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faith in FOCUS

Volume 49/8, September 2022

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the
Jonah
PROBLEM

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| A waste of good preaching? | 3 |
| Jonah: Grace for the Unworthy | 5 |
| Loving our LGBTQIA+ Friends?? | 7 |
| De Moor on Science and Scripture | 10 |
| World in focus | 12 |
| Focus on the Christian life | 16 |
| Focus on faith | 18 |
| Missions in focus | 19 |
| Life and death amongst the Lopit | 19 |

Published monthly for the Reformed Churches of New Zealand

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Printed by: Flying Colours

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Copy Deadline:

Six weeks preceding the month of publication. Church and family notices are free, subject to sufficient space and editorial acceptance.

All correspondence regarding distribution and payment of subscriptions to:

The Secretary:

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Subscription per volume:

\$40.00 (eleven issues)
Bulk Rate: \$40.00
Overseas: \$60.00
Electronically Mailed (overseas only): \$40.00

Editorial

In the time after my own conversion, one of the Christian guys that I worked with made the offhand comment, “you are the last person I expected to see coming into the kingdom”. At the time, I really didn’t think too much of it. However, as I ponder the subject of our theme this month, I wonder if that comment may have had something to do with an idea that our churches are somehow for the more respectable rather than the profane and ungodly.

I was born in the 1950s and grew up in a counterculture of sex, drugs and rock-n-roll, long hair and flared pants. I was a motorcycle riding, Volkswagen driving surfy and a product of that age. It was a time of the Vietnam War and protests and conscientious objection, pacifism and growing egalitarianism and many things weird.

Our post-WWII society was being heavily influenced in a variety of directions. The sexual revolution was born out of this age, with its illicit permissiveness, promoted by media such as Hollywood, the music industry, and television. It was all considered quite normal, it was touted as liberation. Yet if anything, it was the promotion of a godless immoral society.

However, by God’s grace, there was the church preaching the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, offering the good news of salvation with its infinite worth to a society of misfits who seemed to love death and destruction more than life. It was the real message of liberation to a perishing humanity. It was a message of love to the loveless. But thinking back to that comment I received the question now needs to be asked: “do we have low expectations, do we love all without distinction or do we suffer from the Jonah problem?”

Would we talk to the Shi’ite Muslim, the Hindu or Atheist about their faith and worldview? What about our happy-go-lucky neighbour next door, or maybe the homeless guy you encounter on the street?

Anecdotally, I know of occasions where people have said: “I wouldn’t talk to a Muslim”. Why? Is it fear or do we suffer the same problem as Jonah did? Maybe deep down we consider some less worthy of the kingdom like the Assyrian’s living in Nineveh, who were mortal enemies of the people of Israel.

C. John Miller in his book *Evangelism & Your Church* (P&R, p7) makes this comment: “Yet somewhere in the years between Calvin’s century and ours, our working theology has become abbreviated in a way that would have dismayed such a pioneer in missions. Our emphasis on the wonderful doctrines of grace has somehow come to mask and perhaps (in our minds) even justify a deep-seated indifference to the lost.”

Our contributors investigate the problem of Jonah, his attitude to God’s grace and how that applies to us as those saved by grace. *S.D.G.*

Featured in this issue:

Mr Reinier Noppers raises a significant question.

Mr Erik Stolte considers grace abounding to sinners.

Mr Albert Couperus implores us to step out of our comfort zone.

Mr Wes Bredenhof takes us on a journey in church history looking at science and Scripture – a question of hermeneutics.

Miss Jenny Davies of MAF South Sudan writes about Miss Marlene van Tonder and life and death amongst the Lopit people.

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.

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The Jonah problem

REINIER NOPPERS

A waste of good preaching?

When God does anything, He does it on a grand scale! God always thinks big! When He made the earth, He also made the entire universe, the stars, the sun, the moon: that entire expanse! And why? Simply because He could!

When He made Adam, and then Eve, God was not content with just another type of animal, but created humanity in His likeness and image, called us His friends, and then entrusted us with this entire world!

Even when Adam sinned, despite the punishment of exile from paradise and physical death, God did not simply walk away but presented the hope for all generations throughout all ages, the victory that God would bring in Jesus Christ!

When God called Abraham, He didn't just say: come, just you, and follow me: He said: "I will make you into a mighty nation, and through you all the peoples of the earth would be blessed" (Gen 12). Israel was set apart, not so they could be God's only people, but that they would be a blessing to all people!

The prophet Ezekiel declared: "*God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but desires rather that they turn from their ways and live*" (Ezekiel 33:11).

So then, when Jesus was born, the angel proclaimed, "*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people*" (Luke 2:10). And the heavenly choir sang gloriously of good will to men and peace upon the whole earth!

For God's salvation was never meant for just one race or one single people.

When God thinks big He thinks big most of all in salvation! His offer of grace extends to the ends of the earth, and His love is never limited by distance, by colour, or by race! Nor does God only save those who are loveable, adorable or cuddly:

As Jesus declared: "*I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring*

them also" (John 10:16).

And we? I am sure that the words of the Great Commission as commanded by Jesus would find wholehearted agreement amongst us all – but what about in our hearts? And then our actions?

When God sent Jonah to the wicked Assyrians, to their great city of Nineveh, it appears Jonah thought this would be a waste of good preaching.

Why would God offer the possibility of redemption to the very same people who just a few decades later would be responsible for the destruction of Israel? Why would you waste the gospel on "... *the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder – no end to the prey!*" Why would you waste this effort on a people who had taken others "*into captivity; her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street; for her honoured men lots were cast, and all her great men were bound in chains.*" "... *upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?*" (Nahum 3:1, 10, 19) It is easy to think like that – to weigh those to whom we might share the gospel – to weigh them by some standard that we think is perfectly appropriate – but is it right?

Jonah's issue was not whether they were *beyond* saving, in his considered opinion, they were not worth saving. He knew the God he served, as he states "*I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*" (Jonah 4:2)

So let me ask. Could God's grace include someone like Vladimir Putin? Is he worth saving? Would bringing the gospel to him be a waste of good preaching? What thoughts go through our minds as we consider this question – and what are the standards by which we come to a conclusion on this matter?

Take a moment and bring to mind the

Jonah balked at his task because of the abounding love of God. Jonah's theology had no place for the salvation of the Gentiles, and particularly those evil Ninevites.

Does ours?

faces of the persons, descriptions of the types, images of the groups, of whom we tend to be more judgemental and critical.

Is it those who do drugs – and destroy many lives through this despicable trade? Is it those who push gender ideology, creating confusion in the minds of our young and vulnerable? Is it those who peddle open and free sexuality for all and sundry? Those who advocate for abortion and euthanasia, or simply those who hold out their hands again and again for all the blessings of life – with an ever growing thirst for more?

The drunks, the down and outs, the ex-prisoners, the prostitutes, those with a police record; single parents, the ones who are just a bit too hard to love: and maybe we even think that they deserve all they get?



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What about educated versus uneducated, earrings in their ears or their noses ... ?

What sort of personality rubs us up the wrong way – and therefore we avoid at all costs? Do we feel justified when their sin is obvious, their anti-God stance blatant, their enmity to faith consistently brutal?

Where would we draw the line?

Now some suggest that Jonah was simply being wise – why put our life in such danger – after all, if the Assyrians killed him that would be the end of any message he could bring! And perhaps that is where we draw our lines – questions of personal safety and the potential continuance of serving the Lord – but remember the apostle Paul's words when faced with death – *“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to*

live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.” (Philippians 1:22-23)

Surely we should leave life and death in God's hands, and in the meantime obey?

Some suggest Jonah was on a 'hiding to nothing' – his mission *“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”* (Jonah 1:2) It was a call to condemn, a message against gross sin and depravity – not a comfortable message by anyone's standards – and who knows how they might respond? In fact, we could almost convince ourselves that they won't listen, they are too set in their ways, too deep in sin to even hear the call.

But again – surely the matter of a specific response is before the Lord and not ours to determine? After all: He came to us, undeserving sinners, and offered each one of us complete forgiveness, freedom from sin, salvation and life eternal in Jesus Christ, even though we only deserved hell and death!

He continues to love us all despite our failings, our weak struggles of faith, our deliberate and open sins, our hidden and private sins. He sees us only in Jesus Christ, who gave His life for us on the cross!

God still calls us each to heaven, not because we are perfect, not because we deserve it, but because that is His promise to all who believe!

God offers eternal life to those who are spiritually dead. He offers, through His prophet Jonah, to His people and even to Nineveh, the fullness of life in Jesus Christ.

Some even suggest that Jonah is concerned for the honour of His God – after all, to preach a message of judgement and then have the Ninevites repent so that the judgement is not carried out – surely that would reflect badly on God and his certain word? To that we simply suggest: let God worry about His honour – the command was clear, and was to be obeyed without equivocation.

Jonah balked at his task because of the abounding love of God. Jonah's theology had no place for the salvation of the Gentiles, and particularly those evil Ninevites.

Does ours?

Instead of looking through our own carefully tinted glasses as we consider those around us, we look to Jesus, the perfect Word of God, who came to save sinners!

We need to fully appreciate both the awesome privilege and rich blessing that comes with being called children of God,

excited at the prospect of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with all whom God has placed before us, and those we are yet to meet.

Our Lord took the time to speak to Gentiles! A woman at the well! To touch and heal the lepers, to sit and dine with tax collectors, to take time for a Roman centurion, those who were banished because of demon possession, and so on.

He said; *"I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."* (Matt 9:13) *"Love your neighbour as yourself."* (Matt 22:39) And he was so scathing of any who would consider another human being as less than themselves.

Hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, in prison – the issue is not where they are, or who they are, or what they are – the issue is what they need. And most of all, people need the good news of salvation.

Jesus even went so far as to proclaim: *"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."* (Matthew 25:40)

Do we have room in our thinking and theology for those who don't fit into our mould? Can we find a place for thoughts of love and compassion to those who we think

are the bottom of the barrel? Do we classify people as good and not so good: those who are worth preaching to and those who are not? Those worth saving: and those not?

In some ways, Jonah ran away for fear of the success that God might actually save some horrible people!

Are we afraid that bringing the gospel may bring in some undesirables: that it may upset our finely balanced appletart? That it may cause some people to come in here with whom we would just rather not be seen with, or are just too difficult to include and enfold into our families?

We can run from God in our own way, but God's plan is still there. We can run from God, and say we are all busy, we haven't got time for Kingdom work! We too can run from God and wonder: is it all worthwhile? Will they respond, will they listen or not, will we get kicked around, should we keep trying and in the meantime sit around and do nothing?

We can wait for just the right moment to speak to our neighbours: but if we wait for that it may never come. Can we afford to wait that long?

The King, our sovereign Lord, has spoken!

He gave a direct command!

Yes, Isaiah had a glorious view of the King to drive him on; Jeremiah a confidential conference with his Father; Jonah a simple, abrupt command: go!

But what's the difference, really? God has spoken! We do not always understand all the facets of God's command, yet we must obey! Jesus said: go to the nations, proclaim my salvation! We have no idea if our mission will stand or fall: if we will succeed or not, if people will listen or not, we are simply commanded to go.

God said to Jonah: Go to Nineveh because it won't come to you! Jonah: take the time to go there because otherwise all those people will die! Such is the urgency of our calling!

As Paul says in Romans: *"How will they hear, unless we preach to them? Blessed are the feet of those who bring good news!"* (Rom 10:14-15)

Is preaching the gospel ever a waste? I think not.

Mr Reinier Noppers is a minister in the Bishopton Reformed Church.

The Jonah problem

ERIK STOLTE

Jonah: Grace for the Unworthy

I'm sure we have all shaken our heads at Jonah's callous spirit to the Ninevites. How could Jonah be so harsh as he sat on the hill overlooking Nineveh? Why was a smile playing on his lips as he imagined the destruction that was expected? Conversely, why was he so angry when it did not come? We tut-tut Jonah's cold-hearted attitude.

But, could it be that some of Jonah's callous attitude lives in our own hearts? Do we not find that annoying neighbour

unworthy of us showing the love of Christ? Are we indifferent to his salvation? Are there not some unlikable colleagues to whom we would rather turn the cold shoulder than show them the love of Christ? It really is a shocking thought. Are we really that different from Jonah?

In this article, I want us to consider the incredible grace of God as seen in the life of Jonah and us, so that we might be driven to reciprocate that grace to those whom we might otherwise deem unworthy.

Jonah, an unworthy recipient of God's grace

Jonah was a prophet of the Lord. As a prophet of God, he was richly blessed. Amos 3:7 says that "the Lord does nothing without revealing his secrets to his servants the prophets." The people of Israel looked up to him as one who would bring God's word to them. Here was a man who walked with God, listened to God, and told them God's message.

So, it seems strange and totally contrary

to his very work and life that he would do the total opposite of what God told him to do. Rather than go to Nineveh and preach, he'll go to Tarshish and keep his mouth shut.

Could it be that Jonah had drawn the line on God's control over his life? "I'll serve God, preach to Israel, listen to God's voice, but that's it! No further!" "That is the extent of my devotion and service to God". "I'll give him most of my life, just not all of it." Nineveh was just a bit too much.

So off he went to Joppa, setting sail on a sleepy cruise to Tarshish.

But God wouldn't let his mouthpiece off the hook so easily. In the storm and the towering waves he pursued his wayward prophet.

The sleepy cruise turned into a violent

on a bed of flowery ease, but bring him back he did. God showed incredible grace, totally undeserved to a prophet who should have known better. He deserved death, but God rescued him, and even re-commissioned him to his service. Surely this is incredible grace to an unworthy recipient!

Nineveh, an unworthy recipient of God's grace

The next incredible story in this book, again showing the heart of God, is what happens in Nineveh.

Now to get a bit of a sense of what is going on, we need to realise the wickedness of Nineveh. They were enemies of God's children. Nineveh did not just stand against them in international diplomacy, but regularly invaded their country, stole, burned, pillaged, raped and killed as they did so. To say they were not nice people, would be an incredible understatement.

Instead, what happens is a smelly prophet from that weak little, enemy nation of Israel, comes to town and starts crying out in the streets, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

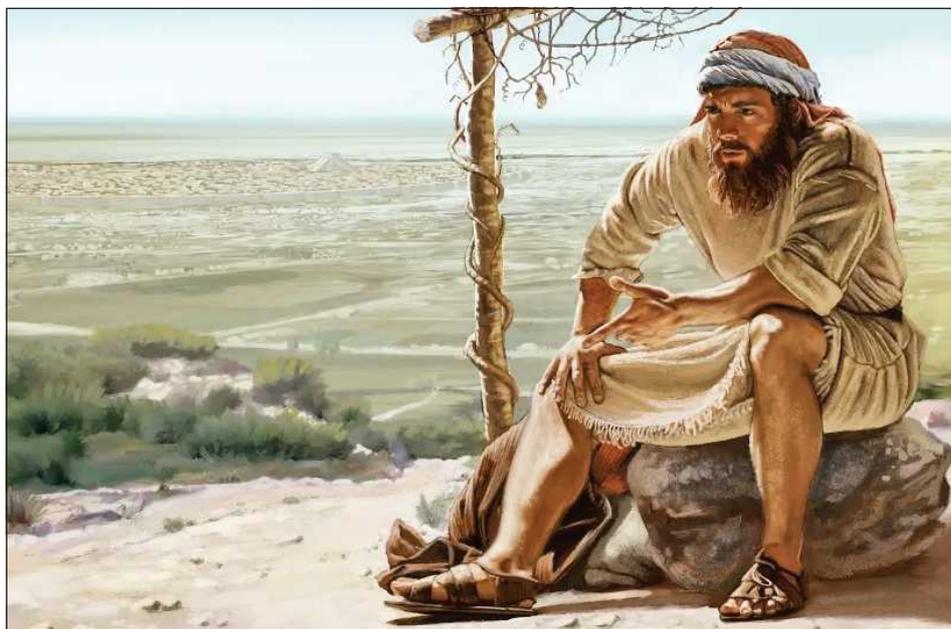
Now if that happened in your local town or city, people would most likely laugh, ridicule and then move on to the next news item. A foolish message coming from a foolish prophet. Why bother to listen?

What should have happened? When they mocked him, did not listen, and continued on in this sin, God should have destroyed them. But He didn't. Why not? This is the amazing part of this story! Because the Lord is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in steadfast love." (Ps 103) God moved the hearts of the people of Nineveh en-mass to repent, to seek the Lord, and the Lord stayed his judgment.

God's mercy and love shines out in the story of Jonah. Neither Jonah, nor Nineveh deserved God's grace. Yet the "grace of our Lord overflowed" in the lives of these Old Testament people. To those, both inside and outside the church, God shows his incredible mercy.

You and me, unworthy recipients of God's grace

Now, last time I checked, you and I are not and have not been Old Testament prophets. We do not receive direct audible revelations from God. But we have something even better. We have the whole counsel of God. We have the freedom and riches to read the scriptures and to hear it preached twice every week. We can boldly approach and confidently



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wake up call for Jonah, eventually being thrown into the sea and left to the elements. That should have been the end of Jonah. The prophet who disobeyed the crystal-clear command of the Lord was no more. God would raise up another prophet to take his place; someone more worthy of the prophet's mantle than he.

So, the great surprise of the story is that God did not leave Jonah to the elements but rescued him via some unsavoury means. He is stuck in the belly of the fish for three days. And in the swirling cesspool of the fish's belly, Jonah came face to face with the kindness, mercy, and long-suffering nature of God.

What an incredible grace and mercy of God to pursue his wayward prophet! For sure God did not bring Jonah to his senses

access the throne of grace, receiving mercy to help us in all our needs (Heb 4:16).

But it's even better than that. Today, we live on this side of the cross of Jesus Christ. We can see clearly what Jonah could only see dimly. We can see even more plainly the love and mercy of God for sinners. We can see the horrible penalty for sin enacted on the cross. We can see how great our every sin is, that it cannot be excused, swept under the carpet, or ignored. We can see that sin is so serious that God had to deal with it, even at the cost of his only begotten Son.

But on this side of the cross we also see the incredible grace of God for sinners. Do you realise to what lengths the Father would go to rescue sinners like you and me? Do we realise what price he is willing to pay to redeem sinners? He willingly gave up his only begotten Son!

If this is what he did, then, as the catechism reminds us, "I am not my own, but belong body and soul to my faithful

Saviour Jesus Christ." So, our *whole* lives are given over to the service of our King. He has shown incredible grace, now we live in service to him and love as he has loved us.

This lost world, unworthy recipients of God's grace

We started off this article asking whether we might somehow think that some people around us might be undeserving of the gospel. How could Jonah possibly think that these Ninevites were unworthy of God's mercy, when God had so much mercy on him? How then, might we possibly think that there are some people around us who might not be worthy of God's mercy?

When we do not consider others as worthy of grace, is it because we have not been awed by the grace poured out on us? The very nature of grace speaks of our unworthiness and God's superabundant giving. This superabundance overflows in sinners living out that grace to others.

Our problem tends to be that we are more concerned about our daily comforts and stress-free lives than being enamoured by the riches of grace. Like Jonah, who took for granted the shady plant that came one day and was angry when his shady comfort vanished, we tend to be more concerned to continue our comfortable blessings while thousands of souls around us are walking their way through life into hell.

But, when we start to see the grace we have received from his good and kind hand, we will start to express that love in warning those around us of the punishment that awaits the wicked, and telling them of the grace and love that is found in Jesus Christ.

So, should we, overflowing with God's grace, not pity the thousands of souls around us (Jonah 4:11) and deliver to them the story of God's mercy?

Mr Erik Stolte is the minister in the Dunedin Reformed Church.

The Jonah problem

ALBERT COUPERUS

Loving our LGBTQIA+ Friends??

"If a state-integrated school allows hateful abuse and bigotry under the guise of special character or religious beliefs, then there is something seriously wrong with the system and this calls for a law change. I'm sure this is not the only school where there are incidents — this is just the tip of the iceberg."¹

Shaneel Lal, Campaigner for Gay rights.

This statement was made to news media in response to a number of incidents that occurred at Bethlehem College in Tauranga. Among other things under fire was a section statement in the school statement of belief: "Marriage is an institution created by God in which one man and one woman enter into an exclusive relationship intended for life, and that marriage is the only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations."²

When I read this article, my first response was one of fear. As current chair of our daughters' local state-integrated Christian School, I would be the one contacted by the media for comment if something like

this became an issue at our school. How would I respond?

We live in a world, as Carl Trueman points out in his excellent work: *"The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self"* that the following statement "has come to be regarded as coherent and meaningful: "I am a woman trapped in a man's body."³ How do we live as Christians in a world where these kinds of statements are not only made, but we are expected to agree with them?

We live in a world that is changing rapidly, very rapidly. Where concepts such as gender dysphoria and gender fluidity are thrust upon us and upon our children.

Should we even engage with these views, and the people that hold them? Absolutely! We are not called to be separate from this world, but still to be a part of it (John 17:14-16). We are all called to bring the Gospel of Hope, without distinction! (Canons of Dort, Article 2.5) So how do we engage with fellow image bearers when they are so different? But before we ask that question, we should also ask ourselves: What stops us from engaging with people who have a different view of sexuality than what God's word teaches?

I want to suggest a few things. You may well have more, but my intention is simply to get you thinking: Our view of sin, our fear, and our lack of compassion.

Firstly, our view of sin. I once had an

of fear. Fear of standing out. Fear of creating conflict. Fear of losing our job. Fear of being corrupted, or having our children corrupted, by the unbiblical views of others. Fear of not knowing what to say.

We may not engage because of a lack of compassion. "They deserve AIDs if they live that sort of lifestyle." Or when we hear the statistics of mental health our hearts are hardened. Research in New Zealand has shown that more than 50% of transgender and gender diverse students have struggled with mental health in the 2021. 57% of transgender and gender diverse youth had reported "significant depressive symptoms". The same number reported that they had self-harmed. Attempted suicide was also reported up by 26%.⁴ We can hear these figures and forget that behind these are lives created in the image of God. People who desperately need the hope that only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can bring.

So how do we engage? How do we show the light of Jesus Christ to a part of our society that we struggle with? I'd like to suggest a couple of thoughts.

The first is to remind ourselves that we are sinners too. Saved sinners, but sinners nonetheless. As God's children we too struggle with sin. Not just sexual sin, although we do tend to focus on this sin as a worse sin than others. Now I do not want to be misinterpreted as minimising sin here in any way. However I do believe that we can elevate sexual sin to a higher level and at the same time minimise some of our own sin that we are not dealing with.

We also need to confess our sin. Our sins of judgement, our presuppositions, our fears, our lack of love, and our self-righteousness.

We need to respond to those with whom we come into contact with gentleness and compassion. Acknowledging the challenges of mental health. Equipping ourselves to help others who are challenged in this area. Praying for wisdom as we seek to engage with those who come across our path, and they will!

Does this mean that we need to compromise our beliefs and our principles? In no way, at least not if our beliefs and principles are biblical ones! We are not called to accept or indulge a person's sexual sin. Be it someone who is living in adultery, living with someone outside of marriage, or someone who is living life as a transsexual.

But what we are called to do is to follow in the footsteps of our Saviour Jesus Christ: *And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for*



Photo by Sharon McCutcheon on Unsplash

acquaintance who, whenever the subject of homosexuality would come up, would delight in calling them "Sodomisers", pointing to their coming judgement, and just generally speaking with disdain. They were going to hell, and they deserved it. Interestingly enough, it later became apparent that his own sexual sin caused great harm. But we can all be guilty of looking down our noses at others who are living a lifestyle that is contrary to God's commands for sexuality. We thank God that we are not like those sinners. We can have the view, that while all sin is deserving of God's judgement, some sins are more deserving than others, in particular in this area.

We also may not engage simply because

... we will need to have some difficult conversations with our children and with each other. Sexuality is pervasive in society, and we ignore these conversations with each other at our peril. We need to consider how we will deal with various scenarios that we may well come across.

there were many who followed him.¹⁶ And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"¹⁷ And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:15-17 ESV)

Is this a criticism that can be labelled against you?

I am not suggesting here that all of us need to seek out those who are LGBTQIA+. Given the way our society is heading, I don't actually think we need to! You will come into contact with someone, if you have not already. The question for you to consider is really: How will you respond? 1 Peter 3:15: "but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect," (1 Peter 3:15 ESV).

This means that we will need to have some difficult conversations with our children and with each other. Sexuality is pervasive in society, and we ignore these conversations with each other at our peril.

We need to consider how we will deal with various scenarios that we may well come across:

- How would you respond to an invitation to a gay friend's wedding?
- Your son or daughter comes to you and tells you that they are struggling with same sex attraction, how do you answer them, how do you care for them?
- Your child sees two men walking hand in hand down the street and asks you why they are holding hands?
- You are on your local integrated school board, and a request is made for a child to attend school that is openly transgender. What would you say?

More than anything our response should be offering the hope that we have. The grace that we have been given, and offer that to others. The hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A hope that transcends any sexual struggle, any sexual sin (note that the two are not the same!). This is the hope that we can offer. This is the hope that our LGBTQIA+ friends need. This is the hope that we all need!

Is this easy? No! But given God's grace, we are able. Given His strength and wisdom are able. May God give us this wisdom as we walk in an increasingly hostile world!

I want to conclude with a prayer of the Human Sexuality report – recently accepted at the 2022CRCNA synod. This is not the complete prayer. This is not necessarily a prayer that you may have to pray, or maybe it is! But I lay it here as food for thought:

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you with our bodies, our hearts, and our minds, by what we have done and what we have left undone. We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent.

Omniscient God, who sees what is done in secret, we recognize that we ridicule and fear the LGBTQ among us. We admit that we drive our sisters and brothers away. We acknowledge that, like the Pharisee with the tax collector, we scorn and criticize the temptations that are not ours. We confess that we overlook the sexual sins of the majority while harshly judging those of the lesbian and gay minority. We do

not show the love and hospitality of Jesus to people whom we deem worse sinners.

Cornerstone of the church, we ask you to build these living stones into a family who love one another deeply from the heart, who remind each other of your commands and your rich promises, and who reflect your glory to the world. Heal our divisions. Make us one body.

AMEN⁵

Further helpful reading:

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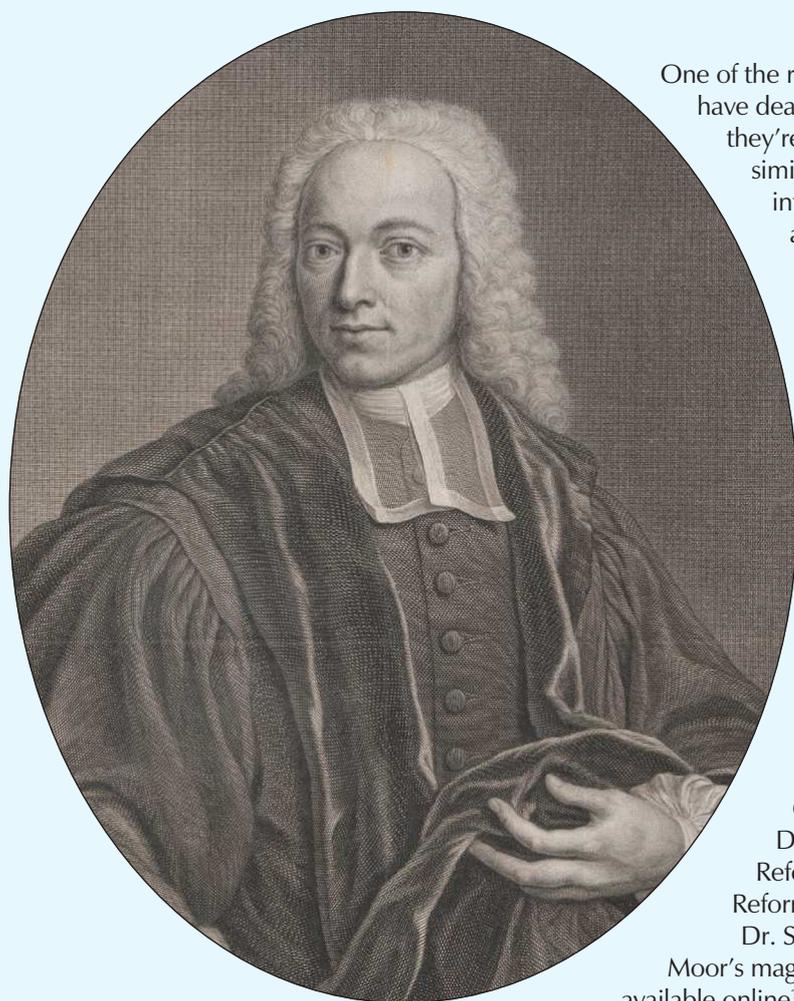
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WES BREDENHOF

De Moor on Science and Scripture



Bernhardinus De Moor

One of the reasons history is exciting is that you often find others who have dealt with similar questions to the ones you're dealing with. No, they're not usually identical questions, but they are sometimes similar. When it comes to these similar questions, it's also interesting to compare the answers given in history to the answers we come up with today. Here at *Creation Without Compromise* we're especially interested in the questions and answers that have to do with the relationship between science and Scripture.

Today's venture into history takes us to the late 1700s. By and large Reformed theology had been devastated by philosophical influences associated with the Enlightenment. There were only a few holdouts who could be described as confessionally Reformed and orthodox. One of them was Bernhard De Moor (1709-1780).

After serving for several years as a pastor, De Moor took up a position as professor of theology at the University of Leiden. In this capacity, De Moor lectured at length on a textbook published by his teacher and friend Johannes à Marck. These lectures were later published in a massive seven-volume set with the catchy title, *Commentarius perpetuus in Johannis Marckii Compendium theologiae christianae didactico-elencticum*. De Moor's book is regarded as the high water-mark of Reformed orthodoxy. It was a comprehensive overview of Reformed theology as it stood at that time.

Dr. Steven Dilday has taken on the massive task of translating De Moor's magnum opus into English. He has been making it freely available online¹. He began in late 2012 and, at this moment, he is currently in chapter 2. This is obviously going to be a project that stretches over many years!

One of the topics dealt with in chapter 2 has to do with the relationship between science and Scripture. I would like to briefly survey what De Moor writes on this. Here we can observe a Reformed theologian from about 200 years ago dealing with questions similar to what we face today. If you're interested in reading the English translation of Dr. Dilday for yourself, the topic begins at this blog post². But I think you will find my summary a little easier reading ...

Broadly speaking, De Moor is dealing with Scripture in chapter 2. In section 21, he begins by noting that the Bible does have a primary subject: true religion. The Bible is mainly about "the right manner of coming to know and of worshipping/serving God for the salvation of man as sinner and the glory of God..." However, Scripture does also speak of other things related to this primary subject. These other things include natural, historical, and genealogical matters.

From there, section 22 of chapter 2 deals with the fact that Scripture speaks truly. De Moor insists that God's Word speaks truly about all things, including natural things. This is directly connected to the fact that the One who inspired these writings is the Spirit of Truth.

Here one has to remember that De Moor is commenting or lecturing on a textbook of Johannes à Marck. De Moor mentions that à Marck points out an alternative hypothesis, namely that "Scripture in natural matters speaks according to the erroneous opinion of the common people." The philosopher Baruch Spinoza advocated this position, and so did theologian Christoph Wittich. De Moor also notes that the English theologian Thomas Burnet took this position in regards to what Scripture says about creation and the Flood. Just prior to that, he also points out that this was the view of Balthasar Bekker (1634-1698), a Dutch theologian heavily influenced by Cartesian rationalism.

Now I want to pause here for a moment and mention something important about Bekker. Bekker argued the hypothesis mentioned by De Moor in relation to demons. Specifically, Bekker taught that the angels (including demons) are not real, but the good angels in Scripture merely speak metaphorically of God's omnipotence. Bekker also taught that Eve was not tempted by a literal snake in the garden, nor was Christ literally tempted by Satan – it was merely a dream. At issue was Bekker's way of interpreting Scripture. Dutch theologian Wilco Veltkamp has written a dissertation which delves into this. In a December 2011 article in *Nader Bekeken* (see here), he explained the connection between the hermeneutics of Bekker and that of theistic evolutionists today. The connection is a refusal to start with the authority of Scripture and submit to Scripture through to the end of an issue.

Going back to De Moor, this hypothesis gets several points in response, beginning with the observation that its foundation is preconceived human opinion rather than Scripture. De Moor points that the Bible was inspired in all things by the Spirit of Truth. Scripture calls God the God of Truth. This hypothesis makes him a liar. Moreover, God is omniscient and he knows that of which he speaks. He would also never deceive us or leave us in error. If this hypothesis were true, De Moor writes, we are at liberty to interpret Scripture as we please and there would no longer be any certainty as to what it actually says. De Moor quotes Augustine as he insists that none of the canonical writers erred. He finishes responding to this hypothesis with a reference to article 5 of the Belgic Confession, "We believe without any doubt all things contained" in these canonical writings.

De Moor then adds some nuance to the discussion. He notes that while the Holy Spirit "never speaks according to the errors of the common people," he can accurately relate errors made by people. Further, De Moor acknowledges that Scripture does sometimes speak according to

external appearances. For example, the Greek in Acts 27:27 literally says that the sailors with Paul suspected that some country was "drawing near to them." Of course, the land wasn't approaching the ship, but it is common to speak in that fashion and no one errs in so speaking.

There is one more objection that De Moor addresses – this one also comes from Spinoza. It's one that is still trotted out today, albeit in a different form: Scripture is not designed to teach us concerning natural matters or science. Instead, the intent of Scripture is to make people obedient. Today's version usually refers to faith or salvation rather than obedience. But certainly we do hear today as well that the Bible is not a "textbook for science" and such things. How does De Moor respond? He affirms again the primary purpose of Scripture is to teach true religion. However, that primary purpose does not exclude subordinate ends such as teaching people the magnificent natural works of God. One does not rule out the other. Finally, it would be out of place to suppose that the Holy Spirit would use errors to carry out his purposes. He would never give anything contrary to the truth – it would be out of character for him.

De Moor concludes this section with an intriguing reference to an Order of the States of Holland and West-Friesland, dated September 30, 1656. This order actually prohibited the interpretation of Scripture by nature, rather than the other way around. In other words, at one point there was Dutch legislation maintaining that Scripture is to be the lens through which we interpret nature. De Moor deems this legislation "altogether pious."

It's important to remember the era in which De Moor lived – it was the heyday of Enlightenment rationalism. The Bible was under attack by those who said that it could stand in the face of reasoned scrutiny and scientific developments. Intelligent people could not take the Bible seriously at face value. In that milieu, De Moor stood for the absolute authority of the Word of God. He promoted confidence in the infallible and inerrant Scriptures, also when it came to the relationship between Scripture and science. He was not a rationalist – no, he was addressing rationalism and doing so on the basis of Scripture. Those promoting theistic evolution today, especially in Reformed churches, need to ask themselves whether they are carrying on the heritage of theologians like De Moor or betraying it.

1 <https://www.fromreformationtoreformation.com/de-moor-project>

2 <https://www.fromreformationtoreformation.com/de-moor-project/chapter-ii22-reliability-of-scripture-in-matters-of-science-part-1/>

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Sri Lankan Christians push for change against Government crackdown

The Sri Lankan economic crisis sees people wait for a long time to refill petroleum cylinders and other essentials.

In the midst of Sri Lanka's present economic crisis, authorities in the country have continued to crack down on the protestors demanding change.

Most recently, on June 22, police detained seven prominent youth activists, one of whom is also a Buddhist monk. They are accused of damaging public property and illegal assembly during a protest in front of police headquarters in the capital on June 9.

A Sri Lankan rights activist, Surin Randil, said, "People have taken to the streets to demand solutions to the country's economic problems but instead the government misuse the police to oppress the people."

Sri Lanka is in the grip of severe fuel and food shortages that have brought people out onto the streets to call for the removal of the country's president.

Economic mismanagement and collapse lie at the heart of unrest in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan rupee has lost roughly 82% of its value in the last year, foreign currency reserves are depleted, and the country is in default. These underlying problems have resulted in widespread power outages as well as shortages of food, fuel, and other critical goods.

According to International Christian Concern, the Sri Lankan government now seeks aid from India, China, and the International Monetary Fund. Despite popular condemnation and demands from activists for his resignation, the Sri Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa has refused to step down.

Christians among the repressed activists have taken various approaches to push forward for change and relief. Catholic bishops in Sri Lanka co-ordinated with Buddhist and other religious leaders to recommend that the government provide a relief package for the poor in order to address immediate concerns over their

survival.

Alternatively, some Christians have taken it upon themselves to make a positive impact where the government has failed. A Christian woman in Sri Lanka's capital, for example, has decided to personally provide financial assistance to five families in need. She is a 71-year-old retired teacher, and she has chosen to donate a portion of her pension to these families.

As the government of Sri Lanka continues to fail its people, we pray that the nation's Christians would remain strong, standing in the gap wherever possible to help the needy and inspire change.

MCD Staff | June 24, 2022

Pakistani Christian men accused of blasphemy: to receive death sentence

The Lahore High Court has upheld the death sentence of two brothers, both Christians, for alleged "blasphemy".

Qasir and Amoon Ayub were convicted of "blasphemy" and sentenced to death by a lower court in Jhelum, northern Punjab, in December 2018.

Their appeal was heard by the Lahore High Court Rawalpindi bench and lasted from 28 February to 4 March. The verdict was announced on 8 June.

Lawyers working on behalf of Qasir and Amoon announced their intention to file a further appeal with the Supreme Court of Pakistan in Islamabad.

Qasir and Amoon have been imprisoned since 2014. They were accused of posting "disrespectful" material online in 2011, but there is no evidence linking them to the material in question.

Both men were charged under all three of Pakistan's "blasphemy" laws – sections 295-A, B and C of the Pakistan Penal Code.

It is 295-C, the section relating to

"defiling the name" of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, that carries the death penalty.

"Blasphemy" laws have existed in the region since 1927 and were incorporated into Pakistan's Penal Code at the country's founding in 1947. The laws were strengthened under the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq (in office 1978-88) to include mandatory life imprisonment for desecration of the Quran (1982) and to allow the death sentence for defiling the name of Muhammad (1986). A subsequent decision by Pakistan's Supreme Court making the death sentence for "blasphemy" against Muhammad mandatory came into effect in 1991.

The "blasphemy" laws are often used to make false accusations in order to settle personal grudges. Christians are especially vulnerable, as simply stating their beliefs can be construed as "blasphemy" and the lower courts usually favour the testimony of Muslims, in accordance with sharia (Islamic law).

On 31 May the Lahore High Court released on bail Stephen Masih, a mentally disabled Christian who was accused of "blasphemy" following a dispute with his Muslim neighbour.

From Barnabas Aid contacts and other sources

MCD Staff | June 15, 2022

Pakistan: 'Attack on pastors illustrative of increasing pressure', say Christians

1 February 2022

A Pakistani pastor was killed and another wounded Sunday [in an attack outside their church in northwestern Peshawar.

The two pastors were leaving the Shaheedan-e- All Saints' Church where they had led the Sunday morning service when two men on a motorbike drove up to their car. They shot Rev. William Siraj

in the head, killing him on the spot. His colleague, Rev. Patrick Naeem, was injured and taken to a nearby hospital for treatment.

No-one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack and a man-hunt for the two assassins is under way.

The attack took place outside a church that was established in memory of the twin suicide bombing of the All Saints' Church in September 2013, in which 127 church members were killed and more than 250 injured. An offshoot of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP, a Pakistani branch of the Taliban, claimed responsibility for the bombing.

Among those who died that day was the son-in-law of Rev. Siraj, who was killed yesterday. He had, since then, lived with and supported his widowed daughter. "He was a very humble and godly man, and we all respected and loved him. He loved us so much," a visibly emotional church member told *World Watch Monitor*.

TV footage showed people carrying Siraj's body from the car to a nearby house while chanting "Long live Jesus Christ", according to Reuters.

'Deliberate and planned'

The leader of the Church of Pakistan, a union of protestant churches in the country, Bishop Azad Marshall, condemned the killings in a tweet, calling for "justice and protection of Christians from the government of Pakistan".

In a statement, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's chairperson, Hina Jilani, also demanded more steps for the protection of Christians and other minorities in Pakistan "whose right to life and security of person remains under constant threat," she was quoted as saying by the Associated Press.

Although there had been no threats made to priests or the church in advance of Sunday's attack, the way in which it was carried out "suggests a deliberate and planned attack; an act designed to intimidate, challenge and threaten those who offer rights, protection and freedoms to Christian minorities in Pakistan," a local source, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, told *WWM*.

Attacks on Christian leaders, churches and individuals are nothing new in majority-Muslim Pakistan. The 2% minority faces religious freedom violations on several levels, from discrimination in education and the workplace to violent attacks.

The country's blasphemy law is a tool that is regularly used, often to settle scores between individuals. The law is politically

volatile as illustrated by threats and nationwide protests during the court case against Asia Bibi, the Catholic woman who was acquitted of blasphemy in 2019.

Increase in pressure after fall of Kabul

Peshawar is close to the border with Afghanistan, and since August the region has seen an uptick in attacks by the TTP, clearly emboldened by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, as reported by *France24*.

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan also caused an exodus of refugees, hoping to find safety in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan. "We have seen thousands of refugees coming to major Pakistani cities such as Peshawar and Quetta," said a local source, who also wished to remain anonymous for security reasons. "The cities are unable to cope with such an influx and people are facing not just inflation, but homelessness and starvation also. Unfortunately, we have seen an increase in assassination attempts, families in Christian neighbourhoods who are being shot at, forced conversions and bombings. Today [Sunday, Jan. 30] was yet another example of this brand of violence."

Pakistan is 8th on the *Open Doors World Watch List* of 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian but as far as local Christians are concerned, it might as well be topping the list together owing to its proximity to Afghanistan, which is No. 1. This country rose to first place for the first time after having been in 2nd position after North Korea for many years.

"Pakistan's religious landscape and the social degeneration that is taking place, cannot be isolated and distracted from that of Afghanistan," the local source said. "Pakistan might show a moderate face; its heart is increasingly extremist and it wants to embrace a form of Islam where the Madrassa [Islamic school] is the way to get educated, with the Quran as the ultimate textbook." In recent months the government has ordered public schools to implement religion-centred changes such as making afternoon prayers mandatory and reciting the Quran during morning assemblies.

Following the 2013 bombings, in June 2014, Pakistan's supreme court issued a list of instructions for the government to protect the country's minorities, including the development of "appropriate curricula for primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education that promote religious

harmony and tolerance." However, 2020 research by the Lahore-based Centre for Social Justice showed that religious minorities continued to be either invisible or vilified in Pakistan's school textbooks.

"Where does this leave minority children?" the local source said. "The simple answer is this: in a queue for a visa, waiting to leave Pakistan and find hope and a future in a foreign land."

World Watch Monitor Pakistan

Homosexual and transgender issues backfire on Western States at UN

GENEVA, July 8 (C-Fam) The UN Czar for homosexual and transgender issues narrowly survived a fierce challenge in the Human Rights Council this week, as Muslim countries, increasingly frustrated by what they see as Western cultural imperialism, fought back.

The Organisation for Islamic Cooperation mounted a well-coordinated campaign to repeal and undermine the UN post on homosexual and transgender issues with 13 amendments categorically rejecting the mandate of the UN independent expert as inconsistent with international human rights law. Western delegations were in damage control mode for the entire voting session, even having to concede ground before a barrage of amendments.

The mandate survived a close vote, with 17 countries opposing it, and 23 supporting it. But it did not survive unscathed. An amendment to defend the "sovereign right" of countries to legislate as they see fit on controversial social issues passed by 22 votes, with the emerging superpower India providing a key swing vote. All other amendments failed.

The targeted amendments from the Islamic group of states sought to uphold national sovereignty and opposed international financial and political pressure on contentious social issues. They also contested unfettered sexual autonomy and transgender ideology and included language against homosexual marriage.

During the contentious and protracted vote, speaking on behalf of the 54 countries that are part of the Islamic group of states,

a representative of Pakistan said the mandate “neither reflects the legality nor the universal values of human rights.”

“There is no universal consensus on the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity,” he said.

He explained that international human rights law sets out definite categories of non-discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and other status and that there was no need to “elevate the personal sexual preferences of individuals as human rights.”

While he rejected violence against any person on any grounds, he said “we cannot support efforts to invent new rights on the basis of personal sexual preferences.”

He also accused Western countries of undermining “respect for diversity and pluralism” when they promote divisive policies that “run counter to the social, cultural and religious particularity” of different countries, and urged respect for the family as the “natural and fundamental unit of society.”

Representatives of the United States, Germany, Mexico, Brazil, the Netherlands, and others tried to claim that “sexual orientation and gender identity” is now a settled issue that had been previously included in United Nations resolutions. They said the mandate was limited and that homosexual marriage did not come under its purview. But their arguments did not persuade Islamic countries.

The lively debate in the voting session proved that homosexual and transgender issues continue to face an uphill struggle internationally. Rather than more support for the mandate, there was more opposition to the mandate than three years ago, when the last vote took place.

There was evidence of broad opposition to the more radical elements of the homosexual and transgender agenda. Western countries found themselves backpedaling on homosexual marriage and claiming that there was no conflict between religious freedom and homosexual and transgender issues. And moderate states like India supported the sovereign right of states to legislate on controversial social issues.

The vote also highlighted the growing disconnect between national political realities and UN social policy debates. Several countries where homosexual and transgender issues are politically unpopular, including Brazil, Paraguay, Benin, Namibia, and others, supported the mandate.

*By Stefano Gennarini, J.D.
July 7, 2022*

Rich White Sweden targets poor Black Africa

WASHINGTON, D.C. July 8 (C-Fam) Sweden, along with other Nordic countries, have been longtime leaders in the effort to create an international human right to abortion. A recently launched strategy document from the Swedish government outlines its plan to push “sexual and reproductive health and rights” (SRHR) – including abortion – in the African region.

The strategy will be in effect from 2022 to 2026 and applies to the equivalent of about \$60 million a year in U.S. dollars, an increase over the previous annual allocation of about \$55 million.

The funding will be used to promote SRHR and the social norms that would support it, as well as “strengthened conditions for increased accountability for SRHR.”

Sweden sees itself as a global leader in advancing SRHR, a term that has been rejected in UN negotiations, as it is understood to contain abortion as well as a wide range of issues involving gender ideology and the concept of “sexual rights.” In particular, the Swedish government pointed out in a press release announcing this forthcoming strategy that there are few other donors as active in promoting SRHR in sub-Saharan Africa.

According to the strategy, “where [sexual and reproductive health] services are offered, maternal care dominates, while initiatives to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, access to modern contraceptives, safe and legal abortion and efforts to promote the SRHR of young people are virtually non-existent.”

The report also claims that access to comprehensive sexuality education has “deteriorated.” This is another concept that has been rejected by consensus and remains controversial as it is seen as sexualising children.

Sweden was the first country to announce it would have a “feminist foreign policy” in 2014, and when it launched its handbook outlining the policy a few years later, it named SRHR as one of the top six priorities. It explicitly referred to promoting “the right and access to safe and legal abortions.”

Sweden’s foreign aid department, Sida, worked to directly oppose the U.S. Mexico City Policy, which was reinstated and expanded under former President Donald

Trump and blocked U.S. funding to foreign organisations providing or promoting abortion. Sweden threatened to pull its funding from any organisation that abandoned abortion-related projects in order to comply with the policy and remain eligible for U.S. funding, effectively forcing grantees to choose between the two donor countries.

Sweden has also been active in the “She Decides” campaign which was launched in opposition to the Mexico City Policy, and at the 2021 Generation Equality Forum hosted by UN Women, Sweden pledged support “to focus on the neglected areas of comprehensive SRHR such as comprehensive abortion care.”

As stated in a Sida brief, “Sweden’s official position is that access to safe and legal abortion [...] falls within the framework of human rights,” and “although the right to abortion is not explicitly set out in any of the UN conventions on human rights,” the brief cites expert opinions and regional agreements as well as World Health Organisation guidance to make the case for abortion as a right.

In the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a mechanism by which countries review each other’s records on human rights, Sweden has been a leading proponent of both abortion and issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in its recommendations. In the third and most recent cycle of the UPR, Sweden was among the top seven governments urging other countries to liberalise their abortion laws.

It should at least be pondered why a country like Sweden, only 1% black, is targeting largely black Africa for abortion and other social programs that harm families. Pope Francis has called such efforts “ideological colonialism.”

*By Rebecca Oas, Ph.D.
July 7, 2022*

Dutch Government proposes children aged 1 to 12 have access to euthanasia

The Dutch Government has been strongly criticised for proposing that children aged 1 to 12 in the country should have access to euthanasia.

Earlier this week, Netherlands Health Secretary Ernst Kuipers raised the idea in a briefing, claiming that the current rules are too restrictive.

At present, adults in the country are eligible for euthanasia and assisted suicide, and babies under one can also be euthanised by doctors.

Under the new proposal, children will become eligible for euthanasia if doctors believe they are suffering and there is no

possibility of a cure.

They will have to seek the agreement of both parents and have a conversation with the child, to ensure that they're not opposed.

Reacting to the news, the Better Way campaign stressed that developments of this kind in countries that permit assisted suicide and euthanasia demonstrate a "slippery slope".

"A euthanasia option for children between one and 12 has been proposed by Ernst Kuipers, the Netherlands Health Secretary. There's that slippery slope assisted suicide activists say doesn't exist, again."

"This proposal in the Netherlands is yet more evidence that incremental extension is the direction of travel in countries that legalise euthanasia," said British group CARE. "It never stops at terminal illness – there is inevitable pressure to extend eligibility to other, vulnerable groups and even children.

"It's also evidence of the recklessness that accompanies activism for euthanasia, which disregards serious safeguarding concerns. A vulnerable and impressionable child cannot possibly understand the gravity of a decision to let a doctor end their life.

"At the same time this policy is being discussed inside the Dutch Government, activists in the Netherlands are pushing for a 'completed life' law that allows any person in good health to decide they've had enough, and obtain lethal drugs to end their life. It's chilling.

"The only true safeguard against these troubling, extreme laws is keeping assisted suicide and euthanasia off the statute book altogether. If we truly believe in justice and compassion, we cannot risk legislating for this Pandora's box that eviscerates safety and equality."

MCD Staff | July 1, 2022



We are too much attached to our own petty concerns, and too little concerned for the glory of God. — John Newton

GRANT R. CASTLEBERRY

Serving hostile authorities

Increasingly, in a post-Christian world, Christians will serve in positions of influence under leaders who outright reject the Christian faith. Though our culture rejects the Lord Jesus, I believe that God will continue to providentially place Christians in positions of influence. The question that we all must be able to answer is, What is the Christian strategy for work in a post-Christian world? Let me offer three principles that form a biblical strategy for serving under hostile authorities.

Serve virtuously

First, we must strive to serve *virtuously*. The Apostle Paul makes a fascinating statement at the end of his list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23. He says, “Against such things there is no law.” In other words, virtue is not contraband. No society, regardless of its immorality and godlessness, has banned the greatest of all virtues: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (vv. 22–23). In a world dead-set on moral decadence, Christians possess both the spiritual ability and the moral mandate to display true godliness. In many instances, we will be the only Bible people will ever read. So, our lives must attest to the holy God we worship. As Jesus commands us, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). In Luke’s gospel, John the Baptist is asked by some new disciples how they can continue serving in their current secular positions:

Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?”

And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” (3:12–14)

It is telling that John the Baptist’s imperatives are all moral. His disciples were not to resign their positions. Rather, they were to *serve virtuously*.

Serve excellently

Second, we must endeavour to serve *excellently*. By “excellently” I mean that we, as believers, perform outstanding work. Proverbs 22:29 states: “Do you see a man skilful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.” The cream rises to the top. Our superior work is not only a great testimony to our Lord, but it also puts us in positions of influence for the sake of Christ’s kingdom. For example, one of the qualities that is so striking about Joseph is how exceptionally he served everywhere the Lord placed him. He excelled in Potiphar’s house as a slave (Gen. 39). He excelled as an inmate in an Egyptian prison (chs. 39, 40). And finally, he excelled as Pharaoh’s second-in-command over all of Egypt (ch. 41). Of course, all this can be credited to the Lord’s favour in Joseph’s life; nevertheless, that favour manifested itself in visible excellence. When Nehemiah asked King Artaxerxes if he could return to Jerusalem to rebuild the gates and the city wall, it is clearly evident that Nehemiah had found “favour” with Artaxerxes. Not only did Artaxerxes grant his request, but he also asked when Nehemiah would come back and resume his cupbearer responsibilities (Neh. 2:6).

The excellence of our work is a powerful testimony to our Christian faith, and it places us in positions where we can do much good for the kingdom.

Serve transcendentally

Finally, we must make every effort to serve *transcendentally*. By this I mean that we must be God-centred. Our ultimate goal is His honor. Our greatest work is to obey Him. Our ultimate joy is to know

Him. We might serve under hostile authorities, but our greatest authority is our kind and merciful Father. Let me give two practical applications of this principle. First, we should be quick to ponder God’s providence in placing us in our current places of work. We should ask, “Why has God placed me in this position of influence in this time of history?” This is essentially the question that Mordecai puts to Esther in Esther 4:14: “Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” We must ponder anew how we can serve the Lord in our current work, knowing that we are in the exact position the Lord wants us in. Second, we must remember that there will be times when we, like the Apostles, “must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). We can never violate God’s law to please a superior because we have a higher authority who demands our allegiance. Like Daniel, when commanded not to pray, we must pray anyway (Dan. 6:10). When commanded to bow down to an idol, we must refuse (3:6).

Of the three principles outlined in this strategy, living a God-centred life is the most foundational. It is from Him that our virtue and excellence ultimately come. We might live in dark days, yet these are the exact days that God has appointed us to live in. May we trust Him and vow to serve Him faithfully.

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First published in Tabletalk Magazine (Sept 2021, vol 45, no. 9), an outreach of Ligonier.

You are dust, not Divine

We Christians put on a good face, don't we? Each of us shows up on Sunday morning looking like we are doing just fine, like our lives are on cruise control, like we have had the best week ever. But ask a couple of leading questions, and probe just beneath the surface, and it soon falls apart. Each of us comes to church feeling the weight and the difficulty of this life. God has something he wants us to do in these situations. There is something he calls us to – something beautifully surprising and uncomfortable. Track with me for a couple of minutes here, and I'll show you what it is.

The reality: you are dust

One of my favourite passages in the whole Bible is Psalm 103. I pray it often, and focus on these words: "For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." These words tell us that even while we pray to the all-knowing and all-powerful God, we do so as created beings who were formed out of the dust of the ground. If we learn anything from our dusty origins, we learn that God did not intend for us to be superhuman and he did not intend for us to be God-like. He made us dust, not divine, and this was his good will. He made us weak.

The difficulty: you are burdened

Meanwhile, the Bible tells us that this life is full of trials and tribulations. Experience backs this up. This world is so sinful, we are so sinful, and the people around us are so sinful, that trials are inevitable. Each of us has burdens we carry through life. Sometimes these are burdens of our own making, sometimes these are burdens that come through sickness, sometimes these are burdens that come through other forms of suffering. But whatever the case, we dusty humans inevitably face burdens that seem crushingly and insurmountably heavy. Jesus speaks to the reality of life in this world when he says, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). We are weak and we are burdened.

The promise: help

God knows that we are weak. God knows each one of the trials we face, and he makes the sure promise that he can and will sustain us through each of them. In Psalm 55:22 he says, "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you." In times of temptation toward sin he promises, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). There are many more promises we could turn to, but the theme would be the same: God acknowledges our weakness and promises to meet them with his strength. We are weak and we are burdened, but God promises to help.

The temptation: self-reliance

We dusty, sinful human beings face a ridiculous temptation: self-reliance. Despite our weaknesses and despite our track-record of sin, we find ourselves constantly tempted to look to ourselves for help. Listen to what John Piper says: "Pride, or self-exaltation, or self-reliance is the one virus that causes all the moral diseases of the world. This has been the case ever since Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because they wanted to be God instead of trust God. And it will be true until the final outburst of human pride is crushed at the battle of Armageddon. There is only one basic moral issue: how to overcome the relentless urge of the human heart to assert itself against the authority and grace of God." We may see this self-reliance manifest itself in our lives in at least two ways: When we will not bring our burdens to the Lord in prayer, and when we will not bring those burdens to other Christians. In both cases we like to convince ourselves that we can bear this weight on our own, that we are strong enough to carry it.

The solution: community

When we are ready to let go of our self-sufficiency, we find that God offers an amazing solution. He offers a way that we can be relieved of the burdens we carry. Very often, the way God fulfils his promises and answers our prayers is through other Christians right there in our local churches. God expects that we will tell others about our burdens and that

we will respond to them together, in community. This is why Paul told the church in Galatia to "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Our church communities are to be marked by the sharing and bearing of burdens. If this is to happen, our churches need to be marked by humility, as each of us admits that we cannot make it through life on our own; they need to be marked by vulnerability, as we open up to others and seek their counsel and their help; they need to be marked by awareness, as we pursue the people around us, asking them how we can assist in life's trials. God's solutions always come from outside ourselves.

The vocation: burden-bearing

All of this leads us to the joyful vocation of burden-bearing. Piper says, "Here is a vocation that will bring you more satisfaction than if you became a millionaire ten times over: Develop the extraordinary skill for detecting the burdens of others and devote yourself daily to making them lighter." Make them lighter through prayer, make them lighter by skilfully bringing and applying the Word of God, and make them lighter by the comfort of your presence. In every case, make it your sacred calling to seek out and to share the burdens of your brothers and sisters. There is no higher calling than this. (For more on burden-bearing read *An Extraordinary Skill for Ordinary Christians*.) But there is more: You also owe it to yourself and to your church community to share your burdens with them, to humble yourself by asking for their help.

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Focus on faith

LETTERS OF JOHN NEWTON

The Lord reigns!

“The Lord reigns! He is robed in majesty! The Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength!” Psalm 93:1

“The Lord reigns! Let the nations tremble!” Psalm 99:1

The Lord reigns! He who once bore our sins and carried our sorrows – is seated upon a throne of glory and exercises all power in heaven and on earth! Thrones, principalities and powers bow before Him. Every being and event are under His rule. His providence pervades and manages the whole, and is as minutely attentive to every part – as if there were only that single object in His view.

From the tallest archangel, to the meanest ant or fly – all depend on Him for their being, their preservation and their powers! He directs the sparrows where to build their nests, and to find their food. He overrules the rise and fall of nations; and bends, with an invincible energy and unerring wisdom – all events! So that, while many intend otherwise – in the outcome their designs all concur and coincide in the accomplishment of His holy will. He restrains with a mighty hand the still more for-

midable efforts of the powers of darkness; and Satan with all his hosts cannot exert their malice a hair’s breadth beyond the limits of His permission. Satan may rage – but he is a chained enemy!

This is He, who is the Redeemer and Husband of His believing people.

How happy are those whom it is His good pleasure to bless!

How safe are those whom He has engaged to protect!

How honoured and privileged are those whom He enables and warrants to claim Him as their friend and their portion!

Having redeemed them by His own blood, He sets a high value upon them! He esteems them His treasure, His jewels! He guards them as the pupil of His eye. They shall not lack, and they need not fear!

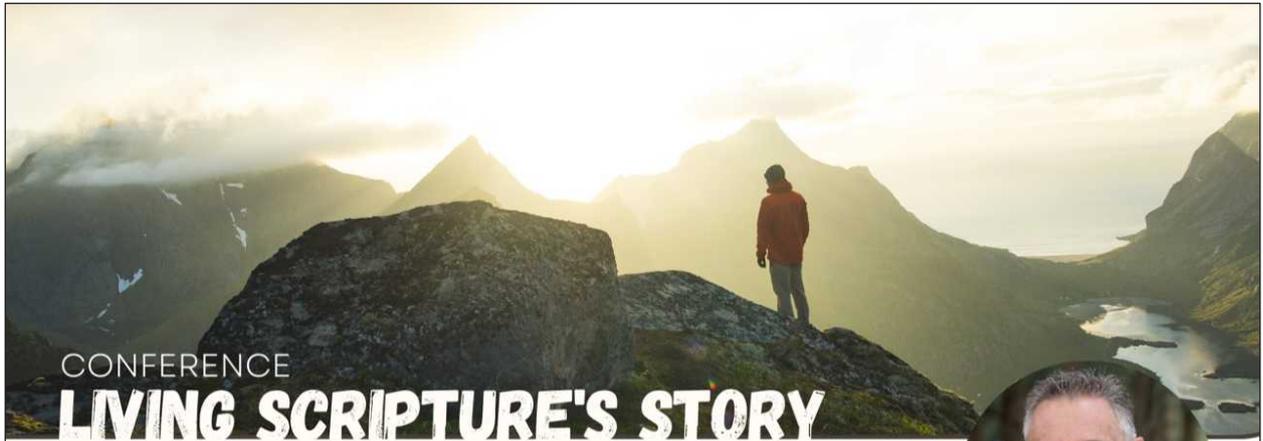
His eye is upon them in every situation,

His ear is open to their prayers, and

His everlasting arms are under them for their sure support.

On earth, He guides their steps, controls their enemies, and directs all His dispensations for their good! While, in Heaven, He is pleading their cause, preparing a place for them, and communicating down to them reviving foretastes of the glory that shall shortly be theirs!

“The Lord reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!” Psalm 146:10



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WRITTEN BY JENNY DAVIES OF MAF SOUTH SUDAN

Life and death amongst the Lopit

From the veranda of Marlene van Tonder's house in Ohilang village, you look over roof tops to the plateau that stretches for miles. The views are beautiful. She calls it her mountain mansion.

Her nearest mission neighbours are a ten-minute flight away in Lokutok. Others serve on the other side of the mountain in the communities around Torit. The hills in the distance are home to an African Inland Mission (AIM) team working amongst the Laarim people.

With a laugh, Marlene shares about the times she's been asked to drive to Lokutok to catch a flight. Although just a short 12km distance on the map, it takes a minimum of an hour in a 4X4. In the wet season you're more likely to get stuck in the mud than you are to arrive. When you have to pay the cost of an international flight in car repairs, near and far are relative terms.

Last year, Marlene's teammate Andrea was held up at gunpoint on her motorbike on this road. She escaped shaken but unharmed after she was robbed of her belongings. Incidents such as this aren't a laughing matter.

Marlene's mountain

The solid concrete structure of Marlene's house was built with cement, flown in by MAF in 2020. The bags were unloaded as rumours of a new disease brought in by white people were reaching the community. Two years later the fears have faded, and the completed house sits proud in its surroundings. Distinctive, but not out of place amongst the village houses.

In the valley below is the airstrip, extended in 2019 to allow MAF planes to land. After eight years of ministry in Iboni and Ohilang, Marlene knows which MAF pilot is landing by their approach, the route they choose through the mountains and how closely they hug the airstrip as they conduct a low pass. The planes are a welcome sight, bringing visitors and colleagues, fresh fruit, and vegetables, and sometimes a cold refreshing coke.

After two months away in her native New Zealand, Marlene is welcomed from the MAF plane by Luka

and Umjuma, close friends who are the other half of the close-knit team currently working amongst the Lopit. The couple are among the first South Sudanese missionaries to be sent by the AIC church in Torit. It is an exciting new initiative to speed the spread of the gospel in a culturally relevant way. They've been in the community for almost a year.

A place to call home

At Luka and Umjuma's home, Marlene is met by a pair of wagging tails and two pairs of gorgeous brown eyes. An hour later and her dogs, Angel and Waji lead the way for the climb 'up the mountain' to her house. Her luggage, carried up on the heads of local ladies, is waiting for her on the veranda when she arrives.

Inside the house, Marlene first checks there aren't any snakes hiding in dark corners, then reconnects

There are new arrivals to greet and old friends to grieve whenever she returns. This is life and death amongst the Lopit.

the solar panels and checks the water in the tanks. The nearest water pump is at the bottom of the mountain so she's happy to see the water flow out when she turns on the taps. She sweeps a layer of dust and animal droppings from the kitchen surfaces and packs away her fresh food. In the middle of the night, she discovers a family of mice nesting in her pantry cupboard, enjoying a midnight feast.

Next morning her guests arrive on her veranda at 6am. Time is told here, not by the hands of a clock but by the position of the sun on the mountain. When the time zone changed a year ago – all it did was create a time zone people call 'Juba time.' Apparently, time is relative too.

News with neighbours

Marlene catches up on news from neighbours and finds out what's been happening while she's been

gone. The big news is the traditional Hifira ceremony and the visitors it has brought from Juba and further afield.

As Marlene digests little bits of news she learns that an elderly neighbour has died alone in her traditional thatched home, less than a hundred meters away. She hurries to the compound where close relatives are keeping vigil by the grave. Her tears melt into the conversation as she hears that the neighbour died of hunger. Everyone asks why she has come to the funeral so late. In her fluent Lopit she explains about her travels to her far away homeland.

Passing from the funeral into one of the small alleyways that separate the compounds, there are neighbours to greet around every corner. She brushes the tears away to congratulate a neighbour who has recently delivered a baby girl. There are new arrivals to greet and old friends to grieve whenever she returns. This is life and death amongst the Lopit.

A new generation

Somewhere in the hills overlooking Ibonni village, the Hifira ceremony is in progress. The ceremony itself happens only every 22 years and is closed to outsiders and women. It involves the naming of the

Somewhere in the hills overlooking Ibonni village, the Hifira ceremony is in progress.



new ruling generation by King Alifa Omoro and the lighting of the fire of the new generation which will be carried to each of the six Lopit villages that make up the Heju Hiting kingdom.

Everyone not involved in the ceremony is at home preparing for the celebrations later. From the top of the hill in Ohilang, you can see ceremonial ostrich feather headdresses fluttering in the breeze. In a compound further down the hill, women are busy preparing the carcass of a slaughtered cow for a feast. Usually, cows are kept almost exclusively for dowry, which speaks to the importance of the occasion.

When the ceremony is concluded, the young men race from the ceremony to bang the drum in the village meeting place. It's an honour to be the first to share the name of the new generation which has been named the Maa or locust swarm. The celebrations begin in earnest in the afternoon. Young men in colourful costume proceed to the beat of the drum. A platform, with several tiers, forms the central structure in the meeting place representing the thirteen generations that have passed since the tradition was introduced in 1736. A bundle of sticks of varying heights represents the generations of leaders that have gone before.

Dancing

More and more people join the celebration to watch and to dance. Older women have whitened their faces with sorghum flour, which is a sign of prosperity, and adorned elaborate beaded collars. Younger women wear colourful hair bands and beaded skirts. The only part of community who are not involved, it seems, are the young boys who sit on the side-lines on the raised hillside overlooking the proceedings. Will they remember this day in 22 years' time when their time comes to lead?

Parallel celebrations are happening in each of the Heju Hiting Kingdom's six villages. A kilometre away in the larger village of Ibonni, the dust whipped up by hundreds of feet mixes with the golden evening light in a joyous whirlpool of celebration. The Heju Hiting flag flies from the tower and is carried jubilantly over the heads of the dancers together with the flag of South Sudan. Two great symbols of identity and hope.

The celebrations will continue for the next few days as Lopit villagers re-establish connections with out-of-town family members. At least four planeloads have travelled from Juba with many younger people coming by car. In the snatches of conversation there is a lot of Arabic mixed in with the Lopit – a reminder that identities are changing, blending and evolving as people seek opportunities for education and work elsewhere. The present and future no longer exists just in one place.

The rumble of thunder breaks over the mountains as the sun goes down. Fires burn on the hillside. Drums beat into the night punctuated by the occasional burst of celebratory gun fire. Strong alcohol has thankfully been banned for the duration of the celebration.

Sunday worship

The next morning is Sunday and on the edge of Ibonni village a small group of Christian believers are meeting for Sunday worship under a tree. Luka preaches to a handful of women and youth. The humble gathering is the opposite of yesterday's spectacle.

People take it in turns to read the Bible passage which is taken from Exodus Chapter eight. The Lopit Bible translation only has two books, Genesis and Exodus. It seems strange that they can't read about the life of Jesus, but they can read about the plague of frogs.

The New Testament is about to be circulated for feedback, a time-consuming process given that the translation consolidates six different dialects and many more different opinions. It is hard to find the words when the worldviews are so different.

More than the word preached or read from the Bible it is Marlene, Luka and Umjuma's physical presence in the village that gives a face to the gospel. Like the early church of Acts gathering in people's homes, the Kingdom that God is building here is very different from the Hifira being celebrated nearby.

Church in the community

After church, the missionaries discuss changes on the horizon over a cup of tea. Marlene is heading out for a season to work with the team in Torit but plans to come at least once a month to continue supporting the church.

They discuss the new secondary school in nearby Murra Lopit, a village further north. As a teacher, Marlene helped to train some of the teachers before the school opened its door in 2021. The school will mean young people won't have to go away to Torit to continue their education. The challenge will be finding qualified and motivated teachers willing to stay.

Knowing when and how to invest the churches' limited time and resources takes a lot of discernment for the team. Ministry must come first but where the church has a strong presence, it can be a conduit for development in areas beyond the reach of the NGOs. Missionaries are often well placed to meet urgent needs like an event that happened in 2017, when a fire burned the hillside in Ohilang destroying homes and grain stores. It was Marlene and her colleagues that arranged the AIM AIR planes that brought in emergency food.

Leaving and losing

The planes depart early the next morning to bring the Heju Hiting Elders and other visitors back to Juba. It is a day of departures. Luka is leaving by road for a short visit to Torit. In a few days, Umjuma will leave on a MAF plane for Juba for medical treatment. Marlene, herself, is preparing to leave Ohilang for Torit to lead a team of new prospective missionaries that will hopefully bolster her team when she returns.

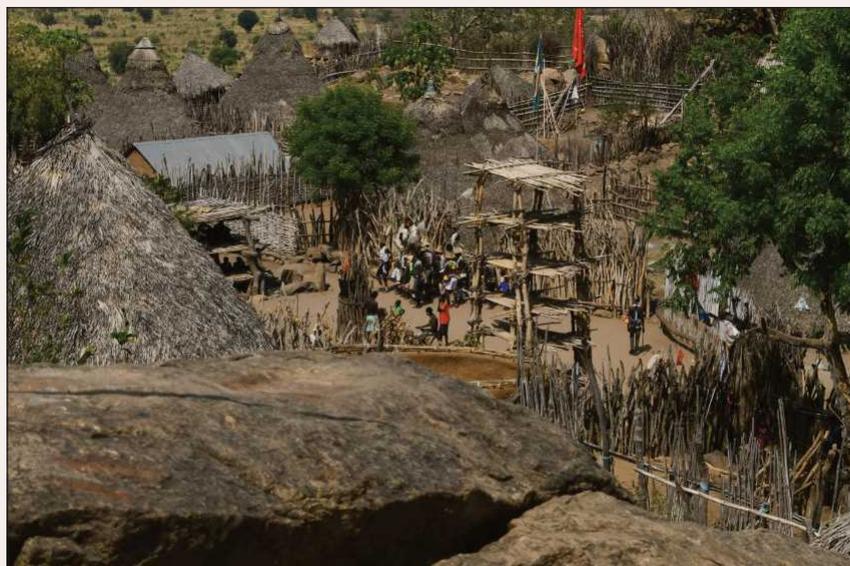
She is still in Ohilang a few days later when she

learns that Pastor Luka has died suddenly in Torit from an unidentified illness, leaving the community without a pastor and Umjuma and their two children and three adopted children, without a husband and father.

At Luka's funeral, Bishop Charles Nyiko speaks to people's unanswered questions when he says Luka's days were finished. He is in the hands of a gracious and loving Heavenly Father. The best way to honour Luka now is to continue the ministry he left behind.

The team is left reeling by the heart-breaking loss of a beloved colleague and one of the first local missionaries to be sent by the church in Torit. Two other young evangelists have died recently from illnesses. Last year an influential and mission focused AIC pastor was called out of his house at night and shot dead in an unprovoked attack. Each person has left a gap in their ministry and their lives.

As their work in Eastern Equatoria continues against the background of spiritual opposition and the cyclical self-perpetuating trauma of war, it seems that the AIM team have been called to count the



cost. Spiritual darkness is as real here as the gospel is light. The battle that is the prelude to every great victory continues to rage.

New ministry horizons

After eight years of ministry in Ibonni and Ohilang Marlene is part of the community. Leaving for a short time does not change that fact or weaken the foundation she's built. As she takes this time to regroup and strategise in Torit, the compound will remain open for visitors. She will travel in and out

at least once a month and trust that God will lead the way.

In Ohilang, there are no walls defending her heart or her ministry, only the prayers of supporters and teammates and the small planes from MAF that arrive on the horizon occasionally bringing the things she needs in this hiatus, and every other phase of her ministry.

Marlene is heartbroken but hopeful as she shares that her desire for her ministry and the people of Ohilang and Ibonni is to see a living, vibrant, Christ centred church – and everything that flows from that. She longs to see lives transformed and set free from addictions, trauma, bitterness, grudges and abuse of every kind. She has seen how, when someone comes to know the Lord, their quality of life improves. They look at the resources God has given them in a different way. She looks forward to the day when the outlook from her home in this beautiful and resource rich area will be transformed by the decent, talented, and resilient people who know Jesus and live in the abundance He provides.

Written by Jenny Davies of MAF South Sudan

