

faith in focus

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Editorial

History is not everybody's cup of tea is it? When we look at the post-modern society that we live in, it really isn't very interested in history on the whole. In general, younger New Zealanders don't seem to like to learn from history either, and would rather relegate that "old stuff" to the top shelf or the bin, and continue to play with their iPods, Playstations or XBox's. For some New Zealanders, history only extends to the events of the last 140-200 years.

However, Christian New Zealanders must have a much larger view of history, because for us, history begins with the opening words of Scripture: "In the beginning, God ... " (Gen 1:1) and ultimately concludes when "He [Christ] delivers the kingdom to the God and Father, ... that God may be all in all". (1 Cor 15: 24b; 28b).

History is about what God is doing in the world, and His church is very much wrapped up in that history. There have been some very significant and defining moments since the Garden of Eden, the most **important** being the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are many defining moments in the life of the Church. In this issue we look at just a few of these moments beginning with "The persecution of early Christians" by Rev David Bayne, "The conversion of Constantine: better times for the Church?" by Dr Sally Davey, and "Spread of the church through 19th century missionary endeavour" by Mrs Tani Newton.

For those of you not familiar with church history, hopefully these examples may whet your appetite to become more interested in the events that have helped shape this world and the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Other features of this issue are "Christianity and the emergent church", followed by a book review on the same subject; a letter to the Editor and "Life on the inside" by Ed Havelaar.

Photo Credits:

Picture of the Bronze statue of Constantine I in York, England, near the spot where he was proclaimed Emperor in 306. www.freefoto.com

The Thought of God – Maurice Roberts

Pg.12

It is the besetting sin of our age to trivialize sin. The remedy is to meditate on the holiness and righteousness of God himself, on the strictness and perfection of his laws, on the agonies of the damned in hell and, above all, on the sufferings of our blessed Redeemer on the cross of Calvary. The Christian stops making spiritual progress as soon as he stops repenting. The modern fashion is to skip through a few words of confession as though sin were no more serious to God than the omission of some detail of etiquette or the infringement of table manners.

Let us recall that sin is the contradiction of God. The best saints have looked into their own hearts as into a bottomless pit of corruption or an ocean of depravity. They were right to do so. It is something we need to learn from them all over again. Of our sins, we might say, 'O the depth!'

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 Dordt, 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.

Defining moments in church history (1)

The persecution of early Christians

Rev David Bayne

Every age and generation in the Church has had its own peculiar characteristics and qualities. Some of these were short lived and were restricted to some specific locality. Others left an enduring legacy, affected the Church as a whole and are therefore worthy of being declared an era of church history. The first of these is the time from the close of the Apostolic age until the Emperor Constantine began a completely new relationship between Church and State.

For over two centuries, God's people were characterised by two great attributes – amazing growth and intense suffering. In our time we tend to speak of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. For those saints the terms were the Church Suffering and the Church at Rest.

Why, in the Lord's providence, was this time of rapid spread and missionary success matched with such great suffering? We might even ask whether one caused the other. Did persecution come because of success? Or did success arise from persecution? Perhaps the answer to both might be "Yes".

Success (that is, the Lord adding daily to the number being saved) did cause jealousy and concern among the Jews. The pattern established in New Testament times flowed on through into later times. Later, this growth became a concern to Rome. Initially Christianity was assumed to be a variant of Judaism. In the Lord's providence, Judaism was extended official tolerance by the Romans (a privilege not to be sneezed at) and Christians benefited from that policy. As it became clearer that "The Way" was not a national religion of the Jews, but a universal religion seeking converts from among all, it was classified as an illegal religion. That status allowed any official the power to investigate and then to punish Christians wherever they might be found.

In our society today, we can scarcely imagine what it means to be persecuted

until death for being a Christian – unlike brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world today. By considering some examples we can think through the issues they raise, and observe that neither age, gender, race, wealth, education nor any other human category excluded from the embrace of the Church or the reach of the persecutor.

Consider the noble bishop Polycarp of Smyrna in Turkey

In a time when the aged were accorded more respect than today, it was nevertheless no protection against the crowd when they turned upon the Christians in a town. As the persecutions broke out in Smyrna and a number of young believers were tortured and killed, the cry went up "Kill the atheists! Get Polycarp". (Ironically, the Christians were called atheists because they denied the Roman gods.) When Polycarp was brought into the stadium the proconsul tried to persuade him to recant. Promised freedom if only he would curse Christ,

he replied "For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" Threatened with wild beasts he showed no fear, and was then condemned to be burned. The account of his death relates how the fire appeared to not touch him; and at the crowd's roar he was despatched by the sword. The Church in Smyrna was addressed in Revelation Chapter 2 with these words "Do not fear what you are about to suffer Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." These were words of encouragement and comfort to the members of that church as they gave up their lives for the cause of Christ.

Consider too, a poor slave girl in France

In the year 170 a number of disasters fell upon the Empire. There were fires and floods (an especially bad flood of the Tiber) along with rebellions, an earthquake and an outbreak of plague which



The execution of Polycarp

spread from Ethiopia to Gaul (France). As often happens in times of disaster people look for someone to blame. Popular opinion held that Christians were the ones responsible and so the persecutions began to flourish. In the year 177 a particularly severe persecution broke out in Lyons. The fury of the mob and the sanctions of the authorities exacted a heavy toll upon the Church. Masters and slaves alike were dragged to the marketplace. Confessing Christ led to imprisonment, torture and death. One shining example of steadfast refusal to deny Christ is found in a young slave girl named Blandina. The historian Eusebius recounts in some detail the events of her final days.

Here is a summary of his report:

Blandina was filled with such power that those who tortured her from morning to night grew exhausted and admitted they were beaten, for they had nothing left to do to her. They were astounded that she was still alive, since her whole body was smashed and lacerated, and they claimed that any one of the tortures was enough to end life But the blessed woman ... gained in strength while confessing the faith and found comfort for her sufferings by saying "I am a Christian, and nothing wicked happens among us".

"On the last day of the contests in the amphitheater, Blandina was again brought in with Ponticus, a boy of about 15. Every day they had been brought to witness the sufferings of others and pressed to deny their faith and swear by idols. Ponticus died first, and Blandina remained the last. She had encouraged many others and saw them go on before her to Jesus. Now she was ready to hasten after them. She faced her death rejoicing – as if being called to a marriage feast rather than wild beasts. The report stated: After the scourging, after the wild beasts, after the roasting seat, she was finally enclosed in a net, and thrown before a bull. And having been tossed about by the animal, but feeling none of the things which were happening to her, on account of her hope and firm hold upon what had been entrusted to her, and her communion with Christ, she also was sacrificed. After the bodies of the witnesses

were exposed for six days, they were burned to ashes and thrown into the Rhone river. The bodies of those who had suffocated in prison were thrown to the dogs, and guards were stationed to prevent the remaining Christians from burying them. The pagans hoped to prevent even the hope of resurrection for the Christians."

Most persecutions tended to be localised and sporadic. At times there were periods of intense attack upon God's people. Then there might be a generation that knew relative peace. You could live for forty years with only occasional molestations – or go through 10 years of relentless harassment.

The persecution instigated under the Emperor Decius (249-251) was the first truly Empire-wide attack on the Church.

A period of relative quiet followed for over forty years from 260 until the last great outbreak of Roman persecution which began under Diocletian in 303.

Through all this ebb and flow, the Church grew and spread from city to city and town to town. Out to the edge of the Empire the Gospel spread and lives were changed. So, back to our question – how are spread and suffering related? One key theme that is seen expressed again and again is the way in which the Christians accepted their persecution. Like Christ, like Stephen, they did not revile their torturers but submitted to the agony with prayers for their tormentors and looking to God for strength to endure. In spite of popular sentiment being against them, their manner of dying led many to question whether there must not be something to Christianity. What was it that could

“The early Church expected people to die rather than deny Christ.”

First of all the Christians had inflamed popular resentment by refusing to participate in celebrating the 1,000 year anniversary of the founding of Rome in 247. Secondly, the following year was marked by a series of invasions by Goths, which greatly unsettled the Romans. Decius was convinced that Christianity was an intolerable threat to the Empire's stability. Increased evidence of Christians among the army would have fed his fears (a soldier named Besas tried to protect martyrs from the crowd in Alexandria and was himself executed). Decius was determined to wipe out the Church. This he tried to do by a systematic persecution beginning with church leaders and then extending it to all Christians. The net was spread widely, with everybody having to be able to produce a certificate saying that they had sacrificed to the gods. Many capitulated and others bribed officials to get a fake certificate, yet large numbers refused and paid the price.

This fanned the great debate in the Church about how to respond to those who had lapsed. Could they be received back into the Church – immediately upon repentance, eventually after a long period of penance, or never?

give such endurance and peace and constancy? How could men and women die so bravely? Why, in spite of rumours, could no real evidence of evil living be brought against them?

Is there a lesson for the Church in New Zealand today? Are we prepared to suffer for Christ? If persecution should come in full measure – would the Lord increase his Church through our witness by martyrdom? To that end we need knowledge grown into conviction and conviction bolstered by resolution. The early Church expected people to die rather than deny Christ. What do we expect? We may tremble at the thought – many early Christians did too – but they came to understand that it is the Lord who strengthens. There are those in Africa and Asia today, who live in that same suffering, and who also know the spread and fruitfulness of the Gospel. May we pray for them in their persecution and for ourselves in our complacency.

Rev David Bayne is the minister of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ashburton.

Defining moments in church history (2)

The conversion of Constantine: better times for the Church?

Sally Davey

We live at a time when the spirit of the age is beginning to press painfully, as well as relentlessly, upon us. Not only is the general public's thinking shifting further and further away from biblical truth and the morality it teaches, but governments also have been taking measures that make it harder for those who want to obey God to do so legally. We find ourselves out of favour with society and intimidated by the government. Increasingly, we are being told how we should think – and it is not how the Bible tells us to think. Our postmodern age demands that we do not discriminate; that we speak no wrong of those who practice another religion (so long as it is not Christianity); that we condone immorality; and that we bring up our children only in ways that accord with the spirit of the age (no smacking; really no restraint of any kind to speak of).

Fear of the future

It is understandable that some Christians are becoming a little afraid of the future. And we are not alone in this in New Zealand. Things have changed over the past few months in America. We have friends quite alarmed by the warm welcome now accorded to Muslims and homosexuals at the White House. These same Christian friends had taken considerable comfort from the previous administration's open espousal of Christian standards. For the last 30 or more years Christians throughout the western world (especially in the English-speaking world) have set much store on having Christians in government. They have hoped that by this means God's standards would be upheld in the laws of the land. They have prayed for this, and worked hard for it. And when Christians in government have let them down through incompetence or shoddy behaviour; or when they have been replaced by those who look more

like the enemies of God, they are once again demoralised and afraid.

But should this be? Does having a Christian-influenced or a Christian-dominated government ensure the triumph of the gospel and the upholding of godliness? Does having a government that encourages wrong-doing thwart God's purposes and ruin our opportunities for effective witness? How should we read these trends, and our times? I believe we can be most helpfully instructed by the experience of God's people in the early centuries of the church.

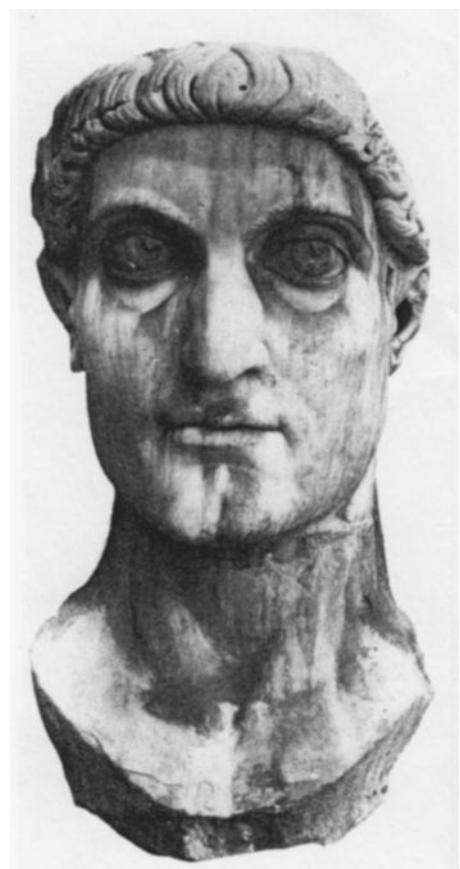
Sorely persecuted

We have already seen (in the previous article) that Christians suffered a great deal in the first few centuries after the time of the apostles. They experienced discrimination, they found it hard to run their businesses; and they were physically persecuted in unbelievably cruel ways. However, the wonderful thing is that God seems to have used their patient endurance in time of trial to draw amazed pagan onlookers to Christ. He actually used their persecution to further the cause of the gospel! Nevertheless, the Christians who survived the final, frightful, empire-wide persecution unleashed by the Emperor Diocletian in 303 must have greeted the conversion of the man who was to become emperor of the entire Roman Empire with joy and relief. Surely, with a Christian at the hub of the imperial administration, things would get better for them. How did this happen, and what were the results? And finally, what can we learn from the outcome of events?

In the year 306, when the empire was temporarily divided into two (east and west), Constantine, who was then governing Britain, Gaul (France) and Spain, was proclaimed Emperor of all of the western empire by his troops on the death of his father. Because he faced rivals to the imperial throne, he took

the decisive step in 312 of marching on Rome against Maxentius, his most formidable opponent. As the story goes, at noon on the day of the battle he saw a vision of a cross of light in the skies. It bore the inscription "Conquer by this"; which Constantine took as a command to fight in the cause of Christ. He won the battle, and became Emperor of all the western empire in Rome. By 323 he was Emperor of the entire empire, East and West.

The sincerity of Constantine's profession of faith is a matter of some debate (he did not, for one thing, seek bap-



The Roman emperors publicised themselves with gigantic memorials. This huge head from a statue of Constantine, once stood in the basilica of Constantine in Rome. The head alone is around 2.5m high and weighs about 9 tonnes.

tism until late in his life). However, he certainly did undertake many measures that dramatically changed the way the Christian faith was viewed, and the ways Christians were treated by the imperial administration. The year following his victory over Maxentius (313), Constantine met at Milan with Licinius, the eastern emperor. They issued the Edict of Milan, which put a stop to all persecution of Christians, and allowed them to worship freely. Christianity was not made the

the church grew rapidly from now on. It was not only safe, it was politically and socially advantageous to turn from the pagan cults to Christianity. Thousands upon thousands of former pagans flooded into the church.

Changes to accommodate

But now another trouble began in the wake of this new popularity. Not all the new "converts" were genuine. And their weight of numbers made the exercising

religion (now Christianity) taught. From the beginning he assumed a major role in the affairs of the church, and was proactive in taking steps to stamp out doctrinal error. He moved against the Donatist "separatist" church in North Africa; and in 325 himself summoned the famous Council of Nicaea. This Council, called together to deal with the Arian heresy that was to plague the church for decades to come, consisted of bishops from all over the empire, though predominantly from the East. It is doubtful that Constantine himself fully understood the finer detail of the doctrines involved, but his insistence that the creed formulated by the Council be enforced, and Arius's heresy condemned, definitely added critical weight. He himself presided over the Council's meetings.

Power struggle

This Council of Nicaea, which had been the first of the so-called "general" councils of the Christian church, set a precedent for imperial involvement in the affairs of the church. For centuries afterwards there was rivalry between the emperors and the bishops of Rome (later called "popes"); and the imperial prerogative to call councils of the church together remained symbolic of the state's leadership in the affairs of the church. At various times the popes tried to strike back (eg by seizing the initiative in crowning the emperor, or by withholding the sacraments from emperors or even from entire nations that attempted to defy papal authority); but this power struggle see-sawed. At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, it was in almost every instance the decision of the national ruler that determined whether the countries of Europe adopted Reformed teachings or remained in the Roman Catholic fold. Later still, in the seventeenth century, there was a titanic struggle in England between successive rulers and the leaders of the church over whether the church would be ruled by bishops (as the monarchs favoured) or by elders (as those following Calvin's teachings wanted). Ultimately, the monarchy prevailed. The legacy of Constantine's initiatives in the life of the church has been long and powerful; and lingers on today in various parts of the western world.

So, to summarise briefly, it is not necessarily a blessing to have a Christian ruler who takes initiatives to promote the cause of the church. In such situations it may become easier and more

“Does having a Christian-influenced or a Christian-dominated government ensure the triumph of the gospel and the upholding of godliness?”

sole religion of the state – it was still one religion among many – but during Constantine's rule there was special government encouragement for the church. He erected magnificent churches in Constantinople, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, as well as in other places (most of the Christians were in the east of the empire at this point). He relieved the clergy of some civic obligations that had weighed heavily on the wealthier segments of the population. He encouraged Sunday worship by outlawing work on that day of the week; and in 319 prohibited private heathen sacrifices. Later on, by building a splendid new capital, named Constantinople in his honour, he removed the centre of power in the empire to the East, where Christians were more numerous and the old Roman pagan traditions less entrenched. This also left the bishop of the church in Rome as the single most powerful leader there; a factor which greatly strengthened the hand of the church in the western part of the empire.

What effects did all these encouragements have on Christians, and on the church at large? You would assume that freedom to worship openly, and the building of large churches, let alone the cessation of Sunday work, would have seen the beginning of a wonderful new era for the Christian faith. Certainly,

of church discipline a great difficulty. Some churches clearly relaxed their standards in the rush to attract new members. Changes were made in the liturgy to accommodate those used to the splashy spectacles of pagan worship. Many church leaders believed that because the barbarians had been accustomed to worshipping images, it would be necessary to "materialise" the liturgy (make God more visual, tangible) if they were to find any real help in church. In the centuries that followed the veneration of saints, angels, relics and even pictures became the practice of the church. It is always surprising how quickly innovations like these are carried from church to church. Ultimately, too, the special veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus, became a feature of Christian worship. (Numerous church historians have suggested a link between this elevation of Mary and various eastern pagan cults that worshipped a female deity.)

Church and State affected

The presence of a Christian emperor who was active in promoting the church had a profound effect on the relationship between the church and the state – for many centuries to come. Constantine, like most of his predecessors, wanted religious peace. There should also, he believed, be general agreement as to what the favoured

attractive to be a Christian in the eyes of the world; but with ease come both error and spiritual slackness. There have been, sadly, many Christians in high places whose behaviour has not matched their profession. (This is not to say that there have not been some whose character has been noble; and whose leadership has brought great good – as William Wilberforce's did). But we should remember that God may

sometimes further his kingdom most gloriously when Christians have the least civic freedom, and experience the greatest suffering. We need to bear in mind what the Apostle James said about the benefits of trials (James 1:2-4; 12). As the cost of being a Christian continues to rise, count it a blessing that our faith – and the witness of the church – may become clearer, brighter, and more faithful in consequence.

Endnotes

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Defining moments in church history (3)

Spread of the church through 19th century missionary endeavour

Tani Newton

What do you think of when you think of the nineteenth century? Down here in 'Victorian Oamaru', we're all too familiar with the usual stereotype of pompous men and women in ridiculous clothes sipping tea and nibbling cucumber sandwiches. But in reality, the Victorian era was a time of tremendous energy: exploration and discovery, colonisation and empire-building, rapid advances in medicine and technology, social action, commerce – and the greatest expansion of Christian missions the world has ever seen.

What led to this remarkable phenomenon, regarded as one of the turning points in church history? Many factors were involved, less inscrutable than the secret will of God; suffice it to say for the present that it may be regarded as a true outworking, albeit at three centuries' removed, of the Protestant Reformation.

World religion

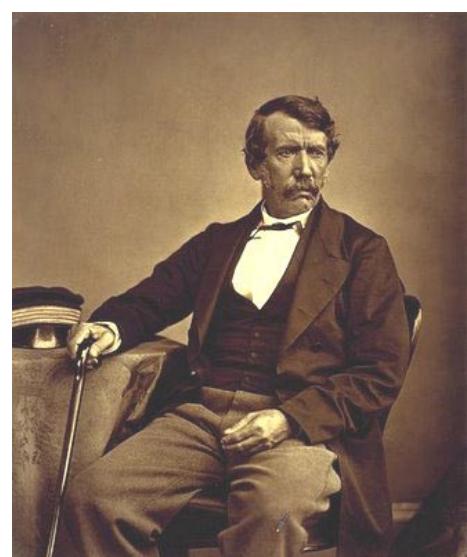
At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Christian churches claimed the adherence of less than a quarter of the world's population. By its end, despite enormous population growth, the proportion had increased to over a third. More importantly, in the past, Christianity

had been the religion of Europe and its colonies – and the whole of Europe was not even officially Christianised until the fourteenth century – whereas now it had become, a world religion. The number of languages possessing the Bible in whole or part had increased from 60 to 537. The twentieth century saw the consolidation of the newly indigenous churches.

Perhaps the most obvious background factor to the great mission movement is the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century. These came at a time of considerable spiritual deadness in the Western world, bringing multitudes to salvation and to such a fervour of spiritual joy that it almost had to spill over into the wider world. More than that, with spiritual awakening came a desire for the glory of God, and it was this that moved thousands of individuals to leave all that was dear to them to make Christ known where his name had never been heard, and that sustained them through the almost incredible suffering they sometimes had to endure. It is sobering to read the lives of such people, and to reflect on how few of us progress in the spiritual life to the point of such consecration.

A second major factor was the political situation. A few centuries ago Europe was actually quite weak politically. But by the

mid-nineteenth century much of the rest of the world had either been colonised by European countries or entered into significant trade agreements with them. Many countries had formerly been closed to foreigners, and to undertake a mission to them was a fast route to martyrdom. The case of Constantine certainly shows us that a Christian government can do the church more harm than good, but it is also true that ungodly government has historically been the greatest human hindrance to missions.



Dr. David Livingstone

Technology assisting the gospel

Technology can hardly be a truly important factor, but it did serve its place in the greatly improved efficiency and safety of travel following the Industrial Revolution. This also meant that, for the first time, large numbers of single women were able to travel to the mission field, which increased both missionary numbers and opportunities for service.

Then there was an ideological shift. Here it must be sadly acknowledged that, while the Roman Catholic church has been consistent in its missionary efforts throughout history, among Protestants there had grown up the regrettable hyper-Calvinist viewpoint that God required

continued to be a shining light in Protestant missions. Though few in number, these spiritual descendants of Jan Hus had a widespread influence, and put other Christians to shame by their extraordinary dedication. They thronged to East Africa at a time when it was known as ‘the white man’s grave’; they voluntarily went into leper colonies from which no living person was permitted to leave; they even sold themselves into slavery to preach to the slaves. It is estimated that one percent of all Moravian Brethren entered the mission field.

Missionaries outspoken

One other thing I must comment on. Worldly historians delight to caricature

spite having been raised in godly homes and eventually achieving great stature, they were certainly not born spiritual giants. They had the same struggles I have – the same doubts and fears, the same exhausting battles to overcome the most commonplace sins, even some of the same dread and heaviness of heart in speaking of Christ to their neighbours. What seems to have made the difference was that God called them, and they – to use a provocative turn of phrase – took the chance and wagered everything on God’s promises.

Heart work

Then their weakness. Many laboured not only under physical illness and infirmity but under a crushing sense of their own unworthiness, even to the point of depression and melancholy. Such a state of mind was dismissed by their contemporaries as fanatical pietism, and today would probably be regarded with horror as a sign of poor mental health. Yet it was this very weakness, together with many hours of solitary prayer and reflection, which God used to bring his chosen instruments to deep humility and self-abandoned trust in himself. And then he poured out his Spirit and his blessings. What a hard lesson this is to learn! We can be so anxious to pursue our own grand schemes, so eager not to waste a moment’s time, that we forget how much heart work needs to be done before we will be useful vessels.

Frequent difficulties

Thirdly, their *difficulties*, which were frequently so great as to overwhelm anyone not supported by complete trust in a sovereign God. The work of the Gospel, it would seem, is always going to be a hard slog, perhaps more work per ‘result’ than a businessman would consider worthwhile. All the more reason why those on the mission field should have all the support we can give them. Above all else, believing prayer is the fuel of missions.

What was the response of faith to these difficulties? James Hudson Taylor, when his wife and several of their children died in China, wrote:

Oft-times my heart is nigh to breaking but, withal, I had almost said, I never knew what peace and happiness were before – so much have I enjoyed in the very sorrow And this I know: only a thirsty man knows the value of water, and

no human assistance in converting the heathen, and that the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 was addressed only to the apostles. To this attitude William Carey’s 1792 pamphlet *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* was a salutary reproof. Through Carey’s influence the Baptist Missionary Society was formed, and he sailed to India with his family in 1793, the date which marks the beginning of the great missionary movement. In fact, many churches still declined to give wholehearted or unified support to missions, and so our period became notable also for the establishment of missionary societies, many of which continue to this day. Rightly or wrongly, much of the work was carried out under the auspices of these societies.

However, the Moravian Brethren had already been active abroad for nearly a hundred years at this point, and they

Christian missions as the cynical adjuncts of colonialism, bringing ‘the natives’ into subjection by administering the ‘opiate of religion’. The truth is far otherwise. Although colonialism unavoidably made a way for missions, the governing powers tended to fear the liberating power of Christianity, especially given that evangelicals were crusading for the abolition of the slave trade. Missionaries tended to be outspoken in the interests of the people they had come to help, as was our own Henry Williams, and their activities could be restricted or even forbidden by the colonial powers – for instance in India, where William Carey was obliged to settle ostensibly as an indigo trader!

Space constraints forbid me to go much beyond broad generalisations on this gripping topic. But several things stand out for me about the leading missionaries of whom I have been able to read a little. First, their *ordinariness*. De-



John Gibson Paton

only a thirsty soul the value of the Living Water.¹

Henry Martyn, facing almost alone the vastness of India, stated:

The Word of God is more precious to me at this time than I ever remember it to have been; and of all the promises in it none is more sweet to me than this, "He shall reign till He hath put all enemies under his feet".²

John Paton, made to spend the night hidden in a tree from those who sought his life, found that:

Never in all my sorrows did my Lord draw nearer to me, and speak more soothingly to my soul, than when the moonlight flickered among those chestnut leaves and the night air played on my throbbing brow, as I told all my heart to Jesus.³

And the intrepid Doctor Livingstone remarked:

People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa Can that be called a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to

sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared to the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice.⁴

A mighty army

Finally, the fruit of their labours. Some whose suffering toils resulted in little obvious 'success' inspired many others to follow them. And though each individual may have done only one or a few notable things, together they made up a mighty army that changed the face of the world. Their works follow them. A couple of years ago I was privileged to meet a direct descendant of the Williamses, New Zealand's great missionary family, whose wife told me that wherever he goes, he gets into conversations with Maori people and tells them, "Don't you know what a great Christian heritage you have?" And just recently I learned that the great-grandson of Yarvis, the cannibal chief who was one of John Paton's first converts in Vanuatu, is in New Zealand picking kiwifruit and working to make disciples on the orchards.

So where do we stand today? Of course, there is still any amount of mission work to be done. Christianity today is growing as ever before, mostly in Africa and Asia. In the countries still closed to missions, communications technology has opened a remarkable door. On the other hand, Europe, once the fountain of missions, is becoming a mission field; the Muslim threat is as great as it has been for fifteen centuries; and the church in the West has lost much of its potential workforce through Christians' acceptance of a "smaller family mentality". Many of the great missionaries and church leaders of the past would not have been born, humanly speaking, if their parents had adopted the modern "that's enough kids" attitude. Of course God can raise up whom he will; but it is also true that if we deliberately reject his blessings, he is under no obligation to make it up to us.

Personally, I have been much blessed in researching this article, and convicted of my own lack of concern for missions. It's hard to read about people like David Brainerd and James Hudson Taylor without feeling like a very poor excuse for a Christian. I feel that I ought to conclude with some kind of clarion call to mission work, but that would only make me a greater hypocrite! Instead, may I humbly recommend to others what has begun to be useful to me, namely, a perusal of

the lives of missionaries of the past and acquaintance with the missions situation of the present. Perhaps we may be fired with a godly zeal to further the cause of Christ abroad by whatever means we have. Let me close with a few words from John Paton, who, when he first proposed going as a missionary to the New Hebrides, was told by an older Christian, "The Cannibals! You will be eaten by the Cannibals!" Paton replied: "Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honouring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer."⁵ Thirteen years later, after enduring unspeakable hardship, he held the first communion service on the island of Aniwa, and later recalled: "At the moment when I put the bread and wine into those dark hands, once stained with the blood of cannibalism, but now stretched out to receive and partake the emblems and seals of the Redeemer's love, I had a foretaste of the joy of Glory that well nigh broke my heart to pieces. I shall never taste a deeper bliss, till I gaze on the glorified face of Jesus Himself."⁶

Endnotes

1. Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Biography of James Hudson Taylor*, Overseas Missionary Fellowship 1965.
2. Richard T. France, *Henry Martyn in Five Pioneer Missionaries*, Banner of Truth 1965.
3. John D. Legg, *John G. Paton in Five Pioneer Missionaries*, Banner of Truth 1965.
4. Quoted in John Piper, *Desiring God* (Multnomah). "Healthful activity" seems a charming understatement, coming from a man who tramped through thousands of miles of jungle on foot!
5. John D. Legg, op.cit.
6. Ibid.

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- Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, Penguin Books 1964.
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World in focus

8 November 2009 is the International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church

IDOPPC organizers explain: "There are many countries in the world today where Christians are martyred for their faith. The world watched in horror the unbridled violence that was unleashed on Christians in Orissa state, India last year. There are other places in the world, such as North Korea, where acts of persecution take place, but we often don't see or hear the full story. Brother Andrew of Open Doors once said, "Our heroes are not with us simply because they are in prison."

"The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church is a time set apart for us to remember thousands of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world who suffer persecution, simply because they confess Jesus Christ as Lord."

+ Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance

Russian revolution

TheSeed.info is a website set up several years ago to make English-language Reformed sermons available to people around the world. This site, which was visited by more than 26,000 people last year and recorded about 800,000 hits, has gotten most of its traffic from the United States and secondly Canada. That's hardly surprising since most of the sermons are contributed by North American pastors so the site is best known in those countries.

Yet something has changed. Late last year Canada lost its second place ranking on The Seed to a country that isn't even English-speaking. What's the country? Russia! In the past few months Russian visits to the site have surpassed even those from the United States – Russians now visit TheSeed.info more than any other nation. What's causing this spike in traffic is not clear, but it is clear there is a real hunger there for solid Reformed literature.

+ James Dykstra

Rescuing human rights

We know that human rights are worthy of being defended. The premise that all people are to be respected and deserve certain fundamental freedoms is regularly advocated and for good reason. But it

seems that the United Nations' rhetoric on this score doesn't match its deeds.

According to academic Joseph Loconte, from King's College in New York, human rights discussions at the United Nations are utterly undermined by their lack of a minimum standard for governments or regimes who participate. He states, "The UN Charter welcomes all 'peace-loving states' that affirm 'faith in fundamental human rights.' Yet the galactic gulf between the institution's ideals and its everyday operations continues to beggar belief." Loconte identifies numerous regimes, such as those in Burma and Sudan, who abuse the rights of their citizens daily and yet are welcomed into the United Nations and given the privilege of voting in that assembly.

Not only that but the UN and some of its members, lack clarity about what fundamental human rights really entail. Loconte says, "Under the banner of multiculturalism, the United Nations has produced a torrent of treaties and conventions, with ever-expanding categories of rights." Member state Iran, for example, claims an "inalienable right" to nuclear technology," as though this is equivalent to the right to be free from persecution.

If we are to see human rights taken seriously we need to be clear about what is fundamental for all people. We then need to have the strength to stand for those rights and not allow them to be compromised by political expediency. As Loconte argues, "The best hope for promoting and protecting human rights resides with those nations that have upheld a democratic creed ... It is to them that the victims of tyranny look for relief, for sanctuary, and for justice." We let those victims down if we allow politics or politically correct jargon to muddy the debate and to compromise our advocacy on their behalf.

+ Maxim Institute

Meet the Puritans Blog announced

A new collaborative blog called Meet the Puritans has debuted.

The blog authors are Marty Foord, Danny Hyde, Mark Jones, and Rowland Ward.

The purpose of Meet the Puritans is to promote the seventeenth century English Puritans by means of original research, theological and devotional commentary

upon the writings of the Puritans, reviews of books about the Puritans, recommendations of books about the Puritans, and by providing Recommended Reading of helpful materials in the study of the Puritans.

+ *Meet the Puritans Blog*

Church News from the Northern Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia

The Presbytery also considered the resignation of the Editor of "The Presbyterian Banner." It was agreed unanimously that the name of the Rev Sjirk Bajema be put forward as the new Editor of the magazine to the Administrative Committee/ Media Committee.

+ *The Presbyterian Banner*

Christians react to Muslim prayer rally at US Capital

The Muslim prayer rally at the U.S. Capital on 25 September 2009 drew less than 3,000 participants after rally organizers predicted 50,000 Muslims would be in attendance.

Prior to the rally, a letter from The Ad Hoc Committee of Americans for Transparency and Honesty in Religion was sent to rally organizers, which said: "Around the world, the overwhelming number of terrorist acts are carried out by Muslims, that many Muslim-American groups have terrorist ties and that justification for acts of violence against 'infidels' is found in the Koran," then asked the organizers to disavow a lengthy list of terrorist acts committed around the world by Muslims in the name of Islam.

Meanwhile, Operation Save America (OSA) held an eight-hour 25 September 2009 Gospel proclamation at the U.S. Supreme Court. OSA director the Rev. Flip Benham said of the Muslim prayer rally: "They will make this statement of faith that will echo off the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial: "There is no God but Allah, and his prophet is Mohammad." This last statement demands a rebuke from the people of God. We are headed to D.C. to do just that with our faces low to the ground and our hearts filled with the Gospel of Christ that made this nation free and made this nation great. Islam has been at war with Christianity for fourteen centuries. There is no dialogue, no common ground, no reaching across the aisle in this battle. We

are not called to build bridges to Islam. We are called to storm the gates of hell – to defeat the false god of Islam with the unsheathed Word of God and to set people free from the monstrous tyranny and bondage of this religion birthed in the deepest pits of hell."

+ Christian News Wire, + Operation Save America

Reformation2Germany seeks to re-establish churches true to biblical and confessional standards

Reformation2Germany seeks to establish Presbyterian and Reformed churches in Germany that are true to biblical and confessional standards, because: "In a most distressing sense, Germany has been inoculated against fresh presentations of the Gospel. The bastions of the Reformation have long become museums that tourists frequent instead of places from which the Gospel can spread. The many beautiful steeples still adorning the German countryside are nothing but reminders of an all too distant past chapter in the cultural history of Germany: its "Christian phase"."

The Reformation2Germany team consists of Sebastian Heck and family. Heck is a church planter who has an M.Div. from a German seminary, and is presently a Ph.D. candidate at the Theological Universiteit Apeldoorn, Netherlands, working on the natural theology of John Calvin under Dr. Herman Selderhuis.

Will Traub and his wife Judi serve through Mission to the World (MTW), and have spent twelve years serving in Germany as missionaries. Traub served as pastor of Peace Reformed Church in Loveland, Colorado and Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Blacksburg, Virginia, before going to Germany where Traub now serves as Co-ordinator of Theological Education and Training for MTW Europe.

Reformation2Germany is seeking others to become involved in this important missionary endeavor. Details can be accessed at http://www.reformation2germany.de/?page_id=13.

+ Reformation2Germany,

Needed: Good preachers

The church needs to invest more in training preachers, according to the head of Clarion Trust International. Speaking at the Keswick Convention, the Rev Stephen Gaukroger said that preachers needed to be "thoroughly biblical" but also bear in mind that "they are not giving an Old Testament

lecture in a theological college".

"People's souls have to be fed – it has to be applied," he said. "On the other hand, you don't want someone to stand up with a bunch of jokes and a few applications.

"Why should we believe them, unless it is grounded in Scripture? So we have to have both attractive skills in communication but deep commitment to rigorous Bible teaching."

He went on to say that there were few people as gifted in preaching as they believed themselves to be. "We have lots of people in our churches who desperately need help in their preaching – help to be attractive, to be biblical and to be good communicators."

Mr Gaukroger said he believed there were fewer good preachers in churches today than 25 years ago. "Finding someone who can hold the attention of 3000 people over an extended period of time is very difficult," he said. "But don't let anyone tell you that a speaker can't hold someone's attention for more than 10 or 15 minutes."

+ Christian Today

Slovakia outlaws all languages other than Slovak

A new law in Slovakia took effect on 1 September 2009, which establishes restrictions upon and punishment for using languages other than Slovak within the broadly and vaguely defined "public realm."

The law targets the fifteen percent of Slovakia's population that speak languages other than Slovak, the largest group of which being Hungarian-speakers comprising eleven percent of the Slovak population. Fines for violating the language laws range from €00-5000. The law exempts the small minority of Czech-speakers living in Slovakia.

+ Hungarian Human Rights Foundation

Raid against a registered church in Uzbekistan

The latest report of Forum 18 News Service shows that oppression against both registered and non-registered religious communities in the form of fines, imprisonment and confiscation of religious literature is still an ongoing reality in Uzbekistan. On 23 August in the capital Tashkent seven church members of the legally registered Donam Protestant church were arrested by Anti-Terror Police officers, who raided the regular Sunday afternoon worship service. Three of them were released,

but four, including pastor Vladimir Tyo, were sentenced to 15-day prison terms for "violation of the procedure for organising and conducting meetings". The rest three of the detained were released. Christian literature was also confiscated and destroyed without giving any reasons.

+ Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance

New governmental threats against the New Life church in Belarus

The government of Belarus continues to threaten with confiscation of the building one of the largest protestant churches in the country – the New Life Church in Minsk. The church has been in a long-running struggle with the government to register in compliance with Belarusian law, but have been refused every time. The community continues to resist government efforts to force them to sell their church building, despite an official notice ordering them to turn it over to the city government. CSW reports that "according to New Life Church representatives, EU officials from 15 member states and from the European Commission Delegation met with Pastor Slava Goncharenko in the French Embassy" on August 25th. At the New Life Church website we read that on September, 9th the church directed the reference to the Committee on Human Rights at the United Nations, presenting an official report on infringement of the rights and freedom of the believers. Belarusian Christians, struggling for their religious freedom, hope for efficient international intervention in the case.

+ Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance

South Island FAMILY CAMP

**Teapot Valley Camp,
Nelson**

CANCELLED

**TILL
DECEMBER 2010-
JANUARY 2011**

Note: This was an additional camp. And therefore does not replace North Island Camp.

Christianity and the emergent church

Danny E. Olinger

In her best-selling book, *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle argues that a sweeping change is occurring in Christianity. Much like the Protestant Reformation, the church is cleaning out her attic, and what will remain is the emergent church.

According to Tickle, the Luther-like leader of the great emergent is Brian McLaren, and his 2005 book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, is the ninety-five theses of the movement. McLaren presents a new way for the church that avoids the pitfalls of so-called conservative dogmatists and liberal indifference. McLaren's goal is to deconstruct Christianity and to rebuild it in a fashion amenable to our postmodern culture – a kinder, less heaven-looking, more socially transforming faith. The church must lower its voice

"Congratulations, America! Thanks to everyone who had the courage to vote for change over entrenchment, hope over fear, diversity over homogeneity, and reconciliation over division."

What applies to politics applies to the church for McLaren. To move past its entrenchment, the church must drop its dogmatic tone and cease proclaiming doctrines that are fearful (heaven/hell) or abusive (substitutionary atonement). The church must embrace all, regardless of belief (Arminian/Calvinist) or lifestyle (homosexuality). The church must rid itself of certainty (inerrant Bible) and self-imposed boundaries (confessions), which have caused division and disunity. The good news is that there are now many Christians doing this.

Regardless of whether you agree with McLaren's assessment of the changes in American politics, you must ask yourself

ity: the liberalism of J. Gresham Machen's day and the neo-orthodoxy of Cornelius Van Til's day.

Christianity and liberalism

Liberalism in Machen's day was predicated on adapting Christianity to modern thought. Its answer to the apparent tensions between faith and science was to see Christianity primarily supplying a moral life, which learning could only enhance. Emergents are more interested in contemporary sensibility than intellectual respectability, but they share with liberals the goal of establishing a righteous kingdom on earth through social transformation. Emergents and liberals share a common hermeneutic, namely, that Christianity is about deeds, not creeds.

McLaren repeatedly proclaims that the gospel is the way of Jesus. Ethics comes first, and then doctrine. McLaren says of liberal Protestants who emphasize deeds and not creeds, "I applaud their desire to live out the meaning of miracle stories even when they don't believe the stories really happened as written" (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 61).

J. Gresham Machen, in *Christianity and Liberalism*, maintained that Christianity was about creeds and deeds, doctrine as well as life. Machen stated, "It will be said, Christianity is a life, not a doctrine. The assertion is often made, and it has an appearance of godliness. But it is radically false" (p. 19). Instead, Christianity is a life based upon a message – "Christ died for our sins." Machen explained that "Christ died" is history, and that "Christ died for our sins" is doctrine. Without history and doctrine joined in an indissoluble union, there is no Christianity.

Machen also saw liberalism separating history from faith when it maintained that faith can exist despite historical inaccuracy and fabrication in Scripture. Tickle indicates this is the position of the emergent. She writes, "An emergent, in observing heated debates or impassioned conversations about the factualness of the Virgin birth, for example, can truly be puzzled. For him or her, the whole 'problem' is just not 'there' in any

“This new movement, the emergent, actually combines aspects of two older theologies that stood opposite Christianity: the liberalism of J. Gresham Machen’s day and the neo-orthodoxy of Cornelius Van Til’s day.”

about absolute truth and certainty and follow the example of Jesus in dealing with man's most pressing problems (hunger, climate change, communicable diseases, consumerism).

President-elect Obama, with his post-partisan message, has shown the way forward for a new day in politics; now the church must do likewise in religion. Fervently supporting Obama, McLaren wrote on his blog after the election,

if this same kind of movement in Christianity is good news. Good news really centers in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for sinners. "Christ crucified" is the message the church must proclaim if it is to be a faithful witness bringing good news to a fallen and dying world.

This new movement, the emergent, actually combines aspects of two older theologies that stood opposite Christian-

distinguishable or real sense. For the emergent, as he or she will be quick to say, the Virgin birth is so beautiful that it has to be true, whether it happened or not" (p. 149).

The authority of Scripture

McLaren believes that modernity and Protestantism are linked, and that Reformed theology is the best theological system in modernity. The end of modernity, however, spells the end of any theological tradition that depends upon the authority of Scripture as its foundation.

Confessional Protestants, McLaren argues, put their confidence in an error-free Bible. The doctrine of inerrancy, however, is a red herring because the Bible is about following Jesus as a way of life, not about truth claims. The Christian life is a journey in which the believer can know God, but that knowledge cannot be equated with certainty. McLaren prefers to speak of "inherency," for, he says, the Bible only contains the Word of God.

McLaren is very careful in his writings not to say much more about Scripture than that he loves the Bible and that Christians have always been blessed by using it with the goal of becoming good people who, in following Jesus' example, do good works in God's good world. It appears that McLaren is applying the advice that he once received from the novelist Walker Percy. Percy wrote to McLaren, then a college English instructor, "The religious writer must always cover his tracts." McLaren states that he never knew if Percy's malapropism was intentional or not, but "whether one is writing for a religious audience or a nonreligious one, there are times when indirection is the best strategy" (Dan Knauss, interview with McLaren, at www.newpantagruel.com, vol. 2, issue 3).

The way of indirection is to profess a love for the Bible, and yet maintain that no outside authority is larger than one's personal experience. McLaren's belief is that meaning is located, not in the text, but in the reader. Interpretation of the Bible reveals what a particular person believes, not what the Bible teaches. The authority of the Word, then, is not found in the words of Scripture. Historically, this view is related to neo-orthodoxy's doctrine of Scripture.

The neo-orthodox position on Scripture in Van Til's day was that the Bible is not the Word of God, but a witness to the Word of God that is transhistorical.

The Word of God, then, is not to be identified with the words of Scripture. Rather, Scripture becomes the Word of God as God makes himself known to the one who reads it in faith. Revelation cannot be the written word; it is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

In Reformed theology, however, the Bible is the Word of God, and the authority of Scripture is grounded in the person of God himself. It doesn't depend for its authority upon any man

plagued by doubt over the certainty of faith, the emergent has bathed its tune in the language of humility in order to attract a hearing. But it is a false humility. Ambivalence about truth and the work of God in history is not biblical humility. Biblical humility submits to the living God and to his Word. True humility recognizes that man's interpretation is fallible, but that the Bible, God's interpretation of his activity in accomplishing redemption, is perfect. Our confidence is in our God

“This mighty act of God in Christ, what Machen called “the triumphant indicative,” is the good news of the Bible that the true church believes and preaches.”

or church. Scripture is self-authenticating, the judge of all controversies, and its own interpreter.

Christ writes me a letter. What is the letter? The letter is Scripture, which focuses on Christ's redemption from sin. Scripture constitutes the climax of the redemptive work of God through Christ and his Spirit. Van Til, then, places certainty in God himself, the self-attesting God of Scripture.

Van Til believed that the neo-orthodox position was just liberalism in new dress. One key difference was that it did not offend openly, as liberalism did. Liberalism poured milk out of a bottle and substituted polluted water, and then neo-orthodoxy gave the polluted water the color of milk.

Christianity and the emergent

Tickle and McLaren openly declare that the emergent church is playing a different tune than that of the historic church. What they do not state, however, is the bias of the tune. It does not split the difference between confessional Protestantism and liberalism. Rather, it carries strong notes of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, announcing that man can solve the world's problems through moral effort, combined with an attack upon the authority of Scripture.

But, knowing that modern culture is

and in his revelation to us, and our hope is in the atoning work of his Son, Jesus Christ, in history. This mighty act of God in Christ, what Machen called “the triumphant indicative,” is the good news of the Bible that the true church believes and preaches.

Following the lead of Machen and Van Til, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church throughout its history has stood against the liberal and neo-orthodox juggernaut. It appears that the same stand is now necessary against the emergent.

The author is the editor of New Horizons. Reprinted from New Horizons, with whom we have a reciprocal agreement.

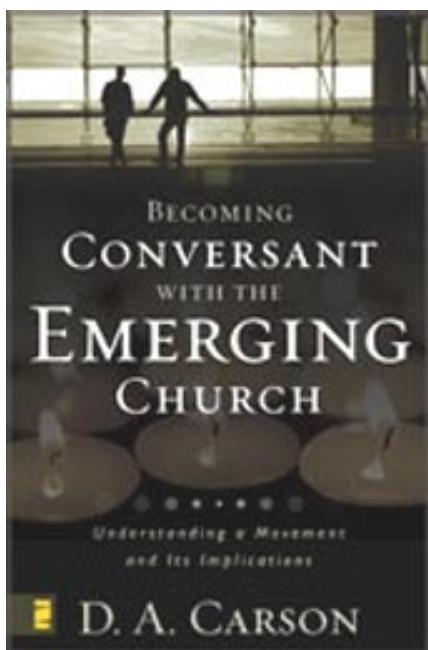
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**faith in
focus**

Book in focus

Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church

D. A. Carson
Zondervan, 2005
Reviewed by elder David K. Thompson (OPC)



From the beginning, one of the pillars of our denomination has been its commitment to a thoroughly biblical ecclesiology. Machen's words, in front of us often now as we celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the OPC, speak to this commitment: "We became members, at last, of a true Presbyterian Church." The common confession that drove our fathers to act was best channeled within a visible expression of Christ's body. They sought truth, indeed, but they realized that truth could not be divorced from Christ's bride. They passionately desired to be members of a true church.

Today, such a commitment is under assault. Those leading the attack believe that they are saving Christ's church, not contributing to its destruction. Their method is based on a stark assertion: "Postmodernism has effected such a gigantic and irreversible shift in people's thought patterns that the church is faced with a fundamental choice: adapt so as to respond better to postmodernism, or be relegated to irrelevance" (pp. 127-28). To touch lives, to make a difference in this world, to be Christlike, the traditional model of the church must be radically

overhauled. At the heart of this overhaul is postmodern man, awash in community experience, skittish about doctrinal and confessional certainty, and standoffish toward those who make strong claims to truth and morality.

This is the "emerging church" movement, the subject of D. A. Carson's book. The movement, led by such men as Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren, and Todd Hunter, is driven by "the conviction that changes in ... culture signal that a new church is 'emerging.'" Christian leaders must therefore adapt to this emerging church. Those who fail to do so are blind to the cultural accretions that hide the gospel behind forms of thought and modes of expression that no longer communicate with the new generation, the emerging generation" (p. 12). The emphasis is placed on "belonging" to a community of faith over against a more traditional notion of "becoming" one of the faithful first. The job of the emergent Christian is to "invite people to belong,"

welcome them aboard, take them into [his] story ([his] individual story, and the story of [his] local Christian community) and the 'becoming' may well follow" (p. 146). Belief is not a basis for communion, but a potential by-product of it. Join the community of faith now; confess your experience later, if the community of faith has touched you. Unlike our forefathers, emergent Christians have little interest in being members of "a true Presbyterian Church."

This may not be Carson's concern, either, for his analysis of the emerging church movement is decidedly evangelica!. He is a professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He certainly does not frame the debate in the same ecclesiastical and confessional context that I have in this review. Nevertheless, his book is very helpful. Though technically heavy at points, Carson illuminates for us what may well be the issue that occupies the attention of the church for the next generation.

Letter to the Editor

Lessons from Mangere?

As br John Goris wrote in his letter to the editor of this magazine (*FIF Sept 2009*), it is good and necessary to ponder on what has happened to Mangere in the light of God's Word. What happened at Mangere demands careful reflection not just by those of us directly involved, but by us all. There are some very necessary lessons to be learned.

Why did the fellowship at Mangere close its doors? Br Goris writes, *'It may have been a "practical" decision to close down a shrinking church. However, is that the only viable option?'* He asks about the removal of the lampstand there and adds the question, *'by whom?'* He continues, *'Which RCNZ congregation could be next? Am I too pessimistic? Shouldn't we just be "practical" and move on, or is some soul-searching in order?'*

I agree. Soul searching is not just 'in order' but mandatory! There are some

important lessons to be learned from Mangere, and from other congregations that have closed in years gone by.

Therefore some questions.

- What happened at Mangere?
- Why did the elders recommend to its members that the doors be closed?
- Why did the Auckland Presbytery concur with this decision?
- Was it simply a 'practical decision' or was there more to it?

I would like to provide some input and share a few thoughts, *not* as a past member at Mangere, or their counsellor, but as a member of the Presbytery and the person who presided at the meeting of the Presbytery where the decision to concur with the elders' request was made.

Finance and property

One of the amazing things about the folks at Mangere was their utter commitment to real giving! Mangere had no debts. They owned a very valuable property as

well as a manse. Furthermore, the weekly income from the offerings would have been sufficient to pay a pastor for the foreseeable future – and more! Finance was *not* the reason for closure. In fact, financial viability was consistently cited as a primary reason for being able to continue into the future. Relocation was a real possibility as well. It would have been possible to buy elsewhere without needing to raise a huge bank loan. I stress Mangere was not a needy church! That was *not* a reason for closing the doors.

A vacant church

The pulpit was vacant and, with two other vacancies in the Auckland Presbytery, the pressure to keep it supplied was real for both the Mangere elders and the pastors of the presbytery. The elders were indeed hard pressed, but received real support. For example, the Hamilton session had offered to send elders to lead the reading services and the ministers of the presbytery supplied for 50% of the services. We have a retired minister in our presbytery, two vicars during 2009 and the ability to call on preachers from Grace Presbyterian Church. Besides, there was a real possibility that a ministerial candidate from the USA would be available. Again, being vacant was *not* a reason for dissolving the congregation.

Dwindling membership

The membership was small and dwindling. However, this was in and of itself not the reason for the decision. It was pointed out over and over again that there are countless examples of fellowships that are much smaller than Mangere. Not only is it possible to survive with small numbers, it is possible to thrive. Both numerical and spiritual growth can very much be stimulated by small numbers.

* * *

Why, then did all the elders, the majority of the members and the Presbytery of Auckland agree to proceed to close down this fellowship? Please ponder the following:

'AT' not 'OF'

It has always struck me that our denomination here in New Zealand names congregations according to their location. We use the word 'of' indicating, as I understand it, that this is a fellowship of God's people belonging to the place

where they worship. Originally, when the Dutch settlers came to Auckland in the 1950s, Mangere (South Auckland) was indeed where they lived and worked. After the original Reformed Church of Auckland split up, West Auckland folks gathered in Avondale, the rest in Mangere. These sites were chosen because that is where many of them lived. Later on it was geographical location that eventually led to the establishment of a fellowship on the North Shore and, some years later, in Pukekohe.

As the years went on several changes took place.

- Mangere became increasingly undesirable as a place to live for most of our members. Waves of South Pacific Islanders came to South Auckland (Mangere and Papatoetoe) with their own churches and traditions. Therefore, the previous waves of migrants, among them the Dutch, moved out.

Was that necessarily wrong?

- At first it was mainly the young people who moved 'out' of South Auckland. Many of them, for different reasons, found a spiritual home much closer to where they lived. Even many of the older ones left the region, but a core group remained. Again, was that the wrong thing to do?

- With younger folks leaving, the average age of the congregation continued to increase. It came to a point where a very sizable percentage of the fellowship was no longer able to play an active role in the life of the fellowship. Yes, they were and remained utterly devoted and faithful. They prayed as real warriors, worshipped continuously and gave generously – but active leadership and 'man hours' became increasingly difficult. Is this not inevitable?

- Over the years, another factor became increasingly obvious. While the buildings, etc., were **at** Mangere, the congregation was not! All that was left *in situ* at Mangere itself was a building and a number of faithful folks who travelled big distances, often twice a day. There was worship **at** Mangere but there was not a Church **of** Mangere. Do we confuse the church with the building? When a congregation 'ages', what do we do?

- A fine Christian day school was established on the Mangere site. It proved to be a genuine beacon of light and hope. The members at Mangere worked hard to maintain

the school and used the openings it provided very effectively, especially by means of the ministry of the Cadets and Calvinettes. But it was a real struggle. A few years ago that school closed – for very necessary reasons. The result was that the dynamics of the congregation necessarily changed. Was this preventable?

- While there was continued focus on outreach – pamphlet drops and door knocking – there was little if any response from the neighbourhood. This method of 'outreach' was clearly not effective. Even when visitors would turn up, few did so more than once or twice. There was something not right.

Did the problem lie within the church community or the wider community in which it was based? The standard answers focused on 'them' and not on 'us'. It went along these lines: 'South Auckland, especially Mangere is filled with Islanders. These folks are already members of their P.I.Churches.' But, was it really a 'them' rather than an 'us' problem? That's worth pondering!

- There were discussions and plans to relocate the centre of worship. However, because the membership was small and widely scattered, there was no natural, central location; no viable core group that was ready at *this time* to be and do what was necessary. Interestingly, the matter of location had been discussed some 20 years ago, and rejected by the majority. Was that right?

Lessons to learn?

By definition the *church* as the body of Christ is people located at a certain place at a certain time. When the people move to other locations (for whatever reasons) and a building remains behind, the *church* in the biblical sense of the word is no longer there. That's what happened at Mangere. If we define the church in terms of the buildings in which we worship, we misapply plain biblical teaching. Let's keep that lesson before us.

But there's more, much more. By definition God's people, individually and corporately, are commanded to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. The church is, by definition, *mission*. It is to be the voice and the hands of the Lord Jesus. The Church makes visible the invisible presence, power, love, compassion and mercy of its Head! Are

our churches doing that effectively?

It is in answer to this question that what has happened at Mangere points the finger at all of us – as did what happened at Tokoroa, Kerepehi, Balclutha and Invercargill prior to that. That is the lesson we all need to face up to. Is the problem *us*?

I found it ironic that the John Goris's letter was published in the very issue of *Faith in Focus* that was all about mission and evangelism. While we talk, train, exhort and pray for mission at home and abroad constantly, while we raise huge amounts for the field in Port Moresby, the reality is that our churches make little if any impact on the communities in which we live and work. Mangere had no future because it, along with most our churches, wasn't making any impact outside its own membership. It 'maintained' but was not at all equipped to make an impact and shine where it was located. The salt remained in the shaker and the light hidden behind the walls. It didn't have a 'presence' in its local community.

True, the gospel was proclaimed week in week out. The doors were open and no service took place without a word of welcome to 'any visitors who are worshipping with us today.' But being faithful and preaching to faithful members, being a faithful presence in a location is not being the Church. I grieve over the fact that Mangere has closed, but even more so over the fact that this will happen again in the future, not because of a lack of faithful members, or a lack of faithful preaching or the lack of a presence, but because we are just not making an impact. We are failing to be salt and light in the communities where our churches are located. I repeat, that's the lesson of Mangere. That's the reason for genuine Christian concern for the entire denomination.

My call is for us *not* to be reductionist in the sense of thinking that the Reformed Church at Mangere closed mainly for practical reasons. This was never the case. It goes much deeper. Mangere closed because it failed to make an impact on the community in which the Lord had located it. It failed because, for better or for worse, it didn't know how to adapt itself, how to make the changes necessary to do this. In that Mangere is no different from most if not all of us. Shouldn't we be pondering that and heeding the Lord's challenge to us all in this regard?

Dirk van Garderen

Focus on home

Andrew Reinders

Gleanings from our bulletins...

Avondale

Prayer & Praise items: In this morning's worship service, Isaiah Saul Alexander and Marcus Edward Gjaltema will receive the sign and seal of the covenant of grace in baptism. By this sacrament, God signifies that he adopts us as his children and heirs. This week's prayer diary reminds us to pray for parents as they bring up their covenant children.

Announcements: Congregational meeting: Communicant members are invited to stay behind immediately after the morning service for a congregational meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to decide between calling Rev. Peter Moelker or Vicar André Scheepers.

Congratulations to Phil and Judith Popping who received the gift of another baby boy on Tuesday morning. They have named him Jed. God is good. Congratulations also to the grandparents, Len & Ann van Trigt.

Bishopdale

Science and Scripture: On Friday 11 September at 7.30pm, at Bishopdale, Adrian Bates from Creation Ministries will speak on "Science, Scripture and the Battle for the Truth." This is a wonderful opportunity to think through an issue that is foundational to faith and life. Please contact Robert van Wichen for more information.

Thanks from the de Vries family: We would like to thank the congregation for the loving reception you have given us. We thoroughly enjoyed the welcome evening and will remember it with great fondness, especially the songs by the children. The Lord has certainly blessed this congregation with a generous measure of creativity, enthusiasm, and good humour. To all those who were concerned that the Aussie jokes went too far, please be assured that just like Kiwis, Aussies don't mind laughing at themselves. Besides, I will have many opportunities to return the favour during the years the Lord gives us here in

Christchurch. Our special thanks to the organising committee who put the night together – you did a wonderful job.

Pastoral. Albert and Dickie Louman celebrate 50 years of married life together this coming week. The Lord has been good to you! May you enjoy many more years together.

Pastoral. This evening we have the privilege of witnessing the profession of faith of Annelise Posthuma. May the Lord continue to use and bless you as you enter into all the privileges and responsibilities of communicant membership in His church.

Buckland Beach

Pastoral. Warmest congratulations to Sonja and Koos Vorster who became a very thankful first time mum and dad last Monday (Aug 31). Jacob Thomas, a robust, noisy little bloke (3.8kg or thereabouts), made a difficult entry into this world, but is, praise God, well. So is mum.

Next Sunday evening. Next Sunday evening will be a little different! To celebrate the beginning of daylight saving and the beginning of two weeks of school holidays (!) we are asking everyone to come together before the evening service to enjoy one of our world-famous-in- Bucklands-Beach soup nights! Delicious homemade soups will be freely available! As will drinks. All we ask you to do is to bring along a plate of bread or the like. We start promptly at 6.00pm. The service that follows will be a 'LABS Service' – meaning that our focus will be on sharing the gospel and its power to those for whom English is very much a second language. All our LABS students have received a special invitation to come along – and also to be there for the soup night! This will be a great opportunity to share in a multi-cultural context. We would like everyone to be there!

Pastoral. On Tuesday evening a group of seven folks met with the elders seeking to make a public profession of their faith before the Lord and us as his people. It was a very special moment indeed. These folks are: Wayne Barton, Rachelle Clark, Karla de Beer, Natasha Fietje, Chris Loader, Alice Malan and Wynand Malan. The plan is for this profession to

take place during the morning service on Sunday, Nov 1st. School holidays once again! This time is always a very necessary break for the young ones and a change of routine for many of the church's activities. Please keep a close eye on the church calendar.

Christchurch

Pastoral. We rejoice with Iain and Anna Begg with the safe arrival of Eleanor May, born yesterday morning. Mother and baby are doing well.

Pastoral. Congratulations to Tante Tini (Mulder) who last week was awarded the Cosgrove Award for Community Service after having served Meals on Wheels for 30 years. You are an inspiration and an example to us all!

Pastoral. Following Rev. Jim Klazinga's recent visit to a Brisbane PCEA church, the congregation have asked the Northern Presbytery to issue a call to him (in line with Presbyterian polity). Our Brother will await the outcome of this process before making any decision on the call from Dunedin to serve in Timaru.

Notes from Session Meeting. Session hopes to have Rev Crosbie DeKrester and his wife here for all of January and the first week of February for pulpit supply.

Dovedale

Pastoral Notes. Last week in the morning sermon we looked at the subject of truth speaking. One of the aspects we covered was the need to let love guide our truth speaking as we consider the impact of even the truth upon others. One member kindly pointed out a few other thoughts from the author, David Powlison, in relation to candour. The way of Jesus was to rebuke, admonish, exhort, and confront. The way of the devil is to vent, criticize, nag, accuse, judge, and attack. As an alternative to the blunt and insensitive truth, Powlison offers up such helpful ideas as constructive candour, gracious frankness and disarming honesty. A lot can be said so long as it is true, framed with hope, and given with constructive intent. What we certainly need to avoid is exaggeration and an unbalanced view. May the Lord continue to guide us into all truth as we lean on the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Hamilton

Pastoral and matters for prayer. Congratulations to Roel Hagoort who turned 80 on Friday and to Corrie van Selm

who will turn 80 on Tuesday. Please join us for a shared lunch in the hall after the morning service to celebrate the Lord's goodness to them. Last Sunday evening (Monday morning our time!) Evert & Rebekah Grul were blessed with a son Cayden Theodore (3.15kg). We rejoice with the proud parents and grandparents!

Pastoral and matters for prayer. Congratulations to Cor & Gre Bouter who celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary Tuesday a week ago and to John & Itty Regnier who celebrated their 55th this last Tuesday. We note, too, that the Vinks and the Weedas celebrated 55 years of marriage earlier this year. We praise God for His faithfulness to these couples.

Nelson

Wedding Invitation: Everybody is invited to come and witness the joining of Holy Matrimony of Nicholas Van Maanen and Alesia Toms on the 17th October 2009 at 2:00pm at the Richmond Baptist Church. Please bring a plate of finger food for the afternoon tea/reception. We look forward to sharing our special day.

North Shore

News & Announcements. Congratulations to John & Marielle Posthuma and family. They were blessed with another son, born last Tuesday, Ben John, weighing in at 9lb 3oz.

Introducing God course. We are planning to run the 'Introducing God Course' over the next months. This free course consists of a DVD series going over the main principles of the Christian faith in approximately 10 weekly or fortnightly sessions. It is targeted at those who are unfamiliar with the gospel, but is also very suitable for people who would want to think through the principles again. We are looking for: – Dedicated Christians, who are willing to lead this course, i.e. watch the DVD over 10 sessions, build relationships with the participants and be available for conversations. Participants. Perhaps you try to talk about the Christian faith to someone you know, but find that difficult. Then this is your chance to bring that person and together work through the basics, assisted by others, in a well-structured, yet relaxed way. A homely, warm, non-threatening place, where there's a DVD player and screen, and which can seat approximately 10 people. We have not set dates yet, so this is to be discussed among potential leaders and participants. Please con-

sider prayerfully if this is something you could be involved in or whether you know people whom you would like to participate.

News & Announcements. We can rejoice with and thank God for, the safe arrival of Jamie Hendrika Steenkamp, 7lb 6oz born 3:45pm last Sunday afternoon. All are well, including Albert. Welcome to Janet's mother, Hettie, as she visits at present. Congratulations to you both – and the grandparents – and may the Lord give you much wisdom and strength in the years ahead as you bring this little girl up in the fear, knowledge and love of God.

Profession of Faith: Last Sunday afternoon elders Don Petchell and Mike Coster met with Frans Steenkamp and Naomi Milne to discuss with them their desire to profess their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. For the last ten months or so they have been studying the Westminster Confession of Faith with John Rogers (the last couple of months on Skype as Naomi also has moved to Wellington; so we are getting quite up-market!). With much joy and thankfulness to God, Session is very pleased to concur in their request. Failing any lawful objections, this will take place on Sunday, 27th September, in the morning Service.

News & Announcements. Many of you will have met by now Gary & Louise Dreyer who have been worshipping with us for the past several months. They come to us from the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa via the Afrikaans Christian Church of NZ and this morning we welcome them into membership of this congregation. Gary & Louise, we trust you will find a real spiritual home among us and that, in turn, we may be blessed by your fellowship and gifts.

From Session meeting held on Thursday 17th September. Possible Church plant on the Hibiscus Coast. John Rogers & Don Petchell reported on their meeting with those specially interested at Frank & Rachel's home on Tuesday evening. Session discussed the matter and the following motion was passed: Dependent upon the concurrence of the congregation and obtaining a minister to lead it, Session resolves to proceed with a Church plant on the Hibiscus Coast. This will require approval of 75% of the congregation. Session plans to meet on 1st October to review our finances with the BoM, which has been requested to prepare a budget. If it seems financially

feasible, a full proposal will be given to the congregation on 4th October and we will have a Special General Meeting on 11th October to vote on it, Lord willing.

Palmerston North

Guardian Ad and Editorial. We have an ad featuring our Church in the Guardian community newspaper every week. This past week we also had some editorial, and Lord willing we will have some editorial in next week's Guardian as well. Please pray that the Lord will use these words to cause readers to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Here is an editorial, possibly read by many thousands: Published on 27-8-2009: The Reformed Church of Palmerston North is part of a uniquely New Zealand Christian denomination established in 1953. We hold to the Biblical, historical beliefs of the Protestant Church as taught by the great Reformers such as John Calvin and Martin Luther. There is great joy and comfort in clearly understanding what the Bible says about our salvation in Jesus Christ and knowing how this understanding should influence and direct our lives. For example, as Christians we know that we are not masters of our own futures but belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He owns both our physical bodies and our spiritual souls. He owns us now in this life and will continue to own us after death. This is because He has fully paid for all the sins of each believer with His own precious blood, thereby setting us free from the tyranny of the devil. As the Lord of our lives, Jesus Christ watches over us so carefully that not a hair can fall from our heads without the will of our Father God in heaven. In fact, under His Lordship, all things work together for our progressive salvation from the power of sin in this life. But there's more! Because we belong to Him, Christ assures us of eternal life in heaven with Him after death and makes us whole-heartedly willing and ready to live for Him from now on! He does this through His Holy Spirit who dwells within those who believe in Him.

From the Pastor. Today we welcome into membership in our congregation Carol McKay. Carol, it is wonderful to have you join with us as part of our church family.

Pukekohe

It is with joy that we announce the remarriage of Jan and Petra Kerkhoven. If there are no lawful objections this will take place at 2:30pm on Saturday

19th of September at the Pukekohe Reformed Church and will be led by Rev John Haverland. Please do not bring any presents – your presence on the day is enough. However, would you please bring a contribution to an afternoon tea that will be held in the church lounge after the wedding service. All are welcome.

From the Pastor. This morning Endrico Bester, Caleb Grul and Jacques Fourie will profess their faith in the Lord and join the church as communicant members. We warmly welcome you as full members of this congregation and pray you may use your gifts well in the church and kingdom of the Lord. A warm welcome to family members and friends who are here for this occasion. In the sermon we will consider words the apostle John addressed to young men.

Silverstream

Pastoral Notes. Congratulations to Albert and Janet Steenkamp on the birth of a healthy baby daughter, Jamie Hendrika. Jamie was born on the Lord's Day, August 23. Mother and baby are doing well. Also our congratulations to Bart and Hetty van der Werff as they now have become grandparents! Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Sermon Audio. Dear Friends and Supporters, I'm sure some of you have wondered what had happened with our project of putting several hundred of my sermons on Sermonaudio.com. Well, it is with great joy and thanksgiving that I can now tell you that it is now happening. Ruling Elder Jack Pluister of the Orland Park OPC has done some wonderful work organizing, and digitizing many of these sermons already. He recently put a whole series on the Minor Prophets on the Sermonaudio site. I deeply appreciate the diligent work that Jack has done to do this. <http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?speakerOnly=true&curSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Rev%2E%5EG%2E%5El%2E%5EWilliamson> Yours in the fellowship of Christ, G.I. Williamson

Wellington

From the Pastor. We have the privilege in two weeks time of witnessing the baptism of Cordell Johnson, which will take place in the morning service (Sunday 13th September).

The Christian

Several years ago, a preacher accepted a call to a church. Some weeks after he arrived, he had an occasion to ride the bus from his home to the downtown area. When he sat down, he discovered that the driver had accidentally given him twenty cents too much change. As he considered what to do, he thought to himself, 'You'd better give the twenty cents back. It would be wrong to keep it.' Then he thought, 'Oh, forget it, it's only twenty cents. Who would worry about this little amount? Anyway, the bus company gets too much fare; they will never miss it. Accept it as a 'gift from God' and keep quiet.'

When his stop came, he paused momentarily at the door, and then he handed the twenty cents to the driver and said, 'Here, you gave me too much change.' The driver, with a smile, replied, "Aren't you the new preacher in town?"

'Yes' he replied.

'Well, I have been thinking a lot lately about going somewhere to worship. I just wanted to see what you would do if I gave you too much change. I'll see you at church on Sunday.'

When the preacher stepped off the bus, he literally grabbed the nearest light pole, held on, and said, 'Oh God, I almost sold your Son for twenty cents.'

Our lives are the only Bible some people will ever read. This is a really scary example of how much people watch us as Christians, and will put us to the test! Always be on guard – and remember – You carry the name of Christ on your shoulders when you call yourself 'Christian.'

One day a soldier, charged with fleeing from the enemy was brought before Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great asked him, 'What's your name?' Dropping his head, he replied, "Alexander." Alexander the Great grabbed him by the shoulders and said, "Soldier, change your conduct or change your name! **You have been called to live a life worthy of the One whose name you carry.**"

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Life on the inside

Ed Havelaar

I was bundled into a van and carted off to prison. I knew this was going to happen eventually; what surprised and disappointed me was that my children were not at all concerned. Not even the first time.

I guess it was because they were only young. Their knowledge of prison was limited to vague recollections of Bible stories about Joseph and Paul and Silas. Prison was not so bad for those men – after all, they always got back out a few verses later.

The gravity of prison did not really sink in until my children were taken to the gate one day. They saw fences up to the sky with loops of razor wire on top, and it was explained to them that men lived in there who were not let out. This made a deep impression on my compassionate daughter, who indignantly stated that policemen must be very mean indeed to lock people up like that.

We may smile patronisingly at a response like that, and wonder how to explain that people are not put in there without reason. But she has a point: prison is a sad place to wind up.

My mates and I took the easy route into prison. We avoided the terror of arrest and the tedium of court cases. We filled in a form, went to some seminars, waited for approval, and started going once a month. It was all very pain-free with the assistance of Prison Fellowship New Zealand.

Each month, after our afternoon church service, five or six of us pile into a van and make the half-hour trip to Christchurch Men's Prison. While we travel we have some opportunity for extended fellowship and male bonding. The discussion is always stimulating. For example, last month we hit upon a secondary income stream for our church: the Department of Corrections gives petrol vouchers to approved volunteers who visit the prison more than six times per year; by travelling as a large group in a single vehicle, we could come out ahead financially. If we could involve the rest of the congregation in prison visits...

Having arrived, we park, and pray for the Lord's blessing on our efforts. We march into the reception area. Sometimes there are other groups there who have arrived slightly earlier than us. Most of the Prison Fellowship meetings are at 7pm on Sundays, so we recognise a few of the faces by now. We queue up and sign in. Our identities are checked. Each of us gets a sticker identifying us as a visitor... as if that wasn't obvious from our clothing! I try to dress down a bit on prison nights but I still look more "holy" than "holey".

After that, the check-in procedure varies somewhat from one month to the next, depending on which piece of equipment has broken down. We go

some chairs and line up the projector. Then we stand around and wait...

Perhaps half a dozen inmates enter. One or two have familiar faces, but because prisoners get moved around a lot we don't see the same men more than a few times. To my shame, I remember few names from one month to the next.

They are not like us. There are some Maori; some soft-spoken Polynesians; some wiry-looking tattooed Pakehas. I know we don't have classes in New Zealand, but they are all lower class. They wear identical dark sweatshirts and matching pants with holes. Of course they all have criminal records, though we don't necessarily find out the details.

Yet, they are like us after all. They

“Where can you find a more concentrated group of people at a crisis point in their lives in need of godly advice? ”

through the metal detector; any items we want to take in go through the x-ray machine. It's easiest to take in "nothing at all", which means I only need to put my watch, belt, shoes, and wedding ring through the x-ray. Electronic items – including guitar tuners – are problematic (could be a communication device). Pens are frowned upon (haven't you seen James Bond?). The guitar is okay, but it's closely inspected. And of course somebody needs to take in a Bible and the projector slides for our songs.

We pass through a few doors, and are out in fresh air. For a few moments we enjoy the porcine fragrance wafting in from a neighbouring farm, and long for Alcatraz. A few more gates and doors, and we are in what looks like a prefab classroom.

There's nobody there yet. We set up

are men. New Zealand men. Moreover, some of them are professing Christians. These are our brothers. Their indiscretions are a matter of public record, making them more like "publicans". They hide their faults less. My sins are still on the inside, like the pharisees'. We have this in common: we need God's forgiveness, and have it in Jesus.

We shake hands lightly and say hello. There's a bit of introductory chit-chat. I make an attempt to learn some names, but seldom hear well enough to catch them. Unfortunately I'm usually too embarrassed to ask more than twice.

Sometimes a chaplain comes too. Our local chaplains are great. They love the Lord and have a genuine interest in the welfare of the prisoners. I'm always pleased when a chaplain comes to our meetings, because he seems like "one of us" but he knows

how things work in prison – the rest of “us” are just amateurs.

We settle down for the formal part of the evening, which includes prayer, scripture readings, a “talk”, and a few songs.

It appears *Amazing Grace* is the only truly ecumenical hymn in existence. Beyond that, we’ve had trouble finding any songs the inmates know. Personally, I decided not to worry about it; I just picked songs we visitors could sing well, subject to guitarability. The down-side was that I had to act as translator – even the *Book of Worship* has hangovers from the days when all church services were in Latin: “...incarnation... oblation... passion...” These are all fine words rich

rupted by pertinent questions. (Perhaps we should offer similar encouragement to our ministers?)

After the service, we have some time for fellowship and conversation. Besides the universal discussion starters regarding family members, a question that leads to a thousand opportunities is “what will you do when you get out?” Some responses are encouraging; some are amusing; and some are worrisome. I put “I don’t know” into this last category because many of the men will have friends in low places apt to ensure rapid re-entry into the prison system.

The most encouraging response was also the most challenging to deal with.



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in theological significance, but not found in prison argot. There’s a nice problem for the hymnody committee, in case it needs another one!

I was a little taken aback when someone called the talk a “sermon”, but at the cost of distressing a few more synodical committees, the distinction is purely academic. The “talk” has two purposes. For those who are not Christians, we are proclaiming the Gospel. For those who are, we are aiming to build up and equip.

We take turns leading the services, preparing our own talks on subjects of our own choosing. It is a wholesome challenge for us to try to communicate gospel essentials to others. Here too, we find that one of the greatest difficulties is to use language and concepts that are accessible to our audience. We worry that perhaps we are preaching over peoples’ heads, so it is actually a tremendous encouragement to be inter-

The man in question was to be released in the next few weeks. He had a job lined up, and he had a place to live. He was going to look for a church.

Many questions went through my mind. He would be living close to one of *our* churches. Should I send him there? He looks pretty rough; how would people react when he walked in the door? Assuming they remember James Chapter 2 and receive him warmly, would he “fit”? Did I know of any other churches in the area which might provide a good spiritual home?

Some of these questions are homework for our team, but I have to leave others as an exercise for you, my reader. And I’ll up the ante a bit: I *did* give him the church address and worship service times, so he may be coming to a pew near you one day soon!

Our meeting ends when either the inmates decide to leave or 8:30pm arrives. They all seem to leave as a

group. Then it’s time for us to put the chairs away and walk back to reception. The doors on the way out misbehave, so most months we have the opportunity to repeat the old joke about being locked in with fewer amenities than the prisoners. So far, we have always been released back into the real world.

On the drive home, we often review how things went. We discuss things the inmates did or said. We consider what went well and what we could improve in the future. We wonder why on earth more people are not involved in prison fellowship work. After all, where else in New Zealand could you go and talk to men about Christianity and get an open ear? Where can you find a more concentrated group of people at a crisis point in their lives in need of godly advice? Where could you preach without fear of being bitten by either the wolves or (dare I say it) the sheep? It seems to me there’s no place as secure as a prison!

By now I have probably convinced you that you need to start your own Prison Fellowship team. Great! The Department of Corrections’ web site at www.corrections.govt.nz shows there are prisons within reach of most of our churches. Your first step is to contact your local Prison Fellowship coordinator through www.pfnz.org.nz.

Prison Fellowship can help with information, resources, and training for your group. They’ll also put you in contact with the local prison chaplains and other Prison Fellowship teams. Once your paperwork and background check are approved, you’ll be free to enter your prison (and leave, if you wish). The chaplains allocate teams to prison units, and will help arrange a suitable timeslot. We found it beneficial to tag along with an experienced team a few times before heading in on our own, and appreciated having a chaplain sit in with us for much of our first year.

If, on the other hand, I have so far failed to persuade you, there’s only one thing more I can think of to urge your involvement in prison visitation work. It’s a carrot-and-stick inducement from Jesus himself. I wasn’t sure which to quote, so I’ll include both and leave the choice to you!

Come, you who are blessed by my Father...for... I was in prison, and you came to visit me...

Depart from me, you who are cursed... for... I was... in prison and you did not look after me.