

faith in **focus**

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Spiritual barometer:



HOW IS MY WALK WITH CHRIST?



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Editorial

Are you interested in the service of the Lord? Is there a measure of spiritual growth ... ? What does your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ mean to you? Are you very sure of your own faith in Christ? Do you live close to Christ? These are just a small selection of essential questions that come out of the "Home visitation guide" in the Office Bearers' Handbook of the RCNZ.

The answers to these questions may very well determine how the rest of a home visit might proceed. And so they should. Answers to these questions are an indicator of where a man, woman or child is spiritually in relation to Christ, similar to a barometer which indicates a change in the weather.

Barometers work by atmospheric pressure – our life of faith works/lives because of an abiding communion with the Triune God through the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, it is a good question for each of us to ask: "how is my walk with Christ?" Does it manifest a life of faith and obedience and a genuine love for the Lord, or is our response that of lukewarmness and indifference? Do we look like a proverbial barometer, forever changing – rain, change, fair?

All the articles on this theme address some very profitable and positive subjects. Mr Andrew de Vries considers the issue of longing for heaven; Mr Iwan Baumann asks the question "Is the Lord among us, or not?" and Mr Pieter van Huyssteen looks at the blessings and necessity of personal devotions.

Mrs Sally Davey gives a very short review of *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*, by Donald S. Whitney and suggests why the "Victorians" wrote so many hymns.

The 31st of this month will be Reformation Day and we publish a couple of articles from *New Horizons*: "Luther and the Reformation" by Stephen J. Nichols and "Reformation – then and now" by Gordon Godfrey.

The book review for this issue is: *Psalm 119 for Life: Living Today in the Light of the Word*, by Hywel R. Jones and reviewed by Mr Stephen J. Tracey

Mr Albert J. Tricarico, Jr. an OPC missionary to Karamoja, Uganda relates a very interesting account of his work among the interesting people of this region.

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Apology

In the previous issue (38/8, September 2011) the article on p15 by Mr Daniel Wilson was missing its title, which should have been "The Biblical Practice of Forgiveness". My apologies to the author for this omission. **Ed.**

"No man can prove that he is a child of God without showing the family likeness."

John Blanchard

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

Spiritual barometer: how is my walk with Christ? (1)

Do I long for Heaven?

Andrew de Vries

We sat in the lounge room intently gazing out the window. Ten days prior I had been told there would be snow this weekend. Saturday night's weather forecast predicted the same. And now, on Sunday afternoon, the whole family peered with longing into the cold afternoon air. We were almost willing the snowflakes to fall. Our eyes strained to see the slightest hint of something more than rain or sleet. With deep desire we wanted to see the backyard turn white. But alas, it was not to be, and off we went for the afternoon church service.

As Australians who had never seen snow fall, we were truly longing for a good dumping. I wonder how many of us could honestly say that we long for heaven with the same intensity and earnestness. If you can say you do long for heaven like that, then it will be easy for you to recall the last time you spent a concentrated period meditating on the glories of heaven. It will be easy for others to tell who you are, because not a Sunday goes by without you telling them about how much you are looking forward to being there. It will be easy for the whole denomination to recognise you, because you are the one constantly sending through overtures to the Synod to increase our support for various kingdom works, because there is no need for us to store up treasures here on earth.

Do you really?

Do you really long for heaven? I take it you do. However, most of us are aware of our meagre longing for heaven. We are too comfortable in this life to long for heaven. Our schedules are so full with appointments and parties and soccer matches that we don't take time to think about heaven with the seriousness it deserves. Perhaps the only time you ever think about heavens is when you're in

attendance at a funeral. And besides all that, you might have the sneaking suspicion that heaven will be boring. You imagine it will be like an eternal church service where you can't move, you can't talk, the pews are uncomfortable, and you've only got one peppermint to last through all eternity! Of course if that's what you think, you will certainly be in for a very pleasant surprise.

It is clear that we don't long for heaven as much as we ought. But at times we do have a good and godly longing for our true home. I want us to consider those times in the hope of stimulating a deeper and more abiding longing for heaven.

Don't you long for heaven when the **church** is not what she should be? When people get into petty arguments about their favourite songs. When people would rather talk about the football than the sermon after a worship service. When you've got plenty of males in the church, but none who are striving to meet the biblical qualifications for elder or deacon. If you have been in a church,

any church, you've seen many of the spots and stains of the bride of Christ. No amount of makeup or perfume can cover over the blemishes or the smells. And it is sometimes quite painful and ghastly to see. Especially when we know Christ's intention is to make her holy and to present her to himself as a radiant church (Eph 5:26).

The church – triumphant and beautiful

One of the glories of heaven is that we shall finally be that radiant church! In fact, the picture given in Revelation 21 is that the bride of Christ (*i.e.* the church) is absolutely stunning. She is large, she is precious, and she is beautiful! Jesus Christ will have finally made his bride ready for the marriage celebration. We will finally be a pure a radiant church. No more painful breakdowns in relationships. No more church discipline. No more of the ministers and elders letting you down. The language in Revelation strains the senses to describe how beautiful the church will be. Perhaps you find

“We have to be constantly throwing off everything that hinders us in the Christian race. The Christian life is a battle that needs to be constantly fought, not a resort holiday where we chillax and pass the time in leisure and comfort.”

that hard to imagine, yet that is what we will be like in heaven. A perfect church. Next time you are disappointed with your church, instead of some sharp remarks about her failures, why not remember what she will one day be and begin longing for that day.

Don't you long for heaven when you are weary by **your own struggle** against sin? One of the great blessings that Christ has won for us through his death and resurrection is that we are dead to sin but alive to God (Romans 6:1-14). Sin no longer has power to rule over us. But sin is not yet dead. It still tempts and lures us. We still choose the fleeting pleasures of sin over love and obedience to our Saviour who died for us. We still have to battle each day against

battle against sin, after you have brought that sin to the foot of the cross, why not remember and long for that place when your battle will finally be over?

Don't you long for heaven when you see **the suffering of this world**? Isn't it perfectly obvious that this is a world under the curse of sin? Our world is full of suffering and death. When you visit a nursing home and witness once healthy bodies and minds decayed to such an extent that they need full time care, the curse is obvious. When you attend a funeral, the curse is obvious. When the solid ground under your feet shakes like jelly, the curse is obvious. The whole creation has been subjected to frustration. The final solution to this frustrating situation is the new heavens

and a worship service it has seemed as it was no longer the preacher addressing you, but Jesus Christ himself speaking to you. Perhaps as you have mediated on God's word, you have been thrilled by the glories of Jesus Christ and been lost in wonder and adoration and praise. Perhaps you've had a season of darkness where the valley you walked through was deep and dark. Yet as you walked thought that valley you experienced the gracious hand of the good shepherd and had peace and assurance like you've never had before. But the joys of these times of intimacy with Christ are often fleeting. Samuel Rutherford used to say *'When Christ comes he stays not long, but certainly the blowing of his breath upon a poor soul is heaven upon earth.'* When you've known this fleeting experience of heaven upon earth, don't you long for heaven more deeply?

It's in heaven where we'll experience the deepest and most glorious intimacy with our Lord Jesus Christ. Isn't that why Paul says that to depart and be with Christ is better by far than living on in this earthly body (Phil 1:23)? What is it about heaven that you long for most? Is it because that is where you will see your loved ones or all your mates who have gone before you? Is it because you think you'll have heaps of spare time to do all the things you wanted to but didn't get a chance in this life? Is it because you think that heaven is where you'll be able to indulge your favourite pleasures: watching your entire DVD collection, playing rugby union without injury or disruption, eating perfect croquettes or fish and chips without putting on any weight? These are not the things that make heaven, heaven. These are not the greatest pleasures of heaven. It is the presence of the Lord Jesus, knowing him, and enjoying that intimate fellowship with him that makes heaven, heaven. And if you've tasted the pleasure of knowing him in this life, then isn't the life to come something worth longing for more each day?

Notes

1 The description of the heavenly Jerusalem is a description of a people, not a place. In Revelation 21:9 John is told he is going to see the bride, the wife of the Lamb. This bride is immediately described in 21:10ff as a Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God

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“It's in heaven where we'll experience the deepest and most glorious intimacy with our Lord Jesus Christ.”

impatience, selfishness, hard-heartedness, ingratitude, and all the other sins of the flesh. We have to be constantly on a high state of alert against the lies and the temptations of evil one. We have to be constantly throwing off everything that hinders us in the Christian race. The Christian life is a battle that needs to be constantly fought, not a resort holiday where we chillax and pass the time in leisure and comfort.

No more struggling

In heaven, that battle will finally be over. The new heavens and the new earth are the home of righteousness (2 Peter 3:13). It is the place where the spirits of righteous men will be made perfect (Heb 12:23). You won't ever again drive to work and find yourself struggling against the temptation to covetousness aroused by pervasive billboards. There will be no more temptation. You will never have to wrestle with those thoughts that you hope no-one ever finds out about. You will never again utter with pain and disappointment 'oh no, I've done it again.' You will never hear that accusing voice of the devil saying 'you call yourself a Christian, what a joke' when you stumble into sin yet again. Next time you are weary in the

and the new earth.

Hard to imagine

One day everything will be made new, and the old order of things will have passed away (Rev 21:4-5). It is hard to imagine what a world without any more crying, or mourning or pain will be like. We won't need hankies or tissues or first aid kits. Drug companies will suddenly be out of business. 'Cancer' and 'Alzheimers' won't be part of our vocabulary. The yellow pages will shrink exponentially without any listings for doctors, psychologists, funeral directors, ministers, police, or lawyers. The Bible is clear that it is not our best life now – the best is yet to come. Once you realise this, you don't have to hang on to this life with all your might. You won't get bitter at God when life becomes difficult and painful. You won't seek to indulge every earthly pleasure and become frustrated when you can't. You will learn to long for heaven.

Don't you long for heaven when you get a brief taste of **intimate fellowship with Jesus Christ**? Through faith we are always in fellowship with Jesus Christ, but there are times when we experience that fellowship more keenly. Perhaps in

Spiritual barometer: how is my walk with Christ? (2)

“Is the Lord among us, or not?”

Exodus 17:1-7

Iwan Baumann

The Israelites asked that question in the desert almost completely without faith. But it is also a good question for us to consider. How do we know that the Lord is among us? What, if anything, can tell us that he is among us? For us today, as for the Israelites then, the temptation is to look at our material needs and the Lord's material blessings and make our judgment based on them. “God surely must be among us if our physical needs are met, if we are well-off financially, are successful in the world's eyes, and are feeling satisfied with ourselves.” But I trust you know that, at the end of the day, that is entirely contrary to the character of biblical piety. We are to walk by faith, not by sight.

In our passage, God indeed provides for the basic physical needs of his people, as he promised he would. He gives them water to drink so that they would not die of thirst. But most importantly, he teaches them a lesson – he is with them even when they don't feel it. And the way they and we can be sure of that is not because of our prosperity, but because of God's unchanging word of promise to be with his people and provide for their needs.

Doubt and rebellion

By the time Israel comes to Rephidim, they have been led by the Lord for quite some time. And they have seen his faithfulness to them. Just before, in Exodus 16, God miraculously provided manna – bread from heaven – for his people, even though they had grumbled against him. God could have immediately punished them for their doubt. But we see how merciful God was with his people, teaching them to trust in him in various trials.

So when we come to Rephidim, God once again tests his people and teaches

them about his provision for all their needs. The trial this time was not lack of food, but lack of water. If you have ever been tramping under the hot sun, you know how vital water is. And here, when we read that there was no water at Rephidim, it means that the closest water they knew of was at their previous camp, a day's journey away. Only the strongest would not faint on such a long journey back. So how do the people respond? How would you respond?

Well, the people quarrel and grumble against Moses. That is worse than mere arguing. The original language helps us understand that it is as if the Israelites

they wanted. The Lord in their midst should protect them from any difficulties, or at least remove them quickly.

You know, there are primarily two different attitudes to the Christian life we could take. One of them is to expect, to quote a book title, “Your Best Life Now,” a life free of suffering. Such an attitude demands now the glory that we will only have in heaven. The other attitude is the one Jesus Christ talked about in Matt 16:24: “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.” It is a life of suffering now, but glory in heaven. And it is a life of such joy in

“When you doubt that the Lord is with you, turn to him in prayer. Confess your guilt in doubting his gracious promises and let them sink into you afresh.”

were “bringing a lawsuit” against Moses in court. In effect, they thought, “Moses, you are failing at your task of taking care of us. If we could, we would sue you and win!”

After Moses unsuccessfully tries to pacify the Israelites, their complaint gets more vicious: “Is this why you brought us out of Egypt, to kill us with thirst?” But v. 7 tells us that ultimately, they were doubting that their Lord was still in their midst and watching over them. They assumed that God's presence in their midst meant that God would immediately provide whatever earthly comforts

the cross of Christ that the world, with its avoidance of personal suffering at all cost, cannot know.

Understanding the problem

Unlike the Israelites, however, Moses remembered the history of God's dealings with his people. He recognised what was really at stake in the people's grumbling – they were putting the Lord to the test: “Why are you complaining against me? Why are you testing the Lord?” After all, Moses was God's chosen servant to bring his people out of Israel. It was through Moses that God had led them through

the Red Sea. And it is through Moses that God has brought them to Rephidim. To grumble against Moses was to put the Lord to the test.

Sometimes, however, our grumbling against our elders can be a kind of putting the Lord to the test. That is, if our elders lovingly seek to bring Scripture to bear on our problems and we reproach them with meddling. It is easy enough for us as readers of Exodus 17 to wonder, "How much longer will God bear with his people?" It is not so easy, perhaps, to ask the same question about our own hearts.

When Moses saw that the people were about to stone him, he did the best thing he could have done, pouring out his heart to God (v. 4). James 5:13 tell us, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray." Moses was suffering here, in spite of his faithfulness, and he is an example to us of what to

do when we suffer. When you doubt that the Lord is with you, turn to him in prayer. Confess your guilt in doubting his gracious promises and let them sink into you afresh. Romans 8:32 says, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" Pray, too, that God would sustain you in your hardships.

God's gracious solution

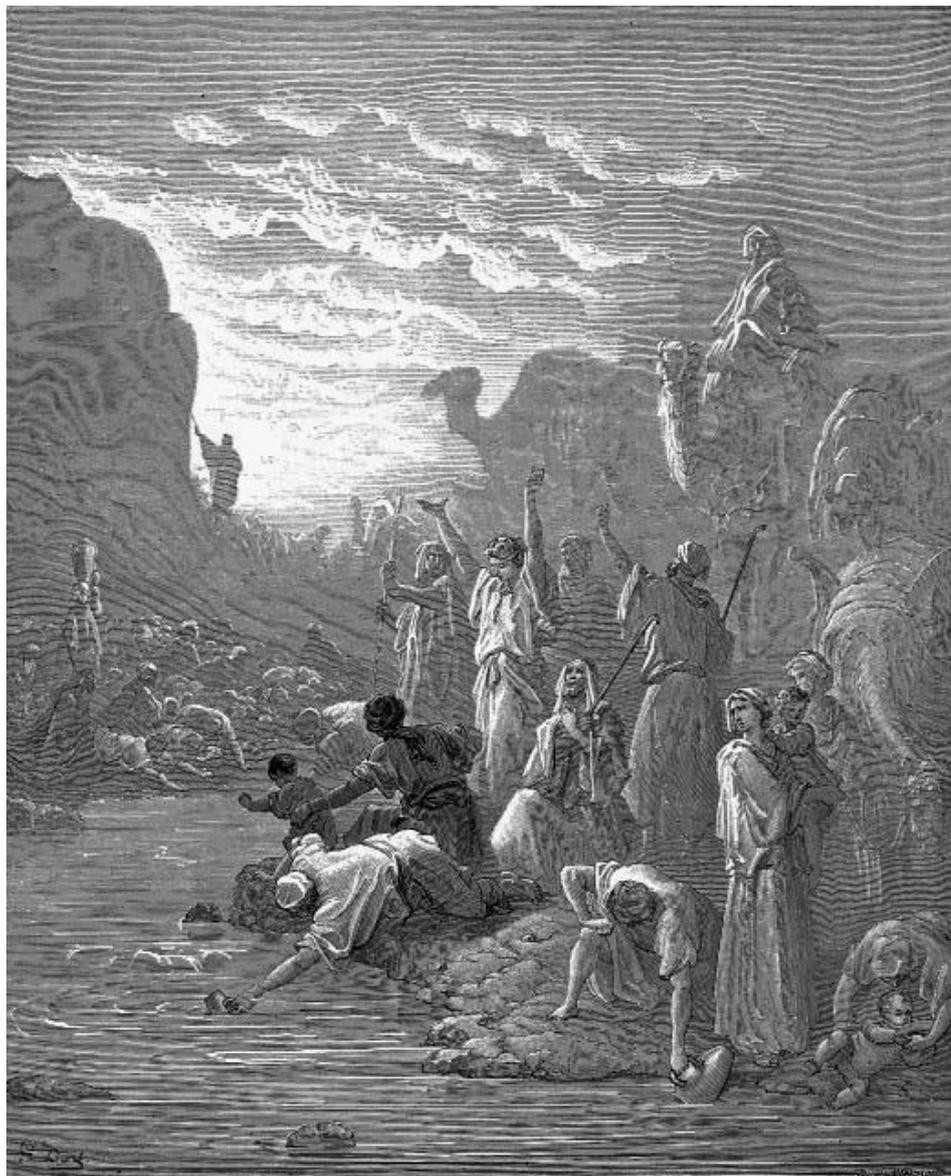
In v. 5 and 6. The first thing that God tells Moses to do is to pass on before the same people who were about to stone him. He is not to hide from this angry crowd. You can be sure that all eyes would be on him. He is not to move in front of the people alone, because some of the elders are to accompany him. They are impartial witnesses to what is about to happen. Most importantly, Moses is to take with him the staff with which he

had *struck the Nile*. Let us think about this staff. That detail, striking the Nile, tells us that the staff is here an instrument of God's *judgment* on his enemies. True, the staff also brings to memory God's *mercy* to his people – Moses lifted up the staff when he divided the Red Sea. But here, we remember it as a rod of judgment.

Since the people are the guilty ones in this story, we should be wondering, "Will God tell Moses to strike and judge the people?" But no, Moses is to walk past the people, the staff in his hand. *Judgment passes them by*. What God says next is momentous: "Behold, I will stand before you there, on the rock at Horeb" (v. 6). As these words are the center of God's speech to Moses, they are crucial (from Latin *crux*, cross) to the story. What is significant about God's words is that nowhere else in Scripture does God "stand before" us. Rather, we are to stand before him who is the King of kings and Lord of lords: "You who fear the Lord, praise Him; All you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him and stand in awe of Him" (Ps 22:23). When God says that he would stand before Moses, he is clearly taking the place of his guilty people, being taken to account in their place.

Finally, we see how God actually provided water for his rebellious people. Moses is to strike the rock at Horeb on which God is standing and water will come out of it to quench the people's thirst. And that is absolutely staggering! That same staff with which God had judged the Egyptians now strikes the rock on which God is standing before his people! At Horeb, God stood in the place of his accused people. The penalty of judgment was inflicted on him, not on his people. He bears their condemnation! No surprise that Moses later calls God the "Rock of our salvation" (Deut 32:15)!

And yet, this glorious story does not end on a happily-ever-after note. Rephidim, though a place of God's remarkable mercy to his people, is not renamed something like "The Lord will provide". Instead, it becomes Massah and Meribah, "putting-to-the-test" and "quarreling". God is teaching us something here – that in spite of his amazing mercy, the people's fundamental need remained and had yet to be taken care of. Israel's – our – fundamental need is far greater than food and drink. It is sin, and unless it is dealt with, all of our lives should be called Massah and Meribah.



Moses Striking the Rock at Horeb, engraving by Gustave Doré from "La Sainte Bible", 1865.
en.wikipedia.org

What Israel and we need the most is what that rock pointed to – God bearing our punishment and making atonement. When many centuries later the apostle Paul reflected on Israel’s time in the desert, he tells us that the people “drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). At Horeb, in Moses’ striking the rock on which God was standing, we have a picture of the incarnate Son of God – our Lord Jesus Christ – being stricken for the transgression of his people. God gives us a picture of how he rescues us from our sin – God, as God the Son incarnate, receiving our penalty. On the cross, God in Christ was wounded for our transgressions, as

the apostle Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that God purchased his church “with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). On the cross, Jesus was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities (Is 53:5). At Horeb, the people did not die a thirsty death. Yet on the cross, Jesus did cry “I am thirsty” (John 19:28), dying a thirsty death to provide the water of life for us.

So back to our question, “Is the Lord among us, or not?” Friends, for our holy God to be among us, at work in his church and our lives, our sin had to be punished and in Christ, God nailed our sin to the cross. God is surely among us, not because we are so successful in this life, but because Jesus was stricken,

smitten by God and afflicted in our place. In times of doubt, turn to “our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13) to remind you that God is with all who trust in him. And when you are going through a desert in this life, remember those words from Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” Our God is among us!

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Spiritual barometer: how is my walk with Christ? (3)

Regular personal Bible reading: importance and blessings

Pieter van Huyssteen

The vital importance of Bible reading

I am sure there is not a person in this world who does not like food! You have to be really sick not to want food! People simply love food – all kinds of food. You don’t have to watch Master Chef Australia to see that! Just skip one meal and you know how vitally important food is to your body!

Well, I can hardly exaggerate: as important as food and drink are for your body so important is God’s Word (Scripture, the Bible) for your soul! If you stop eating you will get weak; eventually you will die! If you skimp yourself with Bible reading, your soul will, by default, start following worldly ideologies and values. Eventually, if the Lord, in His grace, does not prevent it, you will perish without Him! Indeed, as food is for the body, so is Bible reading for the soul – exactly what the prophet Jeremiah, by God’s grace, discovered. In total agony, because

of the pain his people were suffering, Jeremiah cried out to God and, when God’s words came, Jeremiah said, “I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight...” (Jer. 15:16). Jeremiah’s starving soul simply “slurped” up the quickening words of God!

Don’t we see the same craving in a dying man? He does not want earthly treasures – has no use for them. He just wants spiritual nourishment – God’s Word! Is that not also why we sing, “As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after You...?” (Ps 42). Surely our Lord was right when He said, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4 & Deut. 8:3).

Why is the Bible food for your soul/spirit? Well, because it is *God-breathed* (2 Tim. 3:16). The Bible is simply God’s breath in written format! Come to think of it, before God’s Word got to the stage of being written down, it was simply the words of God coming with His breath from His mouth! God’s *Word* was literally God’s *breath* – it carried the Spirit

of our Creator! Is it any wonder then that the Bible is food for the creature’s (your and my) spirit?

In what way does it feed your soul? Well, 2 Tim. 3:16-17 says the Bible “is useful for teaching (telling us *what is right*), rebuking (telling us *what is not right* in our lives), correcting (telling us *how to get right*), and training in righteousness, (telling us *how to stay right*) so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”¹

This agrees with the words of 1 Peter 2:2, which tells us that “the pure *milk of the word*” causes us to “*grow in respect to salvation.*”

Some people might perhaps say, “Well, I needed the Bible when I was younger; but I can do without it now that I’m older.” How wrong they are! Adults need the guidance of the Word just as much as children! After all, don’t adults face temptations and don’t they have to make many vital decisions, among others, also leading their children? Whether you’re old or young, without spiritual food you will

have no spiritual health and growth!

Our Lord Jesus knew this! Did He as a human child not have to memorise Scripture like any other Jewish boy? And He knew God's Word is the only way to defeat the devil's lies (Matt. 4; Luke 4:4,8,12). And were His often-repeated words, "Have you not heard?" not a way of exhorting his listeners to study the Scriptures? Christ simply knew, "Your Word is truth!" (John 17:17).

The vital importance of personal Bible reading

I'm talking to the church-goer now: Yes, you hear the Word *in church* every Sunday! And yes, you may even read it regularly with your *family*, but don't forget your *personal* quiet time – time at which *you* read God's Word! You see, it is marvellous (even necessary) to have fellowship with God's people on Sundays, and similarly, it is important to participate in family devotions, but ultimately, when you meet up with Christ, it will not be on the faith of someone else that you will enter the kingdom of God. It will be just you and Christ and

Christ and you! So, why not now cultivate that personal relationship with Him? Why not take regular time to be alone with God for personal devotions?

Our *Lord* did it – He took time off to be alone with His Father. We read, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a *solitary* place, where he prayed" (Mark 1:35, NIV). And Luke tells us Christ did it regularly, "But Jesus *often* withdrew to *lonely* places and prayed" (Luke 5:16, NIV). Well, if *Christ* craved to be alone with His Father, then who are we to neglect personal time with God to hear His voice (reading Bible) and pray to Him? You simply want to know Him personally! After all, you and I are Christ's bride! Don't brides want to have a personal relationship with their grooms? Martin Lloyd-Jones, that very influential twentieth-century preacher, said of God's Word, "The more we know and read it, the more it will take us into the presence of God. So if you want to set the Lord always before you, spend much of your time with regular daily reading of the Bible."²

When to fit it in? I cannot prescribe a time for you. Everyone knows best *when* personal devotions will work for him: morning, noon, evening, or night – choose for yourself!

You say, "I'm too busy." Well, it doesn't have to take much time! Besides, the few minutes you lose from your busy schedule will return to you with dividends even if you have to do with Scripture what some people do with their food – "dashboard dining!" Well, if that's the case, take hold even of such little time! A little Bible reading at a time is not to be despised – it may just be like manna: an ongoing daily portion which will sustain your soul.

So don't become downhearted if your reading gives you only a little "harvest." The other day, I had read only three verses when I discovered a "gem." I was reading Matthew 5 when verse 3 "hit me for a six" (to use cricket terminology). I must say I was reading in another language – Afrikaans. I have found that reading in another language (or even just another English version) helps spotting things you may miss when you read

How is my walk with Christ?

Perhaps you have asked that question and wondered – how *does* one assess one's own walk with the Lord? Are there any tests for progress in spiritual maturity? (It is, after all, a serious matter – the writer of the letter to the Hebrews was pretty severe on those who were still needing spiritual milk when they ought to have reached the stage of teaching others – Heb.5:12).

Help is at hand in the form of Donald S. Whitney's *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*. This little book offers ten "tests" as a gauge for the progress you may or not be making in your Christian walk. If you are familiar with Whitney's other, best-selling book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, you'll know you're in for a good, bracing challenge.

He begins with a medical analogy: "The English Puritans of 1550 to 1700 used to refer to ministers as 'physicians of the soul.' ... My purpose in writing these pages is to act as a physician of

the soul – to ask questions and suggest spiritual tests that can, by the help of the Holy Spirit, enable you to self-diagnose your spiritual health." It is, he writes, like having your annual physical checkup (as Americans usually do).

So, what are these tests? They include:

Do you thirst for God?

Are you more loving?

Are you more sensitive to God's presence?

Do you have a growing concern for the spiritual and temporal needs of others?

Do you delight in the bride of Christ?

Are the spiritual disciplines increasingly important to you?

Do you still grieve over sin?

Are you a quicker forgiver?

In a chapter on each of these questions, Whitney probes our minds and hearts, deals with our excuses and

shows how a development in each of these areas indicates progress along the path of faith. He gives practical, helpful suggestions for ways to improve in each of these areas, and makes them thoroughly and properly attractive. He is a pastor who knows the Scriptures well, and knows how to apply them tellingly. (Whitney would be the first to say that there are other questions you could, and maybe should, ask yourself along these lines – but they are a good, sound starting-place.)

You will find this book a great help as you seek to become more spiritually mature. It would be well worth reading it with a friend, or in a study group, to spur one another on in your walk with Christ.

Donald S. Whitney, *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health* (NavPress, Colorado Springs, 2002).

Reviewed by Sally Davey.

in your familiar version. Well, this time I was truly blessed by the way the Afrikaans Bible has rendered the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." It said, "Blessed are those who know how dependant they are on God..." I realise that this way of translating the words of Matthew 5:3 does not cover the full width and depth of what it means to be "poor in spirit," but even if it did only partial justice to the original intent, I was blessed!

Time-proven tips for personal Bible reading

Here are some tips that have helped many a godly person:

Make time: Just as we schedule times to eat our physical food, so we must do for our spiritual food. Choose a slot in your schedule and corner of your world, and set it aside for you and God. It helps if you can make it the same time every day, for this way you will remember it.

Pray before you read: This will prepare your heart to hear what God wants to say to you rather than you looking for your own idea. After all, reading the Bible prayerfully is reading it carefully. And remember the words of Matt. 7:7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

Do not close until: Don't close the Bible until some message "hits" you; until you know at least one thing God would have you do in response to your reading. It may be a doctrinal insight, or a habit to begin or to break, or a prayer to offer, or a conversation to initiate, a letter or e-mail to send, a phone call to make, or a spiritual discipline to practice. Thus, read the Bible for application, not merely for information. And because something may "hit" you after only a few verses of reading, it means that, at times, you will choose depth of reading over quantity.

Hear means obey: Eight times in the gospels and eight times in Revelation Christ says, "He who has an ear, let him hear..." Also the Apostle Paul, through the Holy Spirit, writes, "Faith comes from hearing the message..." (Rom. 10:17). Quite often in the Bible "hearing" means "taking in" and "obey." In other words, what has "hit" you as you read will only be meaningful if it has an impact on your daily living. Remember our Lord's parable of the seeds sown on different soils (Mark 4:1-20). You want to be the soil that bears fruit!

What will help you hear (*i.e.* obey)? Two things: **praying** over the points that "hit" you and **meditating** on them during the rest of that day. That will rekindle what you have read.

What does meditate mean?

The Hebrew word used in the following quotations from Scripture means, among others, "to reflect on something while muttering." In other words, it is to audibly say to yourself, through the day, the words and meaning of what has "hit" you in your personal devotions.

- The Lord said to Joshua, "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do ev-

“Through regular personal Bible reading, the Word of God will become for you a lamp to your feet and a light for your path.”

erything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful" (Joshua 1:8).

- Ps 1:1-2 "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. ² But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night."

Why meditate on Scripture? Well, is it not true, as someone has said, "The Bible is not a newspaper to be skimmed but rather a mine to be quarried"?³

What else does meditate involve? It certainly involves **asking questions**, for example: "What does this discovered 'gem' mean for my personal walk with God; for my family; for my marriage; for my finances; for my work – the amount of time at work, etc.?"

It also involves **praying** as you meditate.

It may even involve **jotting down** a few mind-joggers. Indeed, some believers have found great benefit in keeping a small booklet (call it a journal, if you wish) in which they write every day's per-

sonal gleanings. This means these meditations can with very little search-effort be looked up again and be meditated on again and again. This way, quite a number of Bible verses can, over time, become ingrained in your memory.

Blessings

Well, this is what you will discover if you get into an ongoing personal Bible-reading habit: as 2 Tim 3:16-17 promised – Scripture will become *useful* to you as you are being taught, rebuked, corrected and trained in righteousness! Changes will be seen and experienced in your life – not to become proud of, though, just glad! Once this happens, that will be your gauge that you have

the most prized blessing – the presence of God in your heart and life! By God's grace, you will then become a personification of James 1:25, "But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does."

Indeed, through regular personal Bible reading, the Word of God will become for you a "lamp to your feet and a light for your path" (Psalm 119:105) for every situation you're in. It is my prayer that you will be thus blessed!

Notes

- 1 Also cf. W.W. Wiersbe, W. W. , *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (2 Ti 3:16-17) (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996).
- 2 Lloyd-Jones, in Donald S. Whitney, *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*, (Colorado Springs, CO : Navpress, 2001), p.65).
- 3 M. Lucado, *Just like Jesus* (Nashville, TE : Thomas Nelson, 2003), p.44

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Feminine focus

Sally Davey

Why the Victorians wrote so many hymns – and what that might tell us

By any reckoning, Victorian England was a busy, productive society. Industrialisation was transforming its cities; its factories were supplying the world. An extensive canal system transported goods like china from the Staffordshire potteries safely and efficiently; and the new railroads were making rapid travel possible for all manner of people. A fast and well-organised postal system was also diminishing distance; greatly benefiting both communication and business.

It was an age of problem-solving and inventiveness: whole new branches of manufacture, and the applied sciences that made them possible, appeared. It

was an age when both prudent – and adventurous – investors made huge fortunes from trade. Britain's empire was growing, and provided both raw materials and markets for manufacture. There was an absence of major wars for the duration of Victoria's reign that provided the stability for economic growth. By contrast, the continent of Europe was engaged in serious conflicts over nationalism and republicanism.

Women were busy, too. Most homes were centres of activity; and while middle and upper class women had domestic staff, managing them required skill, patience and not inconsiderable

time. Most women did a lot of sewing – both their own clothes and many decorative items for their houses – such as the “Berlin work” wool tapestries that ended up as cushions, rugs, firescreens and wall hangings. They practised musical instruments and singing, and provided some skilled home entertainment. Philanthropic women began schools for the poor, visited hospitals, and were busy in all manner of other charitable work.

It was a busy, productive age when a lot happened; and a lot was achieved. But it was also a religious age – one deeply influenced by the gospel. The generation before had seen a significant revival of evangelical Christianity, and these believing “Fathers of the Victorians” had set their stamp on church and home life. Evangelical Christians were never the majority in Victorian society; but they were a very influential part of what was a particularly churchgoing and God-fearing culture. Even those who were not evangelical by conviction were often very active and energetic church participants. Religious debates were played out in the political arena, and in the press. Almost everyone had opinions on religious matters; because to almost everyone, religion mattered.

Small wonder, then, that the Victorians applied their prodigious energy to the worship of God. And perhaps in no sphere was this more evident than in hymn-writing. The nineteenth century saw a phenomenal output of hymn-writing in England. Many of the hymns we know and love so well had their origin in this time and place. In part, this was due to the new role hymns had in public worship. As John Haverland explained in his article last month, hymns were not sung in the services of the Church of England until 1820; and so when permission was granted for this by the Archbishop of York, the only English-language hymns then available were those of the Methodists and other



It was an industrious age... (Newcastle Quayside in 1861, William Bell Scott)

dissenters like Isaac Watts. (The Greek and Latin hymns of the early church, and the German hymns of the previous three centuries had not yet been translated into English). The new popularity of hymns created a great surge of demand that Victorians from many walks of life stepped in to fill.

But apart from their general industriousness there were other factors in the culture of the day that were particularly conducive to the writing of hymns – and good-quality hymns. The most important of these was the literary awareness of the upper-middle and upper classes of England. They were a people who *read*. This began with childhood story-books; and continued through school or lessons with a governess. Grammar, foreign languages (Latin, Greek, French, German and Italian), history and literature were the key subjects. The extent of such education depended on parents' resources and the quality of schools, of course, but it was a society that became literate.

However, for the creation of a hymn-writing culture, nothing was more important to such an education than its emphasis on poetry. Poetry was considered to be *the* literary art – even in an age when fiction was coming to full flower as an art form. It was enjoyed by all at home – children memorised lots of it, and were encouraged to recite it. Whole families read it for pleasure together. Jane Austen's family, in the generation before the Victorians, used to read William Cowper's poetry aloud to each other in the evenings. Victoria's generation did the same with Tennyson; and with John Keble's runaway bestselling volume of poems, *The Christian Year*. This habit travelled the empire, too. We find Canadian Anne [formerly of Green Gables] and her new husband, Gilbert, quoting lines of Tennyson to each other in *Anne's House of Dreams* in order to make points about matters of duty.¹ Boys, who generally had a more academically-advanced education than girls, were taught the poetry of classical Greece and Rome, right through to university level at Oxford and Cambridge. The classics were considered to be excellent training for a career in administration, whether in the civil service at home, or in the imperial government abroad.

In short, educated Englishmen and women became thoroughly familiar with the conventions of poetic form. They knew how to read poetry; they could understand its richly symbolic language.

People would convey ideas by quoting a line or two from a well-known poem. They appreciated the effects a poet could create with different patterns of meter and rhyme. Poetry was valued for its own worth, and conveyed important messages. It even played an important role in romance and courtship. The young man who could quote poetry on appropriate occasions certainly impressed young ladies. There was no more romantically-expressive gift to give a young lady than a "slim volume of poetry". If you have ever read Elizabeth Barrett Browning's immensely popular *Sonnets from the Portugese* (published in 1850) you will know what I mean!

Here is Number 43:

*How do I love thee? Let me
count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and
breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling
out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal
Grace.
I love thee to the level of every
day's
Most quiet need, by sun and
candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive
for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn
from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put
to use
In my old griefs, and with my
childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed
to lose
With my lost saints,—I love thee
with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and,
if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after
death.*

For a culture that appreciated this quality of poetry, and was familiar with it to the degree that it was, writing poetry for singing in worship was not such a big stretch. All sorts of people, who had grown up reading good poetry, discussing it, using it and even experimenting with writing their own, began to adapt their skill to writing poetry appropriate for singing in worship to God. Over the next few months it is my plan to introduce some of these people and their hymn-writing efforts.

Observing the Victorians' facility with poetry leads us to consider our own

culture. Where do we stand with poetry? Do we appreciate and understand it? Do we read it, use it, write it? These questions are worth asking, since our age is not noted for good hymnody. I made a very simple and informal survey of some New Zealand adults I talk with every day. What did they think of poetry? As I suspected, none of them read poetry. They see it as "airy-fairy", hard to understand, and very unlike their ordinary, everyday speech. Some asked, why didn't poets just state things plainly? Given Browning's sonnet above, why didn't she just say something like "I really love you!"? Many people, forced to study poetry at school, find the image-rich language "too flowery"; and one person I spoke to was suspicious that their teachers just read ideas into poetry that the poet probably hadn't intended anyway! (Which is related to the notion that no one knows what poetry means, it's so obscure).

We seem to have adopted the assumption that poetry is too unlike "normal" language and therefore either too hard for me, or too obscure for effective communication. Two things might be said here. Firstly, we tend to forget that we are using imagery all the time – even in conversation. It's just that familiar images have become routine, recognisable shorthand. For instance, we say that the sun "sets". But actually, the sun is not literally doing that, is it? Neither do our hearts sink, or jump into our mouths. It's just that concrete-picture expressions are so much effective than an abstract proposition like "I was dismayed." The second thing is that poetry is not *meant* to be everyday language! Its very compressedness, specialness and "otherness" are what make it so effective. It is not ordinary, everyday fare. We tend to feel uncomfortable with ambiguity, or with the possibility of several layers of meaning. Take the ninth and tenth lines of Browning's sonnet, left: it is quite possible she meant several things by "old griefs" and "childhood's faith" – which add to, rather than detract from, the picture she is painting of her present love, which has so thoroughly redirected the energy formerly given to those things. We may not agree with the direction she has taken; but the ideas help us understand the complexity of love.

Finally, though, there is one very good reason why we of all people should make more effort to understand and appreciate good poetry. A wise older English professor wrote that when he comes to the first unit on poetry in his literature

courses at his Christian college, he asks how his students know God intends them to understand and enjoy poetry. The answer, of course, is that one-third of the Bible is poetic in form². Some modern, looser translations that take interpretive liberties have rendered many such passages in prose form, with the imagery replaced by abstract propositions – but in the original Hebrew, they were poetry. This has been done with the motive of making things easier for the modern (supposedly less intellectually capable) reader. But that is just another indicator that our appreciation of poetry

has been discarded, like the finer, more formal clothing of earlier times.

It seems to me that we need to recover an understanding of poetry, and to cultivate a love for it. This means encouraging our children to choose poetry as an option at school or university; an option as valuable as engineering or chemistry. It means treating poetry seriously, as being important, and worth some effort, rather than being something to groan over or laugh at. It is time to start reading it with our children, and discussing its meaning. It is time to remember how much of the

biblical canon is poetic in form. It seems to me that unless we do this, we shall never become a people who really appreciate our hymns, let alone one who writes good hymns. That is the lesson of the Victorians.

Notes

- 1 L.M. Montgomery, *Anne's House of Dreams* (A.L. Burt, New York, p.257)
- 2 Leland Ryken is the professor. Wheaton College is his college. He makes this point in his book, *The Word of God in English* (Crossway, 2002), p. 243. (This book is an excellent defence of the importance of respecting the intricacies of biblical literature.)

God's definition of forgiveness

Part 3

What if I don't feel like forgiving?

Daniel Wilson

Sometimes, I find driving by the rules of the road tedious and frustrating. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever been late for an appointment, when it seems that every traffic light is red and there are incompetent drivers at every roundabout? In such frustrating moments, I have often felt like ignoring the rules of the road. I felt like blasting straight through the red lights or going the wrong way around the roundabouts! But, what would happen if I took such risks? At the very least, I would endanger myself and

others on the road, but I could seriously hurt or kill someone! Even if I didn't hurt anyone, I would be breaking the law, and I don't think the police would respond kindly to my excuse. "Sorry, officer, I just didn't feel like stopping ..." I don't believe any law-abiding officer or judge would ever allow my "feelings" as a valid reason for breaking the law.

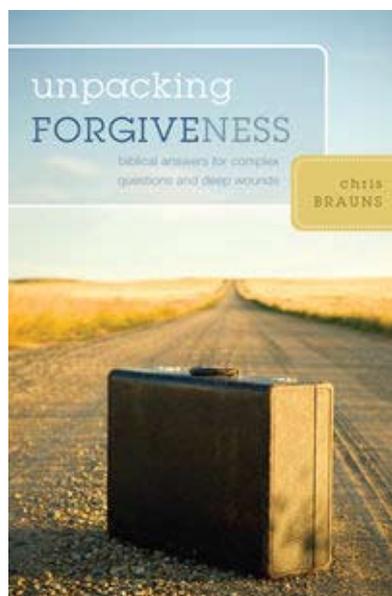
All of us readily admit that our feelings don't allow us to steal, speed, or murder. However, I fear we often use our feelings as an acceptable excuse to ignore our duty before God. How many times have you and I neglected private or family Bible reading because we didn't "feel" like it? We all have been lazy or negligent in spiritual duties at one time or another, but do we really think that the Judge of heaven and earth will just let our disobedience slide *because of our feelings*? And while breaking the law doesn't *necessarily* jeopardise our citizenship in New Zealand (or in God's kingdom), we will certainly face consequences when we disobey.¹ The same is true when we neglect to do our duty regarding forgiveness: there are consequences, for us and others.

We began this series by defining God's forgiveness, which helped us define how we are to forgive. Last month, we expanded on that definition to describe the basic practice of forgiveness: from covering in love to confronting our brother.

But, what if you don't *feel* like forgiving? Is that a valid reason to withhold forgiveness?

It can be very difficult to forgive someone who has sinned against you. Even in relatively small matters, it can be quite hard to let your feelings of frustration, hurt and bitterness go. The more grievous the offense, the more likely you are to question the offender's repentance and motives. You may feel like making him prove his sincerity. The more grievous the offense, the more people will naturally understand (and excuse) your unwillingness to forgive. In fact, with more grievous offenses, many psychologists and even pastors believe that forgiveness is optional. But as God's people, we dare not rest on the feelings which come naturally or on what most experts think.² Rather, we must look to God's Word to define our duty and practice regarding forgiveness.

In Luke 17:1-10, Jesus teaches, "*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.*" In those words, Jesus sums up the process that we already looked at briefly last time. But, He doesn't stop there. Jesus proceeds to define what **HE** means by "*if he repents.*" He doesn't explain that we only forgive when we see "true repentance" (which most people define as fruits of repentance, changed actions, true remorse, etc.). No, far from giving such stipu-



lations, Jesus says something radically different, “If he sins against you **seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.**” (emphasis mine) Jesus really raises the stakes by putting His instructions in the context of a seven time repeat offender. Even more striking, Jesus says, if he comes back **SEVEN** times in the same day and **SAYS**, “I repent,” then we are to forgive him.³ A person doesn’t have time to sincerely change or show true remorse if he is offending/repenting seven times in a day. It just isn’t possible. Therefore, we must forgive the one who offends us when he asks, not when he can prove he means it. We must forgive, even when we doubt his sincerity, and trust me, after four or five times in the same day, we would all definitely doubt an offender’s sincerity!

Now, this does NOT mean that sinners can just commit offenses seven times a day and get away with it because they say, “I repent.” *Not at all!* This passage is primarily intended to define what God requires of us in forgiveness, not to give excuses to the unrepentant. Many other passages define repentance and consequences for sin. Psalm 51 and Isaiah 55:6-9 define repentance as being a change of the mind, the attitude (emotions), and the will. Biblical repentance involves recognising sin as sin, changing your attitude toward that sin from desire to remorse, and turning from that sin to new obedience in Christ. In Luke 17, Jesus is teaching that we cannot stop to evaluate the quality of one’s repentance before granting forgiveness.

Like many of us, the disciples reacted incredulously to this, saying, “*Increase our faith!*” They understood what Jesus was saying, and they thought, “We need more faith before we can obey that command.” But, Jesus refused to allow the “not enough faith” argument to stand. Jesus rebuked them by pointing out that it only took faith the size of a mustard seed to uproot trees and throw them into the sea. What Jesus meant was that if you have any faith at all, you can obey His command about forgiveness. He proceeded in verses 7-10 to prove that such forgiveness is our duty before God. There Jesus described the situation of a servant who had been working all day ploughing or looking after sheep. When he came in from the field, the master would never allow the servant to sit down and relax and eat. Instead, the master requires the servant to prepare his food, and then serve it

to him. Only after the master has eaten may the servant eat and relax, and he is due no extra thanks or praise for this patient service – he has only done his duty. In fact, to neglect that duty in any way would be sinning against the master. It is easy to simply pass over that account as unimportant, and yet Jesus was pressing His disciples (and us) to understand that our duty is more important than our feelings. Imagine if you were that servant – having to cook for and serve your master after a hard day’s work in the field... every feeling in you would be screaming, “Forget the Master, and serve myself first – **I deserve** to eat first ...” But, the servant’s duty to his master is more important, and that is what Jesus wants us to understand about forgiveness as well. Forgive whether you feel like it

this debt, but then the unmerciful servant went and refused to forgive the debt of a fellow servant which was only a hundred denarii. When the king heard about it, he was furious and handed that servant over to the jailers (literally torturers) until he paid back all he owed. And Jesus concluded that parable with these words, “*This is how My heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.*” There are a few important elements to this story, which we must understand. *Firstly*, Jesus is speaking to the disciples and speaking about servants of the king – so, He is talking about what our heavenly Father will do to believers if they refuse to forgive. *Secondly*, the margins of your Bible probably say that the comparison of debts is millions to a few dollars. That is a correct scale between the two amounts, but it belit-

“It is more important to understand the seriousness of your sin before God and the seriousness of the sin of withholding forgiveness!”

or not, because if you refuse, you are sinning against *your* Master, God.

You might reply, “Ok, I see your point, but what about situations of rape and incest? Surely Jesus would make exceptions for extreme situations, right?” You may even be thinking, “Requiring forgiveness in cases of abuse/rape is belittling the seriousness of the situation!” It is never good to belittle sin, and that is why such replies are so dangerous. For they misunderstand the danger and implications of sinfully withholding forgiveness. We must not lose the Biblical perspective; God’s perspective is more important than our personal preference. In Matthew 18, Jesus teaches that it is not the seriousness of *the sin committed against you* that is most important; rather, it is more important to understand the seriousness of **your sin before God** and the seriousness of **the sin of withholding forgiveness!**

In Matthew 18, we find the parable of the unmerciful servant. There, Jesus describes a king’s servant who owed his master 10,000 talents. The king forgave

the smaller debt.⁴ The average wage for a day’s labour was one denarii. This means that the 100 denarii was not a small debt. It was roughly 1/3 of a year’s income. If the average Kiwi worker makes \$30-\$45,000 a year, then we are talking about a debt of \$10-15,000. That is no small debt. That is a debt big enough to hurt quite a bit. So, Jesus doesn’t intend to belittle the offense committed by the second servant. He only intends to direct us to understand the enormous debt that God has forgiven us, and how His forgiveness should lead us to show that same mercy to others! They may not *deserve* to be forgiven, but neither do you! *Furthermore*, by refusing to forgive, the unmerciful servant (the original offended party in this case) **becomes the abuser** by choking and imprisoning his fellow servant! In this, Jesus proves the necessity for believers to dutifully forgive, lest they be handed over to the torturers until they pay their own debt.⁵ Jesus is not being harsh in these verses; rather, He is warning us that refusing to biblically forgive leads to the torturous prison

of bitterness. All who are injured by grievous sin need this truth of Jesus to set them free (both offenders and offended). We need to understand that we become the offending party when we refuse to have a forgiving spirit, and that deadly unmerciful sin will harm us spiritually, emotionally and possibly even physically.

Jesus teaches that God requires forgiveness. We must cover offenses in love, or confront the offender in love – either way, God requires that we graciously offer to pardon those who sin against us, and to pursue reconciliation as far as it depends upon us. God’s forgiveness is a promise fulfilled by Christ - not a feeling. Therefore, we **can** obey and follow Christ in forgiving others, even when everything in us is screaming otherwise. Far from being a harsh requirement, God desires to see both sinners and those sinned against delivered from the bondage of sin, bitterness and fear. The peace and joy of God cannot be separated from His view of forgiveness. It is much like being tempted by some object of lust/covetousness. That object is so appealing, and nearly everything in us is calling for us to indulge our craving. But God commands us to reject those feelings and emotions. Instead we

must recognise that the house of the wayward woman leads to death and that covetousness kills.⁶ God’s perspective may go against the grain at times, but His way saves from the certain pain, suffering and death that sin always brings! Likewise, we must understand that while it is immensely appealing to withhold forgiveness, that sin will bring more pain and suffering to you than God’s way of forgiveness. It ultimately comes down to a matter of trust. Who do you trust more? You and your emotions and preferences? Or the infinite, eternal God, whose thoughts are light-years above yours?⁷

In this brief series, we have defined forgiveness and wrestled with many aspects of this very difficult topic. However, we have not covered every possible angle. Lord willing, in a few months, I plan to write one more article in a question and answer format to fill in the remaining gaps. Perhaps, you still have unanswered questions. If so, please write me an email or letter, and I will do my best to either answer you personally or address your question in the final article.⁸ Until then, I commend two worthwhile books to you: Chris Brauns’ book *Unpacking Forgiveness*, and Jay

Adams’ *From Forgiven to Forgiving*. May God sanctify us to reflect His mercy in Christ by the way we forgive others!

Notes

- 1 God gave the law to prevent such consequences. In fact, God gave His redeemed people the Law so that through serving Him, it might go well with them in the land He gave them (Deuteronomy 6:1-3, 17-18).
- 2 John 8:31-47, 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, and Ephesians 2:1-10 clarify that what comes naturally to mankind is not honouring to God.
- 3 The number seven is the biblical number of perfection. So, we aren’t given permission to withhold forgiveness the 8th time a person commits the same offense. In fact, I believe Jesus’ answer in Matthew 18:21-22 was in response to this very discussion.
- 4 A talent was 6,000 times bigger than a denarii. So, a talent would be about 19 years labour, which means that 10,000 talents would be essentially an infinite debt!
- 5 Read Chris Brauns’ helpful treatment of this in his book: *Unpacking Forgiveness*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008), 119-128.
- 6 Proverbs 5,6,7 and Romans 7.
- 7 Isaiah 55:8-9.
- 8 cdanielwilson@gmail.com

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Luther and the Reformation

Stephen J. Nichols

Martin Luther died within eyeshot of the font where he was baptised as an infant. During his life, he had come to see the entire Western world change. Born on November 10, 1483, Luther entered a world dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. By the time of his death, that institution was crumbling. That was due in no small part to the lawyer turned monk turned reformer. Luther pried open the lock that the Roman Catholic Church had on worship, the sacraments, religious life, and especially the gospel. He pointed the church back to its sure foundation of God’s word and the gospel, laying the foundation for the Protestant Reformation that would encompass Ulrich Zwingli’s efforts in Zurich, John Calvin’s in Geneva, and John Knox’s in Scotland.

“Who would have divined,” Luther re-

called later in life, “that I would receive a Bachelor’s and then a Master’s of Arts, then lay aside my [law] student’s cap and leave it to others in order to become a monk ... and that despite all I would get in the pope’s hair – and he in mine – and take a runaway nun for my wife? Who would have predicted this for me?”

No peace

His intense religious conscience might have indicated that he was headed for the monastery. His father, however, had other plans, working and sacrificing for his son to receive the best education of the day and enter the profession of law. Luther excelled in his studies and made his way quite well. But his spiritual anxieties seemed to dog him at every turn.

An early turning point in Luther’s life came as he traveled back to Erfurt, where

he had just taken his M.A. in law, after visiting his parents in Mansfield. A violent thunderstorm caught up with Luther. He took it to be the very judgment of God upon his soul. He clung to the only mediator he knew, or at least the only mediator he dared approach, St. Anne, the patron saint of miners, his father’s profession. He cried out, “Help me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk.” He survived the storm and made good on his vow. His troubles, however, did not find resolution in the monastery. In fact, Luther’s struggles intensified.

His wise abbot, Johann von Staupitz, recognised Luther’s potential for the church, if only the young monk could get over his struggles. He prescribed a pilgrimage to Rome, thinking that a visit to the Holy See would set all things right in Luther’s soul. What Luther found at Rome, amidst its hypocrisy and facade and chicanery, however, only further

disillusioned him. Staupitz next sent Luther to study theology. Luther would be so busy, Staupitz reasoned, that he wouldn't have time for his intractable self-examination.

Insurmountable obstacle

Again, the cure proved worse than the disease. As Luther earned another master's degree, this time in theology, received his doctorate, and began lecturing in theology, he was driven back to the writings of Augustine, and from there to Paul. What he found, at first, seemed to be an insurmountable obstacle: that he was unrighteous, and that the holy God demanded righteousness.

This plagued Luther much more than it did his contemporaries. They thought that God's standard of righteousness could be met by racking up enough merits, enough righteous deeds. But Luther knew it wasn't a matter of quantity, but of quality. We are sinners not merely in that we sin, but at the very root of our being. Sin isn't just a matter of what we do; it's a matter of who we are. And nothing we can do, even if we're saints, can overcome that. Luther saw no solution to the dilemma. He concluded that God demanded, like a tyrant, a righteousness that they could not give. He no longer feared God; now he hated him.

Church ineffective

Luther first tried to draw attention to the ineffective way the church was dealing with the problem of sin on October 31, 1517. The date is important. It was All Hallows' Eve, the day before All Saints' Day. On that day, pilgrims would file past the relics in the church and appeal to the excess merits of the saints, all in hopes of satisfying the righteous demands of God. Of course, this occurred every year, but this year was different.

Two things in particular converged. First, Luther's study had been leading him to very different conclusions than the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Second, an unprecedented sale of indulgences brought out Luther's ire. Pope Leo X was in dire need of money to pay for his lavish tastes, which included Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel. To raise money for the Pope, the enterprising monk Tetzel was hawking indulgences that claimed to forgive sins, past and future.

Luther could be "silent no more," in his own words. He posted his Ninety-Five Theses in the hopes of stirring a debate,

where the best minds could grapple with the problem of sin and the gospel. Leo X wasn't interested in a debate, especially a theological one. In fact, at first Leo X simply dismissed Luther. "The ramblings of a drunken German," he said, when he first read the Ninety-Five Theses, adding that Luther will "think differently when he sobers up."

The five "solas"

From 1517 until 1521, Luther was constructing the planks of Reformation theology: *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *solus Deo gloria*. When Luther was caught in that thunderstorm, his thoughts turned not to Christ, but to St. Anne. Luther came to realise, however, the futility in looking to another mediator. This led him to the conviction that humanity's only mediator is Jesus Christ – *solus Christus*.

He also changed his view of God, the righteous judge. The righteousness that God demands, he realised, is not active, but passive. In other words, it's not a righteousness that I earn, but one that was earned for me (by Christ). I am not justified in the sight of God by my works or merits, Luther argued, but by faith alone through grace alone – *sola fide* and *sola gratia*.

The principle of *sola Scriptura*, that Scripture alone is the church's final authority for faith and life, is a significant part of Luther's legacy. When he refused to recant at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he boldly asserted, "My conscience is held captive to the Word of God."

He was fond of saying, "We can spare everything, except the Word."

That leaves one final Reformation *sola*, *solus Deo gloria*. In Luther's day, only ecclesiastical positions were called "vocations" (callings). But Luther applied the word to all professions, and to the various roles that we play. Being a husband, son, or father, or being a wife, daughter, or mother was a calling. So too was being a farmer or miner. And so all of life could and should be lived for the glory of God alone.

The recent movie on Luther stops at 1530 and the Augsburg Confession, curiously just like the old black-and-white movie from 1955. This is understandable, to a certain extent. The time of "action" spans the years 1517 to 1530. But it's important to realise that Luther lived until 1546. By the end of his life, he had much cause for joy and much cause for sorrow. He had seen a child die as an infant, and he held his beloved twelve-year-old daughter's hand as she too passed from this world. He was villainised by former friends. All his life he remained an outlaw with a death penalty hanging over his head. He suffered, his constitution never quite recovering from his ascetic days as a monk. He was given to times of depression. And, like Jacob, he wrestled with God. All the while, he wrote prodigiously – his collected writings fill over one hundred volumes – preached five times a week, and labored to see the new church, the *Evangelische Kirche*, established for generations to come.



The sale of indulgences shown in A Question to a Mintmaker, woodcut by Jörg Breu the Elder of Augsburg, circa 1530. en.wikipedia.org

Pointed to Christ

It is fitting that we remember him this month on Reformation weekend, even 488 years after he posted his famous Ninety-Five Theses. He was truly larger than life. Yet it is most fitting that we remember him because he so ably pointed beyond himself to Christ.

Shortly after Luther's death, his friend, the artist Lucas Cranach, Jr., painted one more portrait of the Reformer. Cranach

has him in the pulpit of the castle church, Bible open, congregation looking on. What is most stunning, however, is the center. There Cranach painted Christ on the cross. As Luther preached, he preached Christ and him crucified. And his congregation did not see Luther, but instead saw Christ. Luther pointed the way to Christ. His life and his writings and the Reformation he led continue to do that. Reformation Day is cer-

tainly about history. It is also about the power of the gospel to break through the noise and static of the world and to point to Christ.

The author teaches at Lancaster Bible College and Graduate School. He is the author of Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought. Reprinted from New Horizons, October 2005.

Reformation – then and now

W. Robert Godfrey

"It may be safe to say that the greatest event for Christendom in the last 1500 years was the Protestant Reformation."¹ Professor John Murray spoke these words in his class lectures on justification in the mid-1960s.

At that time, forty years ago, it would have been hard to imagine anyone in a Reformed or evangelical church finding much that was exceptional about Murray's words. But today, in a world that would amaze him, the central doctrines of the Reformation are under attack, not only in liberal and ecumenical circles, but in the heart of evangelical and Reformed churches.

Contemporary criticisms of Reformation doctrine, it seems to me (a historian of the Reformation), usually arise from those who are not well acquainted with the theology of the Reformers, the concerns that motivated them, or the biblical foundations for their teaching. In this brief article, we cannot survey or answer all the critics. But we can take a quick overview of the fundamental convictions of the Reformers and see their continuing importance for the life of God's people and of our churches.

John Calvin's reflections on the Reformation are a good place to begin. In the course of his life, he wrote three important treatises defending and explaining the need for reform in the church. The first was a quite personal statement defending the reformation in Geneva, usually called *The Reply to Sadoleto* (1539). The second, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*

(1543), was written at the request of Martin Bucer for presentation to Emperor Charles V at a meeting of the imperial Diet. The third treatise, *The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church* (1548), was written in response to the imperial victories over the Protestant princes and the imposition of the Augsburg Interim requiring Protestant conformity to certain Roman Catholic practices.

While there are differences among these treatises, reflecting the different occasions on which they were written, they really speak with one voice, giving us Calvin's understanding of the basic concerns of the Reformation. These treatises show that for him the Reformation had five key concerns (not the traditional five points of Calvinism!). The first was that the Bible alone is the authority in the church for religious matters. The second was that the church must worship God purely, according to the Bible. The third was that justification is by grace alone through faith alone in the righteousness of Christ alone. The fourth was that the church must have a proper understanding of the two (and only two) sacraments instituted by Christ, baptism and the Lord's Supper. The fifth was that the true pastoral, teaching office must be restored in the church.

The Bible

The authority of the Bible as an utterly reliable and accessible source of all religious truth is foundational to Protestantism. The Reformation took its stand against the pretensions of Rome to make tradition an authority in addition to the

Bible and to make the pope the only ultimate arbiter of the meaning of the Bible and tradition. Calvin wrote, "Ours [is] the obedience which, while it disposes us to listen to our elders and superiors, tests all obedience by the Word of God; in fine, ours [is] the Church whose supreme care it is humbly and religiously to venerate the Word of God, and submit to its authority."² The Bible was not only a formal authority for Calvin. It was the vital and necessary authority in the life of God's people. In his Genevan Catechism, Calvin taught the way in which the Bible should be used:

If we lay hold on it with complete heartfelt conviction as nothing less than certain truth come down from heaven; if we show ourselves docile to it; if we subdue our wills and minds to his obedience; if we love it heartily; if having it once engraved on our hearts and its roots fixed there, so that it bring forth fruit in our life; if finally we be formed to its rule – then it will turn to our salvation as intended.³

Today the Reformation doctrine of Scripture is being undermined in some quarters by college and seminary professors and in other quarters by uneducated demagogues. Some professors contend that unless one possesses arcane knowledge of antiquity, one cannot understand the basic message of the Bible. At the other extreme, some arrogant demagogues contend that they alone, without education, really understand the Bible. Whether these claims rest on appeals to scholarship or appeals to the Spirit,

they deny the authority of the Bible. The church still needs to study and believe the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, understandable to careful, grammatical-historical interpretation. The church needs to love and study that Word, confident that it directs us in the truth that we must believe and live.

Worship

Calvin believed that one of the most serious deformations of the church in the medieval period was the corruption of worship. Worship had become idolatrous, with human inventions and creations replacing divine institutions. Worship had become man-centered, focusing on human actions and reactions. Against this corruption, Calvin insisted that worship must be directed by the Word of God alone:

I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, seated as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honour of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course?⁴

Protestant worship in our day has become a factory of musical, dramatic, and artistic invention. Singing the Word, praying the Word, and reading and preaching the Word are often viewed as inadequate to produce the experience of God that so many are seeking. Serious worship as the meeting of the covenant people with their God through his Word seems in retreat far and wide. Human wisdom in worship is replacing divine truth, just as it did in the Middle Ages. Those who love the Word need to restore worship according to the Word.

Justification

Murray, immediately after the words which began this article, stated:

What was the spark that lit the flame of evangelical passion? It was, by the grace of God, the discovery on the part of Luther, stricken with a sense of his estrangement

from God and feeling in his inmost soul the stings of his wrath and the remorse of a terrified conscience, of the true and only way whereby a man can be just with God. To him the truth of justification by free grace through faith lifted him from the depths of the forebodings of hell to the ecstasy of peace with God and the hope of glory. If there is one thing the Church needs today it is the republication with faith and passion of the presuppositions of the doctrine of justification and the reapplication of this, the article of a standing or falling Church.

Murray here testifies that the doctrine of justification stands at the center of our Christian faith and life. He stands with Luther on this matter. Murray sees that the centrality of justification

springs from a proper apprehension of how great our sin is and how dire our spiritual condition is outside of Christ. Murray, like Calvin and Paul, knew that only the imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness would enable sinners to stand before a perfectly holy God. Calvin wrote:

We maintain, that of what description soever any man's works may be, he is regarded as righteous before God, simply on the footing of gratuitous mercy; because God, without any respect to works, freely adopts him in Christ, by imputing the righteousness of Christ to him, as if it were his own.⁵

The Protestant doctrine of justification has been replaced in many modern evangelical circles with vague talk about



Statue of John Calvin. www.calvin500.com

loving Jesus and being converted. Ecu-
menical statements express ambiguous
sentiments that do not clearly uphold
the gospel. Even Reformed scholars who
have subscribed to Reformed confes-
sions seem not to understand the doc-
trine. As Murray rightly said, without the
biblical, Reformed truth of justification,
the church will fall. He was not talking
about the collapse of an institution, but
the collapse of the true church as the
bulwark of the truth.

Sacraments

In the medieval church, sacraments had
multiplied and become the center of
worship and Christian experience. The
art and ritual of the church supported
that excess, which the Reformers prop-
erly labeled idolatrous. The Reformation
returned to the two sacraments insti-
tuted by Jesus and sought to under-
stand them in their biblical meaning.
Calvin wrote:

*Christ instituted the Sacraments to
be not only symbols of the true re-
ligion, which might distinguish the
children of God from the profane,
but also evidences, and therefore
pledges of the divine favour toward
us. In Baptism, both forgiveness of
sins and the spirit of regeneration
are offered us; in the Holy Supper
we are invited to enjoy the life of
Christ along with all his benefits.*⁵

In many evangelical churches today,
the biblical sacraments are maintained
but marginalised. Instead of looking to
the visible and tangible signs that God
has given us to confirm and strengthen
his grace, churches have sought other
visible helps for the Christian life – again
following the pattern of medieval Chris-
tianity. In some places, the sacraments
have been removed from the Lord’s Day,
joined to other occasions of worship or
even made a family matter at home.

The church must again recapture the
scriptural teaching about the meaning
and value of the sacraments for her faith-
fulness and well-being. The sacraments,
like the faithful preaching of the Word,
are the church’s means of grace.

The Church

For Calvin, the Roman church had
become a tyrannical institution, binding
the consciences of members by doctrines
and practices of human invention:

As it was, therefore, our duty to
deliver the consciences of the faithful
from the undue bondage in which they

were held, so we have taught that they
are free and unfettered by human laws,
and that this freedom, which was pur-
chased by the blood of Christ, cannot
be infringed.⁷

Calvin not only opposed church
tyranny, but also sought to restore the
office of the minister or pastor in its bibli-
cal character. The opening of the Word
of God was at the heart of this office.
Calvin wrote: “No man is a true pastor
of the church who does not perform the
office of teaching.”⁸

But today many churches are led
by men who see the pastoral office in
terms of administration, pop psychology,
and entertainment. Seminaries are under
great pressure to train “leaders,” rather
than to educate preachers and teach-
ers of the Word of God. If preaching is
a means of grace – indeed, the central
means of grace – then the Reformation
was right that pastors must be faithful,
effective preachers, carefully educated
to understand, believe, and communi-
cate God’s Word.

The preaching of the Reformation
built churches with millions of members
which endured over centuries. The
pragmatists among us should note that
as churches in America, following the
advice of church-growth experts, have
moved away from faithful worship and
preaching, the church in America is
smaller and less influential than it was
forty years ago. We still need pastors who
will preach the law and the gospel.

Conclusion

We should not be unduly surprised by
the varied assaults on the biblical truth
that was recovered by the Reformation.
So it has always been, and so it always
will be until the return of our Lord. But
we must not minimise the seriousness
of Reformed churches failing to preach
Reformation truth with clarity and en-
thusiasm. We should ponder the sober-
ing yet inspiring words of John Owen,
written in 1682, only thirty-five years
after the completion of the Westmin-
ster standards:

*Let us take heed in ourselves of
any inclination to novel opinions,
especially in, or about, or against
such points of faith as those
wherein they who are gone before
us and are fallen asleep found life,
comfort, and power. Who would
have thought that we should have
come to an indifferency as to the
doctrine of justification, and quarrel*

*and dispute about the interest of
works in justification, about general
redemption, which takes off the
efficacy of the redeeming work of
Christ; and about the perseverance
of the saints; when these were the
soul and life of them who are gone
before us, who found the power
and comfort of them? We shall not
maintain these truths, unless we
find the same comfort in them as
they did But now it is grown
an indifferent thing; and the horrible
corruptions we suffer to be intro-
duced in the doctrine of justification
have weakened all the vitals of re-
ligion. Let us, for the remainder of
our days, “buy the truth, and sell
it not;” and let us be zealous and
watchful over any thing that should
arise in our congregations.*⁹

Notes

- 1 John Murray, *Collected Writings*, vol. 2 (Edin-
burgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 203.
- 2 John Calvin, *Reply to Sadoleto*, in *A Reformation
Debate*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Harper
and Row, 1966), p. 75.
- 3 *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, in
Calvin: Theological Treatises (Philadelphia: West-
minster, 1954), p. 130.
- 4 John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the
Church*, in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts
and Letters*, ed. H. Beveridge and J. Bonnet
(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), vol. 1, p. 128.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- 6 Calvin, *The True Method of Giving Peace to
Christendom and Reforming the Church*, in
Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters,
ed. H. Beveridge and J. Bonnet (Grand Rapids:
Baker, 1983), vol. 3, p. 274.
- 7 Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*,
p. 176.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- 9 John Owen, *The Duty of a Pastor*, in *Works*,
vol. 9 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968),
pp. 459-60.

*The author, a URC minister, is the
president of Westminster Seminary
California. Reprinted from New
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Focus on home

Harriet Haverland

Gleanings from our bulletins...

QUOTABLE "QUOTES"

"The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold on me." *Martin Luther*

"Christ comes with a blessing in each hand; forgiveness in one, holiness in the other." *A.W. Pink*

"A good character is the best tombstone. Those who loved you and were helped by you will remember you when forget-me-nots have withered. Carve your name on hearts, not on marble." *Charles H. Spurgeon*

I would think it a greater happiness to gain one soul to Christ than mountains of silver and gold to myself.

Matthew Henry

BIRTHS

Budding, Jack Joshua – a son born to Jan and Rhonda – 21 July (Masterton)

Smilde, Mark Ethan – a son born to Tjeerd and Louise – 26 July (Avondale)

PROFESSION OF FAITH

Dovedale: Anna Buter

Nelson: Nathan Borger

Pukekohe: Gwen Cook, Daniel Roberts

DEATHS

Bouman, Johanna – Mrs. Johanna Bouman passed into eternal glory on the 5th of August. Please keep the family in your prayers as they mourn their loss. (Christchurch)

Braakman, Sjaan – On Tuesday July 26, Sr Sjaan Braakman went home to be with the Lord. Please pray that the funeral of Sr. Sjaan Braakman may be of comfort and encouragement to her family and brethren and that as the gospel is heard, it may reach any present who might not know the Lord, according to His electing purposes (Silverstream).

Den Hartog, Henk – Our condolences to Coby den Hartog, and to Peter and Cathy and to the other family members on Henk's passing on the 29th of July. We are thankful that our brother is with the Lord, but our prayers and support go to Coby and the family at this time of loss. (Palmerston North)

Van der Laan, Annie – The Lord called our sister Annie van der Laan home. We rejoiced in God's goodness to her at a thanksgiving service. Let's pray that the gospel that was preached may produce fruit in the lives of those who heard. Annie was the oldest member of our church fellowship (Bishopdale).

Verbeek, Jim – completed his earthly pilgrimage on the 11th of August. He is now fully at rest in the Lord. Jim had been anticipating going home to be with the Lord and we are thankful that he is now with his Saviour. Please pray for the Huysden and Verbeek families at this time, that they might find hope and comfort in the ever-living Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Avondale)

MINISTERS AND CHURCH WORKERS

Pukekohe: Dear Church Family, Thank-you so much for the love you have shown us in welcoming us to Pukekohe. The house was well furnished, the pantry, fridge and freezer stocked, and our first meals provided for. All this allowed us to settle in very quickly. We are very much looking forward to this year with you. For us it will be a great year of learning and we hope that it will be a blessing for you also. Our home is open, so please feel free to pop in at any time. Christian love from *the Stoltes*.

To help welcome the Stolte family we will be having a Family-Lympics at the Recreational Centre. We have a great line up of physical and mental challenges including the ever-popular rag-hockey, and soccer with a twist. After that we are having a potluck Dinner and Dessert at the church.

Candidate **Craig van Echten** has received and accepted a call from CRCA Australind (WA) where Rev. Peter Kossen is the part-time pastor. We wish Craig the Lord's blessing as he begins his work there.

Dunedin: Before leaving Dunedin to

return to Belmont, North Carolina, Rev Moreau left this message for us: "I want to thank the entire church for your wonderful hospitality and fellowship and for the opportunity to lead in worship and to visit your beautiful country. Georgia and I will never forget our stay here, and whatever works out in God's good providence and wisdom, your church will always be on our hearts and prayers."

Palmerston North: Dear congregation, You have made us feel very welcome! The manse is beautiful, and we are amazed at all the details you thought of to prepare for our arrival (down to hand-soap and can openers!). We can't wait until our jet-lag wears off so we can have you over to our home and get into your homes! We look forward to what the Lord will do here in Palmerston North, and have very high hopes. When our phone is set up at home, please call us to say "hi". In the meantime, I'll be working on calling as many of you as I can to set up times to meet with you to get to know you. Nathan and Melissa Ketchen

A very special welcome to **Nathan and Melissa Ketchen** and the children. It is wonderful to have you with us (in Palmerston North) and we hope and pray that you settle in quickly and make all the adjustments (including driving on the wrong side of the road!).

CHURCH PLANTING

Christchurch: Worship services at the Rangiora preaching post have begun. A work North of the Waimak has been on the Session agenda for several years, and so it is with a sense of excitement and anticipation that the journey continues. Please be in prayer for this work, for unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Prayer points:

- that our Lord would be glorified through the work
- that the Lord would make those who have been invited responsive to coming to worship and accepting hospitality
- that we would see the power of the gospel demonstrated in people coming to faith
- that there would be ongoing unity amongst all involved in the work
- that we would have wisdom as we

seek to progress the work in the months ahead.

Let us give generous thanks to God for the work done so far, for the privilege of being his servants, and for the joy we share in our Lord Jesus Christ.

MISSIONS

Dunedin: In the last few years we have

been sponsoring Andrew and Kate as they seek to further the cause of the gospel in China. We have opportunity to hear something of their work as they visit us. Do plan to come to the church hall to be encouraged and to encourage our speakers.

Silverstream: In response to the call to again serve at the OPC Mission station

in Mbale – with a very familiar job description as to what that entails – we go with the full support of Silverstream congregation, backed up by our own Canberra session and congregation, for a period which could extend to 9 months. As on past occasions, we want to express our gratitude for the continued support of our brethren (financially, and in prayer), and look forward to maintaining regular contact with you during the months ahead ... God willing. There is One Who has promised to never let us go, and bring us safely home – together – in His good time. Praise be His Name! With our love in the Lord, Barry and Anne James

ACTS OF SERVICE

Bucklands Beach: Bravery Award Investiture Ceremony – On Wednesday, July 27th, a number of us joined John and Miriam Mulder at the investiture ceremony at Government House (Auckland) to witness the awarding of the New Zealand Bravery Star (NZBS) to Anthony Walter Mulder (posthumously) by the Governor General, the Right Honourable Sir Anand Satyanand. Anthony's award was received in connection with six others, including a similar one to Antony McClean and a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) to Elim principal, Mr R Murray Burton. Both Anthony Mulder and Antony McClean (teacher), tied a weaker, less water-competent student to themselves in order to help them try and cross the flood-swollen river. The Governor General described the awards as 'bitter-sweet' – a feeling that we all shared. We were and remain thankful for and proud of Anthony for his selfless act. John Miriam, Marcus, Lauren and family: Anthony is indeed a true hero! We are proud that he was one of ours.

Christchurch Reformed Churches Earthquake Relief Fund have now purchased a vehicle to transport elderly members of Maranatha Homes to church.

CLASSES and COURSES

Avondale: Adult Education Class – "Why We Need a Modern Reformation". What could the historical event of the Reformation of the church in the 16th century have to teach us in Auckland, New Zealand in the 21st century? Is the Reformation over? Are the biblical teachings of men like Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and many others, simply the dusty old relics of a by-gone age? In our

Auckland men's presbytery day

The following is a brief report on the "Men's Presbytery Day", which is an annual event hosted by the member churches of the Auckland Presbytery. This year's meeting was hosted by and held in the Pukekohe Reformed Church on the 6th of August, 2011. The event got off to a good start, at around 8.30 a.m., with a cup of tea or coffee for those who needed refreshment after traveling to Pukekohe from far and wide. The meeting was opened by the Rev. John Haverland, at 9.00 a.m., with singing and prayer and, of course, with the introduction of the speaker, Dr. Peter Reynolds.

The message presented by Dr. Reynolds was taken from the inspired writings of Solomon, entitled The Book of Proverbs, with reference to other passages. The prologue to the Book of Proverbs comprises its *Purpose and Theme*. Within a few brief verses, namely chapter 1, verses 2 and 3, Solomon declares its purpose to be:-

'for attaining wisdom and discipline',

'for understanding words of insight',

'for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life',

'for doing what is right and just and fair';

in brief, to give moral instruction to all of us, but especially to the young people.

On referring to chapter 10 verse 1, which reads: "A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother", Dr. Reynolds made it clear that the overall theme of the proverbs was the contrast between *Good and Evil, Wisdom and Folly*. He used this passage to illustrate our relationships with our parents, siblings, spouses and families, our friends and neighbours, at school or at work.

Dr. Reynolds' discourse, which was spiritually edifying, was presented in such a manner that was comprehensible to all present and, without doubt, left little room for ambiguity. The first part of the two-part lesson ended at approximately 10.00 a.m., and continued half an hour later after a morning "tea break".

The last 15 to 20 minutes of the meeting, prior to the lunch break, was allocated to representative members of the various presbyteries who gave brief reports on the activities and aspirations of their assemblies for the future. One member expressed the desire for more men to attend these meetings.

A very nourishing lunch was provided and served by the ladies of the Pukekohe congregation at 12.30 p.m., which gave the men ample opportunity to catch up and have a "chin-wag" with old friends and to get acquainted with new ones.

The meeting concluded after lunch; and the more than one hundred men of all ages departed for their homes, spiritually and physically well-fed. Without fear of contradiction, I would like to add that a very informative and pleasant time was had by all. I'm sure that I can speak for everyone present when I express our thanks, firstly to Dr. Peter Reynolds, secondly to the organisers and the pianist, and last, but by no means least, to the ladies (great and small) for the nourishing food and drink provided and served by them, all of which were a great source of blessing. Thank you.

David W. Hill

Member of the Pukekohe congregation.

modern world, have we *progressed* well beyond the basic matters of faith and the rallying cries of the historic reformation like Scripture alone (the Bible is the absolute final authority for faith and life), Grace alone (salvation, in its entirety, is a work of God's sovereign Spirit), Christ alone (there is no other Saviour or path to the Father except through the person and work of Jesus), Faith alone (we are not saved by anything we do, but simply through faith in the One who has done it all), and God's glory alone (our passionate desire is for God to be glorified and not man)? Is this old news ... or forgotten news? Are these biblical truths really worth dying for? They were in the 16th century ... and they should be today. Join us as we consider why we need a modern reformation!

Hamilton: New Study Group start-up to look at our biblical worldview – In a recent study, the Barna Research Group revealed a stunning statistic that continues to reverberate throughout the evangelical world. Only 9 percent of professing Christians have a biblical worldview. Because of this, today's believers live very similarly to non-believers. A personal sense of significance is rarely experienced, we spend our money and time on things that fail to satisfy and we begin to wonder what life's ultimate purpose really is. We are, in short, losing our bearings as a people and a nation. The Truth Project is a DVD-based small group curriculum, published by Focus on the Family, comprised of 13 one hour lessons taught by Dr. Del Tackett. This home study is the starting point for looking at life from a biblical perspective. Each lesson discusses in great detail the relevance and importance of living the Christian worldview in daily life. We'd like to watch and listen to this series together as Reformed people and discuss how we can apply these lessons in our daily lives and in short fill the gaps in our own views on the world around us.

Wellington: Lord willing, we hope to have Peter and Margaret Reynolds conducting a marriage seminar based at our church on Friday 7th and Saturday 8th of October. Time spent reflecting on your marriage is an investment in one another and a gift of the ongoing faithfulness and love you promised your spouse on your wedding day.

ACTIVITIES

Avondale: Mark the weekend of 28-

30 October on your calendar! We will be having a Reformation Celebration weekend. This will be an opportunity to celebrate our roots and Christian heritage in the Reformation which was a time in church history when the church of the Lord Jesus was called back to the Scripture as her ultimate authority for faith and life. We will celebrate the great biblical truths that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone! Friday evening, 28 October, we will enjoy a special service of worship as we gather with reformed believers from various churches around Auckland, while on Saturday, 29 October; we will have a Reformation Celebration family fun night with food, games, drama, and more. This will be for all ages. Put these dates on your calendar and plan to be there!

North Shore: Our Cadet Club is having its annual garage sale in October. Please support us by setting aside saleable items over the next 3 months. Things that sell well include: clothing, furniture, kitchen items, toys, books, tools, plants ... in fact you'd be surprised at what we can sell! We are fundraising for several things: our mission project: Su'u School in the Solomon Islands, National Camp and our Big Day Out.

Hello guys and gals!!! There is going to be a Barn Dance. Come dressed in

Western style if you so desire. Come whether you can dance or not. Please bring snacks and soft drinks along to share.

Pukekohe Soccer Tournament: Two weeks ago the Youth ran an Indoor Soccer Tournament for the Auckland Presbytery. There were 10 teams including two from Wellington. The event ran smoothly with Silverstream winning the trophy. Thank you to everyone in the congregation who assisted in running the event. We really appreciated your help on the BBQ, as referees, driving the trucks, and those who came to show support. *Youth Group Committee*

Silverstream, Wainuiomata and Wellington Ladies are having a Ladies Night Out. We will be going 10 Pin Bowling and out for coffee afterwards.

South Island Youth: Attention All Youth! This is an advance notice for the South Island Snow Trip! Keep Saturday free for a time of Skiing, Snowboarding, Fun and Fellowship with youth from all over the South Island! We will be going to Porters Pass ski field.

Wellington: "Guess Who's Coming For Dinner" is getting closer, an evening of fun and fellowship! The posters are up, the forms are out, and we now just need your RSVP's!

Book in focus

The Whole Counsel of God, vol. 1, God's Mighty Acts in the Old Testament

by Richard C. Gamble.

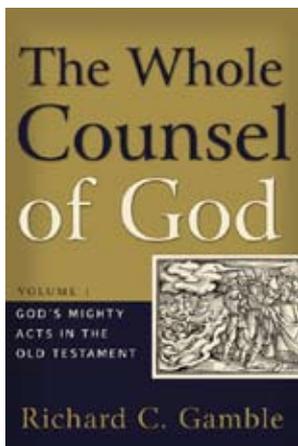
P&R. Reviewed by Stephen J. Tracey

This book is about God's Great Deeds (*Magnalia Dei*). It is the first in a projected three volume series. Dr. Gamble sees his book standing in line with such stalwarts as Calvin's *Institutes*, Owen's *Biblical Theology*, Wistius's *Economy of the Divine Covenants*, and Vos's *Biblical Theology*. His aim is "to continue discussions of the relationship between exegesis and hermeneutics, and the interpretations of biblical, systematic, and historical theology" (xxxiii). Gamble says: *The Whole Counsel of God will attempt to meet the need for a comprehensive*

theology that is attuned to the methodological advantages of biblical theology, but will also combine that advantage with the strengths of historical and systematic theology. (xxxiii)

Dr. Gamble is certainly aiming high. In one sense it is difficult to assess if he hits the mark because only one-third of the work has been published. That first third of the series, volume one, focuses on the Old Testament. The second volume will cover the New Testament, and the third will "track the church's theological development in its understanding and explication of the Bible's teaching through the centuries" (xxxiii).

In this review I will restrict myself to examining whether or not Dr. Gamble moves towards his target in his treatment of the Old Testament. Before launching into the body of his work, Gamble gives a



lengthy introduction (Part 1, 1-142) covering the following topics: "The Nature and Method of Theology," "How Shall We Structure Systematic Theology?" "The Idea of Systematic Theology," and "An Old Testament Theology." I found these sections very helpful. Particularly strong is the critique of "three prevailing models" of systematic theology: the biblical theology school, the practical school, and the missiological school. This discussion was not only informative, but, with Gamble's feast of footnotes, directs the reader to many more fruitful fields. He then provides a comprehensive and capable introduction to Old Testament theology. I am sure that not all will agree with his arguments in several areas of Part 1, but it is a well-written and informative introduction nonetheless.

What I expected, or perhaps hoped for, in the remainder of the book was an exciting tour through exegesis of key Old Testament texts, with an assessment of their place in the flow of bib-

lical revelation and an injection of key doctrinal subjects to be picked up later in New Testament theology, historical theology, and systematic theology. That is, more or less, what we get in Parts 2 and 3. These sections form the bulk of this first volume.

Part 2 (145-309) deals with "Revelation from Adam through the Flood." This section is packed with ripe fruit. Gamble covers the debate over the interpretation of the days of creation, creation itself, the nature of revelation, God and evil, the imputation of Adam's sin, and various other aspects of Old Testament theology relating to humanity. He also carefully introduces the subjects of revelation and covenant.

Part 3 (313-473) examines "Revelation from Abraham to Moses." Gamble concentrates on the Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant, with a useful introduction to the nature of God's law. This section ends with a helpful discussion of ecclesiology in the Pentateuch.

Part 4 (477-665) looks at the "Prophetic and Wisdom-Poetic Era of Revelation." Gamble has brief notes on each of the remaining books in the Old Testament. The fruit in this section is not as ripe or seasoned as the previous sections. Several biblical books have only a page or two of notes, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. For a book dealing with the whole counsel of God to cover the exegetical and biblical theology of the major prophets with such brevity is disappointing. Perhaps it would have been wiser for Gamble to give a separate volume to Part 4, in order to trace

out the rich themes of progressive revelation after Moses. The deepening theme of the new covenant bursting forward with the increasing clarity of messianic revelation is confined to six pages under the title, "Theology in the Prophetic Era" (626-31). This little section glances at the doctrine of the covenant and ecclesiology during the prophetic era. In comparison to the weighty Mosaic section, this is lacking in depth.

Part 5 (669-83) seems to stand as merely a postscript, "God's People Respond to the Magnalia Dei." Faith and justification are briefly summarised without any reference to the ongoing debate with the New Perspective on Paul. This is surprising given the importance of several Old Testament texts in this debate such as Genesis 15 and Daniel 9. Perhaps the debate with Tom Wright is waiting, like several other issues, for volume 3.

This book will certainly be of use to students beginning to work their way through biblical theological issues. As an introduction to Old Testament theology, this volume is strong in Mosaic revelation and disappointing on the rest of the Old Testament. We must wait for the other buds to bloom before we can assess the success of this bold undertaking.

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Ordained Servant Online, May 2011.

Missions in focus

NEEDING JESUS more than anything else

Albert J. Tricarico, Jr.

"The problem with Karamoja," a man in Entebbe told me, "is that the people are not civilised. They wear no clothes, raid for cows, and kill people. Ah, those Karimojongs!" This was the response I recently received when I said that I live

in Karamoja. It was not the first time I had heard such a thing. He went on to suggest the two things that will help the Karimojong people most: education and disarmament. "Take all their guns, and put the children in school." That was his program for change.

When I tell people who live in other

parts of Uganda that I am from Karamoja, I am sometimes not believed. People laugh. "You can't live there." "They will shoot you." "They will eat you." These are some of the things I have been told. Usually it is a look of utter shock that I see on the faces of the people whom I tell.

It is true that there is a history of violence in the region. Karamoja's reputation is deserved, though it is exaggerated. The Karimojong live in remote, north-eastern Uganda. They love to accumulate cows. Their practice of cattle raiding is well known. In the past, they openly rejected efforts to bring education to the region. Not long ago, many moved about without clothes. Some still do.

The people, apart from grace, are enslaved to the sins of drunkenness, stealing, lying, violence, idleness, and jealousy. Polygamy is widely practiced. Animism is their faith, and superstitions of various kinds have captured their hearts and direct their conduct.

And ... they are just like you and me.

But by the grace of God

"But by the grace of God I am what I am," wrote the apostle (1 Cor. 15:10). What is good is produced by grace. People who are mastered and harmed by sin have only one hope – Jesus Christ. Sin is the great equaliser; we are all in trouble and need help. The gospel is the universal hope for recovery from sin's destructive program. Praise God for the inexpressible gift of his son! (2 Cor. 9:15).

This is why the Orthodox Presbyterian Uganda Mission is committed to Word-based ministry, combined with works of mercy. We in the Mission want to love our neighbours in many ways, which is why we have a clinic, a farm, and a workshop. It is why we drill wells, teach literacy, and deliver community health instruction. But at every turn we want to love people in the very best way. Above all else, the Karimojong people need Jesus. We have Jesus, and we want to give him to them.

But how is the work to be done? Where does the Mission go? How are venues for ministry chosen? How long do you work in one field before the time comes to move to another? These are questions we asked over ten years ago, when we began our work here, and we still ask them. The opportunities for ministry are as vast as the needs of the people are deep. The openness of the Karimojong to have us in their midst and to listen to our message is amazing. They love to welcome us! So how do you choose? How do you go about the work?

There is more than one approach to these questions. Right now, there are eight villages that host Bible studies

and/or gospel preaching on a regular basis: Nakaale (our home village), West Kopetatum, East Kopetatum, Moruathia, Atedeoi, Akuyam, Namalu, and Nakathian. Other places, like Okudud and Namorupus, are visited occasionally. Each village ministry is unique and has its own story. The villages are at different stages of development as well. We have, on occasion, made the difficult decision to "shake off the dust" (Matt. 10:14) and discontinue a work that does not appear to bear fruit. Here are a few profiles of works currently on our list.

From Nakaale to Namalu

In Nakaale, there is a congregation of seventy-five people under the care of the Mission. As the Mission's first preaching venue, it naturally developed into something of a "home church" for the missionaries. The church meets across the path from the residential compounds in a structure built by the Mission. We expect that this work will continue to develop, and we pray for God's provision of indigenous leaders to shepherd the flock.

About seven years ago, some of the people worshipping in Nakaale asked the Mission to start meetings in Kopetatum – a village about two kilometers away. It seemed wise to do this, and so to this day we conduct Sunday worship services and Friday afternoon studies in that village. The work is small and we review it from time to time, wondering about its viability.

Last year, a Kopetatum man named Mariko participated in our work-for-food program. He requested that we come to his place, known as East Kopetatum. This has become a regular meeting place on Fridays and some Sundays, and we have enjoyed some of the richest interactions there. When the time comes for local leaders to take up some of the work, perhaps Mariko will be among them.

In 2007, we conducted a weeklong evangelistic effort in Nakathian, the home of a secondary school where some students in the church attend. Two of the men present that week joined our readers' fellowship, which meets once a month on a Saturday morning. At that meeting, we read Bible lessons in Karimojong with friends from various villages and encouraged the men to take the lessons home to their people. While meetings at the original location in Nakathian have stopped, another ministry emerged from our time there.

We asked the two Nakathian men (Abram and Francis) where they thought we should go next. Without hesitation, they suggested Okudud, a new village about twenty kilometers south of Nakaale. We brought the gospel to the people there for a week. The next year we drilled a well for them. Since that time, we have had gospel meetings there on the Lord's Day. The first time I visited after the well was finished, I opened the meeting with the question, "How do you like the water?" I had to wait quite a while for the applause to



Tricarico and people clapping.

subside before bringing the Word to them. We have had as many as one hundred people come to meetings in Okudud.

Our work in the town of Namalu (ten kilometers from Nakaale) is unique. We labour there in connection with an established church and its pastor, Rev. Zachary Emuron. Emuron (as he likes to be called) is a strong believer and an ally of the Mission. He helped us translate our gospel booklet and loves to have us come and preach in the congregation he serves. We do this once a month. On Tuesdays, we join him for literacy and health instruction (provided by Martha Wright and Leah Hopp),

along with Bible teaching.

We don't know what this relationship will produce, but we are praying that the Mission's influence there, along with the significant ministry that Emuron has to us, will continue to unite us. Perhaps, as the Lord wills, he will join us in more formal ways in the future.

So, sometimes we meet a person who invites us to come to his village. Sometimes there are connections made with members of the church, students we support, or neighbours who inquire. Sometimes a request comes from someone who has been helped by our diaconal ministry. Sometimes a location is identified for drilling a well, and we

conduct meetings in connection with that. Sometimes an idea comes to us, and sometimes we ask friends within our sphere of ministry what they think. These are some of the ways that God has led us to bring the gospel to particular Karimojong villages.

Looking to the future

Of all the groups, the most mature is the one meeting in Nakaale. We have identified a number of men over the years as potential leaders, but are disappointed that all but one of them have left us. Presently we do have two young men translating for us who may be candidates for leadership one day. We pray to that end and invite you to do the same. We also enjoy the fellowship of a Kenyan brother who is a strong believer and has recently begun teaching in the church.

The rest of the groups are at various levels of infancy, with potential leaders present in some of them. The work in Karamoja is, at this stage, very much a seed-planting work. We continue to look for the best opportunities, and plead with the Lord to favour our labours with a harvest of righteousness for his name's sake.

I told the Entebbe man that I believe in education. I oppose violence and the use of illegal weapons. I also told him that education and disarmament will not bring about the change that matters most. The Karimojong need Jesus more than anything else. They need to turn from their idols and serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9). They need to discover the delights of living under a kind master. They need to long for heaven while they live in righteousness, peace, and joy until heaven comes. He did not seem to disagree.

Please pray for the Lord's blessing on the proclamation of his gospel in Karamoja. We long to see people refreshed by grace and committed to holiness. We want to proclaim Jesus faithfully and live for Jesus. We want the Karimojong to see themselves as God sees them – sinful, broken, needy, and loved. We want the name of Christ to be known, treasured, and glorified. Please send large prayers to heaven, not only for Karamoja, but also for Mbale, our other mission fields, and for the harvest around the globe.

Mr Albert J. Tricarico, Jr. is an OP missionary to Uganda, labouring in Karamoja, New Horizons, May 2011.



Tricarico speaking under tree.



Tricarico speaking in church.