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Jeremiah, the weeping prophet

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Editorial

Over the last couple of months in my morning devotions I have been wading through the Old Testament prophets as a supplement to my New Testament readings. It has been quite a mission starting with Isaiah and going all the way through to Malachi. At the time of writing this, I am anticipating the end of my journey through the prophets, and the Old Testament, by starting the book of Habakkuk, thus embarking on the last few books at the end.

I certainly consider reading the OT prophets a journey, and one that is well worth taking. It takes you through the high and low periods of the nation of Israel and of its neighbours. It shows you Yahweh, who is God Almighty, as the God who visits His people and calls them to live with Him in covenant faithfulness. You witness His wrath upon His idolatrous people and His judgements and vengeance against the enemies of Israel and the unbelieving nations of the world. It all seems rather dark doesn't it?

Yet, there is more! There are those moments when the LORD God reveals His amazing grace. Yes, grace! There is grace in the OT – times when the Lord promises the restoration of His people whom He loves. He speaks tenderly and lovingly to them and gives them true hope and confidence in His salvation. "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God. "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, That her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins." (Isaiah Is 40:1-2)

The prophets make for very interesting and edifying reading. I do recommend the "major" as well as the "minor" prophets for your consideration.

Our contributors have provided four excellent articles which deal with the life and times of Jeremiah – the weeping prophet.

Mr Michael Willemse surveys who the prophets were.

Mr John Haverland gives us an overview of the prophecy of Jeremiah.

Mr Erik Stolte writes personally about the man, Jeremiah.

Mr John Goris delves into the historical and political history of the times.

Mrs Sally Davey reflects on the plight of Christians in Iraq.

Mr Nelson Kloosterman celebrates the legacy of Herman Bavinck.

Mrs Harriet Haverland gleanes interesting bits'n pieces from around the churches.

Mr John S Shaw (general secretary of the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension in the OPC) talks about outreach.

*"Becoming a Christian is not making a new start in life;
it is receiving a new life to start with."*

John Blanchard

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Who were the Old Testament prophets?

Michael Willemse

Introduction

The Old Testament prophets are somewhat mysterious figures. They often appear on the scene, with little introduction, to proclaim a thundering “Thus says the LORD!” to His people and, sometimes, to the surrounding nations. Who were these men and how did they come to be prophets of Yahweh? And how are we to understand their task?

Answering these questions will be very helpful to us as we read the Old Testament. But it will also be very helpful in understanding our role as Christians today. After all, in Christ, we are all *prophets* as well as priests and kings.

For the purposes of this article, we will confine ourselves to looking at the more prominent prophets. The Old Testament also speaks about men who belonged to the “company of prophets” but they are a topic for another day.

Sent by the LORD

The prophets were men directly called by God. The calls of a number of them are recorded explicitly for us. Moses was called while tending his father in law’s sheep at Horeb (Exodus 3 & 4). Samuel was called as a boy in the temple (1 Samuel 3). Isaiah’s call is recorded at length in Isaiah 6. Jeremiah was set apart from birth and called to prophesy at about age 20 (Jeremiah 1:5ff). Ezekiel was called while he was in exile in Babylon (Ezekiel 1 & 2).

In some cases, God’s call comes in the context of a vision or a dream (Numbers 12:6). Isaiah and Ezekiel are both given overwhelming visions of God in His splendour. Sometimes God’s call comes “out of the blue.” Amos was a sheep breeder when “the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me

‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” But what is clear in each case is that these men were appointed by the LORD – they do not take this role on themselves.¹

God’s spokesmen

The prophets were not only appointed by the LORD – they were to speak *His word*. Many times we read “the word of the LORD came to ...” (e.g. 1 Kings 18:1; 21:17) and often the message itself is introduced with the formula “This is what the LORD says” (e.g. 1 Kings 20:42; 21:19). By contrast, God condemns false prophets because “they have run with *their message*” (Jeremiah 23:21) and “they lead my people astray with *their reckless lies*” (Jeremiah 23:32.)

A prophet is one who stands in the council of the LORD (Jeremiah 23:18; 1 Kings 22:19-20), hears God’s word and proclaims it to His intended audience. God illustrates this principle when he says to Moses “I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet” (Exodus 7:1). In Deuteronomy 18:18, God says “I will put my words into [my prophet’s] mouth.” The people are to accept those words as God’s words – if they do not listen and obey, God Himself will call them to account! (Deuteronomy 18:19.)

But although the prophets are given God’s words to speak, they are not mere parrots or megaphones. Each brings the word of the LORD in a way consistent with their own education and experience; often showing interests and using examples consistent with their background. Ezekiel, as a priest, shows a great familiarity with the temple and, indeed, much of his message has to do with the temple. Amos (a tree tender / sheep breeder) speaks of the Amorites “tall as cedars and strong as oaks” (2:9) and of Israel’s survivors “As a shepherd saves from the lion’s mouth only two

leg bones or an ear so will the Israelites be saved” (3:12.) God’s word comes to His people through the personality of the prophet.

It is worth saying, at this point, that the prophets are to be God’s witnesses. Although their message calls for a response, their success is not measured by this. They are simply called to faithfully proclaim God’s word and bear witness to Him.

Culture interpreters

At first glance, the message of the prophets can seem somewhat obscure, the sins they identify relatively minor (in some cases) and the punishments pronounced by God rather extreme. But, on closer examination, it is clear that they prophesy against a particular – and clearly delineated – background which

“When the prophets speak about God’s impending judgement of His people, they are testifying that God is faithful to His promises.”

is immensely helpful in coming to grips with their message.

The LORD's prophets are *covenant messengers*². Even though they may not specifically speak about covenant, they address God's people as those who are in a covenant relationship with Yahweh. In Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, God had explained to His people how His covenant relationship with them would work. Because He loved them and was at work for their good, He would confirm right covenant living by blessing them abundantly; and He would respond to covenant unfaithfulness by cursing them in specific ways.³ The prophets, therefore, interpret their culture in the light of God's covenant: they evaluate the people's attitude to God by their

animals (Malachi 1:7-8), failure to tithe (Malachi 3:8-10), perversion of justice and so on.

Not only do the prophets highlight covenant sins – they also proclaim covenant consequences. Sometimes we think that God loses His temper with His people because of their disobedience, and that the prophesied punishments are a 'tit for tat' reaction on His part. In fact, when the prophets speak about God's impending judgement of His people, they are testifying that God is *faithful* to His promises. So, when the prophets condemn the behaviour of God's people and warn about His coming judgement, they always do so in terms of the covenant curses. They prophecy famine, infertility, disease, drought, oppression

mostly they do), the prophets' words still testify to God's faithfulness and justice – even in punishing His own people.

Always counter-cultural

What is striking in reading the prophets is that their message almost always stands in stark contrast to the perception of God's people. Ezekiel, for example, prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in a climate where the people are up-beat and believe that their current troubles will be short-lived – and that God would never allow the temple to be destroyed. Then, when the temple falls and the spirits of the Israelites dive and their outlook for the future becomes bleak, the LORD's message through Ezekiel becomes positive and speaks of future restoration. In both instances – when Ezekiel prophesies judgement and then restoration – his message is directly contrary to the prevailing sentiment of the people.

Bringing a strongly counter-cultural message was challenging for the prophets, but it was made worse by the fact that many of them prophesied in a climate in which there were many false prophets bringing messages that the people's itching ears wanted to hear – and doing so in Yahweh's name. The prophets' task was no easy one – God even warned some of them that their words would fall on deaf ears (e.g. Jeremiah 7:27). Ezekiel was even told that the people regarded him as a sort of frivolous entertainment (Ezekiel 33:32)! No wonder many of them were reluctant, as Moses was, to take up this work or complained about their lot, as Jeremiah did.

In many cases, because the hearts of the people had become so hard, the prophets were called to act out God's message in physical ways so that the people's curiosity would be aroused and they would be prompted to ask what the act signified. Ezekiel had to lie on his side for more than a year to symbolise the siege of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 4 & 5), and was not allowed to mourn when his wife died suddenly (Ezekiel 24:15ff). Isaiah went around stripped and barefoot for three years (Isaiah 20). In these and other ways, the LORD sought to appeal to His people when they no longer listened to His words.

The prophets were called to stand fairly and squarely on God's side and to proclaim His word – come what may (Jeremiah 1:7-8). But God also specifically equipped them for their task by putting His Spirit on them and giving them strength to stand against the op-



Jeremiah, proclaiming God's judgement and faithfulness.

obedience to God's law or lack of it; and they evaluate God's attitude to His people by whether they are experiencing His blessings or His curses.

The sins the prophets identify are covenant sins. For example, Amos begins by condemning the surrounding nations for crimes against humanity (1:3-2:3) but, when he gets to Judah and Israel, he condemns them for covenant violations – idolatry, rejection of God's law, oppression of the righteous, the poor, the prophets and the Nazirites (2:4-12.) Other prophets also include covenant violations such as Sabbath-breaking (Ezekiel 20:21), not practicing the Sabbath year (2 Chronicles 36:21), cloaking violence with empty worship (Isaiah 1:11-15), sacrificing blemished

by their enemies and finally, exile, if the people continue in their unfaithfulness (c.f. Deuteronomy 28:15-68). These punishments are not God 'lashing out' at a people who have 'ticked him off' but a reminder that, even when God's people are unfaithful, He will remain faithful – "if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:13).

The prophets' words were intended to cause the people to consider their ways and return to God (e.g. Amos 4's refrain "I gave you ... but you have not returned to me"). Thus God's promised punishment was an instrument of His *grace* and the prophets' warnings are a call to be faithful as God is faithful. If the people refuse to heed the prophets (and

“Whether people listen or not, we are called with our words – and our lives – to bear witness to God’s Name.”

position of His people – “Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land ... They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you” (Jeremiah 1:18-19 c.f. Ezekiel 3:9.)

Forth tellers and foretellers

Many times prophecy is understood as predicting the future. This is certainly an element in the message of the Old

Testament prophets, but their work is perhaps best understood as “forth telling” – taking the word the people already had and applying it relevantly to their day. God, through the prophets, helped His people to see themselves in the light of His covenant, to see the consequences of their unbelief and rebellion, and called them to return to Him and so be part of His promised restoration. Clearly, a part of this message will always lie in the future – ultimate restoration comes in the new heaven and the new earth when God’s dwelling is with man (Revelation 21:3-4). But how God’s people respond to His word also has implications for the present – when the people listened to Micah’s prophesy “did not the LORD relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he pronounced against them?” (Jeremiah 26:18-19). The message of the prophets, while including promises which are still in the future for us, was intended for a particular people at a particular time so that they would return to the LORD.

Conclusion

The Old Testament prophets were men called and sent by God to speak His word to His people. They were God’s witnesses against those who had rejected Him, enabled and equipped by

His Spirit. They interpreted their world in the light of God’s word in order to vindicate God’s name and perhaps turn people’s hearts to Him.

Like the Old Testament prophets, we are called to be God’s witnesses, enabled by His Spirit to understand our culture – both inside and outside the church – in the light of His word, and to speak against the godlessness of our day, calling people to into fellowship with the living God. Whether people listen or not, we are called with our words – and our lives – to bear witness to God’s Name.

Notes

- 1 This fact is also reflected in God’s condemnation of false prophets – “I did not send them ...” (Jeremiah 14:15; 23:21,32.)
- 2 Though some prophets e.g. Jonah, Nahum are not speaking directly to Israel, their messages are still framed with reference to the Lord’s covenant relationship with His people and are intended to be read by His people and understood in that light.
- 3 This also established a predictable pattern for God’s people, enabling a prophet like Haggai to urge the people to give careful thought to their ways (Haggai 1:5ff) and to see that they were plainly experiencing the effects of God’s curse. When they respond in obedience, he can confidently promise God’s blessings.(Haggai 2:18-19).

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Jeremiah, the weeping prophet (2)

An overview of the book of Jeremiah

John A Haverland

Back in 2005, early in my ministry in Pukekohe, I preached through the prophecies of Jeremiah in a series of twenty sermons.¹ Some sermon series are more challenging than others; that one was particularly so, but I also found it very profitable. Part of the difficulty of preaching this book is understanding Jeremiah’s historical situation and then making ap-

propriate applications from events that happened 2,600 years ago! The historical background will be covered in another article, as will Jeremiah as a person, and the role of the Old Testament prophets. My purpose is to give you an overview of this book.

Introduction

I have already mentioned two of the challenges of preaching through Jer-

emiah. Another is the sheer size of the book; it is the largest book in the Bible containing more words than any other! Yet another challenge of reading and preaching Jeremiah is the depressing tone and subject matter as much of it is about God’s judgement on the rebellious and sinful nation of Judah. Having said this, there are also many memorable and encouraging passages in this book as well as wonderful

“God revealed his truth to Jeremiah and the people of Judah through spoken words, but also through physical symbols – visible illustrations of spiritual realities.”

promises of God’s mercy and grace.

Jeremiah had a long ministry that spanned 40 years of prophesying, beginning in the 13th year of Josiah in 627 BC and continuing through the reign of another four kings until the fall of Je-

rusalem in 587 BC during the reign of Zedekiah.

Half of the book is written in Hebrew poetry and the other half in prose, but these two writing styles are mixed up throughout. It also contains laments, narrative, biography, acted parables and symbols.

An outline

Biblical scholars have found it very difficult to analyse the structure of this book. Part of the problem is that it is a collection of prophecies given during the prophet’s long ministry. The general flow of the book is chronological, beginning with the call of Jeremiah and ending with the destruction of Jerusalem. However, the structure of the book is topical rather than chronological; that is, it is arranged according to subject matter rather than according to when the prophecies were uttered. The arrangement of material is not always neat and ordered. For instance, chapters 1 to 25 are largely prophecies of warning and judgement but included with these are messages of hope. Chapters 30 to 33 are known as the Book of Consolation, but in these words of comfort and hope are also warnings of doom and destruction. One commentator, J A Thompson, explains that the book “was the result of a long and complex process. It is a collection of collections which were brought together by more than one hand over a period of time.”² There is, however, a structure.

Most books begin with an introduction and end with a conclusion. This book is no exception. Chapter 1 introduces these prophecies with the call of Jeremiah to be a prophet and with a summary of his message; “See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (1:10). These words of the Lord outline the themes of judgement and restoration that are expanded in the rest of the book. Chapter 52 concludes with a description of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple; the judgement God threatened came to pass. Yet the themes of hope and restoration also come through in this conclusion as Jehoiachin was released from prison, an event that anticipates the release of the people of Judah from exile and their return to their own land.

The main part of the book may be outlined as follows:³

1. Declarations of judgment on Judah and Jerusalem; 2-25
2. Declarations of restoration for Judah and Jerusalem; 26-35
3. The judgment on Judah and Jerusalem; 36-45
4. Declarations of judgment against foreign nations; 46-51

Jeremiah’s prophecies were addressed to the people of Judah and Jerusalem warning them of God’s coming judgement on their idolatry and evil and urging them to repent of their sin. He also prophesied a return of the people from exile and a restoration to their land. Those who compiled these prophecies into the scroll of Jeremiah addressed this message to the Jews who were in exile in Babylon; they wanted them to understand *why* they were in exile and to encourage them to put their *hope in God* who would fulfil his promises of restoration. It is significant that the brightest section of this book, the Book of Consolation, which promises a return from exile, is placed just before the account of the destruction and fall of Jerusalem.⁴ Clearly God wanted to encourage the exiles to look forward in hope!

Symbols

God revealed his truth to Jeremiah and the people of Judah through spoken words, but also through physical symbols – visible illustrations of spiritual realities. In one of these God instructed the prophet to purchase a *linen belt* and to wear it around his waist. Later God told him to go and hide that belt in a



Jeremiah brought before Zedekiah the king of Israel charged with sedition for proclaiming God’s word.

“The Lord was not only the God over Israel but was Lord over all the nations of the world and that their destiny too lay in his hands.”

crevice in the rocks and then, many days later, to retrieve it; but by this time it was ruined and completely useless. This was a picture of how God had bound his people to himself but how they had worshipped other gods. In response God would ruin the pride of Judah and Jerusalem so they would be like that linen belt – completely useless! (13:1-11).

Another well known symbol in this book is *the potter and the clay* (18:1-18). In response to God’s command Jeremiah went down to the potter’s house and watched him working there. The pot was marred in the potter’s hand so he formed it into another pot. The lesson for Judah was that just as the potter controls what he does with his clay so the Lord is sovereign over what he does with his people.

Chapter 19 records another symbol, again using a *clay jar*. This time Jeremiah was instructed to buy a jar, gather some of the elders and priests, proclaim Judah’s sins and God’s judgments, and then smash the jar as a dramatic picture how God would smash the nation of Judah and the city of Jerusalem (19:10f).

In the Book of Consolation (chapters 30-33) we have an account of God’s instruction to his prophet to purchase a plot of land in his hometown of Anathoth from his cousin Hanamel. It was a most disadvantageous time to purchase land because he was in prison and the Babylonian army was besieging the city. Jeremiah, however, obeyed God’s command and purchased the land as a symbol that

God would fulfil his promise to bring his people back from exile; “Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land” (32:15).

Prophecies against the nations

Having proclaimed many prophecies against Judah for her sins and having warned her of God’s coming judgement Jeremiah also proclaimed God’s judgments against the foreign nations. These are recorded in chapters 46 to 51. God had used some of these nations to carry out his judgement against Israel and Judah, but these nations would themselves be judged. The prophecies show that the Lord was not only the God over Israel but was Lord over all the nations of the world and that their destiny too lay in his hands.⁵

True and false prophets

A common theme in the prophets of the Old Testament is the contrast between the prophets who are true to God and who faithfully proclaim his word, and the prophets who are false and proclaim their own ideas. This theme is clearly expressed in this book. Jeremiah complained to the Lord about the prophets; “They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace’, they say, when there is no peace”. (6:14). The false prophets kept telling the people; “You will not see the sword or suffer famine” and promised “lasting peace in this place”. In response the Lord said, “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds... I did not send them” (14:14f).

On another occasion the Lord expressed his profound grief that “Both prophet and priest are godless; even in my temple I find their wickedness” (23:11) He warned the people of Judah; “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord” (23:16). They had not “stood in the council of the Lord to see or hear his word” (23:18) In response the Lord warned them that he would cast them out of his presence and bring on them “everlasting disgrace – everlasting shame that will not be forgotten” (23:39).

There is an application here for us in the 21st century because there are false prophets today in the church who pro-

claim their own ideas rather than the word of the Lord, who promise peace when the Lord warns of destruction, who prophesy lies rather than speaking the truth from God’s word.

Prophecies about the Messiah

A brief introduction to this book would not be complete without reference to prophecies Jeremiah gave about the Messiah. The entire Old Testament pointed ahead to the Lord Jesus, including, and even especially, the prophets, including Jeremiah. The people of Judah in exile looked forward in hope to their return to their land. But the greatest promises pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah who was the final and full hope of Israel. Jeremiah did not have as much to say about the Christ as Isaiah, but he did look ahead to his coming. One such prophecy is sobering as it predicted the weeping of the women of Judah after Herod murdered the baby boys in Bethlehem (31:15). Another is a glorious announcement about the Lord Jesus; “The days are coming declares the Lord, when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, A King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land ... This is the name by which he will be called; The Lord our Righteousness” (23:5f). And yet another is the wonderful promise of the new covenant that God will make with his people, a promise fulfilled in the person and work of the Lord Jesus and in the coming of the Holy Spirit in this New Testament age.

Jeremiah is not the easiest book of the Bible to read, partly because of its size, and partly because of its content, but it is fascinating, profitable and applicable to our day and age.

Notes

- 1 You can find these sermons on the RCNZ website in both written and audio form – rcnz.org.nz
- 2 JA Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1980. P. 32
- 3 This outline follows that of S. Jonathan Murphy in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September 2009, pp. 306-18) and that of the NIV Study Bible 1985, p. 1118.
- 4 Irving L. Jensen, *Isaiah/Jeremiah – a self-study guide*, p. 81.
- 5 JA Thompson, p. 687.

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Jeremiah the man

Erik Stolte

I have often wondered how I would react to Jeremiah's preaching week after week from the pulpit of my local Reformed church. Jeremiah's preaching and prophesying was, at least to our ears, depressing! In an age where we want to be encouraged and empowered, where preachers need to be uplifting and upbeat, Jeremiahs preaching would go down like the proverbial lead balloon. Jeremiah was about as popular in his time as he would be now – out of favour!

Maybe we are not so much different

“Jeremiah was a determined, dedicated, longsuffering, and visionary follower of God. His courage and stamina serve as examples to even the most faithful of all God's embattled servants.”

from the ancient covenant people after all! It is little wonder that Jeremiah's prophecy isn't one of the first books we read when we open our Bibles.

I think we will see as we look at Jeremiah himself that while Jeremiah was not preaching a popular message, he was preaching the message of the Lord nonetheless. This did not make him the most sought-after preacher. He was beaten, put in stocks, thrown in prison, starved, and thrown in a muddy disused well; all because he had a burden to tell God's people God's Word.

Let's look at Jeremiah the man.

Early ministry

Jeremiah was called to be a prophet from a very young age, probably when he was still financially dependent on his parents. His family was from the defrocked priestly line of Abiathar (the line that Solomon had removed from the priesthood in 1Kings 1:28-2:26),¹ and he was born in the small town of Anathoth, about 5kms north of Jerusalem. So Jeremiah was born of humble beginnings, but called to be a mighty prophet to Judah and the surrounding nations.

Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet. Like Moses before him, he tried to excuse himself: “Ah, sovereign Lord,... I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.” (1:6). But God would equip Jeremiah for this great and difficult task of prophesying, “...do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you... I have put my words in your mouth...” (1:8,9).

Jeremiah began his ministry in the thirteenth year of the reign of the godly king, Josiah (2 Chronicles 34). One can imagine the glory of this period – for not only for the godly people of the land, but also for Jeremiah. Under his prophecy people heard and, at least on the surface, listened. There was a wonderful revival of the worship of the Lord under the reign of King Josiah.

After the death of Josiah, Jeremiah

continued to prophecy through the reigns of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, the last kings of Judah. During this time the real hearts of the people were exposed. They were a rebellious people that had only an outward formal religion, emptied out with no heart. The temple worship was in full swing but was a mere formality. The people of Judah viewed the temple as a bit of a ‘good luck charm’ as Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 7:3-4 “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” The people thought that because they had God's temple in their midst all would be well.

This is what Jeremiah spent his lifetime preaching against. He was very blunt about the sins that the people of Judah were committing. “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” (2:13). In their hearts they had rejected God and turned to other means of security. If they did not turn, the Lord promised to destroy Jerusalem and the temple.

Opposition

This unpopular message made Jeremiah a very lonely figure (15:17) causing him doubt and depression. In fact he became so depressed that at one point he exclaimed “Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!” (20:14) “Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?” (18).

Jeremiah's God-given message made him unpopular with his prophet colleagues and the common people, as well as with the authorities. As a result of this, his life was in danger more than once. Even his own hometown plotted against him (11:18-23).

We read a lot about his unpopularity with the last king of Jerusalem, Zedekiah. Jeremiah repeatedly warned

Zedekiah to surrender to the troops of the Babylonians who were besieging the city. But Zedekiah was a man-pleaser rather than a God-pleaser. He gave in to the ancient opinion polls and tried to hold his ground against the truth of God's word from Jeremiah. Despite that, Zedekiah sometimes asked if Jeremiah had any new revelations from God. Even in his wickedness and rebellion, Zedekiah realized Jeremiah was a true prophet of the Lord.

Despite all this opposition, Jeremiah loved the people of Judah. He was called by God to preach destruction because of their wickedness, but he earnestly desired that God would not destroy Judah. He wanted God to deal with the nations that threatened Judah, but not Judah itself – they could never survive if God would punish them the way they deserved. (Jeremiah 10:23-25).

Later ministry

As Jeremiah's ministry and life progressed, the days of the nation became gloomy and dark. Gradually more and more of Judah's territory was destroyed. Increasingly the people hardened their hearts against the Lord. In the end, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. All the people, save some of the poor, were deported to Babylon.

Even after the Lord destroyed Jerusalem through the Babylonians, the people did not listen and turn back to him. Jeremiah continued to proclaim God's message to the people who were left, but they still disobeyed the Lord. When Jeremiah told them not to go to Egypt, they did anyway and forcefully took him along.

The last recorded message of Jeremiah was the release of Jehoiachin from prison, which would mean that he was between 85 and 90 years old.²

Success in ministry?

If there was ever a prophet who saw little success in his ministry, it was Jeremiah. There are only two recorded converts in Jeremiah's ministry: Baruch his friend and scribe, and Ebed-Melech, an Ethiopian eunuch who served the king (Jeremiah 17: 7-13). These are the only two who we know responded to Jeremiah's message of a change of life and heart.

Did this discourage Jeremiah? At times it did, but Jeremiah could not stop his prophetic ministry. He felt ridiculed as people insulted him whenever he spoke God's Word. But he could not stop. He could not be silent, for "...[God's] word

is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed I cannot." (Jeremiah 20:9)

A spiritual giant?

Jeremiah is often referred to as the "weeping prophet" but let that not cloud your vision of a tough Jeremiah. Jeremiah had a deep love for his people, the people of Judah. He wept over them and their sin and the knowledge that God would destroy them for their sin. But as one commentator puts it, "Jeremiah was a determined, dedicated, longsuffering, and visionary follower of God. His courage and stamina serve as examples to even the most faithful of all God's embattled servants."³

Of course that strength was not a natural characteristic. He was upheld, supported and encouraged by the Lord.

However, that does not mean that he always *felt* wonderfully helped and sup-

ported by the Lord. He had his valleys of distress and hardship just like we do. Sometimes we place human beings on a spiritual pedestal and think they don't struggle like we do. Jeremiah was, like all of us, a man with periods of doubt. He also struggled to see God's work in his life. At times he also wondered what the Lord was doing. In Jeremiah 12 we hear his anguished plea, "...Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" (Jeremiah 12:1) He continues: "You have planted them, and they have taken root..." and, "... you are always on their lips but far from their hearts." (Jeremiah 12:2).

His enemies had also ridiculed him and thrown him in prison. Even during his latter ministry there was no great revival and turning to the Lord, though he kept proclaiming God's Word. I think we would all forgive him for wondering what God was doing.



Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem, Rembrandt, c. 1630,

But God reminds Jeremiah, as he does all of us, that justice will be done. God's ways are always right. Things might not go the way we think they should, but in God's time and in God's way, his will be done.

Conclusion

I hope that from this short account of Jeremiah's life that we can see why he was the kind of prophet he was. God uses all kinds of people to proclaim his

word. The Bible has John, the 'prophet of love', Moses, the 'prophet of the law', and Jeremiah, the 'weeping prophet.' Through all of them God has brought us his Word.

So, yes, on the surface Jeremiah's message might have been a bit "depressing", but it is the Word of the Lord. It might not on the surface be uplifting and upbeat, but I trust that as you study Jeremiah's prophecies you will see it as it is, the Word of the Lord. Surely then

we will see it is true, real, and through Christ, applicable to our lives.

Notes

- 1 Walter C. Kaiser, jr., *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 398.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 397.
- 3 J. Gordon McConville, *ESV Study Bible*, (Wheaton, Crossway, 2007), p1364.

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Jeremiah, the weeping prophet (4)

The historical and political background of Jeremiah's world

John Goris

Is God interested in politics?

Is God really into politics? He certainly is! The prophet Habakkuk tells us of God's hand behind the Chaldean invasion into Judah (Hab. 1:6). Isaiah tells us of the Persian ruler Cyrus, who is to carry out God's plans for Israel's return from exile (Isa 45:1).

Look at what is happening in the Middle East right now. It is not merely a battle between dissatisfied groups, progressives or fanatics, sorting out the nations in that part of the world. It is all taking place under the watchful eye of the Lord of the nations, as much as it was in the times of Jeremiah. Only then, the prophets spelled out specific reasons. (And notice that classic expression used in Jeremiah's prophecy: "*Magor-missabib*" , i.e. Terror on every side! -Jer 20:3,4,10)

World history is still very much "His story", in that He is shaping the world for the ultimate coming of the Prince of Peace.

The book of Jeremiah is a book for our times, indeed, but it takes great wisdom to preach from it.

Just as in Jeremiah's time, a Covenant-governed nation of God's people was becoming engrossed in the world around her, so a Christian-impacted society is turning away from the gospel in today's pluralistic environment. We observe this currently in the so-called "Christian West". Meanwhile, the Church in the East and the Middle East is growing, despite persecution and opposition.

It is Jeremiah, the man of God, who was wrestling as a "weeping prophet" to speak out to a people who have the Scriptures (the Law and the Prophets). Six centuries later, we see Jesus, the Son of God, weeping over Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37-39). In the historical background we consider, it is the people of God that matter most.

the world that then was ...

Jeremiah lived in a world that saw *major* shifts in political power during his lifetime. When the prophet was born the great super-power of the day was *Assyria*. We see the impact of this already in the days of King Hezekiah. It was Assyria that carried the Northern Kingdom into exile (722 BC).

Before the final defeat of Samaria, Syria had been a constant thorn in the

side of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Further afield, other nations began to awake and spread their wings. Some eventually affected the land of Israel, but many stayed quite a distance away. Before the fall of Samaria the city of *Rome* was built (753 BC), and very gradually it began to expand westward, eastward, northward and southward. The Roman empire came into being slowly, but its excellent road systems were not only serving their armies, but the propagating of the gospel as well.

Also on the Western side the *Greeks* began to assert themselves. Their impact came through Hellenisation (spreading Greek customs, culture and language) over many centuries, ultimately paving the way for the spreading of the Gospel. Alexander the Great, who initiated this impact, did not come on the scene until 338 BC

Closer to Jeremiah's time was the invasion of the *Scythians* from the Russian steppes in the North. They pushed their way into the Middle East, but did not affect Israel and Judah.

From the Eastern frontiers the *Medes* (*present-day Kurds*) began to make their presence felt, ultimately blending with the *Persians*. The Persians in turn

conquered the rich **Lydian** empire in present-day Turkey, which made them eventually rub shoulders with the Greeks.

This gives us a glimpse of historical developments which were going to affect the spread of the gospel later on.

One more area of interest, although it did not affect the spread of the gospel in the earliest centuries, was China. Beyond the Parthian and Median empires to the East, lay the vast **Chinese** empire, at that time under the Zhou dynasty. Jewish exiles had already settled there not long after the time of Daniel. They were known by the Chinese as the people who “don’t eat the sinew of the hip” (Genesis 32:32). That was also the time of the well-known philosopher Confucius.

Eventually the gospel reached China around 630AD, from Syria, via the Silk Road.

This is a broad picture of the political and historical scene. It helps us to see the Middle East in its bigger context.

The specific historical and political context of Jeremiah’s time

Shortly after the time of the godly king, Josiah (640-609 BC), the *Assyrian* armies were defeated. They were initially aided by armies from the *African* bloc (Egypt, Sudan/Ethiopia) under Pharaoh Neco. On the *Eastern* side the Babylonian armies and those of the Medes attacked, and great Nineveh fell, just as the prophet Nahum had predicted it. This was in 605 BC at the battle of Carchemish.

Then the battles were drawn between Babylonia (also known as Chaldea) and Egypt and its confederates. Egypt was pushed back to its home territory and defeated, and the Babylonian troops under Nebuchadnezzar began their big triumph through the Middle East. We notice that Israel/Judah was a kind of “buffer-state” between the big powers.

The smaller nations surrounding Judah were all subdued, e.g. Edom, Moab, Ammon and others.

There were a number of *deportations* from Judah and Jerusalem during Jeremiah’s time. The first (ca. 605BC) included Daniel and others of nobility. They were to be “re-educated” to serve at the Babylonian court.

A second group (597BC) included Ezekiel and others of some standing. They included craftsmen and others who were to settle in the Chebar region, in a place called Tell-Abib. Jeremiah writes to them (Jer 29) and tells them to settle down in their community among the Babylonians, and to “seek the ‘shalom’ of the cities where they were settled”.

The third group of exiles came to Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem (586 BC). They were the left-over population, including some royals, soldiers and common folk.

Actually, there was a fourth group of exiles: a group of Jerusalem dwellers and others left behind by Nebuchadnezzar, who escaped into Egypt and took Jeremiah along, against his will.



Belshazzar's Feast, Rembrandt (1606-1669). <http://en.wikipedia.org>

“God is dealing with His people Israel, and the nations are His “rod”. (This is a principle that must be borne in mind for today too! Even the church will not go scot-free!)”

In chapter 25 of the prophecy, Jeremiah is told by the Lord that the exile would last seventy years, and it is clear that these years started as from the first group of exiles. This term of punishment was for Judah's failure to serve and honour the LORD. But also Israel's enemies were going to receive punishments. In fact that whole 25th chapter shows Jeremiah and us that we are to keep our eyes on the *real or primary* cause of History, the Lord is working out His plans!! The *secondary* causes are the world powers vying for top positions! **God is the Lord of History:** the nations are His servants.

God is dealing with His people Israel, and the nations are His “rod”. (This is a principle that must be borne in mind for today too! Even the church will not go scot-free!)

The last part of Jeremiah 25 hints at the culminating battle at the end of history, and makes us aware of the Great Day of the Lord which is to come (cf Revelation 19:11-21).

Babylon, in fact, becomes a symbol of the world powers (political and economical): “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the great!” (Rev 18:2).

Design in disaster

Let us never forget God's “saving” design in the exile. In chapter 24 Jeremiah relates a vision which the Lord showed him: Two baskets of figs: one full of good figs, and the other filled with bad figs! The earlier exiles were the good figs “to be preserved in Babylon”, the bad figs were left behind for the final (3rd) exile.

Life as we face it with all its ups and downs serves a purpose, and the Lord in His Sovereign designs can and does use even the negative elements in our lives for our good (Romans 8:28).

Even for Israel God had a purpose through all their ups and downs. That concerned the first Coming of Messiah, according to promise. It also concerns God's promises as to the Nation, as the apostle Paul embarks on that in Romans 9-10-11. And so WE are involved in that design, as our Saviour sends us out to bring the gospel and “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19,20). And “all nations” includes Israel!

End times and values for today!

This article is not meant to be merely an objective evaluation of the past, but also an evaluation to understand the future in the light of God's Word. God never contradicts Himself or any aspect of His holy and true nature.

And even so, we may be able with committed orthodoxy to analyse God's acts and actions in this world, yet with little benefit to us **unless** this analysis penetrates our personal spiritual life, and we begin to live and function with deep-felt awareness of the God who personally stepped into our shoes of humanity, and walked on this earth with all its pains and problems. For in His coming in Jesus He did not act out of character.

In all His Sovereign greatness He is still the compassionate Saviour, who sent His compassionate Comforter to guide His Body, His Bride, the Church, into all truth!

In all His greatness He still sees fit to stir His church to action, to discipline and disciple her, to use testings and struggles for our well-being. Here I was reminded of Dr M.R. deHaan (sr)'s book “Broken Things”. He quotes Jeremiah 4:3 ... “Break up your fallow ground...” Here is a principle of renewal! If the ground is not broken, there will be no sowing and no harvest! God is looking for fruitfulness in our lives.

When the exiled people did not have a temple anymore, they built *synagogues*

for prayer and the study of the Word, and God brought about revival and reformation. We still need reformation, most of all in our own hearts, for the idols of this age are close to our hearts. As Jeremiah said (7:3f)... “Amend your ways and your deeds”, when the people kept saying, “The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord!” Likewise the prophet may well say to us, “Amend your ways and your deeds...” while we say, “The Word of the Lord! The Word of the Lord!” (“This is a Reformation issue of *Faith in Focus*, isn't it, Mr Editor?”)

Gordon MacDonald hammers home the need of forging a “real world” faith. And that faith needs to behold “a real God”! Do we see the world for what it is? Do we see God for Who He really is?

The apostle's words are still valid: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols!” (1 John 5:21).

Makes you think!

At least, I hope so!

Books consulted

Commentaries on *Jeremiah* (Laetsch, Douma, Veldkamp, Harrison, etc)

Harry Blamires, *A God who Acts*

Roy Clements, *Practising Faith in a Pagan World*

John Goldingay, *God's Prophet, God's Servant*

Gordon MacDonald, *Forging a Real World Faith*

Os Guinness & John Seel, *No God, But God: Breaking with the Idols of our Age*

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The preacher's prayer

*Oh! That our Saviour dear
may at the exit stand,
as we depart from here...
Oh! May he shake our hand!*

*May preachers just proclaim:
“Behold, the Lamb of God!”
and glory in His Name,
and spread His fame abroad!*

*Ay, may I steal away
and disappear from sight,
while He may ever stay
and shine in glory bright!*

*And in that Light may all
who joyfully expressed
the wonder of God's call,
and serving Him, be blessed!*

John Goris

Wellington, May 2014

Outward focus

Sally Davey

Christians in Iraq

For a long time, most of us have viewed the Middle East as the great centre of Islam. It was the place where the Moslem faith began in the 600s; and from where Moslem armies set off to conquer territory in the rest of the world in the centuries thereafter. A huge Islamic civilisation grew up stretching from the Balkans to India. But in recent days we have been reminded that there are pockets of ancient Christianity in some of those same countries of the Middle East. In particular, we have seen Iraqi Christians in the spotlight as they flee the cruelty of ISIS troops. Church attacks, killings, robberies and rape have been among their traumatic experiences. If you, like me, have been investigating the historical background to all this, you will have been amazed yet again at the way

God works out his purposes among the peoples of the earth.

Ancient roots

In fact, God has been at work in the region of Iraq since the beginning of biblical times. Bounded by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, fertile Mesopotamia was the centre of several ancient empires as well as the site of modern-day Iraq. To begin with, it was the place from which the patriarch Abraham came. Ur, Abraham's original home, lay near the Euphrates River not far from the Persian Gulf. Later on, the Assyrians became the first ancient superpower to inhabit northern Mesopotamia; and Nineveh, their capital (site of today's Mosul), was the place to which Jonah the prophet was called to go and preach. From here

came the armies that carried off the ten northern tribes into a cruel captivity; a dispersion from which they were never to return. The Assyrians were superseded by Babylon, the great power whose capital city of the same name, famed for its hanging gardens, lay on the Euphrates River (about 85km south of present-day Baghdad). God used the Babylonians as his instrument to judge the people of Judah for their idolatry, and there they spent their 70-year captivity. It was in the Babylonian captivity that the practice of meeting to study the Scriptures in simple places called synagogues began; and also that God's people experienced spiritual revival through leaders like Daniel. With the courageous leadership of Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai, a dedicated remnant returned from Babylon



Mosul, Iraq is a modern city by all accounts, interestingly mixed with its ancient past. tahrirsouri.com

to rebuild the temple and walls of Jerusalem. Several hundred years later, the promised Messiah was born there in Judah; and from this people, all the nations of the world (including the nation of Iraq) have been blessed.

Babylon's final appearance in the biblical record is as the symbol of all that is earthly and evil, in the revelation of the apostle John received while imprisoned on the island of Patmos in around 90AD. "Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the great", he wrote (Rev. 18:2). Christ has judged the unbelief and wickedness of Babylon, and its final destruction is certain.

But God had not yet finished with this place in the world, or its people. At the time of Christ there were still Jews living there; descendants of those deported. Some of them ("from Mesopotamia") were in Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost in Acts Chapter 2 (see verse 9). Possibly some among those who heard the gospel in their own language and believed it, returned home and took the gospel with them. Tradition also has it that the apostle Thomas went there with the gospel on his way to India. Archaeological evidence points to the conversion of many Jews who were there during the first century. Synagogues were turned into

Christian meeting places; and over time these were remodelled and became elaborate church buildings. Apparently, it was not long before the entire area became predominantly Christian. The churches here enjoyed more freedom and were spared the sort of persecution endured by Christians in the Roman Empire in the first three centuries.¹

Sadly, though, the strength and faithfulness of these churches declined as the numbers of adherents increased. Unbiblical doctrines and practices weakened them. Nestorianism² and the rebellion against the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon, in addition to power struggles among the clergy, led to deep, lasting divisions among the Christians. Reliance on the clergy increased as the Christians were distanced from reading and study of the Bible. These weak churches were no real match for the Muslim armies who swept into Iraq in the 7th century. Christians fled north to the mountainous areas and here they have remained ever since; Mosul (site of ancient Nineveh) becoming a major centre for Christians in the region. It has only been because of ongoing conflict between Sunni and Shiite Moslems that they have been spared complete annihilation.

Today's situation

Through the subsequent centuries there has continued to be a significant Christian minority in Iraq – until the twentieth century, about 30% of the population. That has been drastically reduced due to the troubles of more recent times. In 2003, it was thought that Christians in Mosul numbered around 35,000. The number dwindled due to a wave of migration. Some estimates put the most recent numbers at 3,000 Christians out of a city of 2 million people. Before the ISIS ultimatum following the fall of Mosul (to convert to Islam, pay a large fine or be killed), only a few hundred Christian families remained in the city. Now there are none.

Most of these Christians were part of various linguistic and ethnic branches of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. However, the hierarchy of these churches did not discourage people from reading and studying the Bible (as in the West prior to the Reformation), and that provided a fertile ground for Protestant missionary work which began in the 1830s. Since then, a number of churches have been established through Reformed and Presbyterian agency, though they are called "Evangelical" as this translates



Mosul, Iraq.

more easily into Arabic than either of the two above terms. The Middle East Reformed Fellowship assists the churches in Kirkuk, Baghdad and Basra and has supplied a pastor and provided training for the ministry for Iraqi men in Egypt.

Other denominations have also planted churches in Iraq. Canon Andrew White has been very much in the news recently. Known as “the Vicar of Bagdad”, he pastors the only Anglican church in that city. He has been prominent in various efforts to promote reconciliation between different religious groups in Iraq; and is both respected and provided with protection by the Iraqi government. (He has lived in constant danger in Iraq during the 15 years he has served there). White has recently noted that only 65% of the pre-war Christian population remains in Iraq. Those wealthy enough to leave have done so; and only the poorer remain. There have been many deaths, as well. His own congregation has fallen (in attendance) recently from around 1000 to 250 as of mid-August. Where do the largest group of Iraqi Christians live today, he asks? In Chicago.

Indeed, Andrew White believes that one of the best ways for believers in western countries to help Iraqi Christians is to take care of those who have had to flee for refuge in the West. He

is encouraging western countries to take in Iraqi Christian refugees; since many are desperate and countries that have taken Iraqis in the past no longer do so.

While it is tragic that so many Christians have had to leave their homes, most particularly Mosul (ancient Nineveh), we know that the flight of Christians has, many times in the history of the church, resulted in the gospel being taken to new regions. This is what happened in the book of Acts when persecution forced Christians to leave Jerusalem. It was also what happened when the Roman imperial authorities persecuted the early Christians. It happened when the Turks took Constantinople in 1453. At that time, fleeing Byzantine Christians took ancient biblical texts to Italy with them; and soon they became available to Renaissance scholars. This meant that scholars like Erasmus were able to provide the West with a more precise Greek New Testament; and on the basis of that the Reformers were able to translate the Bible accurately into the languages of western Europe – furthering the Reformation. While it is a tragedy when Christians have to uproot, leaving all their possessions and fleeing for their lives, there may sometimes be larger purposes that God is fulfilling as he cares for his people.

This leads us to ask what we might do to help. What has been happening in Iraq can remind us of events in the book of Acts when Christians had to flee persecution. When this happened, their brothers and sisters in other churches prayed for them, gathered money and other practical assistance for them, and took them in (see references to collections for the “relief of the saints” in 2 Corinthians 8:4). Perhaps there are ways we can do likewise, and join the efforts of Christians in other parts of the world who care for God’s people fleeing the crisis in Iraq.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.merf.org/index.php/read/43-reformed-churches-in-iraq>. Accessed 25/8/2014
- 2 An ancient heresy stressing the distinctness of Christ’s divine and human natures, to the point that they are but loosely united.

References: I am indebted to the following in the preparation of this article:

<http://www.merf.org/index.php/read/43-reformed-churches-in-iraq>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/june/thousands-flee-as-terrorists-take-over-iraq-christian-mosul.html>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/may-web-only/andrew-white-being-jesus-in-kill-zone.html>

Jerome Starkey, “Christians Seek Deliverance”, *The Times*, reprinted by the *Press*, Wednesday August 20, 2014.

World in focus

Apologetics – the answer to keeping college kids in church

by Chris Woodward | OneNewsNow, 20 Aug 2014

Many Christian teens are beginning college this month, and considering the fact that most students leave the Church after high school, one ministry is working to help young people understand why they believe what they believe.

Frank Turek, author, radio host and president of *Cross Examined*, reports that 75 percent of Christian youth leave the Church after high school.

“There [are] a number of reasons for it, but one of the reasons is, intellectually they don’t know why Christianity is true because they’ve never been told

why it’s true,” Turek offers.

“We simply say in church, ‘Just believe’ or ‘Don’t ask questions.’ Well, when they go to college, the professor doesn’t say, ‘Just believe.’ The professor tries to give them answers for why he believes what he believes, and it’s normally not Christianity.”

Cross Examined goes to campuses and churches, free of charge, to present evidence for Christianity, God’s existence and the truth of the Bible, among other things.

Meanwhile, Turek urges churches to help combat this problem by teaching and embracing apologetics.

“If we would only obey the commands that are already in the Scripture, such as ‘always be ready to give an answer’ (1 Peter 3:15), ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul strength and mind’ (Matthew 22:37), ‘demolish argu-

ments and take every thought captive to Christ’ (2 Corinthians 10:5), then I think people would be much more equipped in order to handle the unbelief that is thrown at them from the culture and from universities,” he contends.

To help train and equip Christians of all ages, *Cross Examined* now has a free app, one that offers a ‘Quick Answer’ section with answers to many questions Christians are confronted with these days.

“So you don’t have to memorise all this stuff. You have it with you at all times, right there on your phone,” the radio host notes.

“It also has all of our podcasts that we do on the *American Family Radio* network. Every week, there is a new hour-long podcast that will provide evidence for Christianity and *Cross Examined* ideas against it,” he adds.

This article courtesy of OneNewsNow

Richard Dawkins says unborn babies with Down Syndrome should be aborted

by Stoyan Zaimov | *The Christian Post* | Aug 2014

Atheist author Richard Dawkins is under heavy criticism on social media after stating that unborn babies with Down syndrome need to be aborted and that parents should “try again” to conceive. Pro-life group Live Action has slammed the comments as “sick and twisted.”

“Abort it and try again. It would be immoral to bring it into the world if you have the choice,” Dawkins said Wednesday in response to a Twitter user wondering what she would do if pregnant with a child with Down syndrome.

The evolutionary biologist posted a series of further Tweets defending his argument, with another message reading: “If I were a woman with a DS fetus I personally would abort. So do most women in fact. If you wouldn’t, good luck to you, it’s your decision.”

He then explained that he would not directly tell a woman such a thing, but was only offering what he would do in such a situation: “Woman said she wouldn’t know whether to abort. I told her what I would do & why. I OBVIOUSLY wouldn’t TELL a woman what to do. Up to her.”

Live Action president Lisa Rose responded to Dawkins’ comments by stating that “it’s sick and twisted for anyone to advocate for the killing of children with disabilities.”

“Dawkins’ ignorant comments serve only to further stigmatise people with Down syndrome,” Rose continued.

“While many people with Down syndrome, their families, and advocacy groups are fighting discrimination on a daily basis, Dawkins calls for their murder before they are even born. Those with Down syndrome are human beings, with innate human dignity, and they, along with the whole human family, deserve our respect and protection.”

The evolutionary biologist’s comments were also criticised by fellow atheists, including David Harsanyi, senior editor of *The Federalist* website.

“A few years back *Newsweek* reported that 90 percent of women whose fetuses tested positive for Down syndrome choose an abortion. Only a small

percentage of mothers even used the test back then. More do today. Soon many more will. It’s not outlandish to believe parents will continue to terminate fetuses in large numbers. Once we have widespread eugenics, where will towering minds like Dawkins place limits? To those who can experience ‘human feelings?’” Harsanyi questioned.

“Dawkins offers no scientific formula for when life is worth protecting that I can discern. Only that it’s ‘immoral’ to bring ‘it’ into the world if ‘it’ doesn’t confirm to his specifications,” he added.

On Thursday, Dawkins posted an apology of sorts for stirring up a “a new feeding frenzy” on Twitter, clarifying that his initial reply to the user wondering what she would do if pregnant with a Down syndrome baby was meant to be private.

He noted that he did not realise it would be sent out to his 1 million Twitter followers.

“That was my intention. However, it doesn’t stop people who go out of their way to find such tweets, even if they don’t automatically pop up on their Twitter feeds. Many did so, and the whole affair blew up into the feeding frenzy I mentioned,” Dawkins explained, asserting that it takes a lot more than 140 characters to fully explain his views on the subject.

This article courtesy of The Christian Post

Boko Haram overruns town, kills 100

Published: August 11, 2014 by Illia Djadi

Suspected members of the radical Islamic group Boko Haram have taken over Gwoza, a major town in Nigeria’s north-eastern State of Borno on August 5.

Details of the attack are sketchy; several bridges linking the town to Borno’s capital, Maiduguri, and to other neighbouring areas were blown up in previous attacks, and telephone lines have been cut.

Peter Biye, a Member of Parliament representing Damboa, Chibok and Gwoza, told *World Watch Monitor* that at least 100 people were killed. The attackers, he said, “came in mass” dressed in army uniforms and loaded on about 15 vans, motorbikes and other vehicles, around 5pm.

“They chased away everybody, firing indiscriminately and killing dozens,” Biye

said. “Unfortunately, we lost a prominent church leader, Pastor Musa Ayuba, from COCIN Church.”

The COCIN, (Church of Christ in Nations) headquartered in the nation’s capital city, confirmed Ayuba’s death. He was in charge of a church in Guduf, a small community east of Gwoza Town. He was killed while trying to run away from the assault.

The assailants burned down a yet-uncounted number of churches, shops, houses and government buildings. Hundreds of residents escaped to the surrounding mountains. The whereabouts of the town’s traditional ruler, the newly installed Emir of Gwoza, Mohammed Timta, is still unknown. His father and predecessor, Shehu Mustapha Idris Timta, was killed May 30 by Boko Haram assailants.

Biye said army troops stationed in Gwoza provided little resistance to the militants, who brought sophisticated weapons, including an armoured vehicle.

“The army used to come monthly to their headquarters in Gwoza and go back to Maiduguri,” Biye said. “Unfortunately, on Monday they left behind about 150 soldiers there, but those soldiers were outnumbered by the insurgents. The army had to run away because of the sophistication of the militants’ weapons.”

The insurgents have raised their black and white flags over Gwoza’s buildings.

On July 21, Boko Haram overran Damboa, another major town in this densely populated region, killing hundreds and displacing more than 15,000 people, according to the Nigeria Emergency Management Agency. The army has since driven Boko Haram out of Damboa.

Fear and uncertainty

Biye said such victories for the Army are the exception.

“Actually, in our region, the army is losing ground,” he said. “Residents are very disappointed and have lost hope. The situation is so bad that you see them (insurgents) coming, and the army are running, and the villagers are running. Then who is going to protect us?”

Boko Haram, based in the north-eastern state of Borno, has intensified its deadly campaign in recent days, targeting several Christian places of worship.

On July 30, at least five churches were razed as militants stormed Kwajaffa, Tashan Alade and other communities in the predominantly Christian Hawul Local Government Area of southern Borno

State. The attack, carried out with improvised explosive devices and petrol bombs, was the second on the Hawul area in less than a week.

Kano, the commercial nerve center of northern Nigeria, has sustained four suicide bomb attacks in less than a week. On July 27, a female suicide bomber blew herself up in St. Charles Catholic Church, just after Mass in Sabon Gari, a Christian enclave of Kano. The area has been targeted on several occasions by Boko Haram in recent months.

The following day, two female suicide bombers blew themselves up at a trade show and a petrol station, killing one person and injuring at least six others. On July 30, an 18-year-old woman detonated a device at the Islamic Legal Studies College in Kano State Polytechnic, killing 16 students as they checked a noticeboard. The same day, another attack was averted as police arrested two suspected Boko Haram members travelling with a 10-year-old girl who was wearing a suicide explosives belt, in Funtua Town, in the relatively peaceful neighbouring State of Katsina.

Analysts have noted Boko Haram's new tactic of using female bombers.

Meanwhile, sectarian violence continues in Nigeria's "Middle Belt," where the predominantly Muslim north borders the mostly Christian south. At least one person was killed and several others were injured when gunmen, referred to



*Some of the displaced children in Gulak Adamawa state. Christians in Gulak are caring for about 300 children orphaned or separated from their parents because of Boko Haram attacks. May 22, 2014
World Watch Monitor*

as Fulani Herdsmen, invaded a Catholic Church in Ungwar Poppo, a village in the southern Kaduna State on Aug. 3. The attack marked the third outbreak of religious violence in Kachia this year.

Attacks carried out by Fulani herdsmen in central Nigeria States of Kaduna and Plateau have reached an unprecedented level this year. The violence has

also spread to other states such as Taraba and Bauchi in the east. Some analysts point to the use of guerrilla warfare tactics, aimed at wiping out an entire community. Women and children have been among the victims, and in some cases prominent families, such as community or religious leaders, were targeted.

Focus on home

Harriet Haverland

Gleanings

THE GLEANINGS

TEAM:

Odette De Kock –
Auckland Presbytery

Yvonne Walraven –
Wellington Presbytery

Frances Watson –
South Island Presbytery

Collated and edited by
Harriet Haverland

MINISTERS AND CHURCH WORKERS

Rev. John Haverland has had kidney cancer. He underwent surgery on the 12th of August to remove the kidney and the tumour. He is having a break of six weeks to recuperate. We thank God for answered prayer (Pukekohe).

Emeritus Rev. Carl Larsen has been battling cancer these last 4 years, as well as losing 1 kidney to the disease in 2005. He has undergone major radical surgery on the 18th of August to remove some organs as the cancer had spread. Remember our brother and his wife Joyce in your prayers during a long recovery

period (Bucklands Beach).

Rev. Michael Willemse after prayerful consideration, declined the call from the RC Foxton (Hamilton).

Rev. Nathan Ketchen (formerly Palmerston North) and his family have moved to the U.S. to take up his new call in Meeker, Colorado.

RTC NEWS

Rev. Michael Flinn has begun tutoring in Palmerston North for the Reformed Theological College in Geelong, in the area of Old Testament prophets and writings. This is part of the RTC distance education programme where students

do their learning from home, assisted by Rev Flinn tutoring via the internet.

Dr Phillip Scheepers has been on study leave this semester to investigate ways in which Islamic communities in the West could be effectively reached with the gospel. This includes research into possible differences in attitudes, beliefs and practices between Muslims in Muslim majority contexts (i.e. in the Muslim world) and Muslim minority settings (like the West). As part of his research he intends to interview missionaries from several different countries who are working among Muslims.

During the month of August **Dr Murray Capill** was in Auckland to participate in a weekend of ministry with Grace Theological College. He has also delivered some guest lectures in preaching at the Presbyterian Theological College in Melbourne and was the speaker at the Bible College of South Australia's Preaching Conference.

This year the RTC is running a new conference called **EXPLORE** instead of the regular Fan the Flame conference. This dynamic two day conference is for people who are moving toward ministry as a pastor, church planter, missionary or church worker, along with those training and encouraging them to do so. It will be a great chance to explore the challenges and opportunities in ministry today. More info will be out shortly, but if you are seriously looking at future ministry or you are already engaged as an intern, apprentice, ministry student or church worker, this conference is for you. Keep 22-24 October free.

Please pray for the RTC **Board** that is currently investigating options for the future of the RTC. Please pray that they have wisdom as they explore ways of making the RTC accessible and useful to many more students.

CHURCH ANNIVERSARIES

Oamaru: We give thanks to the Lord on this first anniversary of the institution of the Reformed Church of Oamaru. It has been a year since this congregation formally became a church on its own, taking full responsibility for all the aspects of church life as one of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. During this year we have seen additions to the congregation and have known God's provision for us in many ways.

MISSIONS

Hastings: What a blessing it was to hear first-hand of the mission work undertaken by the Lagas family in the Solomon Islands and by Bianca Saathof on the Mercy Ship moored at Pointe-Noire in the Republic of Congo. These were truly God given opportunities to serve Him where real needs were so evident.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH & EVANGELISM

Avondale plans to hold another holiday program in October with the theme "Jesus Saves", aimed at reaching not only the children who attend, but also their parents.

The **Bucklands Beach** LABS classes held a mid-year "Provident Pot" dinner for the whole congregation to join with them in fellowship.

North Shore LABS classes have seen a few new students come along due to advertisements in the Korean and Chinese newspapers. The students' grasp of English range from very little to quite good.

CAMPS & CONFERENCES

RTC Preaching Conference: September 25th – 26th in Geelong, Victoria.

Auckland Reformation Conference: October 30th to November 1st – The speaker this year will be Dr. Phillip Scheepers, speaking on the theme "Let the earth hear His voice" – *Reflections on the Reformation and the Call to Missions*.

Young Adults' Convention (YAC) is for all 18 to 30 year olds who want to grow their relationships with God and each other. Due to Synod, this year's YAC will be held later on the 14th – 17th November, again at Lakeview Bible camp in Rotorua. We've tried to choose a date that falls between university exams and the wedding season. From 2015, YAC will

be the second-to-last weekend in August.

Family Camp 2014/2015 is on again this year from Saturday, 27 December till Saturday 3 January 2015. Registrations are now open, visit www.rcnzonline.com/familycamp to enroll. If you have never been to camp before there is a "first time campers" tab on the website that will give you a rundown of what family camp is all about, and how it works. We are looking forward to a fantastic time of relaxation and fellowship with members of our wider church family and hope to see many of you there! *Family Camp Committee*

CLASSES & COURSES

Avondale: There is a new Adult Education Class this third term as they begin a study entitled "Who are the Puritans? And Why We Should Read Them Today." When did they live? What did they teach? Why are they important for today? The Puritans were men and women of deep theological understanding and vision who desired to see the earth filled with the knowledge of the glory of God. They combined doctrine, experience, and practice in such a way that their writings remain a rich resource for biblical spiritual growth and encouragement. They were strongest where the churches in general are weakest today.

Masterton: Pastor Peter Kloosterman and Vicar Ben McDonald will trial a question and answer period following the morning worship service. If you want to ask questions about the sermons recently preached this is a good opportunity to do so.

Pukekohe: Mr Mark James from Creations Ministries is to give a presentation about God the Creator and his amazing creation.

FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES

The **Hukanui and Hamilton** Cadets and

Prolife Facts

In September this year Prolife NZ hosted Debbie Garratt, who is the founder and Director of the organisation, Debbie is also engaged in post graduate studies focusing on the risks and harms associated with abortion. She spoke in four major centres around the North and South Islands, exploring what the research actually says about abortion risks and harms and why abortion alternatives are a preferable option for women facing unplanned or crisis pregnancies.

GEMS had a garage sale to raise funds for National Camp in Nelson early next year, as well as for their Mission Project.

The **Hukanui and Hamilton** youth hosted a Quiz Night, followed by a Silent Auction where members of the youth group volunteered their services to pay to go to youth camp. The proceeds went towards Hagar International.

ACTIVITIES

Cadets & GEMS of the Auckland Presbytery had a Big Day Out, organised this year by the North Shore club; a fantastic day away on Rangitoto Island.

Masterton: Art and craft Afternoon – The “Charlotte’s Web Afternoon” was received by the elderly with happiness and sincere gratefulness. They enjoyed especially the children interacting with them and each other. The children had started on crafts like making spider webs, barns, farm machinery and animals.

Mt. Somers Gut Buster: Introducing a new event to replace the Coast to Coast for this year – The Mt Somers Gut Buster. Come and join us for this one off event over Canterbury Show Day (November 14). The event consists of a 26 km mountain bike ride down the Stour River valley followed by a 12 km mountain run/walk around Mt Somers. A moderate to good level of fitness is

required. So start training now and make a date to join us at the start line.

Short report of the Wellington Presbytery July 2014

The Wellington Presbytery met on Saturday 5 July 2014 at the Reformed Church of Silverstream. The moderator was the Rev. Peter Kloosterman.

The meeting was relatively short, lasting only until lunchtime. The following items formed the bulk of the discussions:

Church Order Article 47 questions: with gratitude to our Lord, the delegates of the Reformed Churches of Palmerston North and of Masterton responded positively to these questions. On behalf of Palmerston North, Elder Daniel Flinn answered that the Session and congregation were working well together. He elaborated on an increased workload for the elders, and on the blessings experienced by the home-school system which is followed by several of the members. He also spoke of the church’s involvement in mission work at home and abroad. The Rev. Hans Vaatstra briefed the meeting on the much-blessed ministry in and through the Wanganui congregation. On behalf of Masterton, Elder W Stolte communicated that there was good cooperation between the office bearers, that discipline is faithfully exercised, and that Christian education is a high priority for the congregational members. The members give good support for the Overseas Mission Board. Local outreach is done through cooking classes and singing in rest homes, among other activities.

The rest of the Presbytery Meeting was taken up by the following items under general business: **1) Youth Liaison Report:** It was pointed out that the Wellington Regional Youth Committee needs new youth members; and that these committee members don’t need to be communicant members – they could be baptised members as well. The delegates were asked to refer this request back to their respective sessions. **2) Overseas Mission Board Liaison Report:** The Rev. Peter Kloosterman presented a verbal report, referring also to the full report presented to the Synod. Some delegates expressed concern at the high costs of some of the items, such as the proposed

compound manager (who would look after all matters of administration and maintenance) and the implications of that for future work. **3) Reports from Counsellors for Vacant Churches:** Messrs. Vaatstra (for Foxton), and Kloosterman (for Hastings), gave verbal reports. Comments were heard about possible men available for short term service. **4) Pulpit Supply for the Vacant Churches:** the meeting adopted the roster drawn up by the clerk, as well as the motion that vacant churches reimburse the supplying churches for travel expenses incurred. **5) On Requirements for Temporary Pulpit Supply by Ministers from Non-Sister Churches:** in response to a request by the delegates of one of the churches, the Presbytery advised that a full *colloquium doctum* would not be needed, but that an informal discussion, e.g. by way of Skype, be held in conjunction with the Counsellor of the vacant church.

The Moderator closed in prayer and the meeting concluded at around 12.30pm.

Pieter van Huyssteen

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Will Metzger, in his wonderful book on evangelism, *Tell the Truth*, describes the biblical pattern this way: “in Scripture we find many examples of the gospel being spread in a person-to-person fashion. Jesus himself constantly converses with people to whom he is providentially led. He brings the word of life to them in the midst of their daily life In the early church the average Christian is found gossiping the gospel (Acts 8:1,4).”

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The legacy of Herman Bavinck

Nelson D. Kloosterman

Although the name of Herman Bavinck may be unfamiliar to some readers, his labors have probably affected all those reading these lines. Bavinck's legacy to the Reformed world, like that of his contemporary, Abraham Kuyper, was disproportionate to the size of his native Netherlands.

I write these lines on the eighty-seventh anniversary of Bavinck's death (he lived from December 13, 1854, to July 29, 1921). He is reputed to have said on his deathbed: "At this point all my knowledge avails me nothing; neither does my dogmatics; faith alone will save me."

True enough, Bavinck was saved by faith alone. Yet his erudition continues

to benefit us today, with its fruit of a massive dogmatics, together with penetrating insight into philosophy, educational psychology, natural science, and modern culture.

This year marks the centennial of Bavinck's Stone Lectures at Princeton (published in book form as *The Philosophy of Revelation*). This year also features the completed publication of the English translation of his monumental *Reformed Dogmatics* (4 volumes, Baker Academic), along with a number of smaller accompanying volumes of Bavinck's works in English translation.

Bavinck's professional career spanned forty years, from 1881 to 1921. This period featured a number of significant intellectual and religious challenges to

the Christian faith in general and the Reformed faith in particular. A eulogist writing in the *Princeton Theological Review*, comparing Bavinck with his contemporaries, opined that his scholarship was perhaps the broadest and technically the most perfect.

A bridge between two worlds

A number of biographers have written of Herman Bavinck as a man between two worlds, the worlds of pietism and modernism. A pietistic spirituality characterized the so-called Dutch Second (or Further) Reformation of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Netherlands. It sought to maintain a healthy balance between heavenly-mindedness and this-worldliness, both of which are features of historic Calvinism. In the face of declining faith and morals in Dutch society, this emphasis on personal faith and godliness promoted renewal throughout society. As it developed, however, the Second Reformation showed spiritual affinity with more mystical, anticultural, and ascetic ideals. Of this piety Herman Bavinck was an heir.

Bavinck's confrontation with modernism began with his studies at the state university in Leiden, which then was the seat of modernist theology in the Netherlands. Here he was exposed to a rigorously historical-empirical approach to philosophy and history that influenced his own fair-minded and balanced treatment of theological friend and foe alike.

In Bavinck's day, these two worlds collided. The collision involved the relationships between faith and reason, revelation and science, and religion and philosophy. The ripened fruit of the Enlightenment was being peddled about – the fruit of antisupernaturalism, with its denial of the transcendent, of the miraculous, of faith as a source of knowledge. By his example and by his publications,



Herman Bavinck

“His astute familiarity with the philosophy and scientific theories of his own day led to an evaluation of them that was unusually balanced and nuanced.”

Bavinck sought to encourage his fellow Dutch Reformed believers to live out their faith in the modern world.

The “Neo” in Bavinck’s Neo-Calvinism

The term *neo-Calvinism* identifies the restoration of Calvinism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Holland, led by Abraham Kuyper, F. L. Rutgers, and Herman Bavinck, and continued by their followers around the world. Naturally, restoration is more than repristination, which merely seeks to reproduce past forms and formulations. This central feature of neo-Calvinism has supplied its opponents with more than enough ammunition for criticizing it as a deformation of Calvinism rather than a continuation of it. Nevertheless, some of the more responsible neo-Calvinists since the days of Kuyper and Bavinck have acknowledged defects in it, especially in Kuyper’s views on regeneration and common grace.

When Bavinck came on the scene in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, evolutionism and naturalism had begun to dominate the sciences. Already the socio-political thought and philosophy of Ernst Troeltsch, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Leo Tolstoy, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and the like, had achieved international stature and acceptance. Thus, to the extent that the

application of Reformed doctrine to these issues was new, the theological and philosophical reflections of Bavinck and his contemporaries constituted a new phase in the history of Calvinism.

In applying Calvinism to these modern problems, Bavinck avoided simplistic, fundamentalist argumentation. He was thoroughly acquainted with both the history of Reformed doctrine and the history of its opponents. His astute familiarity with the philosophy and scientific theories of his own day led to an evaluation of them that was unusually balanced and nuanced. Rather than isolate theology from the burning philosophical questions of his day, Bavinck sought to integrate them in his fresh formulation of Reformed doctrine and life.

For example, Bavinck was fond of the notions of “organic” relationships and of “organism” in reference to bodies of reality. Perhaps the key to his understanding and application of these notions is the premise that divine grace does not eliminate nature, but restores it in service to God. “Grace restores nature” became one of Bavinck’s widely applied principles in every area of doctrine and life, including the organic inspiration of Scripture, the organism of the divine Trinity, and the church as organism.

Another example of the “new” in Bavinck’s Calvinism is his discussion of the biblical doctrine of creation, found in volume 2 of his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Confronted with the theory of evolution and various attempts to harmonize the results of modern science and the biblical account of creation, Bavinck argued for the legitimacy of the scientific method applied in its own field, while at the same time defending the historical reliability of the creation account in Genesis 1. Regarding the length and nature of the creation days, the various editions of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* demonstrate an openness and flexibility with regard to biblical interpretation. In the first edition, he expressed sympathy for viewing the days as periods of time. In the second edition, he suggested that the first three days were extraordinary cosmic days, keeping open the possibility that the second set of three days were also extraordinary. He repeatedly insisted that the word “day” in Genesis 1 denotes an extraordinary day, God’s own workday. Moreover, the fall into sin introduced cosmic alterations of such a kind that the situation after the Fall cannot simply be projected back to the time before the Fall. Bavinck later aban-

doned the view that the creation days referred to “time periods,” but he nevertheless continued to speak of them as extraordinary days, as God’s workdays.

Finally, the “new” of Bavinck’s neo-Calvinism is visible in the cultural awareness embedded in his work and writings. He departed from a more Anabaptist cultural stance that had prevailed among the Reformed in the Netherlands. As a son of the churches born in the Secession of 1834, Bavinck was reared among, and later pastored, church members who had little positive interest in education, politics, social policy, and culture. This son of the Secession, who had been trained among modernists in Leiden, would spend his professional life seeking to apply the principles of the Christian religion to public, scientific, and cultural life. Later in life, Bavinck became active in politics, and was elected to serve in the Dutch national government from 1911 until his death. In this capacity, Bavinck led his nation in education reform, and guided his countrymen in reflecting carefully on the problem of war. His interest in developing a Christian approach to society bore the fruit of essays on the Christian family, the role of women in modern society, and woman suffrage.

Building on the legacy

The enduring relevance of Herman Bavinck’s life and labors lies in his development, within the context of these modern discussions, of a positive, presuppositional Calvinist response in the fields of science, education, social politics, and psychology. Bavinck contributed to the formation of what has come to be called “a Reformed world-and-life view.”

Two features of that Reformed worldview deserve our commitment and imitation today. The first is Bavinck’s constant attention to the historical development of theology in general and of Reformed doctrine in particular, especially in terms of the biblical and confessional sources of dogmatics. The second is his openness and courage to interact with, and address the gospel to, the problems raised by modern science and culture.

May the Lord in his mercy grant the heirs of Herman Bavinck’s legacy the same biblical erudition and courage in our generation!

The author is professor of ethics and New Testament at Mid-America Reformed Seminary. Reprinted from New Horizons, October 2008.

Outreach – where church and community intersect

John S Shaw

“Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man,” says John Piper.

Human beings were created and designed for worship. More accurately, human beings were created and designed to worship the Creator. Unfortunately, men and women embrace sin and choose to worship created things rather than the one and only Creator (Rom. 1:21-23). That basic fact about the human race calls the church to a lifetime of missions, outreach, and evangelism. “Missions exists because worship doesn’t,” says Piper. He goes on to say, “So worship is the fuel and goal of missions” (*Let the Nations Be Glad!* 3rd ed., p.32).

The apostle John records an interaction between Jesus and a Samaritan woman in which Jesus makes a similar

point. The Lord masterfully directs the conversation throughout by answering the woman’s questions in surprising ways. When she asks a question about the proper place of worship, he answers, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (John 4:23).

Notice two things in this verse. First, Jesus teaches something about God’s people: we are worshippers. He describes our worship – “in spirit and truth” – but he most basically says that the people of God are worshippers. Second, Jesus teaches something about God the Father: he seeks worshippers. He pursues and gathers worshippers.

These two basic truths should inform our activity as congregations. Because God’s people are worshippers, the ministry and activity of the church should begin with worship in secret, in private families, and in public assemblies (Con-

fession of Faith, 21.6). Yet our commitment to the glory and worship of God does not end with personal experiences of worship. The Father is seeking, pursuing, and gathering other worshippers.

How does the Lord do this work? He sends his church, filled with the Spirit and armed with the Word of God. We don’t simply sit in our buildings every Sunday, waiting for new worshippers to fill the seats. The Lord sends out his church. We serve him in the gathering of worshippers as we participate in missions, outreach, and evangelism (Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:8; 2:42-47).

Outreach and evangelism

Of course, the big question then becomes: how do we practice outreach and evangelism in our local congregations? Let me describe one approach and then explain how congregations in the OPC have applied it. First, make a list of the talents, gifts, passions, interests, and places of influence among the members of your congregation. Second, make a list of the passions, interests, and gathering places within your local community. Then consider where these circles intersect. These points of intersection provide opportunities to build relationships that open doors of opportunity for witness.

This approach acknowledges the varied gifts the Lord provides for each congregation. He provides exactly the right gifts at the right time for a local body to grow and flourish (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-31). What a blessing it is to recognise the various talents, gifts, passions, interests, and influences that come from God and see them at work within a congregation.

This approach also acknowledges the unique characteristics of the community in which the church resides – the passions, interests, and gathering places



Tuesday English class studying the Bible.

that define the community. These are also gifts from the God who “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). At the points where the interests of a congregation and the interests of a community intersect, we have the opportunity to build relationships with neighbours. And those relationships give opportunity to shine the penetrating light of the gospel through godly actions accompanied with words of truth.

Putting it into practice

Does this really work, though? Consider some examples.

In the summer of 2006, two retired school teachers from Mission OPC in Saint Paul, Minnesota, came to me with an idea. The Lord had given them opportunities in previous churches to work with Asian internationals who had come to the United States for school or jobs. The teachers had developed a love for these families and learned how to communicate with and serve them. But they also found out that these internationals would like to learn how to sew and quilt. One of these teachers had a passion for quilting, and had recently come across several used sewing machines at an excellent price. Her skills and passions, mixed with opportunity, intersected with their desire to learn.

A plan was born. The skilled seamstress designed a program to teach basic skills of sewing and quilting. The other teacher found materials to teach the Bible at a very basic level, since most of their students would lack even the most basic Bible knowledge and struggle with the English language. I reviewed their materials, the church provided space and help with childcare, and the classes began that same fall. Through some trial and error, they gradually built a program that incorporated basic Bible teaching sandwiched between two sessions of quilting classes.

The International Quilting Circle has spawned all sorts of ministry opportunities and gospel conversations for almost eight years. More than one hundred students have come through the classes. Some students have asked for one-on-one Bible studies, and in one case the study continued for years. Others have asked for more opportunities to learn English through the study of the Bible in groups, so an English Language Learners class was started. Every year, quilting students join the church for fellowship

events and also for worship. Most wonderfully, Mission OPC has celebrated four baptisms through the contacts from these classes, while other students have professed faith and been baptised in other local churches.

The Lord has blessed this particular ministry and added to his church.

But notice how this ministry started. Members of Mission OPC possessed particular talents, gifts, and passions. Members of the community possessed particular interests that overlapped. These points of intersection provided an opportunity to build relationships, which opened doors to witness.

Consider another example from the same church, but this time focused on gathering places. Mission OPC’s building stands a couple of blocks from Como Park, a large gathering place with trails, picnic areas, and sports fields. Every year the park hosts a large Hmong Freedom Celebration and Sports Festival on the weekend nearest to July Fourth. Thousands upon thousands of people walk past the church building to attend the festival. So members of the church set up a booth in front of the church building and provided cold water for anyone who was thirsty, comfortable seats in the shade for those who needed to rest, a table filled with gospel tracts and literature about the church, and people ready to talk, share the gospel, or pray with anyone who stopped.

When a congregation takes the time to study the local community, many opportunities for outreach and evangelism become evident. Mission OPC hosted the National Night Out neighbourhood party the summer after purchasing their building. More than sixty neighbours spent a Tuesday evening eating together in the



Another project completed!



Instruction in the use of sewing machines.

church parking lot, and the congregation established some new relationships.

Reformation Presbyterian Church in Queens, New York, hosts BBQ&A

events in the park at the end of every summer and has significant conversations with its neighbours.

Jeremiah Montgomery, the pastor

of Resurrection OPC in State College, Pennsylvania, gives open-air gospel presentations every week at a major gathering point on Penn State University's campus, and the Lord has used those presentations to open doors for ongoing gospel conversations.

Brandon Wilkins, the pastor of Christ Covenant Presbyterian Church in Crystal Lake, Illinois, volunteers at a Christian-run youth center that serves high school students and has enjoyed opportunities to counsel and present the gospel.

Eric Hausler, the pastor of Naples Presbyterian Church in Naples, Florida, teaches weekly Bible studies at the county jail, and some of his former students and their relatives have attended worship more than once.

We could compile a long list of opportunities for witness that church plants and congregations have utilised, and then celebrate how the Lord has blessed those efforts. But what can we learn from these examples?

What do we learn from this?

Effective outreach and evangelism ministries require time and thought. The Lord providentially brings people with particular talents, gifts, passions, and interests to each congregation. The Lord also providentially shapes a community with particular passions, interests, and gathering places. When we take time to analyse how the Lord has shaped our congregation and our community, he often opens the door to tremendous periods of witness that produce much fruit.

Congregations must emphasise weekly worship, sound biblical preaching, and consistent discipleship and teaching. The Christian is by nature a worshipper, but the Christian should also long to see more and more people gathering for worship. That desire to see the Lord receive the worship he deserves from a greater number of people motivates our ministry of witness. May we give thought, planning, and time to evangelism and outreach. And may the Lord bless our witness by gathering more of the worshippers he seeks.

The author is general secretary of the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension.

New Horizons, July 2014.



International students using quilting skills to make bags.



Finishing a T-shirt quilt.