

Catching the Fire
and other pieces

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CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	7
1 Catching the fire	9
2 Evangelists, pastors and teachers	28
3 A simple message	32
4 Mission in the 1960s	34
5 Types and shadows	37
6 Imitators	44
7 The free thinkers	46
8 Faith, hardship and growth	50
9 Alexandria, city of the learned	53
10 A king-priest	57
11 To fear . . . and to deny	61
12 Living among Buddhists	64
13 Understanding God's kingdom	68
14 What did Job learn?	79
15 Caleb the leader	83
16 Worldwide opportunity	86
17 Who are God's true people?	91
18 Religious freedom	94
19 Sheep, shepherds and wolves	99
20 Guidelines from the Hebrew law-code	103
21 Debtors and creditors	107
22 Coping with materialism	110
23 Full-bodied mission	114
24 Television culture	118
25 Too easily satisfied	129
26 Generosity that upsets	132
27 Come and get it	134
28 The priesthood of believers	135
29 One call, many directions	142
30 Some thoughts about heaven	146

Preface

The initial urge to publish these articles came from talks I gave at a convention aimed at challenging Western Christians to ‘catch the fire’ of the vibrant Christianity found in many non-Western countries. The convenors of the conference, held in New Zealand, then published an amalgam of my opening and closing talks in a booklet they circulated around their country. The contents of that booklet are now made available to a wider audience by becoming the opening chapter in this book.

After this lengthy opening chapter are many shorter chapters, for the book is a collection of articles, much in the style of my earlier collection, *Making Sense*. That book brought together fifty articles written for magazines, journals and other publications in over thirty years, but because of restrictions on the size of the book, many articles had to be left out. Some of those are now included in this current book, along with articles published in more recent years.

In general, this book does not repeat material found in my *Bridgeway Bible Commentary*, *Bridgeway Bible Dictionary* and other published books. The articles collected here vary in their subject matter as much as in their style and length, depending on the kind of publication they were written for. But all articles have had some updating from the originals, and those from Thailand, which were first written in Thai, have been rewritten here in English. Whatever their origins, these articles are presented with the prayer that, in a world of increasing confusion and darkness, Christians might ‘catch the fire’ that awakens enthusiasm and gives confidence to face life positively.

Don Fleming

Catching the fire

Any view of the church in New Testament times and the Western world today will reveal a difference between the two in vitality and growth. The Christians in the early church had a fire burning within them to show that a commitment to Jesus Christ and his teaching had changed them and could change the world. That kind of fire is still evident among Christians in many of today's needy countries, but among Christians in the affluent West it seems largely to have disappeared. If, however, they look beyond their national borders, they may see something that will awaken their enthusiasm. They may 'catch the fire' that transforms people into what Jesus wants them to be.

Shocked out of complacency

In the earliest days of the church, many Christians in Jerusalem thought of Christianity as if it was a renewal within Judaism. When Stephen asserted that Christianity was no such thing, his bold stance cost him his life and changed the church from being popular to unpopular. Instead of being predominantly Jewish, it soon became predominantly non-Jewish, something that many well-established Christians found hard to grasp.

Paul was the person who, more than others of his generation, recognised the changing face of Christianity. Gentiles did not have to become like Jews in order to be 'proper' Christians.

To the non-Jews of Colossae, in present-day Turkey, Paul said that God had chosen to make known the riches of his glory among them, *Gentiles*, and the message he preached was that Christ was in them, *Gentiles*, as the hope of glory. Paul had committed all his energies to proclaiming Christ to such people, instructing, warning and teaching them so that they became mature believers. And for this he toiled, striving with all the energy that Christ mightily inspired within him (Col 1:27-29 RSV). The exceptional fruit he saw among the Gentiles was

accompanied by lots of hard work, tears and sweat. Paul used words like 'toil,' 'striving' and 'energy' to indicate the human contribution to the divine activity that 'mightily inspired' him.

As the church in Paul's day grew among those who had not been traditionally prepared for it (non-Jewish people), so it is today (but now among non-Western people). God is moving throughout the non-Western world in unexpected ways, while the church in the West declines. Today's non-Western Christians are 'catching the fire' of enthusiastic evangelisation as did the first century's non-Jewish Christians. From one viewpoint this may be explained as God's sovereign activity in ways we had not expected, but from another we may see lessons in the commitment of non-Western people to hard work, sweat and tears. This is often in contrast to the comfortable lifestyle that many Western Christians mistakenly assume to be God's norm for humanity.

My aim in this study is to look at some difficult countries where God's blessing has been poured out, and then look at the West to see what are the blockages to this blessing and how we might clear them.

Today's changing world

Two simple overviews may help give us a picture of the changing world today. The first is to look at the global church and see what percentage of Christians within it are from the non-Western world. (I am speaking of what we might call evangelical or born-again Christians, as distinct from merely nominal Christians.) In 1800 the figure was about 1%, and by 1900 it had grown to only 9%. But the increased missionary activity of the twentieth century began to see increased results, especially after World War II and the gradual dismantling of the old colonial empires.

By 1960 the number of Christians in the non-Western world had reached 32% and by 1970 was about 36%. Through the 1970s and since, the growth has been extraordinary. By 1980 the figure had grown to 50%, by 1990 it was 66% and by 2000 it had reached 75%. Statistics are not always rock solid, but they at

least indicate what is happening. Today, possibly 80% of all evangelical believers are in the non-Western world. The sad reality is that most Christians in the West are either unaware of it or have difficulty accepting it.

The second overview is best understood by looking at a map of the world that Western missiologists prepared to give a quick visual impression of the world's neediest region. Known as the 10/40 Window, it is an imaginary belt between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator that stretches through North Africa, the Middle East and Asia. It contains 60% of the world's population and 95% of the world's unreached peoples, but only 3% of the world's missionary force and a minuscule 0.01% of average income of Christians worldwide.

Difficult countries that have caught the fire

In the African country of Chad, visionary church leaders initiated an 8-year program that brought impressive results. Driven by prayer and a burden to reach the lost, they surveyed the country according to its regions, with the aim of evangelising all villages and planting churches in those that had none. Each year they concentrated on specific regions. In one year, for example, they evangelised 1,743 villages out of 2,904 planned. In one sub-region of 172 villages they discovered 35 villages that had no church, but by the end of the year all 35 had churches.

Evangelicals in India are now estimated to be 3% of the population, which means there are about 30 million Christians. They are seeing dynamic growth across the country, in spite of opposition that has become increasingly widespread and savage.

In 1990, Christians in Zimbabwe set themselves the goal of planting 10,000 new churches before the year 2000 – surely an ambitious goal for a country whose population then was about ten million. They reached their goal in just over nine years.

One indigenous mission in Nigeria began its outreach with a goal to plant ten churches in the first five years, each with its own leadership, and to have five missionaries from these churches breaking fresh ground in unevangelised parts of the

country. Within the next three years these numbers were to double, and the outreach was to expand by sending five missionaries to the unreached of other countries. When I was in Nigeria in 1993, soon after the mission's ten-year thanksgiving, it had exceeded all its goals. It had fifteen missionaries in foreign countries, and within the next seven years had more than eighty, plus an additional eighty within Nigeria itself. The number today is about two hundred and fifty.

Forty years ago Nepal was largely closed to the gospel – there were only 29 known Christians. Today the number of Christians is estimated to be 500,000. One local mission I visited had noted that churches in Kathmandu tended to be clumped in certain areas, but along the city ring-road it identified fourteen urban regions that had no churches. It then began to work these regions systematically till each had at least one church.

Myanmar, once known as Burma, is another country where opposition has been fierce. But a church in the capital that had struggled to survive in the 1970s now has a regular Sunday attendance of 700 and has spawned fifty daughter churches. In neighbouring Thailand, which has become a haven for refugees from Myanmar, Burmese-language churches are growing rapidly, and that is in a country where church growth has always been difficult.

One country whose images of poverty and desperation have burned themselves into my mind is Ethiopia. Yet there on the wall of one provincial church was a chart for church growth. It was a drawing of nine stylized houses (in pink, of all colours), each representing thirty non-church families. The church was then divided into nine groups, so that one church group was responsible for one non-church group of thirty families, helping with food, education, medicine and other practical needs. No wonder the church grew. And, as in other parts of Ethiopia, the growth was in spite of constant opposition from the entrenched Orthodox Church.

The examples seem to be endless. But I must recount what I heard from an evangelist in Zambia who was disappointed that

he had got to October and had only just planted his second church for the year. He, like a number of his colleagues, had set himself the goal to plant a number of churches each year (in his case, three) and he was feeling a touch of failure.

Blockages and how we might clear them

The blockages that hinder us in the West are many, but we either do not recognise them or make excuses for ourselves by hiding behind our culture. We who have been missionaries in traditionally non-Western or non-Christian countries were always quick to see the need for Christians to break from their cultural norms if they were to be true disciples of Jesus Christ, but back in the West few Christians see the same need.

Most Christians in the West seem to assume that their way of life is basically Christian, when in fact it may be far removed from the way of life that Jesus taught. Christianity seems to have survived in just about every culture it has entered; the one culture where it is having difficulty surviving is that of modern Western civilisation. And one reason for this is that many of the features of Western civilisation are fundamentally opposed to the kind of life Jesus called us to.

1. Convenience

Perhaps the greatest obstacle that our Western way of life puts in the way of Christian discipleship is convenience. Our way of life gives us a secure and comfortable existence, with all sorts of benefits and plenty of money to maintain them. But unconsciously, most Christians have now drifted into a mindset where if a thing is not convenient, that is sufficient reason not to do it. They have become used to the notion of choice in just about everything, but in the process have forgotten that Jesus did not give his followers a range of choices. He called people to self-denial, not self-pleasing; to self-sacrifice, not self-fulfilment. That was the way he lived, and true followers should expect nothing different.

Christians have no *right* to convenience. We sometimes speak of our Western standard of living as if it is our Christian

heritage – an inheritance that goes automatically with being a Christian.

There was a time when I, like many Christians in the West, spoke glibly of our standard of living with words like ‘God has blessed us.’ Then I began meeting Christians in one country after another who lived without the material benefits we enjoy, with little national or economic security, always hungry, always poor, always struggling, yet they knew far more of God’s blessing than I did. We are in urgent need of re-assessing what the blessing of God means. We need to re-orient our lives. The government will not do this for us, nor will any other elements in our society. Rather the opposite; they will tell us we deserve a better life and will promise to help us obtain it.

If we are to be true disciples of Jesus, we must learn to take his teachings more seriously. In the process we may find, as did some of his earliest followers, that many of these teachings are indeed ‘hard sayings.’

One thing I notice in the needy countries where I work is that Christians spend more time than we do reading the Gospels and building their lives on the things Jesus taught. Many of us in the West, by contrast, tend to prefer the writings of Paul. They appeal to our Graeco-Roman way of thinking and do not seem to be quite so radical. But being radical is just what Jesus calls us to – not in the sense that we dye our hair green, walk the streets in bare feet and eat dried orange peel, but in the sense that we reshape every aspect of our lives. Our Christianity must not be something we fit around the edges of our lives to suit our private routines, but something that turns our lives upside down, so that total commitment to Christ dominates everything.

Christians in needy countries would love to have an improved standard of living, but they realise that this has little to do with being a proper follower of Jesus. In being less prone to the apathy that comes from convenience, they have understood better the meaning of commitment to Jesus. Recently, I was re-reading a book that most of us young missionaries read back in the 1950s and 1960s, *Customs, Culture and Christianity* by

Eugene Nida. Whatever else Nida said, he surely had prophetic insight when, back in 1954, he saw the shift of Christianity that has now become a reality. He wrote, 'There is a very great likelihood that the central dynamic of Christianity will pass from the West and find a more receptive home elsewhere, among people who have not engrossed themselves so completely in gadgets and have not made an idol of material success.'

2. Prayer

Across the Western world, prayer is in decline, collectively and privately. Church activities seem to give less time to prayer, and for many Christians private prayer has disappeared as a natural yet disciplined part of daily life. There is little, if any, passion for prayer.

In many non-Western countries, by contrast, prayer seems to be at the heart of everything they do. Whereas we often relegate prayer to private devotions or opening and closing procedures at Christian meetings, they make it their main priority. A man in one African country put it well when he said to me, 'If you people in the West plan a conference, you maybe spend fifty minutes planning and ten minutes praying. We spend ten minutes planning and fifty minutes praying.' At times their lack of planning and our lack of praying are seen in the results – much blessing out of chaos in one case; sterility out of good planning in the other.

Christians throughout the countries of my travels seem to practise fasting along with praying – not always, but often enough for it to be a fairly common practice. In two countries, one where I was teaching at a Bible school and the other at the headquarters of a local mission, I was told that because the next day was to be their day of prayer and fasting, they had made arrangements for someone to bring my meals. They did not want to impose their obligation on the visitor. They were very gracious about this, but the thing that impressed me was this regular practice, in one case weekly and the other monthly, of a day of prayer and fasting. (The outcome of their offer was that while I was grateful for their thoughtfulness, I insisted that I be

part of their exercise. There seemed to be something wrong if the teacher did less than those he taught.)

On occasions my wife and I have had people staying with us in our home in Brisbane who, when asked about times and routines for breakfast, said rather sheepishly not to worry because they awoke early. A Zambian said she normally went to bed about 9.00 p.m. and woke about 2.00 a.m. so that she could have four hours in the Word and prayer before facing the day. A Nigerian went to bed later but woke about 3.00 a.m. so that he could have three hours in the Word and prayer. The Zambian was with us for three weeks and the Nigerian for one week, but each night when I had cause to visit the bathroom, I could see the light burning and hear the voice praying. Their prayer life seemed to be on a different plane from mine.

We have all heard about the huge prayer meetings they hold in South Korea, but I was stunned to hear of what was happening in Egypt, a country far less hospitable to the gospel. Every Monday night a large church in Cairo held a prayer meeting that went for three hours. They had to move all the seats out because 1,500 people attended, which meant everyone had to stand. No wonder Egyptians began coming to Christ in increasingly large numbers. Significantly, the person who initiated this prayer activity was a migrant from Uganda.

3. View of the world

In general, the view of people in the Western world is that God has a vested interest in us. For example, most in Australia would believe that if, let us say, we became engaged in a war with Indonesia, God would be on our side. After all, we are Christian and they are Muslim. Yet there are probably more Christians in Indonesia than in Australia, and even the Indonesian percentage could be higher. But the statistics are irrelevant. God does not count the number of Christians in a country and then say, 'You win.' The whole notion of looking at our country – whether Australia, New Zealand, Britain, America or anywhere else – and thinking God is on our side betrays a lack of understanding of the Bible.

The people of Old Testament Israel refused to believe the prophets who told them God would use heathen nations to attack and destroy them. Jeremiah was vilified and physically attacked for saying God would use Babylonians to destroy the temple. 'But he can't,' objected his hearers. 'Even ordinary Israelites can't go into the innermost parts of the temple, how much less heathen Babylonians.' Yet God allowed the Babylonians to do just that.

'In addition,' said Jeremiah, 'God will use the Babylonians to take you out of this land and into foreign captivity.' 'But he can't,' objected his hearers. 'God gave this land to our father Abraham as our homeland for ever.' Nevertheless, God allowed the Babylonians to conquer the land and take the people captive to a foreign country. Israel had more basis than any modern Western nation for expecting God to preserve it and its way of life, but it had to learn the hard way that no one has God on a string.

One wonders what sort of judgment the West is building up for itself in its pursuit of wealth, its exercise of power and its rejection of God. Christians in the West have to develop a view of the world that is not based on national self-interest but on God's values of truth, righteousness, compassion and justice. Christians in non-Western countries are not free of nationalism either, but because they benefit less from the policies of those who rule them, they seem more able to assess things from a biblical point of view than from the perspective of self-interest.

4. The expectation of a pain-free life

In spite of our frequent complaints, we in the West benefit from high quality health services that most people in the world could not even dream of. One result is that we expect most of our ailments to be healed fairly readily and most of our pain to be controlled or even eradicated. The result is that we become the world's greatest complainers. We do not know how to deal with suffering – not just illness, but death, war, poverty, persecution and brutal injustice – much less how to embrace it in the name of Christ. We know what the Scriptures teach about accepting

hardship and sharing Christ's suffering, but in reality most of us secretly feel we have a right to a pain-free life. Some Christians get easily discouraged and others become bitter.

People in difficult countries do not have such high expectations and consequently tend to complain less when things go wrong. A human tendency is to blame God for life's misfortunes, but this tendency is less evident among those who would appear to have more cause for complaint. After the devastating floods of Mozambique in 1999, the response of one local Christian was, 'We don't blame God; we trust him.'

Our improved standard of living has caused us to become 'soft' to some extent. We read of missionaries a hundred years ago, or even fifty years ago, who went into situations of extreme difficulty, but they persevered. Today, few seem ready to accept the hardships of Christian service in difficult circumstances and give in fairly easily. This is not so among many missionaries from difficult countries who often go into even more difficult countries. Whereas many Christians in the West try to avoid any interaction with Muslims, Christians in many countries of Africa and Asia are looking for ways of reaching Muslims with the love of Christ. They know the risks and the hardships they may face, but they accept the challenge.

Christians in the West have recently become more aware of the enthusiasm that Christians in China have for evangelising out from their country. These Chinese Christians want to move west and evangelise the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim countries till they arrive back in Jerusalem, from where the first apostles set out to spread the message of Jesus. In this way the Chinese see themselves as completing the encircling of the globe with the gospel. But these Chinese have all been prepared for the task in the school of suffering and that is why they, like many of their counterparts in other countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, make such effective missionaries. They have not been spoiled by misguided expectations of a trouble-free life.

In a recent magazine article, an American missiologist, writing about mission strategies, said, 'One strategy that I've not

seen developed in the West is that of willingness to suffer the loss of everything – of life itself, if need be – for the advance of the kingdom. That’s why I find the Back to Jerusalem movement so powerful. These Chinese believe they’re ready missionaries because they don’t need to invent a strategy. They’ve been living God’s strategy for two generations.’

5. Walking by faith

Our well organised society means that, on the whole, life is fairly easy for us. Only a handful of the world’s two hundred or more countries enjoy the sorts of benefits we enjoy. But the things that help us in daily living do not always help us spiritually. This does not mean we should resist improvements in living standards, but it does mean we should not allow our improved living standards to squeeze God out. Our welfare system, for example, has so many safety nets that no matter what our circumstances – sickness, age, unemployment, disability – we have a welfare provision to help us through. That is fine, but in the process we too easily trust in the system and too easily forget God.

In countries of Africa, I hear Christians say things like, ‘Prayer is the only way we get through. If we have a conference, we have to pray that the electricity will stay on. If we post a letter, we have to pray that it will reach its destination. If we want to travel to another town, we have to pray for the money to pay the bus fare. When we get on the bus, we have to pray that it will arrive at the other end without being held up by robbers.’

We should not need conditions like those to make us pray, but the reality is that for most of us we rarely pray those prayers, because we do not feel the need. When we pray the prayer, ‘Give us this day our daily bread,’ we rarely mean it literally, because we already have our daily bread in the fridge – and if it is not in the fridge, we have the money to go and buy it at the nearest shop. For perhaps the majority of Christians in the world today, that prayer is one they mean literally.

For many Christians in the West, if hypothetically God ceased to exist, it would make little difference to the way they

lived. They have learnt to survive without him. For people in difficult countries, their first response to any kind of sickness, no matter how minor, is to pray; our first response is to reach for some medicine or visit a doctor. We are thankful for the medicines and the doctors, and we should not expect miraculous solutions when God has already provided adequate means near to hand, but somehow we have to recover an awareness of the living presence of God. We are supposed to walk by faith, not by sight, but everything in the Western world moves us towards walking by sight, not by faith.

6. Mistaking sophistication for maturity

Unconsciously, we may think of those who speak poor English as not being very bright. But their inability to speak my language is no more a measure of intelligence than is my inability to speak theirs. Most people, except those from the English-speaking Western world, are competent enough to speak in a language other than their mother tongue. Yet they may not be able to read or write.

When we equate literacy with intelligence, we are mistaken. Most of us are literate; that is, we can read and write; but, to put it crudely, that is sheer luck. We are fortunate enough to have been born and bred in countries where everyone is taught to read and write. Such ability, however, has no direct bearing on intelligence. I have met illiterate people who are very intelligent, and literate people who are not very intelligent at all.

It is common to hear people in the West snigger at the clothing of those from poor countries, perhaps because it does not fit properly or is not colour coordinated. Or maybe it is the furnishings in their houses that look to us to be incongruous. But these things are largely a matter of taste, preference, or, more to the point, values. We place such a high value on material things, which is one result of living in a society that is driven by greed and consumerism. In our own eyes we are more sophisticated than our brothers and sisters from poorer countries, but we have mistaken this sophistication for maturity. In spiritual things, we are often the immature ones. We seem not to have

understood some of the most basic elements of Christian faith and practice.

Christians in these needy countries have changed my understanding of Christianity and my understanding of the world. I may be able to teach the Bible and that is why I spend time in these countries. People want to understand the books of Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Galatians and I have a body of knowledge in my head that I can impart to them. But in the matters of Christianity that are common to us all – prayer, worship, giving, witness, discipleship – these people have helped me grow. I go to these countries to teach, but invariably return home feeling I have learnt more than I taught.

7. Giving

One feature of the growing church in the non-Western world is the giving of Christians. Everyone seems to tithe. This is not necessarily the case in some areas where traditional missionary practices are still dominant. A submissive church is less inclined to take the initiative; a dependent church is less likely to see the need for sacrificial giving. But among the new generation of churches, Christians have a much greater awareness of personal responsibility to give, and to give sacrificially.

Examples of sacrificial giving are so numerous that I dare not digress here to recount them. But one thing I have observed is that the more money people have, the less likely they are to tithe. I use 'tithe' not as a figure that is locked in as a fixed percentage for everyone regardless of financial status, though it is a proportionate calculation nevertheless. One would expect that the higher the income, the higher the percentage, but in practice the opposite seems to be the case. Those in poor countries have meagre incomes but seem to give a generous percentage, whereas those in rich countries have generous incomes but seem to give a meagre percentage.

The outstanding exception among the wealthy countries is Singapore. In an index I saw recently that listed the top ten countries according to per capita Christian giving, Singapore's figure was almost twice that of the next country on the list.

Admittedly, the average income of church members in Singapore is among the highest in the world, but high income-earners are not always the biggest givers. In Singapore, however, something is different.

8. Hospitality

As we in the West have become more affluent we have become more self-sufficient, and as we become more self-sufficient we become less hospitable. Our Western individualism militates against concern for others, one result of which is that hospitality has become a dying grace in the West. It may seem strange to some that I list hospitality among the blockages to blessing in the Western church, but a lack of hospitality is usually one symptom of a sick church. Christians who show hospitality within the church are thereby practising the sort of love and care that members of the church are to have for each other. Christians who show hospitality to those outside the church are thereby practising love to their neighbours and opening the way to evangelise them.

I could spend much time recounting examples of hospitality I have received from poor people in poor countries. But these Christians are also hospitable to their non-Christian neighbours and that is how many have been brought to Christ. The poor look after each other – that is the only way they survive. The rich do not need to look after anyone, because they are already self-sufficient and their survival is not at risk.

These examples show why Christians in the West find it hard to understand the sort of self-sacrificing discipleship Jesus taught. Our society has blinded us to our deficiencies. The lives of believers in poor countries should challenge us to take strong action to change our lifestyle. Everything within our culture directs us to more and more self-sufficiency and in the process takes us further from the sort of life Jesus requires of us.

9. Personal ambition

The drive for achievement is so intense in our society that most Christians no longer take seriously the demands Jesus

made. The self-sacrificing discipleship Jesus demanded of his followers is seen as an optional extra – something that is okay for those who are into that sort of thing.

As a consequence, Christians across the entire age range of our society are drifting along with the tide of common attitudes. As the middle aged see themselves moving towards old age, they set their eyes on a comfortable retirement. As parents of growing families seek out the best for their children, they expend much time and money on their children's advancement. And as the children progress through to their higher education, their goal is to secure a rewarding vocation. These goals may be legitimate, but are they being viewed from a Christian perspective? Are Christian parents and churches presenting the claims of Jesus Christ to their youth? The issue is not that young people should be challenged to become full-time Christian workers, but that they should be challenged to become full-time Christian disciples, no matter what their ultimate vocation may be.

Christians in the developing world are probably keener than Christians in the West to see their children receive a good education, because in the poorest countries most children will not receive even a basic education. Parents want their children to have an occupation that is something better than selling sugar cane along the street or making sandals out of shredded tyres.

Yet in many of these non-Western countries the campuses of secondary and tertiary educational institutions are awash with Christian activity. Students in those countries have more incentive than students in our countries to achieve worthwhile qualifications, but they also seem more inclined to put the interests of God's kingdom at the centre of their vocational ambitions. The outcome is that these countries see a generation emerging to provide leadership that is competent in secular pursuits and motivated by spiritual values.

10. How we view time

Life in the West dictates that most of us are always busy. Our society almost makes busy-ness a virtue, or even a social indicator. We are obsessed with efficiency, though much of that

obsession arises because of economic considerations – ‘time is money.’ We might not wish our country to be hampered by the sorts of inefficiencies that hamper countries elsewhere, but surely there is a more moderate way. Surely, there must be some pathway that lies between the two extremes.

The values of the kingdom of God are often at odds with those of modern Western society. Human beings are more important than things; relationships are more important than programs; church is more important than vocation; showing mercy is more important than maintaining routines; human values are more important than profits.

Any of us who have lived in developing countries have an endless supply of stories of the frustrations that are part of daily life. Our obsession with efficiency and timetables drives up our blood pressure and supplies national Christians with amused bewilderment. Yet I have heard national Christians complain about the relaxed attitude their compatriots sometimes have towards timetables. It is all very well to be laid back, but to break one’s word, put others to unnecessary trouble, or throw a church activity into chaos because of apathy or laziness is just as inexcusable in a developing country as it is in the West.

For all that, we in the West can learn from our brothers and sisters elsewhere. We must learn, as Jesus taught us, not to be constantly anxious, but to realise that everything is, after all, in God’s hands. We must be prepared to have our routines messed up for the sake of others. We must sacrifice our ‘valuable’ time for the sake of God’s kingdom. We must put pressure on ourselves to live less for self and more for others. Unfortunately, most of the pressure we put on ourselves is of the wrong kind – pressure to achieve things tied to a world that is passing away. The pressure we have to put on ourselves may be the opposite of what will enthuse our employer or advance our personal prosperity, but it is more likely to please Christ.

11. The Word of God

The previous ten points have been listed, more or less, in order of importance. The final point, far from being the least

important, is among the most crucial. In the West, the Word of God is becoming less popular (certainly, less palatable), whereas elsewhere people have a hunger for the Word that we in the West can scarcely imagine. Instead of reducing the preacher's time, they want to increase it. Instead of dealing with an endless string of topical issues, they want to hear the Bible expounded. Instead of sitting and listening passively, they scribble away to record as much as they can. Instead of walking out of the building with perhaps a polite comment to the preacher, they ask the preacher questions so they can learn more. Instead of having just one or two sermons a week, they want as much as can be given. There are exceptions, both in the West and in the non-West, but overall the contrast is stark.

Here in the West we have more versions of the Bible than we can count, and new versions appear almost weekly, it seems – the Women's Bible, the Men's Bible, the Youth Bible, the Oldies' Bible, the Young Marrieds' Bible, the How to be Happy Bible, the Busy Executive's Bible – the list seems endless. And all these versions are published for one main reason: they make money for the publishers. Meanwhile, a large portion of the Christians around the world cannot read the Word of God in their heart language.

A Nigerian who works in Bible translation put it to me this way: 'You have many versions. We cannot even get the verses.' In many churches of Africa, the majority of literate believers do not own a Bible, even one in a second language such as English, French or Portuguese.

The West has a lot to answer for in using its resources to produce a surfeit of versions for a self-indulgent public, while millions of hungry believers do not own any Bible at all. And what has just been said about Bibles can be repeated in relation to biblical reference books, children's books, Scripture lesson material, audio tapes and videos – to say nothing of the equipment that we consider essential to run our church meetings.

Christians in the West are still buying books, but many of these books have only a tenuous connection with the Bible. The

Christian world has followed the secular world, especially the world of television and advertising, in pandering to a public whose interests are largely concerned with self – self-fulfilment, self-image, self-worth, self-assertiveness, self-actualisation – while teaching on less attractive subjects such as righteousness, justice, sin and judgment has largely disappeared.

To make matters worse, this dubious material from the West is being pumped into some of the poorer countries, because the Western producers can afford to send it free, knowing that the poor tend to take anything they can get for nothing. The Western church should be learning from the church in the developing world, but instead, it is spreading the West's disease.

Time to change

The church in the West is in crisis and clearly we have to do something. That may be hard, but somehow each of us has to make the effort to change the way we think and act. This will not happen by itself. We never drift into good habits and no one can make the tough decisions for us. But before we can make the tough decisions we have to acknowledge our need. We have to admit that the Western church is spiritually sick, and all of us who are part of that church are to a greater or lesser degree affected by the sickness.

In many ways the Western church is like the church that the risen Jesus addressed in Laodicea. Like the Laodiceans, we are neither hot nor cold. We are good, respectable, middle class citizens, but we have not caught the fire. Some of us even think that we in the West are God's favourites; because, after all, we are rich, we are prosperous and, physically speaking, we have need of nothing. These are the things that impress us and we think they are the things that impress God. When Jesus begins to speak, we are in for a shock.

Jesus says, in effect, 'You make me sick. You make me want to throw up. You think you are great and prosperous, but I think you are wretched and to be pitied. You think you are sophisticated in all your fancy finery, but from my point of view you're in the nude. Disgusting! You'll have to repent, and that is

not going to be easy. But if you want to be rich and really well dressed, you'll have to get everything from me. You'll have to be like the Jews in Philadelphia, who were forced to admit that they were no longer God's favourites and had to come and fall at the feet of the Philadelphians and learn that I have loved *them* – that's right, Turks, of all people; or Nigerians, Ethiopians, Indians, Chinese or Brazilians, if you wish.'

'If you can learn from them and get the right things from me,' Jesus goes on to say, 'there is hope for you. I am standing at the door, waiting. Is anyone among you going to invite me in? Be assured, those who make the radical change I demand will not be disappointed. On the contrary, they will be conquerors, and because they choose to share my kind of life in the present world, they will share my kind of victory in the world to come. If you have an ear, take heed – before it's too late.'

From *Catching the Fire* (New Zealand, 2006)

Evangelists, pastors and teachers

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul says God gives abilities as gifts to individuals, and in writing to the Ephesians he says God gives individuals as gifts to the church. Among the gifts given to the church are evangelists, pastors and teachers.

When Paul speaks of these gifts in Ephesians 4:11-16, he suggests the sequence that has produced them. The risen Christ, having left his disciples for the last time, equips them to carry out the task of world evangelisation that his triumphant work has made possible. Apostles and prophets lay the foundation, evangelists carry the gospel further afield, pastors and teachers build up the churches, the Christians within those churches carry on the ministry, and the church as a whole grows towards the maturity that is God's goal for his people.

Evangelists

The words 'evangelist' and 'gospel' come from the same Greek word. An evangelist is one who announces the gospel, or good news. The noun 'evangelist' occurs only three times in the New Testament, but the verb forms occur frequently. They are translated by expressions such as 'preaching the gospel' or 'announcing the gospel.'

Although every Christian has a responsibility to make known the good news of Jesus Christ to others, certain Christians have been specially equipped by God to carry out this task more effectively and over a wider area. The chief concern of the early evangelists was to proclaim the good news to those who had not heard it and to establish churches that would then carry on the work. Yet Paul's instruction to Timothy to 'do the work of an evangelist' shows that established churches also could benefit from having an evangelist. In every place it is necessary to keep making known the gospel. Where this is lacking, the church can too easily become complacent, ingrown and weak.

Pastors and teachers

It appears from the grammatical construction of the Greek in Ephesians 4:11 that the two words ‘pastors’ and ‘teachers’ refer to the same people. We might call them pastor-teachers. They are pastors who teach, and teachers who pastor.

The word ‘pastor’ (or ‘shepherd,’ which is from the same Greek word, *poimen*) speaks of leadership and care of the ‘flock’ (Greek: *poimnion*). The word ‘teacher’ speaks of the building up in God’s Word that such leadership involves. In referring to the leaders of God’s people as shepherds, the New Testament writers have simply taken over a well understood Old Testament usage of the word (Num 27:17; Isa 63:11; Jer 50:6; Ezek 34:2).

When the New Testament writers speak of tending, feeding, pastoring or shepherding the flock, they usually do so in relation to the teaching of God’s people through the Word and through the example of the pastor-teachers (John 21:15-16; Acts 20:27-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4). In any church, it is natural that the pastor-teachers would be leaders, or elders, in that church. That is why a requirement for elders is that they must have the ability to discern between wholesome and unwholesome teaching. They should have the ability to oppose what is wrong and teach what is right (Acts 20:29; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9).

A wider ministry

Because the Bible speaks of a variety of spiritual gifts and uses a variety of words to refer to people and positions in the church, we should not be too rigid in classifying people and their functions. If we seek the Bible’s guidance, we must accept the Bible’s flexibility. Although the Bible speaks of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, it also recognises considerable overlapping between their functions. Some people combined within themselves several gifts; for example, Paul (Rom 15:20; 1 Tim 2:7), Silas (Acts 15:32; 17:10-11) and Timothy (1 Tim 4:13-16; 2 Tim 4:5).

Likewise preaching the gospel and teaching the Scriptures are so closely related that at times there seems to be little

difference between preaching and teaching (Acts 5:42; 15:35; 1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 4:2). Preaching might specifically concern proclaiming the gospel to the unevangelised (Acts 8:12; Gal 1:16); teaching might specifically concern instructing those who have believed the gospel (Acts 20:20; 1 Cor 4:17). But teaching is also necessary for those who do not believe (Acts 4:2; 5:21; 18:11; 2 Tim 2:24-26), and preaching the great facts of the gospel is still necessary to challenge believers (Rom 16:25; 2 Cor 4:5).

The ultimate purpose

The deficiencies of the KJV translation of Ephesians 4:12 have often been pointed out. We must not understand the verse to be saying that God's purpose in giving various people as gifts to the church is that they (the evangelists and pastor-teachers) might do all the service of God in the church. Almost all other translations give the correct meaning, which is that the risen Christ has given evangelists and pastor-teachers to the church to equip the believers so that they (the believers) might fulfil the tasks of Christian service. The evangelists and pastor-teachers, far from using their God-given gifts to establish positions of power for themselves within the church, should aim at producing greater ability and independence among the church members at large.

Clergy-dominated churches may need to be reminded that God wants to use gifted leaders to multiply ministries among the ordinary members of the church. Churches with a lay leadership and no clergy may need to be reminded that the church will not achieve its aim of every-member service till it learns to recognise and use the gifts God has given it.

The involvement of all believers in the life and growth of the church does not mean that the church should fill up the week with every possible kind of activity. The goal, as Ephesians chapter 4 tells us, should rather be the development of believers, individually and collectively, till they grow into a state of 'mature adulthood' (v. 13). There is no point in introducing new ideas simply out of the desire to be different (v. 14). In fact, a

highly active church will only display its immaturity if its activities are of the wrong sort. Vitality must be accompanied by knowledge.

On the other hand, knowledge without spiritual life is deadly. In view of this desired balance, Paul speaks of the combination of truth and love as the way towards Christian maturity (v. 15). Perhaps this is the reason why he combines the teacher and the pastor in one gift. To communicate truth effectively, a person should have love. To communicate love effectively, a person should have truth.

From *Outreach* (Australia, 1982)

A simple message

Chapters 28-32 of Isaiah deal with the era of Hezekiah, king of Judea, which was the southern part of the divided Israelite kingdom. The northern part, still called Israel, had recently been conquered by Assyria and its people taken captive to distant lands. Assyria, in demonstration of its growing power, then began demanding money from Judah as a kind of tax or tribute. For a time Judah submitted, but when Hezekiah decided to resist Assyria by refusing to pay any more taxes, Assyria launched a military attack against Judah.

Hezekiah was a godly man and brought about many social and religious reforms in Judah. His weakness was that he became so anti-Assyrian that was tempted to join an alliance with any nation that was also anti-Assyrian. The prophet Isaiah, a close adviser to Hezekiah, opposed any alliance with foreign nations. He preached God's straightforward and uncomplicated message that if the people of Judah, king and ordinary citizens alike, remained true to God and trusted in him, they would have victory. There was no need to trust in foreign alliances.

The citizens of Judah became annoyed at Isaiah's persistent preaching about trusting in God instead of in political schemes, and indignantly asked him if he thought he was teaching children. 'Who does he think he is teaching – babies?' (Isa 28:9). For years Isaiah had been issuing them with blunt one-line statements: 'Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean.' 'Cease to do evil; learn to do good.' 'Correct oppression; defend the fatherless.' 'If you don't believe, you won't be secure.' 'By faith you'll be saved.' 'In trust you'll have strength' (Isa 1:16-17; 7:9; 30:15). They were tired of hearing this same message over and over (Isa 28:10).

Isaiah responded that if they refused to listen to these clear and simple words, God would speak to them in a different language, one whose words they would *not* understand. He was

referring to the language of the Assyrians, who would come and besiege Jerusalem. They might not understand this language, but its 'message' would be simple and uncomplicated – violence, disaster, suffering, death (Isa 28:11-13).

Most of God's messages are not difficult to understand, but they are often hard to follow. We do ourselves a disservice when we think we are above the simple duties of life and choose instead to pursue a path that makes us appear learned and mature. At times we may think the simple words 'trust and obey' are not scholarly enough, not cultured enough, but they are still basic to what God requires.

From *Daily Power* (Thailand, 1982)

Mission in the 1960s

When we look back on things we did in Thailand in the 1960s, Gae and I sometimes say we would do things differently today. The truth is that if we wound back time by 45 years, for ourselves and our environment, we would probably do things much as we did them originally. People in their twenties see life differently from those in their seventies. Also, the world was different then.

Assumptions and expectations

As we set out for Thailand, it never entered our minds that our mission field service would be anything other than long-term. We expected that a period of ten to fifteen years would be required to learn the language, become effective in our work and establish something that would last. By that time, we expected to return to Australia anyway for the years of our children's secondary education.

The incentive to become proficient in the local language was greater in Thailand than in some other countries, such as former British colonies where English was widely spoken. If we were not at home in the local language, we could not have an effective long-term ministry. We were never tempted to get by with English, because virtually no one spoke English.

From the outset we were committed to full-time language study, which went on for the entire first year and most of the second. But language study is not done in a vacuum, and during those two years we kept using whatever Thai we had to reach out in evangelism and start a church. Writing notes in Thai for enquirers and converts marked the beginning of a wider writing ministry, though I was not aware of that at the time. We went to Thailand not to write books, but to reach the lost for Christ. Our aim was to take the gospel to those who had not heard it and plant a church in some place where there was none.

Missionaries

When Gae and I arrived in Thailand, we were only the seventh missionary couple from Christian Assemblies around the world. The seven couples (or families) were scattered around different regions. We were the only ones in Bangkok, and the other six couples were spread over four provinces of southern Thailand. As a group, we inherited no mission structure and no property such as might be found in some former British colonies. Each of us just rented a house and got on with our work of local evangelism, discipling and church planting.

Some of the missionaries ran Bible correspondence courses and others addressed the literacy needs of unreached tribal groups. Whatever the ministry, all of us spent our energies in grass-roots ministries, without the distractions that come with mission property and administration.

The missionaries in our small group came from six countries and provided plenty of variety in age and outlook. There were different viewpoints, interpretations and practices in matters that elsewhere have been known to cause problems, but among us was a wonderful spirit of love and tolerance. A cynical view might be that the reason we got on well was that we lived in different places and saw each other only occasionally, but the friendships were genuine and have proved to be lasting.

Local Christians

In the 1960s we still had the mentality that saw expatriate missionaries in a different light from the local Christians, even though there was much less paternalism in Thailand than in some other countries. About 700 foreign missionaries were resident in Thailand in those days. But if ever a matter arose that produced a difference of view between local Christians and missionaries, whether our group or the wider missionary community, Gae and I invariably found ourselves on the side of the locals.

Unlike people from other missions in Bangkok, Gae and I did not join the missionary fellowships, but found our fellowship with the local Thai Christians. We were told the expatriate

fellowships were necessary to ‘recharge the batteries.’ This struck us as a bit odd. It seemed to be a contradiction for us to tell converts from Buddhism that the Lord could sustain them in a non-Christian environment, if we ourselves, who were supposed to be mature Christians, had to go off to an expatriate missionary fellowship to have our batteries recharged.

In the church we tried to follow a practice of only expecting of the local Christians what we were prepared to do ourselves. Whether in distributing literature around the streets or breaking ground into non-Christian environments, we were part of the group, not organisers who sent others to do the job. At the same time, we were careful not to start activities that required our expertise or finances to keep them going. The work had to belong to the local Christians, not to us. We wanted every activity to be theirs from the start, not something that we started and then had to hand over at a later date.

For all that, our worldview was still largely Western-oriented. It was assumed that initiatives in general came from Western missionaries. Then in the 1970s the Christian world began to change, and to change dramatically, though not until the 1980s, and particularly the 1990s, did I see how revolutionary that change was. Today the church worldwide is very different from what it was when we went out as missionaries in the 1960s. Instead of being mainly Western, it is now mainly non-Western. The thrust for world evangelisation is coming not from rich countries but from poor countries. The church’s energy is found not among Christians who pursue personal success and prosperity, but among those who put God’s interests before their own.

From *Serving Together* (Australia, 2007)

Types and shadows

Like many brought up in conservative churches, I never thought of questioning what I heard from the preachers and teachers within our circles. We had 'the truth' and that was that. In my late teens I went to what were known as Emmaus Evening Classes, which were a great help in getting me started on Bible study. We had good teachers, with end-of-term examinations, and on the subject covering the typology of the tabernacle, the priesthood and the offerings, I got 100%. To an enthusiastic but uncritical teenager, the tabernacle studies showed convincingly that not only was Christ the only way of salvation, but that the Christian Assemblies (with which I was associated) were the only way of 'doing church.' I wondered how any Christian could not be one of us!

This began to change when, at the age of twenty, I went to a full-time residential Bible college where lecturers encouraged us to 'test all teaching.' Preachers may be godly men, but are their assertions biblical or merely from the imagination?

A wise teacher

The Bible college was located in Sydney and lecturers were mainly from Christian Assemblies in Sydney. The lecturer on the Pentateuch was Tom Carson, who in later years became a good friend and one with whom I shared many conferences. He was a most careful Bible scholar and was regarded then as probably the top Bible teacher in Australian assemblies. He was a gracious man, so measured and sincere in his speech that most of his hearers would nod their heads approvingly even when he said outrageous things. Radical statements were understood to be orthodox, simply because Tom Carson spoke them.

Sitting under Tom Carson's teaching back in 1959-60 was a revelation for me, mainly in the attitudes he fostered within us students. He was among those who taught me to think. He had a

number of classic statements, of which the following readily come to mind. 'Where able scholars differ it is wise not to be dogmatic.' 'There is no point in spiritualising the Bible to draw deep lessons from it if we fail to grasp its original meaning.' 'Some people preach beautiful sermons on the meanings of names or the typological significance of details, but miss the whole point of the passage.' 'Preachers may profess to be giving us the wheat of the Word, but only be giving us the chaff of the imagination.' He never raised his voice, never spoke disparagingly, and was never sarcastic or judgmental, yet in the process he demolished many of the 'fanciful teachings' (another of his expressions) I had uncritically swallowed.

When Mr Carson (as we respectfully called him) lectured through Exodus and then into Leviticus and Numbers, I found myself rethinking a few things. I had been taught that blue was the heavenly colour and red the earthly colour, but Tom (as we less respectfully referred to him) pointed out that the Bible contained nothing to justify such an interpretation. Preachers were assigning meanings and equivalents as it suited them. Someone else might say that blue represented peace and red represented love. In today's world, a person might say that blue represented conservatism and red represented communism. We cannot make a biblical detail represent whatever we choose.

The only clue the Bible gives concerning the significance of the colours of the tabernacle cloth and the high priest's clothing is Exodus 28:2: 'You shall make for the priests holy garments for glory and for beauty.' Whatever the decorative handiwork was, it was intended to show colour, splendour, glory, beauty. Likewise the mixture of spices in the incense was to make a substance that burnt well and gave off smoke that smelt and looked good. Nothing is to be gained by inventing spiritual meanings for each of the ingredients.

The danger of being too clever

After being told in my youth that the timber in the tabernacle components represented Christ's humanity and the overlaying gold represented his deity, Tom pointed out that such a view

could almost be called heretical. Christ's humanity was not hidden or covered by his deity. The most likely reasons for the metal covering over the wood were to produce splendour and protect the wood.

As the years passed and I began to write books, I reached further conclusions. The metal elements did more than give splendour and protection. For example, the metal bases put in the ground to receive the timber components ensured a snug fit and preserved from decay and termites. Because the tabernacle was a mobile sanctuary, not a fixed building, it was easy to put together and take apart – a prefabricated structure that was light to handle and convenient to transport.

The details given to Moses are not complete. They give overall dimensions and specify the products, but much was left to the creativity of those who made it, such as the thickness of the timber, the designs of the embroidery and the shape of the all-covering weatherproof tent. If we tried to build the tabernacle based on the details given to Moses, we would soon discover that we needed to add further details to ensure that the structure would in fact stand up. No details are given to specify the depth of the foundations, the method by which the tops of the columns and frames were tied together, and so on.

Instead of searching for New Testament meanings hidden in the tabernacle's details, we should be trying to understand what the Israelites of Moses' time might have understood. And in so doing we shall learn valuable lessons. We shall learn how deficient the Old Testament worship set-up was, though it was the best available till Christ came. When Christ came, his life and work underlined the shortcomings of the old system. The book of Hebrews tells us that if we think the old will enhance the new, we are wrong.

Some examples

A simple example of this fundamental meaning within the tabernacle system is found in the high priest's clothing. We should not be trying to find typological significance in all the details, but trying to find what the details might have meant to

those for whom the system was designed. In the high priest's clothing, the names of the twelve tribes were inscribed on two sets of precious stones – one set on the breast-piece and the other on the shoulder pieces. This helped the high priest to remain constantly aware that when he entered the presence of God, he was symbolically carrying the entire nation with him. He did not enter God's presence merely as one highly privileged individual, but as the representative of all the people.

The high priest's application of the blood was the best he could do as a cleansing ritual, because that is all it was – ritual. People were saved by grace, through faith,' which has always been the case, whether in Old Testament times, New Testament times, or today. The rituals did not enable anyone to receive salvation. Without faith, they were pointless. The blood of an animal could not take away sin (which should have been obvious to anyone), but it showed that sin could not be atoned for without cost. It showed what atonement involved. The point I make is that we do not honour Christ by trying to embellish the flawed system of Old Testament times. We honour Christ by expounding his riches as portrayed in the New Testament. That is what the book of Hebrews does.

Hebrews talks about the Old Testament system not by showing how it enhances our view of Christ, but by showing how ineffectual it was. It belonged to the shadows, not the light, and something from the shadows cannot illumine something that is in the full light. The glories of Christ, which shine brightly on page after page of the New Testament, will not be enhanced by something coming from the dark. The old system provided an outline or shadow, and that was helpful so long as the reality had not arrived, but now that the reality has arrived, nothing is to be gained by going back to the outline or shadow.

Basic consideration

Whatever part of the Bible I am reading or expounding, Old Testament or New, I have some basic considerations. At the risk of over-simplifying, I could say that I am asking myself a few questions about the part of the Bible being dealt with. Who is

saying this? Who is he talking to? Why is he saying it? What does he mean? Now what can I learn from this?

The Old Testament may be pre-Christian but it is not sub-standard. We do not have to dress it up in New Testament clothes to give it legitimacy. All the New Testament proof-texts we quote in relation to the authority, inspiration, instruction, usefulness and relevance of Scripture are actually references to the Old Testament. It is the Old Testament writings that the New Testament writers refer to, because those writings constitute the only Scriptures they had.

Problems with typology are part of an overall problem many Christians have when they carve up the Bible into parts they see as relevant or not relevant. Dispensationalism made the problem worse, though it is on the wane these days. It had scarcely been heard of until J N Darby propagated it. I have no problem with pre-millennialism, but Darby's theories gave pre-millennialism a bad name. He also heavily influenced typological teaching, which, like Dispensationalism, was the arbitrary imposition of a system upon the Bible, rather than allowing the Bible to speak for itself.

How to say things

Let me conclude where I began, with Tom Carson. Different speakers handle things in different ways. Whereas Tom Carson spoke with precision, I tend to be a bit rough around the edges – rather colloquial. Like him, however, I have learnt that usually it is not advisable to try to destroy long-held beliefs by head-on assault. That only gets people angry and offside. They turn off and refuse to listen to anything else that is said. Yet somehow we have to deal with views or interpretations that are seriously flawed.

Tom Carson did not hesitate to do this, but at times his words were so guarded and his manner so gracious that many mistook his criticism for approval. While he was saying things that were radical, his hearers were interpreting him as supporting their traditional views. They were not startled. It may therefore be necessary, when tackling things that people think they

know, to say them in such a different way that they *are* startled – not knocked off their chairs, but at least made to see things they had not thought of before.

Concerning the tabernacle and its associated religious services, it may help our hearers understand things better if we start not by spiritualising features but by painting word pictures that help them see things in their original setting. We start with the practicalities of the old era rather than leap into the theology of the new era that has come through Jesus Christ. We see how the ancient Israelites, following God's instructions, erected a structure and followed a system that was suited to pre-Christian times.

Ancient Israel again

In looking at the tabernacle in its original setting, we could paint a picture showing what the Israelites might have done when they wanted to set up a new camp. After getting out their shovels, picks or whatever they used in those days, they dug a rectangular trench the size of the pre-fabricated structure. Into this trench they fitted metal bases, which seem to have locked together and so determined the perimeter of the structure. I picture these metal bases as something like the concrete blocks we are familiar with, which have two ready-made holes. Into these holes they dropped the frames of the tabernacle walls – a kind of mortise and tenon construction. They then ran horizontal bars through these vertical frames to hold them together, and tied everything at the corners and tops so that the walls and columns would not fall over.

With the framework now erected, they then threw various cloth coverings over the frame to form the ceiling and external walls. They also hung other pieces of cloth from the columns to form the entrances and internal partition. An animal-skin tent was pitched over the whole.

The structure was of a kind Israelites were familiar with, rather like the Bedouin tents still common today. From the outside it was just a huge drab-looking tent, but on the inside it presented a striking display of partitions and hangings made of

beautiful multi-coloured fabric, all of which were highlighted by gleaming precious metal. Like the high priest's clothing, it was a display of 'glory and beauty.'

One could go on to describe the surrounding courtyard, the articles in the courtyard and the furniture inside the tent itself, along with matters relating to the priests and the offerings as mentioned briefly above. All this helps people today understand how the pre-Christian system operated. This will yield valuable lessons in its own right, but at the same time it will show the weaknesses in the old system and thereby point to a better way.

Full light, no more shadows

Although the interpretation of the Old Testament will be found within it, the completion of what God was doing will only be found in the New. In an era when the reality had not yet come, any shadow or pre-figuring was welcome, but once the reality has come, no one wants to go back to the shadows. If I am awaiting my wife's arrival at the international airport, I may be excited when I see a shadow like hers approaching the exit door, but once she emerges through the door, I think no more about the shadow. The real person has arrived.

The ancient Israelite system demonstrated aspects of God's truth that at that stage were only shadows, things that served a purpose till the reality arrived. They could be understood in broad outline but not in specific detail. They showed what salvation entailed but they could not bring that salvation. They gave hope to people living in an era when the Saviour had not yet come. The system showed that sin needed purging, but the system could not purge it. Now that Christ has come, the deficiencies of the old are replaced by the perfection of the new. The pictures and shadows give way to the reality.

To a correspondent in India (2010)

Imitators

New Christians often copy what they see in older Christians, and whether they are helped or hindered in this will depend largely on whether the example they see is good or bad. Paul was confident enough about his way of life when in Thessalonica that when he wrote to the new Christians there he said, 'You know what kind of men we proved to be among you' and 'You are witnesses how holy and righteous and blameless was our behaviour among you' (1 Thess 1:5; 2:10). He had been an example they could well follow.

Christians must be careful, however, not to become followers of anyone unthinkingly. True, they may be helped by a good example, but they must remember that not all examples are good. The only true standard is God, demonstrated in human form in Jesus Christ.

Paul was well aware of this and when he wrote to these new Christians he made it clear that as Jesus had suffered at the hands of his countrymen so would they. Also, they had seen with their own eyes what Paul suffered in Thessalonica, so when they accepted his message and believed in Jesus, they knew what to expect. But no suffering could take away the joy that the living Christ gave them through his indwelling Spirit. That is why Paul could say to the Thessalonian believers, 'You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit' (1 Thess 1:6).

Whatever encouragement or inspiration Paul's example may have brought, he reminded these new believers that their salvation depended not on him, but on God. 'When you received the word of God from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you' (1 Thess 2:13). If we are upheld in our Christian belief mainly by the strong personality of some other Christian, our faith is not firmly based. We could even be heading for trouble.

Paul was never one to deceive people or gain converts through painting a false picture of what might lie ahead. The Thessalonians may have been imitators of a notable Christian in behaviour considered desirable, but they became imitators of other notable Christians in something not normally considered desirable, namely, persecution. Some people fear suffering at the hands of foreign invaders, but the followers of Jesus may suffer at the hands of fellow-citizens in their own country. This is what happened to the Thessalonian believers. 'You became imitators of the churches in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your countrymen as they did from the Jews' (1 Thess 2:14).

Whether in New Testament times or today, the kinds of people who killed Jesus also attack his followers. They drive out evangelists, displease God and obstruct the proclamation of the gospel (1 Thess 2:15). The assurance that we belong to Jesus Christ comes from things favourable and unfavourable. If we are true Christians, we can look back with gratitude to those exemplary believers whose faith we follow, whether through good times or bad.

From *Daily Power* (Thailand, 1983)

The free thinkers

During the 1960s, Francis Schaeffer made a considerable contribution to the Christian cause by helping people who were troubled by society's drift towards non-rational experiences. Although I am not a disciple of Schaeffer, I have met many who have looked to him for help, especially by way of his book *Escape from Reason*. But many said they found the book difficult, so I bought a copy and read it for myself.

I can sympathise with these confused readers. I have no expertise in the areas of Schaeffer's studies, but I have at least tried to understand what he is talking about. In this article I have combined some of Schaeffer's main ideas with a few of my own, in the hope that it might help those who are looking for the sort of help that Schaeffer can give.

Made in the image of God

Human beings are different from all other creatures in that God made them in his image. Just as the image of the moon on the water cannot exist independently of the moon, so human beings cannot exist independently of God. They are not autonomous. Other animals have their 'animality' in themselves, and if they have food, shelter, space and the opportunity for reproduction, they are satisfied. Not so humans. Their humanity is not within themselves, but exists in their unique relationship with God. They are made so that the highest part of their nature can be satisfied only by God.

People instinctively know there is a 'higher something,' but if they will not accept God, they will put something else in God's place. They may use art, music, cinema, drugs or a range of other avenues to attain some 'higher experience.' They want this experience independently of God; they want to be autonomous. But only God is autonomous, and when people use their intellect, will-power, skills and emotions to pursue their

autonomy, these things take the place of God. Their natural capacities 'eat up' God, so to speak.

Christians assert that the spiritual element within human beings can be satisfied only by God. If people do not accept this Christian assertion, they will seek to satisfy their spiritual desires with natural things. The spiritual and the natural have been reconciled through Jesus Christ, so that believers enjoy life that is truly unified. For unbelievers, the spiritual and the natural are separated, with a great gulf between them. If they refuse to bridge this gulf through Christ, they may try to bridge it in some other way. They try to reach their 'higher experience' by an irrational 'leap.' This experience may be contrary to reason or nature, but it is an assertion of their independence of God.

The modern pessimists

We can easily see how the philosophy behind this irrationality may lead to drug-taking, but it has also produced much of the modern art, literature and theatre. People want to exercise their freedom without restraints; they want to be the centre of the universe; they want to be God. But what is the point of being God if no one knows what you are talking about? Human beings crave for autonomous freedom, even if it means giving up their rationality. Poets, artists, composers and film-makers can produce work that defies rational assessment. No one knows whether it is real or illusion, sane or insane.

Despair is one offspring from this new thinking. Logical thinking and rational art have not led to a higher spiritual experience. All is pessimism. Life has no meaning, no purpose, no significance. Only through a non-rational 'leap' will people get optimism.

This is so not only in art, music and literature, but also in religion. No longer is there faith in a real Jesus who lived, died and rose again so that people might have new life. The only difference between modern liberal theology and modern liberal thought in other fields is in the terminology. The thinking is the same. There is no personal God; Jesus is just a symbol; faith is whatever path one pursues to attain the 'final experience,'

whether that experience be one's God, one's drama or one's painting. The main thing is to *think* there is a God; any God will do. And because human beings are made to seek after God, their desires are unlimited. They therefore try all sorts of acts of desperation in search of the 'ultimate experience.' This is behind the present-day drug problem.

Christians might readily see the problem of drugs, but they do not so readily see that the same thinking is behind most presentations of the arts and the media. In stories relating to crime and sex, the images and reporting show all the stark details. They wake us from our sleep and shock us out of our complacency, only to tell us there is nothing there. Life is meaningless.

Things that are wrong, instead of being pronounced wrong, are shown in a better light through the use of favourable images and music. Slowly but surely, we are being worked on. Faith is being shifted from the absolute to the relative, from the rational to the irrational, from the objective to the subjective. It then becomes nothing more than one's viewpoint or experience, and therefore is unchallengeable. The irrational has become the absolute.

Well-meaning, but confused

Many ordinary citizens are uncomfortable with this new thinking and would like to uphold the traditional dignity and values of human society. Alas, they do not know how to, because they too have left God out of the picture. Often they still think in the right way – right is right and wrong is wrong – but they no longer know why. They cannot understand their children who think in the new way. Words that they use have a different meaning in the minds of their children.

This applies even to Christian vocabulary, whether used in Christian circles or in the wider community. To be 'Christian' might mean nothing more than to be human; that is, to do whatever is desirable at a particular moment. Sexual relations between two unmarried people, or between two people of the same sex, may therefore be spoken of as a 'Christian' expression

of love, even though it may involve breaking the specific morality that Christ taught.

The modern idea, put simply, is this. In the rational world life is meaningless. Right and wrong do not exist. What a person thinks right is right. Pornography and sexual immorality do not exist, because people do not see their behaviour as morally wrong or dirty. If there is no God, there is no divine standard by which to judge things. At the same time, people look for some higher experience to lift them out of a meaningless world. But since they reject the role of Christian faith in bridging the gap between the spiritual and the natural, their only way is by an irrational leap.

The Christian way

Christians do not need such a leap. They see all areas of human life as related to God, because all human beings are made in his image. They may be separated from God through sin, but they are not nothing. They are not animals or machines. The marks of God's image are still upon them; they can still love, they can still paint beauty, they can still compose melodies, they can still achieve scientific marvels.

The attainment of the 'spiritual something' that people desire comes not through an irrational leap, but through a rational faith in a living person who has himself bridged the gap perfectly. This person, Jesus Christ, is the complete human being that God originally intended. By his death he removed sin so that the image might be restored, the bridge rebuilt. No longer is there a separation between the natural and the spiritual, and no longer is there a defiant search for human autonomy. Christ alone is Lord, and he is Lord of the whole life. Our intellect, our morality, our emotions, our religion – none is independent of God. The image is restored, not regardless of God, but by finding its true meaning in God.

From *Tidings* (Australia, 1972)

Faith, hardship and growth

Christians from poor countries who have stayed with us in Brisbane are fascinated by many aspects of our everyday life. One item of frequent interest is the garbage collection truck with a mechanical arm that picks up the bin, then hoists and upturns it in one swift movement that transfers the garbage from the bin to the truck. One person asked me to take a photo, so when I told the driver what I was about to do, he asked, 'Don't they have trucks like this in their country?' 'Trucks like this?' I exploded. 'They don't even have a garbage collection!' The incident shows what little understanding many in the West have of others. They cannot believe that our way of life is not the norm for humanity.

On the other hand, the visitors from these countries are just as incredulous when they learn of the public welfare that our governments provide – and the amount of tax they take from us to pay for it. They cannot believe that such a system would work in their country, where citizens do not expect fair government, do not enjoy national security and have no awareness of the basic freedoms that we in the West take for granted. Christians in these countries, living in circumstance of constant uncertainty, have learnt to trust in God. They survive only by faith.

Faith that works

One reason why many Christians in the West have forgotten how to live by faith is that for them life is apparently so secure that they have no need for faith. Through government provisions and personal affluence, everything appears to be under control. They thank God for their comfortable circumstances and expect that he will guard everything for them. Then, when things go wrong, they become disappointed with God.

Many Christians who live in more difficult circumstances respond differently to adversity. Their attitude is not 'If God makes things right for me, I'll follow him,' but 'Although God

does not seem to have made things right for me, I'll follow him.' Their faith is not conditional upon the removal of hardship; it gives them the strength to bear hardship. A person in a well-developed country may have an under-developed faith, while a person in an under-developed country may have a well-developed faith. A baby yells when it cannot get what it wants; a mature person has learnt to deny self and exercise patience.

Hardship is no setback

In most countries where the church is growing, Christians are suffering hardship. This may or may not be through the hostility of religious fanatics or governments (for some countries are decidedly pro-Christian), but through natural disasters, wars, famine, poverty, mismanagement or corruption. Hardship can come through poor health, inadequate housing, lack of good food and water, or frequent deaths in the family. But, as the Bible says, Christians in such circumstances often demonstrate that suffering produces endurance, character and hope. Faith is proved to be genuine and believers have a greater awareness of God's love.

The number of missionaries from these difficult countries is increasing, but many seem to pick the toughest places to go to. A Nigerian, speaking to other Nigerians through a local magazine, wrote, 'Suffering for Christ and his kingdom is basic to the Christian faith, especially as it relates to missionary enterprise. We are in a violent world. If we are to make any headway in the assignment given us by our Lord Jesus, we must be prepared to endure suffering, hunger, rejection and even death. So long as we remain in this world, suffering is helpful to our faith.'

In typically robust Nigerian style, the writer concluded, 'We should never allow suffering to deter us. Rather it should stimulate us towards accomplishing great things for God. To a large extent our attitude is what determines the role that suffering will play in our walk with God. Should we embrace suffering or avoid it; ignore it or endure it? The truth is that suffering for Christ is part of our calling. Rather than dodge it, we should anticipate situations that will require us boldly to identify

ourselves with the suffering of Christ. We should not put ourselves in unavoidable trouble, but neither should we shy away from opportunities to suffer legitimately for Christ. It is the gateway to glory.’

Growth where there is risk

At a conference I attended in Cambodia were a number of pastors and evangelists from Vietnam and Laos, two countries grouped with Saudi Arabia, Somalia and North Korea as among the most hostile to local Christians. Although these Vietnamese and Lao believers risked their lives in travelling to such a conference, they saw nothing heroic in their actions. The only Christianity they knew was lived by faith in God and at great personal risk.

Yet in both Laos and Vietnam the church was growing. In Laos it had grown from 15,000 to 50,000 in ten years. In the capital city there were now 8,000 Christians instead of forty, and eleven churches instead of one. In neighbouring Vietnam, one pastor I spoke with said that when he left the state-sanctioned church to go underground, he had a mere six people. From that beginning, his ministry grew over the next ten years to sixty-three churches with 7,000 believers.

When the governments of Vietnam and Laos saw they could not control the church’s growth, persecution became intense. But the believers did not see suffering as something to be avoided; it was what they expected if they were committed to Jesus Christ. They read in the Bible that Christians were not to be surprised by the ‘fiery ordeal’ that came upon them.

At times we in the West are not only surprised if things go against us, but may even think God has deserted us. The Bible says that God will never leave or forsake us, but it says also that he never promised to excuse us from all hardship and testing. Disciples of Jesus are followers of Jesus, and the natural desire we have to avoid suffering should never be used as an excuse for avoiding the path that Jesus trod.

From *International Perspectives* (England, 2007)

Alexandria, city of the learned

The conquests of Alexander the Great were decisive and extensive, as he moved with astonishing speed from his Greek homeland across all that remained of the Persian Empire. His conquest of Egypt was marked by the construction of a magnificent coastal city which he named Alexandria, as a monument to himself. Alexandria was a strategic sea port and soon developed into a busy centre of commercial and manufacturing activity. Its ships carried Egypt's corn to Greece and Rome (Acts 27:6; 28:11). Architecturally, it was so striking that it came to be regarded as the greatest Greek city of the time. It was also a centre of learning, from which various influences were felt in the early days of Christianity.

Scholarly writers

Alexandria's population was a mixture of Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Jewish people. In such a city it could be expected that Greek philosophers would be prominent, but a school of reputable Jewish writers also emerged. From these scholars came many writings that spread widely among Jews of the pre-Christian period. But these writings, although highly regarded, were never accepted into the Old Testament.

A more important contribution from the Jewish scholars in Alexandria came from a group of seventy men who prepared the first Greek translation of the Old Testament. This is known as the Septuagint, often abbreviated as LXX, the Roman letters for seventy.

The reason for the production of a Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament was that the Greek language, through Alexander's conquests, spread throughout Alexander's empire and within a short time was its most commonly spoken language. Although the Septuagint was originally prepared for orthodox Jews of the pre-Christian era, those who possibly benefited most

from it were the early Christians. Among those early Christians, most were Greek-speaking, even those who came from a Jewish background, and the Septuagint provided them with a ready-made Greek translation of the Old Testament. The writers of the New Testament, in quoting from the Old Testament, usually used the Septuagint rather than make their own translation from Hebrew.

In matters concerning God and religion, the Septuagint was particularly helpful to preachers and writers of New Testament times. This is because the Septuagint translators chose their words carefully, knowing that words from a pagan background can convey wrong ideas if used carelessly in matters of the Bible. This is a common problem, in any era or country, when translating the Scriptures into languages coloured by other religions. Many Greek religious words had meanings that related to pagan religious practices and therefore the Septuagint translators did all they could to avoid any contamination of the Old Testament Scriptures. They sought to give words meaning or significance in the context of Hebrew ideas, not Greek ideas.

This is something that we too must bear in mind when we read the New Testament. Although many Greek words reflect popular usage, others reflect theological ideas that come from the Hebrew Old Testament. The words may be Greek, but they are used against the background of the Israelite religion rather than the pagan religions.

Eloquent speakers

While having a reputation for care in translation, the Alexandrian school of Jewish Old Testament scholars also had a reputation for extravagance in interpretation. Many of these men enjoyed the philosophical atmosphere of Alexandria and, when expounding the Scriptures, often got carried away with their own imaginative expositions. Among the general public they were seen as learned and eloquent speakers and they readily became popular.

The New Testament mentions the activity of one of these Alexandrian preachers, a man called Apollos, whose knowledge

of Old Testament references to the Messiah was extraordinary. He was an eloquent speaker with a quick mind, which enabled him to debate with Jews who refused to accept that Jesus was the Messiah. At the same time, being a fairly new believer in Jesus, he lacked knowledge in some Christian teachings. But he was willing to learn, even from ordinary Christians who did not have his scholastic background. The fluent debater learnt from a couple of manual labourers and he soon became a powerful preacher. Learning and eloquence may be assets for preachers, but only if the preachers are humble and always ready to learn, no matter who the teachers may be (Acts 18:24-28).

This learning experience of Apollos took place in Ephesus, on the west coast of Turkey. When he went across to Corinth, in southern Greece, the Ephesian Christians wrote to the Corinthian Christians to recommend him to them as a worthy teacher. Foolishly, the immature Corinthians made favourites of different teachers and soon there was tension between groups in the church. Among these groups was a pro-Apollos faction and a pro-Paul faction. Paul condemned this formation of factions, pointing out that he and Apollos were not in competition, but worked in cooperation. They were fellow servants of God (1 Cor 1:11-12; 3:4-9).

Christians are foolish when they make favourites of one preacher, or indeed of any of God's servants, at the expense of another. Sometimes the preacher may also be at fault. Not so with Apollos, who seems to have been displeased that the Corinthians created factions. That would explain why, after leaving Corinth, he thought it best not to return for a while. This was in spite of Paul's enthusiastic urging – showing that Paul likewise had no thought of any competition between preachers (1 Cor 16:12).

Good outcomes

Apollos apparently continued as a travelling Christian preacher for many years. Towards the end of Paul's life, Apollos visited Crete, where another of Paul's fellow-workers, Titus, had to deal with serious difficulties in the churches. Paul urged Titus

to welcome Apollos as someone who could be of help. When Paul asked Titus to give Apollos, along with his travelling companion Zenas, further supplies so that he could continue his journey, it suggests that Apollos might have been sent to Crete by Paul and been the carrier of Paul's letter to Titus (Titus 3:13; cf. 1:5).

Whatever the local circumstances were, both Paul and Apollos kept preaching the gospel, teaching the Christians and building up churches, probably at all times speaking the Greek language and preaching from the Greek version of the Old Testament. The influence of Alexandria was long-lasting and widespread.

From *Christian Torch* (Thailand, 1978)

A king-priest

One Bible character who has puzzled and fascinated the people of God down through the years is the man Melchizedek. Little is said about him in the Bible, but the few references to him indicate that he was a man of unusual importance.

Melchizedek and Abraham

Melchizedek first appears in the Bible story when he met Abraham as Abraham was returning from victory over a group of invaders. Like Abraham, Melchizedek was a worshipper of the Most High God. In fact, he was God's priest. In addition, he was ruler of the Canaanite city-state of Salem, the place that later became known as Jeru-salem. As king-priest he bore some lofty titles, but, more importantly, he exhibited the character that was in keeping with those titles. Here was one who could be called king of righteousness, king of peace and priest of the Most High God (Heb 7:1-10).

In blessing the victor, Melchizedek reminded Abraham that God, and no other, was the true owner of heaven and earth, and therefore God was the one who had given Abraham victory. Abraham gladly acknowledged this, firstly by making a costly offering to God's priest and then by refusing to accept any reward from the Canaanite rulers he had helped rescue. God alone was the ruler of Canaan. He had promised Canaan to Abraham and his descendants, and he controlled Abraham's affairs in Canaan (Gen 14:1-24).

Melchizedek and David

God remained faithful to his promises to Abraham, and in due course Abraham's descendants, the nation Israel, conquered and possessed Canaan. Jerusalem, however, proved to be very difficult to take. Not until David became king, more than two hundred years after Israel had taken possession of Canaan, was Jerusalem conquered.

David's conquest of Jerusalem was probably the most notable achievement in his illustrious career, for it changed the pattern of Israel's history. It immediately won David nationwide support, whereas previously the people had been fragmented through tribal jealousies. Jerusalem would be the centre of David's kingdom – not merely the political capital, but also the religious centre. David brought the ark of God into Jerusalem, and initiated plans for the construction of a permanent temple to crown the city (2 Sam 5:6-12; 6:16-18; 7:1-16).

Being also a notable song-writer and musician, David often composed songs to celebrate important events. His conquest of Jerusalem and the establishment of his throne there seem to provide the circumstances that produced one of his best known psalms, numbered in our Bible as 110.

Psalm 110

Although the purpose of this psalm was to celebrate David's victory, those for whom he composed it were most likely the temple singers. David had at last taken Jerusalem and now ruled as successor to the great Melchizedek. As heir to Melchizedek's magnificent titles, David was now Jerusalem's king-priest (this priesthood being distinct from the Aaronic priesthood). As ruler of Salem and God's representative to his people, David was now king of peace and priest of the Most High God. It was as if God had invited David to sit at his right hand, in the place of supreme power; for if he could conquer Jerusalem, nothing could stop him conquering all enemies and making them, as it were, his footstool (v. 1).

The singers assured David that God was with him 'to send forth his mighty scepter,' so that from the hill of Zion David would rule his people and conquer his foes (v. 2). David was also assured that his people would offer themselves to him willingly for the task of spreading his rule throughout Israel and beyond. An army of young men with the life-giving freshness of dew and the strength of youth would present themselves to their king. 'From the womb of the morning, like dew his youthful ones would come to him' (v. 3).

Just as the authority of Melchizedek, the representative of the Most High God, was not limited by national boundaries, so David's authority in the name of God would be boundless, both in time and in extent. He too would be 'a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek' (v. 4). Because the Lord was at his right hand, he could expect universal conquest as he 'executed judgment against the nations' and 'shattered chiefs over the wide earth' (v. 5-6). David had no need to fear failure in this task, because God would refresh him as he 'drank from the brook by the way.' God would renew his vigour continually, 'lifting up his head' till he stood victorious, master of all (v. 7).

Melchizedek, David and Christ

It becomes clear as we read this psalm that the language is excessive when applied literally to David. This is hardly surprising. Most nations have a tendency to exaggerate their status in their nationalistic songs ('land of hope and glory') and most kings accrue to themselves a list of titles that sound impressive but may mean little ('Shah-en-Shah, King of kings, Light of the Aryans, Centre of the universe').

David was only a very faint picture of the ideal, universal king-priest. The words of the psalm are ill-fitting when interpreted literally of David, but they are entirely suitable when applied to David's great descendant, the Messiah (2 Sam 7:12-16; Luke 1:32-33).

Jews in later times interpreted the psalm as applying to the Messiah, and Jesus agreed that this was a correct application. The words that the temple singers sang in praise to David were words written by David himself; but, as Jesus pointed out, they were written under the inspiration of the Spirit in praise of the Messiah. Thus, the opening words of the psalm, by which the singers expressed homage to David (calling him 'my lord'), were the same words by which David expressed homage to the Messiah. The Messiah, who everyone knew would be David's descendant, was also David's Lord. That Messiah was Jesus. Though a son of David, he was also Lord of David, for he was God (Matt 22:42-45; see also Acts 2:34-35).

The so-called Melchizedek priesthood that David inherited was a priesthood in name only. It was nothing more than one more title to add to the impressive list of titles worn by a king. Christ's priesthood after the order of Melchizedek is more than just a title. It is true, complete and eternal. He is a priest, not by some physical or national inheritance, but by the power of an indestructible life (Heb 7:16-17). His conquest and rule is not limited to the territorial ambitions of some small Middle Eastern country, but is universal. He will reign until he will actually 'put all enemies under his feet' (1 Cor 15:25). It is he alone who 'is called Faithful and True' and it is he alone who 'in righteousness judges and makes war;' for it is he alone who 'has the name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords' (Rev 19:11,16).

From *Treasury* (New Zealand, 1982)

To fear . . . and to deny

Two words that are used in the Bible in both a good and a bad sense are the words 'fear' and 'deny.' By examining the way the Bible uses these two words, believers may be forced to look carefully at the way they live. They might ask themselves if their lives are characterised by fear and denial, and if so whether this is in the good sense or the bad.

To fear

People naturally fear things, events, individuals or power groups that they see as threatening, as having power to control or destroy them. In some cases this may be a cowardly fear, but in others a very healthy fear, amounting to respect or reverence (Rom 13:3-4). It is in this latter sense that people are to fear those who have authority over them and, in particular, to fear God (Lev 19:3; Ps 34:11; Rom 13:3,7; 1 Peter 2:17).

Although sinners have good reason to fear God because of the punishment that will fall upon them, believers fear God in a different sense. Their fear is mixed with love for him. Without having seen Christ, they love him, yet in their hearts they reverence him as Lord (Deut 6:2,5; 1 Peter 1:8; 3:15). Some believers might obey God simply because they fear his punishment, but such obedience displays an immature love. They should obey God because they love him (1 John 4:17-18; 5:3).

Love for God is at the very heart of the relationship that Christians have with God. This does not mean, however, that they are excused from God's judgment. God still requires obedience and holiness. God is the almighty Judge as well as the loving Father, and therefore Christians must have a healthy fear of him as well as a warm love for him (1 Peter 1:16-17). Such an attitude towards God guarantees God's help in living a life that is pleasing to him and beneficial to the believers themselves. The Old Testament tells us that the Lord 'takes pleasure in those who

fear him' (Ps 147:11). The New Testament tells us that he carries out his purposes in their lives 'according to his good pleasure' (Phil 2:12-13).

This awareness of God's activity in the lives of believers gives them confidence in a life that is full of dangers and uncertainties. Those who fear the Lord, as well as enjoying his Word, have confidence amid life's uncertainties. They do not fear, 'even though the earth should change and the mountains shake in the heart of the seas' (Ps 46:2; 112:1,7). If they 'reverence Christ as Lord,' they will have no fear of those who attack them, whether physically or through slander and accusations (1 Peter 3:14-15).

To deny

The New Testament has much to say about denial, both in the bad sense and in the good. Denial in the bad sense has to do with openly disowning or rejecting God. Some people deny God publicly by declaring openly that they no longer belong to him, or no longer want to be identified with Christ (Matt 10:33; 26:70-72; cf. Acts 3:12-14). This is a temptation to which Christians are particularly vulnerable in times of persecution. The risen and victorious Christ therefore gives special commendation for those who, in times of stress, steadfastly refuse to deny him (Rev 2:13; 3:8).

However, it is not only in times of stress that believers might deny their Lord. Wrong behaviour, even without words, can be a denial of their Christian faith. Those who are heartless towards the needy are denying the faith. As Paul says, they 'profess to know God, but deny him by their deeds' (1 Tim 5:8; Titus 1:16). But shameful denial of Christ and his teachings, no matter in what form, is not irreversible. A person might deny Christ in a moment of weakness and, after genuine repentance, be forgiven, as in the case of Peter. But the person who totally rejects God will be totally rejected by him. In such a case it is true that 'if we deny him, he also will deny us' (2 Tim 2:10-13).

Denial in the good sense has to do with self-denial, meaning the rejection of self-centredness. People 'deny themselves' for

the sake of Christ by allowing their lives to be ruled by Christ instead of by themselves. They are controlled by Christ's will, not by their own selfish desires. They promise to be obedient to Christ always, regardless of what it may lead to. When people deny themselves in this sense, they find true life. But if they refuse to deny themselves because they want to keep their lives for themselves, they lose life in its fullest sense – and they lose it for ever (Matt 16:24-26).

Jesus was the supreme example of self-denial, and in his case this self-denial led eventually to death (Phil 2:5-8). The followers of Christ, being united with him, should therefore deny themselves and live according to the values he lived by. They should give up attitudes and behaviour that characterise the populace in general and devote themselves to living godly and disciplined lives. Their motivation should be, 'It is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20; cf. Titus 2:11-14).

From *Bethesda Monthly* (Sri Lanka, 1984)

Living among Buddhists

Before going to live in Thailand in 1965, I spent a lot of time studying Buddhism so that I might evangelise effectively. But when I had settled into life among the Thai people, over ninety percent of whom are Buddhists, I discovered that in many cases I knew more about Buddhism than they did. I may not have known more about the religious ideas and practices that permeate their lives, but I knew more about the doctrines learnt from books.

It was, to give a parallel example, as if a missionary of another religion came to Australia and, knowing that Australians were Christians, studied the biblical book of Romans to learn the doctrines of Christianity – only to discover that most Australians knew nothing of genuine Christian beliefs. The closest they got was Christmas trees and Easter eggs, or perhaps ceremonies to mark births, marriages and deaths.

Religious practices

Ingrained social habits, which we lump together under the word ‘culture,’ are hard to crack, and even harder when they are reinforced by religion. Religion and culture are so intertwined that people do not know where one ends and the other begins. Among the Thai people, to be Thai is to be Buddhist, and those who turn from Buddhism to Christianity are considered to have sold out their nation. The starting point in evangelising them is not to attack their beliefs but to love them for the sake of Christ and then find ways to explain what motivates that love.

In the days before TV travelogues accustomed us to strange religious practices, my first sight of idols and their devotees made a startling impression – the colour and activity as much as the apparent futility. An older missionary friend cautioned, ‘You’ll find it fascinating at first and want to take photos, but after a while it will get you down.’ He was right. What became

frustrating and annoying was not the pointlessness or lack of logic in what people were doing, but the bondage and blindness it brought into their lives.

Strictly speaking, Buddhism is not supposed to be idolatrous. The Buddha himself would turn in his grave, so to speak, if he could see the way Buddhism is practised in Thailand – and Thailand, along with its immediate neighbours Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, considers its form of Buddhism to be close to the real thing, in contrast to the aberrations of places such as China. But what Thais do not see is that while they pay lip-service to Buddhist dogmas, they engage in practices that are contrary to those dogmas.

Some examples

Many things that Christians take for granted are not present in the Buddhist mind. Buddhism does not accept that there is a God and that human beings have a soul or spirit that makes them different from other creatures. Even when Buddhism uses words that Christianity also uses, the ideas behind those words are different. We use the word 'sin' in a sense that includes moral responsibility and accountability, but they hear it as a word that denotes merely the transgression of a religious taboo. They are, in a sense, similar to the Pharisees of Jesus' day, who accused him of sin in transgressing a Sabbath taboo but could not see their own sin in trying to murder him.

There seems to be little moral content in the Buddhism practised in Thailand. When the owners of a business move into new premises, they regard it as obligatory to have a religious ceremony where a group of monks recite incantations, accept offerings and anoint the premises with spots of white paint. Even though the building may be a girlie bar (euphemism for brothel), people see no anomaly in asking for the monks' blessing. Worse still, the monks see no anomaly.

During our period of residence in Thailand, a reasonably benevolent bunch of army dictators ran the country. The army strongman for most of this period had to be content with the status of deputy prime minister rather than prime minister,

mainly because he was so overbearing and corrupt that it was thought better to have a more acceptable person as figurehead. But this dictator, Praphas by name, made sure the press was on hand to take photos of him offering food to monks and engaging in frequent ceremonies at a local temple.

On one occasion I was talking with a group of Thai men, all Buddhists, who were engaging in the usual hushed conversation about what a rotter Praphas was, when one of them said, 'But for all his corruption and rough manner, you've got to admit he's a good Buddhist.' 'Yes . . . True . . . Agree with you there . . .' came the responses, accompanied by much nodding of heads.

No one saw a conflict between the man's religion and his morality. Nor did they see any inconsistency in attributing his enormous wealth to his corruption and at the same time seeing it as the blessed reward of a former incarnation.

Finding a starting point

In presenting the Christian gospel to such people, there seemed little point in attacking their religion. Still, religious issues had to be dealt with, and I found it useful to draw attention to everyday religious practices as a way of introducing the Christian gospel.

Thais consider humans to be different from dogs, monkeys and elephants only in that humans are cleverer – the beneficiaries of improvements in the cycle of reincarnation. Dogs, monkeys and elephants can all be trained to do clever things, and may even be cleverer than some humans, but no matter how clever the animal, there was nothing within it that ever inclined it to carry out religious practices. A human, by contrast, no matter how dull, could still be found seeking blessing though offering food to monks and carrying out temple rituals.

This difference was not related to mental ability but to a fundamental difference between humans and all other creatures. Humans seek after something that other creatures do not seek after. The existence of religions, in whatever country they are associated with, tells us not only that humans seek fulfilment

outside themselves but also that there must be someone outside themselves who answers that seeking. That someone is God, even though Buddhism may not acknowledge him. We are made in God's image.

In presenting this argument we have simply drawn upon what the apostle Paul taught in greater detail in the opening two chapters of Romans. This is not a full explanation of the gospel, but we have opened the way for what Paul goes on to explain in the next few chapters of Romans – that this God became human in the person of Jesus Christ and brought to fulfilment God's plan of salvation. The road to belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour often proved to be long and winding, but at least we had started the journey.

From *Serving Together* (Australia, 2008)

Understanding God's Kingdom

Most of the biblical references to the kingdom of God are found in the teachings of Jesus Christ recorded in the four Gospels. The kingdom was central in Jesus' teaching. Yet Jesus nowhere said exactly what that kingdom was; nor did the writers of the New Testament who followed him, even though they too spoke frequently of the kingdom.

The reason for this must have been that the idea of God's kingdom was well known to those who were familiar with the Old Testament. Jesus' teaching was a development of the Old Testament teaching, and showed that through him God's kingdom found its fulfilment.

The rule of God

As we turn to the Old Testament, however, we find that it does not define the kingdom either. In fact, the expression 'kingdom of God' is never used in the Old Testament, though the idea is there from the beginning.

When, at the beginning of human history, the human race was given dominion over all else on earth, that dominion was a direct result of its creation in God's image. Human beings have dominion only because God has dominion. God is king; he is the sovereign ruler. The Old Testament understands God's kingdom in terms of God's kingship. 'The Lord has established his throne in the heavens; his kingdom rules over all.' 'All your works speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds and the glorious splendour of your kingdom' (Ps 103:19; 145:10-12).

The kingdom of God is the rule of God. It is not a realm or territory over which he reigns, but the rule that he exercises. The Bible's revelation concerning the kingdom may contain many developments and applications, but basic to them all is the notion that the kingdom of God is the rule of God.

God chooses a people

A central issue in the revelation of God's kingdom is the relation between God and his people. When God chose Abraham and promised that he would be the father of a great nation, God confirmed his promise to Abraham by a covenant. The covenant was an agreement, but not an agreement between equals. It expressed a relationship, but not a relationship of equals. The relationship was that of a king to his people, of an overlord to his subjects. God's covenant with Abraham was a work of grace that originated in the free act of a sovereign God (Gen 17:1-18).

God's covenant with Abraham promised a multitude of descendants and a land for them to live in, but at its heart it promised something far greater, a spiritual relationship. 'I will be their God and they shall be my people.' But the people's enjoyment of this promised blessing depended upon their response of faith and obedience. 'You shall keep my covenant.'

When thinking of the kingdom of God and Old Testament Israel, we must always keep this covenant in mind. Especially, we must remember the spiritual relationship that was the covenant's objective. The kingdom of God has always been something spiritual rather than political.

These facts were emphasized when, as a result of God's covenant with Abraham, Israel had become a nation and was on the way to the land promised to it. When the nation was formally constituted as God's people in the covenant at Sinai, elements of a spiritual response and a spiritual kingdom were prominent. 'If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod 19:5-6). God is the king; the people are his subjects. His people are to be different from those of other nations, because their fulfilment in life will be in worshipping and serving God.

No golden age

If the Israelites had a largely secular attitude towards the establishment of God's kingdom in Canaan, they were soon

disappointed. The promises of God did not carry the guarantee of a utopian existence in an Israelite state. After the deaths of Joshua and the leaders who succeeded him, Israel experienced constant disappointment. The promised rest in Canaan turned out to be a miserable existence of oppression by enemies, the reason being that the promises given to Israel did not meet with faith in the hearers (Heb 4:2). The people's refusal of God was the cause of their troubles.

God, however, did not desert the Israelites completely, and when they turned in heart to him, he graciously responded. He gave them leaders ('judges') who saved them from their enemies and restored peace. The message for the Israelites was plain. There would be no utopian kingdom of God on earth, no golden age, for a disobedient people. But a people who truly submitted to God could trust him for deliverance, for he would provide the leaders. The Lord raised up judges (Judg 2:16,18; 3:9).

In spite of this, example after example shows that once the judge was no longer a powerful national influence, the people turned from God. In search of stability, they proposed to set up a monarchy similar to the monarchies of neighbouring countries. But Israel's troubles arose not from the form of government. They arose from the sins of the people. What Israel needed was not a new political system, but a new attitude of heart, a new faith, a new holiness. That was why the people's demand for a king was a rejection of God. It was an attempt to solve a spiritual problem without reference to God.

God's people still tend to do the same. They tinker with the structures, change the name, alter the format, fiddle with new methods, try some new programs, but the problem is usually deeper. Even though the form and structures may need overhauling, without changed attitudes and changed lives, other changes will be spiritually fruitless.

In wanting to change the system of government to a monarchy, Israel was not, as it were, pushing God off the throne so that they could put an earthly king on instead. God could be their king regardless of the form of government. But they did not

want a way of life where their well-being depended upon a spiritual relationship with God. And without God, they could not have the kingdom of God.

A new kingdom

Saul provided the transition between the old rustic leadership of the judges and the centrally based monarchical system developed by David. Under David, Israel expanded its borders and grew strong and prosperous. To many, God's promises to Abraham seemed well fulfilled.

Moreover, the rule of God was now well expressed in the rule of a king after God's own heart, one who ruled as God's representative – indeed, as God's adopted son. Through Nathan the prophet God had promised David a lasting dynasty, whose kings would be to God as sons. 'I will raise up your offspring after you . . . I will be his father and he shall be my son . . . Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me' (2 Sam 7:12-16). Or, as the psalm for coronation day put it, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you' (Ps 2:7).

David made Jerusalem the religious as well as the political centre of his prosperous kingdom. He installed the ark of the covenant there and made extensive plans for the construction of a temple and the operation of its religious services. The state supported the religion and the religion supported the state. If ever the kingdom of God was to be established on earth, surely this was the perfect setting for it. A notion became firmly embedded in the mind of the Israelite people that identified the kingdom of God with the kingdom of Israel (or Judah). They expected God to defend the nation, because there alone, in contrast to the surrounding nations, God's kingdom was to be found.

To the people of Israel, the kingdom of God had become primarily a matter of politics. They, like many in the so-called Christian nations of the West today, were engaging in tragic self-delusion. They had government that was hospitable to the worship of God and gave its citizens a standard of justice, contentment and material well-being that was far more desirable

than that of the oppressive regimes of ungodly neighbours. But if they thought that was the kingdom of God and therefore God was committed to defending them, they were soon to be disappointed.

Not my people

In the centuries that followed, one prophet after another warned the people that because of their disobedience, judgment would fall upon the nation. The monarchy would be destroyed, the temple smashed, and the people taken out of the land God had given them to become slaves in a foreign country.

The people of Israel were so confident in the belief that they were God's people to the exclusion of all others, that they actually desired the day of the Lord; for then God would intervene in judgment to destroy all enemies and vindicate Israel. Amos was just one of several prophets who shattered their dreams. Israel was morally corrupt, even though it maintained its religious institutions. When people claimed to belong to God but violated his law, they were inviting his punishment. The day of the Lord would, for them, be not a day of light but a day of darkness (Amos 3:2; 5:18).

Believing they belonged to God, the people of Israel thought they were safe. But they misunderstood the nature of the covenant if they thought that it guaranteed national security regardless of the way they lived. God required obedience and righteousness, but the people were rebellious and immoral. They were, as God said through his prophet Hosea, no longer his true people. 'You are not my people and I am not your God' (Hosea 1:9).

In Jeremiah's day the objection to such prophetic condemnation centred on the sacredness of Jerusalem and its temple. Surely, God would not allow the heathen to invade Jerusalem and defile the temple. 'This is the temple of the Lord,' they said. 'You trust in deceptive words to no avail,' replied Jeremiah (Jer 7:4,8). He assured them that neither the city of David nor the throne of David would save a rebellious nation from judgment. Both would be destroyed (Jer 34:2-3).

The faithful minority

Over the two centuries of prophetic announcements of doom that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem (in 587 BC), the prophets constantly held out a message of hope. They taught plainly that although a nation as a whole may in a sense be God's people, only the repentant within that nation were truly God's people. Or, as Paul says, 'Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.' That is, not all who are physically descended from Abraham are spiritually the people of God (Rom 9:6-7). 'He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal' (Rom 2:29).

One prophet who consistently emphasized this truth was Isaiah. He saw that although God was judging the nation, salvation was assured for those who trusted in him (Isa 7:9; 28:16; 30:15). Though God would send the nation into captivity, he would preserve the faithful minority, the true Israelites, and from these he would rebuild the nation (Isa 6:13; 10:21-23; 11:16). From this rebuilt nation would come one person, God's true king, or messiah, through whom the kingdom of God would have its full expression.

The hopes that had been built up in the reign of David would now be fulfilled. A new 'David' would appear, a descendant of David who would set up a new kingdom where righteousness would dwell. 'His name will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and for evermore' (Isa 9:6-7). 'There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might . . . With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth' (Isa 11:1-4).

From these hopes two important ideas became more clearly understood. And the two ideas are connected. First, the

messianic hope was tied firmly to the Davidic dynasty; so firmly, in fact, that even when Jerusalem and the Israelite state were destroyed by Babylon in 587 BC, the hope lived on. Second, the believing minority constitute the true Israel – an Israel within Israel – and these are the true people of God. The two ideas are linked, because these faithful believers are the ones over whom the new David will rule. They are the people of the Messiah's kingdom. No national system, whether political or religious, can bring in the golden age of peace and righteousness.

What the faithful of those pre-Christian days looked for was not a patched up or streamlined version of the old order, but an entirely new order; indeed, a new covenant. 'I will put my law within them,' says the Lord, 'on their heart will I write it; and I will be their God and they shall be my people' (Jer 31:31-34). If people pray the prayer, 'Your kingdom come,' the right course of action for them is to submit to the king and do his will from the heart – on earth, as it is done in heaven.

A kingdom coming from God

If the Jews had lingering hopes that some religious or political program could bring about God's kingdom on earth, those hopes must surely have been destroyed by the experience of the Babylonian captivity and the subsequent oppression by various nations. This is clearly expressed in the visions of the book of Daniel.

Nebuchadnezzar had a vision of a huge image representing powerful kingdoms of human construction, but then a stone, supernaturally formed, smashed the image so that it was reduced to dust and blown away in the wind. The stone, by contrast, became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. So likewise, says the interpretation, 'the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed' (Dan 2:44-45). It is a different kind of kingdom from the earthly kingdoms, and is not identified with any of them.

In spite of this, people have repeatedly tried to establish God's kingdom by force. The Maccabees did so in pre-Christian times and, although they restored independence to Israel, they

opened the way for oppression, greed, violence and intrigue that left the nation in a worse state than it was in before. The Zealots of New Testament times similarly tried to establish God's kingdom by force, and instead brought about the destruction of the Jewish state by the Romans in AD 70. Church history gives many examples of misguided enthusiasts who have tried to establish God's rule by the sword. All of them have learnt the hard way that those who take the sword perish by the sword. The violence of war and bloodshed is not God's method of establishing righteousness.

Nevertheless, the kingdom of God would be established on earth, and it would come by a human being even though coming from God. In a later vision Daniel saw 'one like a son of man' coming with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days and receiving from him an eternal and worldwide kingdom. 'All people, nations and languages will serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed' (Dan 7:13-14).

Jesus the Messiah

With the coming of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament hope for the coming of God's kingdom was realised. God's time had come; the kingdom had arrived (Mark 1:15).

In contrast to the popular Jewish belief that God's kingdom was some future national and political kingdom to be centred on Israel, Jesus pointed out that God's kingdom was already among them. People were not to look for it in the sorts of political signs that most Jews expected. Rather the kingdom was already there; it was in the midst of them in the person of Jesus Christ (Luke 17:20-21). Those who humbled themselves and submitted to the rule of Christ entered Christ's kingdom. And when they entered that kingdom they received forgiveness of sins and eternal life (Matt 21:31-32; John 3:3). As always, the kingdom is, above all, a spiritual reality.

A good illustration of these truths is the story of the young man who came to Jesus asking what he should do to have eternal life. When the man rejected Jesus' answer, Jesus pointed out to

his disciples how hard it was for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. He added that a camel could pass through the eye of a needle easier than a rich man could enter the kingdom of God. The disciples, astonished at this, asked who could be saved, and received the reply that nobody could, apart from the miracle of God's grace (Matt 19:16-26).

The point to note here is that the expressions 'eternal life,' 'kingdom of heaven,' 'kingdom of God' and 'to be saved' are used interchangeably. As always, the kingdom of God is to be understood spiritually, not politically. To enter the kingdom of God is to have eternal life, to be saved. Eternal life is the life of the kingdom of God.

Jews and Gentiles

When Jesus took his disciples out to proclaim the kingdom, he told them not to go among the Gentiles, but to go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. God's purpose was that the people of Israel be the first to hear the good news of the kingdom and, upon accepting the Messiah, enter the kingdom. They were then to spread the good news to other nations (Isa 49:5-6).

But the Jews on the whole rejected Jesus, and therefore the message was taken to the Gentiles direct. Those Gentiles who believed entered the kingdom, while the Jews (for whom the kingdom had initially been prepared) were, on the whole, excluded. As Jesus said, the kingdom was taken from them and given to people of other nations (Matt 21:43); or, as Paul said, since the Jews judged themselves unworthy of eternal life, he turned to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46).

The reason many of the Jews rejected Jesus was that he did not bring them the kind of kingdom they were looking for. They wanted a Messiah who would be a political deliverer, but Jesus made it clear that his kingdom was 'not of this world.' They wanted a kingdom of God on earth that would bring material prosperity, but that was not the purpose of Jesus' mission. When Jesus saw that his multiplying of the food supply caused people to want to make him king, he quickly escaped to a place where they could not find him (John 6:15).

Even the apostles did not fully understand the nature of Jesus' messiahship or kingdom, but they did not, as others, reject him. They knew enough to believe that he was truly God's Messiah and that he brought the kingdom and eternal life (John 6:66-69; cf. Matt 16:13-16).

After the spectacular events of the resurrection, the disciples again had the longing that God might now establish an ideal earthly kingdom for Israel. Jesus told them they misunderstood the kingdom if they thought of it only in such nationalistic terms. Their job was to proclaim the kingdom through the power of the Spirit to all nations, so that people everywhere might enter it and receive eternal life (Acts 1:6-8; cf. Matt 28:19-20).

The kingdom today

Whatever misunderstandings existed because of traditional Jewish longings for national glory, the early church rose above them when they saw the power of the kingdom at work. The good news of the kingdom was preached to Samaritans and they believed. Syrians and Cypriots believed. People of Asia Minor entered the kingdom, even though it meant persecution. No matter to whom Paul preached – Turks, Greeks, Jews, Romans – he proclaimed the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22; 17:7; 19:8; 28:23,31).

When people repent and believe the gospel, they submit themselves to the rule of God. They are transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's Son (Col 1:13). Having submitted to the rule of God in their hearts, they learn the qualities of life God demands of them. Yet they look upon his demands not as laws to compel obedience but as expressions of his will they are pleased to put into practice. Happy, blessed, are the meek, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. They do not look for a secular kingdom of God where benefits are political or material. The kingdom of God is not a matter of food or drink, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17).

The principles that operate in the kingdom of God are different from those that operate in the power structures of the

world. Jesus said to Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world. He knew that the triumph of his kingdom could be reached only through suffering and death. The Davidic Messiah of the Psalmists, the heavenly and kingly son of man of Daniel, was also the suffering servant of Isaiah. The triumph of the kingdom is always by the path of suffering. This was shown to be true not just in the life of Jesus but also in the experience of the early church.

Jesus did not expect praise from his fellow citizens, and neither should those who belong to his kingdom. They may have been delivered from the present evil age and have tasted the powers of the age to come but, like their king, their path is that of the suffering servant. In the world they shall have troubles but, says their king, 'Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world' (John 16:33). 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and spread the good news of this kingdom; and remember, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Matt 28:18-20).

Paper, *CBRF Brisbane* (Australia, 1987)

What did Job learn?

A popular belief in ancient times was that those with prosperity and contentment were enjoying the rewards of their godliness, while those with poverty and suffering were reaping the rewards of their wrongdoing. The book of Job contradicts this belief. It shows that good people may suffer all kinds of ills and never know why. But God, who is wise beyond human understanding, is still in control and can be trusted.

The seen and the unseen

Job was a wealthy, well educated, God-fearing man, against whom Satan made the accusation that Job feared God solely to protect his personal prosperity and well-being. If he lost these, said Satan, Job's apparent devotion would disappear. This might have been true of some people, and be true of some today, but God knew that it was not true of Job. He even allowed Satan to test his own theory by allowing Satan to attack Job, God being sure that Job's devotion would not crumble.

God has never promised that those who believe in him will be protected from all disasters. Even the most godly might suffer devastating calamities. That is what happened to Job. In quick succession he lost his working animals, his sheep, his shepherds, his children and finally his health. But we, the readers of the book, know various things Job did not know. We have already been told of Satan's accusations against Job, God's declared confidence in Job and God's permission to Satan to test Job. The series of calamities and sufferings that fell upon Job were a sign, not of God's judgment upon him, but of God's confidence in him.

We cannot make assertions about why people suffer. We do not know all the facts. Above all, we do not know what might be going in the unseen heavenly realms where God, who is in ultimate control, is engaged in matters about which we know

nothing. It may even be that the experiences Satan uses to attack our faith can be used by God to strengthen our faith.

People who knew Job, while professing to be his friends, were not at all helpful. They followed the accepted theory that sufferings such as Job's indicated wrongdoing on his part. Therefore, according to them, Job needed to admit his wrongdoing and ask God's forgiveness. The speeches of these friends are a reminder to us that it is sometimes better to comfort people by saying nothing, or very little, than by pronouncing easy solutions to complex problems. When people suffer as Job did, they might cry out to God to be released from suffering, but that is a different thing from cursing God. Job cried out in despair, but he did not curse God. He felt cut off from God and did not know why, but he never abandoned his faith in God.

Speeches and their outcome

The book of Job is largely a record of a debate between Job and his friends, the usual pattern being that the friends spoke in turn and, as each spoke, Job replied. There was a mixture of truth and error in what the friends said and what Job said, because theoretical argument could never penetrate into the depths of what God was doing.

When we reach the end of the book, we see that the friends, in spite of the truths mixed in with their speeches, were wrong, while Job, in spite of the rash words mixed in with his speeches, was right. In accusing Job of great sin, the friends had not spoken the truth, whereas Job, in claiming to be upright and not guilty of great sin, was shown to be truthful. Certainly, God rebuked him for his unguarded words and Job repented of them, but his devotion to God held firm. God's announcements in commendation of Job and criticism of his friends destroyed the assertions of those, whether in Job's time or in ours, who assert that personal suffering is always the result of personal sin.

What Job learnt

Although Job, having reached the conclusion of the events, still did not have the answer to all his problems, that no longer

seemed important. He now gladly accepted that God was wise and loving beyond human understanding and, for Job, that was enough.

God gave no reason to Job for his sufferings, which is one thing we must remember concerning life's unanswered questions. Christians sometimes say, 'We don't know now, but when we get to heaven, then we shall know.' That may or may not be so. It may be that, like Job, having met God and knowing him better, we see no need for answers to life's conundrums. Our life in God through Christ has always been based on living in a personal relationship, not on having intellectually satisfying answers to problems.

Job probably never knew the reason for his suffering (namely, an accusation made against him by Satan). But an explanation for his suffering seems no longer to be important. The reality was that he now knew God in a way he did not know before. He accepted that God works according to his own purposes, and those purposes are perfect. Though conquered, Job found peace, for the God who was revealed to him was greater than he had ever imagined. He no longer made demands of God; he only worshipped. Previously any knowledge he had of God was theoretical, but now he knew him personally through having met him. His questions may not have been fully answered, but he himself was fully satisfied.

What we might learn

The book of Job is probably of most benefit to us when we suffer in some way and we do not why. It is also a reminder that when we preach the gospel or minister to the needs of God's people, we should never give the impression that belief in God, or specifically in Jesus Christ, is a way of escaping life's hardships or sufferings. We must not presume to have answers that God might not have given. The weakest thinkers are sometimes the strongest dogmatists.

Understanding and sympathy are often what suffering people cry out for. Others, out of generosity, may give practical help, which is commendable, but even then we must be careful not to

use material generosity as a way of escaping the more costly giving of our time and understanding. Some, however, are not generous at all, because they are too quick to blame. People with traditional or dogmatic views can sometimes be cold and heartless.

In the story of Job we see this in the friends' cruel assertions about Job and his family. They tell Job what they would do if they were in his position. But they had never been in his position. Though Job was sometimes foolish in things he said, he had been provoked by the ignorant rantings of his supposed friends. Whereas they were convinced they knew everything, Job was seeking the truth. He never denied that the circumstances of a person's life were in God's hands, but he was frustrated that he could not interpret those circumstances. In the end he had to be satisfied with not getting an interpretation.

So too we must accept that we do not have all the answers. What sort of a God would he be if we could know everything about him? How can everything within the mind of the eternal and all-wise God be reduced to the limited capacity of one human being's brain?

From a human point of view, we may see no reason why we suffer in certain ways, but we must leave it at that. We need not accuse God of being in the wrong simply because we, so far as we can see, are not in the wrong. We, like Job, have to accept that if we cannot govern the physical or moral universe, we are in no position to dictate what God must do. We are in no position to challenge God. But God is certainly in a position to challenge us. The unanswered questions of life may be one way in which he is challenging our commitment to him. If, in the end, we know God better and are better people ourselves, the experience will have been worthwhile.

Abridged from a series in *Daily Power* (Thailand, 1984)

Caleb the leader

Caleb was born in Egypt and spent his childhood there among the slave families of Israel. As he grew up he must have shown himself to be a person of some quality, for once Israel was freed from Egyptian power, Caleb emerged as a responsible leader. Within a short while he became one of the chief men of his tribe, Judah.

On the journey to Canaan

When Moses chose twelve representatives (one from each tribe) to spy out Canaan, Caleb was the representative chosen from the tribe of Judah (Num 13:2,6,17-20). At that time he was forty years of age (Josh 14:7).

The spies returned with a report that although Canaan was a fertile land, its people were fearsome. They mentioned in particular the giant people of Anak, who lived in the region of Hebron (Num 13:21-29). This report immediately discouraged the Israelites from going ahead with the attack; but Caleb spoke up boldly, believing that in God's strength they could well overcome the enemy (Num 13:30).

So far Joshua had not been mentioned in the story. Caleb was the one who took the initiative and who first spoke up in favour of moving ahead. But most of the travelling community chose to accept the opinion of the unbelieving spies, refused to trust God and rebelled against the leadership of Moses (Num 13:31-14:4). At this point we are told that Joshua, the representative of the tribe of Ephraim, supported Caleb – but he was the only one who did (Num 14:6-9).

God therefore announced that since the people did not want to enter Canaan, they would have their wish. During the next forty years, all who were at that time twenty years of age or over, except Caleb and Joshua, would die in the wilderness (Num 14:28-35).

When, forty years later, a new generation had grown up and the Israelites were about to enter Canaan, Moses appointed one leader from each of the twelve tribes to assist the national leader Joshua and the high priest Eleazar in the division of the land. Caleb was the undisputed leader of Judah, and he was again chosen to represent his tribe (Num 34:16-19).

Life in Canaan

After several years of battle, Canaan belonged to Israel and was then divided between the twelve tribes. However, there were still groups of unconquered Canaanites here and there throughout the country, and each tribe had the task of overcoming the enemies within its territory.

Caleb was now eighty-five years of age, but he was still ready to show that his faith and courage were as strong now as they had been forty-five years earlier. People often find it easy to say they have faith, but to give practical proof of it is a different matter. Caleb could say, with James, 'Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith *by my works*' (James 2:18). The people of Anak, before whom the Israelites had once shrunk in fear, still occupied Hebron, the region that had been allotted to Caleb within the tribal portion of Judah. Caleb conquered them and took possession of their towns (Josh 14:6-15; 15:13-14).

People will certainly be strengthened personally when they have the courage to act according to the faith they profess to have. But there is an added benefit. Their boldness may help to develop the faith and courage of others. And this is what happened in the case of Caleb.

Having set an example by the way he had conquered Hebron, Caleb offered his daughter as a wife to the man who conquered the neighbouring town of Debir. The man who took up the challenge and conquered Debir was Othniel, who himself went on to become a great national leader. When Israel was oppressed by powerful invaders from Mesopotamia, Othniel was the man who roused the Israelites, took control of their

fighting forces, drove out the invaders and restored Israel's independence.

Othniel became a hero, but Caleb was the one who had given him the lead. Caleb not merely said what could be done to get rid of enemies, but he himself gave the example by showing how to do it. In the process he inspired a younger man. No one can foresee the extraordinary outcomes that might eventuate from the good example of one believer.

From *Bethesda Monthly* (Sri Lanka, 1984)

Worldwide opportunity

The political balance of the world has changed dramatically in recent years. Instead of two major powers there is now only one (the United States), but there are many power blocs, and the influences that dominate these blocs may be political, religious, economic, regional or ethnic. The European Community may produce one bloc, the Pacific Rim another, the Muslim countries of the Gulf and the Middle East another; and no one knows where China is headed. Wars increase, ethnic conflicts escalate, and the growing number of refugees is now a global problem.

The changing church scene

While all these changes have been taking place, the church has been growing vigorously. Its growth has been so extensive over the past thirty years that its centre of gravity is no longer the West. If there is a centre of gravity, it is probably Africa, though in parts of Asia and Latin America also Christianity is more dominant than it is in the West. In sub-Saharan Africa, the impression that Christianity is the European's religion, though still present in some places, has almost disappeared from others. The national church has an identity of its own, even though it may owe its origins to missionaries of European stock.

Things are starkly different in countries where the church has no dominance, such as Muslim and Communist countries. In those countries, Christians may still be stigmatised as lackeys of the West, in particular the United States. Whether they like it or not, they are identified with Western political decisions and suffer accordingly.

Although we should no longer equate the term 'missionary' with 'Westerner,' much of this present article will look at the role of people from the West, whether full-time missionaries or others. These days, to send people abroad as missionaries can be a sensitive issue, especially in countries where a mature national

leadership has developed. Missionaries have to work alongside, or under, the national leaders.

Some may say that if national churches are as mature as these comments suggest, missionary help from outside is no longer necessary. But the Bible shows that God's gifts are manifold and we all need to profit from them. That is why in all our churches, even here at home, we draw on gifted Christians from outside our own church – people who may come from other churches in our town or region, or even beyond. Christians in other countries recognise this need for outside help as much as we do, and just as we want the right sorts of people to help us, so do they.

The cry from national church leaders in country after country is the same: they want teachers. By this they do not mean imported preachers in the pulpit each Sunday (though some may appreciate input in this area), but those who can teach the teachers (2 Tim 2:2). In many countries converts are coming at such a rate as to be a problem. It is easy to make a superficial 'conversion' by simply adding a Christian veneer to former beliefs. Without adequate teaching, an apparently growing church can finish with a huge problem.

Specific issues

Although well-tried missionary activities are still useful in some countries, things are different in countries that have had spectacular Christian growth. Many national Christians are so fired-up about evangelism and church life that it is they, rather than Western missionaries, who are seen in public activity such as tracting and preaching. If missionaries are working with these local believers, they are usually in behind-the-scenes jobs such as Bible schools, radio work, linguistics, audio-visual ministries, education, literacy programs, health care, computer technology, rural development and a variety of other activities where they can pass on valuable know-how.

An emphasis in present-day missionary enterprise is reaching the unreached people groups. It is estimated that, in spite of the church's unprecedented growth over the past thirty

years, there are still 12,000 unreached people groups. An estimated 15-20% of the world's population has no viable church within reach. A feature in some developing countries is the vision Christians have for evangelising the unreached of their own and neighbouring countries. In the toughest parts of the world, or even the not-so-tough, one can almost be assured of finding Nigerian, Korean, Brazilian, Indian, Filipino or other non-Western Christians who have found a way to tackle the hard jobs. From a practical viewpoint, Africans, Asians and Latin Americans would seem better suited for these difficult areas than missionaries from the West, mainly because of the bias against the West in many of the difficult countries.

But these non-Western missionaries, like those from the West, will be effective only if they are well taught in the Scriptures and well prepared in practical ministries. In most cases, Christian leaders in these countries welcome missionaries, whether Western or non-Western. They are not anti-missionary. Like us, they appreciate the right sort of help; but, also like us, they do not appreciate people who are dictators or know-alls.

Meeting the challenge

People do not have to be career missionaries in order to make a contribution to world evangelisation. Many are effective in short-term missions; that is, ministry that may be, let us say, for three to twelve months in specific roles such as those mentioned above. Another option is to go as 'tent-makers.' This is a term used for those who go to other countries in some form of secular employment that enables them to support themselves financially and at the same time carry out worthwhile Christian ministry.

Whether or not Christians in the West leave their homelands for other countries, all of them can help with money and goods. The West spends 96% of the global church's resources on itself, although it has barely a quarter of the Christians, while leaving the remaining three-quarters of the world's Christians to survive on only 4%. We in the West must work hard at finding ways to correct this imbalance.

As Christians we should be able to serve God in whatever we do and wherever we live. But how often is service for God our first consideration? Too often we decide our vocation on the basis of what appears to be personally satisfying and financially rewarding. Self-fulfilment and personal security are at the root of much of our decision-making.

The Lord Jesus taught us to deny ourselves for the sake of the gospel. He showed us the dangers of putting personal advancement before the interests of his kingdom. He warned against being more concerned with lifestyle than with helping the less privileged (Mark 8:34-37; Luke 12:13-21; 16:19-31). One reason why the church in the West is being spiritually outrun by the church in the developing world is that people in the West have largely ignored the Lord's teachings.

Never too late to change

When we think about how churches in difficult countries are growing extraordinarily and sending their own missionaries into even more difficult places, we might wonder how this can happen. How are Christians in poor countries able to support their own missionaries in other countries? How are Christians in hostile countries able to experience vigorous church growth?

In asking those questions we are probably reflecting the inferiority of our value system compared with theirs. Our brand of Christianity causes us to wonder at something that their brand of Christianity takes for granted. This does not mean we become starry eyed about these non-Western churches, as if they are not beset with sin as we are. Human nature shows a remarkable consistency from one culture to another. Nevertheless, in many of these countries, Christians know much more about sacrifice, commitment and discipleship than we do.

In Paul's day the Corinthian church was affluent compared with the churches of Macedonia, but it was neither as generous nor as spiritually motivated. The 'extreme poverty' of the Macedonians 'overflowed in a wealth of liberality.' They gave 'beyond their means,' which is something most of us know little about. And the reason for their liberality was that 'they first gave

themselves' (2 Cor 8:1-5). In the Christianity of today's Western world, an unspoken element is 'What can I get from it.' In the churches of New Testament Macedonia, as in many poorer countries today, it seems to be 'What can I give?'

The thrust of Western society is to drive people towards self-satisfaction; the thrust of the New Testament is to drive us towards self-sacrifice. It is tempting to throw up our hands in despair at the apparently hopeless drift of Western society, but Jesus would never want his people to give in like that. To overcome, however, will mean deliberate effort on our part. Perhaps we have been listening to the messages from our society instead of listening to the teachings of Jesus. But it is not too late to change.

From *Tidings* (Australia, 1994)

Who are God's true people?

In Romans chapter 2, Paul deals with matters of God's judgment in relation to those who profess to be his people. In the previous chapter he had written some colourful but devastating comments about the Gentile world, which on the whole had rejected God and refused his authority, but now he goes on to speak more of the Jewish world. Here, people had not so visibly rebelled against God, but they were not as pleasing to God as they imagined. It is easy to be critical of the Jewish community of Paul's time, but perhaps we need also to look at the Christian church in our own time. In many ways, Paul is very up to date in what he says here.

The impartial judge

A common human failing is to think that, because wrongdoing is not immediately punished, it is not a matter of serious concern. Some may even think there is no God who will judge them; or, if there is, he approves of their behaviour. What they do not realise is that God is being patient with them. He does not act in heavy-handed judgment every time people do wrong, but in patience he withholds, giving them the opportunity to see their sin and turn from it. The 'kindness of God' is meant to lead them to repentance (v. 4). If they take no notice of the opportunity God gives them to repent, they are storing up a heavier punishment for themselves (v. 5).

Too many, however, think they are immune from God's punishment. Some think that, because they belong to the community of God's people, they are better than others. They sometimes condemn the behaviour of others, yet they themselves 'do the very same things' (v. 1).

God 'shows no partiality' in judging' (v. 11). That is, he cannot be bribed or otherwise persuaded to be lenient to those who consider themselves his favourites. He makes a distinction

between people not on the basis of whether they have the name Jew or Gentile (or Christian or heathen), but on the basis of how they have lived. He will 'render to people according to their works' (v. 6). Our actions show the sorts of people we are. If we say we are believers but our actions are unchristian, we may be deceiving ourselves. The judgment will reveal the hidden truth.

Greater and lesser penalties

Christians sometimes ask questions about what happens to those who have never heard the gospel. Often the question is asked as if the matter is nothing more than something they are curious about. People like answers to puzzling questions. Those who ask such questions may have little concern for those they are talking about. The Bible's response is not to answer our queries or satisfy our curiosity, but to urge us to do something. 'How shall they hear without a preacher?' Therefore, if people have not heard the gospel, we should go and take the gospel to them (Rom 10:13-17).

In spite of this forthright challenge, the Bible does at times have something to say about the question of God's judgment of those who have never heard the gospel. Paul says that although such people may not have the Bible as a written standard to guide them, they still have a conscience, which is a kind of standard within them. This at least gives them some understanding of right and wrong. 'When Gentiles who do not have the law do by nature what the law requires . . . they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts' (v. 14-15).

Conscience, however, is not a perfect standard, because, like everything else that makes up a human being, it has been corrupted by sin. But if people do what their conscience tells them is wrong, they are held guilty. Wrongdoers will still be punished (v. 12), but God's judgment will take into account the extent of their knowledge and the response their conscience made to that knowledge (v. 15-16).

As for those who have heard the gospel and *do* know what the Bible teaches, God will judge them by a higher standard. Their clearer understanding means that God requires more of

them. Perhaps in the judgment day, people who get the biggest shock will be those from countries that are more privileged through having received the Word and heard the gospel.

The true people of God

The Jews of Paul's day were an example of the privileged people just referred to. They considered themselves to be God's special possession, those who knew his law. But because they did not practise what they knew, their judgment would be more severe. They saw themselves as teachers of others, but they did not practise the things they taught (v. 17-23).

In particular, the Jews prided themselves in certain religious ceremonies, such as circumcision, which they believed marked them off as God's select people. Paul had to remind them, and in so doing he reminds us, that a ceremony is of no value if a person's life is not in keeping with the meaning of the ceremony (v. 25). In Paul's illustration, an uncircumcised person with good behaviour was more pleasing in God's sight than a circumcised person with bad behaviour (v. 26).

Those who join in the Christian church should take note of Paul's words to the Jews. They can too easily build their hopes around Christian ceremonies such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, thinking that these give them some acceptability with God. But just as the Jewish ceremonies did not in themselves make anyone acceptable to God, neither do these Christian ceremonies.

The true people of God are not those who have undergone religious ceremonies, but those who have turned from sin, trusted in Christ and are now enjoying renewed lives. Any ceremonies given by God are important, but their underlying truths are what matter most – things 'of the heart, spiritual and not literal' (v. 29). Ceremonies are never a substitute for purity of heart and holiness in behaviour.

From *Daily Power* (Thailand, 1982)

Religious Freedom

Most Christians support freedom of religion, something that is closely related to freedom of conscience. This is not to say that all religions are equally valid or that all consciences are perfect standards. Everything about human beings has been affected by human sin, but at least these instincts are a reflection of the higher experiences that humans are capable of. Christians believe that the reason humans are capable of these experiences is that they have been created in the image of God.

Freedom and tolerance

Because Christians hold certain views about Christianity's uniqueness and exclusiveness, they are sometimes criticized as being intolerant. But the critics misunderstand the nature of tolerance. Tolerance does not mean agreement. On the contrary, people are only required to tolerate things they do *not* agree with. If they agree, tolerance is not required. Christians may not agree with the beliefs of non-Christians, but they should be tolerant in that they recognise the right of those people to hold those beliefs, and to express and debate them. In fact, it seems at times that the critics of Christians are the intolerant ones. Because they do not agree with Christians, they want to deny them the right to expound their beliefs.

Unfortunately, there are occasions when Christians give their critics a basis for criticism by appearing to be concerned only for their own rights. It is true that Christians have a primary concern to maintain their loyalty to God, but they should also be concerned for promoting the dignity of human beings in general and the right of all people to respond to the promptings of conscience. Such tolerance does not mean that Christians should be afraid to promote their values, as if a society should have no standards or a government should admit to no moral absolutes. All legislation reflects some moral value. If there are no standards, legislation becomes impossible.

Christian expectations

Some countries have governments that are pro-Christian, others that are decidedly anti-Christian. The early church functioned and expanded in a society where many religions existed side by side and one in particular was promoted as a state religion. The church evangelised as vigorously as conditions allowed, but it did not aim to make Christianity the vehicle of civil government. When churches of a later period tried to, the results were disastrous.

Here is something that Christians in the West need to remember. We have become so accustomed to living under governments hospitable to Christianity that we feel we have a right to live under pro-Christian laws. Certainly, pro-Christian laws are desirable and in a free society we have the right to promote our view as much as others have the right to promote theirs. But Christians in New Testament times, as in many countries today, never expected to live under a government that favoured them. They were not to be surprised at hostility from the ruling authorities, but at the same time were to be obedient to them – unless the rulers claimed for themselves what rightly belonged to God (1 Peter 2:13-16; 4:12-16; cf. Acts 5:29).

Hostile societies

History has shown that Christianity, Islam and Communism have all at times used the power of the state to impose their own beliefs and silence others. Citizens have thereby been denied the fundamental human freedoms of being able to think for themselves, respond to conscience and exercise religious belief. When the controlling authorities use religious power to remove religious freedom, they use it wrongly. Moreover, the curtailment of religious freedom usually leads to the curtailment of other freedoms.

This is well demonstrated in some Islamic countries of the Middle East. According to one United Nation's report, these countries rate lowest in individual liberties, civil participation and press freedom. Many of the countries are fiercely anti-Christian, yet the response of the church is not negative. One

Arab Christian leader roused his fellow-Christians to reach into neighbouring countries with this positive message: 'We all share the same language and traditions, we all face the same challenges and we all have similar problems. The Lord has opened the door for Arab missions. We believe many will be blessed and millions will come to know Christ as their Saviour as a result of our missionary work.' Arab Christians present a challenge to their Western brothers and sisters in the initiatives they have set up to provide access for the gospel into countries where religious freedom is minimal or non-existent.

The stories that usually grab the headlines in Christian news bulletins are those that have brought violence – anti-conversion laws in India, blasphemy laws in Pakistan, *sharia* enforcement in other countries – but a more widespread ordeal is what has been called 'silent persecution.' In many countries Christians might be stripped of basic freedoms, coerced into converting to the state religion, denied entrance into schools, barred from working in the civil service, refused treatment at clinics, excluded from aid distribution and subjected to other forms of discrimination and injustice. Churches may be refused registration or have building applications rejected in attempts to force their closure.

Personal freedoms and state legislation

In view of the anti-Christian atmosphere of some countries, Christians in pro-Christian countries value their religious freedom. This, however, does not give them licence to do as they like. In any society, citizens must live within a framework of legislation that promotes the well-being of the society as a whole. The purpose of religious legislation should not be to impose religion upon people, but to protect them from such imposition. At the same time it should guarantee their right to express their beliefs.

Within this overall guarantee of religious freedom there may be certain pieces of legislation that interfere with the religious beliefs of certain groups. These beliefs may include such things as polygamy, combat in war, body mutilation or killing those considered to be 'cursed' or unwanted. In such cases religious

adherents may be called upon to contest their position. Such conflicts are inevitable, but they should not weaken the government's resolve to uphold the right of all citizens to express, practise, teach and propagate their religion. The government's responsibility is not to dictate which religious system its citizens should follow, but to ensure that the citizens are able to decide for themselves.

Realities in today's world

In many ways Western governments seek to uphold these ideals of religious freedom – in theory, anyway. In fact, most countries say they uphold religious freedom, but often the opposite is the case. Perhaps the best example of a government that tramples all such ideals underfoot is North Korea.

Although professedly Communist and therefore having no religion, North Korea has through several generations brainwashed an entire nation and then deified the ruling family as a kind of incarnation of the state. When Christians are caught resisting this state religion – or even talking about Jesus, owning a Bible, singing a Christian song or attending an illegal Christian gathering – they are thrown into the country's notoriously brutal labour camps. The number of imprisoned Christians is thought to be as high as 100,000. Life expectancy in the labour camps is three or four years.

A lesser form of government control is found in Myanmar (Burma), which in many ways reflects the religious policies of its powerful neighbour, China. There is a government-sanctioned church, but all over the country there are countless unregistered churches which the government finds impossible to obliterate.

For more than forty years Myanmar has been ruled by a paranoid government that mixes superstition, brutality and corruption in controlling an oppressed people. Yet, as in China, in spite of decade after decade of affliction, the church has not only survived, but has also grown enormously. One example I am very familiar with is that of an unregistered church that managed to survive into the 1990s with a few dozen members, but over the next fifteen years saw spectacular growth. Through

energetic outreach it outgrew its premises and began planting churches in other areas. Now, fifteen years later, it has more than seventy daughter churches, while its own congregation numbers seven hundred. The long-standing anti-Christians laws have not changed, but somehow the church across an entire nation is bursting with growth.

While most Christians in the West cling to their desire to live under a government that is favourable to them, Christians in many other countries simply get on with life regardless of the government. We often hear it said that opposition and suffering produce strong Christians and strong churches. Understandably, none of us wants our country to become anti-Christian, but the reality is that when life is too favourable, faith becomes weak.

Christian faith has been strong and the church has grown in the most unlikely circumstances. The kinds of circumstances where Christian faith seems weakest and the church seems to be stagnant are those of prosperity, comfort, pleasant living, individual freedoms and favourable governments.

To make matters worse, the religious freedom we in the developed world hold dear is commonly seen as an indispensable part of this highly desirable lifestyle. Many Christians, though not putting their feelings into words, assume that God is obligated to preserve all this for us. Yet the church in the rest world today, the majority world, following the church in New Testament times, knows little of these desirable circumstances. It seems we have wrong expectations. We are trusting in the wrong things.

Sheep, shepherds and wolves

A common picture that the Bible uses of a leader is that of the shepherd. There is, however, an important element in the picture that is frequently overlooked. Perhaps this is partly because of the illustrations we saw in children's books of Jesus holding a cuddly lamb. Usually, the pictures were painted in soft pastel shades and Jesus was dressed in white. Then there were the prayers: 'Jesus, tender shepherd . . . meek and mild . . . bless your little lamb.'

No one doubts the compassion, care and gentleness of Jesus, but this is only part of the story. The same one was so outspoken in some of his denunciations that his enemies considered him a public danger and proceeded to get rid of him. To speak of a shepherd, even the Good Shepherd, as someone soft and sweet is not true to reality. If we think of those in our own country who keep sheep and cattle, we certainly do not have such a mental picture, and people of Bible times would not have had such a mental picture of the shepherds they knew.

Perhaps this vague association of shepherds with soft pastoral scenes has coloured our understanding of what the Bible calls a pastor. To many, the word brings with it the image of a person who is gentle and caring, who visits the aged and the sick, who comforts the feeble and who enjoys a friendly chat over tea and biscuits. This may be part of the story, but it is not the whole story.

A leader

Throughout the Bible the shepherd is, above all, a leader. In Old Testament times, the word 'shepherd' was used commonly for the leaders of Israel – not necessarily spiritual leaders, but civil leaders as well. Moses, along with Joshua who succeeded him, were referred to as shepherds over the flock of Israel (Num 27:16-18; Isa 63:11).

The later history of Israel shows, however, that many of Israel's leaders were worthless, and because of them the nation crumbled. 'My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray' (Jer 50:6). 'The shepherds have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain' (Isa 56:11). 'Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves' (Ezek 34:2). 'Woe to my worthless shepherd who deserts the flock' (Zech 11:17).

In the New Testament likewise, shepherds are leaders. The believers in any locality constitute the flock of God in that locality, and those whom God has appointed to lead and care for that flock are his shepherds (John 21:15-17; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4). But the idyllic pastoral scenes of the picture books are no more the setting for shepherds in the New Testament than they are in the Old.

Not for the faint-hearted

Shepherds as portrayed in the Bible are invariably tough – not in the sense of being hard-hearted, but in the sense of being able to take knocks. They are courageous in the face of hardship and will do battle with any opponents who threaten the welfare of those in their care. In the dry semi-desert regions of the Bible stories, they lived hard, tough lives, moving around from place to place with their flocks in search of grass and water.

Moses described the barren regions of his sheep-keeping experience as 'a great and terrible wilderness, with fierce serpents and scorpions, and thirsty ground where there is no water' (Exod 3:1; Deut 8:15). Isaac's men had violent clashes with other shepherds over the use of wells (Gen 26:17-22). Jacob said, 'By day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes.' He had a constant battle to defend his animals. Sometimes they were 'torn by wild beasts,' other times 'stolen by day or stolen by night' as robbers attacked him (Gen 31:39-40).

David fought with, and killed, a lion and a bear (1 Sam 17:34), and Amos knew that the shepherd at times had to 'rescue from the mouth of the lion two legs or a piece of an ear' (Amos

3:12). Even the much-loved shepherd psalm is set amid danger and violence. The sheep were thankful to have a feast of green pastures beside the still waters, but even that well spread 'table' stood in the presence of enemies. Wild beasts lurked nearby, and only through the courage and vigilance of the shepherd were the sheep able to enjoy their royal feast. They were moving through a valley where death lurked in the shadows in the form of wolves, lions and other predatory creatures (Ps 23:4-5).

For the Good Shepherd himself, the work was not soft or easy. He knew that his people were like sheep among wolves (Matt 10:16). In his constant battle with the Jewish religious leaders he had to grapple with thieves and robbers who were attacking the flock and with wolves that were destroying the flock (John 10:1,8-12). But the Good Shepherd did not yield an inch, even though it meant that his concern for the sheep eventually cost him his life (John 10:11,15).

Seeing the job through

The element of conflict persists in the references to church leaders as shepherds. When Jesus told Peter of the shepherd responsibilities that were now his, he added that Peter could expect opposition and even martyrdom. 'This he said to show by what death he [Peter] was to glorify God' (John 21:17-19).

Paul was equally blunt when telling the elders of the Ephesian church what they could expect. Immediately after reminding them that the Holy Spirit had appointed them shepherds of the flock, he warned that 'fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock' (Acts 20:28-29). In pointing out that the attacks would come from false teachers within the church, Paul indicated one quality of a true shepherd, namely, the ability to see the difference between preaching that feeds the church and preaching that inflicts disease upon it.

By the time Peter was approaching the end his career, Nero was Emperor and state-backed persecution of Christians was widespread. It was in the middle of a passage dealing with increasingly hostile persecution that Peter reminded the shepherds of their responsibilities to look after the flock (1 Peter

4:12-16; 5:1-4,8). In a time of such difficulty the church needed courageous leadership, for the leaders were the ones who bore the brunt of the attack. Perhaps some wanted to opt out of the leadership when the pressure was on – like the hireling who fled when he saw the wolf coming. That is why Peter urged the shepherds to tend the flock that was in their care, ‘not by constraint, but willingly.’

Worth following

Strangely, this necessity for courageous leadership, though fundamental to the nature of shepherds, is often overlooked. It is only one aspect of a very broad subject, but unfortunately the abuse of power by some has caused others to be hesitant in showing courage and giving a firm lead.

Some of the shepherd-leaders in Old Testament times ‘ruled with force and harshness,’ ‘fed themselves but not the sheep,’ and even ‘trafficked in the sheep’ (Ezek 34:4,8; Zech 11:7). Shepherd-leaders of God’s new people, the church, face similar temptations. That is why Peter warns them not to use their position ‘for shameful gain’ and certainly not to be ‘domineering over those in their charge.’ Nevertheless, shepherds are to ‘be examples;’ they are to give a lead (1 Peter 5:2-3).

The shepherd, said Jesus, ‘leads his sheep out. He goes before them and the sheep follow him’ (John 10:3,5). One result of good leadership is a good following.

From *Links* (Australia, 1983)

Guidelines from the Hebrew law-code

Anyone looking at the ancient Hebrew law-code must take into account the cultural and social habits of the time. Hebrew law was not a blueprint for the perfect society, but a system designed to maintain order and administer justice within an established way of life.

The example most frequently quoted to illustrate this point is that of slavery. Hebrew law did not abolish slavery, possibly because the social, economic and political order of the age was such that community life could scarcely survive without it. But Hebrew law introduced attitudes of consideration for the welfare of others that were unknown in most ancient cultures. This began a process that led eventually to the abolition of slavery.

Characteristics of Hebrew law

Hebrew law bore certain similarities to other law-codes of the ancient world, but in other aspects it was very different. One distinguishing feature of Hebrew law was that justice was the same for all. Laws were not designed to suit the ruling classes, but protected the rights of those who were defenceless or under-privileged. Consequently, people such as the poor, foreigners, widows, orphans, debtors and slaves were guaranteed a fair hearing. Also, the punishment was always proportionate to the offence. There was not the gross brutality that became a feature of some ancient nations, where punishments were often excessive in relation to the crime committed.

One reason for these differences is that Hebrew law came from God, a fact that is mentioned repeatedly. Legal, moral and religious matters were not separated as in other law-codes, because in the community of God's people all aspects of life were relevant to each other. Everything was viewed in the light of the Israelites' understanding of God, to whom they were bound in a special relationship.

An illustration from slavery

A Hebrew slave had rights. Any person, male or female, who was sold as a slave to another Hebrew could not be held as a slave for more than six years. If a man took his wife with him into slavery, he also took her with him when he was released; though if he was single when enslaved and then later was given a wife by his master, he did not take his wife and children with him when released. They remained with the master. The former slave could, however, choose to remain in the master's service and so keep his wife and children (Exod 21:1-6; Deut 15:12).

In the case of a female slave who had become a wife or concubine of the master, things were different. She was not automatically freed after six years, but neither could she be sold to a foreigner if she fell out of favour with her master. She had to be bought back by her parents or someone eligible to become her new husband. If she was not bought back, her husband-master had to look after her in accordance with her rights as his wife. If the husband-master failed in his responsibilities, he had to let her go free without payment (Exod 21:7-11).

Special laws protected slaves from excessive punishment by their masters. If a slave, in being punished, was seriously injured, he received compensation by being set free unconditionally (Exod 21:26-27). If he was beaten to death, the master was punished (Exod. 21: 20). If, however, the slave died several days after receiving a beating, it may have been difficult to ascertain whether the death had resulted from the beating or from other causes. In that case, the master was given the benefit of the doubt and was not punished. But neither could he seek compensation by obtaining a new slave. He himself had to bear the financial cost of losing his slave (Exod 21:21).

Slaves were given consideration in the laws that were laid down to protect or punish the owners of animals that injured or killed people. The main factor in determining fault and assessing compensation was the extent to which the owner could be held responsible for the control of the animal. If the person killed by the animal was a slave, compensation had to be paid to the

master, since he owned the slave. But the slave was recognised as a human being, not treated as a mere 'thing' that somebody owned. Therefore, the animal that killed the slave had to be destroyed, the same as in the case of an animal that killed a free person. The destruction of the animal was an acknowledgment of the sanctity of human life (Exod 21:28-32).

Even-handed justice

When defending the downtrodden, some might have had a tendency to be persuaded by their sympathy for the poor and prejudice against the rich. The ruling classes could then become victims of injustice, simply because of their wealth and status. Hebrew law, though giving due attention to the exploitation of the defenceless, also noted the possibility of overreaction. Therefore, though it warned, 'You shall not pervert the justice due to the poor,' it also warned, 'You shall not be partial to the poor' (Exod 23:3,6).

This avoidance of partiality again showed itself in laws relating to goods that had been damaged or had disappeared while in the care of another. Those who had been asked to look after goods on behalf of an owner were not required to pay for the damage or loss of those goods, provided they could satisfy the judges that they were not responsible. They did this either through making a statement on oath or through producing evidence to prove their innocence (Exod 22:7-8,10,13). If, however, they had borrowed the goods, different laws applied. Since the borrowers, not the owners, were the ones seeking the favour, then the borrowers, not the owners, had to bear the cost of any loss or damage (Exod 22:14).

In assessing responsibility for injury to animals, there was again a noteworthy fairness to all concerned. If a farmer failed to control a bull that he knew to be aggressive, and his bull attacked and killed another farmer's bull, the first man had to replace the dead animal. However, he could keep the dead animal and so gain some reimbursement by selling or using its hide or meat. This also prevented the wronged party from exploiting the situation for his own profit (Exod 21:36). In a case where one

man's bull killed another's and no one could say for certain who was to blame, the live bull was sold and the two men divided the money equally. The dead animal was also divided (Exod 21:35).

More than mere law

In view of this even-handed consideration for all parties, it is not surprising to find in the New Testament that Hebrew law was leading to something far better than mere adherence to rules. It pointed to a higher way, as Jesus clearly showed. Even the ancient Hebrews were told to love their enemies and to do good to those who ill-used them. 'If you meet your enemy's ox or his ass going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the ass of one who hates you lying under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it. You shall help him to lift it up (Exod 23:4-5).

The tragedy was that people succumbed to the weaker side of human nature and found it more convenient to hate their enemies. But this was not an attitude taught or encouraged in the Old Testament. No blame can be laid on the Hebrew law-code. On the contrary, Hebrew law taught them 'You shall not hate your brother in your heart . . . You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge . . . You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:17-18). It was such a lofty ideal that it formed one of the two great principles that underlay the entire process of preparation for Christ and the Christian era (Matt 22:37-40). Our roots go down into very rich soil.

From *The Witness* (England, 1980)

Debtors and creditors

Behind the Hebrew law-code was the constant awareness that Israel was no ordinary nation. It existed in a special relation to God and this fact governed people's relations with each other. They were to look upon themselves as one big family where no one was to be refused help in time of need. They were not to exploit those who fell on hard times. On the contrary, they had a positive responsibility to help the less fortunate and treat them as equals (Lev 25:36,42-43).

Loans and interest

When adverse circumstances left people unable to support themselves, their fellow-Israelites had a duty to help them. They had to rehabilitate these unfortunate fellow-citizens to the point where they could become independent again. Under such circumstance, those who lent money or goods to the poor were not to take interest (Lev 25:35-38).

If, however, those in need were not destitute, creditors were allowed to ask for some article to be held as a guarantee that the debt would be repaid. Even then, they could not take items that were essential to the other person's everyday living. They could not, for example, take a millstone, as that would leave a person with no way of grinding flour to make food for the family. Clothing taken as guarantee had to be returned by evening so that the person would not have to sleep in the cold (Exod 22:26-27; Deut 24:6,10-13). Creditors could give employment to debtors who wanted to use their labour as a way of repaying debts, but they could not force debtors to become their slaves (Lev 25:39-40).

Wrong practices later developed when creditors took advantage of debtors, and debtors took advantage of friends whom they had asked to be guarantors for them. People could get themselves into trouble by agreeing to be guarantors for

friends (or strangers) if those friends had no way of getting enough money to honour their promise. A debtor could slide so far into debt that the guarantor could be ruined. Guarantors were therefore warned against making rash promises and were advised to withdraw guarantees from dishonest debtors before it was too late (Prov 6:1-5; 11:15; 22:26).

Dishonest creditors, however, were more of a problem than dishonest debtors. The Bible gives frequent examples of ruthless creditors who, ignoring the laws laid down in the Hebrew code, seized debtors' food and clothing (Amos 2:6-8; 5:11; 8:6), farm animals (Job 24:3) and houses and land (Micah 2:2). Some even took members of the debtors' families and made them slaves (2 Kings 4:1; Neh 5:1-5).

Release from debt

These disorders existed in spite of the law which stated that at the end of every seven years Israelites were to forgive any debts owed them by fellow-Israelites. No one was to be declined a loan in a time of hardship, even if the year of release was approaching. In contrast to the hard-hearted attitudes referred to above, the law encouraged generosity, emphasizing that 'you shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him.' God promised that he would reward those who were generous to their fellow-Israelites (Deut 15:1-11).

As with the law concerning interest on loans, the law concerning release from debt did not apply to foreign debtors. Foreigners were not bound to God and to one another in a covenant relationship as were Israelites. In monetary affairs concerning foreigners, normal business procedures applied (Deut 15:3; cf. 23:20).

Relevance to Christians

In all these laws, the emphasis was on helping fellow-Israelites in need, and the background to the laws was the simple agrarian society of ancient Israel. What the Bible condemned was the exploitation of the disadvantaged, not the investment of

money to set up or expand a business as in a commercially developed society. Jesus too condemned the exploitation of the needy and the taking of interest on a private loan. 'If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much again' (Luke 6:34). But he approved of wise investment to earn income. 'Why then did you not put my money in the bank, and at my coming I should have collected it with interest?' (Luke 19:23).

In spite of all this, Jesus did not approve of investment and trading where the main concern was to make money while neglecting the needy (Matt 25:42-45; Luke 6:24-25,30). One of his best known stories was about a man who was so engrossed in gathering wealth and enjoying it that he had forgotten God and no longer noticed the needs of others (Luke 16:19-25). Christians are encouraged on the one hand to give to those in need (Matt 5:42; Rom 12:13), but on the other to avoid getting themselves into debt (Rom 13: 8).

Lending and borrowing were frequently referred to by Jesus and the New Testament writers to illustrate their teachings. The bondage by which debtors were bound to creditors illustrated that bondage to the old nature from which believers in Jesus have been freed (Rom 8:12-13). The generosity encouraged by the Hebrew law, namely, helping the needy and forgiving debtors, illustrated God's mercy and grace in forgiving sinners (Luke 7:41-48).

This same picture illustrates how Christians, having received God's forgiveness, should then forgive those who sin against them. The law of Moses promised God's blessing to Israelites who forgave debts freely without grudging (Deut 15:7-10). Jesus taught his followers also to forgive freely, reminding them that only as they forgive the wrongs of others can they confidently pray to God their Father, 'Forgive us our debts' (Matt 6:12; cf. 18:21-35).

From *The Witness* (England, 1980)

Coping with materialism

Most Christians in the affluent West have a constant battle in dealing with material possessions and physical comforts. But this conflict is not new. It is as old as the human race, and people of different eras and countries have to examine the issues and determine how to handle them.

The material world is God's gift

There is nothing inherently evil about the material world. God created it, and he gave it to the people of his creation for their enjoyment (Gen 1:26; 2:16; 1 Tim 4:4). God's gifts will always be abused by some, but that is no reason for others to reject those gifts. Christians should neither oppose the proper enjoyment of material things nor place importance on them at the expense of spiritual values.

These two extremes were reflected in the gnostic-type teaching that troubled the early church. False teachers propounded that matter was evil, and this led to two opposite errors. Some tried to avoid involvement with things of the natural world in the false hope that this would promote practical holiness (Col 2:20-23; 1 Tim 4:1-5). Others, acknowledging the futility of such efforts, cast off all restraint. They indulged in all sorts of sensual pleasures in the false assurance that, since they were spiritually mature, such things could not adversely affect them (1 John 3:4-10). Both extremes are of the devil (1 Tim 4:1; 1 John 3:3), and both are still with us today, even among mainstream conservative Christians.

Food, drink, money, pleasures, possessions, sex and social involvement will all at times create problems for Christians, but abstinence is not necessarily the answer. Ascetics, celibates and hermits are not holier than others, nor do they represent God's norm for the human race. God's purposes for different people may vary, but his gifts must not be despised. They are to be used

in fellowship with God and in accordance with what his Word teaches (1 Tim 4:5). This does not mean that people have to become artificially 'spiritual' in their enjoyment of God's physical and material gifts. 'God richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy' (1 Tim 6:17), and there is nothing to be ashamed about in a full-blooded enjoyment of those gifts (Eccles 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:9).

The danger in making a sharp distinction between 'spiritual' and 'material' things is to treat the latter as if they are of little interest to God because they do not serve specifically 'spiritual' ends. When the ordinary things of life are separated from the spiritual, the result is that people who are religiously strict may at the same time be more materialistic than those who have a healthy enjoyment of life's good things.

Material things can be misused

When John warns Christians not to love the world (1 John 2:15-16), he is not speaking of the physical world or the gifts God has given through it. He is speaking of the sinful world of human society (cf. 1 John 5:19) and the selfishness, greed, pride and status-seeking that characterise that world. Such attitudes usually express themselves through the wrong handling of God's good gifts. It is in their attitude to legitimate things that Christians must be different from others. Things given for human enjoyment become a cause of stumbling when people give an all-absorbing interest to them. Those things usurp the place of God and dominate a person (Matt 6:24; Col 3:5). For this reason a statement encouraging enjoyment of God's gifts may be preceded by a warning of the danger of misuse (Eccles 5:10,19; 1 Tim 6:10,17).

Whatever material prosperity God's people enjoy, it is not in itself a sign of divine reward for godliness. In some cases it may be (Deut 28:1-6; 2 Cor 9:10-11), but in others the prosperity may have resulted from greed or injustice (Isa 3:14-15; James 5:1-6; Rev 3:17). Similarly, while in some cases lack of prosperity may be a chastisement from God (Haggai 1:9; Luke 19:24), in others it may be inexplicable, having no connection with any wrong-

doing (Job 1:8-22; Rev 2:9). Neither prosperity nor poverty is a virtue. To be anxious about the future, whether out of the desire for wealth or the fear of poverty, is to behave little better than those who do not know God at all (Matt 6:30-34).

It is true that on one occasion Jesus told a rich man to sell all that he owned, but the reason was that the man's wealth was his god (Matt 19:21-22). Jesus did not tell all rich people to sell their possessions. However, he made it clear that all who follow him must be ready to do so if that is what God requires of them (Mark 10:29).

The Bible does not always condemn wealth, for it can be given away and so be a help to others (1 Tim 6:17-18), but it consistently condemns luxury, for luxury is self-indulgent (Amos 6:4-6; Luke 6:24-25; James 5:1-6). By comparison with social standards in Jesus' time, most Christians in today's affluent West are wealthy, and probably live in luxury. The same may be said of them in comparison with the majority of people in the world today.

The wider social problem

From the beginning, God intended people to use the material resources of the world for their benefit. Most citizens in highly developed countries take for granted the standard of living available to them through the achievements of science and technology. But Christians in these countries should want to see people of the rest of the world sharing those benefits. One of the inbred evils of Western materialism is that it so insulates people against major hardship that they become indifferent to the plight of others. This individualistic view of life is at the root of present-day consumerism.

God is concerned for people's material well-being (Exod 22:1-31; Matt 6:32; 14:14,16), and Christians should be also. They are to work for the good of all (Gal 6:10; Titus 3:1). They are to be concerned for a just and proper distribution of the world's material resources so that people of all nations may enjoy the same benefits of health, food, clothing, housing,

transport, education, work and recreation as they themselves enjoy.

One temptation in the West is to look upon material progress as being unquestionably Christian. Many Christians so regard their country as being 'Christian' that they unthinkingly accept the *status quo* as having God's approval.

Some Christians have high principles of personal behaviour but unthinkingly support a system that ignores those principles. They may, for example, give generous aid to the needy in poor countries, yet at the same time support a trade policy that ensures their own nation grows richer while poor countries get poorer. They may condemn wrong behaviour done by an individual, yet approve of something done by a nation, society or business that is equally wrong.

Although material prosperity gives people security, it also tends to make them selfish. Those in a position to bring about change in the distribution of prosperity are usually the least likely to want change. It suits them better for things to remain as they are. Christians should never be motivated by the selfish desire to protect their own interests. They should put other people's interest before their own (Phil 2:4), and follow the example of him who, though he was rich, yet for their sakes became poor (2 Cor 8:9).

From *Outreach* (Australia, 1984)

Full-bodied mission

Some of us were brought up to beware of any presentation of Christianity that placed an emphasis on improving people's social well-being at the expense of preaching the gospel. In the West many of our daily needs were covered anyway, because of government-sponsored welfare systems. Our concern for people in less developed countries often had more to do with 'saving souls' than with sending practical aid. Today the interest is often the other way round. This is so particularly among younger people, who do not cut themselves off from the world to the extent 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. This is referred to today as 'holistic' or 'integral' ministry. We deal with people in the totality of their being rather than separate the spiritual from the physical.

Poor Christians in action

Many Christians in poor countries are better than some of us in wealthy countries at getting involved in community affairs. For them, civil rulers are usually corrupt and uncaring, and ordinary citizens are so poor that they have no mind for anything other than personal survival. But Christians are often different. This is something I observe in one country after another as I engage in ministry around Africa and Asia. Churches have goals and strategies that included both proclamation and practical care.

Among the churches of Ethiopia, one of the poorest of countries, a consistent feature I noticed was that they had programs to help their communities with such things as food, water, education, house repairs, clothing, health services and

sanitation facilities. Though poor, these churches were well organised and kept track of operations using wall charts to record details of their welfare administration.

Many churches had programs to help people become self-sufficient by giving or lending money to set them up in small businesses such as tailoring, shoe-making or retailing. These projects are sometimes referred to as micro-enterprises, which sounds sophisticated but may be no more than a seat under a makeshift shelter by the roadside, one person making clothes, another mending shoes and another selling a few items of household hardware.

As I see this kind of self-sacrificial yet vigorous welfare activity in poor countries, I often wonder how the churches pay for it all. People in poor countries seem to do so much with so little. Perhaps some receive help from churches and agencies in the West, but much also comes from the tithes and offerings of local believers.

At the same time, these churches are fervent about evangelism. In the West we have almost to take a stick to people to get them evangelising, but in poorer countries most Christians seem to be fired up about evangelism. In some places it is the only preaching they do, which then becomes a weakness. They focus solely on making converts, whereas Jesus told us to make disciples. With a narrow emphasis on merely getting 'decisions for Christ,' a new nominalism can develop. This is not because of a so-called 'social gospel' that has removed the offence of the cross, but because of a lack of teaching. People need not only to be converted, but also to be taught 'the whole counsel of God.'

One feeds the other

Christians in the West, living in a society where much of the populace has no interest in the church, often struggle with ways of reaching out with the gospel. This seems not to be a problem in many poorer countries. Christians in these countries see no tension between evangelistic work and welfare work, because the two go together. Each feeds the other.

An evangelist in Zambia who had planted more than a dozen churches in rural areas also, with his wife, helped look after about a hundred orphans and widows. Some of these lived in scattered villages, some lived in the evangelist's own home, and some came for once-a-week meals and other provisions that the man and his wife provided. In another area of Zambia, twenty-five churches had reached out to the needy by taking orphans and the chronically ill into their own homes. At the time when I was in the region, fifty-seven Christian families were caring for 160 orphans and an additional 252 who were chronically ill with HIV/AIDS-related health problems.

This kind of thing is common throughout Africa. Christians take orphans and other disadvantaged people into their homes and care for them – all this without any welfare assistance from governments. Giving help to the needy is one thing Christians should do, but when it is done in the name of Christ, people respond to the gospel and churches grow. A man in Malawi spoke of opening several new preaching points, but when this brought him and his church in contact with the needy of the district, they soon found themselves involved in care for people's physical needs. With its meagre resources, the church reached out – and grew.

Christ is the answer

As these Christians demonstrate Christ's love, they share the message of hope and life that comes through Christ. A man in Cameroon put it quaintly but sincerely when he said, 'If you give somebody something without Jesus Christ, you have done nothing with that person, but if you give Jesus Christ before any other thing, that will be very good forever.'

This is something of a contrast to a growing tendency among Western churches. Many Christians, in keeping with the popular psychology of the day, behave as if an improvement in physical circumstances will solve social and personal problems. It is true that Christians ought to be concerned for those around them and for society at large, but there must be a spiritual new birth if people are to have the kind of life God wants for them.

Churches in the West can learn from churches elsewhere that growth occurs where the church's approach to mission is healthy and full-bodied, without over-balancing in one direction or another. Churches ought to be energetic in community involvement while at the same time being committed to the proclamation of the gospel. Social work and gospel proclamation are not separate and independent ministries; each needs the other if it is to be truly effective.

From *International Perspectives* (England, 2008)

Television culture

A much-quoted statement about the influence of television in modern society is Marshall McLuhan's 'the medium is the message.' The statement is perhaps too short to be entirely self-explanatory and I often wondered about its meaning, till I read Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. That book not only helped me understand McLuhan's cryptic statement but also confirmed my misgivings and sharpened my perceptions of what television is doing to us.

The form determines the content

Another way of saying 'the medium is the message' is to say 'the form determines the content.' A radio broadcast, for example, demands a certain style of communication, because it relies solely upon the receptor's hearing, but television demands a different style of communication because it relies more upon the receptor's seeing. The medium of communication dictates the content of the communication.

If, in a former era, some indigenous people in a remote tribe were sending smoke signals, their communication would be limited to matters that could be transmitted by that medium. They could not use smoke signals to have a philosophical discussion. The form determined the content; the medium imposed itself on the message.

When a person presents his ideas in writing, his physical appearance is irrelevant. His ideas are the focus of attention. But on TV, the visual effect is dominant, and the person's image overwhelms his ideas. Because television is a different form of communication from writing, it demands a different content. The image-maker, not the speech-writer, is the one who controls the message. Serious discussion becomes almost impossible, because the form of communication is not designed for it. But since television is the dominant means of getting people's

attention, serious issues are adapted to its form, and in the process are reduced to entertainment, trivia or gimmickry. Ideas are affected by the form in which they are presented.

Influence of communications on a culture

We usually gain insight into a culture by observing how its people communicate. Their means of communication reflect and mould their thinking and interests.

The invention of writing, for instance, changed the way people thought and acted, because they could now see, as well as hear, what others said. Instead of being required to give an instant response, they could think about, analyse, debate, question and discuss without any limits of time or location. The invention of the clock changed the way people viewed events, through causing them to see life as a series of units that can be measured mathematically. The electronic era changes things again, so that both the written word and the measured time unit appear to be superseded by an image that is both wordless and instantaneous.

In an oral culture, the skills people develop are concerned firstly with composing sayings that are short and meaningful, and then with memorising such statements. In a print culture people develop the ability to read and understand words without being distracted by their shape. Their concern is with meaning, not appearance. They must think as they read, and therefore they expect things to be presented rationally. Each writer is subject to unlimited public scrutiny (for his words are not restricted to just one time or location), and each reader is challenged to personal assessment (because reading is an activity that each person must undertake individually).

Perhaps the first move away from the use of reading as a rational activity came with the introduction of slogans, and then pictures, in advertising. Instead of giving information in factual or descriptive form, advertisers reduced written language to non-grammatical headings, catch phrases and pictures. Instead of appealing to people's reason, they appealed to their impulses. In today's image culture, the shift goes even further, so that written

words have almost no place. We can picture the appearance of people but not understand their words. When we think of Cicero, the apostle Paul or Dante, what first comes to mind is their words, not their appearance; when we think of Mao Zedong, Margaret Thatcher or Billy Graham, what first comes to mind is their appearance, not their words.

The telegraph and the photograph

People have always been impressed with great inventions and discoveries, and have enthusiastically looked for ways to apply their new-found capabilities. As soon as it became possible to transmit messages by telegraphic means, newspapers seized the opportunity to broadcast news from the other side of the world. Whether that news was relevant to the readers was of no consequence. The fact that something could be done meant it should be done. Information was given to the public regardless of whether it served any useful purpose. It became a product to be traded for commercial profit. News that travelled the greatest distance or at the fastest speed became the most marketable product of all. The private life of an American basketball player may have had no relevance to people in England, but it gave them something to talk about. The main function of news was no longer to give useful information, but simply to entertain.

In contrast to a book, which takes time to write, read, assimilate and assess, telegraphic news was broken into brief segments that majored on the sensational. Unlike books, which sought to make contributions that lasted and had quality, radio news focused on what was of immediate or novel appeal. Photography augmented this. It could deal only with what could be photographed, not with values or concepts, but when added to the news, it became a powerful communications tool.

Most people believe what they see, with the result that, without stopping to analyse whether the picture is a presentation or a manipulation of reality, they succumb to the hypnotic power of televised news. The image replaces the written word as the basis of understanding and decision-making. Television is not supportive of the written word, but hostile to it.

Material must be entertaining

Television's concern for what is eye-catching means that news broadcasts give glimpses into events that grab the attention but are without context. The events may be bizarre, degrading, catastrophic or pathetic, but they can leave the impression that life is meaningless. Nevertheless, the news entertains, and that, for the controllers of television, is reason enough for it to be broadcast. And therein lies the core problem with television. The problem is not that it presents entertaining material, but that all material must be presented as entertainment.

This concern with amusement value means that television is not a good medium for serious discussion. The nature of the medium demands a simple format that engages viewers without requiring too much mental effort on their part. It appeals to the emotions rather than the mind. Performance and style, not ideas or reason, are the chief considerations. Watching a person think is not entertaining. But television is concerned with pictorial images, not with thinking. The presenters that TV stations like to put in the public eye are not those who think best, but those who look good and perform well. The people on screen, from religious leaders to politicians, must have public appeal, so that viewers are made to feel good and respond favourably.

These things ought to disturb Christians, because we are told that whatever we see or hear, we should not give our assent simply because it makes us feel good. What happens to our minds is of critical importance. We ought to think differently from others because of the transforming effect of the Word of God. We should develop a Christian mind, which will enable us to test all things, and thereby see what is worthwhile and what is not (1 Cor 14:15; Phil 1:9-10; 1 Thess 5:21).

It may be argued that there is nothing wrong with trying to extract a favourable response from people. Christians, like others, use many forms of communication, including radio, books, newspapers and television. But the power of television is that, sooner or later, it takes over specialised areas of the other media. People do not buy a CD to get a weather report, do not go

to the cinema to learn about money management, and do not read a book for a panel show. Television is able to present material on all these things, but because it does so in a format designed to entertain, it changes the way people see life. They watch TV not to stimulate thought but to relax. Eventually, real life issues are treated as if they are part of a soap opera.

News and current affairs

Any news presentation, whether by print media, radio or television, is only a summary of events. The tendency may often be to major on the spectacular, even though it may be trivial. The disadvantage of television presentations compared with those of the other media is that they must feature those elements of the news for which pictures are available, even though the pictures may bear little relevance to the subject. The pictures determine the aspect of news that is presented.

All items in a news broadcast are of necessity brief, which means they are often without context. If the dominant element is a picture, an item may be broadcast even though its news value is minimal. The prime consideration is not an item's importance but its entertainment value. And when the items are broken up by commercials, viewers are given the impression that the news is not to be taken seriously. Watching the news is, after all, a recreational activity.

If the writer of a book on Yugoslavia's problems interrupted his story every few pages with unrelated statements about the appeal of some hair shampoo or the chance of a free cruise for some lucky person who buys a pizza, readers would hardly think he was treating them or the subject seriously. Yet people have become so accustomed to similar treatment of news on TV that they are no longer shocked by it. The alarming fact is that they expect TV to be like that. Something within tells them that news is supposed to represent fact, but something else tells them not to worry too much. Anyway, the hosts are nice people and they will be back with more pictures at the same time tomorrow.

News and current affairs programs avoid complexities, make no demands on viewers' comprehension, reduce most issues to

simple yes/no propositions, substitute visual stimulation for thought, and dismiss all problems within a few seconds or, at the most, minutes. Everything is packaged to entertain. People today see pictures from more countries than their forebears, but know less about the world. They are better entertained but more poorly informed. After years of almost daily viewings of the troubles in Yugoslavia, most people still have no idea of what the issues are. The footage gives them an illusion of being informed, though in reality they know almost nothing.

Television changes the concept of what it means to be informed. It confuses information with understanding. People think they hold an opinion, when in fact they have nothing more than a vague feeling. They have merely been amused.

We readily admit that we remember what we have learnt by personal study, but rarely remember what we have only heard or seen. Television actively discourages personal study, because it wants to keep people watching – which means doing nothing. And because of TV's dominance, other media feel they must adapt to its style, with the result that the entire information environment soon reflects television's superficiality.

Advertising

Most of the features of television are seen more starkly in television advertising. If television programs are a powerful influence in shaping public attitudes, perceptions and opinions, television advertising focuses that influence. By replacing words with images, the appeal is no longer to people's rationality but to their emotions. With little concrete fact, decisions cannot be based on whether a person or thing is good; only on whether it appears to be good. Worse still, people can easily base their decisions not even on what the objects appear to be, but only on how they feel about themselves in relation to the objects. The market emphasis is not on making products of worth, but on making products that people feel good about buying. Market research outweighs product research.

Advertisements for cars may tell us little about the quality of the car but a lot about the sense of status that comes through

driving it. Sports persons advertise products about which they have no expert knowledge, but we are expected to buy the product because of their endorsement.

In political advertising, a person who aspires to high office must have an image-maker, a person who creates pictures that viewers can identify with instantly. Within thirty seconds, people must be convinced that their problems can be solved. If someone wrote a brief statement saying that a certain problem could be solved instantaneously by a politician, he would be laughed at. But when a similar message is seen on TV, people respond to it.

If, let us say, the thirty second advertisement was lengthened to five minutes so that the political aspirant could talk about just one item more fully, the advertisement would be less effective. People do not want the uncertainty of pros and cons. They want the confidence of leaving it to a person who is 'like them.' That is why the image-makers show pictures of the candidate in as many roles as possible – at home (in casual clothes), in the office (in business attire), at the sportsground (in sportswear), talking to workers (in a hard hat) and so on. They want voters to identify with the candidate. The advertising is not about the product, but about the consumers.

Successful political advertising is that which provides good images, not rational analysis. The advertisement may say nothing about the person's character or ability; the main thing is that the person appears to be someone voters can identify with, someone who reflects an image of themselves. Successful politicians are those who can change themselves into the image voters want.

Education

For the children of today's world, TV is part of life from the time of their earliest memories. Before they start school, most will watch television shows that claim to be a preparation for school learning.

But these shows do not prepare for school learning. There are no classroom essentials such as interaction with a teacher and with other pupils, no requirements for behaviour, no disciplines

of attendance, and no penalties for inattention. The makers of such shows are not concerned with a classroom environment but with a television environment. The shows do not help children to like school; they help them to like television. Some may argue that the shows are educational, and this may be true, but only in the sense that anything anybody watches is educational, whether it is on television or elsewhere. Being amused by activities on a screen is poor preparation for learning by reading and writing. If anything, it is hostile to it.

Even so-called educational programs, for children or mature-age people alike, are prepared and presented according to the overall requirements of the television medium. That is, they must be without context so that viewers can understand them without the need for historical continuity or prior knowledge. They must also be simple, in order that viewers will not be mentally taxed. The presentation will often be in the form of a story, with lots of visual images, so that viewers are amused and stay tuned. Television survives on ratings. Its prime concern is with viewers' contentment, not with their education.

We take it for granted that TV sets (also computers) benefit students at school. This may be so, because students must be fitted for life in today's world. At the same time we should be aware that today's world is concerned largely with *how* things can be done, not with *whether* they should be done – with means, not ends; with practical outcomes, not moral values.

Technology provides electronic equipment to help education, but does not help people understand the values and aims of education. It prepares them to use electronic equipment in their future vocations, but does not prepare their minds to evaluate those matters of ethics, language, religion and history that make human life meaningful. The fault lies not with the electronic equipment itself, but with the public perception that those who know how to use it are thereby better educated.

No sense of history

The fragmented nature of television presentations has virtually eliminated any sense of history for most people. By a

sense of history I do not mean 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. People today may know what has happened in the last twenty-four hours, but have forgotten what happened one year ago, or one hundred years ago. The problem is not just that they cannot remember, but that television gives the impression it is not important to remember. If current images are always the prime consideration, there is no purpose in considering the patterns of the past and their relevance to the present.

Because television's fragmented information comes without continuity or context, people lose any historical perspective. They may have feelings of nostalgia in watching old footage, but that is not the same as having a sense of history. Television gives people no 'big picture' in which the patterns of history become significant. Rather the opposite; the presentation of instant bits of contextless information eventually makes people incapable of remembering anything of importance.

Totalitarian states have been known for rewriting history to suit their ideology. The danger in the West is not from the state but from the media, who hold governments hostage. The danger is not that history will be rewritten but that it will be made meaningless by trivialisation. Books are not likely to be banned by legislation; more likely, they will simply be ignored or discarded, because the television environment is hostile to them. Television discourages reading by encouraging watching, but the material broadcast for watching is packaged to entertain, not to promote thought.

In such an environment, Christianity suffers. Television has no place for quiet contemplation. It wants to use the impressive achievements of the latest technology, and always with a view to economic profit. The beliefs and practices of Christianity were not intended to entertain or satisfy personal ambition, but television encourages both. In the process it will trivialise and even lampoon Christian beliefs. Like other products of modern technology, its interest is with technical expertise, not with moral values. What it can do, it will do.

Christians, like others, watch television, but unlike others they should do so with a critical eye. This does not mean being critical in the sense of finding fault with everything they see, but in the sense of exercising discernment. It is a case not of simply objecting to sex, violence and profanity on TV, but of understanding what television does to the minds of those who watch it. One sign of maturity in Christians is the ability to distinguish good from evil, but this comes only as they 'have their faculties trained by practice' (Heb 5:14). The regular practice of making discerning judgments will help transform the mind to see the world from God's perspective (Rom 12:2).

Meeting the challenge

The threat to Western society is not from without but from within. It is not from a hostile external force that will remove democratic freedoms, but from a freedom-loving populace that welcomes any technological advance that brings contentment. The danger is not that people will be deprived of information by a dictatorial government, but that their unlimited access to information has created a world of trivia. It is not that freedom of speech will be curtailed, but that most serious public discourse has been reduced to entertainment.

During the era of Communist domination, many in the West became paranoid about the possibility of being taken over by totalitarian government. That fear has receded, but they remain oblivious to the threat from a media environment that appears to be harmless. In some ways it is easier to resist a totalitarian dictatorship than the all-pervasive dominance of television. It is easier to fight military forces than to fight an army of endless amusements. Western society is under threat not because the enemy is too grim but because it is too frivolous. And history has shown that a society's waywardness is often the instrument God uses to punish it. A society becomes obsessed with the self-made powers by which it has attained greatness, only to be destroyed by those same powers.

This is not to say that Christians must throw up their hands in resigned helplessness. From apostolic times to the present, the

personal commitment of individual Christian has always been the church's central strength and most effective means of evangelism. There is no easy way to neutralise the debilitating influence of television in today's world. Even a demand that programs be more thought-provoking could be counter-productive. Television is a medium of entertainment, and is helpful when producing entertainment that does not pretend to be something else. It is unhelpful when it dresses up news and current affairs as 'serious television' but is in fact merely providing further entertainment – and it can achieve this only by distorting the material.

Perhaps the best we can do to counter the negative effects of television is to understand its dangers and question it constantly. We all watch it, but so long as we are questioning it, we are not allowing it to control us. We should also encourage a more critical attitude in others by making them aware of the sorts of issues we ourselves have considered. The more we make others aware of what television does and how it does it, the more we are helping them to break its spell.

This is something that anyone can do, but if we are followers of Jesus Christ we ought to do so the more confidently and positively. After all, aren't Christians the ones who claim to have joy, peace, satisfaction and hope that give the fullest meaning to life?

Unpublished (1993)

Too easily satisfied

As a result of the destruction of Old Testament Jerusalem by the Babylonians, the people of Jerusalem and other parts of Judea were taken captive to Babylon, where they remained for at least two generations. They were not held captive in prisons, but lived in large labour camps where they provided a free workforce for Babylon. Over their many years in these camps they had managed to make daily life reasonably tolerable.

When God considered that the Jews' punishment in Babylon had been enough, he used Persia to overthrow Babylon and allow the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild Jerusalem. This was part of God's plan to re-establish Israel in preparation for the coming of his promised saviour, the Messiah. When we read Isaiah 55 in that setting, we may see what God was saying not only to the ancient Jews but also to us.

People: 'We're settled down; please don't disturb us'

When the prophet saw how the people had become rather too settled in the way of life they had established for themselves in Babylon, he realised they might not want to uproot themselves to go and face the hardships of life back in their desolated homeland. Many were more concerned with making life easier for themselves than with knowing God and looking to him for their provision.

Through his prophet, God warns his people against this self-centredness and invites them to trust fully in him. The blessings he gives cannot be bought. They are obtained 'without money;' they are 'beyond price.' But they bring more satisfaction than all the temporary benefits that people might manage to gain. Why labour for that which does not satisfy? God once had a purpose for them to go to Babylon, but now his purpose for them is to return to Jerusalem. If they want his blessing, Jerusalem is the place where they will experience it (v. 1-2).

God: 'To enjoy my blessings, you must first change'

If the people are to experience the life God has prepared for them, they must listen to what he is saying and respond to him. God's purposes are not for the people of Israel alone, but are to extend far beyond the borders of their restored nation. When God's people take his message to other nations, those who previously had no knowledge of God will become followers of the God of Israel. The people of these nations will come 'running to them,' so to speak. God had given promises to David of 'steadfast love' and an 'everlasting covenant.' These promises will now be fulfilled beyond their expectations (v. 3-5).

First, however, God requires repentance – which is what he always requires if people are to enjoy his promised blessings. Too often they want to claim the promises of God without submitting to the conditions he lays down. They must first of all 'seek the Lord,' because they cannot find God's chosen life by their own efforts. Instead of trying to be self-sufficient, they must 'call upon him while he is near.' His invitation will not be open for ever, and his mercy cannot be taken for granted. Therefore, sinners must 'forsake their ways,' renounce former patterns of thought and behaviour, and 'return to the Lord.' When they do this, they will soon find that their all-knowing and merciful God 'will abundantly pardon' (v. 6-7).

God: 'My promises do not fail'

This divine mercy is so great that it is beyond human understanding. 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor my ways your ways,' says the Lord. People will always misunderstand God when they judge him by their own standards. In reality, what he has prepared for his people is greater than they could ever imagine (v. 8-9). And these promises of God do not fail. He told the captive Jews they would return to their homeland, and he does not go back on his word, whether to the ancient Israelites or to people today. As surely as rain soaks into the ground and makes plants grow (it does not bounce back up to the clouds), so will God's promise of Israel's restoration come true (it will not return to God fruitless) (v. 10-11).

In the case of the captive Jews, God will lead them out of Babylon and back to their homeland. They will 'go out in joy and be led forth in peace.' It will be as if 'the mountains break forth in singing' and 'the fields clap their hands.' Healthy trees will replace useless thornbushes, and life in general will bring fellowship with God and personal well-being such as they could never have imagined (v. 12-13).

What about us?

Why, then, do people waste their money, their energies, their lives, on things that do not satisfy (v.2)? As the prophet spoke so did Jesus, when he pointed out that human beings are more than just creatures that need to eat if they are to stay alive. We do not live by bread alone, but by the spiritual input that comes from God himself (Matt 4:4).

The problem with the Western world, as with the ancient Jews, is that life can become too settled, too convenient, too comfortable. Surely, we don't think that self-indulgence is what gives meaning to life! Prosperity, comfort and ease have not brought inner peace or happiness to people in our country. On the contrary, they seem to be more unhappy, insecure, and dissatisfied than ever. Whereas Jesus said that 'man does not live by bread alone,' many today have convinced themselves they can. But we are made in God's image, and without God, we will never have the life God intended for us.

There is an urgency about this. Seek the Lord while he may be found (v. 6). Return to him, give up our self-centredness and we shall find that he generously pardons (v. 7). If we try to go it alone, we shall end in despair, but if we put first God's kingdom and God's interests, we shall find that everything else works itself out. God is waiting, but we must make the first move.

From Chinese Church Bulletin (Australia, 2005)

Generosity that upsets

Jesus was well aware that many human beings have built-in resentments that they sometimes display when they see kindness shown to those who, in their opinion, do not deserve it. But when God exercises his love to the repentant, he does so on the basis of his grace, not their deserts.

In the Yugoslavian conflict of the 1990s, I saw Christians reaching out with love and practical help to those they might have had good reason to ignore. Whether on the Croatian side or the Serbian side, Christians rose above the petty jealousies and personal interests being stirred up by national leaders, and through their efforts many came into Christ's kingdom. Only by God's grace do any at all enter his kingdom, and if God's children exercise that same grace, others join them in the kingdom and receive its blessings. When the Kosovo crisis erupted a few years later, Serbian Christians again showed God's love to people that fellow citizens saw as unwanted intruders.

Not long after the genocide in Rwanda, I was in its next-door neighbour Burundi, a country that also saw conflict between a Hutu majority and a Tutsi minority. The devastation in Burundi was heartbreaking, yet Christians reached out and helped others, regardless of ethnicity. Their generosity of spirit welcomed all into God's kingdom, regardless of what they may or may not have been previously.

In one of Jesus' stories, a vineyard owner illustrated the breadth of God's grace by being so generous that people resented him for it. The man hired workers for an agreed amount, and at several times during the day hired additional workers. At the end of the day he paid everyone, but when the first lot of workers saw that he gave all workers the same amount, they complained. They felt they deserved more. The vineyard owner replied that he had paid them the amount agreed upon, and if he paid others the same, that was his concern. The workers' discontent arose

not because the vineyard owner had done wrong, but because they were jealous of others who received payment equally with them (Matt 20:1-16).

The relevance of the story in the time of Jesus was that the Jewish leaders were angry when they saw Jesus welcoming disreputable Jews, such as tax collectors and prostitutes, solely because of his mercy on the repentant. In the days of the early church, other Jewish leaders were angry that Christians welcomed converts from heathenism straight into the full blessings of the kingdom. The Jews considered themselves special in a way that excluded others. After all, they had for generations worshipped God and studied his law, and they resented his mercy being poured out on those who had not worked as they had. Foreigners received equal blessing with Jews, regardless of their background.

Two thousand years later, when the church is almost entirely non-Jewish, we find that similar attitudes are still common. This is so not just among those within the church but also among those outside. When people's chief concern is with what they think they deserve, they lose sight of grace.

Among the ordinary citizens of wealthy countries, some resent the arrival of those from poorer countries who receive equal benefits with them. The respectable may be annoyed when mercy is shown to those they despise. Among Christians, those of long-standing may even think it unfair that death-bed conversions lead to the same eternal bliss for which they have waited a lifetime. If it was not for the grace of God, no person would ever be saved, because all are guilty before God and do not deserve his mercy. But, as Jesus' story demonstrates, God is generous in grace. And he is the model for his people.

From *Light of Life* (India, 2002)

Come and get it

Reading the book of Proverbs requires us to use our imagination. In the second half of Chapter 1, we have to picture an impressive woman standing in the town square and speaking with such passion that she commands the attention of passers-by. This woman represents wisdom (v. 20-21). She calls to all within hearing, whether they are indifferent, lazy, empty-headed, irresponsible, cynical or careless, and urges them to come to her and freely receive wisdom (v. 22-23).

That sounds a very appealing invitation. The trouble is that before receiving wisdom, people may have to suffer some rebukes. Before receiving what God offers, they may have to accept God's judgment on the worthlessness of their own efforts. 'Give heed to my reproof, and I will pour out my thoughts to you' (v. 23). That is what normally we do not like to do. But as long as we persist in the notion that we are always right, there is little likelihood that we will receive any help from God. We will miss out on the wisdom he makes available to us.

Aware that people's self-centredness causes them to ignore wisdom's invitation, the woman warns that those who go their own way will in the end meet disaster. It will then be too late for wisdom to help. As the foolish people recall how they ignored wisdom, that wisdom seems now to mock them (v. 24-27).

The urgent lesson for us is to respond to what wisdom, represented in this woman, is saying: 'The complacency of fools destroys them, but he who listens to me will dwell secure' (v32-33). We need to snap out of our complacency and make the effort to get God's offered wisdom while we can.

From *Daily Bread* (Australia, 1988)

The priesthood of believers

The expression ‘the priesthood of all believers,’ though commonly used by Christians, is not found in the Bible. That is not to say that the notion is unbiblical. There are many expressions used by Christians that accurately represent biblical truths even though the expressions themselves may not be found in the Bible. But it is possible that some views of the priesthood of all believers may not be as consistent with the Bible’s teaching as we assume.

The popular views

It would surprise many in the Christian Brethren Assemblies that I was brought up in to learn that the priesthood of all believers, so far from being a belief held by them and few others, is a widely held belief across Protestant churches. The idea, put simply, is this. Under the new covenant there is no intermediary class of priests between God and his people as there was under the old covenant, because all his people are now priests, and through Christ all have direct access to the mercy seat (or grace throne).

However, many Brethren churches take the notion one step further and apply it to their own distinctive style of church operation. In relation to the overall life of the church, they would argue against what they call a one-man ministry, for ‘all are priests,’ and the domination of proceedings by one person denies others the opportunity of exercising their priesthood. In some Brethren worship meetings they prefer no one to lead, again because ‘all are priests’ and all should be free to express themselves openly in praise, prayer, devotion or exhortation.

(There is, it should be noted, an inconsistency in the practice of many Brethren churches. After asserting that all believers are priests, they then impose a blanket silence upon more than half of them, namely, the females. But that is another matter.)

Church practices

If we look first of all at some of the distinctly Brethren practices, it seems out of place to apply the notion of the priesthood of all believers to the structures or operations of local churches. The only New Testament writers who speak of anything that might be interpreted as the priesthood of all believers are Peter, in his First Letter (1 Peter 2:5,9), and John the seer (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6), and neither of these writers relates the imagery in any way to the structures or operations of the local church. As for Paul, the favoured source for Brethren teaching on the local church, he says nothing at all about the priesthood of all believers.

To develop a simile, metaphor, parable, picture, idiom or symbol outside its context is always a hazardous procedure. Invariably, it will lead to wrong practices or, at best, hopeless inconsistencies and complications. For example, if all believers are priests after the pattern of the Levitical priests, it follows that all believers are teachers, for the Levitical priests were the teachers in Israel (Deut 33:10). Perhaps that accounts for the practice in some Brethren churches of allowing anyone to minister the Word publicly, even though such a practice is contrary to the New Testament assertion that only some are teachers (1 Cor 12:29).

When the New Testament speaks about the structure and operation of the local church, it never uses the priesthood as an analogy. The most fully developed analogy is that of the human body (1 Cor 12). Here all the members are functioning (the truth that Brethren churches are justifiably keen to preserve), and functioning as God intended them. They utilise different gifts, yet all contribute to the unity and growth of the body.

The details of church leadership (one-man ministry or otherwise) and conduct of church meetings (open participation or a structured service) are to be worked out in the light of what the New Testament says on such matters, not by drawing upon the analogy of the priesthood. The imagery of believers as priests is not specifically concerned with such things.

A kingdom of priests

The more widely held view of the priesthood of all believers (i.e. our unhindered access to God) seems also to be based on a misunderstanding. This is because, wherever priesthood is mentioned, most people immediately think of the Levitical priesthood, which in turn leads them to Hebrews, where old and new covenants are contrasted. However, in the two books that speak of believers as priests, 1 Peter and Revelation, the priesthood referred to is a royal priesthood, or a kingdom of priests, not the Levitical priesthood.

In 1 Peter 2:9, Peter combines two Old Testament passages, Exodus 19:5-6 and Isaiah 43:20-21. In those passages Israel is spoken of as God's people, his own possession among the nations, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation and a people whom God formed to declare his praise. All the expressions are corporate, not individual. They show what God intended his Old Testament people to be, and Peter now uses them to show what his New Testament people should be.

All Israel was a priesthood; or, to put it another way, Israel was God's priest among the nations – God's representative, his chosen instrument to take his message to the nations and to bring the nations to God. The corporate priesthood of the whole nation is in no way in conflict with the Levitical priesthood. In fact, one might say that the priesthood is spoken of in two distinctly different ways. The national priesthood is a figure of speech, the Levitical priesthood is literal. For a comparable example, think of how we might speak of a family of nations, yet speak also of a family get-together. The former is a figurative use of 'family,' the latter is literal. Once we recognise the difference, we see no conflict in using the same word in different ways in different contexts.

There is nothing wrong in referring to the priesthood of all Christians, provided we allow that this is a word-picture taken from the priesthood of all Israelites. The expression does not mean that each individual is a literal priest in the Levitical sense, but that corporately the people constitute a priesthood. Peter's

reference to Christians as a royal priesthood answers to the Old Testament statement that Israel was a kingdom of priests. (John's references in the Revelation likewise speak of Christians as a kingdom of priests.) Peter's concern is to show that the church is now God's chosen people. Its calling to be a priesthood under God's kingship is fulfilled in worshipping and serving him through proclaiming his message worldwide – taking God to the nations and bringing the nations to God.

The Levitical priesthood

When we look at priesthood in the book of Hebrews, we find no suggestion that believers are priests. Rather Christ is the priest, or, more precisely, the high priest, and because he has made a perfect sacrifice we enter the presence of God through him. In Hebrews, in contrast to 1 Peter and Revelation, the imagery comes from the Levitical priesthood, not from the national or corporate priesthood. The imagery in Hebrews, again in contrast to that of 1 Peter and Revelation, is not designed to show that believers are priests, but to show that there are no priests. Christ alone has made access to God possible, and believers come to God through him. They come not as priests, but as ordinary people, and they come through Christ, the one and only high priest.

Those who speak of the priesthood of believers as giving them right of access into God's presence overlook the fact that, in the symbolic rituals of the tabernacle, ordinary priests did not have access into God's presence. Only the high priest entered God's presence (the mercy seat, or grace throne), and he did so only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. It was Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest, who, on the basis of his one sacrifice for sins for ever, entered God's presence once for all and thereby made free access available to all God's people. Believers can come freely into God's presence only because of what their High Priest has done for them (Heb 9:6-12,24-26; 10:12,19-22).

In summary, then, there are two separate and distinct usages of the imagery of priesthood in the passages we have been considering. In 1 Peter the picture of priesthood is applied to

Christians, not to Christ. In Hebrews it is applied to Christ, not to Christians. But through carelessness, many have confused the two pictures. To put it another way, they have got their wires crossed. The right connections should be: 1 Peter 2:9 (Christians' priesthood) connects with the priesthood of Exodus 19:5-6. Hebrews (Christ's priesthood) connects with the priesthood of Leviticus. Somewhere a careless switchboard operator has connected 1 Peter 2:9 with Leviticus.

The offering of sacrifices

A number of places in the New Testament speak of believers offering sacrifices. This does not mean that, to be consistent with the imagery, believers must therefore be priests. When the Old Testament speaks of people offering sacrifices, it is usually the ordinary people (i.e. non-priestly people) that it is referring to. Kings and administrators, prophets and preachers, men and women, individuals and families, the young and the old, the sincere and the insincere all offered sacrifices. Their purpose in doing so was, ideally, to express their devotion, worship or thanks. They provided the animal or food and presented it at the altar, where the priest officiated over the ritual and, in particular, applied the blood. Priests offered sacrifices on behalf of the people and on occasions for themselves personally.

In 1 Peter 2:5 believers are a holy priesthood and offer spiritual sacrifices. Peter has mixed his metaphors well in this verse. He says that believers are living stones who form a temple in which God is worshipped, and then in the same breath says that they are a holy priesthood who officiate in that worship.

Other passages that speak of believers offering sacrifices seem to view them as ordinary people, not as priests. The writer to the Hebrews is consistent in maintaining that believers approach God not as priests, but as ordinary people through their Great High Priest. Therefore, they offer their sacrifices through him (Heb 13:15-16). Paul also speaks of believers' sacrifices, but he does not connect them with believers' priesthood. They are expressions of devotion that God's people in any age, Christian or pre-Christian, might fittingly make (Rom 12:1; Phil 4:18; cf.

1 Chron 29:21; Ps 51:17; Micah 6:6-8). Among the many pictures Paul uses in illustrating his ministry is the picture of the priest (Rom 15:16); but he also uses the picture of the builder (1 Cor 3:10), the farmer (1 Cor 3:6), the steward (1 Cor 4:1) and the ambassador (2 Cor 5:20).

Practical implications

Certainly, the Bible applies the picture of the priesthood to believers, but it also applies many other pictures. We should learn the lessons that are taught us by these illustrations, but we should not press them too far. In the case of the priesthood of all believers, the problem is not just that the illustration has been developed excessively, but that it has been developed in a way that is inconsistent with its biblical meaning. Consequently, it has produced faulty doctrine and wrong church practices.

Some may feel that with a more strictly defined priesthood of believers they are losing something. In reality they are losing nothing. In the matter of distinctively Brethren church practices, the church that lives and operates as the body of Christ through which the gifts of the Spirit function will be healthier than the church that gets itself sidetracked through misunderstanding references to Israel's religion.

Because the priesthood of all believers has been made a basis for Brethren worship meetings, much unprofitable public speaking has been imposed upon congregations. Also, much unnecessary tension has arisen within the hearts of those who are godly and well-meaning. Because they have been told that 'there is no such thing as a silent priest,' they feel they must make solo contributions to the corporate worship, even though they may not be so gifted. An understanding of Paul's teaching on the gifts of the Spirit and the life of the body should help remove such tension.

Concerning the believer's confidence in approaching God, as set out in Hebrews, this is not diminished by the interpretation suggested above, for access to God is not based on the believer's priesthood, but on Christ's priesthood. The sacrifices that believers offer do not depend upon their being priests, but spring

from the grateful hearts of ordinary people who have tasted the goodness of God.

Likewise a correct understanding of the corporate priesthood of believers, as referred to in 1 Peter and Revelation, is a gain, not a loss. As believers understand more clearly the purpose for which God constituted his people a royal priesthood and a holy nation, they should be challenged to fulfil that calling. The thrust of 1 Peter 2:9 is distinctly evangelistic.

Emphasis on the corporate nature of this priesthood is no reason for believers to feel any lack of personal involvement, for a community operates properly only as the individuals who make up that community operate properly. The reason the old community (Israel) failed was that the people within it failed. The new community (the church) is now called to do what the old failed to do. It is to be a priesthood in which all Christians are to be active in worshipping and serving God.

Paper, *CBRF Brisbane* (Australia, 1983)

One call, many directions

It is now fifty years since Gae and I first believed God was calling us to serve him among the nations. After eight years of preparation, we took up residence in Thailand with our young family, believing this would be our home for many years. It was, though not for as many years as we had planned. But that did not alter our obligation to love and serve God 'with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.' Service for God is not something we 'do,' like a nine-to-five job, after which we use the rest of our time for ourselves. Circumstances change, but our commitment to love and serve God is ongoing.

This article is about our own ministry, because that is what we were asked to write about. The ministry journey may take a few turns, but it is still one journey. We do not see ourselves as passive pieces of humanity being moved along some pre-determined course by an iron-clad fate, but neither do we believe we have licence to start or stop things as we choose. The Bible speaks of God opening and closing doors, but we should not use biblical language to justify whatever we choose to do. An 'open' or 'closed' door may be the real thing, but it may also be a temptation to take the easy way out or avoid the hard way ahead. Our like or dislike of something is not an automatic indicator of the direction we should go.

Thailand

When we went to Bangkok, we had the goal to learn the language, make known the gospel to those who had not heard it and plant a church in a place where there was none. This was done mainly through person-to-person evangelism, whether with individuals or in small groups, and in the course of doing this I wrote notes and handouts that might help those we worked among. Over the next fifteen years these writings grew into a commentary on the whole Bible, a Bible dictionary and a number of other books, some for non-Christians and some for

Christians. By this time we were back in Australia, but the circumstances that brought us back were not of our choosing.

Physically, Gae had been reduced almost to immobility through mysterious illnesses and frequent hospitalisation, which left us with no alternative but to return to Australia. It was a tough decision. We believed our work in Bangkok was unfinished, but we also believed in the sovereignty of God, so we did what we believed was right and left the outcome to him. As things worked out, I was able to complete the Thai writing projects by working at home and making periodic visits to Bangkok.

Australia

Back in Brisbane, our ministry expanded in ways we never imagined. After a few years Gae was rehabilitated enough for us to begin an outreach in a locality where, again, our aim was to reach the unevangelised with the gospel, disciple the converts and build them into a church. Our children were going through higher education, Gae was immersed in the local outreach work, and my writing work expanded as international publishers asked to publish my books in English. This was a development we never expected. When we first went to Thailand, it was not with the intention of writing books in Thai, and even then it had never crossed my mind that these books might one day appear in English.

Initially, the English-language books were published in the Philippines, Hong Kong and India, but soon they spread around the world. That resulted in the establishment of Bridgeway Publications as a non-profit trust to publish the books and distribute them to national workers and institutions in needy countries. We then began receiving requests for translations into other languages, and invitations came for me to go to various countries in Bible teaching ministry.

The local church we had started in Brisbane was now self-functioning, so we went back into full-time overseas ministry. That was in 1995. Our plan was to spend several months during the first half of each year in countries of, let us say, Africa, and

then follow a similar pattern for the second half of the year in Asia or the Pacific. This worked well for several years, till Gae had crises that landed her in hospital in various countries, sometimes for emergency surgery, and eventually put an end to our overseas travel. Things had not worked out as we had planned, but that was no cause for despair. We simply found ways of getting around obstacles.

The world

By this time our ministry was extensive. My English-language books were in more than 130 countries and had been published in more than forty languages. I still visited some countries even if Gae could not, but the trips were shorter.

On one occasion we decided to use money we had saved on Gae's fares to bring a Zambian woman to Australia, where we could promote her ministry and raise funds to build her a school. The good response from Australia awakened us to two things. First, our help to needy countries should extend further than biblical resource materials; second, people at home should have their eyes opened to a world that is wider than just one project in Zambia.

By this time I was sixty-five, which meant that I was officially 'old' and therefore entitled to write something that looked back on a life of wide-ranging ministry around more than fifty countries. I entitled the book *A Different World*, with the aim of using money from sales to help Christians and churches in an increasing number of needy countries. The number of aid projects has now grown to seventy, the projects are spread over twenty countries, and donations come in greater quantities and from more sources.

The recipients of this practical aid may be individuals, churches or ministries, and the projects may provide bicycles, sewing machines, generators, computers, printers, photocopiers, buildings, bookshops, electricity connections, water supply, food production, income generation, vocational courses, children's education and the like. Both of us are deeply involved (as are others), so that even though Gae can no longer travel overseas

and my own travel is restricted, the work of helping needy countries still goes on. The apparent limitations have turned into expanded opportunities.

When one person commiserated with me that we must feel frustrated because our original ministry was not being fulfilled, my reply was along the lines that he was looking at the most fulfilled person walking the planet. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.' Those are the great commandments, and our missionary call fits within them. Once we are motivated by those two commandments, we will always find ways to fulfil our calling.

From *Serving Together* (Australia, 2007)

Some thoughts about heaven

A friend was grieving over the death of his wife after fifty-eight years of marriage. Both were very committed Christians, 'high profile' in Christian circles, and very close friends of ours. I was not surprised to hear that the local church's pastoral ministry had been negligible. Most churches seem to be the same, from what I hear. It seems that everyday friendship is the kind of pastoral ministry most needed – being there, dropping in, making a phone call. Verses from the Bible and expressions of Christian hope are all part of the ground of our assurance and therefore have their place, but in the end we have to admit that 'we know only in part,' we see things dimly. We have no first-hand experience in matters concerning heaven and the afterlife.

The following represents the edited contents of a lengthy email I sent my friend after a telephone conversation. The two of us were accustomed to discussing all sorts of things, whether we knew a lot about them or not, and in the matter of heaven and the afterlife we have to admit that much of what we say is speculation. Very likely, everything will be much different from, and certainly better than, anything we have ever thought about. A caterpillar may one day be a butterfly, but crawling along a leaf it can never understand what life as a butterfly is like.

Hope for the afterlife

Even focusing on 'heaven' rather than on the 'new heaven and new earth' is probably short-sighted. The Christian's hope is not tied up with disembodied spirits floating around in some airy existence, but with the resurrected body in the new heaven and new earth. We shall be the same people, but renewed people, the kinds of people we always should have been but never were – in body, soul, spirit, mind, personality, the lot.

Whatever the 'intermediate state' might be, it is probably something that exists only from our perspective. From God's

perspective there may be no such thing. The time system in which we live is bound up with the present world, but out of this world it does not apply. When a believer dies, the next conscious moment may in fact be the resurrection.

Certainly, departed believers are 'with the Lord,' but in such a place there is not the cycle of daily living that we experience here. God does not go to bed at night and get up in the morning, and believers already with him are not biding their time waiting for the rest of us to join them. If, with God, all things are eternally present, there may not be any 'intermediate state' once we are on 'the other side.' This is not what some call soul sleep, because once we are out of this world's time system, there is no sleep – though, as we know, the Bible sometimes uses the word metaphorically to symbolise death.

For me C S Lewis's children's books about Narnia illustrate this notion of 'time' in relation to the present world and the next. For the children in the stories, when they were in this world, normal time operated. When they were transported to Narnia another kind of time operated which was normal for that world. But when they returned to this world, the moment of their return was the very moment on which they had departed for Narnia. It was as if no time had elapsed at all.

Recollections and fulfilment

As I write, my wife is still with me, so I shall not make pat statements about experiences I have not yet been through. When the time comes, it is likely I shall be shattered, having lost the one I shared my life with and considered the most wonderful person in the world. From where I stand at present, I hope that if she went to be with the Lord ahead of me, part of my comfort would be in the recollection of the many enjoyable things we did together, rather than in trying to picture where she is or what she might be doing right now.

When we are in the new heaven and new earth, having been raised to a new existence in resurrection bodies, I wonder whether life may be something like the true fulfilment of all the legitimate things that brought joy on earth. Or perhaps it may be

the true enjoyment of things that we were denied on earth, whether through unwelcome circumstances or through denial of self for the sake of others – which ultimately means for the sake of Christ.

If this is so, it means that heaven will be experienced in different ways by different people. A friend once spoke of the joy of playing a heavenly round of golf. Playing a round of golf would, for me, bring no joy at all. It would be more like a punishment, something akin to the Mikado's elliptical billiard balls. Visiting friends in Ethiopia, however, would be just the thing!

As for those friends in Ethiopia, having a home that was free of war and had an abundance of good food and clean drinking water may indeed be heaven. People would have the sorts of enjoyments they legitimately longed for but were unjustly denied.

Of course, I do not think of heaven as having golf courses or Ethiopian villages, but whatever might have driven the better parts of me in this life will have a satisfaction beyond anything I can imagine. Again I am reminded of words from C S Lewis when he said that 'all the beauty and joy on planet Earth represent only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not yet visited.'

Experiencing pleasure, not pursuing pleasure

It seems from my reading of the Bible that the only things that will prove to be of lasting value are those we give up for the sake of others – even a cup of water, said Jesus. Those things that we keep for ourselves, even if legitimate (such as a cup of water), will perish with us.

Another way of putting it is that those legitimate things we do because they are what we should do or enjoy doing, are the things that bring pleasure and joy; but those things we do, whether legitimate or not, with the selfish aim of extracting pleasure or joy will usually be found to cheat us. Again, as Jesus

said, if we seek first the kingdom of God and its values, all other things will be ours as well; but if we seek the other things, not only will they cheat us, but very likely we shall lose the kingdom of God also. Lewis put it like this: 'I think earth, if chosen instead of heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region of hell; and earth, if put second to heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of heaven itself.'

The present 'taste of heaven'

For those who love the Lord Jesus and love each other, heaven will surely bring the best of all fellowship – with Jesus and with each other. I do not necessarily picture a scene where Gae and I are sitting with Jesus and our best friends in our living room having a cuppa and chatting over the things we share. Yet such a picture may not be as far from the truth as it sounds. The central issue is not what might be called the 'physical details,' but the spiritual substance behind it all. True friendship, oneness of spirit, sharing of interests and rejoicing in God will all be there. They will be the fulfilment of all the good things that brought a taste of heaven in the present life.

Therefore, if we reflect on those good times that we, as God's children, had in the past, I think we could be closer to appreciating what life in the hereafter might be. Christ will be at the centre of life in the new heaven and new earth, and therefore he should be at the centre of our lives now. If he is the one who gives meaning and richness to our lives, the joys of the present life might be seen as a foretaste of the future. This would apply not just to church-related matters (as if heaven were nothing more than an interminable church service), but to all aspects of life, including the relationships and activities that God originally wanted human beings to enjoy.

For all that, our ideas of heaven should not centre on the expectation of reunions with predeceased loved ones. The centre of our focus will be Christ – but isn't that how it should be now? And in what way will we experience Christ? When we read the Bible, we see him sometimes as a person whose friendship

people enjoyed in everyday life, but sometimes as the supreme Lord before whom people fell awestruck and speechless.

I often think of how Jesus fulfilled the varied expectations of Old Testament people, but never in the ways they expected. They foresaw a great prophet, a suffering servant, a messianic healer, a kingly conqueror and so on, but they did not see that all these varied figures were in fact one person. Concerning God, they saw him, as we do, to be a person of love and compassion to whom we can cry for mercy, but also as a person of truth and justice before whom we dare not take liberties. When we look at Christ's return, we face a similar ambivalence – emotions ranging from the expectation of a joyful meeting to the solemn reality of a day of reckoning. The one who is our friend is also our judge.

How all these multi-faceted realities will work out in the new heaven and new earth is something we currently have no way of knowing. But as with God's people in any era, we do not help ourselves by concentrating on one truth at the expense of others. We hold all to be true, and in due course we shall find out how they all blend into an existence that is perfectly suited to each individual.

End note

The above is substantially what I wrote to my distant friend in his grief. A short time later I happened to come across a quote from C S Lewis in a daily reading devotional book compiled by a well known writer. 'Listen, Peter,' said the Lord Digory, 'when Aslan said you could never go back to Narnia, he meant the Narnia you were thinking of. But that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here; just as our own world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan's real world. You need not mourn over Narnia, Lucy. All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door.'

As we think of those who we once lived with and loved but who have now departed this world, our recollections of the best things – ‘all of the old that mattered’ – are not to be dismissed as nothing more than memories. They will probably be closer to the realities of the new than any attempt to visualise something that in our present state cannot be visualised. The best moments of worship, of appreciation of Christ, of love, friendship, music, reading, work or leisure are all, as Lewis says, a shadow or copy of the real things. From one point of view we can say they are *only* a shadow or copy, but from another point of view we can comfort ourselves that they *are* a shadow, they *are* a copy.

When we awake in the New Jerusalem, we shall have at last the life we have longed for. What the Bible calls the new heaven and new earth is the ultimate justification for what we see now as the present heaven and present earth. In our innermost selves we know that all the disappointments, tragedies and sufferings of the present life are temporary, and that should help make them easier to bear. We know they will not last for ever; the time of genuine re-creation, of redeemed bodies, will come.

Some Christians may currently be trapped in pain, sorrow and fear through sick bodies, brutal persecution, broken families, grinding poverty or social injustice, but for all such people, for all of us, life in the new heaven and new earth promises a future that will be a time of wholeness, joy, pleasure and peace. It will all be focussed in Christ, the one who loved us, gave himself for us, and brought us the life that is life indeed.

To a correspondent in England (2010)