical standards. It was no trouble to argue that something was wrong because it was harmful to yourself, your family, or to society – or even because God condemned it in the Bible. And because of this, if people wanted to indulge in immoral behavior, they would generally try and hide it from public view. For these reasons, western societies had much lower rates of divorce, family breakdown, and the dislocations and misery which ensue for generations. It is not hard to see that the culture was much healthier and happier as a result. From this quick assessment, it seems unmistakably true that the former days were better than these.

Why is it unwise to ask this?

And yet, the preacher in Ecclesiastes does not pose the question in this way. He raises it by way of quotation as something that is unwise to ask. But – if trends suggest that things were better in the old days, why are Christians unwise to ask this question?

First, it actually flies in the face of historical reality. Ask historians, who ought to know. They are often initially drawn to their profession through strong personal interest in a particular time period or culture or place – or sometimes through the romantic pull of the past, which offers a gentler, quieter simpler world order – and nostalgic glimpses of a nicer place to inhabit.

Almost all will tell you, though, that when they begin to dig more deeply, investigation of the surviving source material disabuses them of any sense that the past was “better than now”. The common sins of humanity were simply expressed in a different way – or perhaps



“The Yalta Conference, February 1945: Three leaders consigning millions to another 45 years of Soviet domination”.

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-churchill-roosevelt-and-stalin-planned-to-end-the-second-world-war>

as we try to defend our convictions about the wrongness of certain behaviour. Interestingly, other groups which hold similarly strict views, eg Muslims, are tolerated because they are seen as a cultural minority whose quirks should be respected in western societies.

As more and more commentators are noticing, from Prince Charles downwards, Christians are the religious group facing the most persecution around the world right now. It is perhaps too embarrassing for the liberal western media to admit: for a long time they have called for protecting the rights of everybody – except Christians. Probably this has a lot to do with the previously dominant

different sins were more frequent than those observable in the present day.

You may think of the United States as a Christian nation. It surely has been blessed by the influence of fine Christians in its history. Nevertheless, when I was studying the founding fathers during the presidency of Ronald Reagan – a time when many Christians were attempting to reclaim their past as a nation founded on Christian principles, what did I find? That many of the revered founding fathers were deists whose political principles owed more to radical Enlightenment skepticism than they did to biblical truth.

Every age exhibits opposition to Christ in some form or other. Some examples from recent centuries: brutality, neglect of children, exploitation of workers, political corruption, denial of biblical truth in the form of attacks on the authenticity of texts and their authorship etc, common, though hidden, sexual sins. During the earlier part of the twentieth century frequent wars gave rise to outrageous cruelty and mass murder. On the diplomatic front smaller nations were betrayed when it was expedient (Czechoslovakia in 1938; eastern European nations in the aftermath of World War Two). In the eighteenth century slavery was a terrible blight on several western countries – and on one could go. History simply explodes the narrative that “those days were better than these”.

The Christianity which was dominant was often counterfeit. This so often becomes the case when Christianity enjoys the position of dominant religion. Not all that calls itself Christian is Christianity, as we should all know well. Liberalism is not Christianity, since it denies the authority and authenticity of God’s Word. Sects which claim to believe part of the truth, but not the whole truth, are not Christianity. Nor is any faith which adds something to biblical truth or removes something from it. When gazing nostalgically at more religious ages of the West, we should be careful to discern not just the words spoken and written, but what was meant by them, and the fruits that they produced in the populace. Not all were true and good.

The question is also folly because Jesus told us to expect hostility. A position of honour is in fact a rare situation for Jesus’s followers in this world. Ask any Christian in China, or India, or the former Soviet world. You will hear more stories of suffering than of respect. Even if you look carefully at the experience

of genuine, Bible-believing evangelical Christians in the West you will also find a more sobering reality. The Wesleys and George Whitefield, William Wilberforce and J.C. Ryle all endured considerable opposition in the “Christian” England of their day. Jesus warned his disciples: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but you are not of the world ... A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” (John 15:18-20). The apostle John later wrote: “Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.” (1 John 3:13) Jesus did not



The social ills of gin drinking in 19th century England.

promise us a comfortable place in this world. Indeed, if we find ourselves experiencing this, we should perhaps be asking: are we being sufficiently faithful with the message of the gospel entrusted to us?

In view of the warnings in the New Testament epistles about what to expect in the “last days”, the question about better days also seems naive. The writers of these epistles warned Jesus’ followers about false teaching (which would undermine negligent churches), of treachery from within and of hostility from outside the church. To expect comfort, ease and honour in this world is dangerously complacent and possibly even arrogant, given these warnings.

It is not wisdom to indulge in romantic dreams about a better past, or to wish we could have lived back then. Not only do we probably harbor inac-

curate ideas of what it was like, but we're probably also guilty of discontent. God has chosen the years of our births and deaths; and the culture in which we would live. There is work here for us to do, among those who share this time and culture with us. As Paul said to the Athenians of his day: "he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him." (Acts 17:26-7). Who better to help people find God than those of us who grew up in the same culture and understand their thinking? If we don't help them find God, who will?

It is always useful to remember the job description Jesus gave us in the closing words of Matthew's gospel:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In view of that last promise, were there ever better days than now?²

Notes

- 1 See Don Carson's book, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2012)
- 2 In case you're still doubtful about my conclusions, you might like to read Derek Kidner's commentary on Ecclesiastes 7:10. See Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (The Bible Speaks Today Series, Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, 1976), p. 67.

Letters from New Zealand

D. G. Vanderpyl

January/February 1983

As I was contemplating my letter for the first issue of the New Year, a remark from an elder came to mind as he looked towards the end of his term of office at the close of the year. "These were four long years," he said. "I am exhausted, I feel burned out." "Tja," I thought, "another burnout." Don't we all feel that way at times, especially when the old year comes to its close and we, too, seem to have come to the end of our flight. We often start our tasks with intensity and with great visions before us, then comes reality and often with it the monotony of the many "repeats" in our activities. With some it means the termination of their effective use of talents and gifts, due to the exhaustion of their propellant. Others need a good night's sleep, a second honeymoon or a spell from what they have been doing, to rejuvenate them for a new period and burst of activities.

That's why I am thankful for time limits when, instead of a long, straight and endless road, we can have our bends, crossings and windings through hilly country to take breaks and catch our breath again. A good rest is recognised in God's Law in the Sabbath observance and Jesus told his disciples, too, to "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." A disconnected phone, a little sign on your front door to ask any visitor to please not disturb as the occupant is resting, can make your own home a nice, quiet place too.

I've got some interesting items of news, by the way. Great news actually, very progressive thinking in at least two of our churches. The trouble is, however, that my lips and typewriter have been sealed until further notice. I could easily fill a page about it, but it is not to be. I have to look for other news for our readers. Sorry about that.

Reformation Day fell on the Lord's Day last year and most of our churches used a special feature pamphlet emphasising the fact that through new translations God's Word is being printed in many languages. And still, it is estimated that there are over 3,000 language groups, representing more than

20 million people where the Bible or even a small portion of it has not yet come into print.

In one of the bulletins of that Sunday, the pastor writes, "The best way to celebrate the event of the Reformation is by being Reformed – in fact, as well as in name." He then continues to state some of the reasons:

- That the Bible is the only infallible rule of our faith and practice;
- That salvation is by grace alone;
- That we must emphasise the priesthood of all believers; and
- The importance of corporate witnesses.

The latter is certainly one of the reasons for the existence of our churches in New Zealand. Not just the odd individual, but the whole denomination must believe it and teach it. The Avondale church has a special group of Reformed Nuiea Islanders who joined as a group about three years ago. Just recently they selected six of their members for a very special task in a programme of spiritual renewal and growth. Another matter of growth in that same church is that the car park is becoming rather full on Sunday mornings. That could be prompted either by affluence of the members or by numerical growth.

Wainuiomata reports growth too and needs an extra elder to cope with the work of oversight. They have some problems too. Church chairs are disappearing at a fast rate, which has made their pastor offer a bribe of one free cup of coffee for every chair returned to the church.

Most of the readers, if not all, have at some time in their lives travelled overseas to visit relatives and birthplaces. Without exception they must have visited the duty-free shops at the airports. Did you know that travellers all over the world spent an amount of 26 million dollars on tax-free articles, and that 90% of that 26 million is spent on alcoholic beverages, tobacco and perfume! That leaves only 10% for the rest such as stereos, toys etc. Are you surprised? I am too!

Abridged

Self inquiry

J C Ryle Part 1

“How do we do about our souls?” In handling this question, I think the shortest plan will be to suggest a list of subjects for self-inquiry, and to get them in order. I invite every reader of this paper to join me in calm, searching self-examination, for a few short minutes. I desire to speak to myself as well as to you. I approach you not as an enemy, but as a friend. “My heart’s desire and prayer to God is that you may be saved” (Romans 10:1). Bear with me if I say things which at first sight look harsh and severe. Believe me, he is your best friend who tells you the most truth.

(1) Let me ask, in the first place, “DO WE EVER THINK ABOUT OUR SOULS AT ALL?” Thousands of English people, I fear, cannot answer that question satisfactorily. They never give the subject of religion any place in their thoughts. From the beginning of the year to the end they are absorbed in the pursuit of business, pleasure, politics, money, or self-indulgence of some kind or another. Death, and judgment, and eternity, and heaven, and hell, and a world to come, are never calmly looked at and considered. They live on as if they were never going to die, or rise again, or stand at the bar of God, or receive an eternal sentence! They do not openly oppose religion, for they have not sufficient reflection about it to do so; but they eat and drink, and sleep, and get money, and spend money, as if religion was a mere fiction and not a reality. They are neither Romanists, nor Socinians, nor infidels, nor High Church, nor Low Church, nor Broad Church. They are just nothing at all, and do not take the trouble to have opinions. A more senseless and unreasonable way of living cannot be conceived; but they do not pretend to reason about it. They simply never think about God, unless frightened for few minutes by sickness, death in their families, or an accident.

Barring such interruptions, they appear to ignore religion altogether, and hold on to their way cool and undisturbed, as if there were nothing worth thinking of except this world. It is hard to imagine a life more unworthy of an immortal creature than such a life as I have just described, for it reduces a man to the level of a beast. But it is literally and truly the life of multitudes in England; and as they pass away their place is taken by multitudes like them. The picture, no doubt, is horrible, distressing, and revolting; but, unhappily, it is only too true. In every large town, in every market, on every stock-exchange, in every club, you may see specimens of this class by the scores - men who think of everything under the sun except the one thing needful--the salvation of their souls. Like the Jews of old they do not “consider their ways,” they do not “consider their latter end;” they do not “consider that they do evil” (Isaiah 1:3; Haggai 1:7; Deuteronomy 32:29; Ecclesiastes 5:1). Like Gallio they “care for none of these things:” they are not in their way. (Acts 18:17) If they prosper in the world, and get rich, and succeed in their line of life, they are praised, and admired by their contemporaries. Nothing succeeds in England like success! But for all this they cannot live forever. They will have to die and appear before the bar of God, and be judged; and then what will the end be? When a large class of this kind exists in our country, no reader need wonder that I ask whether he belongs to it. If you do, you ought to have a mark set on your door, as there used to be a mark on a plague-stricken house two centuries ago, with the words, “Lord have mercy on us,” written on it. Look at the class I have been describing, and then look at your own soul.



*“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”
Prov 1:7*

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try is a desire to provide for the spiritual and physical needs of the Kurdish widows and orphans who are hungry to hear the gospel after the suffering they have endured. This is true religion. (Jas 1:27), bringing the gospel of hope that can truly transform lives.

As Mark and the other Christian contacts continue this work, we ask that you pray for his ministry. Pray for opportunities to share the gospel. Pray that many would come to believe in Jesus, as many

have already. Pray for safety for Mark and the other men who are publicly sharing the gospel in the Kurdish mountain range and who are regularly under threat of losing their lives. Pray that the Lord would also change the hearts of their enemies.

The NDC remains grateful to the Lord for leading us to this ministry. It is a privilege to have found a man who is willing to risk his life so that the gospel and practical help can be given in God's

name and to be able to share in this. We are thankful for the generous spirit of the churches who have given to this cause and ask that you continue to remember this work in Iraq, the men that God is using for his work and the recipients of the aid and the Christian gospel which changes lives, even the lives of Muslim refugees.

In the love of Christ, NDC

An ideology of fear versus a theology of fear

Graeme Zuidema

There is no doubt in my mind that in today's world, fear is often used as a motivational tool. In any upcoming election, political parties will normally use some form of fear to scare a constituency from voting for the opposition. Sports' teams will regularly use fearful rhetoric before a big game to trouble their opponent. The media, to achieve a higher viewership, will use fear in their daily reporting to retain the interest of their audience. And it would be remis of me to also not mention insurance companies; their whole industry is built on fear. Fear of thefts, accidents, liability, natural disasters and death.

Now, I am not saying that fear is all bad. It is good to have a respectful fear of heights, because falling hurts. It is good to have a respectful fear of water, especially for younger children and those who cannot swim. So, some fear is good, and it would be unwise not to take notice.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that many of us, if not all of us from time to time, begin and live out our lives as individuals, in our marriage and families and in our churches and denomination with some form of an ideology of fear.

An ideology of fear

So, what do I mean by an ideology of

fear? Well, the smart guys will tell you an ideology is a system of ideas and ideals that form the basis of your outlook on life. Therefore, if I am saying that we struggle with an ideology of fear, I am merely stating that fear is one of the ideas and ideals that govern our thoughts and practices. Sometimes this shapes our world view. Allow me to apply this to the categories above.

As individuals, some of us may be stricken by fear of what others think of us. Maybe as individuals, our fear is not knowing who we are. We come to this conclusion because there is much talk about identity, and it has got some of us in a state of flux about who we really are. As the adage goes: We are not who we think we are. We are not who other people think we are. We are often who we think other people think we are.

Perhaps it is not as individuals, but an ideology of fear drives our marriage. Instead of trust in God and in each other for the basis of a loving relationship, we can easily let fear become the foundation. Fear that she will stop loving me; fear that he will find a better looker; fear that when poverty comes through the door, love will go out the window. Fear that his or her drinking or pornography addiction is not just a fad but may end our marriage because we are too embar-

rassed and fearful to call out for help.

If fear is not in our marriage, maybe we are fearful of what people may say about our parenting or how we educate our children and where we choose to spend our money. It seems to me that fear often restricts many of us from reaching out when we are in need; when our family life is not going in a rosy way, but it looks to us that everyone else has got it all together!

Perhaps there is evidence of an ideology of fear in our churches and our denomination. Fear, whether used directly or indirectly, can be used to squash any discussion or further study about contentious issues where fair-minded Christian people disagree. Fear of change sometimes drives the style of worship, broader participation in worship, dress, the use of audio and visual aids, songs, an alternate Bible version, interaction with other local denominations, differing methodological approaches to church planting, friendships with non-Christians, a study on why we do not see more lower socio-economic people joining our churches. Sometimes we even fear to discuss why we have not grown numerically for sixty-years as a denomination, let alone, our glaring problem of retaining pastors in the ministry or in our denomination. Then there are the current theological discussions that our sister churches and

church in ecumenical relationship are wrestling with, like the purpose of the second worship service – especially with dwindling numbers, women in office and what is our overall philosophy of ministry. And there are plenty more.

Nevertheless, having been around New Zealand for some time now, I am *fearful* that fear will more often than not hinder many of us from discussing and studying any of the above. In fact, just having this article in *Faith in Focus* may be fearful for some readers and could even elicit a ‘thin-edge-of-the-wedge’ response. This is a real problem and one of the ‘elephants’ in the room which

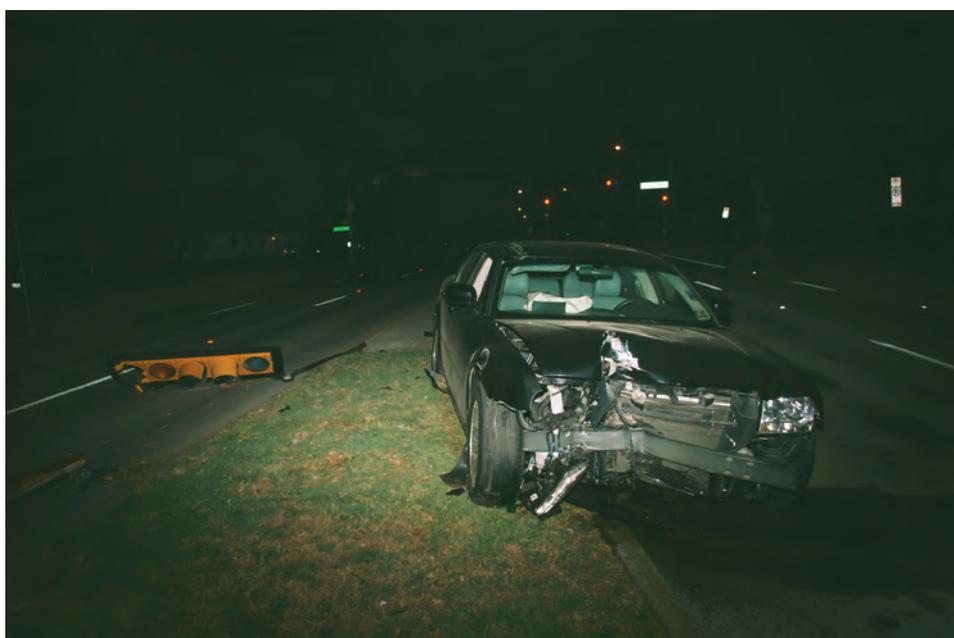


Photo by Matthew T Rader on Unsplash

we need to confront in our discussions. Therefore, may I suggest that the only way we can deal with an ideology of fear head-on is to have a theology of fear.

A theology of fear

A theology of fear, ‘fear’ meaning reverence and awe, is found distinctly in God’s word, which is our sound and sure foundation. Proverbs 1:7 where it states that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge ...” Here we see in Proverbs that our personal and corporate commitment to the reverence of God is the basis of true knowledge. It is interesting that *The Message* states that we are to, “Start with God – the first step in learning is bowing down to God”.¹ It is a reverence and reliance upon God and who he is as revealed in his word that must be our basis. Furthermore,

Proverbs 14:27 declares, “The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life ...” Recently, I had the privilege of leading the talks at a Cadets and GEMS camp. It was a wonderful experience, but it was also stinking hot. The blessing of this camp site, however, is that it is located by a never-ending fountain of water. Fresh and cold, reviving our bodies daily. Having the fear of the LORD is like having this fountain of life-giving water funnelling into our souls, continually informing us of how we are to live and discuss relevant issues. What is more, Proverbs 22:4 also makes known that “Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honour and life”. It is interesting that the writer links humility with the fear of the LORD. But in the same way it is very profound. To realise that the fear of the LORD is the basis that keeps us humble and gives us life.

And there we have it. An ideology of fear at its heart is not humble at all but reeks of pride. It was an ideology of fear that led Adam and Eve to think that they were lacking wisdom in the Garden of Eden, and sin came into the world (Ge 3:1ff.). It was an ideology of fear that continued to play on the Israelites’ mind when they were in the wilderness; “Send us back to Egypt!” they cried (Nu 14:3). It was an ideology of fear that hindered many leaders to not publicly profess faith in Christ “for they loved praise from men more than praise from God” (Jn 12:41). And it will be an ideology of fear that cripples us in our lives.

Nonetheless, it was a Spirit-wrought theology of fear that rid the thief on the cross of his ideology of fear; to fear his saviour and place his trust in him as he hung on the cross next to him dying for the sins of his people (Lk 23:40-43). It was a Spirit-wrought theology of fear that strengthened the church as it grew in numbers, living in the fear of their Lord (Ac 9:31). It was a Spirit-wrought theology of fear that drove Paul to oppose Peter because of his fear of associating with the Gentiles (Ga 2:11ff.). It was a Spirit-wrought theology of fear that led the Reformers into challenging the status quo of empty traditionalism. The point I am making is that having a Spirit-wrought rock-solid theology of fear removes fear and motivates God’s people to ultimately rely and depend on God and his word and not on an empty ideology.

Therefore, as individuals, let us cling to a theology of fear that prepares and grounds us in God, especially when the

world throws all sorts of confusion at us. Let us take hold of a theology of fear when our marriage is not going well, for this theology will motivate us to reach out for help; who knows, we may be surprised that others are struggling with similar issues. Let us grasp tightly to a theology of fear when parenting is hard work and we wonder, “are we the only parents troubled by our children’s concerns?” A theology of fear frees us of our embarrassment and shame about our short comings and failings as parents.

A theology of fear reminds us that at the cross, Jesus took care of our prideful

ideology of fear, and saved us from the fearful wrath of God, because there is no fear in God’s love for his people. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment (1 Jn 4:18). And let us grip a theology of fear when we as churches and denomination are faced with legitimate concerns, questions and ideas that deserve and warrant our attention. We as God’s people in New Zealand can go confidently with a theology of fear knowing that the risen and reigning Christ will build his church and the gates of Hades will never overcome it (Mt 16:18).

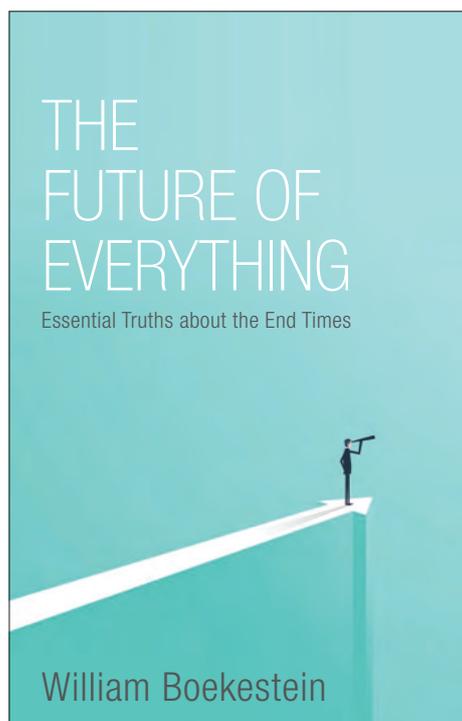
So, an ideology of fear versus a theology of fear? This year and beyond, let us approach all things with a Spirit wrought rock-solid theology of fear for the praise and glory of God’s great name.

Note

1 Peterson, Eugene H., *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Laridian, 2002. *Pocket Bible 2010*.

Mr Graeme Zuidema is a minister in the Reformed Church in Pukekohe.

Books in focus



Book Review: *The Future of Everything*

by William Boekestein

Reviewed by Hans Vaatstra

William Boekestein’s volume, *The Future of Everything*, is a detailed, yet concise treatment of the doctrine of the Last Things. Divided into four main sections beginning with the question – why we should study eschatology? and followed by discussions of personal, general, and applied eschatology. Study questions on each chapter make the book suitable for Bible study groups.

In the first section Boekestein provides a timely and convincing case for the importance of studying eschatology. For example, at some funerals it is asserted that the dearly departed is in a better place without substantiating the assertion in any way. In such cases Boekestein says that eschatology becomes “vain dreaming and the dogmatisation of our wishes,... a sign of Biblical illiteracy.” On the other hand, careful study of biblical eschatology helps us understand our place in redemptive history, gives believers hope in the face of suffering and anticipates our meeting our saviour. In this first section the author also helps readers to see how necessary it is to have a sound grasp of biblical, Christ-centred hermeneutics especially when studying prophecy. He writes “It is for lack of a biblically informed hermeneutic that some visions of the end are so complicated or wildly speculative that the author’s intent is

completely corrupted.”

The next section on personal eschatology helps the reader work through a range of practical issues when thinking about death, and includes wise advice on the Christian funeral. Eulogies, according to Boekestein “tend to crowd out the preaching time, provide ample opportunity to communicate bad theology, and exaggerate the deceased’s good qualities, minimizing their need for God’s grace.” This section also contains a clear explanation of the intermediate state, the general resurrection, day of judgement, and the millennium. The author is careful not to let such topics as millenarianism detract from the main goal of our eschatology, which is to be with Christ. The question “What’s your view of the millennium?” isn’t a terrible question. But it is a terrible replacement for the wonder and awe we should experience when we reflect on how God will resolve this present age.”

Do you long to worship without mixed feelings? Do you long for perfected fellowship with God and your brothers and sisters in Christ? The book’s section on heaven offers a clear and detailed explanation of what we can look forward to in the life to come and how that encourages us in this life to pray, enjoy the beauty of God’s creation now and enjoy closer fellowship within our churches.

In the fourth and last section of the book, ‘Applied Eschatology’, Boekestein encourages wholehearted participation in church and kingdom endeavours, since

“godliness matters because everything matters.” He explains this with the following example. “During a particularly confusing time of life, Sharon Creech’s fictional protagonist in *Walk Two Moons* pondered this proverb: “In the course of a lifetime what does it matter?” If humans are merely infinitesimal specks of dust being poured into the black hole of eternity, then everything is meaning-

less. But if the God of heaven is drawing us into a kingdom that will never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44), then everything matters. The Christian message—a story of the ultimate establishment of God’s kingdom through the restoring power of the gospel—undermines competing narratives that degrade human dignity. It is difficult to imagine a message more relevant for a meaning-starved culture that

has become dubious of the old narrative of divine salvation.”

William Boekestein has written a thorough, concise, pastoral and very practical book on eschatology. Since we are all going to die one day it is relevant to us all, especially in the way it helps us look forward to heaven and the everlasting promises of God – I highly recommend this book.

Letter to the editor

RE: THE LAW IN OUR LITURGIES

Dear Sir,

With great interest, I appreciated the articles on the Law (Ten Commandments) in the April 2018 issue of Faith in Focus. But as brought up in the Anglican Church, I consider that to say the Law is not a major element in its service order is a mistake. The Commandments are printed surprisingly often in its Book of Common Prayer. And it is said that only a well-informed Anglican can fully understand an Anglican, for this needs a detailed knowledge of both the theology and the true history of that church. So I write with empathy, not in criticism of the article’s author.

The Anglican forms of service in the past 500+ years are in this amazing Book of Common Prayer, which contains fully structured forms for several occasions (e.g. danger at sea, thanksgivings, sickness, ordinations etc.) During the 20th century some efforts were made to modify or modernise the Prayer Book’s services, content and language. But this only brought its own difficulties.

The Book of Common Prayer is respected in all the types, languages, translations and countries of the complex Anglican denomination. Yet each country’s church is quite independent.

The main services held in the denomination are Holy Communion, Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. A Church Calendar of readings spread through these services, ensures that each year

the *whole Bible is read aloud from the lectern*. Therefore in due time the commandments are read as the day’s ‘lesson’. So except on special celebrations like Easter, the Bible readings in church may have no relationship to the sermon being preached, a puzzlement and curiosity to visitors.

The Prayer Book’s authority is vested in *‘The 39 Articles of Religion’*, which take the same place in the Anglican Church as is held in our churches by the Westminster Confession or the Heidelberg Catechism. Take a look at each of these three areas of importance in this Book of Common Prayer:

1. Holy Communion is held in importance *every Sunday in all churches*, and in some it is held also during the week. The Ten Commandments (The Law) are prescribed to be read by the minister at the start of the Communion Service, with the congregation responding after each separate one, “Lord have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law.” Repetition makes you think.

2. Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer do not have the Ten Commandments written into their services, but each prescribe a ‘General Confession’, preceded by a different morning and evening set of Bible verses, both sets reminding of our sinful state, and a confession specifically to the *breaking of God’s LAWS* (The Ten Commandments). Many worshippers will have heard these read at an early morning Communion service, but if they have not attended this, their knowledge of the Ten is taken for granted. *Why taken for granted?* Because *they are printed in full in the Anglican Catechism*, a catechism stipulated to be learnt by heart *in preparation for confir-*

mation (profession of faith).

3. The 39 Articles. The Anglican Catechism is much shorter than the Reformed Church Catechism, but comparing the two, as far as I could see each topic of The Law in the 39 Articles of Religion in the Anglican proclamation, agrees fully with the equivalent topic in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, bar one (the article calling for loyalty to the Monarch of the British Commonwealth!)

So communicant members should have learnt a full knowledge of God’s Law and its importance. *The authority of these Thirty-Nine Articles has never been rescinded.*

The Conclusion of all this is that the Law is a major element in the Anglican service order.

I thank God that your article sent me to study more intensely than ever before, *The Book of Common Prayer*. An amazing book, full of Scripture, Biblical from beginning to end.

Having lived through times of struggle, perplexity and attack, I have lived also to see great blessing, growth and increasing fullness of response to the love of the Lord, in both the Anglican church of my childhood, and in The Reformed Churches of New Zealand of my old age. Both have an amazing heritage. Let us all obey the Law and appreciate it in our services. Let us say of this heritage: *“Praise the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me, Bless His Holy Name.”*



Kurios Conference

The New Plymouth Reformed Church hosted the Kurios Conference 2019 on Saturday 6 April. The theme of the conference was Truth. The speaker Dr Phillip Scheepers from the Reformed Theological College in Melbourne had four presentations based on the themes "Truth: a crisis in the West; Truth and the self; Truth and relationships; Truth and society". Each topic had several points and plenty of application to go with them.

One very poignant point that was made is "You cannot talk about truth without the gospel of Christ, Who is the Truth".

Those attending were from a variety of churches in the Taranaki region as well as people who travelled from Auckland, Wellington and places inbetween.

It was a well run conference with warm fellowship, good food and it was well worth the effort to travel up to New Plymouth.

Plans have already begun for the 2020 Kurios Conference.

