

Making Sense

Making Sense

Christianity in today's world

DON FLEMING

BRIDGEWAY

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ISBN 0 947342 18 4

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Bridgeway Publications
GPO Box 2547
Brisbane 4001
Australia

Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

To
Alan and Mary Batchelor

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Preface

This book brings together a variety of articles I have written for Christian magazines, journals and other publications over the past thirty years. In choosing the articles I have not considered those that touch on material already published in my reference books, *Bridge Bible Handbooks*, *Bridge Bible Commentary*, *Bridge Bible Directory*, *Basic Christianity Series* and *Let the Bible Speak for Itself*. The material here is new and different. It covers a wide range of subjects that attempt to make sense of issues we meet in today's world, though always from what I understand to be a biblical viewpoint.

All the articles have been edited to rewrite examples that were relevant at the time of initial publication but would be outdated today. Some articles have been shortened through the removal of material that has since appeared in some other publication, others lengthened through the addition of material that was excluded from the original because of restrictions on length. Articles prepared originally for a language other than English have also needed adjustment.

Many of the articles appeared in more than one publication, sometimes with variations. The credit at the end of each article indicates one appearance, though not necessarily the earliest or the latest. In each case I am grateful to the publishers for the re-use of the article.

Whereas Bible commentaries and dictionaries are full of references, magazine articles often have few. Reference books are designed to be read by people in a studious frame of mind, with Bible, pen and paper before them. Magazine articles are designed to be read by people who may not necessarily be poised for study, but who nevertheless want to read something that is useful. I trust that the articles collected here might in some way contribute to a more confident and active Christian faith in an uncertain and changing world.

Don Fleming

The how-to-do-it syndrome

One description of the present age would be the how-to-do-it age. There are demonstrations, seminars, programs, interviews, manuals, documentaries and talkbacks on almost any subject a person can think of. This is how to do it, and so long as you do it properly you will have success, fulfilment and satisfaction. It matters not whether the subject is woodcarving, child rearing, swimming, Bible study or church growth, there are people to tell you how to do it.

Technique and success

This fascination with technique has become a hindrance to Christian development, both in the individual believer and in the church. People think that if only they can do something the right way, they will have success. Certainly, to be knowledgeable and efficient is better than to blunder along making a hopeless mess of things, but when technique becomes the controlling factor, apparent success may turn into actual failure.

Take, for example, matters relevant to society as a whole. Concerning matters such as sex and marriage, an abundance of material is available to tell people what to do and how to do it. But we should not think about techniques independently of morality. The how-to-do-it teachers encourage us to consider whether a thing works, not whether it is right. Consider also politics. Politicians are called pragmatists when they opt for what is politically expedient even though it may be contrary to their party philosophy or, worse still, contrary to common morality and justice. For such people success overrides all other values. They gain the world, but lose their soul, so to speak.

In Christian circles, as elsewhere, people are looking for success. Any seminar or special meeting that deals with some how-to-do-it topic is guaranteed to attract good support. People will fill the church for a 'workshop' on personal witnessing and

will learn the half-dozen points that make that particular scheme a winner. Others will flock to special sessions on how to study the Bible – though often they seem reluctant to spend time and effort actually doing some Bible study themselves.

Then there are the ever-popular discussions on relationships, especially marriage relationships. Many seem to think that because they have attended a seminar, read a book or consulted a counsellor, their problems are over. They seem not to have realized that they have the unattractive task of changing their selfish ways and doing what pleases others instead of what pleases themselves.

Skills and flexibility

Since no two people are the same, what works with one person will not necessarily work with another. Techniques are designed for repetitive use in an environment that is uniform and predictable. They work well in a motor vehicle assembly plant, but require considerable flexibility when used with people. They can provide helpful guidelines and direction, particularly in formal training for occupational skills, but they cannot produce results mechanically.

As students of the Bible we may at times look for certain exemplary techniques in the ministry of the Lord Jesus. Other times we might try to discover the secret of success in Paul's missionary activity. Jesus and Paul had different ministries, and each carried out his ministry with thought and planning, but in neither case is there a stereotyped technique. Each province, each town, each group, each person, each conversation is different from the previous.

God does not want us to do his work haphazardly. He wants us to think about ways and means of reaching the lost, making disciples, exercising gifts and building the church. He wants us to develop whatever expertise he has given us, and work out how best to use our abilities for maximum benefit to all. Any know-how we gain will be useful, but it will be no substitute for the costly discipline of spending time in prayer, Bible study and personal help to others.

Word and Spirit

One reason why we look for a technique is that we feel insecure without one. This is particularly the case in relation to speaking to others about Christ. The solution to this problem lies not in finding a foolproof technique, but in saturating ourselves with a knowledge of God and his Word so that we do not lose our confidence the first time someone asks us a difficult question.

Another reason why we look for techniques is that we fear to build friendships with those who do not share our faith. We must learn to be more outgoing, more self-giving, more relaxed with others. We must learn to operate in the openness and flexibility of person-to-person relationships, not in the impersonal contact and fixed routines of the manufacturer's assembly line.

Above all, we need confidence in the God whom we serve and to whom we pray. If we believe that the Holy Spirit can use the Word he inspired to make its message relevant to the reader, we will explain the Word as best we can so that the Spirit has the material to work on. We shall not need to push or force people, nor shall we need to follow rigidly the six steps of the rulebook designed to manipulate the potential convert through the gate. But always we shall need patience and trust. In a society that demands instant results – instant prints, instant replays, instant coffee, instant everything – Christians still have to learn to 'wait upon the Lord'. We must be totally dependent on the Spirit of God to do his work, in his way, in his time.

'The wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit' (John 3:8).

From *Outreach* (Australia, 1987)

Respect and respectability

As some of us move around churches, whether in our own country or abroad, we inevitably notice a great variety in what might loosely be called public worship. Meetings take a variety of forms, some conducted well, but others apparently lacking refinement in matters of organization and presentation. Buildings are of all types, some impressive in the local streetscape, others plain and perhaps drab. Sometimes dress is of the 'Sunday best' variety, other times it is distinctly different. Songs and tunes may be of the kind that we traditionally associate with church music, or may be so unconventional that we feel uncomfortable with them.

All in all, things are different from what we are accustomed to. If we are familiar with only the established practices of traditional churches in our home territory, we may feel that less sophisticated churches sometimes lack what we regard as the right atmosphere for public worship.

Perhaps one reason for this impression is that too often we fail to see the difference between respect and respectability. We can place so much emphasis on the appearance of things that we miss the essential character of what we are supposed to be doing.

This was the problem that the Old Testament prophets saw among God's people. There was great enthusiasm in maintaining the right activities and the proper procedures in religious services, but little respect for God himself. God on one occasion even suggested they close down their places of worship. Better to have no worship at all than the second-rate worship that combined procedural respectability with spiritual disrespect. 'If I am a father, where is the honour due to me? If I am a master, where is the respect due to me? . . . Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar' (Mal 1:6,10).

Such lack of respect for God was demonstrated in various ways. For example, people were giving to God only what they had no use for themselves. They brought animals that were blind, crippled or diseased, to which God replied, 'Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you?' (Mal 1:8).

Others understood their relationship with God solely in terms of the blessings they could get from him. 'Implore God to be gracious to us', they said to the prophet, to which the prophet replied, 'With such offerings from your hand, will he accept any of you?' (Mal 1:9). They made demands of God, but showed no sense of commitment to him.

Other people made impressive public displays of devotion, but privately they tried to get by with as little as possible. The prophet's response was, 'Cursed be the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished thing to the Lord' (Mal 1:10).

We could readily think of present-day equivalents to these ancient practices. Human nature is very consistent from one era to the next or from one culture to another. We are good at deceiving ourselves; we are clever at justifying our slackness. The point is that all these people, like many of us, were ordinary 'middle of the road' members of the religious community. They had respectability – and there was nothing wrong with that – but they mistook it for respect. And all too often, respectability, like beauty, is only skin deep.

From *Treasury* (New Zealand, 1994)

Jesus' teaching in the modern world

What Christians imagine people think of them and what people actually think of them are often two different things. Christians may think people consider them a little odd because they abstain from certain activities that others engage in, but in many present-day countries, especially those that have had a long association with Christian traditions, the problem is deeper. People see Christianity as having nothing to say in a modern complex society. They do not try to persecute it out of existence; they simply consider it so harmless as to be irrelevant.

Impact on the world

As the Father sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus sent his disciples into the world. He prayed that they might be kept from evil, but he did not want them taken out of the world (John 17:15; 20:21). They were not to stand aloof from the world, but neither were they to partake of its sin. The separation that Jesus called for was spiritual rather than physical, a separation in mind and spirit, not a separation that in effect took Christians 'out of the world'. One does not have to be a medieval monk to live in isolation from one's fellow human beings.

According to Jesus' purpose, Christians have a responsibility towards society, though this does not mean they should see themselves as experts on every social issue that arises. Many problems of a complex economic and industrial order need to be dealt with by people who have the necessary skills. God never intended the church to be an agency to deal with all such matters. Certainly, some Christians will be equipped to make a contribution in these areas, and all Christians will have to decide whether or not to support specific policies and programs. But the chief contribution of Christians will come from their knowledge of God and his Word. True followers of Jesus will put human values before economic profit, and biblical ethics before political expediency.

Ethics come from theology

To say that Christian ethics are Bible-based is not to say that the Bible is a handbook that sets out rules on every aspect of living. We cannot summarize the teaching of Jesus or the biblical writers in that way. The Bible does not set out details of a universal moral code, but reveals the saving activity of God through history, and specifically through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Out of this it raises the question: because God has so acted, what must we do? Christian behaviour arises out of Christian belief. Our ethics come from our theology.

The Bible gives us many broad principles that are clearly applicable at all times. The words and actions of Jesus showed, for example, that it is wrong to combine social injustice with worship ('they devour widows' houses and for a pretence make long prayers'; Mark 12:40), that religion is not to be a way of gain ('my house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves'; Matt 21:13), and that when people keep the letter of the law in order to defeat its purpose they are being dishonest (illustrated in the 'corban' story; Mark 7: 11-13). The list could be extended considerably.

If, however, we search beyond these general principles for specific instructions about present-day issues, we may be disappointed. For instance, the Bible does not legislate on the extent to which the government should help Christians as private citizens, or the extent to which Christians as private citizens should involve themselves in government. It gives no fixed answers to the many complicated issues that are judged in civil courts. It does not say how many hours people should work each day or how much they should be paid for working those hours. Yet it is not silent on these issues. Throughout the Bible there are teachings, examples and stories from which we can learn the values that God desires in human behaviour.

The moral teaching of Jesus

Some people, though unimpressed with Christians, claim to be impressed with Jesus. At times they refer to him approvingly as a good moral teacher. But Jesus was not primarily a moral

teacher – nor a reformer, philosopher or popular preacher. He was the Son of God, through whom God made himself known to the world and through whom the world could come to know God. He did not prepare a doctrinal charter, but as each occasion arose he expressed the particular aspect of truth that the occasion required. He did not draw up a code of ethics, but left ‘another Counsellor’, the Spirit of truth, who would guide his church by interpreting his words and relating their meaning to future generations.

Unlike the law codes of some religions, the teaching of Jesus is not tied to one era or one culture. It therefore never goes out of date. Also, unlike the legislation of a civil government, it is not a set of regulations applicable to all citizens under all conditions. Rather the teaching of Jesus shows the attitude people must have and the action they must be prepared to carry out if they come under his lordship.

An illustration of this is seen in the encounter Jesus had with a rich man who wanted eternal life. Jesus told the man to sell all that he owned, not because that was the standard procedure for any person to receive eternal life, but because in the case of this man, wealth was his god. It was the thing that prevented him from entering the kingdom of God (Matt 19:21-22). But Jesus did not tell all rich people to sell their possessions. Nor did he tell all working people to abandon their livelihoods. However, he made it clear that all who enter his kingdom must be *prepared* to sacrifice anything if God requires them to. They must always have an attitude that puts the interest of Christ’s kingdom before their own (Mark 1:16-20; 10:28-31).

If people want to regard the teachings of Jesus as the laws of a kingdom, that kingdom is not one of civil administration, but one where Christ rules in the heart. His words are of the spirit, not of the law; they bring life, not death (John 6:63; 2 Cor 3:3,6; cf. James 2:12)

Applying Jesus’ teaching

Jesus’ desire to change people inwardly is well demonstrated in that body of teaching commonly referred to as the Sermon on

the Mount. There he repeatedly contrasts the heart attitude of Christians with the legal requirements of the law. Merely to refrain from murder and adultery is not enough; they must purge such things from their minds (Matt 5: 21-32).

The civil law defends the innocent and punishes the guilty by imposing penalties that fit the offence ('an eye for an eye', 'a tooth for a tooth', 'a bruise for a bruise', 'a scratch for a scratch'), and Christians are part of a society that should uphold those principles (Rom 13:1-5). But the spirit that rules in the heart of Christians is not the same as that which rules in the code of legal justice. In their personal relations, Christians must not be vindictive, but must be prepared to 'turn the other cheek' and 'go the extra mile'. In short, they must respond to persecutors with forgiveness and kindness, as Jesus did (Matt 5:38-41; 1 Peter 2:20-23).

In learning from Jesus, however, Christians must be careful not to mistake his purpose or misapply his words. The labourers who were hired for one silver coin a day illustrate not that workers should receive equal pay for unequal work, but that by God's grace sinners receive more than they deserve (Matt 20:1-16). The rebuke to the young man to 'let the dead bury their dead' is not a command to ignore family responsibilities, but a reminder that disciples of Jesus must examine their priorities. Though there are many people who can look after the everyday affairs of life, only the disciples of Jesus can look after the more important affairs of God's kingdom (Matt 8:21-22).

The purpose in studying the teaching of Jesus is not to find a chapter and verse that speaks about every subject of today's world, but to develop a sense of values that is centred in Jesus Christ. The whole of life is within the area of God's just rule. Every issue must be examined in the light of Christ's love and righteousness. Christian ethics can be applied to the present-day world just as they were applied to the world in which Christ himself lived.

Jesus likened Christians to salt and light. Salt is not thrown on the ground where people walk on it, nor is a candle put under

a tin can. The purpose of salt is to put it on something where it will have a preserving and wholesome action. The purpose of a candle is to put it on a stand where it will give light (Matt 5:13-16).

Christians likewise are to be in places and working in ways that are useful to others. Although salvation in Christ is the basis of their relation with God, that salvation also affects their relation to the people around them. It not only gives meaning to their spiritual life, but should also give meaning to life in the society where they live. If it does not, they are like salt lying on the ground, or a candle under a tin can. They are, in effect, 'taken out of the world'. Christ prayed that this would not happen.

From *The Witness* (England, 1970)

Making the right choices

We are living in the age of the ulcer, the breakdown and high blood pressure. We spend so much time simply keeping up with things that it seems we have little time to do anything worthwhile along the way. On every hand we are faced with such an array of possibilities and options that rather than increase our anxiety by having to decide, we find it easier to go along with whatever happens to be popular at the time.

This situation confronts us everywhere. In the retail market we are embarrassed with the variety of choices available. In the political sphere people from all levels of society offer their remedy for the nation's problems. In international affairs things become so complicated that we no longer try to understand what is going on. In Christian circles there are programs, schemes and how-to-do-it kits for almost any situation we may meet. If we are to find our way through this maze and make any worthwhile contribution to church, family or society, every aspect of our lives must be characterized by the exercise of discernment. We must know how to make right judgments – how to 'refuse the evil and choose the good'.

Exercise and growth

One part of the Bible that is of special relevance to the exercise of discernment is Hebrews 5:11-14. The writer criticizes his readers because of their lack of spiritual progress. They had received so much instruction in the Word that they should have been mature Christians who were able to teach others. They should have been 'full-grown' people who ate solid food, but instead they had to be treated as babies and fed on milk.

In these verses several things are related. Instruction in the Word produces the capacity to eat solid food, and this is a characteristic of people who are full-grown. The verses then go on to say that the full-grown, the mature, are those who through

practice have developed the ability to distinguish good from evil. In summary, Bible knowledge enables people to exercise true discernment, and this discernment is both a requirement for and a characteristic of Christian maturity. But it only comes 'through practice'. We grow spiritually as we learn how to relate Bible knowledge to everyday affairs.

God has made us so that we are all different. We are not products manufactured by a machine, but individuals who have a wealth of capacities and a mind that helps us use them. Just as exercise and growth are requirements for physical maturity, so are they for spiritual maturity. God wants us to 'grow to mature adulthood, to the measure of Christ's full stature' (Eph 4:13-14). A child needs bodily exercise to develop physically and wide interests to develop mentally, and this education does not stop once the child has grown to adulthood. Just as a lack of physical exercise leads to difficulty in doing anything other than routine movements, so lack of mental exercise leads to difficulty in making right judgments.

We must therefore make the effort not only to increase our Bible knowledge, but also to exercise our minds in applying that knowledge; otherwise instead of going forward in our Christian lives we shall go backwards. Jesus was talking about the exercise of the mind when he said, 'Give thought to what you hear, for the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given to you. For to those who have will more be given; but to those who have not, even what they have will be taken away' (Mark 4:24-25). Whatever mental capacity we have, if we do not develop it we shall lose it.

Wide interests

Mental exercise need not be limited to matters concerning the Bible or specific Christian subjects. Although the Bible may contain a wealth of teaching that the human mind can never exhaust, it was never intended to be the sole source of information on every aspect of life. It was never intended to be a text book on mathematics, biology, politics or geology, and if we insist on reading only the Bible we can soon land ourselves in

trouble. We can become the victims of our own imagination by using the Bible to invent our own theories. We distort the Bible when we try to make it provide information about such subjects as the laws of motion or the United Nations.

The Bible itself indicates that God's people benefit from having wide interests. Paul was familiar with such diverse topics as the Isthmian Games (1 Cor 9:24-26), Greek poetry (Acts 17:28) and Cretan philosophy (Titus 1:12), and he assumed his readers were too. Luke had an interest in sea-faring (Acts 27), Jude read religious literature other than the Bible (Jude 9,14), James had a good knowledge of local business practices (James 4:13; 5:4-6) and all New Testament writers use illustrations that show a wide interest in everyday affairs.

Freedom and restrictions

Though encouraging us to have a breadth of interests, the Bible reminds us that not all people have the same interests. God may call one to a life of more limited interests than another, even to a person's non-participation in legitimate activities. But those who abstain from certain activities are not necessarily holier than those who do not abstain. 'John came neither eating nor drinking and they say, He has a demon. The Son of man came eating and drinking and they say, He is a glutton and a drunkard' (Matt 11:18-19). John was not holier than Jesus. He merely had a different calling.

But if abstinence does not indicate spiritual maturity, neither does indulgence. This was a problem that the apostle John had to deal with when Gnostic-type teaching troubled the early church. Certain people believed they had superior knowledge, particularly in understanding what was good and what was evil, and this knowledge made them superior Christians. They believed that nothing done in the body could affect the spirit of those with this higher knowledge. In behaving as they pleased, some asserted they did not sin (which John said was to call God a liar; 1 John 1:10). Others asserted they could sin as they pleased and still be Christians (which John said was not possible; 1 John 3:9). The truth that John's teaching demonstrates is this:

knowledge does not lead a person outside the realms of morality and conscience.

Knowledge, however, must not be despised, as if all those who have knowledge are guilty of pride or consider themselves superior. The intellect is given by God and, like every other part of a person's life and being, is to be submitted to God for his use. Through it Christians learn to exercise discernment, to refuse the evil and choose the good. According to the prayers of Paul, we are to develop knowledge and discernment so that we can judge what is best, and thereby grow to maturity and have fruitful lives (Phil 1:9-11; Col 1:9-10). As our minds are renewed we no longer see things the way other people see them, but learn to make the sorts of decisions that please God (Rom 12:2).

Benefits all round

The Christian ability to make wise choices must not be seen as something to be pursued merely for our own benefit. Genuine maturity does not come to those whose concerns are chiefly for themselves. As part of society, Christians help form public opinion, which is a vital part of the life of any nation. We should therefore take an interest in national affairs so that we can make a contribution that is enlightened and Christian. At the same time we should remember that a nation consists of individual people, and therefore we should take time to develop those person-to-person relationships that are necessary if we are to lead people to Christ.

Whether on the national scale or the individual, our Christian ministry will require us to have a breadth of interests so that we can interact intelligently with people. We ought to be able to discuss matters of interest to them as individuals and to society as a whole, if we are to demonstrate the relevance of Christianity in today's world. We do not want to give the impression that we are ignorant on subjects other than religion. If something is honourable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent or admirable, it is worth spending time thinking about (Phil 4:8). Faith does not stand alone; it should be supplemented with virtue, knowledge,

self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly affection and love (2 Peter 1:5-7).

There are no short cuts and no labour-saving devices in the process of spiritual growth. God wants us to move consistently towards completeness and maturity, but this takes time and effort. It involves the transformation of the mind, as values are moulded by a better understanding of God's Word. This in turn helps in exercising discernment, so that we know how to distinguish what is worthwhile from what is not. But, as the writer to the Hebrews points out, this development comes only 'through practice' (Heb 5:14).

From *The Witness* (England, 1970)

Forced to be friendly

As my friend left the supermarket checkout, the girl behind the counter muttered something that he did not quite hear. When he begged her pardon, she replied with fierce eyes and in gruff rebuking tones, 'I said, Have a happy day!' Actually, that is what he had been having already, till the checkout girl spoiled it. But she had been told to say those words, so she did.

The same sort of thing happens in churches. People are told to turn around, smile, and repeat some slogan to make a nearby person feel welcome. There must be something wrong with churches when people are forced into stereotyped forms of welcoming. Another friend of mine, while working in a town for a few weeks, visited several churches. In the first church, which had the 'let's all welcome each other' routine, he was given the formal words of welcome by a church member seated beside him, but when he happened to meet the same person two days later in the street, the person did not even remember him. The next Sunday he was at a church that had no 'let's all welcome each other' routine, but several people spoke to him, and after church a couple invited him home for lunch.

Recently, my wife and I were at a church camp where again there was a forced welcoming routine. This was the opening night exercise where everyone runs around with a pencil and paper trying to find the answers to ten questions – who was born in August, who owns a brown dog, who plays the piano, and so on. I have participated in many such exercises at camps and conventions, but I cannot recall that they ever helped me get to know a single person. Why not simply be friendly and talk to people?

Just about everybody I know of is embarrassed by these 'ice-breaker' exercises. If they are not embarrassed they are annoyed. Organizers feel they must have them, mainly because they have been told that this is the way to get people involved.

On one occasion about fifty of us came from churches all over the city for a seminar on how church can be interesting for children. The first of the three sessions was a 'fun' exercise to show us that many children are easily bored with church (which we were all aware of, otherwise we would not have come to the seminar). The second session was a group exercise (this was the 'let's get involved' segment) where we were to slot churches into one of half a dozen categories (which again told us why we had come to the seminar). The organizers were trying to make us feel this was a 'relevant' seminar, and they might have succeeded had they dealt with the issue we had come to consider.

We do not impress people by telling them how much we are trying to impress them. We simply do what we are supposed to do, and do it as best we can, with as much thought, love, concern and ability as we are capable of. All the gimmicks in the world will not save a seminar or a sermon if the content is poor. And the same principle applies in our friendliness with people. We all know how we respond positively when someone shows genuine interest in us, and how we dig in our heels when someone is clearly trying to manipulate us.

Something is amiss when we must be forced to be friendly, whether in a church service among like-minded people or in outreach to the unchurched in the neighbourhood. But to be friendly means to put others before self – and that is where the problem lies.

From *Links* (Australia, 1995)

‘Let’s get away from it all’

Living is a risky business. The world in which Christians live seems at times to be a very insecure place. Long-established standards are challenged, and society seems to be falling apart. In a time of such uncertainty the instinct to preserve oneself asserts itself, and Christians have to be careful that this instinct does not override more important responsibilities. Those responsibilities include putting God first and putting one’s neighbour before oneself.

Once they are committed to these ideals, Christians will soon find they are out of step with the rest of society. With people in general, a decision on a proposed course of action is usually based on how much the outcome will affect their own social and economic security. But what about Christians? They say they put their beliefs into practice, but are they really any different from others? Or are they too motivated by self-interest? Are they too tempted to opt out of social responsibilities, to ‘get away from it all’, to let a wayward society suffer the troubles it deserves?

‘Get me out of here’

All around them Christians see practices and attitudes that are in conflict with their belief in a God of justice and love. They see these things on the right and on the left, in the cosy self-assurance of conservative well-to-do people and in the reckless radicalism of the promoters of chaos and violence. They may, if they stand for Christ and his values, be attacked from one side or the other.

When such conflicts arise today, Christians will know that they are not the first to suffer for righteousness’ sake. They may experience the temptation to try to escape from it all, as David did when oppressed by the wicked: ‘O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest’ (Ps 55:6). But there was no likelihood that David would grow wings, and in a more sober

moment later in the same psalm he came to realize that escapism was not the answer. He would remain unmoved in spite of the attacks on him, confident that God would sustain him: 'Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved' (verse 22).

Here is a proper appreciation of God's comfort. Thoughts on the higher life are not a form of escapism from life's realities, but a source of strength amid life's complexities. God's people cannot ignore the problems in the world around them in the hope of a better life in the hereafter. As David wished at times to be free of conflict, so did Paul, but, like David, Paul faced up to reality. Certainly, the prospect of being 'with Christ' was 'far better', but he readily accepted that 'to remain in the flesh' was 'more necessary' for those who needed his help (Phil 1:23-24).

'Don't do this to yourself!'

The temptation to opt out, however, comes not only from within believers themselves. It sometimes comes from their friends or relatives, whose words may reinforce those feelings of frustration that everyone experiences some time.

David had difficulty enough handling his inner conflicts, but to add to his tension his friends also put to him the suggestion that he 'fly away'. 'Flee like a bird to the mountain', they said, 'for the wicked bend the bow, they have fitted the arrow to the string, to shoot at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?' (Ps 11:1-3). In other words, follow common sense and opt for whatever creates least hardship for yourself. After all, if society is in such a mess, what use is it for a righteous person to try to resist evil?

Silence may sometimes be the best response when Christians suffer unjustly from the wrongdoing of others. Jesus taught it and exemplified it (Matt 5:39; 1 Peter 2:21-23). But he was careful in assessing when he should keep silent and when he should not. Silence can become a lazy way out when Christians see evil committed against others. People may interpret their silence as approval, and they themselves may give in to the temptation to go along with evil instead of resisting it.

Christians are aware that they are to have ‘no part in the unfruitful works of darkness’, but they often hesitate over the instruction that follows, ‘but instead expose them’ (Eph 5:11). Jesus showed no such hesitancy, even though it brought him into conflict with people of power and influence.

Most of Jesus’ harsh words were directed against people who were religiously conservative, socially respectable and financially comfortable. By his words and his actions he condemned their selfish nationalism (Matt 21:43; Luke 4:24-28), their desire for social status (Matt 23:6-7; Luke 15:2), their materialism (Matt 6:19-24; Luke 6:24), their religious smugness (Matt 6:2-6; Luke 18:11-12) and their heartless neglect of the needy (Matt 25:41-45; Luke 16:19-31).

‘A good standard of living gives protection’

Jesus’ harsh words against the wealthy (and most Christians in the West would be wealthy by the standards of Jesus’ day) arose not from a poor man’s resentment of the rich, but from a godly man’s opposition to the selfish. Economic security can become a means by which people isolate themselves from God and their fellow human beings. Being dependent on no one, they may easily imagine they have no need of God; being secure themselves, they may easily become insensitive to the needs of others (Matt 19:20-23; Luke 6:25).

A world of greed, exploitation, cruelty, twisted values, social upheaval, family disintegration and industrial turmoil may not be the kind of world that Christians feel at home in, but it is the world they have to live in whether they like it or not. Once again the temptation comes to sprout wings and fly away from it all; and because they have the financial capacity, in a sense many can do it.

Babylon of Habakkuk’s day did it – and earned God’s judgment for its efforts. ‘Woe to you who get evil gain for your house, to set your nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm!’ (Hab 2:9). Babylon used its ill-gotten economic power to make itself secure, so that it could live in ease and comfort, immunized against the afflictions and troubles of the world

around it. But in the day of judgment its luxury was to be a witness against it: 'For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond' (Hab 2:11).

James said much the same to people of his day who similarly maintained a self-indulgent lifestyle at the expense of others. 'Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you' (James 5:3).

'But I came to serve'

Service is the only way. The best example of what God requires of Christians is the example of Christ himself. So far from 'getting away from it all', Jesus immersed himself in the world of his day, even though it was a world whose principles and conduct were in contradiction to his own. In an incredible act of self-emptying, he who was rich became poor, the Word became flesh, God partook of human nature (John 1:14; 2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:7-8; Heb 2:14). And when Jesus did this he was concerned not just for the respectable and the religious, but also for the underprivileged, the diseased, the poor, the mentally deranged and the socially despised.

Jesus sought no publicity for himself, yet the very nature of his ministry made him so controversial that people were either decidedly for him or against him. He was thoroughly identified with those he served, so that he felt the pain of their sin. More than that, he bore it – and out of suffering came healing (Isa 53:4-5; Matt 8:17; 1 Peter 2:24). There was no escapism, but there was new life.

If Christians are to serve their fellow citizens as Jesus did, they cannot hope for the undisturbed tranquillity of a life that is insulated from the ills of a troubled world. Indeed, they can expect the sorts of conflicts Jesus experienced. But if their suffering is in the cause of righteousness, then, like the greatest of all suffering servants, they may be assured that in due course they will 'see the fruit of the travail of their souls and be satisfied' (Isa 53:11).

From *Interest* (USA, 1992)

Seeing is believing – or is it?

Most of us would probably be surprised to find how much our view of people and events is moulded by impressions; that is, impressions as distinct from facts. We readily respond to images and words without always seeing the full picture – though we may not like to admit this. We accept the impression that our senses give us.

Images from the past

This blurring between impressions and facts is well illustrated in the way many view the Bible. Though they may not say so, they have an impression that the people and events of the Bible are not real.

Many see the Bible as a collection of stories with a moral, but they have difficulty making a distinction in their minds between a literary figure and a historical figure. Lady Macbeth has equal credibility with Queen Jezebel. Romeo and Juliet provide the theme for one movie, Samson and Delilah for another. Jack the giant killer has his biblical equivalent in the youthful David. Only when biblical people and events are linked with well-known people and events (for example, Alexander the Great or the fire of Rome) are people jolted into realizing that the Bible is grounded in the world of history.

Christians are often no better than non-Christians in holding impressions that have little resemblance to the real world. Think, for example, of the common presentations of Jesus that we see in books or movies. He always wears white, looks European, has brown wavy hair (black hair and swarthy looks are usually reserved for Judas), and gives the impression that when he walks he glides over the ground rather than actually touches it. This artificial impression is so ingrained that some even think it irreverent to suggest that if Jesus lived among us today he would probably get around the house in T-shirt and jeans, eat corn-

flakes for breakfast, and read the newspaper while riding the train to work.

An impression may bear no relation to the reality, yet often people accept the impression and miss the reality. For years they may have read what Paul wrote to the Romans without realizing that those he addressed were Italians. Preachers extract beautiful spiritual lessons from some of Israel's battles without seeing the reality of human beings sloshing around in blood and hacking each other to pieces. The stereotyped images and religious jargon become so dominant that people are unable to see the real world properly.

Impressions through television

Perhaps no area of modern life demonstrates this fact more clearly than the world of television. Even if people are sometimes sceptical about what they read or hear, they nearly always believe what they see.

That may be valid in the real world, but the TV screen is not the real world. Even news and documentary programs do not portray the real world. A two-minute clip on the news may or may not be a true indication of what happened in an event that lasted several hours. Always at least one human being comes between the event and the viewer. With all the goodwill in the world, reporters, photographers, editors and presenters are still human beings with personal values and opinions, and their choices affect what is shown. The supposed factual objectivity of what we see on the TV news is an illusion.

Likewise the desire for technical excellence and efficient presentation can distort an interview, even if no distortion is intended. We can understand why some politicians will only give interviews that are transmitted live; they know what can happen to a recording when an editor cuts short a comment, rewords a question or shifts an answer into a different context.

This is not to say that all TV producers are dishonest, but it shows that viewers should not accept any news program, current affairs presentation or face-to-face interview as being 'the real

thing'. If technological skill can produce high quality pictures, it can also produce credible deceptions. But when people watch TV they are usually in a relaxed state of mind, and tend not to challenge what they see. The person who reads a novel knows that the material is fiction, but when people watch TV they think they are seeing reality, even though what they see may be a distortion or falsification.

If such difficulties are evident in programs that claim to be factual reporting, they are much more obvious in programs that are straight entertainment, such as movies, soap operas and the weekly 'cops and robbers' favourites. The danger is not that all who see something violent or sexy will go out and commit a violent or sexual misdeed (though some might), but that their minds are numbed and their values altered without their realizing it. Again they can mistake what they see for reality: 'that's the way it is in the world out there'. People absorb the cultural values and in due course their behaviour reflects them.

Christian values

When someone points out to Christians that they should exercise judgment when watching TV, they usually respond by nodding in solemn agreement and making disapproving comments about sex. Because they see themselves as defenders of traditional standards of sexual morality, they are already on guard in relation to such matters. But the more serious danger usually lies elsewhere.

An uncritical attitude to news, commercials, panel games and talk shows is more harmful, because the issues are more everyday and fundamental, while viewers are less defensive. Viewers may recognize an X-rated movie as an attack on their moral values and so censor it out, but allow third-rate trash and greed-promoting commercials to eat away at their minds like a deadly cancer.

For many the trouble arises out of the reasonable desire to relax after a hard day's work. Television is there to entertain them, not to make them think. But if people become merely spectators of life and forget that they are also participants in

it, the impression they get from the TV screen can easily dominate their view of life in the real world. If they do not think about what they see, they will fall victim to the cleverest media manipulator. The less people develop their critical faculties, the more at risk they are. That is why children are particularly vulnerable.

Mind as well as eyes

Christian parents complain about the harm that television does to children, but if they themselves are gullible, lacking in discernment, or impulsive rather than rational in their decision-making, they can hardly expect their children to be otherwise. Parental control does not simply mean switching from one TV channel to another. It means teaching children the full range of Christian values so that children grow up with the ability to make the right choices in life (Deut 6:6-9). Maturity comes as people learn for themselves how to refuse the bad and choose the good (Heb 5:13-14), and they will be equipped to do this as their minds are nourished on what is good, right, true and wholesome (Phil 4:8).

Children are likely to get this sort of personal development in a home environment where parents talk to them intelligently, and encourage them to assess and evaluate. They are not likely to get it where parents use TV as a child-minder.

If Christians want to become more critically discerning, they must resist the media's concern to create a certain kind of 'image' for people and events, and concentrate instead on understanding the issues. Unfortunately, this requires too much effort for some people. They are content just to sit back and allow the presentation to roll on unchallenged. And usually the TV presentation will major on what can be seen rather than what can be thought about. A fire or crash makes better television than an enquiry into government accountability.

Television's chief concern is to keep people entertained, not help people understand. Even when it does deal with something important, it usually does so in a way that appeals to an unthinking public. It avoids the real issues ('they are too

complex') and presents matters in a simple 'for and against' format.

Once again viewers are manipulated into accepting a false impression. The problem is solved within half an hour (within half a minute in the case of commercials). Viewers are led to believe there is a simple solution to life's problems, when in reality there is not.

Blurred vision

If Christians are unable to distinguish between reality and unreality, fact and impression, substance and image, they have little chance of dealing satisfactorily with the complexities of life in the workaday world. Moreover, they will be ill-equipped to convince others of the reality of sin and judgment and of the need for repentance and salvation.

Christianity does not belong to the world of fables and make-believe. It is grounded in history and is based on fact. Peter stressed that in declaring Christ's God-given glory he was not following made-up stories: 'we heard his voice, we were with him on the mountain' (2 Peter 1:16-18). Luke spared neither time nor effort to make sure that his story about Jesus was based on authoritative records and the testimony of eye witnesses (Luke 1:1-4). John preached about one whom he had heard, seen and touched – a real human being (1 John 1:1). Paul wanted no one to mistake the shadow for the substance, which is Christ (Col 2:17).

It is there, in the historic Christ, that the true meaning of human existence is to be found – in a person who lived in this world, who died and who rose again. But what chance do people have of dealing with the issues of life when they cannot tell reality from unreality? Television has blurred the way they see life. Do they know who is real and who is not? Can they tell the difference between John Cleese and Basil Fawlty? Is Sir Humphrey really the Cabinet Secretary? Does Rumpole exist?

In a survey conducted a few years ago, people were given a list of well-known names and asked to indicate which people

were real and which were fictitious. With many of the names, fewer than two-thirds of those surveyed gave the correct answer. If people are so unclear about the real and the fictitious, it is not surprising that they give little serious thought to Jesus Christ. They are not sure if he is any more real than Santa Claus. Sometimes Christians themselves seem not to be sure.

A clearer view

Well-worn sayings may give an appearance of orthodox Christian belief, but they must not be mistaken for the real thing. Christianity is concerned with reality, not with glibly spoken words. It gives no slick solutions to life's problems, but instead enables people to handle those problems through bringing them into a relationship with the living Christ. Having once lived in this world himself, he is now able to help his people (Heb 2:18; 4:15; 5:8).

If, however, Christ's people are to please him and receive his help, they must be willing to make sacrifices. If their whole person is to be presented acceptably to him, their minds must be renewed (Rom 12:1-2). This will not be easy, because it will involve getting rid of established prejudices and changing deep-seated attitudes. The result will not be that their journey through life will suddenly become plain sailing. There may be a few storms, for the conventional will not like some non-conformists among them. But at least it will be a journey towards reality.

From *Harvester* (England, 1988)

For this I toil

We seem to be great ones for getting in our own way. Often we burst into some unevangelized area with much enthusiasm, and may even see a few converts, but then as our activity increases, the growth dies off. Sometimes the problems are of our own making.

It is tempting, when the needs and opportunities are so great, for outreach workers to immerse themselves in a hectic round of activities. Yet the very activities they use to evangelize can slow down the process of independence in the church. The young converts may feel that unless they have the expertise, equipment and time available to the 'professionals', they cannot do the work of evangelism. Pioneer evangelists, by the nature of their work, must be leaders, but the more activities they start the more the work revolves around them, and the less likely it becomes for new converts to operate on their own.

We can easily become too dependent on programs, methods and gadgetry. It is demanding and time consuming to teach people personally so that they understand the Scriptures and are confident in their Christian lives; but such work is basic to all outreach and growth, regardless of country, language or culture. Paul expressed it thus: 'Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For *this* I toil . . .' (Col 1:28-29).

From *Fiji Christian Alert* (Fiji, 1995)

A suffering church

We sometimes talk about people who see certain things through rose-coloured glasses. But all of us see life through glasses that are tinted with one colour or another. Present-day Christians in the Western world have a particular problem when reading letters sent to first century churches, because our view of the church in the West colours our interpretation of letters written to churches in New Testament times.

The churches of Revelation

A good example of this Western colouring is the view that sees the present-day church typified by the Laodicean church of Revelation Chapter 3 – materially prosperous and comfortable, but spiritually complacent and self-satisfied. Certainly, such a description fits many churches in the affluent West, but it does not fit the church worldwide.

One weakness of that scheme of interpretation that views the churches of Revelation as representative of successive eras of church history is that it views the church as ethnically ‘white’ and culturally Western. In general, the proponents of that view mostly live in countries that are economically advanced and have a long tradition of nominal Christianity. But Christians in such circumstances represent the exceptional rather than the normal in today’s church. There are far more Christians in Africa, Asia and South America than there are in Europe, North America and Australia. And in most of the non-Western world Christians are not materially prosperous and do not enjoy government that is sympathetic to their beliefs.

We could argue that, of the seven churches of Revelation, the one that most closely typifies the church today is Smyrna. But we should do better not to assert that any one church in Revelation is representative of the worldwide church in a particular period. The range of conditions throughout the world

makes consistency in such identification impossible. Moreover, the Bible gives us no authority to interpret the letters this way, and no encouragement to follow any interpretation that obscures the meaning the letters had for those who first received them. The letters to Smyrna, Thyatira and Laodicea have meaning for their first readers and relevance to us today, just as do the letters to Corinth, Philippi and Thessalonica.

Mixed blessings

Many Christians in the West take it for granted that their standard of living, national security and religious freedom are unquestionable indications of God's blessings upon them. In a sense these things are God's blessings, though not in the sense that they show God's special approval of the recipients in contrast to Christians who lack such benefits.

The only two churches in Revelation that receive unqualified approval from Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, are the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia. But both churches appear to miss out on what many today consider to be essential if they are to serve God effectively – lots of money and lots of people. For the church in Smyrna was poor (Rev 2:9a) and the church in Philadelphia was small (Rev 3:8b).

Our interest here is with the church in Smyrna. We are not told why it was poor, though we may guess that the poverty had something to do with opposition from the local Jews. 'I know your afflictions and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan' (Rev 2:9). Jews of the province of Asia were hostile to the Christians, especially those of their own race who became Christians (Acts 21:27). Very likely they plundered the houses of the Christians and used their economic strength to bring as much trouble upon the church as possible (cf. Heb 10:32-34).

Whether in the first century or the twentieth, personal economics is a testing ground for Christian faith. Believers are at times outspoken in opposing unchristian policies concerning religion, but are not so outspoken in opposing unchristian

policies concerning economics. They may protest loudly against atheism while unconsciously giving in to greed. They may be keen to take a stand against things that are not a temptation to them, but not so keen to stand on their principles when it means they will be materially worse off.

Not so the Christians of Smyrna. To stand by their principles was so costly that they lost out materially – woe of all woes for most Westerners! But Jesus Christ pronounced them spiritually rich. By contrast, the Christians who *were* materially rich, the Laodiceans, were the ones Jesus Christ pronounced spiritually poor (Rev 3:17).

Promises, but no open cheques

In view of what Jesus says to the churches of Revelation, there is surely a distortion in the kind of modern evangelism that promotes him as a sort of heavenly vending machine – someone who delivers the goods in response to a few coins of prayer. The Christians in Smyrna did not see him that way. So far from receiving any promise that their Christian faith entitled them to a trouble-free life, they received a warning that their troubles would become worse. Some of them would be thrown into prison, and all of them would face a time of ‘tribulation’ and ‘testing’ (Rev 2:10). But this intense suffering, said Jesus, would last only ‘ten days’. This was his assurance to them that he was still in ultimate control of events and that he had set a limit to their trials.

The Lord of the church does not cause the suffering of his people, but neither does he shelter them from it. He uses it to strengthen character, but never to destroy character. No trial is more than his people can bear. They are still his elect, and for their sake he may choose to intervene and shorten the suffering (Matt 24:22; 1 Cor 10:13).

There will be cases, however, where divine intervention does not occur, or where Christians do not live to see the end of the time of widespread trial. Some may suffer martyrdom, while others may survive to see more peaceful and prosperous times; but whatever the future holds, Jesus says to all alike, ‘Be faithful

unto death and I will give you the crown of life . . . Those who conquer will not be hurt by the second death' (Rev 2:10b,11).

This promise provides a fitting climax to the letter. Like the concluding promise of some of the other letters, it is linked to a particular characteristic of the Lord of the church mentioned in the letter's introduction. And, as in the other letters, that characteristic is taken from the description of the Lord that John gives in Chapter 1. In the letter to Smyrna, Jesus introduces himself as 'the first and the last, who died and came to life' (Rev 2:8; cf. 1:17-18). This one, who has himself conquered death, is the one who now promises victory to his people. Death can no more conquer them than it could him. Just as he 'came to life and lives evermore', so he gives eternal life to those who are committed to him.

From the beginning Jesus made it clear that discipleship means sacrifice. Following him means denying oneself. Those who want to keep their life for themselves will lose it, but those who are willing to lose it for Christ's sake will find it' (Mark 8:34-35). Jesus taught and demonstrated the paradox that in his kingdom people attain glory only via the path of suffering. The way to lasting riches is through sacrificing present riches. There can be no real life without first the taste of death.

From *Links* (Australia, 1992)

It's all topsy-turvy

Many Christians are aware of the contradictions in modern society, but they are not sure what to do about them. They realize they are being cheated by the promises that the modern world makes, but they dare not change, lest they or their children fall behind their contemporaries.

In wanting the best social, academic, artistic or sporting advantages for their children, parents rush from one venue to another to drop them off or pick them up, all the time meeting more people but making fewer friends. Their community involvement is greater but their relationships are more superficial. They have more money, but give less away. The media exposes them more to the plight of the needy, but they are less caring. The more information that floods into their homes, the less informed they seem to be. Like the public at large, they know much about the trivial but little about the eternal. Their lives are focused on the immediate instead of on the ultimate.

Christians must realize that our society is not Christian, and if we are to make a stand for God and his Word, we shall be branded with unpleasant names by the non-believing world. If we allow our children to learn music, participate in debating or watch TV, we shall be considered normal, caring parents; but if we teach them the values of the Bible, we shall be accused of brainwashing. If we want them to play sport on Sunday we shall be congratulated, but if we want them to go to church we shall be criticized.

When parents allow their children to go without sleep to watch videos, nothing is said, but if they suggest that their children start the day early with God, they are accused of being religious extremists. A family that watches trashy TV together is tolerated, but a family that prays together is considered fanatical. When children earn money to buy things for themselves, that is considered worthy, but when they are encouraged to give a

portion of their earnings to Christian ministry, that is considered harsh or unfair.

It is considered wrong to teach children moral values, but right to teach them psychology. The same society that no longer wants to teach children how to hold a spoon or a pencil insists that it is important to teach them how to hold a cricket bat or a football. On the one hand we are told that training is wrong and a child must be left to develop as it will; on the other we are told that training is essential so that the child is not left to develop as it will. The training given by parents is considered invalid; the 'proper' training must be given by professional experts.

Too often Christian parents absorb the values of the society around them, while at the same time they complain about the unchristian social values that dictate their children's attitudes. Parents in general are hesitant to set firm guidelines for the children, and Christian parents are sometimes just as hesitant. But it need not be so. They can have confidence in their family decisions, but first their minds must be renewed, and this will only happen through the agency of the Bible. As a result they may find themselves out of step with what the modern world considers normal, but they will be closer to knowing the will of God (Rom 12:2).

From *Outreach* (Australia, 1995)

Tuned in and turned off

Years ago most of the interest that Christians in the West had for people in less developed countries was concerned with 'saving souls' rather than sending food to hungry people. Today the interest often seems to be the other way round. This is so particularly among younger people, who do not cut themselves off from 'the world' as much as their parents did, and who are more concerned about the social impact Christianity should have.

Any reading of the Bible, Old Testament or New, will show that God's people have responsibilities in both areas. They are to be concerned for both the spiritual and the physical well-being of others. Concentration on one is no excuse for neglect of the other. No doubt there are many reasons for the changes that occur in the area of Christian concern, and perhaps one of them is the effect of the media, especially television, on people.

Most of us have mixed feelings about television, though whether we allow our mixed feelings to change our viewing habits is another matter. We appreciate being able to 'travel' to distant lands and see peoples and places we would never see otherwise. But, of course, we do not travel at all; we sit comfortably in our own living rooms. We are stirred by what we see of starvation in some countries of Africa, and we are concerned. Or are we? Perhaps our concern is partly a feeling of guilt. Something inside us says to send a gift to World Vision; something else tells us to switch to another channel – a sports show, a panel game, a movie, anything that is a bit lighter and will direct our interests towards something more relaxing.

Is television making us both sensitive and insensitive at the same time? It stirs us from our cosy complacency, but at the same time presents us with the convenience of instantly turning away from anything that disturbs us. We become skilled at switching off our emotions. The TV news will move from

disease-ridden children in Bangladesh to a local celebrity's hair style, from a mutilated body to a comic commercial, while we sit watching, sipping our coffee.

God made us capable of a wide range of feelings, but television can easily dull those feelings. On the one hand we are moved to pity, but on the other we are so over-exposed to what is violent and hideous that we become insensitive. Hell does not look quite so terrifying, and the urgency to evangelize correspondingly diminishes.

As Christians we may feel that in such a society we have an uphill battle in taking the gospel to our fellow citizens. If television has so dulled our sensitivities, how can people make those emotional responses that lead to repentance?

Surely, the difficulty is no greater than any other associated with human sin. As always, the answer lies in the gospel, for the gospel is still 'the power of God unto salvation'. What's more, it is good news, in contrast to the bad news that is dominant in the media. But it still needs someone to announce it. After all, how can people hear without a preacher? (Rom 10:14) And it still calls for us to respond to its social obligations; for if we see others in need but close our hearts against them, how can we say that God's love dwells in us? (1 John 3:17)

From *Tidings* (Australia, 1988)

An age without standards

For decades people have referred to the age in which they lived as an age without standards. Few meant the expression 'without standards' to be taken literally. Most used it to indicate the decline, rather than the absence, of moral standards. The standards had not disappeared entirely; stealing and adultery were still wrong, even if people were not as easily shocked as in former times.

Today, however, there is a view that would like us to believe that the expression is literally true, that there are, in fact, no standards. All things are relative. There are no objective values that we can look to as immovable standards of reference. Everything, we are told, depends on our viewpoint, upbringing, conditioning or environment.

Moral values

Those who reject traditional values (whom we shall call the debunkers – people who profess to expose the hypocrisy of things) have so influenced modern attitudes that ordinary people have difficulty raising an argument against them. They do not agree with the new thinking, but neither can they point out its errors. They welcome the openness with which people face up to social issues, and are pleased to be rid of certain old-fashioned attitudes. But they still feel uneasy, for now people seem to have gone too far.

When people express this uneasiness, the debunkers reply by asking on what basis do they object. If they reject old-fashioned styles and attitudes in order to accept others more pleasing to them, why do they complain when others reject their styles and attitudes for the same reason? Everything is relative to people's personal tastes or opinions. The debunkers assert there are no fixed standards, and therefore people can throw off restraints and enjoy complete freedom to express their true self.

The debunkers have failed to notice, however, that while they reject the notion of fixed moral values, they themselves are pursuing a goal that they regard as universally desirable. They consider, for example, that the freedom to express oneself is a value that everyone has a right to claim. But they then pursue this value while ignoring others. They choose a popular modern value (such as self-expression) when it suits them, but reject a traditional value (such as chastity) when it does not. They accuse Christians of being arbitrary in setting up certain values as a standard, but they themselves have done the same.

Instinct

No doubt the debunkers would reject this accusation. They might say they are not introducing new values, but merely telling people to follow instinct. At times it seems that the only instinct they have in mind is the sexual; and, according to their thinking, the impulse to do something means you should do it.

But human beings have many instincts and these are sometimes in conflict with each other. We have an instinct to preserve our own lives, but we also have an instinct to preserve the lives of those closest to us, such as our children. What happens when certain circumstances bring these two instincts into conflict (for example, our house is on fire and we and our children are caught inside), and we are forced to obey one instinct at the expense of another (our instinct to save our own lives can only be fulfilled if we ignore the instinct to save our children's lives)? On what basis do we make the decision?

Clearly, there must be some higher standard of reference that sits in judgment on our instincts. When two parties are in conflict, there must be a judge to decide the case. Instinct cannot be the basis on which we make moral judgments. It is one of the parties to the conflict, not the judge that makes the decision.

Natural law

This higher law that sits in judgment on our instincts we shall call, for convenience, natural law. This is that universal law written on the hearts of human beings that cause them to

recognize certain things as good or bad, heroic or cowardly, beautiful or ugly, even when no law demands such a response (Rom 2:14-15). Because of this unwritten law within the human heart, it is natural to call the butchery of infants shocking, a rescue in life-threatening circumstances heroic, or a garden of flowers beautiful.

The debunkers would say that such words as 'shocking', 'heroic' and 'beautiful' are not valid judgments, but merely indications of our emotional response. Certainly, in the cases just mentioned some people might, for various reasons, feel no emotional response, but when we call a thing shocking or heroic or beautiful, we are not talking about our emotions. We are talking about characteristics in the object that demand a certain response, whether we make that response or not. Objective value exists in its own right, regardless of our emotions. Values are not relative to our emotional response, but to the fixed standards of natural law.

In spite of their efforts, the debunkers cannot escape the fact that, in suggesting certain goals to be preferable to others, they are unconsciously acknowledging the existence of natural law. When they call a thing good and its opposite bad, they make a value judgment based on a fixed standard. As we saw earlier, they choose freedom of self-expression as a desirable value, even though they use it at the expense of chastity. But the point to note here is that they are only able to recognize freedom of self-expression as a desirable value because of the universal natural law that God has put within them. The existence of natural law is what makes moral decisions possible, whether of private citizens or national governments.

No new values

Those who want to debunk traditional values also want to create new ones. The debunkers want to become the innovators. But no one can create a new system of values regardless of natural law, because natural law is the source of all values. Outside it there is no ground for making any judgment whatever. Natural law is not one system among many, but the basis that

makes all systems possible. We cannot step outside natural law to invent a new system, because we would then have no point of reference by which to judge anything. C. S. Lewis, to whom I am indebted for the general line of this argument, points out that the human mind is not capable of inventing a new value any more than it is capable of imagining a new primary colour.

The reason for the perversions of modern society is not that people have invented new values, but that they have chosen some and rejected the rest. The debauchery, lawlessness and violence of modern society show what happens when people pursue one desirable good at the expense of others. But what right do people have to accept some values within natural law and reject others? If they assert that the values they reject have no authority, neither have those they retain. If what they retain is valid, so is what they reject. All stand or fall together. And since they only have to call a thing 'good' or 'bad' to admit the existence of natural law as a basis of all value judgments, they have no alternative but to accept the lot.

The conflict

Christians do not fight this battle on the debunkers' ground. They fight it on their own ground, for they accept the entire law of God. The only ground the debunkers can argue from is the small portion they have chosen to retain. Christians need not fear that they are arguing with those who have invented a new set of values. They are arguing with those who have but a limited and imperfect grasp of the universal and unchanging principles that God has placed in the human heart and made clearer through his written Word. How successful Christians will be in this conflict will depend on how well they understand God and the Word he has given them.

From *The Witness* (England, 1975)

Conditioning the masses

We saw in the previous article that among the people who influence modern thinking are those whom we called the debunkers; that is, people who profess to expose the falseness of traditional values and the hypocrisy of those who hold them. But the debunkers also see themselves as innovators; that is, having rejected some values, they then promote others that they consider more desirable. We shall now see how the innovators become the conditioners, people who manipulate the minds of others to achieve ends that they consider good.

The results of progress

People speak in awe of the progress and achievements of the human race – the conquest of space, the conquest of nature, the conquest of human limitations. Closer examination, however, reveals that this conquest is not by the entire human race but by certain people within that race, and the results are passed on to the masses whether the masses like it or not. Each victory won by ‘the human race’ is, in fact, power gained by a few people over the rest. In other words, with each advance, the human race comes increasingly under the control of fewer people. Some people boast that humankind can now make itself what it pleases. What this really means is that some people can make the rest of us what they please.

Through whatever means are available – the mass media, telecommunications, entertainment, education, advertising – the innovators become the teachers. They, not the parents, become the conditioners of the new generation. This is not to say that progress is wrong or that all new ideas and methods should be a cause for instant alarm. Our concern is not with ideas or methods, but with values. And if people reject the notion of natural law, the values they choose or reject will be according to their own whims and fancies. They acknowledge no fixed moral standard to which they should refer.

Subjects of the conditioners

Once people reject the notion that fixed moral values exist, traditional words such as 'duty' and 'good' have no meaning. The innovators decide what is duty and what is good, and now that they have become the conditioners, they determine how society should view 'duty' and 'good'.

People today like to think they have freedom, but in reality they are in bondage to their conditioners. Each new generation is conditioned by the one that preceded it. But whereas in earlier times this conditioning took place within the framework of a universally accepted natural law, now it takes place without any acknowledgment of natural law. Previously the parents were the teachers, and the education was based on natural law; but now others are the teachers, and the education seeks to create an entirely new set of standards, outside natural law.

The difference between these two kinds of education, or conditioning, is demonstrated in an illustration from C. S. Lewis. The old dealt with people as parent birds deal with young birds when they teach them to fly. The new deals with people as a poultry farmer deals with young birds when he raises them for purposes that the birds know nothing about.

Application of natural law

Within the outworking of natural law there will be variations and developments, but there can be no innovations. For example, the Ten Commandments taught Israelites not to murder, and Jesus developed this commandment when he told his followers not even to be angry (Matt 5:21-22). Jesus' instruction was a refinement of the earlier instruction, but both grew out of the same basic principle, namely, that violence is wrong. No new ethic can make murder praiseworthy.

Consider another example. People clothe their bodies in the interests of decency (1 Cor 12:23-24). The clothes of a century ago may be conservative compared with the clothes of today, but no new ethic will require people to wear none. As Lewis points out in another illustration, those whose behaviour is within the

framework of natural law may be likened to a person who, because he likes his food fresh, decides to grow his own vegetables. Those whose behaviour is outside the framework of natural law may be likened to a person who throws away his vegetable and eats bricks and centipedes instead.

To accept natural law does not mean that people will become rigid or legalistic. To believe that certain things are right or wrong does not mean that people will become self-righteous. On the contrary, the acceptance of natural law enables people to be flexible and confident in applying its values. They can uphold God's standards and at the same time look for solutions to problems with love and sympathy.

A working conscience

One obstacle in the way of the conditioners is the conscience of the average person. They do not want conscience to be the judge, but seeing they cannot remove it, they decide what sort of conscience a person should have. They therefore give new meaning to words. Actions are no longer said to be right or wrong, but merely 'preferences'.

Only natural law provides a common standard of judgment. God has engraved this law on the hearts of all alike, so that conscience may help people make right judgments and guide them in the path that is right. But because of sin, conscience has been dulled and sensitivity to sin has been lessened.

God, however, has not left us subject to our own moods and feelings. He has not left us with his law written only on our hearts, where it can be understood or distorted, applied or ignored, according to the impulses of our sinful nature. He has given us an objective revelation of his law, untarnished by sin. In the climate of present-day thinking, pious feelings that are not grounded in fact will have little chance of withstanding the influence of the conditioners. We need a thorough working knowledge of God's Word if we are to have confidence that the values we profess to hold are in fact Christian.

From *The Witness* (England, 1975)

What sort of God?

'I am he who comforts you; who are you that you are afraid of a mere mortal . . . and have forgotten the Lord your Maker?' (Isa 51:12-13). Do you catch the rebuke in those words? God comforts his people, but his comfort is not soft or sentimental. It asks questions and it makes challenges.

To people who fear their opponents, the comforting words of God include a question that shows them what God thinks of their timidity. In fearing mere humans, they insult God. They show that they have forgotten the sort of person he is. They have not directed their minds towards the important task of understanding the character of the God in whom they profess to believe.

A warm feeling in the heart may at times be a comfort, but it will not last. It is no substitute for that matter-of-fact knowledge of God that will be a fortress of strength no matter how a person feels. God's people become 'strengthened for all endurance and patience with joy' when they 'increase in the knowledge of him' (Col 1:10-11).

From Daily Power (Thailand, 1982)

Family, faith and risks

How do we know where to draw the line in regard to our personal and property insurance? If we believed and acted upon all we are told, we would be increasingly wary of doing anything unless we were properly 'covered'. At the same time we would be handing over increasing amounts of cash to keep ourselves safe. There is no simple answer to many of the questions that arise in the complex society we live in, other than to remind ourselves that as Christians we ought to have a different value on material things and a different estimate of security. Our faith in God should make us different.

That sounds fine and most of us would probably agree in principle, but for many Christians faith seems to have vanished into thin air. They are happy to be saved by faith, but resist the idea of living by faith. Yet the New Testament repeatedly uses expressions such as 'do not be anxious', 'we walk by faith, not by sight', 'we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen' and 'without faith it is impossible to please God'.

Tentative parents

One area where this lack of faith shows itself is in parents' tentative approach to fulfilling the biblical command to bring up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). One hears many arguments for parents' going softly in this area, and nearly all of them are based on fear.

Parents are frightened the children will rebel against family prayers and Bible teaching; or that they will rebel against going to church; or that they will rebel against moral or social restrictions placed on them. The decisions all seem to be based on fear. Where has faith gone? If God's Word tells us to do certain things, we should do them. True, we have no guarantee that all the children will finish up where we want them, but that is no

reason to hold back from what we are supposed to do. Obedience to God is not a trade-off for watertight guarantees we expect of him. We obey in faith.

From a purely pragmatic point of view, those who give a proper place to Bible teaching in the home would seem to have everything to gain and nothing to lose. If children are not taught the Christian way they are not likely to walk in it anyway, but proper teaching at least gives them the right start. The tragedy is that many Christian parents leave it to the church to give the Christian teaching. But the church is restricted in what it can do in the limited time available each week, whereas the family has time available to it every day.

The unspoken message

When parents push children into all sorts of out-of-school activities – coaching classes for swimming, tuition classes for maths, exercise classes for ballet – but have no comparable activity in the home for teaching about God and his Word, they are giving the unspoken message that God and the Word are not important. They are giving the same message as non-Christian homes are giving, namely, that personal satisfaction and achievement will lead to a fulfilling life.

There is an imbalance in the Christian home when children are full of information about TV shows, sports people and entertainers, but are ignorant of the Bible. When children from a Christian home know all about the Stephen who creates special effects in movies but nothing about the Stephen who changed the direction of the early church, something is wrong.

Clash of interests

Children's complaints that church is boring are usually a reflection on the lack of biblical teaching in the home. Children have apparently not grown up in a value system where God is put first. They have apparently been given the impression that everything is supposed to be entertaining. And when they are allowed to stay away from church to swot for exams or compete in sports, the parents' lack of faith is passed on to the children.

The Christian attitude should surely be that where there is a clash of interests, God comes first, but this is becoming a rarity in Christian families. It is not that sport, studies or the arts are wrong in themselves, but they become wrong when they cannot be given up. If parents are fearful to call on their children to make sacrifices, they will find it extremely difficult to teach them Christianity; because Christianity is based on the notion of sacrifice – not just Christ’s sacrifice for us, but the sacrifice that our commitment to him must involve.

Be obedient, and trust God

Most parents live with a lot of tension in relation to the children’s upbringing. They naturally want their children to grow up to have worthwhile lives, but at the same time they are apprehensive because of the pressures and attitudes of modern Western society. They want their children to develop character, but hesitate to teach that self-denial is part of that development. Some also feel apprehensive because of what they have been told about peer pressure – as if no one before the modern era ever experienced it. Taking a stand against the majority is not easy, but resisting pressure for the right reasons will do more to develop character than giving in to it.

There are no insurance policies that can guarantee the sort of future for our children that we would like. In family relations as in physical health, there will be cases of people who do right but suffer, while others do wrong but get through with few apparent troubles. The future may not be within parents’ control, but the present certainly is. The risks are unavoidable, and to act in fear instead of in faith will help nothing. What God requires of us is obedience now. Our desire ought to be to see our children grow up with a certain priority in life – to love God, to love his Word, to love his people and to love the lost. Other things can fit in around that.

From *Alert* (Australia, 1995)

Turn that noise down!

There must be a conspiracy, surely. It cannot be by accident that we are bombarded with noise every moment of the day. Someone must be behind it, coordinating the operation. Perhaps it is Satan, making sure that silence is banished. People must not be left in quiet, just in case they start to think about some of the real issues of life.

That dreadful muzak, it's everywhere – in the waiting room, on the bus, around the department store, even over the telephone if you have to wait a few moments for someone. Then there are the local workmen, on the job early and waking up the neighbourhood – can't work without the radio. Children get out of bed and turn on the TV. It does not matter if no one is watching, so long as the noise is there. Even action replays of football or the screening of the cricket scoreboard must now be accompanied by beat music. The box must never be silent.

It seems that people can tolerate just about any sort of noise, but they cannot tolerate silence. And the more laws governments make to control noise, the more beepers, whistles, bells, buzzers, sirens and alarms there are.

People are afraid of silence, afraid of being by themselves. Try group therapy, group discussion, group anything, but never allow people to be alone and undisturbed so that they can actually think. Away with anything that involves contemplation. Goodbye literature, goodbye art; turn on the telly, turn on the radio. What people need is torrents of words and blasts of music, the more discordant the better. The main thing is that it must distract, so that no one has the chance to reflect on those unseen, indefinable, spiritual qualities that make human life unique – life that exists in the image of God.

But people do not want to think that there is anything beyond their grasp, anything mysterious or immeasurable. If it cannot be

put on a computer or a TV screen, it cannot be real. Nothing must be hidden or private; all must be put on the screen and transmitted into people's living rooms, where it can be laid bare before the gaze of all.

It matters not how distasteful, how private or how personal a matter may be, it must be spread around for public consumption. Information, coverage and exposure are the media's concern; contemplation, mystery and hiddenness make them feel threatened and uncomfortable. They are concerned with what is emotive, not what is reflective. People's senses of sight and hearing must be constantly aroused, lest there be a moment or two for quiet consideration.

Some people are always learning, while never coming to a knowledge of the truth. They are flooded with wave after wave of information, but are no better informed. Yet there are genuine treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and they are available to all, but they are hidden from the world of sight and sound. They are found only through faith, and they are unlocked through the key that is Jesus Christ (Matt 11:25; 1 Cor 2:7-9; Col 2:2-3). God has prepared for people something better than eye has seen or ear heard. If people were to rest their eyes and ears occasionally, they might be able to think about it, and perhaps find it.

From *Treasury* (New Zealand, 1987)

Modernity

Most of us are usually wary of modern words, 'in' words, or any other words that convey the impression that the user is 'in the know'. 'Modernity' may fit into that category.

The word was new to me when I heard Os Guinness use it in his address 'The Impact of Modernization' given at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization (Manila, 1989). That address was considered by many participants to be the highlight of the convention, and it provided the basis of my own studies that produced this article. Modernity, in the usage of Os Guinness, is the spirit and structure of the modern world as produced by industrialized technology, capitalism and telecommunications.

Modernity has brought to our society great opportunities, but also great challenges. We are thankful for it, but we also feel threatened by it. It has brought the greatest human advances, but at the same time has brought the greatest threat to individual identity and family values. It brings convenience, efficiency and openness, but it also brings the world into our lives. The church has benefited from it, but at the same time is blind to it, and so has been damaged by it. Modernity has opened countries to the gospel, but has corrupted those that have the gospel.

Words and images; truth and feelings

Changes are constantly occurring in society, but at the time we are not aware of them. Only as we view conditions over a period can we see the changes that have occurred; and most of the changes have been to the detriment of Western Christianity. I have summarized these as a number of 'shifts'.

First, and perhaps most influential, is the shift from words to images. This has come about mainly through television, but it is present in all the visual media. It has its effect on all reading, with the result that the written Word no longer has the place it should have in the lives of Christians or in the life of the church.

In some churches people are even able to conduct worship, evangelism and other Christian activities without the Bible.

Along with this shift from words to images goes the shift from facts to impressions, a shift again brought about largely through the mass media. People rarely seek the facts or details, let alone stop to digest them. They are happy not to think about issues but simply to see something that conveys an impression, satisfies their curiosity, feeds their prejudice, or merely gives them something to talk about.

This detached view encourages people to see everything in terms of entertainment. When a leading television current affairs personality made the comment that news had to be entertaining, not just factual, people nodded their heads approvingly. No one seemed to see the fundamental danger once entertainment value overrides objectivity. The same spirit has crept into the church, so that church services must now be entertaining. It seems to have escaped people's notice that not everything in life is meant to be entertaining. It does us the world of good to direct our attention to someone else (for example, God) instead of thinking all the time 'what am I getting out of this'.

Other shifts have come about through the techniques of modern advertising. We are so used to being told that we deserve the best that we have come to think that comfort and convenience are our fundamental rights. The emphasis has shifted, even in Christian circles, from self-denial to self-fulfilment – in spite of the teachings of Jesus, which assert that love for God is our first responsibility, then love for others. Self-fulfilment comes not through seeking it, but through denying self and serving others. The modern 'cult of self' is incompatible with the practice of biblical Christianity.

This focus on self gives rise to a further shift, this one from truth to feelings. We hear people talking about whether they 'feel comfortable' with certain behaviour or action. The basis of judgment is not whether a thing is right or wrong, but whether a person feels comfortable with it. The standard has shifted from the objective to the subjective, from a fixed value to a personal

feeling. But the poorly instructed conscience can hardly be expected to set the sort of strict standard that will make a person feel uncomfortable. And two poorly instructed consciences that are in agreement make matters even worse. Yet the community consensus now is that sexual behaviour between two people is beyond question providing the two people consent to it.

Once there is a shift from truth to feelings, there is a shift in the usage of words, so that words that indicate approval are applied to things that ought not receive approval; or, as the Old Testament prophets say, people call evil good and good evil, put darkness for light and light for darkness.

For example, the child of a normal loving marriage relationship is not called a 'love child', but the child of adultery is. A doctor who genuinely cares for his patients is not called a 'love doctor', but one who exploits them by administering his own brand of 'sex therapy' is. A lively male with natural sexual behaviour is not called 'gay', but one with unnatural behaviour is. Those who are discriminating in the amount of violence and indecency they will tolerate in movies are not called 'mature', but the indiscriminating are.

Techniques, specialists and professionals

The explosion in knowledge and technology has brought with it increasing specialization. Because no one can keep pace with all the changes, people tend to concentrate on selected areas and soon become known as experts. Many of these people carry out their work in an environment that is cut off from the life of ordinary people, but their proposals are readily accepted by an uncertain public. People feel reassured if they are receiving 'professional help' or if a thing has been 'scientifically proven'. Sadly, Christians in general are no different from others in their blind acceptance of this professionalism.

In a Christian discussion group I once put the question, 'What advice would you give to a Christian married couple who were thinking of consulting a professional marriage counsellor because of their relationship problems?' The participants discussed the issue at length and broadly agreed on the desirability

of professional help, but not one person mentioned the pastoral ministries of the church. Surely, most relationship problems are spiritual, and Christians should be able to handle them if they read and obey the Bible; but 'professional help' bypasses the spiritual and attempts to solve problems on some other basis.

As the church has absorbed the notion of specialization, there has been a shift from the pastoral to the psychological, from spiritual warfare to techniques. While the Bible tells us that the weapons of our warfare are not those of the world, many Christians live as if they are. Instead of taking the whole armour of God, they take the latest illustrated handbook or consult the latest counselling service. They may deplore sex education where high schoolers are taught practical techniques without personal morality, yet they themselves accept advice that is equally secular in its presuppositions.

This fascination with the techniques of experts also leads to stagnation in the church's outreach to the lost. In the normal course of events, no one comes to Christ without the personal involvement of some Christian. But many Christians will avoid personal relationships because they are costly and inconvenient. They interfere with our routine lifestyle and do not fit into the 'church hours' in which we prefer to do our church work.

The attractive alternative is to use the advertised schemes that we are assured will bring results. In the end costly personal involvement is replaced with what has been called 'sweatless, arms-length evangelism'. Modernity tries to eliminate self-sacrifice; Christianity cannot function without it.

The relevance of the church

With this dominance of professionalism and specialization, people increasingly see the church as irrelevant. When Christians act as if the issues of life can be dealt with on a secular basis without reference to the spiritual, they reinforce this view.

Added to this is the self-centred lifestyle where Christians seem to be no different from others in the quantity and standard of material necessities they need in order to live contentedly. It is

difficult to preach a message that says Jesus Christ, not material prosperity, alone can satisfy, when the lifestyle of Christians quite clearly sends out a different message. Modernity has undermined the church's ability to demonstrate Christianity's integrity and effectiveness. It has caused the church to mistake the trappings of Western civilization for evidence of a mature Christianity. It says, 'I have prospered and need nothing', but does not know that it is 'wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked'.

In a society that acts as if only the tangible is real, there will inevitably be hostility towards the spiritual. Christians are therefore keen to protect the area of their lives that might be called spiritual, and are wary of anything that appears tainted by the occult or New Age teaching. But what modernity has produced in the church is not so much heresy as idolatry. Whereas Jesus said people cannot serve God and mammon, modernity says they can – and many Christians believe it. They explain away the 'hard sayings' of Jesus about denying self and making material, family and personal sacrifices for his sake and the gospel. Yet without these sacrifices, said Jesus, a person cannot be his disciple.

Deceptive benefits

The benefits that come from the modern world are the very things that make discipleship in the modern world difficult. In such a world not only is it difficult to practise the lordship of Jesus Christ; one must be radical to do so. But being radical is about the last thing most conservative Christians want.

Sooner or later, however, if the church is not to be totally absorbed into the spirit of the age, Christians must take some deliberate action. Most Christians in the West have become so accustomed to thinking of their country as Christian, that they have never stopped to consider that the so-called Christian way of life in the West is a long way removed from the Christianity of the New Testament.

Modern society has become a 'do it' and 'fix it' society. It is concerned with the technology, methodology, procedures and

techniques that make things work. It is pragmatic; that is, it is concerned with the practicality of things, not with their morality. It is concerned with *how* things should be done, not with *whether* they should be done.

Whatever understanding people have of God, it is usually in keeping with their understanding of life in the present age. To them, God also is a pragmatist. He is like a counsellor who is there to fix up their problems. In listening to their story he extracts knowledge, but he makes no judgments. In the problem-solving society everything must be available, workable and negotiable, without any absolute rules or fixed moral judgments. People see God in the same light.

The sovereign God

Because modernity is concerned with what is workable and available, it has no notion of the transcendence of God. By the transcendence of God we mean that surpassing excellence which sets him beyond, above and apart from the material world order.

A transcendent God cannot be manipulated or bargained with. He remains the one who said 'I am who I am' or 'I will be what I will be'. He is eternal, absolute, unchangeable, always present and ever active. He is answerable to no one, obligated to no one, and he writes no open cheques. But if people trust him, he will prove himself to be always dependable and completely able to meet all their needs, though always in the way that he sees best.

This is not the sort of God that modernity encourages people to want. Today's people have the supermarket mentality, where consumers insist on choice and are free to change what they do not like. They want services on demand, and they want instant results. The transcendent God, by contrast, is the sovereign ruler over them. He is not there to do whatever people demand of him; he is the supreme Lord of the universe who demands submission, obedience, self-denial, discipleship and moral purity.

Christians, as well as non-Christians, often feel ill at ease with this God. They do not like to think that their independence

is under threat, or that discipleship demands total commitment. Modernity's 'cult of self' tells them that self-esteem is more important than self-denial, and self-fulfilment more desirable than self-discipline. Since they need only do what they feel like doing, they are then free to wander from church to church till they find one that suits them. The consumer mentality tells them they are entitled to shop around for what they want, and that colours their attitude to the church. They see it as something they go to rather than something they are part of. It is a sort of Christian club, where they pay their dues by way of the Sunday collection and expect services from the club in return.

Jesus Christ made it clear that Christianity, if it is to be life-changing, must also be radical. There must be a break with social values that will be costly – in personal priorities, family relationships, material comforts and economic security.

Modernity has so affected the countries traditionally called Christian that many conservative Christians maintain a value system that makes them little different from everyday atheists. Jesus not only demanded self-denial for his sake, but he demonstrated what such self-denial involved. He showed that the values of his kingdom are different from those of the world. The way to life is death; the way to up is down; the way to exaltation is humility; the way to enrichment is sacrifice. He did not pursue self-fulfilment, but committed himself to total obedience to his Father, no matter what it cost. In the end it cost him his life, but the path to sacrifice turned out to be a path to fuller life.

From *Links* (Australia, 1995)

How should we believe?

Over the years I have lectured at or visited many evangelical Bible Colleges, both in my home country and in more than twenty other countries. A consistent feature I have noticed is that students can be divided largely into two groups. There are those who come to Bible College to learn about the Bible and Christian belief, and those who think they know it already (more or less) and simply want the Bible references to support their views. The chief aim of the first group is to learn; the chief aim of the second group is to get the ammunition to fire at those who do not yet share their views. I have even seen Bible Colleges where students are required to declare specific viewpoints on issues of legitimate debate *before* they enter the college.

This state of affairs in Bible Colleges illustrates a more widespread problem that many evangelicals have with the authority of Scripture. They may declare openly that they believe in the absolute authority of Scripture, but underneath they have an unspoken qualifier that says, 'provided it is consistent with what I have always believed'. The result is that we allow our values and opinions to influence the Bible, instead of allowing the Bible to influence our values and opinions.

How we view Jesus

Consider, for a moment, how this wrong approach to reading the Bible brings disastrous results when non-Christians attempt to evaluate Jesus Christ. They look at him through the eyes of unregenerate human nature and conclude that if he was human, he could not have been perfect. Because *they* may be guilty of bad temper or lustful thoughts, they assume that *he* must have been guilty of the same things. If they write novels or make movies about Jesus, they interpret the biblical record according to their opinions, rather than accept the biblical record and change their opinions. Invariably, the result of their work is a distorted and degrading view of Jesus.

Christians readily condemn non-Christians for allowing their views to override the biblical record, but they themselves can easily be guilty of a similar offence. The Bible is very clear, for instance, that Jesus did no sin (1 Peter 2:22), knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21) and had no sin in him (1 John 3:5). Those who lived closest to him asserted that he never sinned (1 Peter 1:19; cf. Matthew 27:3-4), and even his enemies, when challenged to accuse him of sin, could not (John 8:46). For some Christians, however, this clear record is not enough. They then want to ask *could* Jesus have sinned. Moreover, they judge the orthodoxy of other Christians by the answers given to their questions, not by whether people accept the biblical record.

If we accept the biblical record, we accept without question the absolute sinlessness of Jesus, but we must allow the biblical data, not our feelings or opinions, to define 'sinlessness'. We might like to know the answers to difficult theoretical questions, but the Bible rarely satisfies such curiosity. There are many questions to which the Bible gives no clearcut answers, and we must learn to accept its authority when it keeps silent as we do when it speaks.

How we view the Bible

Another issue where evangelicals often try to impose their views on the Bible is that of inspiration. The Bible tells us that all Scripture is inspired by God, that it is the product of the Holy Spirit's work within the writers, that it instructs for salvation, and that it teaches, reproves, corrects, trains and equips God's people for right living (2 Tim 3:15-16; 2 Peter 1:21). But for many that is not enough. To the word 'inspiration' they must add the word 'verbal', then the word 'plenary', then the word 'infallible', and then the word 'inerrant'.

When Christians add 'verbal', 'plenary', 'infallible' and 'inerrant' to the Bible's single word 'inspiration', they can easily fall into the trap of making their extended definition the standard by which they evaluate the Bible. It can also become the standard by which they judge their fellow Christians. But surely the Bible itself is the authority that determines what it means by

'inspiration'. We should form our view of inspiration not by assuming that an inspired writing must have certain features, but by looking at the inspired writings as they are and finding out what features they already have.

We have all found on occasions that when we read the Bible we meet some puzzling features – unfinished sentences, difficult statements, colourful language, free quotations, apparent contradictions, variant accounts of the same events, and so on – but we should not try to force the Bible into our definition of inspiration. On the contrary, we should adopt a view of inspiration that accommodates these biblical features.

In other words, if we accept the absolute authority of the Bible, we shall come to the Bible with humility and allow *it* to determine our view of what an inspired writing is like. We will not come to the Bible with our own pre-determined notion of what an inspired writing *should* be like.

For this reason, when reading the Bible we should be careful of the expression 'principles of interpretation', lest we or others get the idea there is some formula that guarantees a correct understanding of the Scriptures. Certainly, there are matters we must bear in mind when we read (e.g. historical context, cultural background, kind of literature, etc), but there is no independent authority that we can impose upon the Bible. We do not provide the 'rules' that determine the meaning of the Bible. Rather we let the Bible speak for itself and then submit to what it says.

Where we place our faith

Systematic theology, Christian creeds and statements of faith all have some use in summarizing our beliefs concerning Jesus Christ, the Bible and Christian doctrine in general, but they run the risk of usurping the authority of the Bible itself.

There is nothing wrong with having ordered explanations of the Christian faith. The danger is with the people who use them. If we are not careful, we can become so committed to a creed or formula that we think people cannot know God and his Word unless they move along that path. We might even reach the stage

where we think people must accept an entire list of Christian dogmas before they can become Christians.

An orderly theology is the result of our new life in Christ, not the cause of it. The basis of salvation is always faith, not knowledge; and faith means more than an acceptance of certain truths about Jesus. It means commitment to him.

Jesus said, 'Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest' (Matt 11:28). Peter said, 'Repent and turn again that your sins may be blotted out' (Acts 3:19). Paul said, 'Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Rom 10:13). The initial demand was for faith and repentance, not for precise theological understanding. At the point where we turn from our sin and commit ourselves in faith to God, we may have only the barest knowledge of God and his Word, but once we come under his rule, he begins to change us so that we start to become more like his Son.

Where our security lies

Faith in Jesus Christ, not faith in the Scriptures, is what saves sinners. The Scriptures are the divinely given witness to Christ, but they must not take the place of Christ. Faith involves a living relationship with Christ based on trust and obedience, and when believers live in this relationship, they enjoy true security.

This, however, is not the sort of security that most people want. The tendency in human nature is for most people to want watertight certainty without personal commitment. The kind of assurance they want from the Bible is that of an unconditional guarantee – something 'in writing', like an insurance policy, that exists in its own right to provide legal guarantees.

But the Bible does not exist as a document that is independent of God, and in particular Christ, to whom it directs us. Too often we search the Scriptures to find statements on which we can pin our hopes, whereas what the Scriptures themselves want to do is direct us to Christ, in whom alone we can find true life (John 5:39). We make demands on the Bible to satisfy our

craving for certainty, whereas the Bible makes demands on us to respond in obedient trust.

The living Word did not always conform to what the people of his day thought he should be, and the written Word has not always conformed to what Christians think it should be. But both are exactly what God wanted them to be. The same living Word and the same written Word are still doing their work in the lives of people today. Those people may not always turn out as others might want or expect, but that is not important. We are disciples of Jesus, not of our fellow men and women. We are under the Bible, not the neatly packaged systems of theology. We may not know where our paths will lead, but we can have confidence that they will be paths of righteousness.

From *Light of Life* (India, 1993)

Grasshoppers and eagles

When the ancient Israelites were in captivity in Babylon, many of them had lost heart. It seemed Babylon was so powerful that they would never be free from its power. God therefore sent his prophet to remind them that their God was the Creator of the universe. Before him, the leaders of the world were as powerless as grasshoppers (Isa 40:22).

God's people need never fear that he has lost control of events. He may not always act as quickly as we would like him to, but that is not because he lacks the power or initiative. He may test our faith, but we must not throw away our confidence in him (Heb 10:35).

One cause of discontent among the captive Israelites was that the pessimists among them were saying God had forgotten them – 'my way is hidden from the Lord' (Isa 40:27). Such talk both weakens one's own faith and discourages others, with the result that even the strong become weak – 'even the youths faint and grow weary' (Isa 40:30). But God does not forget his people, nor does he lose his power. When God's people trust in their own strength they fail; when they trust in God they experience fresh power – 'they mount up with wings as eagles' (Isa 40:31). God still 'puts down the mighty from their thrones, but exalts those of low degree' (Luke 1:52).

From *Spiritual Words* (Bulgaria, 1994)

Principles and practices

In any community most feel comfortable with things they are familiar with. Many Christians feel the same way about church practices, and do not welcome change. This can be useful at times, as it may stop people from introducing change merely for the sake of novelty. But it can also hinder a church's growth. People want to see their church develop, but they are also afraid of introducing practices they consider are not 'scriptural'.

That may be a worthy attitude, provided people have thought about what they mean by 'scriptural'. Sometimes, because they fear that something 'unscriptural' might happen, they avoid the problem by not allowing anything to happen.

New Testament practices

How do we decide what is scripturally acceptable and what is not? Do we follow the recorded practices of New Testament times, imitating what we find there and rejecting what we do not? What is the basis for our judgment?

The answer to these questions may not be as simple as we sometimes imagine. For instance, many Christians follow the practice of the church in Troas by 'breaking bread' on the first day of the week, but do not follow the practice of the church in Jerusalem by sharing their possessions in a common pool. They may observe the Lord's Supper, but they do not practise foot-washing, which was introduced on the same occasion. Some practise the covering of women when they pray, but not the greeting of each other with a holy kiss. If we say that some of these practices were intended to be permanent and some were not, on what grounds do we distinguish between the two?

Furthermore, on what grounds are some things judged to be 'unscriptural' solely because there is no mention of them in the New Testament? Why have some people regarded Bible Schools as unscriptural, but not Sunday Schools? People have at times

rejected certain things because 'Scripture knows nothing of them', yet accepted without question other things of which Scripture 'knows nothing', such as the practice of holding church meetings in buildings specially erected for that purpose.

What is scriptural?

To help clear the confusion, we might consider different ways of understanding the word 'scriptural'. Believer's baptism is scriptural in the sense of being a specific biblical requirement. It was commanded by Christ, doctrinally based on the believer's union with him, and practised by the apostles and the New Testament churches. According to this usage of 'scriptural', a thing would be unscriptural, and therefore wrong, if it was contrary to biblical teaching but made an essential requirement; for example, a human priesthood that placed itself between ordinary people and God, but asserted that it was the only means by which people could approach God.

A different meaning to the word 'scriptural' would apply to the practice of churches meeting in private homes. This was the way churches in New Testament times met, and clearly they had God's approval. But no divine command told Christians to meet in this way, and no doctrine was involved. Therefore, although the present-day practice of meeting in church buildings is non-scriptural, it is not thereby wrong.

Preaching the gospel is scriptural, because it is based on a clear command of Scripture. But Scripture gives no instructions about the details of organized gospel activities or the media to be used to spread the gospel. According to this understanding, Sunday Schools, youth clubs and radio gospel broadcasts, though not found in Scripture, are in fact scriptural.

Examples could be extended, but these should be enough to show that we cannot insist that items of church practice are scriptural if the New Testament records them but unscriptural if it does not. The New Testament gives us guidelines and examples of how Christians put principles into practice, but we cannot demand a chapter and verse to justify each separate function in the church. No church could fulfil such a require-

ment, as the above examples show. There is no way we can apply some fixed rule that will automatically decide whether a particular proposal is 'scriptural' or not. Whatever biblical references are available to us, we must try to understand what they mean, why they were written and how we can learn from them.

More than correct practices

In discussing whether or not church practices are scriptural, we are often too concerned about the scriptural justification for procedures, but not concerned enough about the scriptural teaching on attitudes. That is not to say we can do what we like. We are not to make excuses for unthinking behaviour by saying we felt good about it or had the Spirit's leading. God has given us guidelines in his Word concerning ways in which the Spirit might work, but we need the reminder that correct procedure will not by itself produce a healthy church.

No matter how closely we think our church practices may approach God's ideal, they will not produce a church according to God's design unless it consists of people living according to the work of God's Spirit within them. Christianity is more of the Spirit than of the letter. If we attempt to practise 'New Testament principles' without having a heart and mind controlled by the Spirit of God, we are attempting the impossible. Any requirement that things be 'scriptural' must apply to our lives and attitudes if it is to apply to our church activities.

From *Challenge* (Australia, 1978)

Separate, but involved

For many of us brought up in conservative Bible-believing churches, the message we heard for the first half of our lives was that the world is an evil place and we should separate ourselves from it. But for much of the second half of our lives we are told that, though the world is still an evil place, we must get back into it. Perhaps the word 'world' is used with different meanings, but the reality is that Christians are not the isolationists they used to be. Whether they are any more like Christ is another matter.

We also heard the gospel often, the message being that we had to accept Christ as our own personal saviour. Salvation was a *personal* issue, and so was the piety that went with it. Personal holiness was emphasized, and if we were genuine believers we strove for it. But this striving for personal holiness often brought with it an indifference to the state of affairs in the community at large. The world's evil was contagious, and the way to protect ourselves against it was to avoid community involvement as much as possible.

Christians today are less hesitant about getting involved in community affairs, but at the same time many are less diligent in developing personal holiness. Because holiness has traditionally been associated with physical separation from the world, they find it old fashioned and awkward in a society where Christians are becoming increasingly involved.

An example to follow

The notion that holiness meant separation is in fact biblical, though not necessarily in the sense we might imagine. To the ancient Hebrews, holiness indicated the state or condition of a person or thing as being separate from the common affairs of life. People, places, land, clothing, food and produce were considered to be holy when they were set apart from ordinary secular affairs for God.

Because of this separation from the common and mundane, the word 'holiness' developed a wider meaning that included ideas of excellence and perfection. When applied to God, this carried ideas of moral perfection, for God's holiness implied more than his separation from the everyday material world. He was above all separate from sin (Hab 1:12-13). As a result holiness came to have the ethical connotations we are familiar with today. The Bible's consistent theme is that because God is holy, his people are to be holy (Lev 11:44-45; Isa 57:15; 1 Peter 1:15-16).

Peter takes up this theme in his First Letter. In urging Christians to be holy (Chapter 1), he refers them not to a law or an ideal, but to a person; and that person is one of absolute moral integrity. God not merely commands holiness, he exemplifies it. Christians in turn take God as their model. Their new nature is created after his likeness in righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10).

The true non-conformist

Although God is at work in them, Christians have a duty to take positive action themselves if they are to be of use for God. Peter therefore urges them to a strong self-discipline in their thinking and behaviour (v. 13), to a strict obedience (v. 14a), to a deliberate rejection of former patterns of conduct (v. 14b) and to a determined effort to achieve the practical holiness that God demands (v. 15).

This holiness, being patterned on the character of God, is seen in its perfect application in Jesus Christ. He was holy – but he was not a killjoy. The reason he attracted opposition was not that he opposed the enjoyment of life's good things, but that he disturbed those who were comfortable and self-satisfied.

Where the people around him were concerned with keeping rules, Jesus was concerned with saving lives (Mark 3:1-6). Where they were hard and unyielding, he was understanding and forgiving (John 8:1-11). Where they were lax, he was firm and uncompromising (John 2:13-18). Their holiness was concerned with the kind of food that went into their mouths; his was

concerned with the kind of speech that came out of their mouths (Matt 15:11). Their holiness was conformity to religious conventions that made a social separation between them and those whom they despised as sinners. Jesus' holiness was a separation in spirit and mind, a difference in attitudes and values. And he lived out this holiness not in a community of like-minded believers, but in the rough-and-tumble world of hatred, prejudice and selfishness.

A community of non-conformists

Throughout the opening chapter of his letter, Peter discusses the personal salvation that believers have in Jesus Christ. As taught elsewhere in the New Testament, salvation is a personal matter, and all attempts to achieve Christian ethical standards without personal Christian salvation are bound to fail. But while salvation is a personal matter, it is not a private matter. People live their lives in a society, and Christians must strive to see God's will done in that society – God's will done on earth as it is in heaven.

Although individual Christians are a channel through which God works, so is the believing community of which Christians are a part, namely, the church. Peter demonstrates this in the parallels he draws between individual Christians in Chapter 1 and the church in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 1 Peter points out how believers have been redeemed, or bought by God, at the cost of Christ's life (v. 18). In Chapter 2 he points out that not only is the individual believer owned by God, so is the church as a whole. The Christian community is a people for God's own possession (v. 9). And just as in Chapter 1 he said that individual believers must be holy (v. 15), so in Chapter 2 he says that the church as a whole must be holy (v. 5,9). The new community must, like the individual believer, live out its life in an alien world that it is trying to convert. The leaven must permeate the dough; the light must penetrate the darkness (v. 9; cf. Matt 5:14; 13:33).

The Christian life is not one of isolation. Christians are part of a community within a community, and they must learn how to

live effectively for God in both spheres. No area of human life is beyond God's concern, and this should be reflected in the lives of God's people. As Christians gain new insights into God's ways, they must apply those insights to the problems of human society. But they cannot do this if they isolate themselves from the world; nor can they do it if their values and behaviour are no different from those of the world in general.

Change, at a price

The early church expressed the lordship of Christ by going into the world as Christ did. It did not conform to the world, but neither did it try to bring in the kingdom of God by political revolution. It proclaimed a kingdom that all could enter by faith and repentance. In doing so it gave expression to the rule of Christ, and like Christ it cut across racial and social divisions. As a result large numbers of socially disadvantaged people, such as women and slaves, entered the church. A social revolution was under way – not because fired-up revolutionaries set out to create a utopia, but because this new community was a live community, living under the lordship of Christ.

God's new people was both a living temple and a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5,9). Holiness was a personal responsibility, but it was not just a private affair. Christians had learnt to be holy as God was holy, and at the same time had penetrated a darkened world as Christ had. They were not isolated from the world, but neither were they swallowed up by it; consequently, they changed it.

The fervent desire for personal holiness is no excuse for neglecting social responsibilities. Neither is enthusiasm for community involvement an excuse for neglecting personal holiness. Maintaining the balance is costly, but it is a price that must be paid by those who say they are God's people. They must be holy as he who called them is holy; and, as Peter said, this holiness must extend to *all* their conduct (1 Peter 1:15).

When are we going to wake up?

The Thailand of the 1960s was not the economic success story it is today. I can recall commenting more than once, 'I don't know how these people survive on the little money they have'. Then one day I heard a Thai who had just returned from India comment, 'I don't know how the people there survive on the little money they have'. Years later in Bombay, an Indian who was printing material for Tanzania said to me, 'I don't know how the people in Tanzania survive on the little money they have'. Recently a Tanzanian who was in Mozambique said to a friend of mine who was there, 'I don't know how the people of Mozambique survive on the little money they have'.

These reported comments are slightly stylized, but they illustrate a human characteristic: no matter how much or how little we have, we cannot imagine ourselves living on less.

Wartime lifestyle

Some time ago I read an article by a prominent Christian leader who suggested that Christians in the West ought to adopt a wartime lifestyle, in order to free up finances for the warfare of world evangelization. But most people in the Western world of today know nothing of wartime stringencies, and those who do have no desire to go back to them. So, having put that fleeting idea out of our minds, we return to less disturbing thoughts. We maintain our convenience and comfort, perhaps even maintain our current level of Christian giving, but we have no intention of putting any further pressure on ourselves.

Most of us are fairly satisfied that our standard of living is modest and that our level of giving is adequate. We compare ourselves with each other and judge ourselves favourably – but in so doing we are judged by the Bible as 'foolish' (2 Cor 10:12). And even when we do give, we usually give to projects where people of the West are the chief beneficiaries. While 96% of the

church's finances worldwide are spent in the West, the rest of the world has to survive on only 4%. Yet this neglected part of the world is where most of the unreached peoples are located and where three-quarters of the world's Christians live, the majority of them in poor circumstances.

Non-white missionaries

Many Christians in the West are not aware of the revolution that has taken place in global evangelization in the fifty years since World War II.

During the first half of that period the structures of Western colonial rule were dismantled and over seventy nations gained independence. At the same time the national churches in those countries saw the beginnings of spectacular growth. During the second twenty-five years the church in the non-Western world has grown so vigorously that it numerically dominates the Christian world scene – and the rate of growth is increasing. In spite of declining numbers in the West, the percentage growth rate of the church worldwide is twice the percentage growth rate of the overall population.

Evangelization of the unreached peoples of the world is the responsibility of all the church, West and non-West alike. The Christians of the non-West are responding to this challenge with an enlightened enthusiasm rarely seen these days in the West. Yet when Christians here are forced by the facts to give mental assent to this, they have difficulty coming to terms with it. Many are still back in the coloured beads era.

When the needs of a region or country are raised in a prayer meeting, the usual response is to 'pray for the missionaries'. When people are challenged with responsibilities of financial giving to the unevangelized world, the usual response is to 'give to the missionaries'. By 'missionaries', people usually mean those like myself – white, English-speaking expatriates in non-Western countries. I am not saying that white missionaries do not need prayer and finances. The point I am illustrating is that our mindset is narrow and ill-informed. We still tend to think of national churches primarily in relation to the work of white

missionaries, whereas we should be thinking in relation to the work of the national church. We think that the lead is still coming from Western-based missions, but it is not.

White missionaries still have a valuable role to play – in biblical education, leadership training, management courses, linguistic programs, technical assistance, and a range of other ministries – but the future of the church is in the hands of the nationals. The initiative and thrust is coming from them, and the burden of any hardship or persecution is borne by them.

Trustworthy managers

Many in the West have a mental block when it comes to giving money to non-Western mission enterprises. They wonder whether the money will be used wisely, and they want some accountability from the recipients. But when giving to Western mission enterprises they do not usually make the same demands. What it boils down to is a lack of trust in their non-Western brothers and sisters. Undoubtedly, there will be cases of waste, mismanagement, or even dishonesty, but this is so also in Western-based missions.

Once we start looking at measurable returns for our financial investments in mission, we may be embarrassed to discover that the nationals see more growth than we do, and with far less money. And as for their accountability, my involvement with more than sixty needy countries around the world has satisfied me that the national Christians on the whole are trustworthy, efficient and dependable.

We may find it difficult to know how to help national Christian workers without creating within them or their churches a dependence on Western finances – though if the national churches were responsible for basic support, and overseas gifts were treated as supplementary, the problem of dependence would scarcely arise. But even if we balk at providing income for individuals, there is no need to balk at providing the basic resources they desperately need. We are willing to help projects where Westerners are involved; why not where non-Westerners are involved?

Equal partners

The danger for us is not in giving money to non-Western mission enterprises, but in wanting to use that money to exercise control. We have become so used to the secular notion that money means power, that we tend to carry that over into our Christian giving.

When the suggestion arises that we give to non-Western people or projects, invariably someone will caution that we must be wise in our stewardship. That is fair enough; we should not enter any undertaking thoughtlessly or rashly. But we should also remember that we are, after all, only stewards. Our money is not ours, but God's. We ought not, like the world, use it to dictate terms, but realize that we are giving it back to God for the use of his servants and the furtherance of his kingdom.

Although we may not like to admit it, many of us in the West have an unspoken impression that God has a vested interest in our nation in particular. We think we have a right to a certain standard of living and we expect God to protect it for us. But, according to the words of Jesus, if much has been given to us, much is required of us. Many of the Bible's most fearful judgments are directed not at those who lacked knowledge or blessings, but at those who had them but did not use them (Luke 12:47-48).

Christianity may appear to be losing ground in the West, but in many other places it is forging ahead. We can be partners in this global movement, but it will require some radical changes, partly in our lifestyle as Christians in the West and partly in our attitude to our brothers and sisters elsewhere. It will not just happen; we must make a deliberate effort. And one of our first efforts must be aimed at eliminating our aloofness and suspicion towards those from the non-West, and developing cooperation and trust.

From *Tidings* (Australia, 1995)

Free to serve

Christians are very thankful if they live in a country where the government allows them religious freedom, especially when they think of the restrictions placed on their fellow Christians in some other countries. But the human heart has a remarkable ability to take something that is good and twist it into something that will serve self-interest. Human freedom, if exercised without concern for the common good, can become an instrument for ruthlessness.

The self-assertive will readily take advantage of a commonly shared freedom to advance themselves at the expense of the less forceful. The healthy desire to do well at something can easily degenerate into the unhealthy desire to have more power and prestige than others. Even the Christian emphasis that salvation is a matter for the individual can be twisted so that a person becomes unconcerned about others.

Christians are not likely to fall into the Marxist error of undervaluing the worth of the individual, but they are very open to the temptation of becoming too individualistic. Freedom becomes an instrument to serve self-interest. Perhaps this is partly behind the declining interest in Christian activity in countries other than one's own. It certainly gives relevance to Paul's warning 'not to use your freedom as an occasion for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another' (Gal 5:13).

From *Echoes* (England, 1984)

Reaching neighbourhood families

As my wife and I move around the unchurched community in our neighbourhood, we get the impression that a lot of people have some sort of belief in God and a sympathetic view of Jesus. At the same time they have a guilty feeling that they do not know much about Christianity. But they refuse to have anything to do with the two places where they are most likely to find out, namely, church and the Bible. Our experience has been that if we can calm their fears about church and the Bible, they provide a ready field of evangelism.

Building friendships

Unchurched people will not readily talk about issues they consider sensitive or embarrassing, such as religion, so we have to spend much time building friendships with them. Sadly, many Christians are afraid to do this. Yet any study of the life of Jesus will show us not only that it is what we should do, but also that we can do it without compromising our principles, lowering our standards or watering down the gospel.

We must pay the price of getting involved with people; and that means being genuinely concerned for them, not just *appearing* to be concerned in the hope of getting the opportunity to preach at them. Instead of isolating ourselves from non-Christians, we must become friends with them. Jesus was known as a friend of sinners.

Christians often do not know how to start developing wider friendships. But the churches they belong to usually have regular activities for children and youth, and we have found it easy to develop friendships with these families. Parents appreciate it when others are interested in the welfare of their youngsters.

Also, there are many community activities we can become involved in – school functions, sporting events, special interest groups, local charities, and so on – and we have found that these

soon bring many new friends that we can start praying for in the cause of Christ's kingdom.

Making friends with people must go beyond merely meeting them at functions. It means having them home for meals, going to places they want to go, and helping them with household jobs such as sewing, painting, concreting and baby-sitting. If we are to build bridges to people, we must be prepared to become part of their activities. As often as possible we drop in on people, trying not to appear predictable or over-zealous. It is easy to find excuses to drop in. In addition, we sometimes ask people to help with jobs, or even help in work that has to be done around the church, so that they feel they are helping us as much as we are helping them.

This building of friendships is something different from what is commonly referred to as 'witnessing', a one-off opportunity here and there to tell people the gospel. This, of course, happens, because once we show interest in people and their problems, they begin to confide in us. They have family concerns, work problems, financial anxieties, memories of bad experiences and many other issues that create difficulties. We try to point out that their real need is spiritual and the real answer is Christ, but most are in a state of mind where they cannot see it at the time. Nevertheless, they appreciate our concern.

All these things help towards what we are hoping for, and that is to start something longer term and less threatening than the one-off 'witnessing' activity. We are trying to secure an arrangement where we can patiently and carefully go through the basics of Christianity over a period of weeks or months.

Home Bible studies

What we aim for is a weekly Bible study with the non-Christian couple. Always this is in their home, where they feel comfortable and secure. Usually we only start the Bible study if the husband agrees. This stops the men from opting out, and stops us from driving a wedge between husband and wife. We think that each should know what the other is doing. If the Christian men have first put in the effort to build relation-

ships, the non-Christian men are usually willing to be part of the study.

Preferably, the home Bible study will be informal, with the Christian couple and the non-Christian couple seated around the kitchen table. Usually the study starts with the book of Romans, as that gives a clear and orderly explanation of the gospel. However, we ask the couple to read either Mark or Luke in their own time (that is, not connected with the group study) so that they are introduced to the life and ministry of Jesus.

The study is not run as a miniature church service with opening and closing prayers, songs and the like. We merely explain what the Bible is saying. Our aim is to present the gospel as simply and as clearly as possible. We are not there to embarrass people by quizzing them on their knowledge, though we involve them with simple queries that enable them to say what they think. There is no need to worry if the discussion goes off onto other issues, as it gives opportunity for us to show that Christians are interested in more than just the Bible, and have values that are relevant to everyday affairs.

Hard work with prayer

It seems that getting people to agree to a home Bible study is half the battle. When they have let down the barriers to that extent they are exposed to the Bible's message. The hard and costly work on our part is the preliminary work of building the relationship to the point where the couple will agree to a Bible study. This could take only a few months, but in a secular and cynical society such as ours it sometimes takes several years.

There is, however, no formula for success. People will not repent and believe just because we are having a Bible study with them. We must not under-estimate the forces we are fighting against – 'not flesh and blood, but principalities and powers, the rulers of the present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places'. Without daily prayer, we can spend a lot of time and effort fruitlessly. We must never forget that only God can save anyone.

Even with prayer we still must spend a lot of time and effort. There may be no need for a large church budget or a lot of church organization, but the work is costly to us personally. That is not surprising, because any worthwhile work for God requires sacrifice. We must have confidence that the Word will do its work in people's hearts, but it can only do that work if they understand it. God is the one who saves people, but we are the ones who explain salvation to them.

From *Alert* (Australia, 1988)

More than politics

Politics is a lively issue in most present-day societies, and one that Christians often prefer to avoid. But that is not entirely possible, because they are all part of society and cannot escape the tensions that result. They must live positively for God and contribute to the common good, even though society as a whole is growing less sympathetic to the Christian viewpoint.

Attitudes to government and society

Whatever Christians may think of the kind of control the government of the day exercises, they are convinced that God wants a just and ordered society. They uphold the principals of civil obedience set out in such passages as Mark 12:17, Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Timothy 2:1-2, but realize also that when Caesar claims for himself the things that belong to God, conflict will result. In such cases they must put loyalty to God before loyalty to the state, and be prepared to suffer the consequences (Acts 5:29,40).

Christianity's task is not to form a political party or govern society, but to bring people to salvation through Christ and see them recreated in his image. Nevertheless, Christians are to be a good influence in society. They are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-16). Not every country gives them the right to express their opinions through the ballot box, but they still have a responsibility to use their judgment in deciding which things in society they should support and which things they should oppose.

As Christians understand the Scriptures better, they will have a better knowledge of what God wants for human society. The Creator knows what is best for his creatures, and since Christians take their standards of morality, welfare and justice from God, those standards are surely the best, not just for Christians but for everyone.

Getting along with others

These ideals are commendable, but the reality is that all human beings are in a morally fallen condition where they are incapable of living as God would have them. Jesus Christ, and he alone, lived according to God's standard. Christians are able to approach that standard only because of the transforming power of the living Christ within them (Rom 8:1-4; Col 3:10).

Others, however, do not have that inner power. Their condition is one of hardness of heart, so that the ideal is too high to aim for (Matt. 19:8). Christians must realize that the law cannot always enforce the standards they desire in society. No law, for example, can force a person to be loving or stop a person from being spiteful. Therefore, though Christians might pursue their ideals in giving advice to private citizens, they may have to accept something considerably less concerning the formation of civil laws for all citizens.

Human society has been so spoiled by sin that often there is no simple solution to its problems. In some cases, no matter what law the government makes, some ideal standard will be broken somewhere. The right course of action may mean choosing the lesser of two evils. Even then it should be remembered that what was formerly evil is still evil. It does not become good simply because there are now laws to regulate it.

What is more important

When Christians in democratic societies want to decide whether to propose or support specific issues of state legislation, they may be disappointed if they search the New Testament for precedents. The reason for this is that citizens in the time of the New Testament had no rights in deciding who governed them, in challenging government decisions, or in submitting proposals for government action.

Perhaps the nearest examples we can find are in certain matters where Christian leaders had to find ways for people to live together harmoniously when they held different community standards and cultural values. The solution did not compromise

the standard of personal behaviour required of Christians, but it did acknowledge that one universally applicable ideal could not be imposed on a mixed community if that community was not ready for it. For example, Paul taught clearly that Christians are not bound by Jewish rituals, but he agreed that, in the interests of harmony, Gentile converts moderate certain practices for the sake of Jewish converts whose view was less Christian (Acts 15:19-29).

Although Paul himself held high Christian values, not everybody shared his values. His refusal to water down his personal values did not prevent him from making concessions. He refused to have Titus circumcised when Jewish legalists wanted to insist upon it, but he wanted to have Timothy circumcised in order to gain access to unevangelized Jewish communities (Gal 2:3-5; Acts 16:3).

When two groups in the Roman church disagreed about what they could eat, Paul refused to force the standard of one upon the other. No doubt one view was better than the other, but to force it upon unwilling people would have created more trouble than the matter was worth. Paul looked for a compromise, but it was a good compromise. Some may have thought he proposed a solution that was second best, but it turned out to be the best in the long run. He suggested that both parties accommodate to each other and pursue what makes for peace and upbuilding (Rom 14:19). The principle is worth bearing in mind in a wider context than the church.

From *Harvester* (England, 1984)

Christians and democratic freedom

God cares about the condition of human society, and if he cares, his people also should care. Jesus came into the world to deal with the problem of human sin – to release people from its power, grant them forgiveness and give them eternal life. In addition, when confronted with the suffering and despair that sin had created in human society, he brought people hope through a ministry of healing and restoration. When his followers work to bring similar hope in a sin-damaged world, they reflect the heart of Christ and show the kind of world God wants. If God's goal is the removal of evil and the establishment of righteousness at Christ's return, Christians should be working towards that goal now.

Benefits and dangers

Once Christianity has penetrated a society, it has usually resulted in improved living standards. There is better care for the sick and the poor, more protection for the underprivileged and the defenceless, and greater respect for justice and honesty. Christianity may even develop such a prominence that the country claims to be Christian.

In such a situation, true Christians recognize the danger of people being merely nominal Christians. But true Christians are often unaware of the dangers to themselves. They may have so benefited from their country's better standard of living that they unthinkingly accept government policies simply because those policies help them maintain their benefits.

Some people have commendable principles in their personal behaviour, but at the same time support a system that ignores those principles. They may, for example, give generous aid to needy countries, but at the same time support policies that ensure their country gets richer while others remain poor. They may approve certain actions of government or business, but would

condemn similar actions in the day-to-day life of ordinary people. They may have a genuine concern to avoid sin in their private lives, but they ignore the sin that infects the system in which they live.

People can err also in the opposite direction. They can be concerned for reform in the wider society, but ignore their personal duties. They may condemn governments for ignoring the needy, but they themselves do nothing for needy families that live in their own street. They may denounce racism in distant nations, but stand aloof from neighbours who come from a different ethnic background. Christians need to remind themselves that Jesus often condemned people not because of the wrong they did, but because of the good they failed to do.

Self-interest

Human nature has a natural tendency towards selfishness, and Christians wrestle with this problem the same as other people. Self-interest can be very subtle. Christians may find themselves supporting, let us say, a new tax arrangement solely because it benefits them. Other Christians may find themselves opposing the same tax arrangement solely because it leaves them with less money, even though it may help towards a more just society. Since Christians are to put other people's interests before their own (Phil 2:4), they should put the interests of society as a whole before the selfish interests of just one section of society.

Christians have rights, but at times they may be required to sacrifice those rights for the sake of others. If, in consideration of justice and fair play, they see fit to defend their rights, they should be careful that they are not being motivated by self-interest. Jesus was never motivated by self-interest, and therefore he willingly sacrificed his rights; but he readily defended the rights of others. He condemned the oppressors and defended the downtrodden, and so did his followers (Matt 23:4; Mark 12:40; Luke 6:20,25; James 5:1-6); though neither he nor they used violence in any form, whether to protect what was good or overthrow what was bad.

It is not surprising that the main opposition to Jesus came from those who were religiously respectable and socially comfortable. They were in a position to bring about change in society but they preferred not to, because they were the ones who benefited most from the existing order. Likewise many people today, Christians among them, have at times opposed change because the social order suits them to remain as it is.

Realistic expectations

The selfish desire to protect one's interests should never be the guiding principle for Christians. If Christians, more than anyone else, recognize the weaknesses of democracy as a system of government, all the more reason why they should not take advantage of its weaknesses for selfish purposes. Rather they should be thankful for the freedom that democracy gives them to influence public opinion and government policy, and they should use the opportunity to promote Christian values.

Christians may not be as successful in influencing public opinion as they would like, but public opinion is not everything. Governments do not always wait for public opinion to guide them. They can take the lead by introducing laws that help improve social attitudes and behaviour, though the laws would need to have some hope of public acceptance if they were to work.

Laws, however, cannot force people to be morally good. Human sin is too deeply ingrained for laws to eradicate it. The best that laws can do is create a climate that encourages good and restrains evil (Rom 13:3-4). They can protect those who are easily exploited, and restrain those who want to exploit them.

The price of freedom

Although Christians may try to influence the government, they must remember that not all Christians hold the same view on every issue. Also they must remember that there are others in society besides themselves. The basis of the democratic freedom they enjoy is that the government exists by the choice of the majority of people. Christians may be correct in believing their

viewpoint to be the most beneficial for society (1 Peter 4:2-4), but they cannot expect to use the law to force a minority view on the whole society if the majority does not want it. They cannot, for example, expect the government to enact laws that force people to go to church on Sundays, no matter how much they may believe such a practice would benefit society.

If Christians want neither dictatorship on the one hand nor anarchy on the other, they must support both the principle of human freedom and the principle of law and order. If society as a whole is to enjoy freedom, all within society, good and bad alike, must accept some limits to their freedom.

Even God allows rebels to enjoy certain blessings equally with his own people. He gives sunshine to bad people as well as good, and sends rain for honest and dishonest people alike (Matt 5:45). Christians likewise must be even-handed and tolerant. They must allow non-Christians the same freedom as they themselves enjoy. In short, they must love their neighbours as themselves.

From *Harvester* (England, 1984)

How much should we give to God?

Accountability is one aspect of life that Christians too often prefer not to think about. Because we believe that salvation is not dependent on personal good works but on God's free gift, we can easily settle into an attitude that ignores personal good works and takes God's grace for granted. We may forget that we are still accountable to God for what we do, and that we still must face a day of reckoning.

Facing the facts

Although people in general might ignore God, Christians should view life differently. We know that whatever we have for the maintenance of our present existence has been given by God – life itself, the natural environment, the time at our disposal, our natural skills, our accumulated possessions. In none of these things do we have absolute right. We have these things only on trust from God, and we are answerable to him for the way we use them.

This means more than simply having a responsible attitude in managing what God has entrusted to us. It means acknowledging God as the giver of life's blessings. It involves actions that on the one hand express thanks to God, and on the other resist the natural selfishness that makes us want to use everything for maximum personal benefit. Our handling of personal income and material prosperity should therefore include giving a portion to God; and that, if done sincerely, can be a genuine act of worship (Gen 14:20-23).

Balancing devotion and discipline

If, however, our giving is to be a genuine expression of worship, it must also be a sacrifice. It must cost us something. It must be part of us, so to speak. If we give to God something that costs us nothing, its significance as 'part of us' is lost (2 Sam 24:24; Phil 4:18).

This expression of personal devotion does not mean that we must try to manufacture feelings of heroic self-sacrifice to ensure that our offering has value in God's sight. Nor does it mean that to give sincerely, we must wait for the right mood. Giving can be planned and still be a sincere and spiritual act. Discipline is not an alternative to spirituality, but part of it.

Israelites in Old Testament times were required to give God a tithe (i.e. a tenth) of their annual income (based on the extent of their crops, fruit, flocks and herds). God was pleased with this regulated offering when people offered it in the right spirit, but not when they offered it with a feeling of smug self-satisfaction (Deut 14:22-29; Luke 18:12).

But even if Israelites offered their tithes in the right spirit, when they had finished the task they had still merely done their duty. Israelite law therefore contained a consistent theme that reminded people of other matters beside legal obligation. Over and above the compulsory tithes and sacrifices, they could make voluntary offerings and contributions, by which they further expressed their devotion to God and concern for others (Num 29:39; Neh 12:44).

Proportionate giving

The Israelite tithing arrangements were part of a unified system that combined civil, social and religious affairs in a way that was unique to Israel. The New Testament asserts that Christians are not governed by Israelite law (Gal 3:2-3; 5:1-3), though it readily acknowledges that principles underlying that law may be relevant in a wider context. They may be written, as it were, on the heart (Rom 8:4; Heb 10:16). Concerning the offering of part of our income to God, the underlying principle is that of proportionate giving. The amount we give depends on the amount we earn.

In writing to the Corinthian church on the subject, Paul had the perfect opportunity to lay down laws concerning percentages and figures, but he refused to. He wanted people to give out of willingness, not compulsion. He wanted their contribution to be a gift, not a tax (2 Cor 8:8; 9:5). Nevertheless, his words remind

us that proportionate giving is a Christian responsibility. We are to give according to our financial ability (1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 8:3), but even then we are merely doing our duty. The Bible therefore has a special word of praise for those who give beyond their financial ability (2 Cor 8:3).

Although the one-tenth offering was regulated under the law of Moses, it was a practice of God's people long before it was commanded in the law (Gen 14:20; 28:22). The tithe seems to have been the minimum amount God's people gave as a fitting offering to him.

Whether in pre-Christian times or today, the one-tenth offering would be of considerable cost to some but of little cost to others. The greater financial capacity of some should mean not simply that the amount they give is more but that the percentage they give is higher. Jesus' comment about the poor widow's contribution to the temple shows that God sees our offerings not according to their monetary value, but according to our total financial capacity (Mark 12:43-44).

A more moderate lifestyle

God does not want to drive people into poverty. He does not want us to look upon our giving as a burden (2 Cor 8:13). Yet the offering must cost us something if it is to have any value. We insult God and disgrace ourselves when we offer him only what we have no use for (Mal 1:8). If we will not miss it, we can hardly expect God to take notice of it.

Because of inborn selfishness, we shall always be able to produce arguments to justify giving less than we should. In most matters, however, once we have the will to do something, we soon work out ways of doing it. If the willingness is there (2 Cor 8:12), we may find that a more sacrificial lifestyle is not the burden we imagined.

The example of the Macedonian Christians shows that fear of financial hardship is no excuse for meanness in giving. The Macedonians lived in extreme poverty (2 Cor 8:2), but they gave beyond their ability and of their own free will. They even begged

Paul 'for the privilege of taking part' in the collection he was organizing (2 Cor 8:3-4). Because they had 'first given themselves to the Lord', there was no reluctance in their giving. They gave cheerfully (2 Cor 8:5; 9:7). This should be our natural Christian response once we have become motivated by the greatest of all examples, Jesus Christ, who gave everything for us (2 Cor 8:9).

Feelings and motives

Although generous giving should flow naturally from a spiritual motivation within, we are not to sit around waiting for some sort of irresistible spiritual impulse so that we 'feel right' before doing anything. Christianity does not tell us to feel in a certain way but to act in a certain way. If we know what Christ has done for us and what our response should be, we should set about putting our knowledge into practice.

Vague feelings are no substitute for calm assessment of the amount we should give and how we should give it. In the same sentence where Paul speaks of true Christian giving as being the cheerful response from a willing heart, he says that people should give 'as they have made up their mind' (2 Cor 9:7). Earlier he encouraged the same people to have a planned and systematic approach to their giving by regularly 'putting something aside and storing it up' (1 Cor 16:2). To be haphazard is no sign of godliness.

In both Old and New Testaments, contributions from God's people are put to use for two main purposes – the service of God and the help of the needy (Num 18:21,28; Deut 15:10-11; Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 9:13-14; Gal 6:6,10). The discernment and thought required in determining our giving is also required in directing our gifts. But just as the love of money can be a cause of sin, so can the giving of it. If we give with a view to winning praise we may gain the reward we look for – but it will be our only reward (Matt 6:2). If we give with the intention of being deceptive, we may meet with God's judgment (Acts 5:4).

God promises to reward those who give because they love him and love others. This does not mean they are to give

liberally as a way of buying financial blessing from God, but it does mean they will enjoy his special care now and his lasting blessing in the age to come (Matt 6:19-20; 2 Cor 9:6-12). When Paul said, 'My God will supply all your needs', he was talking not to Christians in general, but to Christians whose monetary gifts had been a real sacrifice (Phil 4:18-19).

From *Challenge* (Australia, 1984)

Growth means change

A healthy church will be a growing church, but as it grows it will need to adapt constantly to changing circumstances. No matter how large or small the church may be, its health will largely depend on the balance that it maintains between outreach to the non-Christians and up-building of the Christians. Where the spiritual life of the believers is neglected in the interests of evangelism, the church will be spiritually immature and weak. Where so much effort is put into the ministry of the Word that believers have neither time nor enthusiasm for reaching the lost, the church will be self-satisfied and fruitless.

Not only must these two aspects of church balance each other, they will affect each other. The spiritual age and maturity of the believers will determine the kind of Bible teaching given, and the effectiveness of the Bible teaching will be reflected in the addition of new converts to the church.

Outreach and upbuilding

It is often pointed out that most believers were converted during their childhood or youth. This is hardly surprising when we consider that, in most churches, more than ninety percent of the non-Christians reached each week are in this age group. Also, a corresponding proportion of the workers and finances assigned to local activities are used in children's and youth activities. Churches must do more to reach the adult population and, in particular, whole families.

No matter how the church reaches people, the initial contact will in most cases involve some personal relationship between Christians and non-Christians. Christians must be alive to what is going on in their local community as well as in the world at large, and be ready to involve themselves in discussions and friendships intelligently and cheerfully. The church must turn itself inside out, so to speak, so that Christians get out of their

secure church environment into the real world of the local community. Too often the church's pattern of Sunday services, its religious jargon and its cosy fellowship give people the impression that it is a religious club and does not welcome intrusion from outsiders.

Not all Christians may be gifted enough to guide people through all their problems to faith in Christ, but they may be able to bring people to a group study in a private home. And every church should have at least one service a week that interested people can attend if they seek help from the church or want to learn about Christianity. But whether in a private home or a church building, Christians must learn to adapt to the viewpoint of the non-Christian enquirer. This may require them to exclude certain elements of Christian routine that are not helpful to those who do not yet believe. The church should not require people to accept Christian ideals and practices before they have a chance to understand the gospel.

Churches need some program of teaching where people can learn about Christian beliefs and responsibilities. The teaching may include exposition of suitable Bible books, along with treatment of current issues. Christian teachings and values are constantly being questioned, and only the teachings of the Bible can give people 'the wisdom that leads to salvation'. 'The Lord's servant must be a good and patient *teacher* – gently instructing those who oppose him, in the hope that God will grant them repentance and lead them to a knowledge of the truth' (2 Tim 2:24-25). Such teaching would be beneficial to Christians and non-Christians alike. God's Word will do its work in people's lives, once they understand it.

Making youth feel part of the church

When mature-age people come to faith in Christ, they soon learn to participate in the normal life of the church, whether in regular Sunday services or in prayer and Bible study groups in private homes. But the church has a wide range of ages, and sometimes those who are older forget how younger people see things. It is therefore important that the youth of the church be

integrated into the church's worship, teaching, prayer and outreach activities.

Through the teaching and example of the leaders, young people should be shown that the church, not the youth group, is the body of Christ. If they are encouraged to give their first loyalty to the youth group instead of being led into the place God has for them in the church, they will eventually run into difficulties. They will find that when they are too old for the youth group, they will be unfitted to participate in the full life of the church, and perhaps too old to make a start.

Young people must see that to be born at all is to be born into a family, and in spiritual life this family is the church. The church has the responsibility to receive them and to adapt where necessary to give them an environment in which to grow. When a baby is born into a family, other members of the family do not return to the behaviour of babyhood, but they do change. They make adjustments to suit the requirements of the new child. The church does not have to reduce itself to the level of the 'pop' mentality, but it does have to adapt to meet the new challenge.

Something is demanded of all groups. The demand on the young people is to accept that the church is God's family and they cannot live the Christian life properly by ignoring it. Nor can they expect everything in the church to be changed to suit them. The demand on the older people is to accept that the church is a living body, and that it must adapt if it is to maintain a healthy growth. To do things solely because 'we like it that way' is not good enough. All must accept each other's differences and realize that in God's family both young and old have a vital part to play.

Freedom means life

Although the integration of youth into the church is an important aspect of church life, it is not the only area where people must adapt in the interests of harmony. The more active the church, the greater will be the need. If all the members of the church are actively engaged in the work of God – praying,

teaching, evangelizing, learning, caring and otherwise using the spiritual gifts God has given them – the church is certain to meet difficulties. There may be a wider expression of personalities and greater independence of ideas and actions. The result may be that the church will become more difficult to control than one whose members remain as children – subject, irresponsive and immature.

A community of free and responsible citizens is more difficult to control than a group of slaves, but who would give up this freedom for the sterile orderliness of slavery? A church may, out of fear of problems, suppress any sign of non-conformity, but it may find in the end that the price it has paid has been the life and power of the church itself.

From *Aim* (India, 1997)

Who are the nominal Christians?

In many countries there is a recognizable group known as 'the Christians'. Some countries are even regarded as Christian countries. Many genuine believers have always felt uneasy with this title, partly because it encourages people to think they are Christians when in fact they may have no personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The same Christians find the title even more questionable today, especially in so-called 'Christian' nations, where social values and behaviour often appear to be anything but Christian. The danger is, however, that when we so easily see the faults in others we tend to feel good by comparison and consequently fail to see the faults in ourselves. We might well ask ourselves how much *our* lives are truly Christian.

It's a good life

Many born again churchgoers have been brought up in good churchgoing families and have always lived fairly respectable lives. Others have come into the church from distinctly non-church backgrounds and their lives have experienced dramatic change.

Either way, people soon discover that Christianity provides them with a fairly good way of life. In the home they tend not to fight and squabble as much as others, and in society they usually get on better with people. They have a sense of well-being and stability that is reassuring in an uncertain world. They no longer spend excessively on clubs, entertainment, gambling, drinking and other costly pursuits, so that even after giving money to the church, they are still financially better off than they were before. In short, Christianity gives them a much better lifestyle. But is this cleaned-up respectable lifestyle as Christian as we think it is? How does it compare with the Christianity that Jesus Christ taught?

Christianity is unique in that it is not bound to any culture. People can live the Christian life in the West or the East, under a democracy or a dictatorship, in a technically advanced or a struggling under-developed country. But for many Christians, Christianity has become equated with modern civilization. They enjoy a life that is personally beneficial and secure, even though it may bear little resemblance to the sort of life that the Lord Jesus demanded of his followers.

Excuse: ‘But we all need a good night’s sleep’

When people expressed interest in becoming his followers, Jesus left them in no doubt what this would involve. Three cases bring to light three aspects of the life that Jesus requires of his followers (Luke 9:57-62).

In the first case, Jesus points out that following him will mean physical inconvenience (‘the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head’). But convenience is one of the chief benefits that modern society provides; so much so that many Christians, like others, believe they have a *right* to convenience. Jesus tells us that his followers have no such right at all.

Most of us want to please God and are prepared to do certain things for him, but usually only if those things fit into ‘church hours’ – which in most cases means specified times on Sunday and perhaps one other time during the week. Outside those set periods, our time is our own and we do not want it interfered with. Having gained the benefits of an improved standard of living, we do not want to give them up. This unwillingness to put up with personal inconvenience is one reason why Christianity in the West is going backwards while elsewhere it is going forwards.

Excuse: ‘But I have all these other commitments’

In the second case, Jesus tells us that responsibilities to him and his kingdom must come before all other responsibilities. There are plenty of people who can look after the mundane affairs of life, but not many who can fulfil the specific ministries of the kingdom (‘let the dead bury the dead, but you go and

proclaim the kingdom of God'). Yet in church after church across the Western world there is virtually no growth – other than through people migrating from other churches.

The reason for this is partly that we are not willing to put ourselves out for the sake of the lost, but partly that often we are too busy with other affairs. In our secular jobs we may be willing to put up with longer working hours, and in leisure or community activities we may accept increased commitments, but we seem to be unwilling to mess up our routines for the sake of Christ's kingdom. We are reluctant to pay the price of building costly personal relationships, even though without these we shall not reach people effectively with the gospel.

This calls for self-denial and self-discipline, but even here we must keep watch on ourselves. We may make certain sacrifices and impose certain disciplines upon ourselves, but within time we have them under such control that they are no longer costly. We need to put pressure on ourselves; otherwise a former sacrifice may transform itself into a smug routine. This does not mean we are to inflict suffering upon ourselves as if that is a virtue in itself. Self-denial, according to the Lord Jesus, should be for his sake and the gospel's, and we must make some hard decisions when we are confronted with the conflicting interests of the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

Excuse: 'But self-fulfilment is important'

The third case of the would-be disciple reminds us that there is no place in Christ's kingdom for those whose real interests are elsewhere ('no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom'). Unless we make a deliberate effort to resist the tendencies in society at large, we shall soon find ourselves rationalizing our self-centredness. We need to put pressure on ourselves, lest we drift into attitudes that are no different from those of the practising atheists around us.

In the hurly-burly of modern life we certainly put pressure on ourselves, but too often it is the wrong sort of pressure and it is applied for the wrong reasons. We bring about our own troubles when we opt for a lifestyle that requires an extra job to

provide the income, or that demands the pursuit of further academic qualifications to find personal fulfilment. We may say we are better equipping ourselves to serve God, but in practice it rarely turns out that way. It is hard to think of a case where a person has relinquished a spiritual responsibility for the sake of a secular one and prospered spiritually as a result. Jesus taught and demonstrated that we achieve self-fulfilment not by seeking it, but by forgetting about self and orienting our lives to serve others.

In spite of Jesus' reminder that people cannot live by bread alone, Christians often behave as if they can. Our tendency is to take to ourselves, or even to actively seek, whatever advantages and benefits are available to us. What we should rather do is systematically work at living on less to help others. How can we demonstrate to unbelievers that Jesus Christ alone is sufficient when our own way of life tells them that we need so much else? How can we call others to become his followers when we ourselves do not take his words seriously? We used to hear gospel sermons that asked the question, 'What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world but lose his own soul?' We need to ask the same question of ourselves.

It's either one or the other

Much as we may not like things put to us in a 'take it or leave it' package, Jesus is uncompromising in certain issues that he puts before us. In various places he says that if we are not willing to make family sacrifices, deny ourselves legitimate pursuits, take up our cross after him and even renounce all that we have, we cannot be his disciples.

These are hard sayings that we have somehow managed to explain away. When we hear of the difficult circumstances of Christians in certain countries, we are inclined to say, 'Oh dear, poor things', and perhaps pray for them, without ever stopping to think that these people may be nearer the New Testament brand of Christianity than we are. The comfortable life that we consider to be our right is scarcely Christian. We may be on our guard to make sure that the spirit of the age does not lead us to heresy,

while at the same time we unknowingly allow it to lead us to idolatry. Jesus tells us that we cannot serve God and mammon, but we have managed to convince ourselves that we can.

The last thing most conservative Christians want to be branded as is 'radical'. Yet that is precisely what Jesus requires us to be – not in the sense that we have to shout slogans, wave placards, walk barefooted and live off orange peel, but in the sense that we have to cut loose from the self-centred way of life that society tells us is our right. We have to learn again that the things done for self will perish with us. The only things of lasting value are those we give up for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.

From *Outreach* (Australia, 1995)

Always positive

Anyone engaged in God's work knows that the enemy, Satan, is constantly placing obstacles in the way. When Paul was prevented from returning to the recently established Thessalonian church, the reason he gave was, 'Satan hindered us' (1 Thess 2:18).

But Paul was not one to sit idly by, complaining about frustrations. When he could not go himself, he did the next best thing and sent someone else. 'We were willing to be left at Athens alone and sent Timothy' (1 Thess 3:1-2). There is usually some way around obstacles if we are serious enough about what we are doing.

Even this alternative, however, was costly to Paul. By sending Timothy, he was left to face alone the difficult task of preaching in Athens – and we know the tough job he had when, for example, he stood as a lone figure before the council of philosophers to be quizzed about his beliefs (Acts 17:16-34). But that was part of the price he paid through sending Timothy to Thessalonica.

As Christians we are called upon to make all sorts of sacrifices. Sometimes the sacrifice may involve the loss of a valuable member of the church or organization for the sake of God's work elsewhere.

From Daily Power (Thailand, 1983)

Communication, communion and ‘the box’

With each advance technology makes, Christians readily find ways of using it for the benefit of the kingdom of God. The printing press, electricity and the radio have all been used to advance the gospel. Television, however, has been used much less in the cause of Christianity (in Australia, at least), partly because exceptionally large amounts of money are required for television productions, and partly because the control of the vast TV networks is in the hands of only a small number of people. Anyone can go to a printer and produce a leaflet on Christianity, but not anyone can go to a TV station and put across his or her views to the public.

One person or one million

In the secular world, people skilled in the areas of entertainment and information use TV successfully to entertain and inform. The temptation that presents itself to Christians is to compete with the secular world by presenting a Christian version of similar kinds of programs. In most cases, such attempts fail. The Christian imitation of a secular TV program will very likely finish up being culturally a second-rate show, and theologically a poor presentation of the gospel. Likewise an attempt to sell the gospel as one would sell Coca Cola is bound to fail. Jesus is not a marketable ‘product’, even if he is recommended by a converted football star.

This is not to belittle the positive value of well-known people declaring their Christian faith. In fact, it is good if Christians can penetrate the television world, not just as performers but more particularly as scriptwriters and producers. Christians in the right places can upgrade the quality of TV programs.

Special Christian programs, given the opportunity, can help the work of evangelism by providing information about such

things as the world of the Bible, the spiritual aspects of human life, the basics of Christian belief and the social responsibilities of Christianity. These can then be a useful background against which others can do personal evangelizing. Also, if people from politicians to crackpots can appear on television without paying a cent, surely intelligent Christians can try to find ways and means of doing the same.

The nature of the gospel is such that TV cannot, in normal circumstances, aim for the kind of interaction and response that one-to-one communication can achieve. This, alas, is where the difficulty lies; the theory of personal evangelism rarely gets put into practice. Most Christians are unwilling to make the effort to talk to others about the gospel. They prefer to send money to a Christian organization that can use television to do it for them. ('They can reach millions more than I ever could.')

But Christians cannot excuse themselves from evangelism by leaving it to the experts. The early Christians turned the world upside down, even though they had none of the technology that Christians today enjoy.

Electronic host or living presence

Some programs represent what is sometimes called the TV church, and feature people known as TV evangelists. Other programs, less flamboyant, televise selected church services. The style and content of these programs make them an unlikely means of evangelizing any but the fringe-dwellers of the church, though they may be of benefit to people who would like to go to church but are physically unable to. Unfortunately, some able-bodied Christians, instead of going to church, give in to the temptation to stay home and watch the TV church service. In so doing they give a demonstration of the influence of television in encouraging physical laziness.

An additional problem with the TV church service is that it obscures the togetherness of corporate worship. We ought not believe the TV presenter when he tries to create a feeling of togetherness by saying, 'It is good to be with you today'. He is

not with us at all. He is miles away in a room of whirring cameras, glaring lights and hard-nosed media people.

When Paul spoke of the church's observance of the Lord's Supper, he called it a communion, something in which the worshippers participate together (1 Cor 10:16). If the Lord's Supper was nothing more than a reminder of Jesus' death, a striking painting or sculpture might stir the imagination more than bread and wine on a table. But Jesus wanted his followers to *do* something, and to do it together – to partake jointly of a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. Personal participation in fellowship with others and with the risen Christ is an essential part of Christian worship.

Communion means involvement, the interaction of people with each other. In the communion that God's people have with him there is a two-way movement – from the people to God and from God to the people. That is why the reading and preaching of the Word should be part of the church's worship, and why no other form of communication, whether television, drama or discussion, can take its place. Through his Word, God speaks to his people and nourishes them. Communion is one thing that cannot be done by proxy. It requires total presence – God dwelling among his gathered people.

The world is people

Life in general may be physically easier because of cultural and technological advances, but in other ways it has not changed. People live and work together in a world of personal relations as they always have. It is a world where the only way to know a person properly is by physical presence. It is also a world where God still expects evangelism to come from the person-to-person communications of his people, and where he still desires their worship in the face-to-face communion of the congregation.

From *Tidings* (Australia, 1987)

A look at missionaries

Most of us who are foreign or cross-cultural missionaries would say we are seeking to build New Testament churches. We believe in the autonomy of the local church, the priesthood of all believers and the exercise of spiritual gifts in the church, but in practice we often exercise a control that is a contradiction of these beliefs. Nothing happens in the church unless it first passes us and meets our approval. We then complain that the church is not growing.

Make disciples

We usually assert that our missionary principles are taken from the activity of Paul; not to do so would be to admit we were wrong. But, without embarking on yet another analysis of Paul's travels and methods, we must admit that Paul got his churches functioning in a remarkably short time compared with us today.

Certainly, Paul had some advantages, such as the use of a common language in the region of his work and the availability of synagogues with ready-made audiences, but we cannot use those issues alone as an excuse for our lack of progress. One important matter that we tend to overlook is the simple command in Matthew 28:19-20 that we are to make disciples of people, baptize them, and teach them to obey all that Jesus commanded. The initiative lies with us. We must ensure that converts are attached to Christ and independent of us.

This initiative means we must have personal involvement, and not simply rely on preaching from the pulpit. Often it is said of some person who shows interest, 'We think he might be a believer'. Apparently no one ever asked him. He might have been coming to church functions for years, but no one has sat with him privately to explain the gospel. The person may have heard many sermons, each with a call to 'accept Christ as Saviour', but still be confused about who God is, how he relates

to the human race, and what he has done through Christ to save sinners.

One reason why people do not come to Christ is that they do not know why they should. An interesting sermon on a Bible story, even with a scriptural call to faith and repentance, will be of little help to people who do not know there is a God to whom they are accountable. We cannot create faith in others, but by systematic person-to-person teaching we are more likely to find out where the problem lies.

When people are allowed to drift around the fringes of the church without receiving direct help with personal problems, they often become complacent. The day may come when they profess conversion, but by that time they may have developed the same passive attitude as was shown to them. This attitude is shown also with regard to baptism. It is sometimes said, 'We are hoping he will see the truth of baptism soon', sometimes after the person has been a Christian two or three years. Or there is the other statement, 'We think she is a Christian, but don't feel she is ready for baptism yet'. Surely, according to the New Testament, if people are Christians they are ready for baptism. But too often we fear they might 'go back' to their former way of life.

Most of our problems are self-created because of our lack of faith in God and his Word. The New Testament missionaries, it seems, did not sit back and wait to see if their converts 'went on' or 'went back'. With us, however, we give them reassuring Bible verses to teach them that they can never be lost, but then we hesitate to baptize them just in case they 'go back'! Some drop off simply through frustration and discouragement – to which our response is, 'Just as well we didn't baptize them'.

If we are to teach people assurance, we must show that we too have assurance. If converts are encouraged in the life of faith from the outset, they will mature more quickly and have greater joy and purpose in their Christian lives. Within the time they might otherwise have been waiting for baptism, they should have grown in character and developed spiritual gifts in the church. It is our job to *make* disciples.

Teach all things

Paul sent off his letters to the churches only a few months, at the most a few years, after he founded them. He did not look upon the new converts as babes for ever. He taught them not just elementary matters of behaviour, but the great truths of the Christian faith. His prayers show that he expected them to understand these things. When he met Christians who, after a year or so, were still spiritual babes, he did not pamper them but rebuked them (1 Cor 3:1-3). He did not hold back from teaching the whole purpose of God (Acts 20:27).

Sometimes we think that because converts do not have a history of Christian tradition behind them, they cannot understand the height and depth of Christian truth as well as we can. In thinking like this we are guilty of pride and folly. The absence of a Christian background may in fact be an asset, because new converts will read the Scriptures without the colouring of tradition that often influences us. At times our minds are so set in a certain mould that we cannot see the plain truth written on the page. New converts are indwelt by the same Spirit as indwells us, and he can be trusted to enlighten their minds.

Most people in New Testament times did not have the opportunity of higher education that people in many countries today have, but Paul still expected them to understand his letters. And they did so, apparently, without the luxury of each person having his or her printed copy to read. We deceive ourselves if we think that converts cannot understand God's Word solely because they live in circumstances that restrict their access to higher education.

Experience has shown that people lost in paganism and idolatry, once converted, readily understand the Bible and soon acquire a knowledge of Christian truth. Missionaries have been known to say things such as, 'You couldn't teach them that; they'd never understand it; it's far too hard for them', but such statements indicate either a lack of faith or a false sense of superiority. Even people with only a modest education can readily develop considerable ability and discernment, not just in

giving thoughts on selected verses, but in conducting expository studies on Bible books and doctrinal topics.

Keep evangelizing

In some places the missionary is considered to be the church's evangelist (sometimes its pastor and teacher as well), while the main responsibility of the local Christians is to attend church and support its activities. Even when local Christians are teaching Sunday School and conducting Bible studies, the outreach evangelism may still be seen as the missionary's job. But local converts are often keen to do evangelism, and therefore it is important to encourage and teach them.

This does not mean asking the local believers simply to give out tracts or lead the singing at an open-air meeting. The missionary and the local believers can do the same work of explaining to people the truths of the gospel; and a well taught local believer will usually do this better than a foreigner. Local believers have the added advantage of personal witness to the saving power of the gospel in their own cultural setting.

Therefore, we must constantly be teaching, so that the local believers know the Scriptures and know how to pass on the truth of those Scriptures to others. In spite of all the avenues of mass communication, the gospel has mostly been spread through the work of individual Christians. Personal contact is usually the chief element in the process of bringing people to Christ. Christians do not have to give up their secular jobs and become full-time evangelists. They can help in the work of evangelism wherever they are, but only if they themselves are confident in the message they are trying to teach others.

Think again

Starting a small self-propagating church may not appear to be of great significance when we think of the enormous task of global evangelization; but almost anything we do can seem insignificant in relation to global evangelization. The way to eat an elephant is one mouthful at a time; and the way to evangelize the world is one person at a time, one village at a time, one town

at a time. We may have overall strategies, but these should not blind us to the day-to-day details. The best of strategies will fail if we as people fail.

The challenge we face as missionaries is not to re-examine the New Testament missionary principles we already profess to believe, but to re-examine ourselves. We must think about whatever we do, especially if it is something we have been doing for a long time, because our practice may be far removed from our belief. Above all, we must have more confidence in the Spirit of God to work in his people and lead his church. Our urgent needs are for greater humility and greater faith.

From *CBRF Journal* (England, 1967)

Is this God's blessing?

The first half of Proverbs Chapter 3 is a much-loved part of the Bible for many Christians, especially its assurance of God's help in decision-making: 'In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths' (v. 6). But if we are to claim the promise in the second half of the statement, we must practise what is written in the first. The *whole life* must be lived for God. We must acknowledge him in everything we do.

A few sentences later (v. 9-10) the writer gives an example of acknowledging God in everything: 'Honour the Lord with the first part of your produce . . . and your barns will be filled with grain.' We are to give God the first part of our income – and notice it is the 'first part', not the leftovers.

The writer knows, however, that there is not always a simple explanation to our circumstances in life. Blessings do not always come in the form of prosperity. God may sometimes show his love by allowing us to experience difficulties, his purpose being to correct faults and improve character. In the next two verses (v. 11-12) he therefore gives a warning: 'Do not despise the Lord's discipline . . . for the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father corrects a son of whom he is proud'.

Economic prosperity and physical well-being are therefore not always signs of divine approval. Neither is wealth a sign of wisdom. Wisdom cannot be bought, and 'nothing you desire can compare with it' (v. 13-15).

These verses raise serious questions as we compare the comfort of some Christians with the suffering of others, and the affluence in some countries with the poverty in others. Perhaps we have an inadequate understanding of what constitutes God's blessing. We may be measuring by the wrong standard.

From *Daily Bread* (Australia, 1988)

Surveys, statistics and social science

Just about the surest way to establish credibility or prevent contradiction is to begin a statement by saying, 'Scientific studies have proved . . .' or 'A recent survey has shown . . .' But many of the issues where comments are introduced by such triumphant assertions are issues of human values or behaviour, where scientific methods cannot be properly applied and surveys are largely influenced by those who conduct them. In these matters, as in others, Christians must take to heart the words of Paul: 'Let no one delude you with beguiling speech' (Col 2:4).

'Blinded by science'

We have become accustomed to hearing about social science as if it is a physical or natural science whose 'findings' are as concrete and indisputable as those from a chemical laboratory. In reality this is not so. Natural scientists are concerned with investigating things objectively (e.g. the characteristics of blood, the force of gravity) and look for concrete evidence that can be physically proved or disproved. Moral judgments are not part of their scientific procedures (even though, like other people, they may hold opinions on what is or is not morally desirable).

Investigators of social issues are better called sociologists than scientists. Their 'findings' are essentially subjective, and cannot be subjected to laboratory tests as can those of a chemist or physicist. They therefore cannot be proved true or false. Also, whereas moral judgments are not part of a natural scientist's profession, they are the very reason for which social scientists exist. Their concern is not with what *can* be done, but with what *should* be done. They purport to uncover principles by which society or individuals should organize their behaviour.

A loss of confidence

One reason for today's increasing dependence upon social researchers is the lack of confidence that people now have in

their own judgments. The 'information explosion' has led them to believe that the answer to human problems lies in an abundance of information, and the way to gain access to that information is through modern technology – or rather through those who know how to use that technology. The sociologists become the guides of society not because they have better character or wider experience, but because they have access to more information. Their judgments, however, are still subjective and unprovable, but they are greeted by an uncertain public as objective and 'scientifically proved'.

Without faith in God, people are desperate for something tangible that they can cling to. Therefore, they grasp after what appears to them to be a foolproof resource that combines technology and science.

Much of the social researchers' work seems to revolve around counting numbers and asking questions. Although a scientist, like any other person, may also count numbers and ask questions, these activities do not in themselves make anyone a scientist. But in the 'information society', such activities and the conclusions researchers draw from them are elevated to the status of 'scientific fact', even though they are not capable of being subjected to scientific tests.

Manipulated by questions

There is nothing wrong with carrying out research into the behaviour of people. The danger is in accepting the conclusions of the researchers without looking at the questions upon whose answers the conclusions were based. For it can be easily demonstrated that a question on a particular subject can produce opposite answers, depending on how the question is framed. For example, a question about the desirability of accepting political refugees could produce opposite answers depending on whether the question was 'Do you think our country should be compassionate to people fleeing violent political oppression?' or 'Do you think it more important to accept political refugees than to deal with violence in our migrant ghettos?' Those who ask the questions are in a position to manipulate the result.

In fact, the whole idea of asking questions in such a form raises doubts about the usefulness of the exercise. Few issues can be satisfactorily dealt with by asking a question that requires a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer. Most issues are not clearcut, but need to be thought about at length. Although opinion polls are not geared for that sort of discussion, they are a common tool that today's information-gathering technology uses for the conduct of political and sociological research.

Furthermore, in the example given above, even the yes/no percentage results would lose their force if it was revealed that a quarter of the people polled did not know what political refugees were, another quarter knew what political refugees were but could name only one country from which we accepted them, and over ninety percent had never seen a migrant ghetto or known anyone who lived in one.

Christianity recognizes that there are issues that can be seen in black-and-white terms. Some things are right (e.g. being kind, telling the truth), others are wrong (e.g. being brutal, telling lies), and a special judgment is announced upon those who obscure or remove such differences by calling evil good and good evil (Isa 5:20; Rom 1:25). But other things are not so easily categorized as right or wrong (e.g. one's standard of housing or tastes in music) and in such cases maturity comes through exercising judgment in determining what is fitting and what is not.

God wants his people to have the maturity of adults, not the immaturity of children, but this maturity will come only as they know God and his Word better, and then use that knowledge to mould their opinions and behaviour (1 Cor 14:20; Eph 4:14). It will not come as they allow themselves to be manipulated by those who reduce social values to a set of statistics.

How do we make judgments?

Whether or not people want to reduce personal opinions to a statistical symbol, society is virtually demanding that they do so. The notion of technological infallibility has become so widespread that almost all judgments, opinions or propositions must be supported by computer-generated data if they are to have

credibility. Otherwise, they will be treated as ‘subjective’ and therefore inadmissible.

This rejection of subjective judgments means that traditional values of morality are no longer acceptable as standards. Suggested patterns of behaviour are acceptable only if they are the product of ‘scientific research’. We have known for generations that a good home environment helps children to be better behaved at school, but such knowledge is now dismissed as mere moralizing – until the television news reader announces that ‘a recent scientific survey has shown’ that children from a home where the parents habitually quarrel are more likely to have behavioural problems at school than those from a home where the parents do not quarrel. The judgment is now acceptable, because it is ‘factual’, ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’.

The results of this might be summarized as twofold. First, traditional morality is replaced by whatever practice the social researchers can justify. The teachings of the Bible may not be valid, but the submissions of sociologists are. Second, people must be able to produce reports from social researchers to uphold their case in a legal dispute, because these reports are ‘objective’ assessments that a tribunal can recognize. To argue about what is morally right or wrong is useless; the case must be supported by ‘scientific’ surveys, intelligence tests, aptitude tests, psychological tests, lie detector tests, statistical analyses or any other data that can be presented on a computer printout.

Technology’s stranglehold

One area of everyday life where this reliance on technological data is obvious is that of doctors dealing with their patients. In times past doctors carried out their work largely through talking with their patients and looking at their bodies. Technology brought beneficial advances that made many things possible that were not possible before, but with it came the specialization that technology makes inevitable – for the wealth of information in the technological era is always greater than any one person can absorb. As a result some specialist doctors (such as pathologists and radiologists) have no face-to-face contact

with patients, do not talk to them, and look at only bits of them (such as blood samples) or photos of them (such as x-rays). They rely less on subjective assessments and more on objective evidence; less on what their patients tell them and more on what their equipment tells them.

The old way of dealing with patients was not perfect, but neither is the new. The concern of our illustration, however, is not with the methods doctors use but with the requirements laid upon them because of society's unquestioning submission to technology.

Even if doctors have faith in their own judgments, they may still feel the need to use the technological procedures available to them; otherwise they will lack the required scientific evidence should an unsatisfied patient sue them in court. Patients use technology to attack doctors, and doctors use technology to defend themselves against patients. Not only does technology affect the relation between doctors and patients, but both parties rely upon its objective data because it carries more weight with the courts. This in turn affects government legislation and the policies of insurance companies.

In the end large areas of medical care, like most other areas of modern society, are subjected to the dominating power of technology – a state of affairs to which social critic Neil Postman has given the name 'technopoly'. Postman's word is not likely to become part of the English vocabulary, but his book of the same name has brought into focus many of the formerly vague ideas presented in this article. Western culture has surrendered to technology. Our society has changed from one that uses technology to one that is shaped by it.

Experts are not always experts

The sort of specialization we have referred to in relation to medical technology is spread right across modern society. But if people are specialists in one area, it follows that they are probably not specialists in others. Moreover, there are many areas where people cannot be technological specialists, because such areas are outside the realm of technology (e.g. religious

beliefs, parenting, a love for old paintings). But the modern fascination with computer data makes people think that consultation with a specialist will solve their problems. Everything depends, however, on the nature of the problem and the nature of the specialist.

A civil engineer and a marriage counsellor, let us say, are both specialists and both deal with problems, but their uses of technology in dealing with problems are not equally objective. Both may have used modern information-gathering technologies to assemble lots of relevant data, but that does not mean that the data itself is technical. In the case of the civil engineer it may be, but in the case of the marriage counsellor it is not. The difference is similar to that between the natural scientist and the 'social scientist' that we have considered above.

But whatever expertise the civil engineer and the marriage counsellor may have in their professional specialities, neither may have any workable knowledge on such subjects as history, religion, philosophy or education. We would not expect those issues to affect the advice of the civil engineer, but they could be at the heart of the problem addressed by the marriage counsellor. Yet people tend to accept the 'expertise' ('professional advice') of both specialists as being equally valid. The technological society gives sociologists an authority in religious, social and moral affairs that they are not entitled to.

Christian confidence

For Christians, the concern is not merely that technology cannot determine good and evil, but that it has no notion of good and evil. Moral and spiritual values cannot be measured, and therefore they cannot be incorporated into the data framework that information-gathering technologies require.

Anyone can see that things in society are not as they should be. But since moral judgments are no longer admissible ('we should not be judgmental'), wrong behaviour escapes condemnation. Instead of being condemned as sin, it is classified as a statistic in relation to other statistics. Instead of people being held responsible for their actions, the problem is related to a

medical condition, hereditary factors, the social environment, or some other 'cause' where statistics can be obtained and then processed electronically.

Christians have long been known as people who face up to the issue of personal responsibility. They know that all human beings have sinned, all are answerable to God for their actions, and there is no escape by blaming environment or upbringing (Rom 3:23; Gal 6:4-5; Rev 20:12). But while holding this belief in theory, they sometimes show little confidence in practice. The apparently unlimited capability of modern technology is able to produce data that looks overwhelming when compared with their limited knowledge.

There is an urgent need for Christians to remind themselves that statistics are no substitute for moral values, sociology is no substitute for biblical knowledge, and a piece of electronic equipment is no substitute for personal relations. Christians may be appreciative of modern technology because of the benefits it has brought, but they ought not allow it to usurp the place of their own judgments.

At the beginning of this article we saw how Paul warned Christians not to be deluded by beguiling speech. Earlier he prayed that those same people would 'be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding', so that they could face life's decisions confidently and so please God in the way they lived. But this increased wisdom was inseparable from 'growth in the knowledge of God' (Col 1:9-10). In the end, the confidence of Christians is dependent on how well they know God. The matter is not primarily one of information, but one of understanding; not data, but a relationship.

From *Links* (Australia, 1998)

Thinking about writing

The advice often given to those who would like to do some Christian writing is 'Don't write unless you have to.' This advice is only partly valid. Writers should not write merely because they would like to see something from themselves in print; but they should write even if their writing never gets into print. Writing clarifies thinking, makes people more exact in their expression, and records their studies and reflections. Whether the writing will be useful for others is another matter.

A common misunderstanding is that writers are people who have such a passion for writing that they can hardly resist the urge to put pen to paper. For most writers this is far from the truth. They usually have to force themselves to put other matters aside and sit down to do some work. If they wait till they have the right mood, most might never write. They must have a disciplined program, which may mean setting aside certain hours per day or week. A deadline may also be useful.

The people who write

Whatever kind of writing people attempt, they themselves must have a love for words and a love to communicate. They should be interested in language and how it conveys ideas, but they should also be interested in people and how they respond to ideas. Whether they inform, instruct or persuade, they should want others to understand and benefit from what they themselves have learnt.

This means that writers should be careful not to separate themselves from the affairs of daily life, whether by spending most of their time in an office or by living in an isolated retreat. They must be aware of the issues that concern people in the real world – issues of work, family, sex, money, health, education, politics, the environment and so on. Ideas do not just drop into writers' minds. Their material does not come through flashes of

heavenly inspiration; it comes mostly through lots of hard study as they read widely in their subject, look sensitively yet critically at society and interact with a range of people, Christian and non-Christian.

Christian writers should have an appreciation of the past, an up-to-date view of the present and a vision for the future. They must remember that people's lives are rooted in history, and this affects their current attitudes. But people cannot remain in the past; they must adapt, and that means accepting new ideas. The new ideas should not be those of the passing fad, but those that help set a course for a better future. Christian writers should therefore have a deep love for God and his Word. Their values will come from the Bible. There they will see how Christian faith is grounded in history, yet relevant in all circumstances and directed towards the goal God has for humankind.

Being a Christian writer does not mean being chiefly concerned with biblical or theological expositions. For some it will mean writing on a range of general topics but from a Christian point of view. In such cases it is important that the writers themselves have a good biblical knowledge, otherwise they could be merely repeating non-Christian values. Their writing might have a Christian flavour, but if their biblical knowledge is poor their writing could be damaging.

Because of their interest in words, writers should be regular users of a variety of dictionaries and at least one good thesaurus. They should also refer regularly to books about the usage of words and the mechanics of writing. Among the oldest and best of these is Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, but many others are available. As writers become more aware of the characteristics of good and bad writing, they will find themselves looking more critically at everything they read, and their own writing will benefit.

The people who read

Although writers usually write about things that are of interest to them, they must make sure that those things are also of interest to their audience. If they are interested only in writing

for the sake of writing, they will not enjoy much success, because they have nothing to say. They must write because they have something to talk about, and they believe it will interest or help others.

Writers should therefore write with a certain kind of people in mind, though at the same time they must be flexible. Their readers will come from different social, religious, educational, racial and language backgrounds. But if the writing is readable, helpful and attractively presented, people will read it.

No matter who the audience may be, writers must look for a point of contact so that they can communicate in a way that can lead their readers on. Having gained their readers' attention, however, they must be careful not to present their material in a way designed chiefly to win their readers' approval. If writers are challenging people to change, they must set out their material so that readers see the conflict with existing ideas. In Christian writing in particular, there is a danger that readers may simply add a Christian belief to some existing belief, instead of getting rid of the old and replacing it with something new. When people use Christian teaching to endorse unchristian attitudes, ideas or practices, their condition becomes worse.

The people who publish

If writers want to see their material available to the wider world, they must have someone to publish it. The first step may be to approach a local church magazine, or write letters to newspaper or magazine editors. No magazine accepts all the material submitted to it, and some do not accept unsolicited material at all. Writers should not be discouraged if articles are rejected, but should treat all their writing as a learning experience. This applies also to the adjustments and changes that an editor might suggest. Writers should look upon editors as partners and learn from them how to improve their writing.

Editors look for writing that is fresh, relevant, concise and readable. They reject articles that only say what other writers have said better. Nevertheless, they are always looking for new writers.

Manuscripts submitted to publishers should be clearly typed on A4 paper (single-sided) with double line-spacing and wide margins all round. Writers should send a covering letter giving home address, relevant personal details and the approximate number of words in the article or book. In the case of a book, they should also give a one-page summary of the entire book and a chapter-by-chapter summary in two or three pages.

Those who want rejected manuscripts returned should enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. They should allow the editor at least a month to assess the article or book before they check to see whether it is likely to be published. Acceptance means that authors must then discuss and possibly negotiate copyrights and other contractual matters with the publisher.

Rejected writings do not mean wasted effort, because the writers themselves have benefited from the work they have done. Writing is a process of learning, correction and improvement. It is, in a way, comparable to learning to play a musical instrument; meaning that the only way to learn to write is by writing. There may be an underlying gift, but the skills have to be learnt and developed.

From *Light of Life* (India, 1997)

Writing that will be read

The previous chapter looked at issues to be considered by those who want to do some Christian writing. This chapter looks at a number of practical matters they should bear in mind as they write. For although any writing is useful in helping to clarify one's thinking, more is required if people want others to read and understand their writings.

Communicating with the reader

As people write they should put themselves in the position of the reader. It is often a good idea to imagine each sentence read aloud or spoken to see how it sounds. It is also a good idea for writers to get into the habit of writing simply and clearly from the moment they begin an article or book. They should resist the temptation to write carelessly and rewrite later. The discipline will save time and improve their ability to express themselves concisely.

Writers must also express themselves grammatically. If they have not been taught grammar at school, they should make use of whatever books or courses are available. They are not likely to become good writers if they are not familiar with the basic parts of speech (nouns, verbs, etc.), sentence structures (phrases, clauses, etc.) and stylistic features of written language (spelling, punctuation, etc.).

Some writers like to express themselves eloquently with long or unusual words, but if their readers do not understand them, they have failed to communicate. They have been talking to themselves. Their constant aim must be to express themselves simply and clearly, so that even readers who are unfamiliar with the subject can understand them. If they cannot express themselves in such a way, they probably do not understand the subject clearly. They must work hard at eliminating jargon and ensuring that even the common words they use have the same meaning for

the reader. They can do this by asking themselves constantly whether a non-Christian friend would understand what they are writing.

Easy to read

To write simply does not mean to lower the standard of language. Simple language means easy language, not childish language. Writers should not patronize or 'talk down' to their readers, nor should they use language that is rough or ungrammatical.

In most cases it is advisable to avoid long or difficult words, and writers can do this by finding shorter or easier words (e.g. 'try' rather than 'endeavour', 'happen' rather than 'eventuate'). Other times they may have to think of a different way to write the sentence. But too many short words, particularly prepositions, become untidy and might well be replaced by one or two longer words (e.g. 'put up with' replaced by 'tolerate', 'keep out of his way' replaced by 'avoid him'). It may be worthwhile to include an occasional longer word, provided it has a positive use and is not just for show, as it will help readers to increase their vocabulary.

Most readers have trouble with foreign words or phrases. Writers should therefore look for ways of expressing themselves within the limits of whatever language they are using. If writing in English, for example, instead of using the foreign expression *inter alia* they should use the English 'among other things'; instead of using *corpus* they should use 'body'. Everyday words are preferable to words that have a literary flavour because of their Latin or Greek origins (e.g. prefer 'dog' to 'canine', prefer 'peaceful' to 'irenic'). In many cases a straight substitution may not be enough, and the alternative word will require a rewriting of the sentence.

Another help towards easier reading is to write directly rather than indirectly, to use concrete words or phrases rather than abstract. It is better to write 'Christ's followers must speak the truth' than 'Truth is a necessary attribute in those who follow Christ'.

Active voice is usually more direct and forceful than passive voice (e.g. 'The church should deal with these matters promptly' rather than 'These matters should be dealt with promptly by the church'). Statements are usually expressed better in the positive form than the negative (e.g. 'We should help the poor' rather than 'We should not be indifferent to the poor').

Long subjects should be avoided, especially when the verb of a sub-clause comes before the verb of the main sentence. This again means rethinking and rewriting the sentence (e.g. instead of writing 'Those who say they love God but do not obey him are deceiving themselves', write 'If people say they love God but do not obey him, they are deceiving themselves'). If the sentence involves a time sequence, it will be easier to follow if the clauses or phrases are in the same sequence as the actions they refer to (e.g. 'When Jesus saw the man's faith, he healed the child' rather than 'Jesus healed the child when he saw the man's faith').

One peculiarity of English is that it has a gender-inclusive pronoun for the third person plural ('they') but not for the singular (only the masculine 'he' and the feminine 'she'). This creates problems, which are increased by the various usages of the word 'man'. Writers must give special attention to this matter (e.g. instead of 'God desires that men might know him and walk in his ways', write 'God desires that people might know him and walk in his ways'). With the singular 'man' or 'person', the problem can sometimes be avoided by using a plural instead (e.g. instead of 'If a person says he loves God, he will obey his commandments', write 'If people say they love God, they will obey his commandments').

Easy to follow

As they organize their material, writers may have to remove certain things they would like to say, or create another section or chapter to say them. This will avoid digressing or having too many sub-clauses and sub-phrases in a sentence. Material should be arranged as neatly as possible, so that each sentence leads to the next and each paragraph relates to what follows, without repetition or unnecessary expansion.

Long sentences should be avoided wherever possible, though there should be variety in the lengths of adjoining sentences. Writers should pay attention to the opening words of sentences to avoid a sequence of sentences beginning with the same word (except in cases where this is used for special effect). The same considerations apply to adjoining paragraphs.

Sub-headings are important. They not only introduce readers to what follows, but they break up the page so that readers are attracted by the page layout. Most people are discouraged from reading when they see large unbroken slabs of print.

Opening and closing paragraphs require special attention and may need rewriting several times as the article develops. The opening paragraph must be sufficiently arresting to stop readers from skipping over it, but it must not be so arresting that the rest of the article looks colourless by comparison. Similarly the closing paragraph must leave readers thinking about what they have read, but its tone must not be so triumphant that they feel they have just been conquered.

Self-editing

It is a good idea for writers to come back after several days or weeks and re-read what they have written. A fresh look may alert them to details that need adjustment. Once satisfied that the material is in the form and sequence they want, they should then inflict some severe editing upon themselves.

Firstly, they should recheck any data they have quoted to ensure it is correct. This will include all statistics, quotations and references. They should anticipate objections from those who do not share their viewpoint and see that they have adequately considered alternative views. Writers should remember that unless they are famous, people in general are not interested in their views or speculations. But if they have built their material around statements of fact that can be tested, readers are more likely to give attention to what they have written.

Secondly, writers must do to their writing what a good editor is likely to do to it, and that is go through it carefully and cut

out all unnecessary words. They will find they can eliminate words that lengthen a sentence but often add nothing (e.g. 'very', 'great', 'both', 'real'). Sometimes two words in different parts of the sentence say the same thing (e.g. 'back' and 'again'); others have their meaning contained elsewhere (e.g. 'or not' after 'whether'). Untidy or clumsy words can be deleted or changed (e.g. not 'one of the reasons why', but 'one reason why'; not 'we will be joining', but 'we will join').

Words such as 'of' and 'that' can often be omitted (e.g. not 'half of the world is poor', but 'half the world is poor'; not 'he said that he would go', but 'he said he would go'). A strong verb is better than a weak verb with an adverb (e.g. not 'he said emphatically', but 'he emphasized').

Before typing the final manuscript, writers should have their material checked by others, preferably people who have seen little or nothing of the work during its preparation. These should include at least one person capable of assessing the material theologically, and at least one person capable of assessing it for grammar, style and structure. When the final manuscript is typed, it should be checked by someone mainly for typographical or presentation errors. After corrections, the manuscript can be submitted to the publisher. And writers can take heart that if the publisher is convinced of its worth, others will surely benefit from it.

From *Light of Life* (India, 1997)

Dialogue and fisticuffs

Why is it that many people, Christians among them, cannot discuss a matter reasonably or rationally? What is it that drives them to see issues as offering only two options, totally for or totally against? Why can they see no shades or colours, only black and white?

Perhaps the reason is a lack of confidence in their knowledge of the subject; perhaps it is just laziness. After all, most people find it easier to retreat into the reassuring fortress of their own opinions, where they feel safe and comfortable. But whatever the reason, it dulls people's minds, blunts their discernment, blinds them to the truth, and results in an immature, ill-informed public.

Many Christians are afraid of openness. They know how to behave in the right way and say the right things, but they are careful not to reveal what is hidden within. They never volunteer an opinion until someone else has led the way. They never air their doubts, in case others think them unspiritual or, horror of horrors, unorthodox. Christians are supposed to stand for what is just and true regardless of the opinions of others, but in many ways they are the most conformist of all. Some take pride in being different from the world, but in their own subculture they are conformist in almost every detail.

Christians are not alone in this attitude. Many people are insecure outside the familiar routine and jargon of their own set. Because they have never learnt how to discuss issues honestly or intelligently, they feel self-conscious and threatened in open discussion. Though ill-equipped to talk about issues, they are well equipped to talk about personalities; and because everyone has a weakness somewhere, discussion soon turns to accusation. Constructive dialogue is replaced by verbal fisticuffs.

One would think we might be ashamed of this, but often the opposite is the case. Television interviewers, instead of trying to

clarify complex issues, prefer a childish presentation where everything can be reduced to a simple yes-or-no proposition. Instead of trying to learn something from those being interviewed, journalists try to gain some sort of victory over them. Instead of encouraging intelligent dialogue, they try to show people up as humbugs or hypocrites.

With a nightly TV diet of this sort of thing, is it any wonder that people see those who are abusive as heroic, and those who are reasonable as weak? What hope is there for different political viewpoints to get intelligent consideration? What chances do the cases for employer and employee have of getting a fair hearing via the media? People want to see a fight, a scrap, a brawl. Sport is their main interest; they want winners and losers. Did you see how so-and-so clobbered so-and-so on the TV last night?

Instead of trying above all for victory, why not try first of all for truth? Instead of wanting to rush in and attack, why not try to understand the issues involved? The Bible warns against being like a horse or a mule, which, with its blinkers and bridle, is safe and secure, but is a dumb animal nonetheless (Ps 32:9).

God wants his people to have understanding, so that they are equipped to handle life's debates and controversies. In a society where the least informed are often the most outspoken, the person who thinks carefully and rationally is less likely to get a hearing, but he is more likely to get closer to the truth. And God is concerned for truth.

From *Links* (Australia, 1987)

Truly, this was a righteous man

The soldiers of an execution squad must have been a hardened lot. They had no doubt crucified people many times, and were largely indifferent to the suffering of their helpless victims. Even while the person on the cross was still conscious and could see what they were doing, they would heartlessly divide his few remaining clothes among themselves. But the centurion in charge of the execution squad that dealt with Jesus saw that this man was different. 'Truly', he said, 'this was a righteous man.'

Many people witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus, and their recorded comments show a remarkable similarity. Some of the onlookers challenged him that if he was the Son of God, able to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, he should give proof of the fact by saving himself and coming down from the cross (Matt 27:39-40). The chief priests, who were feeling triumphant at last and had come to Golgotha to see their sentence carried out, mocked him in much the same way: 'He saved others, but cannot save himself! He claimed to be the king of Israel; let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. He claimed to be the Son of God; let God deliver him now' (Matt 27:41-43).

The robbers who were crucified with Jesus mocked him in similar fashion (Matt 27:44), their bitterness being motivated by the frustration of seeing this reputed miracle-worker as helpless as themselves. 'Aren't you supposed to be the Messiah? If so, save yourself and us!' (Luke 23:39).

But the way Jesus bore the insults and suffering changed the view of one of those robbers, bringing the assurance that he would share life with Jesus in Paradise (Luke 23:40-43). It also changed the view of the centurion. Jesus' Jewish opponents had said that if he was the Son of God he should save himself. As things turned out, he did not save himself, yet the centurion's

response was, 'Truly, this was the Son of God!' (Matt 27:54). While others saw Jesus' death as proof that he was *not* the Son of God, the centurion saw it as proof that he *was*!

The reported words of the centurion vary in different Gospels and different translations. In Matthew his confession is that Jesus was the Son of God, and in Luke that he was a righteous man (NIV), an innocent man (RSV), a good man (GNB). The centurion had seen something unique in the way Jesus had died. He had heard Jesus' final words, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit', and had witnessed the earthquake that immediately followed. He was, we are told, 'filled with awe' when he made his memorable confession (Matt 27:54 Luke 23:46-47).

Just as we see more in the chief priests' words than they themselves intended (for if Jesus was to save others, he could not save himself; Matt 27:42), so we see more in the centurion's confession than he himself was aware of. He was not making a theological statement – at least not in the sense of one who studies New Testament theology – but confessing his belief that the person who had just been crucified was unique. Jesus was a righteous man, and he had the right to call God his Father.

The centurion had probably never thought about a philosophical definition of 'goodness', nor did he have a theological definition of 'righteousness', but he recognized goodness and righteousness when he saw them displayed in Jesus Christ.

And is not that consistent with the way God often presents truth? He presents it not in the form of abstract ideals, but in the form of a person. The Word becomes flesh. We may search for correct theological expressions, but unless we know what it is to contemplate the Lord Jesus, we shall never know God as he should be known.

From *Aim* (India, 1998)

Spiritual gifts in the church

Spiritual abilities, or gifts, are many and varied, and widely scattered. But the Bible gives no complete catalogue of gifts and no formula to determine their distribution and use. In view of the multi-national composition of the universal church and the great variety in local churches, this is hardly surprising.

New Testament writers give lists of gifts in several places (Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10,27-31; Eph 4:11-16; 1 Peter 4:9-11), but make no attempt to be exhaustive. Their selections seem to be random, made chiefly to illustrate a point, and present us with much variety, even surprise.

How are the gifts distributed?

Our observation of people and churches confirms the Bible's broad view of the sorts of gifts God has distributed throughout the church. We can be sure that God gives these gifts according to his will (1 Cor 12:11) and wants people to use them to build up his church (1 Cor 12:7), but we must not expect all the gifts to be found in every church. In some cases the size of the church would itself make this impossible.

Another factor that affects the use of gifts in a church is the presence in one district of several churches, all of which may seek to function as Christ's church in that district. But none of them is *the* local church to the exclusion of all others. No church could seriously assert that it contained all the Christians and the others none, or that it had all the gifts and the others none.

Not every church can do everything, but by examining the gifts it has or has not, it can learn which ministries it can develop and which require help from outside. The Bible shows that, whereas some people exercise their gifts mainly in a local ministry (e.g. Acts 20:28-32; Col 4:12-13), others do so over a wider area, spending longer or shorter periods in various churches (e.g. Acts 11:25-26; 20:31; 3 John 5-8).

How are the gifts recognized?

Whatever need may exist for help from outside, this should not be an excuse for evading the responsibility to develop gift within the local church itself. There may be more latent gift than people think. Unfortunately, some are more readily impressed by gift that is imported than by gift that is home-grown. On the other hand, if a church recognizes that it lacks certain gifts and needs help, it should not feel that this in itself is a cause for shame or a sign of inferiority (1 Cor 12:15,17).

Local church leaders should be on the lookout constantly for any sign of gift they can help develop (2 Tim 2:2). But, human nature being what it is, jealousy can arise when one person sees another as a threat to his or her position (1 Cor 12:21). There is also the problem of church leaders not being able to recognize gift when they see it, perhaps because they are not equipped for the responsibilities required by the position they hold.

Christians should desire spiritual gifts (1 Cor 14:1) and pray for them (1 Cor 14:13), especially the higher gifts (1 Cor 12:31). Church leaders should not only be searching and praying for the emergence of gift in the church, but should also be encouraging the believers to search and pray likewise. They should desire the whole body to be built up as believers discover and use the gifts God has given them. This may mean that some of the church's structures and operations will need to be altered to accommodate the renewed exercise of gift, but that will be no problem where leaders are concerned for the church's spiritual health.

The ability to recognize gift includes the ability to discern between what is real and what is not. Counterfeits may arise, and even people with good intentions may be wrong (1 Cor 12:1-3; 1 Tim 1:7; 2 Peter 2:1). Without discernment, the recognition and use of gifts will be misguided (1 Thess 5:21; 1 John 4:1).

How are the gifts developed?

The best way to develop spiritual gifts is to use them (Rom 12:6). If a church is serious in wanting to develop its gifts, the leaders should take the initiative by giving opportunities to

people to discover any latent gifts they might have. More than that, they should teach, train and guide people to get some know-how in using their gifts (Acts 13:5; 16:1-3; 2 Tim 2:2). If there is love for one another within the body of Christ, people will be tolerant and persevering when others make mistakes or do not fulfil expectations (1 Cor 12:26).

Although the development of any gift will require hard work, people should always bear in mind that it is *spiritual* gift. While Christians must spare no effort in trying for technical excellence in whatever ministries they attempt (1 Tim 4:15), they should also realize that ability in performance cannot be separated from godliness in everyday life (1 Tim 4:16).

The Bible does not encourage Christians to think that the Holy Spirit will work through them regardless of their own effort and discipline (1 Cor 14:32; Gal 5:16-26). At the same time, effort and discipline are not in themselves enough to do God's work. Spiritual functions can be properly carried out only by the work of the Spirit of God within (1 Cor 2:12-13).

Any development of spiritual gifts should be within whatever guidelines the Bible gives (1 Cor 14:27-31). In using their gifts, Christians should be submissive to each other (1 Cor 12:25; 1 Peter 5:5) and specifically to the church leaders (Heb 13:17). Their aim should be to build up the church as a whole (1 Cor 14:5,26), because gifts are given to benefit the entire body, not to satisfy the personal ambition of those who practise them (1 Cor 12:7; James 3:16; 1 Peter 4:10).

Without the exercise of love, the exercise of spiritual gifts can be harmful. That is why the development of gifts must be accompanied by a corresponding development in love (1 Cor 13:1-3; 14:1). The gifts, being limited to service in the present life, are temporary and imperfect. But love is permanent. It will outlast the gifts and endure into the life to come (1 Cor 13:8-10).

From *Outreach* (Australia, 1982)

Keeping your word

Upon entering Canaan under Joshua, the Israelites were supposed to destroy all the indigenous Canaanite people. But the people of Gibeon and three other towns tricked the Israelites into believing they were from a distant land and were not Canaanites at all. As a result Joshua and his fellow leaders promised not to destroy them (Josh 9:19). When the Israelites learnt they had been tricked, they felt justified in cancelling their promise and wiping out the Gibeonites. Joshua and the other leaders refused. They had given the Gibeonites their word, and they would not go back on it.

One mark of true believers is that they keep their word even when it is to their disadvantage. The psalmist says that those who may enter the presence of God are those who do what they have promised, no matter how much it may cost. Having given their word, they keep it, in spite of unforeseen circumstances that later make things unpleasant for them (Ps 15:4). The Israelite leaders might have felt fools for being so easily deceived, but a second mistake would not have corrected the first. To do right may sometimes be embarrassing as well as inconvenient.

Although this attitude of the Israelites pleased God, it did not guarantee them a smooth path ahead. Rather the opposite; their troubles increased. Leaders of neighbouring Canaanite towns saw the agreement between the Gibeonites and the Israelites as an alliance that threatened their own security. They therefore decided to do what the Israelites would not, namely, wipe out Gibeon, and so strengthen their security (and at the same time weaken Israel's). The threatened Gibeonites sent off an urgent message to Joshua to come and rescue them.

Joshua's refusal to desert the Gibeonites led to increased danger, and he now faced his toughest battle to date. But while

God does not shield the upright from difficulties, neither does he leave them to struggle on alone. He therefore gave Joshua special encouragement and strength to face the crisis ahead. 'Do not fear them. I have given them into your hands' (Josh 10:8). God then intervened with dramatic changes in the weather that proved helpful to Israel but fatal to the enemy. In the end Israel had an astonishing victory (Josh 10:11-14).

Joshua and his fellow leaders, by remaining true to their word, saw God working in ways that they would never have experienced had they destroyed the Gibeonites for their trickery. We shall always learn more of God through doing what is right than through doing what is merely expedient.

From *Daily Bread* (Australia, 1987)

Israel's mission to the world

When God formally established Israel as his people at Sinai, he indicated that he had missionary purposes in view. 'All the earth is mine,' he declared, 'and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod 19:5-6). One reason for his choosing the people of Israel to be his 'own possession among all peoples' was that they might, as priests, be intermediaries between him and the world. From one side they were to make God known to the world, and from the other they were to bring the world to him. This article looks at how Old Testament Israel responded to its mission.

Broader vision – when it suits

The people of Israel gladly accepted the noble ideals that God set out for them, but that was about as far as they got. They may have referred to them on those occasions of national celebration when they expressed their aspirations with gusto, but in practice they did little. As with us at times, their expressions of fervour did little more than make them feel good. The words from God that they liked best were those about being his 'own possession'; they were not so keen on those words that spelt out the obligations this placed upon them. After all, *they* were on the right side of God; as for the rest, they were idolatrous, immoral, greedy, proud, violent, and deserved God's judgment anyway.

In spite of this often contemptuous attitude to other nations, the Israelites readily copied those nations when they saw benefits available for themselves. For example, after repeated conquest by foreigners during the time of the judges, they concluded that the foreigners' form of government was better and decided to adopt it. They changed their own form of government to a centralized monarchy, but their reasons were entirely selfish. They wanted security among the nations, but had little thought about their service for God to those nations.

During the time of David, however, Israel expressed a more expansive spirit towards other nations. Significantly, this was a period of Israelite dominance; the nation could afford to show an expansive spirit! When psalms were sung on great national occasions, Israelites expressed the desire that people worldwide come to know the only true God; but as a rule this knowledge was seen as something people were forced to accept through military conquest, not persuaded to believe through a genuine witness to God's grace. But at least the psalms showed a concern that God's saving power be known throughout the earth, that all people praise the Lord and that the nations be glad and sing for joy (Ps 2:8,11; 67:1-7).

At the dedication of the temple, Solomon again demonstrated a concern that people outside Israel might know and worship God. He asked that when foreigners came from far countries and prayed towards the temple, God would hear their prayers (1 Kings 8:41-43). This showed commendable unselfishness in relation to Israel's temple, but underlying it was the assumption that the nations must come to Israel. Israel would not go to them.

Self-interest, the fatal policy

Whatever higher thoughts Israel's leaders may at times have had, narrow-minded nationalism was just as much a problem for God's people then as it is today. The well-known story of the prophet Jonah shows how some people would rather see unfriendly nations get their just deserts than be recipients of the grace of God (Jonah 4:1-2,11).

Other prophets were closer to the heart of God. Amos, for example, knew that Israel's special status in being God's chosen nation carried with it greater responsibility and therefore greater judgment when it failed. 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities' (Amos 3:2). The Israelites thought that because God had brought them from Egypt to Canaan, they would never be driven into captivity. Amos reminded them that God had overseen the migration of other nations besides Israel. God had a

wider view of the world, and would not guarantee the safety of a nation that had rejected him (Amos 9:7-8).

Israel was reaching the stage where inevitably it would reap the fruit of its indifference to the spiritual plight of the nations around it. It had failed as God's witness to the nations, and now those nations would be God's instrument to punish it. God would allow them to destroy Israel, northern and southern kingdoms alike, and take the people into captivity. The prophet Habakkuk, for one, had difficulty accepting this, but God assured him it would happen (Hab 1:5-6,13).

Servants, good and bad

God's purpose was that Israel be his servant – 'Israel, my servant . . . I have chosen you' (Isa 41:8-9) – but Israel proved to be a useless servant – 'Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as the servant of the Lord?' (Isa 42:19). As a result Israel was destroyed and the people taken off into foreign captivity.

That, however, was not the end of the story. Not every person within Israel was useless, for a minority remained faithful to God. These were God's true people, and through them he continued to work – not just so that they could preserve Israel's national identity, but more importantly so that they could do what Israel till then had not done, namely, make his salvation known to the nations. 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth' (Isa 49:6). The evangelistic heart of God still yearned to see his people reach out to the nations.

Fresh start, old habits

After their foreign captivity, the Israelites returned to their homeland full of noble ambitions for the reconstruction of their nation on a proper religious footing. But once they were safely settled, they showed no more enthusiasm for enlightening the nations than had their ancestors. On occasions they had visions

for something bigger, such as in the visions of Daniel, but the emphasis was on the might of the king and the strength of the kingdom rather than on the responsibility of the people to make God known.

Daniel looked forward to the coming of one who would receive from the Ancient of Days a worldwide kingdom, where people of all nations and languages would serve God's appointed king (Dan 7:14). Malachi looked forward to the appearance of a messenger who would announce the coming of the Lord (Mal 3:1). But among people in general the expectation was confined largely to national blessing for Israel. Many were not merely indifferent to the notion of extending God's blessing to the Gentiles, but positively hostile to it.

Finally, the time arrived when God sent the one who, according to the divine plan, had made possible the worldwide salvation concerning which Israel was supposed to be God's witness. More than a thousand years had passed since the formal establishment of Israel to be God's 'kingdom of priests' to the nations, but the people had spread the message of his salvation little further than fifty kilometres east-west, and two hundred kilometres north-south. Worse than that, when the promised saviour arrived, they killed him.

God's people – or in name only?

As always, however, a minority of Israelites believed and these were God's true people. Jesus chose some of them for special training, so that Israel might yet become a centre for world evangelization (Matt 10:5-7; 28:19-20; Acts 1:8), but again Israel as a nation was a disappointment (Matt 21:42-43; 23:37) The missionaries of the early church set out with the same concern for Israel as expressed by Jesus – and met the same disappointment (Acts 13:46-47; 28:23-28). Nevertheless, the evangelism went on, and with great success, though not because of any national revival within Israel.

The people of Israel had for centuries been so busy telling themselves how blessed they were to be God's people that they had done nothing about helping those of *other* nations to

become God's people. But once people from those nations began to believe, they caught the vision for evangelism and Christianity spread vigorously. The non-Israelite nations became more Christian, while the Israelite nation became useless for God.

There seems to be a lesson in all this. The church in the West has many similarities to the Israel of biblical times. Instead of reaching out, it has become inward looking, enjoying what it sees as God-given privileges while neglecting the responsibilities God has entrusted to it. But at least an earlier generation took the gospel to the non-Christian nations, and now those nations are providing the vigour and thrust in world evangelization – just as the previously neglected Gentile nations did in New Testament times.

God will see his work done, though he may choose not to use those who at first seemed to be best fitted for it. Branches that do not bear fruit may be broken off and other branches grafted in instead, but God's tree will keep growing. It is the broken-off branches that will be the losers.

From *Tidings* (Australia, 1998)

Social worker or Bible teacher

A church that was looking for a full-time pastor/evangelist wrote to me and said they were thinking of a social worker rather than a Bible teacher. The correspondent was a sensible person and was possibly using a form of shorthand in specifying the two alternatives. But we must be careful not to become too clearcut in these alternatives.

Certainly, it would seem that if we are looking for a full-time worker to help the church grow, we should be looking for a person to work among the families in the community. In fact, we should probably be looking not for one person but for a married couple. Assuming the full-time worker is a male and does not have a large staff, he is restricted in the pastoral and evangelistic work he can do in the community unless he has a wife working with him as an equal.

The church's expressed preference for a 'social worker' rather than a 'Bible teacher' might have meant it was looking for someone to work 'out there in the community' rather than a person to stand up and preach in the pulpit each Sunday. In view of that particular church's circumstances, I would probably agree with their preference. But it ought also be noted that some of the most effective community workers (with regard to church work) are also good Bible teachers.

One can understand how some people have reservations about those who function in Christian organizations purely as social workers. One such person expressed envy of my wife because of the effective Christian ministry she had among needy families of the community – my wife could do 'spiritual' work, whereas the social worker could not! The problem is that people may be trained in social work but be biblically ill-equipped. As a result their work has virtually no spiritual content, and consequently no spiritual fruit. The same problem is evident at times among those who work in Christian aid agencies.

Without a firm biblical base, Christian humanitarian ventures inevitably adapt to the values of their secular environment, and Christian workers finish up in a spiritual desert. But biblically oriented pastor/evangelists, if they have a genuine concern for their work, should be good community workers. The apostle Paul, in Ephesians 4:11, saw an inseparable link between pastors and teachers – they must be pastors who teach and teachers who pastor. A parallel from my observations in various countries is that most good missionaries are also community aid workers, but community aid workers are not necessarily good missionaries.

We do well to be disturbed at the shift away from biblical evangelism in much church-based activity. At times one gets the impression that some Christians think that improving people's physical circumstances is the solution to society's problems. On the other hand, it seems that virtually all the churches that are growing are those where members have an energetic community involvement and a healthy social conscience. Instead of seeing Bible teaching and social work as separate and independent ministries, we should see that each needs the other if it is to be truly effective.

From *Tidings* (Australia, 1997)

Should church be entertaining?

Most things of social or cultural influence in America sooner or later have influence elsewhere. One of those influences is television, and its effects are felt in places such as Australia and New Zealand. We may not see the same amount of religious television here, but most of us have some idea of the style of the televangelists and the content of their programs. While we may not think that churches here are greatly influenced by the televangelists, the reality is that America's religious television is but a reflection of a wider church scene, and elements of that wider church scene are certainly reproduced here.

Television exists to entertain, and because of its dominance there is a general impression that other areas of communication and information should also be entertaining. This carries over into the church. It raises the question whether religion in general, and Christianity in particular, should also be entertaining.

In a manner of speaking

The modern era's revolution in communications has led us to expect that all media should be used to the fullest to promote the cause of Christ. In a sense that is true, and like Paul we should search for ways of adapting to our social environment so that we might bring people to Jesus Christ (1 Cor 9:20-23). But at the same time we should realize that not all forms of communication can be translated from one medium to another. For example, poetry can be converted into prose, but in the process it ceases to be poetry. Some of its meaning can be translated, but the thing that makes it poetry is lost. The form affects the message.

We have probably all experienced the frustration of writing a letter that someone has misunderstood through placing the emphasis on the wrong word. Something meant as a compliment can be interpreted as a criticism if the reader imagines a wrong attitude within the writer. Spoken words can appear to have

a different meaning when they are expressed in a different mode of communication such as writing. Again, the form affects the message. We may use every form of communication available, but not all will be equally useful for all messages.

Keeping the faithful amused

The primary purpose of television is to entertain, and therein lie its limitations in presenting a true picture of Christianity. Our concern is not that television presents entertaining material, but that *all material must be presented as entertainment*, which is a different matter. That is why television finds it difficult to have a serious discussion. It requires the presentation to be in a simple format that makes few demands on people's mental powers. The chief issues are performance and style, not ideas or reason.

Consciously or otherwise, churches tend to follow the lead of television in assessing what has public appeal. They look for the formula that gets results. They want good ratings. But when religion is presented as entertainment, the presenters will have great difficulty in conveying notions of what is profound or sacred. A medium of communication that wants to convert everything into visual images will inevitably be uncomfortable with the notion of a transcendent God.

We may be thankful that people have the opportunity to watch a religious program in the kitchen or bedroom, and that they can switch channels from trash to something better. But the other side of the coin is that they can just as easily trivialize religion by seeing it as no more than an alternative to the cheap shows that otherwise share their kitchen or bedroom viewing.

Ratings require popularity

Perhaps the biggest problem with the 'formula for success' kind of thinking is that the gospel is not the sort of message that is likely to attract widespread support. A message that demands turning from self and submitting to Christ will not be popular in a self-centred society. Maybe the only way the church can attract good numbers or its TV programs improve their ratings is by removing the more demanding aspects of the gospel. Popularity

comes through offering people what they want, preferably something material and especially something for nothing.

But Jesus made demands on people. It is hard to imagine citizens in our country flocking to him in response to his demand that the self-sufficient rich sell their possessions (Matt 19:16-22). He will not attract a huge following when people are told that he demands self-renunciation if they are to be his followers (Matt 16:24-25; Luke 14:33). In fact, Jesus refused to satisfy those who were looking simply for some form of entertainment (Mark 1:44; Luke 4:22-30; 23:8).

Jesus did not come to amuse people, and any form of communication that is based on amusement is unlikely to bring the sort of response Jesus aimed at. The occasional surge in Jesus' popularity was usually because people misunderstood what he was doing and saying. When he explained things more pointedly, many turned back from following him (John 6:15,26,66).

This may all sound a bit grim, as if Christianity should be presented as a joyless experience, where glum penitents cower before a stern master. Such would be a poor presentation of the gospel. Christ was the embodiment of joy and peace, and he gives these blessings to all who trust in him (John 10:10; 14:27; 16:22). But they receive his blessings only as they part with their selfish life for his sake. Christianity offers more than money can buy, but not in the style of a 'winner takes all' TV program. It addresses the issues of life, but does not trivialize them by smart advertising and the offer of slick solutions.

Fads and gimmicks

Promotion plays a key part in modern society. The logo, the slogan and the gimmick are so much part of the scene that the church is tempted to adopt them. Christianity, instead of being presented as a way of life to be taken seriously, is treated as if it is simply part of present-day culture, where fads rise seemingly out of nowhere, then within a few months or years disappear.

The basis of many present-day activities of the church is not theology, but gimmickry. Some church organizations have given

up trying to gain support through biblically based appeal, and have turned instead to the attention-catching gimmick. People no longer think about long-term commitment (or, for that matter, any commitment), because they want the option to engage in an activity only so long as it suits them.

How we see things

One irony of this state of affairs is that often the Christians who most loudly denounce the evils of TV are the ones whose church practices have been most influenced by it. They denounce the media's portrayal of violence and sex, but unconsciously absorb its obsession with amusement and self-centredness. Entertainment takes precedence over proclamation of the gospel and instruction in biblical knowledge.

As with television, the problem with much of the Western church is not just that it entertains rather than informs, but that its *apparently Christian content is packaged as entertainment*. Television changes the way people see the world and themselves, and Western Christianity has allowed itself to become oriented to television's standpoint. Like television it deludes Christians into thinking they are informed, when in fact they are ignorant. It makes them think they hold certain beliefs, when in fact they have nothing more than vague feelings of satisfaction. Like television, the church has given them what they wanted.

Over the years the church in one country after another has survived all sorts of attacks and crises. Today it is growing rapidly throughout the non-Western world, and in many cases this growth is taking place in the face of much hardship, poverty and persecution. In the West, by contrast, the church gives the impression not merely that it believes it should be excused all hardship, but that it is entitled to maximum comfort, amusement and tranquillity. The church has survived amid the fiercest hate and persecution, but how successfully it can survive amid self-indulgent entertainment remains to be seen.

From *Treasury* (New Zealand, 1997)

Perception

At times we need to remind ourselves that converts from a non-church background may quickly develop a better perception of spiritual realities than we realize. We are mistaken if we think that the only ones who fully understand the deeper issues of spiritual life are those who have been conditioned by generations of churchgoing.

It is therefore challenging to see the confidence that at least one early missionary had in those recently converted from raw heathenism. And raw it was – a society where previously these converts had been darkened in their understanding, separated from God, ignorant in mind, hardened in heart, insensitive in conscience and unrestrained in immoral sexual behaviour (Eph 4:17-19). Yet these were the people to whom Paul gave the lofty teachings found in Ephesians. These were the people for whom Paul prayed those magnificent prayers at the end of Chapters 1 and 3.

In those prayers Paul was not drifting off into some mystical idealism. He was praying that these converts – not their disciples or offspring some generations later – might, then and there, have an enlightened understanding of all the riches that were theirs in Christ.

Perhaps we do not aim high enough. We are concerned too much with minor differences of traditional practice and not enough with major issues of true Christianity. We underestimate people. Worse still, we underestimate the power of God within them. We need to practise the faith we teach them, as Paul did when he committed converts to the Lord in whom they believed (Acts 14:23).

From *Echoes* (England, 1983)

Facing the test

At times there is a ring of unreality in the way we in the Western world read certain parts of the Bible. Being heirs to a society that has for centuries enjoyed the goodwill of the government, we sometimes forget that the letters of the New Testament were written to churches for whom persecution was an everyday occurrence. We have an intellectual understanding of what a Bible writer is talking about when he speaks to Christians under Roman rule of 'the fiery ordeal that comes upon you to prove you', but most of us have never had any first-hand experience of the sort of violence he speaks of.

Although this may be the case with Christians in the Western world, it is not necessarily the case with the church worldwide. With Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America outnumbering Christians in the West, a large portion of the church today is persecuted.

Christians in many countries do not share with us Christians in the West the luxury of social values and political structures that are hospitable to them. It was to such Christians, Christians in a hostile society, that Peter said, ' . . . you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 1:6-7). Where does that leave us who do not, as a rule, encounter fiery ordeals? If faith is never put to the test, how can its genuineness be proved?

False expectations

There is a kind of preaching in evangelical circles that gives a distorted view of faith and often leads to disappointment and despair among Christians. It paints a picture of the Christian life that leads people to expect that once they come to Christ, their

troubles are over. Fears, depression, conflicts, weaknesses and failures are all things of the past. Others may be driven to the point of despair, but not Christians. Christians have more than all the advertising people can ever offer. Through prayer they have access to a divine genie – one rub of the lamp and he will soon remove their problems.

Both Old and New Testaments tell us something different. Consistently they use the picture of metal being put into a fire to test it, to remove impurities, and to bring out the best in it. ‘You, O God, test us; you try us as silver is tried’ (Ps 66:10).

God exposes his people to trials and in this way tests the genuineness of their faith. He tested Abraham (Gen 22:1) and likewise tested Israel for forty years in the wilderness ‘to know what was in their heart, whether or not they would keep his commandments’ (Deut 8:2). James gave Christians the unlikely advice to rejoice when they met various trials, and supported his statement by pointing out that the testing of their faith produced that essential requirement for Christian development, perseverance (James 1:2-3).

Shifting the blame

Inevitably, some testings will result in failure. Even people of proven faith may subsequently fail and be left with feelings of deep disappointment, possibly disgust, with themselves. But they should not allow this to lead them to despair. A thoroughly ashamed David, after his wilful sin against Bathsheba, at least realized that God would not despise a broken and contrite heart (Ps 51:17).

Some are not so ready to admit defeat. They may look for excuses by recounting the course of events in a way that tries to demonstrate that they had been ‘led by God’ in what they did. If they work on the assumption that one coincidence plus a second equals God’s will, they can then conveniently blame their failures upon God.

God, however, does not tempt people to do wrong (James 1:13). On the contrary, he wants to deliver people from evil, and

believers can pray for his help in the confidence that deliverance is his will (Matt 6:13). The problem lies not with God, but with the deceitfulness of the human heart. People are tempted when they are lured by their own selfish desires (James 1:14).

Like James, Peter was in no doubt that some of the troubles Christians meet are the outcome of their own wrong behaviour. To suffer in the cause of righteousness is one thing; to suffer for doing wrong is quite another (1 Peter 3:14; 4:13-16). Trials are inevitable, says Peter, but make sure they are not self-inflicted. A person may endure a beating with great fortitude, but if the beating is a punishment for inexcusable wrongdoing, there is no credit in the endurance. If, on the other hand, a person is beaten for doing right but endures it with fortitude, the endurance is commendable in God's sight (1 Peter 2:20).

Tested by the state

The immediate context of the trials referred to by Peter was persecution by anti-Christian government authorities. This is not the sort of testing that most of us in the nominally Christian countries of the West experience. But the absence of physical violence does not mean that God is testing us less than he does those who live in openly anti-Christian countries.

At the heart of the test is the human inclination to take the line of least resistance, to give in to whatever the pressure may be. Many Christians would with confidence declare that they would refuse to bow to an idol set up by the government, even if it meant execution. But if the government does not legislate to force people to follow the state religion, there is no way the Christians' declaration of loyalty to God can be tested.

The tests that Christians in the West face are usually more subtle. They may loudly proclaim their refusal to submit to a hypothetical religion the government may establish, but at the same time give their approval to unethical practices that the government has already established. They may speak of their uncompromising loyalty to God, but at the same time practise blind loyalty to a political party simply because it suits their personal security to do so. They take the way that is convenient

to them rather than take a stand that may be unpopular, whether with 'the right' or 'the left'. Faith has been put to the test and it has failed.

No end to the testings

In every area of life the faith of Christians is tested. Take, for example, the domestic scene. Many things may have gone wrong in family life, and it is easy to offer glib advice on how conflicts can be resolved and marriage problems sorted out. But whatever the causes behind them, such problems are a valid test of faith for those whose Master told them to be forgiving and to love even their enemies.

So far from loving their enemies, some cannot even love their wives (or husbands, or parents, or children, or in-laws, as the case may be). By 'love', God is not talking about romantic feelings, but about proper attitudes and actions. God does not command people to *feel* in a certain way, but to *act* in a certain way. One New Testament writer after another tells us that the way people act towards others is an indication of the genuineness (or otherwise) of their faith (1 Tim 5:8; James 2:14-16; 1 Peter 1:6-9; 1 John 4:20; Jude 3-4). With family tensions, faith is tested, and all too often it fails.

Life in business or industry is often difficult. Company managers and labour unionists are in conflict, each driven in many cases by sheer greed. Christians frequently find themselves caught in the middle of this turmoil and stress, and their faith faces a test. Are they doing in the name of the company or the name of the union something that, in principle, they would condemn if it were done privately by an individual? Shall they take the easy way out, or shall they stand for the principles of God's kingdom?

Christians can too easily put loyalty to the clique, the group, the party, or tradition ahead of their loyalty to God. Even in the church, where the lordship of Jesus Christ meets no challenge from any human institution, the test of faith is no less real. Often people's firmest principles weaken as soon as the status of their friends or family is threatened. A declared belief, supported by

the right proof-texts, might sound impressive, but its genuineness will only be seen when it is put to the test.

God's way

In no case can God be blamed for the troubles of society or the sufferings that arise from complex family and church problems. But he gives no guarantees that he will shield his people so that they will never be affected by them. To the contrary, it seems at times that God exposes his people to as much testing as they can bear – but never more than they can bear (1 Cor 10:13).

The requirements God lays upon Christians are demanding, but gracious. Although he understands why Christians fail, he gives them no excuse for failure, because he always provides the 'way of escape', the way out. However, it is a way *out*, not a way *in*; a path to strength, not a concession to weakness; a victory, not a defeat; resistance, not peace at any price. It is when the heat is on that genuine faith proves itself.

From *Treasury* (New Zealand, 1982)

Today's hypocrisy

A convenient excuse that many people use to ignore the claims of Christianity is the simple statement, 'Churchgoers are hypocrites', or something similar. But it is surprising how often the same people will call upon the church for some service when it suits them.

Some people never go near a church, but when they want to get married they ask to use the church for the wedding. This may be so when they are already living together and may even be expecting, or already have, a baby. They seem not to see the hypocrisy of wanting some visible endorsement from the church, even though they normally ignore or despise it. The same could be said of their wanting a baby christened. They might make blanket judgments about those who practise church routines but do not live up to them, yet they are keen to practise similar hypocrisy themselves.

Such inconsistency is evident not just in matters relating to the church. The general public is quick to adopt an attitude of moral righteousness when prominent figures are found to have engaged in sexually immoral behaviour, yet the general public is characterized by similar behaviour. Many citizens want to defend the right of adults to pursue abnormal sexual relations if they choose, then when people so choose, the same citizens assume a moral stance against them. They condemn politicians for lying and cheating, but they themselves practise lying and cheating just as readily.

This mass hypocrisy is fostered by the media. They give greatest coverage to stories that are immoral or violent, and then presume to take the high moral ground when society suffers from immorality and violence. They feign indignation at a photographer who invades someone's privacy, but they then violate the person's privacy by showing the pictures that the photographer has taken.

All this has a familiar ring about it. 'Why do you see the speck that is in another's eye, but do not see the log that is in your own?' (Matt 7:3). 'In passing judgment you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. Do you suppose that you will escape the judgment of God?' (Rom 2:1,3). Even in making or assenting to the comments in this article, we have taken a risk. For we have placed ourselves in the position where God will judge us by the judgment we have just made on others. 'With the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get' (Matt 7:2).

From *Alert* (Australia, 1997)

Home-grown leadership

For half an hour I had been speaking to the group about the progress and suffering of the church in Sudan and Nigeria. Then I asked two people in the group to pray, one for Sudan and one for Nigeria. But when they prayed, they barely touched on the matters I had just explained, made no mention of the national church and focused solely on 'the missionaries', praying that God would keep them safe and bless their work.

I had not mentioned the word 'missionary' in my talk. In fact, I had made no reference at all to expatriates from the West, though I did speak of people I had met from Uganda, Nigeria and Papua New Guinea who were engaged in Christian ministry in Sudan. But the prayers indicated that what people had in mind were white, English-speaking missionaries. And that seems to be the mindset of many people in the West. Their understanding of the church in non-Western countries is dependent on a picture they have of Western missionary activity.

How people see world mission

In a way this view of world mission is understandable, as most of the news Christians receive is from missionaries who send reports home about the work they are doing. I have been writing such newsletters for more than thirty years, and have been reading them for longer still. They are necessary in the interest of accountability to, and fellowship with, the Christians who support us by prayer and finances. But with all the good will in the world, the view we give is limited, and may give no indication of the state of the church nationally.

There even are cases where people at home think that the church in some countries is struggling to stay alive, simply because Western missionaries are no longer there. The opposite is often the case. The church may be growing with a vigour and sense of purpose that leaves us in the West looking second rate.

It is significant that in many cases this vigorous growth has come after the Western missionaries have left. This is not a side-swipe at Western missionaries. We always said that our aim was to work ourselves out of a job, and we should welcome the enthusiasm and initiative that are so widely evident today. It is natural that local believers with the right gifts and motivation will give positive leadership once they no longer feel that someone is looking over their shoulder. Undoubtedly, the churches develop their own character and style, and in many countries have established such a strong identity that they no longer have to fight against the criticism that they are merely the products of Western colonizers.

Where the growth is heading

There is, however, a danger that lurks within these rapidly growing churches, and that is that people may be swept along with the tide of evangelization. Their 'Christianity' may be no more than a few Christian notions added to former pagan beliefs. Leaders in the national churches are usually aware of this, and express a desperate need for Bibles and the sorts of biblical materials that will help them in discipling converts and teaching those who can teach others also. They do not ask for better buildings or more comfortable seats, but they cry out for Bibles and associated materials. One reason why their churches grow more than ours is that their leaders have better priorities.

Consider, for example, Nigeria. To an outsider looking in, it is a country of desperate needs and little hope – a seething mass of social, economic, religious and political tension. Yet it has a church with vision and energy for evangelism, especially among the unreached peoples, and in particular among Muslims. Most Christians in the West would run a mile rather than talk to a Muslim, but the courageous Nigerian Christians are itching to get at them.

Through the Bridgeway ministry that I am associated with, we are sending biblical resources not only to Nigerians in their own country, but also to Nigerian missionaries in countries such as Benin, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Kenya, Liberia,

Namibia, Niger, Sierra Leone and Togo. And these African missionaries have goals, not just to evangelize, but to establish churches and see them reproduce themselves.

Recently a Nigerian mission added another country to its list of fields by moving into Central African Republic. Its published goal for the first five years was to disciple five hundred new believers, of whom fifty would be sent out as cross-cultural missionaries, ten of them to unreached people groups. Among the expanded goals for the next five years was the sending of missionaries from these churches into three Islamic countries of North Africa.

Here is a quote from a Nigerian mission periodical sent to local churches – words of Africans for Africans. ‘Mission is not mission unless the missionary plants a church and the church as a living organism reproduces itself. If mission is to be kept going, the key is the involvement of the native converts. It takes the average missionary one year, at least, to learn a new language and culture. The work therefore becomes faster when such a missionary succeeds in learning the language and making a native convert who is disciplined and in turn becomes a missionary to his own people.’

Get up and go

A short time ago *Tidings* published a report from Chad that was presented at a recent international conference on mission. The report demonstrates how church leaders in Chad are leading. Having set out an eight-year program to plant a church in every village in Chad, they are mobilizing Christians throughout the country, region by region. In the program’s first year they targeted a region of 172 villages, 35 of which did not have a church. All those villages now have churches. Each year the evangelism program has become more ambitious and the number of Christians mobilized for the work has multiplied. Now, after five years they are evangelizing more than a thousand villages each year.

At the same conference a Kenyan, whom I had met in a struggling Nairobi church where he began his work six years

ago, told of how the church has grown to 1200. Two years ago in Myanmar (Burma) I spoke at a church which, in spite of years of repression, now has a central congregation of over 600 and has given birth to twenty-four other churches. In India and Nepal I have been challenged by some of the dynamic home-grown enterprises that are motivating Christians to venture out from the safe environment of church fellowship into the unreached world around them.

Examples could be multiplied. Common factors in all these examples are the absence of resident foreign missionaries and the initiative of biblically motivated local leaders. That is not to say there is no place for foreign missionaries (though their role would need careful defining). Rather it is a reminder that the examples of missionary enterprise given in the New Testament are still workable, provided we trust the local leadership as the early missionaries did. They committed the local believers to the Lord in whom they believed, and left them to it.

From *Tidings* (Australia, 1997)

Greed and superstition

The instructions recorded in Exodus Chapter 23 were given at Mt Sinai as Israel prepared for its life ahead in Canaan. Instead of being a nation of builders' labourers, Israel was to be a nation of farmers. The people's life would be built around the annual agricultural cycle, and they had to acknowledge God as the Lord of nature by gathering together for regular farmers' festivals throughout the year (v. 14-17).

Already the people knew that they were to rest from work one day in seven, and this rest was to extend to their farming animals (v. 12; cf. 20:8-11). This principle of one-in-seven rest applied to years as well as to days. This gave their farming land the opportunity to renew its powers of reproduction, and gave the people the opportunity to acknowledge in a special way that God was the true owner of the land. They had to trust him for extra productivity during the sixth year, along with sufficient natural growth during the seventh (or 'rest') year, to provide food for the poor and pastures for their flocks and herds (v. 10-11; cf. Lev 25:18-22).

In both cases (seventh day and seventh year) two elements were prominent – spiritual devotion and physical rest. Physical work damages the spiritual life when people do not know how to cease from it. It pushes God aside and so becomes a god itself. When it arises out of greed, it becomes yet another expression of that human selfishness that draws people away from God. The Sabbath laws were a reminder that no one can serve God and self at the same time (cf. Matt 6:24).

To stop work according to the law's demands required faith as well as personal sacrifice. It was a reminder that the blessings of nature and the course of life's events were matters over which people had no control. They had to trust in God. If they had no faith, the temptation then arose to turn to superstitious practices instead. But God hated superstition just as he hated greed. He

therefore outlawed the keeping of part of a sacrificial animal as a sort of lucky charm. He also outlawed the boiling of a young goat in its mother's milk, a superstitious ritual that people hoped would bring increase in their flocks (v. 18-19).

It seems that people have always had a tendency to resort to something they themselves can do rather than follow the simple, but often more difficult, path of trust in the unseen God. People today have similar problems. In the practices of any society, even in the habits of some Christians, the temptation exists to replace the invisible with the visible, the spiritual with the tangible, faith with superstition. If we are Christians, we are supposed to 'walk by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor 5:7).

From *Daily Power* (Thailand, 1987)

What's new?

One of the ironies of the modern world is that just when people have become concerned about preserving their physical heritage – restoring old buildings, protecting nature from the developers, publishing books of old pictures – they are breaking their connections with their spiritual and moral heritage. They have so benefited from the comforts, convenience, efficiency, hygiene and endless innovations of modern technology, that they have come to see almost everything in physical terms. The only things that are worthy of their attention are those that can be measured, felt, heard or seen. Technical prowess leaves them spellbound. It can now do their thinking for them. The possibilities for the future seem so good that they no longer have any need of the past.

Most of us never stop to think how much we have given ourselves over to the technological experts. We trust technical processes more than human judgments, believing them to be absolute and our own judgments subjective. In short, we have lost confidence in ourselves.

As a result of this loss of confidence, faith seems to be out of date. Surgical procedures and prescribed medicines have made prayer unnecessary, and spiritual issues are treated as no more than psychological maladjustments. Technology redefines what we once meant by faith, religion, truth, conscience, morality and family, so that traditional words no longer have their traditional meanings. There may be little we can do to alter the course of technology, but at least we can be aware of its hypnotic powers and make sure we do not fall under its spell.

Knowing our roots

Our connection with the past is important, not in the sense that we should live in the past, always longing for 'the good old days', but in the sense that we should know where we come

from and why we think and act as we do. But the domination of modern technology, especially in the areas of mass media and telecommunications, gives us the impression that we can sever our connections with the past – pull up our roots, so to speak, and follow the information superhighway to wherever it may lead. It works against our having any sense of history.

By a 'sense of history' we do not mean a knowledge of the names and dates of rulers and events, but an awareness of the origin and development of things – knowing why things are what they are. Today we are bombarded with information, most of it in picture images and most of it trivial, so that we know what has happened in the last twenty-four hours, but have already forgotten what happened one year ago. The problem is not that we cannot remember, but that we are given the impression it is not important to remember. When current information is the prime consideration, there is no purpose in considering the patterns of the past and their relevance to the present.

This is a long way removed from the values God instilled in his people in biblical times. Israelites were to instruct their families in the origin and meaning of their cultural and religious practices (Exod 12:26-27; Lev 23:41-43). Their values were tied to their knowledge of God and what he had done for them. When they strayed from the path God wanted for them, they were reminded of their roots in history and the values upon which their national life had been built (Hosea 4:1-2,6; 11:1-7).

Even in the New Testament church, where national identity was not related to membership, Christians were reminded of their Old Testament roots and the New Testament events that brought God's plans to fruition (Rom 11:17-22; 1 Peter 1:10-12). God's pattern was consistent, and he worked out his purposes through the historical person of Jesus. Christianity and its values are grounded in history (Acts 10:36-43; 1 Cor 15:3-8).

More commitment, not more information

In contrast to the progressive revelation given in the Bible, much of today's information comes to us fragmented. It is usually without continuity or context, with the result that we

lose any sense of historical perspective. We may have feelings of nostalgia in watching footage of old film, but that is not the same as having a sense of history. We are given no 'big picture' in which the patterns of history become significant. And when information is given to us without a context – historical, moral, spiritual or cultural – it soon assumes absolute authority. It is backed by an apparently infallible modern technology, and we are easily made to feel powerless before it.

We tell ourselves that all this information will lead to a better quality of life, but we know that in reality society gets worse. The reason for family break-up, moral decay, political corruption, poor education, urban violence and civil war and is not lack of information. These problems will not be solved by computers and television. The information-gathering technology gives the impression that knowledgeable people have the answers simply because graphics and pictures appear on a screen, but the impression is a delusion.

Many people today confuse information with understanding, and substitute technical data for personal commitment. The solution to human problems will come not from efficient electronic equipment, but from the personal sacrifice, love and commitment of human beings.

Information, if it is to be beneficial, must be subjected to the evaluation of those who still have strong value systems. That is why organisms of human society such as family and church must be seen as things of inestimable value, a heritage that must be preserved. We must know what they are and why, and in the light of that understanding evaluate the products, schemes and programs that pass endlessly before us. Technology can tell us what can be done, but we have to decide whether it should be done. Technology can tell us a thing's price; what we have to assess is its worth.

From *Alert* (Australia, 1997)

The final triumph

Jesus Christ left his early followers in no doubt that with his arrival the triumphant powers of the kingdom of God had burst upon the world. The age of God's triumph had dawned.

The whole world may have lain in the power of the evil one, but one stronger than he had now come to bind him (Matt 12:28-29). Satan could be seen falling from heaven (Luke 10:18). Death would no longer hold people in its grip, because he who had the power of death was conquered (Heb 2:14-15). A new king had come, to release people from the power of darkness and bring them into the unconquerable kingdom of God (Col 1:13). This king would build a new community, a new people, against whom not even the powers of death would be victorious (Matt 16:18).

An unlikely way to victory

No wonder Pilate was confused. Was this pathetic-looking, defenceless figure before him a potential world conqueror? Was Jesus really a king? Indeed he was, though not the sort of king Pilate thought him to be; for his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36-37). Small wonder, then, that many turned back from following Jesus when they found that his kingdom was not about to bring them a secular utopia (John 6:15,66).

Yet there were those who kept following Jesus – not without doubts, failures and misunderstandings – and slowly but surely the reality of his triumph dawned upon them. His way to triumph was via suffering, his way to kingly glory via the cross (Luke 24:26). And for his followers, victory would be reached only by the same pathway (John 15:20; 2 Tim 2:11-12).

Suffering of a triumphant people

The early church – poor, misunderstood and attacked – never lost heart, never saw itself as anything other than the victorious

church of the triumphant Christ (Acts 2:36; 4:25-31; 8:3-4; 16:25; Rom 8:35-39; 2 Cor 4:3-11; 1 Peter 4:12-19). The full force of government-backed persecution was turned upon the followers of Jesus Christ, but their loyalty to him remained firm. Like him and through him, they triumphed by way of death. 'They conquered by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives, even to death' (Rev 12:11).

So it has been ever since. The church is still called to be identified with the Suffering Servant of God. Persecution has only strengthened it, demonstrating again that suffering is the way to victory (1 Peter 4:13).

Understandably, God's persecuted people may at times cry out, 'How long, O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' (Rev 6:10). God responds to those prayers, though his response may not be immediate. But when he pours out his great and final judgment upon evil, he does so partly as a vindication of the righteous (Rev 16:7; 19:1-2).

The rejected ones reign

Already, in this present age, Christ is exalted to his Father's presence, where he reigns in glory (Acts 2:33-36; Eph 1:20-22; Phil 2:9; Rev 3:21). In some mysterious way believers share this exaltation (Eph 2:6).

At present, however, neither Christ's glory nor that of his people is displayed in the world or acknowledged by its people. But such rejection or indifference will not remain for ever. One result of Christ's return in power and glory will be that his reign will be universally acknowledged (Phil 2:10-11; Rev 19:11-16). And again, in some mysterious way, believers will share his reign with him (1 Cor 6:2; Rev 20:4).

Paradise regained

This demonstration by God of his pleasure in his people is far more than merely a welcome reversal of the former state of affairs, where both Jesus Christ and his people were despised

and rejected. It is part of a glorious transformation where God brings to the world the perfection that he always desired, a perfection that the human race had made unattainable because of sin. What humankind lost through Adam it regains through Christ – and much more, for always ‘the free gift is not in proportion to the trespass’ (Rom 5:15).

Because of this super-abounding grace, God not only reconciles sinful men and women to himself, but restores the world of nature also. The physical creation, which has suffered through no fault of its own (but through the fault of sinful human beings), will enter its full glory along with God’s redeemed people (Rom 8:19-23; Col 1:20). If part of the glory of the redeemed is to have their bodies changed to be like Christ’s glorious body and thereby fitted for life in the age to come (Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 15:44,49; Phil 3:21), part of the glory of creation is to be transformed in anticipation of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 21:1).

Since the whole universe has been affected by sin, the final triumph of God is concerned with the removal of all evil and the restoration of all things to a state of beauty and perfection, all in complete harmony with himself (1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:9-10). Through Christ, and specifically through the cross of Christ, God achieves victory, effects reconciliation and makes peace (Col 1:20-22).

Grand finale to a finished work

In the light of this final great triumph of God, the miracles of Bethlehem and Golgotha take on even greater significance. The Word who in Bethlehem became flesh (John 1:14) and who on Golgotha’s cross finished the work his Father had given him to do (John 17:4; 19:30) will at last see the final fruits of that victory.

Through disobedience and rebellion, in our world and in the unseen world beyond, the authority of God had been challenged. Therefore, the Father had entrusted to the Son the mission of overcoming all rebellion and restoring all things to a state of perfect submission to the sovereign God (John 5:20-28; 2 Cor

5:19). That mission, having extended to the whole universe, will reach its climax when death itself is banished. The last enemy will have been conquered (1 Cor 15:26). The Son will then have the satisfaction of seeing that the victory he achieved at the cross is effectual even to the last outpost of rebellion.

With the conquest of evil and the restoration of all things to God through Jesus Christ, God's triumph will be complete. No deviation from absolute devotion to God will be possible; in fact, no one will even desire it. God will be everything to everyone (1 Cor 15:28).

From *Outreach* (Australia, 1984)