

faith in **focus**

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“Praise the LORD, O my soul.
O LORD my God, you are very great;
you are clothed with splendour and majesty.”

Psalm 103:1

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Editorial

The news in April came close to home for many of us. The devastating headlines which we can usually glance over we would be totally immersed in. It involved some of us, and so it touched so many of us. The account by our Br Dirk van Garderen in this issue brings this out. It is such a time that the faith laid in our hearts by the Lord makes all the difference. Then the comfort of the gospel is very precious and very real. But that is not to take away from those who have a huge gap in their lives or who continue to be traumatised through what has happened. We pray for them.

In 2nd Thessalonians 4:14-15 the Word of the Lord comes through the apostle Paul:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

This is the Gospel. This is what we must always look to. It is alone what we can take comfort in. And so it is helpful that we also have two timely reminders in this issue about the importance of keeping the Word central in all things. There has always been the danger in the Church to be distracted away from what God says to what man does. We must be careful to recognise that possibility when it appears and so be driven back to the Scriptures. Like the Bereans in Acts 17:11, who checked up on what the apostle Paul was preaching and teaching to them, we must always compare what we hear and see with what God has declared.

"Explain the Scripture by the Scriptures."

Clement of Alexandria

Photo Credit:

Cover – Henk Kwakernaat

Please note that the Mission House pictured on the cover of the March 2008 issue was built in 1822 not the 1840's as noted there. Also please note that the Maori chief whose tombstone was on the May cover was an earlier convert to the Christian faith.

The opinions expressed in this magazine are not to be considered the official position of the Reformed Churches of NZ 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 NZ. 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.

The Scriptures are necessary more than ever before

Testimonies are fallible

M. P. Geluk

What do you think about this question: Are your religious experiences and the exciting testimonies of others becoming more important to you than the Scriptures? Christian believers sometimes speak about personal experiences they have had, or they pass on testimonies from other Christians, and it appears that these experiences and stories have excited them more than important truths taught in Scripture. The Spirit of God can, of course, have us experience something that turns out to be a great blessing to us and at the same time confirms a number of Scriptural teachings. So it is far from my mind to deny the value of God's hand of providence on our lives. Yet, I have a concern that a number of Christians today are looking for a 'high' in their faith, an excitement in their walk with God, a demonstration that God is real, that comes not from Scripture in the first place but from some experience, either their own or someone else's. Let me explain what that concern is based on.

The necessity of Scripture must be maintained against Roman Catholicism

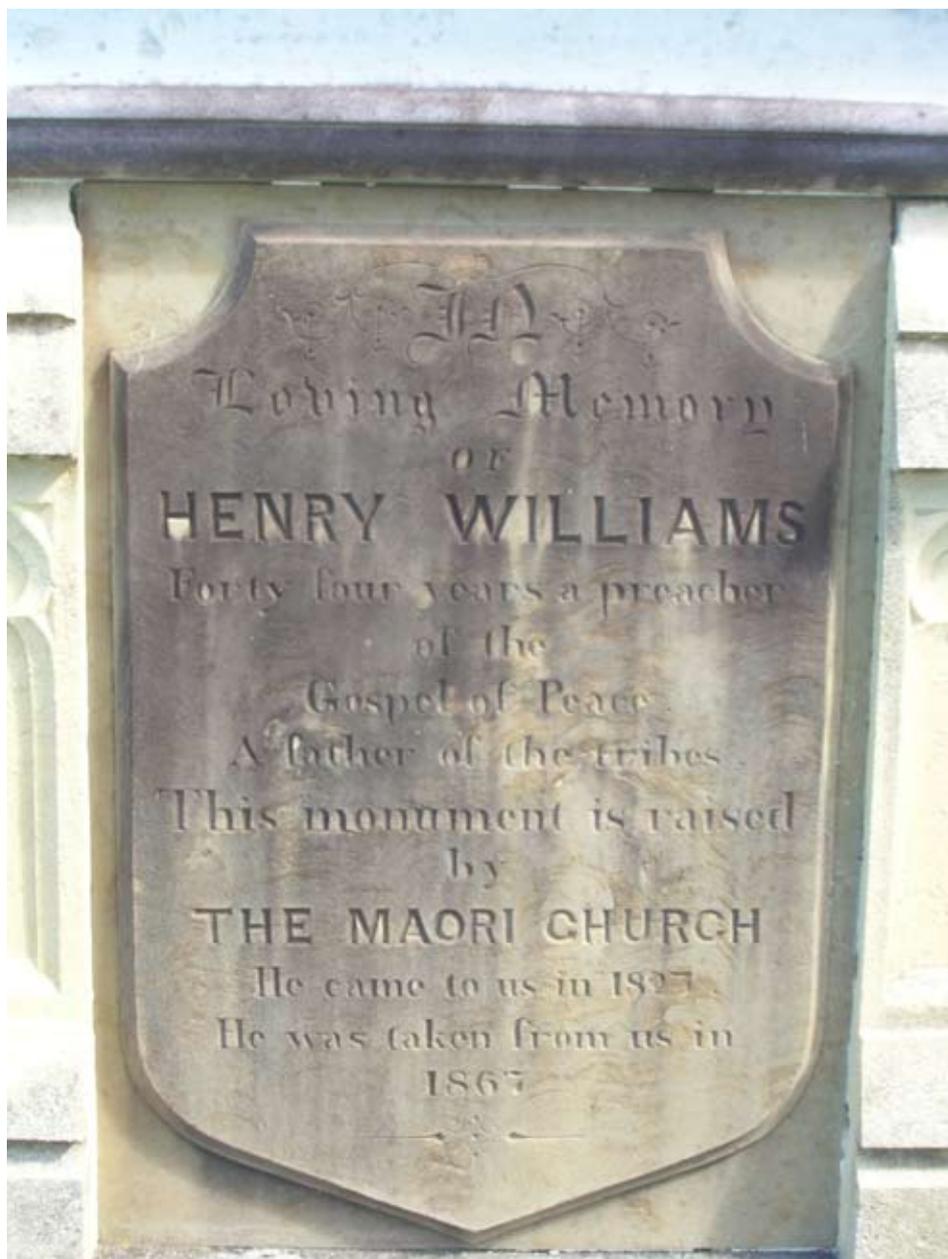
Herman Bavinck in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, volume one, speaks about the necessity of Scripture [p.465 ff.] and says that the Church of Rome believes that the Church is trustworthy in and of itself. That is, Rome claims that the Church is self-sufficient. What that means for Rome is that the Church faithfully and purely possesses the truth, and preserves this truth by means of the infallible teaching office of the pope. Rome believes that Scripture proceeds from the Church. Scripture is useful and good, but it is not necessary for the existence of the Church. The Church, says Rome, does not really need Scripture, but Scripture — for its authority, augmentation, exposition, etc. — does need the Church. In other words, what the Church declares to be true comes before what the Scripture says is true. What the Church says about the Bible is more important than the Bible's own testimony. The Church will determine what the Bible's teaching is really saying.

Rome believes that the grounds for saying the above lie in the fact that believers who lived before Moses had no Scriptures. Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, but believers prior to Moses believed and trusted God solely by tradition handed down through time. The same with believers who lived before the New Testament was written. Rome says that believers in the time of Jesus and the apostles also lived their lives of faith and trust in God by tradition. This argument is not completely

correct and Bavinck explains what Rome fails to mention. We will mention this further down.

The necessity of Scripture must also be maintained against mysticism

Throughout the history of the Church, many mystical movements have weakened and denied the significance of Scripture for church and theology. Gnosticism, for example, which flourished around the time of the early Church and particularly in the



second century A.D., said that Biblical data is necessary for people on a lower level but the spiritually enlightened do not need the historical facts of the Bible. Scripture is not a source of truth, but only a means by which the elite can elevate themselves to a higher level of 'gnosis' [i.e. knowledge]. The Montanists, also from the second century A.D., claimed that the new revelations they received were an improvement of what was in Scripture. Even the great church father Augustine [354-430 A.D.] assumed that the devout, especially the monks, were endowed with such a great measure of faith, hope and love, they could do away with Scripture for themselves and live in solitude without the Scriptures.

There were reasons why in the history of the Church some people and certain movements played down the necessity of Scripture and got more excited about experiences, their own or of others. Prior to the Reformation [16th century] the Roman Catholic Church expressed its power and its tradition to such a degree that it crushed the plain teaching of Scripture. People

reacted against this abuse of power. And because the Bible was always not available in their own language, or people simply could not read, spiritualism often emerged. Some leaders taught others to live only by the Spirit. The external means of Scripture and Church were no longer needed. The internal was far more important.

The pietistic and mystical movements, which flourished during the Middle Ages in Europe, sought by means of self-denial, austere living, meditation and contemplation, to reach a communion with God that could do away with Scripture. The Bible was still needed as a ladder to ascend to the higher level of internal religious experience. But once that personal union with God, or that vision of God, was reached, then the Bible became superfluous. The emotions and feelings of the heart were exalted at the expense of the external Word of God. A contrast between Scripture and the Spirit was forged. Holy Scripture was not seen as the true Word of God, but only a witness and a record of that Word. The true Word was spoken in the heart by the Holy

Spirit. Even today there are those who claim an assurance of salvation, not based on what the Bible teaches, but on a personal experience they have had.

Evaluation

The emphasis of the internal over the external Word of God usually led to the identification of the teaching of Scripture with the natural light of reason and conscience. The Quaker movement [17th century] was an example of this. The inner light became more important than God's revelation in Scripture. The letter kills, the inward spirit brings life. Here the claims of Rome were repeated. That is, people had faith in God in the time from Adam to Moses when there were as yet no written Scriptures. Christianity existed before the New Testament was written. Accordingly it was believed that the Christian religion is true not because the apostles taught it: no, the apostles taught the Christian religion because it was found to be true in the inner experiences of believers. The writings of the apostles must be interpreted in accordance with the internal truths experienced by Christian believers.

When we try to evaluate this then we must, of course, affirm that there is a leading of the Spirit in the individual believer and in the Church [Rom. 8:14, 16; Gal. 5:22]. From heaven Christ dwells and works in His Church on earth [1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 2:22]. There is a mystical union between Christ and His body, the Church [Eph. 4:13, Col. 3:3]. The witness of the Spirit in the heart is needed for the believer to know that the Bible is the Word of God [1 Thess. 2:13]. But the Christian faith is not only a matter of the heart, the emotions, and the will, but also of the head. God must also be served and loved with the mind. The Church must have a source from which it draws the truth.

The Reformation did not accept the infallibility of the pope. Therefore it did not look to the pope in order to decide what the Bible is teaching. Nor did the Reformation accept the inner experiences of the Anabaptists as the determining factor as to what the Bible taught. The Reformation taught the necessity of Scripture because it only is the source of truth. If Scripture is not necessary then the Christian faith weakens, and truth will become lost because the believers' experience and testimony are not infallible while Scripture is.

Authority of the Word

Today also we must regard the authority



RTC Preaching Conference

Thursday 25 & Friday 26 September 2008

preaching Hebrews ...a better way

*In this majestic epistle
everything seems to be better*

**a better hope <
a better covenant <
better sacrifices <
a better country <
a better resurrection <**



Guest Speaker
Rev Michael Raiter
Principal, Bible College of Victoria

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of God's holy Word as being above whatever authority is claimed from religious experience. Believers sometimes tend to seek in their religious experiences a sure conviction that God is real. They may hear of other believers' experiences and get all excited about the work of the Holy Spirit being dramatic and wonderful. Again, as we said before, we must not deny that God through His Spirit leads and guides His people, sometimes in unusual and dramatic ways. But we can be absolutely sure that what the Scriptures speak of and teach is truth, whilst with religious experiences, our own or that of others, we do not have that certainty. Scripture is necessary not only because it is true, but also because religious experiences are open to error. Our interpretations and understanding of what we and others experience of God's presence and leading is fallible. It is open to misunderstanding. Whatever we experience and whatever exciting testimony we hear from others is always influenced by our subjective leanings. As we listen and digest what others are telling us of God's mighty works in their lives, our imagination of what it was like is always inaccurate. The Bible is clear in its teaching that we are imperfect. Our interpretation of our own experiences and the testimonies of others cannot be relied upon as being one hundred percent true and objective. Scripture alone gives us the certainty that what it says is absolutely true. And we must not interpret Scripture so that it fits in with what we or others have experienced.

What about the argument from the Church of Rome that believers, who lived before Moses and who lived before the New Testament was completed, had to rely on tradition? What about the many believers in the history of the church who lived and died without ever having read and examined the Scriptures, either because they could not read or the Bible was not available in their own language? And what about many believers who seek spiritual satisfaction not so much from Scripture, but more from a wide assortment of devotional literature? The Church as the body of believers may be older than the written Word, but it is definitely younger than the spoken Word. Before Moses there was the unwritten Word of God before it was recorded. The Church never lived from and by itself, or merely by tradition, but always lived by and in the Word of God. God verbally spoke to Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and other believers in the time prior to Moses. The canon of the New Testament books was

only recognised during the second half of the second century A.D., but from the beginning the New Testament Church had the writings of the Old Testament. Jesus spoke the true Word of God to the people of His day. The churches mentioned in the New Testament were founded by the spoken word of the apostles, who were inspired by God's Spirit to say what God wanted to reveal. At a very early stage the Church came into possession of the writings of the apostles, long before the canon of Scripture was declared. The writers of the New Testament letters instructed the churches to read the letters written to them as well as letters written to other churches [Col.4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 2 Thess. 3:14; 2 Pet. 3:16]. While the apostles were alive and visited the churches, no distinction was made between their spoken Word and the written Word. But when the first period of the Church passed and the apostles had died, it became very necessary for the Church to have the spoken word of the apostles in writing. Revelation has now ceased, for God has said in the written Word all what He wanted to reveal. Scripture, therefore, is complete and necessary for the existence of the Church. Scripture is now the only adequate means for guarding against the imperfections of and even the corruption of the spoken word of people interpreting the written Word. Thus those believers who had to rely on others to tell them what the Bible said, because they themselves could not read or had no Bible, were exposed to the errors of those who spoke the Word to them. Also, those who rely more on devotional literature than on the Scriptures are exposed to misconceptions and misunderstandings of that literature. And those who rely more on experiences, their own or of others, than on Scripture, are exposed to imperfect interpretation and imagination.

However exciting a testimony may be, we need to realise that the Bible warns against the unreliability of memory and the craftiness of the human heart. The prophet Isaiah gave a strong warning to those who consulted sources other than God: 'To the law and to the testimony. If they do not speak according to this Word they have no light of dawn' [Is. 8:20]. The law and the testimony were the written Word of God.

Scripture alone

Today we face a seriousness of errors in reporting what takes place in the world. The facts are sometimes deliberately

twisted in order to achieve personal gain. The unproven or false claims of science are more extensive. The memory is often weak, and deception is more brazen. Sadly, these factors in society also appear among those who claim to speak for God. Thus the necessity for the Holy Scriptures has increased. There is no knowledge of Christ and the Holy Spirit apart from Scripture. We cannot completely rely on our experience or on what others tell us. There are religious books today that go beyond what Scripture teaches. For example, we hear of people testifying of having died and gone to heaven and then came back to tell us what heaven is like. Sadly, there are those who get excited by these false claims. Instead of getting excited by the miracles described in Scripture, which attest to the trustworthiness of God's acts of redemption, to Christ as the Son of God, and to the apostles as His true messengers, some love to hear of miracles outside the Bible that seem to prove that God is more real than the miracles mentioned in the Bible. There is no denying that those who are involved in short or long-term missions learn valuable lessons for their faith and trust in God. Yet, often there is more emphasis placed on what is experienced and how those involved in these ministries were taken out of their comfort zone, than on teaching and sharing the truths of Scripture to those they are ministering to. What is more important — what we get out of a certain ministry, or being an instrument in God's hand in passing on the truth of salvation in Christ to the lost? The apostle Paul tells us about his many experiences on his missionary journeys [2 Cor. 1:8-10; 4:7-12] but always his overriding concern was to reach the Gentiles with the gospel of Christ. And he took great care that his message was according to the Scriptures. Therefore, we must continue to test all experiences and testimonies against the truth of Scripture. We have complete certainty of what God tells us in His Word. We do not have that same certainty with what others are saying. To be close to God and enjoy the blessings of salvation, we must rely on the truth of Scripture and less on our experience and the testimony of others.

The Rev M. P. Geluk is a retired minister of the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia, who has also helped serve a 3 month locum at our Dovedale congregation.

Letters to the Editor

Response to National Youth Camp Review

Peter Kloosterman

I would like to respond to the review of the National Youth Camp written by Tim Sterne. There is no denying the enthusiasm expressed by Br. Sterne regarding the Camp. That is much appreciated and needs to be encouraged. I hope that my response will not diminish his or other's enthusiasm but direct it toward the building of the church and the extension of Christ's kingdom. His review was polished and captivating. There were, however, points he made wherein I sensed a disturbing undercurrent. These are like the rip currents at the beach. The sea might look cool and refreshing, but if you aren't aware of the danger, a rip current can be deadly. The rip can quickly pull the unsuspecting swimmer out to sea. Br Sterne and others were greatly moved by what happened at camp. For that we must be thankful. But this is also where the danger arises.

Comparing camps

The concluding sentence states, 'NYC was a time when God poured out His Spirit on our people.' This is a quote from Joel 2:28. This refers to the promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Tim writes to reassure us that he doesn't mean speaking in tongues or healings. That is good, but there is another concern. That is his elevation of this last camp above the others he previously attended. I don't think it is fair to those who have planned the previous camps to say that their work, because it didn't have a particular effect, was spiritually wanting. That is the impression that I received from Tim's review and I think it illustrates the particular danger of an undercurrent.

That danger would be what some call 'convention' or 'conference' spirituality. There is no denying the fact that conventions and conferences are times of intense experiences. We are alerted to that in the opening paragraph of Br Sterne's review. That is what makes them memorable and special. My intention is not to counter that or diminish the blessings of those experiences. We must, however, guard against the idea that suggests that those extraordinary

experiences are to be the measure of what God is doing. We must always be alert to the use of experience as the verification of the work of God. This can quickly pull one away from the moorings of God's word and from the safety of God's harbour, which is the Church.

Relevant recent history

The history of the Church in America alerts us to this fact. Long before Pentecostalism, as a movement, arose in the form of the Azusa Street movement in 1901, a shift had taken place in the mindset of the Church at large. Pentecostalism found a ready-made foothold, because earlier the mindset of many Christians had been changed to the view that experience is the means of verifying what God is doing. Scrutinising events according to the teaching of the Bible was disparaged, because the events of revivals and seemingly new works of the Spirit were so enlivening. (For further study I would suggest Iain Murray's book, *Revival and Revivalism*). You can imagine the appeal. When it seems like the revival tent is where the Spirit lives and works, the church which is built on theology and preaching soon becomes passé. The solution offered in America was a century-long experiment of changing the structure of the Church. Trying to develop and maintain a spirituality that thrives on new and exhilarating experiences has developed a church of showmanship and spectacle. Sadly, the place of doctrine and the stability of truth were lost.

I am not suggesting we are at the point of lost doctrine and instability. My understanding from the article is that this current is just starting to ripple in the waters of church life. Several things indicate this ripple. The most prominent is the shift in focus from the *substance* of what was said to the *effect* of what was said. Certainly there is a place for reflection on the effect. However, when that supersedes substance the current needs to be examined.

From substance to effect

After reading this review, I knew more about the effect than the substance of the lectures and testimonies. In fact, it seems that it is the effects that lead Tim to conclude that the Spirit was active in a way not before apparent at the camps. However, the Spirit's work is not simply to

move people. His work, according to Jn. 15:26,27 is to testify about the work of Jesus Christ. Bringing Christ to His children via the truth is the substance of what the Spirit is doing. That is why He is called the Spirit of truth (cf. Jn. 14:17). It is in conformity to the doctrines of Christ that we can test the spirits (1 Jn. 4:1,2). One must ask, was the work of Christ confessed, or was it the effect of the work of Christ? There is a subtle shift. As a Pastor, I am very aware of how easy it is to shift the focus. Then the message becomes more about what Christ can do for a believer, rather than who Christ is and what He has done. One places the focus on the well-being of man, the other on the glory of God in Christ. Let us be aware of the indications of a changing current.

The place of the local church

Another indication of the stirring waters is the disconnection from life in the Bride of Christ. During these conferences, our spiritual fervour is expanded like a balloon that deflates as you return to life in the daily grind. It causes us to live as if the Spirit inhabits the conventions and conferences, but not the local body of Christ. In our home church, everything seems routine and too common. The excitement and thrill of such powerful persuasions grow stale and our spiritual balloons burst on the prickly characters of God's people. But, it is in the local church that we must be diligent to walk by faith and not by sight. In the structure of the authority of ministers, elders and deacons, we must learn to see Christ working. They are part of Christ's gift to the Church (Eph. 4:11). In the 'grind' of weekly sermons and corporate worship, we must learn to appreciate the Lord's profound promises of His presence by the work of the Spirit.

Recognising the rips

As I reflect upon this response the warnings sound ominous. Perhaps you think I am an alarmist, but the dangers are real. A swimmer properly taught can survive a rip. So too in the Church; just because there is this undercurrent, it doesn't mean we must be swept to sea. We must learn where these currents will take us. We must recognise their danger and alert others to it. We must learn what is necessary for us to survive. That is why I have taken

the time to respond. There is hope. Hope that when we recognise the current we will drop our anchor in the work of Jesus Christ. Then our souls will be secured as we reflect upon what He has done for us and how that is applied by the work of the Spirit; not only at conventions and conferences, but especially in His Church — the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

The Rev. Peter Kloosterman is the minister of the Reformed Church of Masterton

The Editor

In the February 2008 issue of *Faith in Focus* Tani Newton, in her article **The 'smacking debate,'** comments on the furore that surrounded the repeal of Section 59 of the Crimes Act and the various comments that have been made by those for and against this bill.

I found the article very helpful and it highlights many of the real issues that are at stake in the government's drive to control the lives of the people of New Zealand. However, I do not believe that all her comments under 'Christian response' necessarily reflect the way the Bible encourages us to respond.

Yes, we have to be aware that there is a war going on against the Lord and how He wants His people to live.

Yes, parents must be honest with themselves and each other about the difficulties of bringing up their children in

the way of the Lord.

And yes, Hebrew scholars do inform us that the words used in the various proverbs refer to *beating, bruises, wounds, weals*, etc. But these scholars also inform us that these words have a wider meaning than that, which is not excluded in the application of these proverbs.

In Proverbs 13:24 the Hebrew word for 'discipline' includes the following range of meanings: chastise, reproof, warn, instruct. Proverbs 22:15 uses the same word (also in Hebrew) in the same way. The word for 'rod' certainly refers to physical discipline with the use of a rod, yet in Proverbs (esp. with reference to parental discipline) it more generally refers to discipline, i.e. a) the preventive discipline of verbal rebuke **as well as** b) the corrective discipline of physical punishment. To imply that every *proverb* that refers to the 'rod of discipline' is of necessity talking about inflicting *bruises, wounds and weals* as a result of *beating* the child is saying more than the words themselves and the proverbs in question are teaching us.

Even the word 'punish' in Proverbs 23:13-14 can mean 'striking lightly' right through to 'wound' and 'kill'. Though the mention of 'the rod' certainly implies that the writer has physical punishment in mind, this does not imply even here that this should only result in wounds, weals and bruises to have the desired effect (v.14b).

In the various proverbs and other passages that deal with parental discipline Scripture does **not** indiscriminately call for

discipline that consists of '*beating* a child, *using an implement* and *leaving a lasting red mark*'.

We must remember that these are *proverbs*. Proverbs are sayings that 'condense the wisdom of experience [of a community of believers]' or 'the illustration of a general [Biblical] truth' or again 'a time honoured and generally accepted saying [with a strong Biblical foundation]'. (The bracketed words are added by me.) A proverb should **not** be absolutised into a commandment. The **main** commandments we are given with regard to bringing up children (younger and older) are found in Deut. 6:6-9 and again in Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:18-21.

As parents we must heed the **whole** counsel of God and we must live and proclaim it, but when we do so we must not overemphasise one point over another and so border on misrepresenting what the Bible teaches and give our opponents not only an one-sided picture of what the Bible teaches, but also opportunity to sidetrack us and draw us away from the real issue.

Because the most important thing in this whole debate is not so much the level of force (or lack of it) that is used in discipline, in a way this is a side-issue. The most important issue is: **Who is responsible for bringing up children?** Has God given this responsibility to parents, or does it belong to the government? Section 59 recognised that it is the task of parents. The law as amended says it is the task of the government. We must respond to the actual question which Tani raises so well earlier in her article, because this is where the **real** battle is and our aim must be to claim that responsibility back from those who have taken it from the parents to whom God has given it.

God has given **parents** the task and responsibility to bring up their children in the Lord. They must do so in a way that honours God, and this will require that they discipline them. But by God's grace preventative (verbal) discipline, i.e. instruction, will be the larger part of discipline.

I am sorry that I used so many words to make this point but I believe this it is important that we understand and apply Scripture correctly, so that then we can indeed be a clear witness to the nation we live in, as well as to other believers, and call them back to living life God's way, whether the law of the land permits us to do so or not.

Pieter van der Wel



The Scoop'a on NOOMA

Part 2

Greg Gilbert

Here's the scoop on the Rob Bell video series storming through youth rooms and sermon series across the country.

Rob Bell's NOOMA videos have made quite a splash in the Christian world. In some ways that's not terribly surprising. The little videos are masterpieces of technical production, and Bell has just about perfected the art of looking into a camera and making you think you're having a nice conversation over coffee, or on a subway platform, or between breaths as you plant a tree together. It's all very compelling, not at all "churchy," and so Christians look at it and think, 'Wow, I could show this to the guy I buy coffee from every morning and not be embarrassed. This is great stuff!'

In some ways I don't blame them for saying that. Bell's approach is undeniably fresh, and it will communicate with people who are immediately turned off by a suited guy in a pulpit with a fake green plant in front of it. In that sense, NOOMA is good. Really good.

But that's not the end of the story. Once you get past the razzle-dazzle of the videos' style and really listen to what Bell is saying, you start to wonder if maybe they're not so good after all. Watch the videos with a discerning eye, and certain questions start nagging you: What's the cross for again? Why did Jesus die? *How* do you become a Christian? Hold on — did he just say that *everyone* has the Spirit of God living in them already? *Jesus* has faith in *me*? *I* am the gospel? What in the world does that mean?

Most of the videos in the series don't really get at the most important questions about what the gospel is. Most of them talk about practical topics like sex, anger, materialism, loving your enemies, and the like. But there are a few that really focus on the gospel itself and try to answer the question, 'What does it mean to be a Christian?' The best way to get at the heart of NOOMA's presentation of the gospel, I think, is to watch the episodes titled *Trees*, *Luggage*, *Dust*, *Rhythm*, *Breathe*, and *You*. Of course there are places here and there in the other videos that speak about the gospel, but I think the crucial points are made in those six.

In [Part 1](#) of this review, I argued that, at the very least, the gospel Bell presents in NOOMA is incomplete. Essentially, it boils down to the assertion that God loves us just as we are, wants to heal us of our brokenness, and calls us to live a life of love and compassion just like Jesus did. There is very little about the cross, very little about the resurrection, and nothing about how sin separates us from God or deserves his righteous anger.

But the problem doesn't end with incompleteness: it's not just what is left unsaid. The concern is worse than that, because if you take the videos on their own terms, and if you take Bell's presentation of the gospel at face value, what you end up



with is actually something very different from biblical Christianity. You end up with a 'gospel' that misleads people about their relationship with God, is inexcusably unclear about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, and finally makes Christianity little more than a banal moral system that tells people to live in a certain way.

NOOMA misleads lost people

Let me explain what I mean when I say that the gospel presented in NOOMA misleads lost people about their relationship with God. The Bible could not be clearer that the consequence of sin and rebellion against God is that we are separated from him, our relationship with him is severed, and we are brought under his judgment and condemnation. 'Your sins have made a separation between you and your God,' Isaiah says (Is. 59:2). And Paul writes in Romans 1 that the wrath of God is revealed

against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

These facts — that sin separates human beings from God, and that God judges sin — constitute one of the most important themes in the entire Bible. They explain why everything else was necessary — the sacrifices, the priests, the prophets, and especially Jesus' death on the cross. It's why Jesus cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46). He was separated from God so that his redeemed people would not be.

Bell doesn't say any of that in the NOOMA videos. In fact, he seems to tell lost people exactly the opposite — that they are already in relationship with God and even forgiven of sin, and that the only problem is that they just don't realise it. Whether because of shame, or embarrassment, or sheer ignorance, they're hiding under the covers (see *Lump*) when a loving, merciful God has already forgiven them, is already in relationship with them, and is just waiting for them to realise it and start acting like it.

Take the video titled *Rhythm*, for example. Bell compares God to a song that is playing throughout the universe in every heart and soul. 'The song is playing all around us all the time,' he says. 'The song is written on our hearts. And everybody is playing a song. See, the question isn't whether or not you're playing a song, the question is 'Are you in tune?' In other words, are you living the kind of compassionate, loving life that harmonises with the song that's already playing in your heart? Here's the last line of that video: 'May you come to see that the song is written on your heart, and as you live in tune with the song, in tune with the Creator of the universe, may you realise that you *are* in relationship with the living God.'

Now, that language is bewilderingly slippery. Is everybody playing a song, or *the* song? Who is Bell talking to exactly when he hopes they realise that they *are* in relationship with the living God? The lost person who's hearing this for the first time? The person who's been living 'in tune with the song' for a while? None of that's clear.

Or take this passage from *Breathe*:

Life is fragile, and yet at the same time we've been breathed into by the creator

of the universe. And this divine breath is in every single human being ever... We're these sacred, divine dirt-clods. And yet we possess untold power and strength. Your life is but a breath, and yet you were made by the creator of everything. Now for thousands of years, people have understood that this physical breath that we all possess is actually a picture of a deeper reality. In the Bible, the word for breath is the same word as the word for spirit. In the Hebrew language, it's the word 'ruah,' and in the Greek language, it's the word 'pneuma.'... Breath, spirit. Same word.

The divine breath is in 'every single human being ever', and everyone knows that *breath* and *spirit* are the same word. Well, all right so far. Every human being has a spirit. But then:

The first Christians took hold of this idea, and they took it way farther. They actually believed that the Spirit of God resides, or can literally dwell, live in a person. One scripture in Romans 8 says that if the pneuma (Spirit of God) who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then God will give you life. Another scripture says that what the Spirit of God does living in you is, it sanctifies. Now the word sanctify, it means to, like, purge, or to clean out. What it essentially means is that when you let God in, when you breathe, what happens is you become aware of all the things you need to leave behind, everything you need to let go of. . . . Jesus said that what the Spirit of God does is it guides us into truth. Is there anything you need guidance in?

Again, who's he talking to here? It's hard to believe that he's suddenly quit talking to lost people and shifted to talking only to those who have repented and believed in Jesus. Yet he's talking about the Spirit of God dwelling in us, and what that means in our lives. Does Bell think that the Spirit of God dwells in 'every single human being ever'? When he puts the phrase 'when you breathe' right next to the phrase 'when you let God in', is he saying that the way you let the Spirit of God into your life is just by taking a breath? When he says that the early Christians 'took this idea way farther' and began to talk about the indwelling *Spirit of God*, does Bell realise that they only applied that idea to people who were Christians? Or does he still think that's true of 'every single human being ever'?

Here's how it ends: 'A person doesn't have to agree with this for it to already be true. God has already given us life, in the breath we just took, and the breath

we took before that, and the breath we're gonna take and the breath after that.' Okay, but are we back now to talking about just *breath* and just *spirit* of the kind that every human being has? Or are we still talking about the Spirit of God?

And what about this, from *Luggage*: 'It's like right at the heart of [Jesus'] message is the simple claim that God has forgiven us of all of our sins, doesn't hold any of our past against us — because none of us have clean hands, do we?... So when I forgive somebody, I'm giving them what God has given to me... May you forgive as you've been forgiven. May you give to others what's been given to you.' Again, who's he talking to? Who's been forgiven? If I'm not a Christian, and I'm hearing all this for the first time, am I supposed to see myself in that statement? Am I supposed to walk away thinking I'm already forgiven?

To be fair, I wouldn't draw any hard conclusions from this on its own terms. The language is just too slippery, to the point that it almost seems *designed* for one to be able to interpret it however one wants. If you're lost, you can hear it and walk away convinced that the Spirit of God is dwelling in you, that you have life, and that you've been forgiven of all your sins. But then again, Bell could come back and say, 'No, I didn't mean that at all.'

Actually, I wish he would say that. Then we could chalk it all up to the consummate communicator not communicating very well. There's a passage in one of Bell's books, however, that leads me to think that Bell really is asserting that life, forgiveness, and even the Spirit of God is already possessed by every single human being ever. The only hitch is that some people don't realise it. Here's the relevant passage from *Velvet Elvis* (page 146):

The fact that we are loved and accepted and forgiven in spite of everything we have done is simply too good to be true. Our choice becomes this: We can trust his [God's] retelling of the story, or we can trust our telling of our story. It is a choice we make every day about the reality we are going to live in.

And this reality extends beyond life.

Heaven is full of forgiven people.

Hell is full of forgiven people.

Heaven is full of people God loves, whom Jesus died for.

Hell is full of forgiven people God loves, whom Jesus died for.

The difference is how we choose to live, which story we choose to live in, which version of reality we trust.

Ours or God's.

I don't know how else to understand this: What Bell is asserting here is a bizarre kind of universalism in which every human being is forgiven and yet some forgiven people end up in hell anyway. The NOOMA might be slippery, but this passage from *Velvet Elvis* isn't at all, and that may offer some insight on what he's actually saying in NOOMA. The only way I can see to understand it is that Bell is telling lost people that they are forgiven, that they are in relationship with God, even that the Spirit of God lives in them and is waiting to guide them and sanctify them if only they'd wake up and realise it.

That kind of thinking, though, is devastatingly misleading to lost people. To be lost is not merely to be ignorant about the fact that you are already in relationship with God, forgiven, free, and full of his Spirit. To be lost is to be separated from God and under his judgment. That's a crucial part of the gospel, not just because Bell's alternative involves the absurdity of forgiven people suffering in hell: it's crucial because, unless you understand that God hates sin and judges it, the cross doesn't make any sense. In fact, it becomes kind of superfluous. The fact is, somebody could hear Rob Bell's version of the gospel in NOOMA and walk away feeling forgiven and Spirit-filled without a single thought about Jesus' death. And at that point, what you have is something quite other than Christianity.

NOOMA is unclear about the meaning of the cross

All that may actually go a long way toward explaining why the Emergent movement seems to have so much trouble with the cross: They can't really find a place for it. It doesn't fit neatly into the storyline. I've written about this in another place, with particular regard to Brian McLaren's work. But it's true of Rob Bell's material in NOOMA, too. Blood atonement just doesn't find a natural home in the Emergent story, so even though it can't be ignored entirely, the cross doesn't get mentioned very often. And when it does, it's never with any clear explanation of its meaning.

I didn't keep a count of exactly how many times the cross makes an appearance in the eighteen NOOMA videos I watched, but I am certain that it doesn't get any extended treatment, much less a video to itself. But where it is mentioned, the viewer is left utterly unclear as to what Jesus' death does, or why it matters.

Here's what Bell says about Jesus'

death in *Luggage*:

It's like right at the heart of his message is the simple claim that God has forgiven us of all of our sins, doesn't hold any of our past against us — because none of us have clean hands, do we? I mean we've all wronged someone, but with Jesus there's no condemnation, there's no list of wrongs, there's no judgment. It's like the cross is God's way of saying, 'I don't hold your past against you.'

There's nothing necessarily *wrong* there, but then again, the whole idea of these videos is to talk to non-Christian people and tell them about Jesus Christ. Exactly what are they supposed to gain when Bell says that the cross is God's way of saying that he doesn't hold their past against them? At the very least, that's pretty thin stuff to offer up as an explanation of what most Christians consider to be the centre of their faith.

There's a slightly more filled-out treatment of Jesus' death in *You*, where Bell

Caesar? Whose kingdom do you find more compelling?

There's not much there to go on, but the point seems to be that Jesus' death was a picture of Caesar's wrath against his life of love and compassion, and the resurrection was then another picture of God vindicating Jesus' way over Caesar's way. Love conquers violence. McLaren floats a similar understanding of the cross in *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, calling it the 'powerful weakness' theory of the atonement. The problem with that, however, is that it casts Jesus' death as a mere spectacle. It's just God *showing* us that he prefers Jesus' way to Caesar's. But it leaves the cross actually accomplishing nothing objective.

I've watched several hours' worth of NOOMA videos now, and I still have no idea what Bell thinks the cross was for. Somehow it has to do with God not holding our past against us, and together with the resurrection it's a powerful statement

just ignore it. And when you can't ignore it any longer, you'll say something benign and cloudy like, 'It's God's way of saying that he doesn't hold our past against us.' Then you'll tut-tut Caesar for killing Jesus. What you won't do is face up honestly to the fact that Scripture says, 'Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him.'

Here's the thing: No one would say that the cross is a comfortable topic. It's not. It's a horrible moment in the history of humanity, one that embodies the most heart-wrenching truths imaginable. God the Son dies. The eternal Father forsakes the eternal Son. There's a reason God extinguished the sun and shrouded the whole thing in darkness: the universe twisted up and broke when Jesus died. The cross is not something that's fun to stare at, and it's not a crazy instinct to want, at first, to avert one's eyes from it.

Then again, it's precisely in those grotesque paradoxes of the cross that its beauty lies. Admittedly, that beauty isn't obvious at first glance. You have to stare at the cross to see its glory. You have to see *why* God the Son died, *why* the Father forsook the Son. You have to see the *meaning* of it, and not just the bare, bloody facts of the matter. Once you do that — once you've stared long enough and deeply enough — you start to see that exactly there, in its very ugliness, in the most horrific outpouring of wrath that the world has ever seen, God expressed love incomprehensible!

That's the real tragedy of Bell's approach to the cross. He's not willing to stare at it long enough to see its glory. The wrath inherent to it is so distasteful to him, so off-putting to the audience he's speaking to, that he ends up, sadly, without the resources to tell his listeners about the most profound and most beautiful love in the universe — that of Jesus laying down his life for those he loves, and absorbing the wrath of his Father in their place, as their Saviour and Redeemer.

NOOMA turns Christianity into a banal moralism

Of course, once you decide to demur from talking about the cross, you've really turned Christianity into nothing more than a banal moralism that tells people to live in a certain way. Now that's a charge that's loaded with irony, because moralism is one of the main things the Emergent movement is reacting against. But take a look at what they're saying. Take a look at how Rob Bell defines Christianity in these



presents the gospel as a choice between changing-the-world-by-force-and-political-coercion-like-Caesar and changing-the-world-by-love-and-compassion-like-Jesus. Here's his point about the cross:

Well, obviously the way they were living and the things they believed brought them — it raised all sorts of questions for those around them. Who do you believe: Caesar, who thinks that a new world, a better world, is made through his brute military and political power, by forcing people to do what he says, or Jesus, who invites you to make a new and better world through loving acts of compassion and generosity? Caesar who killed Jesus on an execution stake, or God who raised Jesus from the dead? Whose way do you think is better? Who do you think is Lord? Jesus or

that God doesn't care for Caesar's *m.o.* But that's it. That's all Bell gives us in eighteen different videos.

So what's going on here? My guess is that it's the same impulse that would lead Bell to ignore the fact that God judges sin. Wrath is uncomfortable, and it doesn't play well in the Emergent culture. People don't want to hear about a God who could be wrathful.

Of course, that causes problems for explaining why Jesus had to die, because, like it or not, the cross is bound up with wrath. After all, that's what the word 'propitiation' deals with. If you're not willing to talk about a God who has wrath and is willing to use it, you're going to be really uncomfortable explaining why the Bible says that God killed his Son. You'll probably

NOOMA videos. It's not much more than, 'Live like this, not like this.'

Consider the way Bell describes what it is to be a Christian in *Rhythm*. If you're living 'in tune with the song,' you're there. 'When I'm like selfish and stingy or refuse to give,' he says, 'I'm essentially out of tune with the song. . . . When you see someone sacrifice themselves for another, for the well-being of somebody else, it's like they're playing in the right key. That's why it's so inspiring and powerful. They're in tune with the song.' It's all about doing this, living like this, acting like that.

And it's not that Bell is saying that 'living in tune with the song' is the result of God's regenerating power in the life of the believer, either. It's just a decision you make to do it. 'An infinite, massive, kind of invisible God — that's hard to get our minds around. But truth, love, grace, mercy, justice, compassion... the way that Jesus lived. I can see *that*. I can understand *that*. I can relate to *that*. I can play that song!'

All you have to do is believe in yourself.

No, seriously. He says that. And really it's even worse than that, because believing in yourself is the grand finale of a whole theological argument in which Jesus is made out to have faith in *us*, rather than the other way around. Jesus has faith, Bell says, that we'll be able to live like he wants us to.

All this happens in the video entitled *Dust*. Having explained at some length how the Jewish rabbis would choose students to learn under them, Bell asks why it was that Peter, seeing Jesus walking on the water, got out of the boat to do it himself, and why it was that he started to sink. Here's how Bell answers those questions:

Why is Peter's first reaction, 'If it's you, then tell me to come to you?' Because he's a disciple, he's oriented his whole life, devoted his whole life to doing what he sees his rabbi doing, learning to be like his rabbi. So he sees his rabbi walking on water, and what's the first thing he wants to do? 'I wanna walk on water, too. I wanna be like my rabbi.' And so Peter gets out of the boat, and he starts walking on water, and he yells out, 'Jesus save me!' And the text reads that Jesus immediately caught him and said, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' Now, I always assumed that Peter doubts Jesus. But Jesus isn't sinking. Who does Peter doubt? He doubts himself; he loses faith in himself, that he can actually be like his rabbi.

So it's not that Peter let his fear of the waves overwhelm his faith in Jesus' power to keep him afloat. No, it's that Peter lost faith in himself. He stopped believing that he could do what Jesus did. He was, as Jesus put, a man 'of little faith' — never mind that Jesus always uses that phrase to refer to someone's lack of faith in God, not lack of faith in themselves. Here's the point Bell wants to make:

I mean, all my life, I've heard people talk about believing in God. But God believes in us, in you, in me. I mean faith in Jesus is important. But what about Jesus' faith in us?... I mean, what if we can actually be the kinds of people that God created us to be? What if he actually believes that? I mean, what if he actually believes that we can be the kind of people who live like Jesus lived, the kinds of people who take action because we're aware of all these endless opportunities around us all the time, for good, for beauty, for truth? Jesus has faith that you can follow him and you can be like him...

May you believe in God, but may you come to see that God believes in you. May you have faith in Jesus, but may you come to believe that Jesus has faith that you can be like him.

So that's it. Christianity is about living like Jesus lived — and Jesus believes we can do it if we just try hard enough.

In fact, if you take Bell seriously, 'live like this' is pretty much the bottom-line of Jesus' message to the world. As he sums it up in *Trees*: 'My understanding of Jesus' message is that he teaches us to live in the reality of God now — here and today. It's almost as if Jesus just keeps saying, 'Change your life. Live this way.'

Change your life. Live this way.

That is moralism.

Sure, it's a tricked-out moralism. There's some colourless grace at the front end of it (God accepts us as we are). It also has a really great moral example in Jesus trailblazing a new way of life right under the nose of the Roman Empire, and it comes with a big story about God launching a rescue effort to put the world back together. But it's still moralism. It makes Jesus into one more philosopher/teacher telling us all to live this way, not that way. It makes Christianity a matter of Jesus trusting us to live a certain way, rather than our trusting in Christ to save us from sin.

Conclusion

I realise that Rob Bell is trying to communicate with people who have never given

the time of day to spiritual things. He's trying to present Jesus to them in a way that will be accessible to them. I think that's a noble goal, and I don't think it's a futile one. But I also think that the way Bell has gone about it — with particular reference to these NOOMA videos — is something far smaller than and far short of biblical Christianity.

Having watched so many of these videos, it strikes me just now how seldom Bell uses the traditional Christian language to name Jesus. He doesn't call him Saviour, or Redeemer, or Son of God, and only very occasionally does he call him Lord. Instead, he very much seems to prefer calling Jesus 'teacher' or 'rabbi.' I'm sure part of that is that he wants to be fresh and edgy. But I think it also points to just how far these videos lower the meaning of Christianity.

The fact is, the NOOMA videos retell the story of Jesus in a pretty radical way. Though Jesus is certainly respected and honoured, the point of the story no longer involves the divine Christ who died on the cross as a substitute for his people, rose from the dead, and is now enthroned in heaven, but rather Jesus the Nazarene who teaches people how to live and how to find God. Jesus shows the way, rather than being the Way. He is respected, honoured, and heeded, rather than worshipped. He is 'Rabbi,' rather than 'Saviour.' This is, as Darrell Bock and Daniel Wallace described it recently, the replacement of 'Christianity' with 'Jesuanity.'

Bell would never use this word, but I believe what he's presented in NOOMA is really just another *religion* that's not so much different from any other religion in the world. For the gospel of NOOMA isn't finally about the Son of God who lovingly dies in his people's place to redeem them from sin and save them from God's righteous judgment. It's about the really great teacher who says, 'Change your life. Live this way.'

Once you're past the flashy packaging, that's not really all that inspiring, is it?

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World in focus

Bible Presbyterian Unity Put On-Hold

After two decades of serious efforts to reunite differing groups in the Bible Presbyterian family, a developing issue calls all these efforts into question.

On 28 March, South Atlantic Presbytery, meeting at Faith Bible Presbyterian Church in the Washington suburb of Falls Church, withdrew from the General Synod of the denomination. The action was taken in a private session but the end vote of 13 to 5 expressed the dissatisfaction of the majority with continued fraternal relation between the Bible Presbyterians and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Orthodox Presbyterians have been occupied themselves with doctrinal deviation and much of their Assembly time has been absorbed by judicial matters growing out of the dispute. The departing Bible Presbyterians claim the efforts to purify the church and sustain the Reformed confessions have not been either sufficiently rapid or extensive.

A minority protest has been filed with clerks of both jurisdictions. The protest suggests that however appropriate the disjunction may have been, the constitution of the denomination places the decision to withdraw exclusively in the congregation.

South Atlantic announced its intention

to continue supporting historic agencies. Among these would be the Independent Boards for Foreign Missions and the Presbyterian Missionary Union.

+ Rev. John T. Dyck, Acting Stated Clerk, Bible Presbyterian Church, 12229 38th Street, Edmonton, AB T5W 2J2 Canada (780) 477-5622

+ Rev. Mark W. Evans, Moderator, South Atlantic Presbytery (Autonomous), 20 Sharon Drive, Greenville, SC 29607-2835 [1](864) 232-1486

California Reconsiders Ownership of Children

The California court decision on 28 February that parents without teaching credential have no right to home school their children provoked a national protest which has now reached the federal courts.

The Second District Court of Appeals in Los Angeles vacated the ruling pending review. On 11 March Jack O'Connell, California Superintendent of Public Instruction, announced that he believed that home schooling is still legal in California. Actually, local school districts decide when to initiate prosecutions for truancy and they are not officially controlled by the state agency on these matters.

According to the Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) some 20 percent of America's home schoolers live in California and are immediately influenced by the relief.

+ Focus on the Family, 8605 Explorer Dvie, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920

'Wee Frees' Want Their Own Schools

Faith-based schools designed on Biblical Presbyterian principles and the confessional testimony should be re-introduced, according to the Free Church of Scotland. The 'Wee Frees' say they want to return to the period before Scotland's Presbyterian churches gave up their schools to be run by the state. In 1872 the Free Church, together with the other Presbyterian churches, gave up their schools to be run by the state. 'This was done of the condition that they continued to be Christian schools run on a Christian ethos,' according to David Robertson.

Roman Catholic and Scottish Episcopal schools still exist but are controlled by local education authorities, not the churches.

Rev David Robertson, editor of the Free Church of Scotland's official magazine, has contacted First Minister Alex Salmond, suggesting that it is time to return to education delivered on religious lines and seeking to

initiate a national conversation.

Salmond is looking for friends. Members of the Scottish Parliament are calling for Alex Salmond to stand down from Westminster after he spent more than UK£130,000 in expenses and staffing costs as an MP during a period in which he visited the Commons six times, according to published reports.

+ Free Church of Scotland, 15 North Bank Street, The Mound, Edinburgh EH1 2LS Scotland

Algeria Closes Churches

Police ordered two Algerian churches to cease activity in March, the latest in a series of 10 church closures and further court cases against foreign and local Christians. In Tizi Ousou, 100 kilometers (62 miles) east of Algiers, security police on 9 March notified pastor Salah Chalah to close his 1,200-member church.

Police issued notice to a second pastor, Mustapha Krireche, to close down his church in Tizi Ouzou's Nouvelle Ville district. 'They are trying to establish a minority, which might give foreign powers a pretext to intervene with Algeria's domestic affairs,' Religious Affairs Minister Bu 'Abdallah Ghoulamullah told reporters.

Written police orders called on both churches to 'cease all activity until [their] situation could be regularized and brought into conformity' with a 2006 religion law governing non-Muslim worship.

Passed two years ago, the law forbids attempts to convert Muslims to other religions and bans the production of media intended to 'shake the faith of a Muslim.'

+ Compass Direct News, PO Box 27250, Santa Ana CA 92799

Presbyterian Church of Sudan (Malakal) Reorganises

The 32nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Sudan met 30 March thorough 2 April in Malakal to reorganise after more than 20 years of disruption. Delegates from 10 presbyteries active in the nation came together under the direction of Dr Riek Maachar Teny, Vice President of Southern Sudan.

Under the new constitution, each presbytery will be represented by 34 members at future General Assemblies and the local jurisdictions will manage most of their own affairs. A Moderator General from the national structure will coordinate inter presbytery ventures. Each presbytery will

Family Camp 2009

Family Camp is on again this year!

The camp will be held at Finlay Park from Saturday 27th December 2008 – Saturday 3 January 2009.

Lord willing, Rev Kloosterman will lead the morning studies, and Rev Michael Flinn the evening devotions.

Please note there will be an increase in camp fees this year. Watch this space for more details!

also have a representative on the denominational executive committee.

The jurisdiction not only suffered from political division, but social and theological disputes. A variety of dissenting denominations remain outside the Malakal organization.

+ Embassy of the Republic of Sudan, 2210 Massachusetts Ave., Washington DC 20008 (202) 338-8565

Evangelism Becomes National Security Issue in China

As China deals with the fallout of protests in Tibet and alleged protests in neighboring Xinjiang province, the family of a Uyghur Christian fears he may be sentenced to death after officials accused him of endangering national security.

Officials closed Alimjan Yimit's business last September and accused him of using it as a cover for "preaching Christianity among people of Uyghur ethnicity." When they detained him on 12 January, officials told his family only that the arrest was a matter of "national security."

Officials closed Alimjan Yimit's business last September and accused him of using it as a cover for "preaching Christianity among people of Uyghur ethnicity." When they detained him on 12 January, officials told his family only that the arrest was a matter of "national security."

In view of the recent crackdown on Tibetan protestors and an alleged protest in the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang that reportedly saw 400 Uyghurs detained by late March, Yimit's family fear he may be branded a separatist, a crime punishable by death. Friends said a verdict is expected by the end of April.

Alimjan's arrest followed that of another Uyghur Christian, Osman Imin, on 19 November 2007. Authorities placed Osman in criminal detention and accused him of assisting foreigners in illegal religious activities and revealing state secrets, according to China Aid Association.

+ Compass News Direct, PO Box 27250, Santa Ana, CA 92799-7250

Competing for the next generation in Russia

For some ten years the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (MP ROC) has sought to promote its 'Foundations of Russian Orthodox Culture' as a compulsory school subject, to try to win children and young people. This divides children by religion and has led to the persecution of 'sectarians' (including Protestants) even in schools. The MP ROC also wants to stop children's ministry in Protestant churches, including Sunday school. A Methodist church in Smolensk was liquidated by a court order after a complaint by a Russian Orthodox Bishop. The church was found guilty of giving religious education without an educational

licence – in a Sunday school of just four children of members. That may threaten all 'sectarian' churches. Please pray that the children in Russia may grow in faith and receive instruction in the word of God.

+ Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin | No. 473 | Wed 09 Apr 2008

Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed Opens

Ben Stein's much-anticipated movie *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* debuted at No. 9 with \$3.1 million in box office receipts. Released by Rocky Mountain Pictures, the film features Ben Stein as he challenges Darwinian theories that prevail in academic circles and suggests that life could have emerged through intelligent design.

Expelled uncovers that educators and scientists are being ridiculed, denied tenure and even fired in some cases for the fact that they believe there is evidence of 'design' in nature, challenging the idea that life is a result of random chance.

+ The Baltimore Examiner, 400 E. Pratt Street, Baltimore, MD 21202

+ Motive Marketing, 1303 Oakgrove Place, Suite 100, Westlake Village CA 91362

West Papua's 45 years of Indonesian rule

The first of May 2008 is the 45th anniversary of Indonesia assuming administrative control of West Papua. Before 1 May 1963, West Papua was under Dutch control and there was openness, human rights, missions and mass conversions from shamanism to Christ, and from tribal conflict to harmony. Whilst the Dutch wanted West Papua to have independence, America supported Indonesian claims for economic gain and Cold War political expediency. Ever since 1 May 1963, the Papuans have been suffering violent repression, exploitation, murder, dispossession, starvation, torture and other human rights abuses at the hands of the corrupt Indonesian military. Javanese Muslim colonisation, Islamisation and military repression have escalated dramatically since 1999. The West Papuans are now facing genocide. The Church must be their voice. Please pray for God's intervention.

+ Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin | No. 476 | Thu 01 May 2008

Kurdish Authorities move to annex Assyrian lands in North Iraq

According to the website nirgalgate.com, Kurdish authorities are coercing Assyrians

to sign a form proclaiming the Nineveh Plains should be annexed to the Kurdish areas and come under the rule of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) visited Assyrian towns and villages in the Nineveh Plains, including Tel Kepe and Wana, and forced the Assyrians to sign the specially-prepared forms. The KDP members included Ali Mohammad Salih Garo, the mayor of Wana; Lieutenant Colonel Safar, in charge of the safety of the dam in the region; Lieutenant Colonel Arshad, the Asayesh (Kurdish Security) officer in Wana and other village heads supported by the Zerevani (Kurdish forces that protect the roads).

The translated form begins: 'To the Committee Implementing Article (140)

We the undersigned notables, clergymen, and mayors from the Christians (Chaldeans, Syriacs and Assyrians) in Telkaif District demand to join the Telkaif District to the region of Iraqi Kurdistan. However, we as Christians should have a 'self-rule' within the region of Iraqi Kurdistan.'

We ask all concerned parties to implement article 140 of the Iraqi constitution and to respect the opinion and will of the people."

+ Assyrian International News Agency, www.aina.org

New studies support abstinence education

Erin Roach reports that abstinence education is effective at delaying sexual initiation and reducing the levels of early sexual activity, according to two studies presented 22 April at the National Press Club in Washington.

A study led by Stan Weed of the Institute of Research and Evaluation examined the impact of abstinence education in reducing the initiation of sexual activity by seventh-grade students in suburban Virginia.

Students receiving abstinence education, the study concluded, were about one-half as likely to initiate sexual activity as students who did not receive abstinence education.

The authors reported '... Opponents of abstinence education contend that these programs fail to influence teen sexual behavior. At this stage, the available evidence supports neither this assessment nor the wholesale dismissal of authentic abstinence education programs.'

Janice Crouse, senior fellow of the Beverly LaHaye Institute, said it makes no sense for the federal government to

decrease funding for abstinence education when it is clearly working to reduce some of the chief problems among youth. 'It is amazing that some legislators would want to cut abstinence education funding when it

is such a drop in the bucket to the amount of money that goes to comprehensive sex education programs,' Crouse said in an 22 April news release.

'And, look at what happened when all

that money was spent for all those years on comprehensive sex education – teen sexual activity went up, teen pregnancies went up and abortions went up.'

+ Baptist Press, www.bpnews.net

Feminine focus

The feminine virtue of purpose

Sally Davey

One of the things that characterises our contemporary world is the purposeless of so many people's lives. At first glance, it might not seem like that. It may look to you as though most of the people you know at work, for instance, are in a rush to go somewhere, or achieve something – be it the next promotion or qualification, a better house or a more luxurious holiday. They might appear motivated, even driven, by these (admittedly materialistic) goals. You might disagree with what drives them so hard, but you find yourself unable to say they lack purpose.

The truth is, though, they *are* drifting. Anyone who moves through life without a clear sense of who they are, what life is about, why they are doing the things they are doing, and what is the ultimate purpose of their work, their relationships, their pleasure, their birth and their death is drifting indeed. It may be a swift and precipitous rush, or it may be a slow, imperceptible floating. They lack moorings, and they have no fundamental direction. The fact is that most people are born, grow up, are educated, work, form relationships, grow old and die without much idea of why these things happen, whether they are important, or how they might do them better. Have you ever asked anybody what matters in life? Perhaps you have, and have found that the commonplace reply is – 'fun', or 'success' or 'achieving my dreams.' Usually, people are unable to say why such things are important, whether they plan for them, or how, at the end of their lives, they will be able to assess whether all they gave to gain these things was worth it. They

simply drift. As American writer Henry David Thoreau wrote 150 years ago, 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.'¹

Mindless drifting

Obviously, for Christians, to whom eternal, unseen things are far more important, living in such a way appears futile. It is actually tragic. And yet, while people who live so heedlessly without the fear of God will suffer for this eternally, they meet consequences of their folly at every turn in *this* life. Mindless drifting means years of wasted schooling, unwise employment choices and most unsuitable friendships. If you don't choose carefully and study the important things, you will most likely squander your educational opportunities on the fun and the easy. If you want a job simply for the quick income it will give you early on, you may forego the possibility of more fruitful, responsible work later. If you tend to gravitate towards people who are popular and attractive, but who lack integrity, you are heading for almost certain personal disaster. The Proverbs say, 'Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.' (Proverbs 13:20) The values of fools will rub off on you – and you will become like them. How much more disastrous still will it be should you marry a fool and bring up children in a foolish home.

Strangely, though, it is quite possible to do all of the above, and yet give to some observers, at least, the impression that you are going somewhere. People who are drifting and unwise in many areas of their lives may still make money, invest their savings shrewdly and sport trophies like houses, cars and attractive friends. Psalm 73 reminds us that the wicked (and they may keep their wickedness outwardly inoffensive) may indeed prosper in this life, at times to the discouragement of those who live for lasting truths.

However, it is more often the case that purposeless living brings bad consequences that are visible in this life. We see these

things almost everywhere around us these days. We may have freedom from war, from famine and from major economic distress. We may have excellent health care. But God will always use something to shake the false security of the heedless. Nowhere is this more heart-rending than in the wreck of family life. I often think about that and wonder whether Christians will be able to keep the faith in our own family relationships. Sometimes we don't do so well. But if we pay careful attention to the Scriptures' teachings, and determine to keep them with the Holy Spirit's help, we know that God will keep us faithful. Our family life may well become our most powerful witness in coming generations.

Heart-filled direction

After all, Christians are of all people blessed with purpose. We have hope in Christ in this world, and the assurance of being with him forever. We have certainty that though we do not see what is promised, we will inherit it in due time. God has revealed himself to us; he has told us who he is and who we are. He has told us what he requires of us, and has shown us clearly why we desperately need a Saviour. He has personally moved in each of our hearts to apply salvation to us. He transforms us, day by day, into the image of his perfect Son. In his Word he explains everything — all we need for understanding our lives and this world. There is nothing that need perplex us, if we trust what he has written. We have purpose: we know what we are, whose we are and where we are going. We can make sense of every difficulty, so far as is necessary for the eyes of faith. And in such a world as we live, this is a wonderful provision. I cannot imagine what it must be like to face even the normal troubles of life in this generation without the Scriptures to make sense of them.

Godly purpose — a quality we should work at all our lives — lies on two levels, as I see it. The first is the more general, as it applies to all Christians. It consists

in our response to the truth God has given us. Do we believe, embrace and apply to our own hearts the great picture of redemption we find in the Bible? Do we make it our one hope, in life and in death? Do we make it our life's study? Do we turn to it for focus when life begins to unravel before our eyes? If so, then we are of all people most definitely to be envied – whatever the world may think. Consider the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: 'What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever.' Its writers caught the single, fundamental truth that makes sense of human life in this world. We are here to live for God's glory by believing him and obeying him – come what may. Our purpose is to love our God, to delight in studying his character; and to serve his interests in everything we do — out of a heart passionate to do it. Have you ever found the first commandment, or Jesus' summary of it, inspiring? 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.' Meditating on this takes the breath away. It means we can never be complacent, or careless, or neglectful – or mindless – in our life for Christ on this earth. When we see him face to face, and know all there is to know, we will see why. We must have this purpose — it is non-negotiable.

It is the kind of purpose that kept the Christian martyrs of church history faithful to the end. It is also what will keep us going in our daily, ongoing, petty troubles. Do you have this kind of purpose? Are you cultivating it?

The second level of Christian purpose concerns our particular calling in life. All Christians share the blessings of salvation in Christ, and the knowledge of God's great redemptive plan as revealed in the Scriptures. But he also calls each of us to certain tasks in life, and each has a particular purpose. Recognising this brings us assurance as we serve God in our daily routines. Knowing that what we have been given to do is worthwhile helps invigorate us when slothful, faint-hearted or weary. Consider the missionaries who have preached the gospel, for years, in hostile cultures when the converts have been few. Consider the women who have faithfully kept the home fires burning for unloving husbands and ungrateful children; unsung in history, but honoured by their Saviour. The same grasp of purpose in their calling kept them going. Let us consider how this might look in *our* lives.

Various callings

There are callings common to many of us, and among these we usually think of those of wife or mother. There have been many good books written by Christians about these callings, so I will be brief here. It is enough to say that marriage and motherhood are dear to God's heart, and there is a great deal written about them in the Scriptures, from beginning to end. It is through these deeply important relationships that he works much of his sanctifying work in this world. He even uses the marital and parental relationships as pictures to describe his tender love toward us. In the historical books of the Bible he shows us wives and mothers acting righteously, and also sinfully; and he gives much instruction on how to love and serve our husbands, and how to bring up our children in the teaching literature of both the Old and New Testaments. This is so crucial. Without these pictures and this instruction we would be at sea in this world; and left to our own imaginations when it comes to dealing with conflicting desires, with our own sin, or with the rebellious pressures of our children. The scriptural teaching on marriage and motherhood gives us purpose. It keeps us going. It enables us to solve our differences and difficulties. Many times a month I wonder how those who are ignorant of it, or who reject it, manage to keep their world from falling apart. Recently I have been reading Dorothy L. Sayers's 1937 novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, which depicts a newly-married couple. Though not Christians, the Wimsseys share a view of life derived from the Scriptures; and so they are able to work their way through the challenges that arise during their first month of marriage. It is a moving picture of married love in action, and I was heartened.

Dealing with difficulties

But what happens when a couple doesn't see the fundamentals of life in the same way? How, for instance, does a wife cope when her husband tells her he needs 'time out' — a weekend off with his friends — and she'd better deal with the children's activities herself? Who decides who is being selfish? Who calls whose needs wrong? And if she is convinced he is wrong, but he doesn't see it and goes ahead anyway, on what basis can she and should she forgive him? I'm sure you can see how it is that the Scriptures give us the principles we need to view our lives and our callings

clearly, and give us a pathway through our difficulties. We can chart the way ahead with confidence. It's not always easy or straightforward, but we have certainty that nothing is ever impossible to solve. There is always a way, through repentance and forgiveness, to find hope in every situation. There are passages that help us order our priorities when it comes to conflicts between husband, children and work. There are passages (such as 1 Corinthians 13) which still our hearts and help us deal with unjust criticism, hurtful anger or ingratitude in our family lives. Christians are different. We're not limited to wishful thinking, nice feelings or the theory-of-the-month when it comes to dealing with the trials of life. We have sure and certain truth to rely on: we have purpose.

The importance of preparation

Perhaps you are young and single, and a student. What is your calling? How do the Scriptures show you how to live for the glory of God? How do they help you set your priorities and solve the difficulties inherent in *your* current calling? Here are some suggestions. It seems to me that the stage of life you are in is one of preparation. You are called to devote yourself to learning certain important things. First of all, there is your formal course of study. You are either gaining some valuable knowledge about the world and the way it works (a general education in human life, perhaps), or you might be undertaking some study to train you for a particular vocation. Either way, this is your primary focus for the time being, and it is important that you don't let yourself become distracted from it. Don't be tempted to skip lectures to take off early for long weekends; or stay up too late socialising, so that you don't get assignments in on time. Friends are important, but your study is still your first priority. Remember principles like honesty (don't argue for things in essays that you know are untrue) and integrity (if your lecturer has a feminist bias, don't compromise on your approach to a topic in order to curry favour with her or avoid trouble). Return your library books on time. Be a reliable friend, and help those who struggle with their studies.

This is also a time of preparation for other things. You're learning lessons in the Christian life as they relate to personal relationships. Remain pure – in thought and in action. Watch what you read, and think about. Be careful about who your friends are, and what company you keep,

especially on your own, and late at night. Having left school, and perhaps your parents' home, you have many freedoms, and the responsibility to monitor use of time is now yours. Use it wisely. Always ask yourself: how am I preparing for service to Christ? Did I use this day wisely, or foolishly? Put yourself in the way of wise and mature company. Make friends with the wise and godly a generation older than you in your church. Seek their input into your life, and ask them to teach you how you should go. And always, talk openly with your parents! They have a special interest in your preparation for godliness. They love you and know you best. These are some of the ways it is possible to bring God glory – now.

The importance of dedication

Perhaps you are in full-time paid employment. Are you a nurse, or do you work in a bank? What is your calling? First of all, you are an employee, and the master-servant relationship as described in Ephesians 6 and Colossians 3 is what primarily applies to you in your particular vocation. Give of yourself diligently in your work. Serve your employer to the best of your ability. Reserve your energy for your work, and make it your priority to be well-rested and well-prepared for it. Do what you are asked, graciously. Set an example to your fellow-workers. Be honest, and do not steal. (Don't make personal phone calls, log in to TradeMe

or write text messages in work time!) If yours is a people-serving vocation (as many Christians gravitate towards), there will be much opportunity to relieve the suffering of others, or to provide wise and useful advice. (Bankers, nurses and teachers are advice-givers by occupation!) But sometimes your calling as a Christian will mean your employer's values will conflict with yours, and to bring glory to God you will have to decline certain actions, or at the very least, enter into some discussion about it with him, her or the 'management.' At times there are some extreme-case situations involving the ethics of health care, and it is wise to prepare for these by careful study of the Scriptures and helpful books written by Christians who work in the health field. But more minor day-to-day issues arise, too. It could be that your employer wants you to rush through a procedure to save time, but you believe it will disadvantage a patient's treatment. Perhaps a fellow-employee has done something unwise and indiscreet, and wants you to keep it from your manager, but you believe it will embarrass the company if it's not dealt with. All these things require us to have a clear sense of our purpose in our calling as Christians, and as nurses, bankers, sales people. What should we do? Study and prepare! Ask the advice of those who know the Scriptures, and/or are familiar with your field of work.

The ultimate importance of faith

Whatever our distinct calling in life might be, as Christian women we have clarity and assurance on our side when dealing with the challenges and uncertainties God ordains for us. This brings confidence and purpose – we do not fear, we do not drift, and we need not muddle along as those who have no hope. In the deepest perplexities we can cling to the surety that God always knows what he is doing, and will show us the way out in his good time. This is especially important when he makes sudden or painful changes in our calling – perhaps in bereavement. By reminding ourselves of his great, abiding purpose for us as redeemed sinners who may give glory to God, we will find ourselves still walking, one foot in front of the other, despite the circumstances. And in the light of his Word, we will find ways to adapt ourselves to the new calling he has for us, whatever that may be. He will never leave or forsake us; and he will temper the wind to the shorn lamb.²

We of all women have much for which to give God glory. Let your light shine, and prove that it is so!

(Endnotes)

- 1 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854), "Economy".
- 2 Originally from a French proverb, via Laurence Sterne.

Focus on home

Andrew Reinders

Gleanings from our bulletins...

Avondale

Avondale Reformers soccer team. Another soccer season has started for our church team in the NZ Christian Football Association (NZCFA). This year we will again play in the 2nd division, called the Super League. The competition includes 3 men's leagues and 1 women's league (making up 32 teams), all played on Saturdays at Riversdale Park in Avondale, from April to

September at 12:30pm or 2:30pm. The NZCFA purpose is "to be a medium that facilitates churches to fellowship and share the gospel of Jesus Christ through sport". We have 11 men from our church involved during the season, with the remaining players from outside our church. It is a real joy to be able to get together and play sport. If you want to see what times we are playing, you can visit www.nzcfa.co.nz or ask one of players – you can usually spot them with their injuries on Sundays :-)

Family Prayer & Praise items: Congratulations to Bill Steenhuis who, Lord willing, will celebrate his 80th birthday this Wednesday. We thank the Lord for keeping you and ask for his continued blessings.

Family Announcements: Today we may celebrate with Marius & Lucie Stok and

their families as they dedicate their marriage to the Lord during this morning's service. Dr. Andrew Young, principal at Grace Theological College in Manurewa, will lead this service.

Bishopdale

Lord willing, two weddings will be held on 26 April.

The ceremony for Jonathan Schouten and Anna Mulholland will be held at St Saviour's Church, 200 Colombo Street, Sydenham at 1:00pm.

Rene Klaasen and Hetty Koelewijn will marry in Hanmer Springs at the Anglican Church at 31 Jollies Pass Road. The service will begin at 11.00am. Please also remember Rene and Hetty in your prayers.

Pastoral. We have invited Reinier Noppers

to come down with a view to calling him as a second minister. He and his wife Trudy will be here from 25-28 April. Reinier will take both services on the 27th. There will be a shared meal after the evening service; this will be a good opportunity to get to know the Noppers a little better. Please something savoury or sweet. If possible, bring enough for yourself and one more.

Bucklands Beach

From the Eldership. It is with a real sense of thanksgiving and joy that the eldership is able to announce that nine young people have asked to stand before the Lord and us as his people to make a PUBLIC PROFESSION OF THEIR FAITH IN CHRIST AS LORD AND SAVIOUR OF THEIR LIVES. The elders have met with these folks, and examined their love for the Lord, their faith, commitment and understanding of what they believe. They have expressed their desire to belong to the Lord and to serve him as members of our fellowship here at Bucklands Beach. If there are no lawful objections, Elizabeth Cunningham, Jolene Fransen, Adrian Kant, Anthony Mulder, Ruhan Snyders, Giselle Stanghan and Philip Strayton will publicly profess their faith during the morning service of April 20th. Alana Reyneke and Luke Scheepers will publicly profess their faith during the morning service on May 4th. This is indeed a very special moment in the life of our congregation here at Bucklands Beach. God's grace is amazing and wonderful. We rejoice with and for these young folks and also with their families as well as many people whom God has used to instruct and prepare them in the past. Praise God for his covenant faithfulness.

Profession of Faith. What a special moment it is in the life of a young person, their family and the church when, by God's grace, in his strength, and for his name's sake, he or she professes faith in Christ as Lord and saviour. As previously announced, a total of nine young people will be making their public profession, the first seven this Sunday and the other two on Sunday, 4th May. In his wisdom, the Lord called home Anthony Walter Mulder before he could stand before us as his family and fellow believers to make this profession. Yet he has made and will I continue to make that profession. He formally professed his faith before the eldership of our fellowship. He professed and demonstrated it over and over again before his family and peers. Today, he professes it before the multitude of heaven in front of God's throne! This

morning also we include Anthony in this profession and celebration. We rejoice in his faith and everything that means. Anthony's family asked that we proceed with the profession today and the other young people and their families agreed. Therefore, with Anthony present in spirit, Elizabeth Yvonne Cunningham, Jolene Miriam Fransen, Adriaan Hendrik Gerrit Kant, Ruhan Snyders, Giselle Yvonne Stanghan and Philip Paul Strayton, will stand before us to profess their faith and offer their whole lives in service to their saviour and Lord. Praise the Lord! The young people who profess their faith will be sitting in the front (centre row) of the church and ask for all the other young people to join them in being seated there. Please note that there will be a shared lunch after the service to provide an opportunity to celebrate and give thanks in an informal way. Everyone is invited to stay and join in.

Pastoral. What happened in this past week is still beyond our understanding. In his wisdom the Lord called home to Himself seven victims of a terrible accident at Tongariro National Park. Our hearts are broken. The loss is shattering - especially for John, Miriam, Marcus, Lauren and their family. Our comfort in the midst of this deep despair is the knowledge that we, along with the other families involved, are not grieving as those who have no hope! We profess that our only comfort in life and in death is knowing and believing that we are not our own but that we belong, body and soul, to our precious Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. That is and ever shall be Anthony's confession. We know it and it gives us comfort that words cannot express - even as we weep. We all grieve and pray that the God of all comfort will grant us all that we need. There are also many reasons for giving thanks. Four of our young people were also a part of the group that were at the Outdoor Pursuit Centre. Isaac Cho and Wynand Malan were there - but not involved in the canyoning activity. Sarah Brooks was a part of the group trapped in the canyon. God mercifully spared her and for that our thanks knows no boundaries. As a fellowship we want to express our sincerest sympathies to all of the other families involved. Above all, we want to express great appreciation for the manner in which the staff at Elim Christian College, in particular its principal, Mr Murray Burton, have been a wonderful testimony to the hope that we possess in Christ. Their testimony in the face of this worst of all nightmares has been amazing.

Praise God for giving them that Spirit of wisdom and peace - and for the witness this is to New Zealand. Anthony's funeral is scheduled to take place this Tuesday morning. Please note the following: The burial service will commence at 9.30am at the Papatoetoe Cemetery (off Puhinui Rd). This will be a brief service. At 10.30am the church service will be held at the Elim Church (159 Botany Road). Because it is expected that there will be many more people than our building can cater for, we have accepted the kind offer of the folks at Elim to use their facility. Refreshments, etc., will be available at our church facilities (228 Bucklands Beach Rd) afterwards. You are all invited to come and share together. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (II Cor 1.3,4)

Christchurch

Pastoral: Tonight after the afternoon service, some of our members will be visiting prisoners for a time of fellowship and worship, with our new in-Prison Ministry starting soon, working with Prison Fellowship New Zealand. PFNZ encourages and promotes prison ministry within the churches, and coordinates prison visits through the Prison Chaplaincy Service. Please pray for this new ministry challenge before us that those hearing the great gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ may revisit their faith commitment, or want to explore the Christian faith. More info on PFNZ at www.pfnz.org.nz

Dovedale

Pastoral notes. As you will be reading in various places, and talking about Mr Andre Holtslag, and preparing for our congregational meeting tomorrow night, I thought a couple of notes may be in order. The session are commending him for call very positively, and trust that since his visit this has been a matter of prayer for you. You'll be aware that being one of the only "unattached" men who are eligible for call in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, he is likely to receive several calls. Therefore, if we call him, we shouldn't presume that he will accept a call from us. Likewise, we shouldn't be pessimistic or dour about low probabilities! If we call Mr Holtslag, it is appropriate for you to write to him, should you want to, telling him if you would like

him to consider favourably a call to Dove-dale, especially if you also tell him why. (As an aside, such a letter is best not a long epistle). We are also called to pray to the Lord that His will would be done, and pour our hearts out before Him. Having done that, if Andre does finish up serving in another congregation, we can be encouraged that we now have another friend for the congregation; another one who loves the Lord, and wants to serve Him diligently. We may be grateful that some of our brethren will now have a preaching elder too. Should the Lord bring him to us, we need to be preparing ourselves to help him serve his Master well. In that regard it is helpful to read through the form for ordination. While it is primarily for the minister there are a number of applications for us, that help ministers to serve joyfully and effectively if we heed the instruction.

Combined Men's Breakfast. This will be held at Bishopdale Reformed Church at 8 am Saturday 3 May. The Guest speaker will be Mr. Steve Sterne, who will speak on Christian business principles. This Breakfast is open to all men and sons who wish to fellowship with the brothers of the 3 Reformed churches in Christchurch. (The deacons)

Pastoral Notes. With Mr Koning's passing away, and having had opportunity to attend his burial and a memorial service to thank God for him, we have reflected on the Lord's blessing in giving Mr Koning to his family and the church for all these years. We have reflected on what the Lord has done in, and through, Mr and Mrs Konings' noteworthy lives with gratitude in our hearts. We know that the Koning family will be greatly comforted that the promises of God are for such as demonstrate the faith in the Lord Jesus that Mr Koning had. For Mr Koning faith is now sight, and his hope realized, and the greatest of gifts, love, in him is now perfect. Our love and sympathy are for the Konings as they now live with the loss of a loved husband, father and grandfather – please pray for them. For those of you who were unable to attend Thursday's funeral, Mr Geluk preached from Philippians 4, and Mr van Ameyde gave a eulogy. In concluding his eulogy Mr van Ameyde reminded Mr Koning's grandchildren that their grandfather had given them a vivid example of hope in Christ and the eternal benefits of His death and resurrection. Their challenge, therefore, is to live in that hope which is the only way to live with integrity. The application is every bit

as much for us all.

Call to Ministry. As was announced last Lord's Day, our letter of call has gone out to Br. Andre Holtslag, following the congregational meeting and vote on the 9th April. Please feel free to write or email short personal messages of encouragement to Andre, whilst he considers the calls received. He has indicated to the churches, that he intends, Lord willing, to arrive at a decision by the 18th May. His address is: Andre Holtslag, 3 Hamlet Place, Pukekohe or familonzies@gmail.com RDM

Youth Group Graffiti painting in Hornby. Come along for this voluntary community work to help clean up our local area. Meet at church on Saturday 26 April at 8.45 ready to begin painting. We will finish at 12.00 p.m. Wear old clothes, bring drink bottle, plate of food for morning tea. Many hands make light work.

Dunedin

Wedding Banns. Willem Steenkamp and Hayley Curtis have signified their desire to be united in marriage on Saturday 12 April. If there are no lawful objections the ceremony will take place on that date at St Enoch's Church, 14 Centennial Avenue, Alexandra at 2:00 pm.

Pastoral Notes. We have been very well fed through the preaching in the past few weeks. Our thanks to Messrs Holtslag, Klazinga and Nugteren for coming to Dunedin, leaving behind some or all of their family members, and letting us benefit from their God-given gifts of discerning and communicating the Scriptures. For the next two weeks we fall back into the familiar pattern of reading services which, perhaps, require greater effort but nevertheless promise great rewards for the attentive listener. We anticipate the arrival, Lord willing, of our interim pastor, Rev Ben Short, on 27 April. To help us to get to know him, a concise biography is included herein.

Introducing Rev Ben Short. Rev Short is a Canadian, born in Toronto, and raised in a Christian home and in fellowship with the Plymouth Brethren which his parents attended. He professed faith in a Baptist church which was liberal and returned to the Brethren. He attended the Brethren Bible College in Toronto and there received his first glimmerings of the Reformed faith from one of the teachers. He was not then aware of the term 'Reformed' in any formal sense. Rev Short became more fully aware of the Reformed faith when attending a Presbyterian church while

attending university. The minister was a strong Calvinist and through him Rev Short became aware of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. After graduating from McMaster University with a BA in Philosophy, he attended Westminster for three years and received an MDiv. While at seminary he became a Presbyterian. Upon graduating in 1964 Rev Short was ordained into the ministry in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. He ministered in that denomination for six years, leaving when it changed its ordination vows which contradicted the vows he had previously taken at ordination. He then entered the Evangelical Reformed Presbyterian Church and ministered in Nova Scotia and California. Rev Short spent some eight years ministering in Los Angeles after which he returned to Canada and attended the University of Guelph receiving a PhD in British Reformation history. While at Guelph he began ministering in 1984 to a group of people who had left the Christian Reformed Church because of the liberalism which had taken over that denomination. After graduating he accepted a call to the group in 1988 and became the founding pastor. He ministered there until his retirement in 2001, but continued preaching for them until a new pastor was found in 2004. Since then Rev Short has been preaching in various churches, as supply, pretty well full time. He has visited New Zealand before, in 2005, when he preached for Rev Leo de Vos who he has known for several years having served together in Canada. Rev Short was married for 38 years until his wife passed away in 2003. He has two children, a son and a daughter.

Hamilton

Pastoral: On Thursday evening around 9pm, the Lord called home our brother Paul van Oosten. We thank the Lord for Paul's life and for the testimony he gave to faith in the Lord. We also pray for Afra, her children and their wider family as they come to terms with life without Paul. A thanksgiving service for Paul's life will be held here in the church on Monday at 2pm. There will be afternoon tea after the service. Can the families that come to the service please bring a plate. Can we also have people to help with the serving?

Charlie Bosgra and Margaret Vickery will get married (DV) this coming Saturday in Australia. We pray that the Lord would make this a blessed day and that he will give you many years of happiness together.

Meditation – The tragic events of last Tuesday have thrown the Christian community

under the spotlight as we grieve with the families and friends of seven people – all Christians – who lost their lives. Through it all, many have spoken of the fact that their faith is sustaining them and will carry them through. Elim Christian School principal, Murray Burton, has said “If our faith means anything at all, then it must mean everything now.” But what does faith mean at times like this? Does it mean that we will miraculously be spared the grief and pain that come from brutal separation from those we love? No. Does it mean that we will never question why things have occurred and God’s purposes in them? No. In fact, belief in a good God may actually mean that we have more questions. Does it mean that we will automatically understand why an event like this has occurred and how God plans to use it? No – though we would dearly like to. So what does it mean? Ultimately, faith in God means that we face every situation in the certain knowledge of at least three things: 1) God is sovereign. He is in control of all things – even this tragedy. What has occurred is part of the unfolding of God’s purposes and will, part of the accomplishing of his plans. 2) God is good and all that he does is good. This tragedy is not the petulant act of a vindictive God. It is not the arbitrary act of a capricious God. Rather it is the planned act of a God who sees all things in the light of eternity and does what is righteous, holy, just and good. 3) God is a loving Father. Not only does God do what is good, but he uses it for the good of those who love him. Even the most terrifying, horrific and tragic events of our lives are used by God for our good. What sustains God’s people when tested to the limit is a sure knowledge, worked in us by God’s Spirit, that, in the face of our grief, our questions, our doubts and our fears, these things are true: God is sovereign. He is good. And He is loving to His children. This is the rock to which we cling in the storms of life: The settled determination to trust in God and cling to him, when everything else tells us to let go. This is faith that saves. This is faith that comforts. Do you have this kind of faith?

Hastings

Wedding Invitation. Arnold and Carla Kaijser are delighted to invite you to the marriage of their daughter Ineke to Ryan Nugteren. The Wedding will take place D.V at the Reformed Church of Hastings on Saturday the 19th April at 12:30pm, followed by an afternoon tea.

Profession of Faith and Baptism. It is with joy that the Session heard the report of an elders' visit with Arthur Andersen-Hull who has requested to profess his faith in the Lord and become a member of the His Church. About 8 months ago the Lord gave Arthur a wake-up call concerning his standing with God when he had a heart attack and had to be flown to the Wellington Hospital. Arthur realised that he needed to get right with God. On the flight down to Wellington Arthur met Arie van Seventer who also had a heart attack at the same time and Arie invited him to church. Since then Arthur has been learning the Christian faith through studying the Catechism and also doing a Profession of Faith class. Session has approved Arthur to make his public profession of faith and be baptised. If anyone has any lawful objections to this taking place, please speak to your elder so that your objections can be properly considered. Lord willing Arthur will profess his faith and be baptised next Sunday in the morning service. We rejoice with the angels in heaven because our heavenly Shepherd has found and brought back one of His wayward sheep.

From Pastor Waldron. Our beloved brother Craig Treacher died suddenly and unexpectedly last Wednesday of a suspected heart attack. His faith and trust in Christ as His Lord and Saviour was evidenced in his life. We therefore have full confidence that he is with the Lord in glory. We have joy in that knowledge, but also grief as we experience the loss of a husband, father, brother and friend. We pray that the Father of mercies and God of all comfort would be especially close to Vera, Daniella, Damian, Karena and Rebecca at this time of severe affliction. As a congregation we grieve together with the Treacher and Van Seventer families, for we are all joined together in Christ through the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Hukanui

Pastoral. Jessica and Ross Darlington were blessed with the birth of a healthy girl on Monday evening 17th March, whom they have named Trisha Cheri. May God continue to grant Jessica healing after her caesarean, and strength as you both lead your family to know and love the Lord.

Mangere

Woman’s Bible Study. As part of the evangelism program, we will be hosting a Bible study specifically focusing on woman. This will be held at the church, every fortnight on

Friday mornings at 10am, commencing April 4th. Please be encouraged to bring along other ladies that may be interested. If you require any further information or wish to arrange transport, please see Carmen.

Pastoral. We commend to the comfort of the Lord the family and friends of Sr Ruth Cremer. The Lord took her to Himself this past Wednesday evening. We thank Him for her faithful service over many years on the mission field in Ethiopia and pray that the Lord would raise up more for that work and mission work all over this world.

North Shore

Preparation for Worship. Dear congregation, We all come from different traditions with different ways of doing things, many of which, even with regard to worship, will be neither right nor wrong. Some of us come from traditions where the done thing is to greet one’s friends and chat and catch up on the week’s doings before the Service. For others, when one comes to Church, one sits down quietly to meditate and prepare oneself to meet the Lord. It would seem, from the noise level just before our Services, that most of us come from the former! (And there is a good aspect to that!) A couple of our district fellowship groups are studying RC Sproul’s lectures on The Holiness of God at present and it has made them wonder about this question: which of the above is more conducive to preparing us to worship that honours a holy God? As a Session, we have sympathy with this and would therefore ask the congregation: could we please keep the volume down before the Service is due to begin so that those who wish to, can meditate quietly, and perhaps the rest of us can also. Thank you. The Session.

Palmerston North

Wanganui Calling Committee Report. The Wanganui congregation had an enjoyable evening on Monday night with Andre and Anita Holtslag. As a Session we met with Andre prior to his giving a Sermon and answering questions that had been put forward by the congregation. The Calling Committee were impressed with Andre, and plan to put the following motion forward to Session at a Session Meeting on Thursday: "That Session extend a call to Andre Holtslag subject to congregational approval." We have a tape recording of the Sermon and Questions that were asked of Andre, that is available to members if they wish. Similarly we have a number of Sermons from Andre in MP3 format. The

Calling Committee

This is from a book called "Brothers, We are not professionals" by John Piper: (It is available from the church library). "We think that we don't have time to read. We despair of reading anything spiritually rich and substantial because life seems to be lived in snatches. One of the most helpful discoveries I have made is how much can be read in disciplined blocks of twenty minutes a day. Suppose that you read slowly, say about 250 words a minute (as I do). This means that in twenty minutes you can read about five thousand words. An average book has about four hundred words to a page. So you could read about twelve-and-a-half pages in twenty minutes. Suppose you discipline yourself to read a certain author or topic twenty minutes a day, six days a week, for a year. That would be 312 times 12.5 pages for a total of 3,900 pages. Assume that an average book is 250 pages long. This means you could read fifteen books like that in one year. Or take a longer classic like John Calvin's Institutes (fifteen hundred pages in the Westminster edition). At twenty minutes a day and 250 words a minute and six days a week, you could finish it in twenty-five weeks. Then Augustine's "The City of God" and B.B. Warfield's "Inspiration and Authority of the Bible" could be finished before year's end. This astonishing discovery freed me from the paralysis of not starting great, mind-shaping, heart enriching books because I lacked enough big blocks of time. It turns out that I don't need long periods of time in order to read three masterpieces in one year! I needed twenty minutes a day, six days a week."

Notes from the Session meeting of 3 April 2008: Our churches have been informed by the RTC deputies that Daniel Wilson is available for a vicariate later in the year. Session has been investigating this and would like to offer a vicariate to Daniel subject to congregational approval. It was decided to provide full information to the congregation about this and to call for a vote at our forthcoming AGM.

Volleyball. In preparation of beating Silverstream volleyball team this year, we want to start with more practicing than last year. We want to enrol a team for the PN Monday volleyball league this second term. This will start from the 5th of May, that's in about 4 week's time! (Another option is third term 21st of July) That means a commitment for the Mondays to come and play. So think about it and let me know

before the end of April please!!! Regards, Maria-Tine Biersteker

Pukekohe

Last Monday morning at 10:13 we were blessed from God to receive a healthy baby daughter. Her name is Tyla Klaassien Phillips and she weighed in at 8 pound 5 ounces. Marlies is doing very well. She was and is absolutely amazing. We are both thankful to God for this gift of life and to all of you for your prayers and thoughtfulness. Josh and Marlies

Mr Louis Draijer, an architect from Nelson, visited us last Saturday to discuss more detail design work for a new church building at our Victoria Street property. John Kaijser provided him with the necessary information from the council. Some alterations from a proposal Mr Draijer sent us previously were discussed at length. He will go ahead and prepare a more detailed plan with consideration of some materials in the most cost effective way. Mr and Mrs Draijer joined us for Lord's Supper on Sunday and could experience firsthand our situation around church meetings and some noise factors from our location. He expects to have these plans available in about 3 months time and then we will be able to consider them as a congregation. The Building Committee

Silverstream

Session Notes. Following a request from a new Heretaunga College Christian group, Rev. Archbald has been asked to look into ways that we might be able to assist them. It appears that large Christian groups with considerable freedom have recently sprung up in a number of local high-schools - an encouraging development.

Congregational EGM: Session invites members of the Reformed Church of Silverstream to an EGM at 7.45 pm on Tuesday April 15. The agenda will comprise 3 matters: discussion on the possibility of applying for a vicar, Br. Daniel Wilson, whose name has recently been circulated by the vicariate committee; an up-date from the Building Committee; and information on Rev. Archbald's attendance at the conference on women in office, to be held in South Africa in April.

40th Wedding Anniversary. Today 30th March 1968 John and Maria Holtslag were married, We praise our Lord for His grace and blessing's in bringing them to this milestone today. We thank God for their witness and care, for us as family and

service within the church and community. May god bless you both for many years to come. Love the Kids and grandkids.

Pastoral Notes. We thank the Lord for blessing Sr. Braakman on her 85th Birthday yesterday. Please continue to pray for the older folk as they struggle daily with the ailments of old age.

Marriage Banns. Alberts Steenkamp and Janet van der Werff have signified their desire to be united in marriage at the Reformed Church of Silverstream on 3 May 2008, at 1.30pm. If there are no lawful objections, the ceremony will take place on that date, the Lord willing.

Wainuiomata

Marriage Banns. Lynton Baird & Anna Bartlett have signified their desire to be united in marriage at the Reformed Church of Wainuiomata on the 26th of April, 2008, at 1:00pm. If there are no lawful objections the ceremony will take place on that date, the Lord willing.

Wellington

From the Pastor. We welcome visiting family and friends of Abi and Danielle Fransen, who will profess their faith during the morning service.

CBI New Zealand Update - March 2008



CBI NZ has now been in operation for 2 years. We give thanks to the Lord that this ministry continues to grow. During the period December 07 - February 08 193 lessons were processed and 44 new students enrolled. As at the end of February there are 134 active students - those who have sent in lessons.

In the last few months a number of

instructors stopped marking lessons due to ill health, beginning tertiary studies or going overseas. I am very thankful to them all for their support and faithful service in this ministry. Six new instructors have been trained, some of whom are already marking lessons. More will be trained in April in Palmerston North (DV). We now have a total of 44 Instructors.

In March I was able to meet with 11 chaplains in the lower North Island. This included chaplains at Rimutaka Prison, Wellington Prison, Wellington Women's Prison, Tongariro/Rangipo Prison in Turangi, and Wanganui Prison. I was very encouraged by their interest and positive feedback. They acknowledged CBI is a help to them in ministering to the prisoners with the Word of God and assured me of their support.

At the moment we are busy preparing for the CBI NZ seminars. There will be 4 in all during this year, two in the South Island (Christchurch/Dunedin) and two in the North Island (Palmerston North/Auckland). The first seminar will be in Christchurch on Friday May 23rd at 7:30pm at the Reformed Church of Dovedale. This will be followed by a seminar at the Reformed Church of Dunedin on Saturday May 24th at 1:30pm. Details for the North Island seminars still need to be finalised. The guest speaker at each of the seminars will be Steve Treloar – Field Services Manager for PARS (Prisoners Aid and Rehabilitation Society Inc.) Look forward to meeting many of you then.

A note from CBI in America: If a student is obviously using a different Bible translation from the NIV but their answer has the same meaning and/or makes sense in the context, do not mark it as an error. Check out www.biblegateway.com. You can switch between many versions of the Bible to help with this. Thank you.

In December all the students were sent a Christmas card on behalf of all of us at CBI. This was greatly appreciated by many, going by the response we received.

I would like to share the following letters received from students since the end of February.

One student, just 20 years old, at Waikeria Prison shares: *'You guys doing awesome work. I wonder if you can pray for me. I just handed in my prospect patch for a gang cause I want to follow God's way now. I got into trouble and got my bashing to get out of the gang. I know God was protecting me cause I walked out of the yard with only a bleeding nose after being attacked by 8 patch members. God works in good ways.'*

At the end of the lesson he wrote: *'At the moment hits are going around the jail to get me in different wings. I know God will protect me but is there anything in the Bible to boost up my confidence cause I'm quite scared. Thanks.'*

In the following lesson this same student writes: *'The other week in the last roadmap (personal weekly devotion booklet which comes with every lesson) I found a scripture that I love – 1 Peter 5:9. 'Resist him (the devil), standing firm in the faith because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.' It's awesome to know I'm not the only person feeling hurt and pain in the world. But we got brothers in the same boat.'*

He went on to share: *'It's amazing what God does for us. Like for example, I was in the yard and one of the fellows who always picked on me walked in. I went up to him cause I saw him bullying a little fellow and the words that popped out of my mouth without thinking was 'God loves you, He's only a prayer away.' Now this fellow had a tear come down his face. All we want is to be loved. Well thanks again and can't wait for the next lesson.'*

Another student who has been doing the CBI studies since August 2006 was due for parole. It had already been postponed several times over a period of 6 months and he was anxious about it and asked for prayer. He shares: *'I have good news for you. I went up to the Parole Board on... And God's been at work. There were three judges in the room, my lawyer and my support person. The amazing thing was, the Chief Judge didn't ask anything to anyone. He just said, 'Mr ... I would like to say thank you for everything you have done in this prison. Your attitudes and efforts to change have been proved. You have been very co-operative with the prison guard and joinery boss. I have no point to hold you here. I give your final release date ...'. It took only about 3 minutes. My family have waited for me a very long time to come home. I hope I can still carry on the study when I go back. Thank you very much. May God bless you.'*

This student encouraged at least 4 other students to enrol with CBI. One of the students he enrolled, in turn enrolled others.

Another student from Mt. Eden shares: *'Please pray that my Bible College application is accepted. I'm doing a Diploma in Biblical studies with a pastoral care focus. My first paper will be 'The Introduction to*

the NT'. I will be doing the Course part time while in prison. Upon release I can apply for full time study. I'm also in a single cell now which is good. God bless.'

Another student from Waikeria wrote: *'I would like to thank CBI for Great Truths of the Bible Lesson 4. This lesson 'Only God Can Save Humanity from Sin' has certainly relayed God's message to me of how serious my **own** 'transgressions' and sins are, from the tiniest to the largest. I know for myself that if I continue to pray for God's forgiveness of my sins and transgressions in Jesus name and with a sincere heart, that I will be **forgiven** with Gods **merciful love** and grace and will one day receive God's gift of **eternal life** through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen!'*

*Yours in Christ,
CBI NZ Co-ordinators*

'God's will will never take you where His grace will not sustain you.'

Interested in teaching English as a Second Language?

Expressions of interest are wanted from people interested in teaching English in China or North Korea.

This is a new project and is in the early stages of development. People with a missions outlook are sought.

You must be 18 or over.

You must have a university degree.

You should have an ESOL qualification.

You should have ESOL teaching experience.

You must have good pronunciation.

You must be a member in good standing of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand.

Please email

Paul Goodenough (North Shore)
paul.g@callplus.net.nz

Tragedy at the Mangatepopo Gorge – A distinctive Christian witness

As the Tuesday catechism class ended, I was told, 'Our apologies for next week, Mr van Garderen.' Elim's annual 'Year 12' camp at OPC is on.' Four of the 13 students indicated they would be away for the next class. I decided to cancel the class for April 15th. No harm done. They're a committed bunch of young people who are a pleasure to teach and it had already been a long term.

Some were getting ready to make their public profession of faith on 20th April and May 4th. There were nine altogether — the largest number that had ever professed their faith in our fellowship at one time. We were all looking forward to this moment, an event that would be a crowning moment in our congregation's 55-year history. Only Anthony Mulder, away at the camp, would be absent for that memorable meeting.

Tuesday, April 15.

I was finishing off the last-minute service details to rehearse with the eight available youngsters. Just before 7.00pm Mrs Miriam Mulder rang the manse. TV 3 was broadcasting *breaking news*. Four students were missing as a result of being swept away by a terrible flood that had suddenly roared its way through the Mangatepopo Gorge in Tongariro National Park. 'Our kids are staying at the Sir Edmund Hillary, Outdoor Pursuits Centre (OPC),' she said. Miriam was due to attend a Pastoral Care Team meeting at 7.30pm, but felt she must stay home, 'just in case'. We weren't too worried. There were other schools at OPC. The students were listed as 'missing' and would probably be found soon.

On arriving at the church for the 7.30pm meeting, I noted that most of the pre-communicant class members were aware of what was going on. Tension and concern was mounting. The phone rang at church. My wife confirmed that students from Elim Christian College were indeed involved. The students were from Elim! Should I ring the principal, Mr Murray Burton, as their pastor, to find out if our kids were OK? The principal was in a bind. He could not give out the names. I therefore asked him, 'Isaac Cho?' 'Yes, he's accounted for.' 'Wynand Malan?' 'He's fine.' 'Sarah Brooks?' 'Yes, she's safe.' Anthony Mulder?

'Er...his name is listed as one of the missing students...'

I immediately rang the three sets of parents to reassure them. One of them didn't even know that anything was wrong. The class, by now apprehensive and tearful, was dismissed while I raced to the Mulders.

The waiting began. No news yet of the missing students yet. How many were involved? Reports varied. We knelt and prayed. *God, in your mercy, let it be that these students are OK. Lord, Anthony is an exceptionally strong and powerful swimmer. Let him live, please.*

Informed that there was a prayer meeting going on at Elim, I picked up my wife



Anthony Mulder

Gonny and joined hundreds of others in a prayer vigil. There was confidence and hope, especially when the name of one survivor, Kish Proctor, was announced. We went back to the Mulder home feeling optimistic.

At 11.00pm, as the house became more and more crowded, we heard on TV One News that five *bodies* had been recovered. Our worst nightmares were becoming a reality. A school representative came in and told us that the matter was now out of the school's hands. The police were in charge and all of us were dependent on them for further information. A victim support team arrived, but could only tell us that Anthony and one other student were still missing. At 12.15am there was another newsflash, but still nobody knew anything about Anthony and the other student. We decided to go to bed, praying that they would soon be found – alive. However, at 2.06am the last

two bodies were found. They were Anthony and a close friend. At 2.45am, the phone rang in the manse. We didn't need waking up. John and Miriam Mulder, Anthony's parents, had just received a visit from the local police informing them that Anthony's body had been found... We went back to the Mulder's home and wept before the Lord. We arrived back home just as a new day was dawning.

By Wednesday morning, the whole nation was in a state of shock. The Bucklands Beach elders had been notified and asked to contact all the members on their lists, advising them of a prayer meeting for 7.30pm that night at the church. The Mulder home was crammed with family and friends. Support and encouragement poured in.

Meanwhile, at Elim Christian College, a special assembly was held. Principal Murray Burton, with the media in attendance, read out the list of those who had perished. The school gasped and wept with dismay as they learnt who had perished. Survivors were also named. At that point, it first became clear that Sarah Brooks had been in the canyoning group – and survived. I heard about this just before midday at the Mulders' and immediately rushed to the Brooks home. Martin and Jeanette, as well as sister Danae, were there to hear for the first time that Sarah had also been a part of the group caught in the gorge, and had been spared. They had no idea until then. Martin had spoken with his daughter at 1.30am — but the exchange had been short, and somewhat strained. 'I'm OK, mum and dad,' was all Sarah had been able to say. Sarah and the other survivors returned to school on the bus – a six-hour journey that really taxed the youngsters. The media folks were everywhere. It was hard!

The survivors

There were a total of 12 members in the party that went 'canyoning'. These included an OPC instructor, Jodie Sullivan, as well as a teacher — Antony McClean. Two of the students were not swept away down river over the dam but nine were, and crashed into the chaos below it. Two survived, seven didn't.

Sarah Brooks, unable to grab the life-saving rope at the dam, went over. She recalls feeling a strong surge of water pushing her to the side, being able to grab hold of some rocks and branches, and finding herself in calmer water. She gradually made her way to a safer spot where she was spotted and



from which she was rescued, bruised and battered, but alive.

Kish Proctor, a friend of Anthony's, took a much, much longer journey down that flooded stream — and survived as well. The crest of water flowing down that stream rose to 18 cumecs (cubic metres per second), up from its normal 0.5 cumecs. As he himself has testified, *'It was God's will that I survived. He still has more plans for me.'*

God's will?

Where was God's hand in all this? On Thursday evening, 15-year-old Kish agreed to appear for a live interview of TV One's *Close Up*. Kish was there with his mum. Mark Sainsbury, the presenter, asked Kish, *'Was it God's will that you survived?'* Kish's agreement was an emphatic, 'yes!' The next question – to a 15 year old, a mere 24 hours after his traumatic ordeal (!) was, *'And was it also God's will that the seven others did not?'* I was stunned and angered at the thought of posing that question at that point! Kish hesitated only slightly. He didn't know if that was God's will that they should not survive, but he knew that, at the very least, it was God's will that *he* was alive!

The issue was taken up and used at the first of the funerals. The *NZ Herald* reported the following:

(TopL) Anthony with the group leader and others in his group just hours before the flash flood.

(CentreL) Anthony on a sports leadership hike.

(BottomL) Anthony with his prayer group.

(Below) Anthony as a cool drummer at the kids club.



Thank you from the Mulder Family



We would like to express our heartfelt thanks for the overwhelming outpouring of love to us through messages of support, sympathy and comfort in cards and emails, meals, gifts, flowers and most importantly prayers from so many people in NZ, Australia and even further afield, following the tragedy at Mangatepopo through which our Lord called our son and brother Anthony home on 15 April 2008.

Our lives will never be the same but we trust that God will continue to give us the strength to go on. We praise God for the confidence we have that Anthony is now safe with Jesus and we continue to pray, and ask you all to pray that through this, many hearts and lives would be changed and God's name be glorified.

We thank you all again for your wonderful support and are sorry that we are not able to thank each of you individually.

John, Miriam (nee Bijenhof), Marcus and Lauren Mulder



Pastor Luke Brough, who led the service, said that the tragedy which took seven lives was not God's will. Life was not always fair and it was not a perfect world, he said.

'When people say to me this is God's will, I say rubbish. That is not true. God is grieving too.'

He said God could have stopped the tragedy but to do that he would have to take away peoples' free will, their opportunity to choose.

He said the greatest blessing God had given was the freedom of choice but it was also the greatest curse, because 'often we choose the wrong thing' and when the wrong choices are made, sometimes innocent people suffer.

In my opinion, that well-intended statement (taken out of its context!) is neither true, nor especially helpful. Pastor Luke was trying to avoid the danger of 'fatalism' – where all the blame is laid at God's feet and none at ours. He did not want to discount human responsibility and accountability in this tragedy. He's right in that respect. But he inadvertently fell into another error – creating a picture of a God who is not sovereign and not working out all things in conformity with his purpose and his will (*Eph 1.11*). Doesn't the Psalmist tell us, '*All the days ordained for me were written in God's book before one of them came to be?*' (*Ps 139.16*). Didn't the Lord Jesus say that '*not a single sparrow will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father and even the very hairs on your head are numbered?*' (*Matt 10.30,31*)

God was present in the Mangatepopo Gorge. He did allow it to happen. We do not fully see why, but we do know that he was in control as a sovereign God and as a compassionate, loving and merciful Father. That's what God himself tells us over and over again. For example, Paul wrote, '*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*' (*Rom 8:28*).

Anthony Mulder was to have professed his faith before our congregation on April 20th. His full-on love for the Lord Jesus had been real in the life of our church for several years. His work in our annual holiday clubs as well as a junior cadet counsellor testified to that. Those kids loved and adored this very tall young man who joked, jostled and had fun with them continually. He had also stood before the eldership two week earlier saying, 'I love Jesus as *my saviour and my Lord.*'

God's *will* was that Anthony be called

home as a 16-year-old on the threshold of life and with the potential to do great things for his Lord. However, none of us can even begin to understand the timing or reasoning of God. I Corinthians 13.12 comes to mind. *'Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.'* At best, we know *in part*.

- We know that it was God's plan to place the finishing line for Anthony's race at the Mangatepopo Gorge.
- We know that Anthony died trying to help a fellow student who was not a strong swimmer by strapping that student to his back. The verse, 'Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.' (John 15.13) Anthony died trying to help his good friend.
- We know also that Anthony's testimony has awakened much in the hearts of his friends and in circles well beyond our own community. At this very moment, God is working through what happened to him and the others.
- We know that even as we grieve and mourn, God is there and that he as Father is in control.

One day we will have answers. In the meanwhile we do know this fully: The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me; — your love, O Lord, endures forever — do not abandon the works of your hands. (Psalm 138:8)

Prayer service

Wednesday evening, 16th April, 7.30pm. The church was filled with mourners. We sang. We prayed. We sought and found comfort in God's Word, in each other's arms and in sharing tears.

We also gave thanks:

- Sarah was spared! The very thought of the other possibility horrifies.
- That Anthony is safe in the arms of the Lord Jesus. What a blessing for the family, the fellowship and all of us involved to know that Anthony, even as a 16-year-old, really knew his Redeemer and he himself was seeing him even as we grieved.
- We knew that the God of all comfort comforts in all our troubles.

It was not necessary to ask for support for the family. That was already overwhelming to the point of overflowing.

One announcement:

On the request of Anthony's parents and siblings, and with the (somewhat tearful)

concurrence of the other six young people, we would definitely proceed with the public profession of faith on Sunday. We would include Anthony, formally presenting him to the congregation as a candidate and celebrating the confession he had already made and was now making before the throne of God!

* * *

Anthony's body arrived at the Mulder home on Friday morning. The open coffin was placed in his (small!) bedroom. Many hundreds of people came in, saw, touched and said farewell to his earthly remains. The grieving was hard and real but, looking back, never without comfort or hope.

Public profession of faith

A very special day had been planned. The public profession was all about celebration. A shared luncheon had been called for. The tables groaned under the weight of the food.

The service itself was wonderful – if not awesome. We couldn't accommodate everyone in the auditorium and needed to open up the hall.

We mourned for those who had been lost. We gave thanks for those who survived. Sarah Brooks and Kish Proctor, as well as many other 6th formers from Anthony's class, were there. We prayed. We sang – especially the song that Anthony had requested two weeks previously: *How Deep the Father's Love*.

We introduced each of the candidates: Elizabeth Cunningham, Jolene Franssen, Adriaan Kant (Ant's cousin), Ruhan Snyders, Giselle Stangan and Philip Strayton. A photo of Anthony was screened to introduce him. The six professed their faith before us and, in Anthony's case, we pointed to the good confession he had made in the presence of many witnesses, and more formally before the elders. We rejoiced in the assurance that continues that profession before the host of heaven. The text placed in the book presented to Anthony at his profession was a verse found in his diary that contained notes for the speech he intended to make before us. He had written, 'Heb 10.23'. *'Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.'* I added to this quotation, *'...let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching'* (Heb. 10.25).

The worship service was unforgettable. The scripture (chosen before what happened on Tuesday) remained fitting

and challenging. We read from Luke 9.18-27 and focussed on 9.23, *'Then he (Jesus) said to them all, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me.'*

The funeral and thanksgiving service

From Saturday morning onwards the seven funeral services began in our district. The sheer logistics of arranging them was overwhelming. Once again, the school and Board of Trustees come out as heroes – as did the folks at the Elim Church. Their facility was made available to those who needed it. They provided their team of ushers (20+) as well as sound, etc. What loving generosity!

Anthony's funeral was planned for Tuesday morning, 22nd April. The burial would be at 9.30am and the thanksgiving service at Elim an hour later.

Anthony's coffin was closed at 8.00am with extended family being present. The cortege made the half-hour drive to the cemetery. Rain threatened – a huge rainbow greeted us as we drove in just before 9.00am. Hundreds of people were already there. Then the rain came down! It was cold. On request, we decided to proceed with the interment at 9.15am. It stopped raining as we started and the sun peeped through the clouds. We laid to rest Anthony's earthly remains in the knowledge that he is with the Lord – forever. The rain returned as the last of the 400+ mourners made their way to their cars.

Somehow, under the skilful guidance of the ushers, the 1,000-plus people who had turned up were seated. The majority were in the 900-seat auditorium and the rest in the gymnasium where TV One had provided a huge screen.

The service was both a celebration of Anthony's short life as well as a call and challenge from God's word. The family spoke, as did friends and many others. Some sang. Others recited. There were times of genuine laughter – and others of tears. The testimony of Kish and Sarah comes to mind. 9-year-old Alicia Kapa, a girl with cerebral palsy whom Anthony had helped in dozens of ways, voiced her love and appreciation for Anthony on behalf of many of her peers.

The Mulder family had selected the Scripture reading, Philippians 3.7-14. In context Paul writes, *'But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.'* The illustration is that of

an athlete or charioteer pressing on and straining every muscle as he races towards the finishing line. For Anthony, that finishing line has already been crossed. He has won the prize. For the rest of us, like Paul, the race towards the goal continues. It involves pressing on and straining ourselves to keep going; not being distracted by what lies behind or the 1,001 obstacles designed

to make us stumble and fall. *Press on!* That call was real for all of us. Anthony has completed the race and spoke to us all: parents, siblings, friends, congregation members, Kiwis, and everyone else on the planet: *Press on folks, to win the prize for which God has called me, you and all us, heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

The service was over. We joined together

over food and refreshments for mutual encouragement and support, but in many other ways, it has only just begun. The words of Hebrew 9.23 ring in our ears: *'Hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.'*

Dirk J van Garderen,
Bucklands Beach, April 24, 2008.

Missions in focus

by Janice

Visit to Knox Theological College, Mbale Uganda

Rev John Rogers continues his reports about his time in Uganda, serving the Orthodox Presbyterian Church of Uganda.

The Knox Theological College is a mission of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church of the USA working closely with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church of Uganda, which churches I introduced you to earlier. For the first three weeks, we stayed with the Rev. Barry and Anne James. We then moved into our own quarters in the College building – a large house with the College using the front part of it and we the back.

The location

Mbale itself is set at 1150m, below Mt Elgon (4381m), which one is very lucky ever to see, it being covered in cloud more days of the year than Table Mtn and Mt Egmont combined. But every day one could see Mt Wanale, a rather long, flattish foothill rising to 2348m. With several waterfalls, it is very beautiful with its aspect changing often, according to the light. The town of Mbale is a dilapidated place with most buildings dating from the 1920s through 1940s. Unfortunately, I think we were there about 70-80 years too late, from that point of view. It must have been a lovely place, indeed, in colonial days. Remnants of it remain. The Jameses lived in the Rev.

Phil and Meredith Proctor's home in their absence, a large brick & tile house. Phil has been the resident missionary for the past three years, recently joined by Rev. Thomas and Caroline Mayville of the RCUS. All the missionaries' homes and the College are in the 'Senior Quarter', that is, where the senior British staff lived. The seal on the streets is pretty broken up and rutted, but many beautiful, large trees still line them and give an idea of what it must have once been like. Each mission property (rented by the mission) has about a half an acre of ground and a gardener's house, pretty standard for the area.

Lectures at Knox Theological College take place Tuesday to Friday, from 8.30 – 12.30, the first half hour being devotions. I also took a few devotions in the early weeks while preparing my lectures. Devotions at the College are intended to model preaching to the students, so they involve serious preparation. There are quite a few village churches within a 25km (+/-) radius of Mbale and on three days per week Sheryl and Anne James would be involved in a Bible Study – sometimes to conduct it, sometimes just to encourage with their presence and whatever contribution they

might make. One was among some of the ladies of the Muzungu (white man) community; another a mixed study in Mbale (also in English); and the third in one of the village churches (and translated).

The work there

I had been asked to teach two courses. The first course was on the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 6. *The Fall, Sin & its Punishment; 7. God's Covenant with Man; 8. Christ the Mediator; 9. Free Will; 10. Effectual Calling; 11. Justification; and 12. Adoption.* While it was not the original intention, I shared this course with Dr Brian Wingard. Brian, with his wife Dorothy, is really a missionary to Eritrea, but was recently unable to return there after furlough in the States for political reasons and so has gone to Uganda for the time being. We need to pray for the Church in Eritrea; it is going through some hard persecution at the moment.

So far as I could tell, the lectures seemed to go well and were useful to the students. Their English is not too bad if one speaks slowly and uses lots of synonyms! And I tried to make sure I gave them plenty of opportunity to ask questions. About a

third of the class passed the exam first time. This being a beginning year for many of the men, the whole scene is quite a new experience. Some are not very educated and the standard must be lifted, but it hard to know quite how to set the pace in that regard.

The second course was an *Introduction to the book of Acts and Paul's Epistles* (excluding the Pastorals). The class was

again twelve men, five from the local Orthodox Presbyterian Church of Uganda, four from the Free Reformed Churches of Kenya and three men from some sort of local charismatic churches, so I was told. These men rode 13km into Mbale and 13km home every day (and some of the OPUC men did similarly). Howzat for dedication? The Kenyan men were good men. One was a pastor already, two were

elders and another an evangelist. I'm not sure where the 'Free' comes from – it didn't seem to originate from the Free Church of Scotland or the Liberated in the Netherlands, so far as I could tell; I guess someone found something else to be free of! At any rate, the pastor was a first rate man and took a real pastoral role with the others as he led them in discussions of the lectures later at night. He could be a



very useful leader in those Churches in the future. (More recently we have heard that five people from these Churches were killed in the post-election riots and fourteen families displaced from their homes. Pray for them.) Thomas Mayville also has a brief to work particularly among these Churches. Among the Ugandan students, one was an older man, an elder, and studying more or less for his own interest. He suffered a stroke some years ago and his speech is still rather slurred and one leg doesn't work very well but he gets up at 5am each day and rides about 12km into Mbale and home again in the afternoon. A couple of the other OPCU men could serve well as pastors in the future. The three 'charismatic' men I did not get to know very well but two of them seem quite intelligent fellows. They were certainly not of the raving variety for we spent two days on the book of Acts and you cannot teach Acts without teaching about the Holy Spirit and about that I was quite straightforward and did not apparently ruffle their feathers. In fact, I saw them nodding agreement with me at times. Maybe even their coming to Knox indicates an open mind on those matters, perhaps even questioning.

A Sunday School seminar

The Saturday after my last course of lectures, while I was marking exams, the missionary ladies, Dorothy Wingard, Anne James, Sheryl and one of the local pastor's wives, Rachel, gave a seminar for the Sunday School teachers of the denomination. It was held at the College and there was a wonderful response. Every congregation sent their pastor and two or three Sunday School teachers. It was partly to give them teaching tips and also to give them a real curriculum with real lessons (!) which Dorothy had been working on for some time, the original having been begun by Liana Havelaar in her Hoyt days half a dozen years ago. Transport was provided as also lunch. It was a real day out for the ladies. They all turned up in their very best finery. It was amazing, considering the homes some of them live in, how cleanly they can present themselves and in what nice clothes. Many of the pastors expressed gratitude for the day and it was hoped that, in some way, it would also help mend the relationship a bit between the Mission and the Churches.

Planning a mission trip? Let us pray for you! If you or somebody you know is planning a mission trip — short or long — please let us know. We want to pray for those on mission trips overseas, but we cannot pray if we don't know that you're going! Deadline for submission of articles to Faith in Focus is 6 weeks before the month the magazine comes to your church. If you would like our congregations to pray for you on your mission trip, send details to Janice at reid4radio@gmail.com

