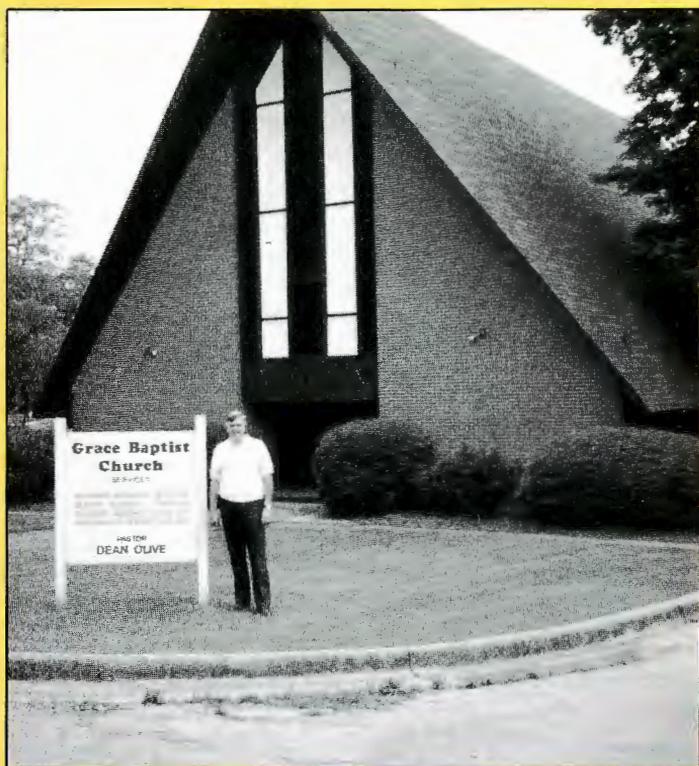


REFORMATION TODAY



JULY-AUGUST 1991

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Tom and Donna Ascol, Rachel, Noel, Rebekah and Sarah (see editorial)

Daily Bible Reading Schedule

Pastor Ted Christman, 3585 Thruston-Dermont Road, OWENSBORO, KY 42303, USA, has produced an exceptionally attractive eight page folder as a daily guide for Bible readings spaced out so as to read the Bible in one year at the rate of about 63 verses a day. With photos in colour, an explanation of what is involved, and one page devoted to helpful suggestions (begin with prayer, ask questions, keep a notebook, meditate and memorise, conclude with prayer, never give up), this may be just what you are looking for.

CAREY CONFERENCE FOR MINISTERS

Swanwick, Derbyshire

January 8-10 1992

Speakers: Richard Gaffin, Professor of Systematic Theology, Westminster Seminary, Bill Hughes, Pastor of the Harpur Memorial Church, Glasgow, Daniel Webber, Director of the European Missionary Fellowship, David Kingdon, Geoff Thomas and Erroll Hulse.

Front cover: Grace Baptist Church, Madison, Huntsville, Alabama (see editorial).

Editorial

In my recent preaching tour of the Southern States of America I was privileged to minister in a number of newly planted churches. The main impression received was of the importance of the pastoral office of the minister and the need for such ministers to work together and encourage each other. We need fraternals because in essence the churches are one. We need to work with others but require a basis of truth and trust to do so. That takes time. Ministers already involved in preaching the whole counsel of God's Word, pastoring and evangelism, do not have much spare time. Nevertheless to expound the whole counsel of God with a contemporary application we need the stimulus of leadership, articles (which often are the vanguard of books), and living expositions. The more lonely a pastor or missionary, the more he needs the stimulus of pure theology. Our souls feed on the Word as it is fed to us. To feed others we need a nourishing diet ourselves.

Ministerial work

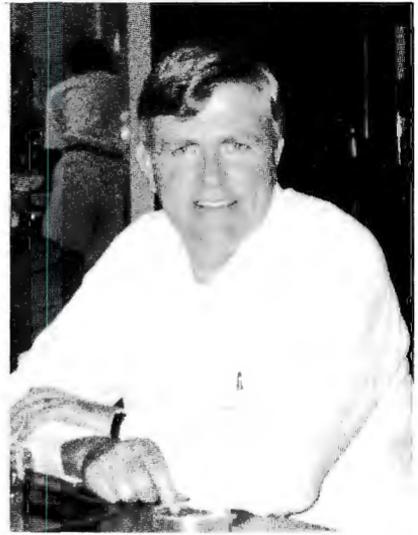
Richard Baxter spells out the exacting nature of the work when he says that ministerial work must be carried on first for God, and for the salvation of souls, diligently and laboriously, prudently and in an orderly way, insisting chiefly on the greatest and most necessary of things, with plainness and simplicity, with humility, with a mixture of severity and mildness, with seriousness, earnestness and zeal, with tender love to our

people, with patience, with reverence, with spirituality, with earnest desires and expectancy of success, under a deep sense of our own insufficiency, and our dependence on Christ, and in unity with other ministers (*The Reformed Pastor*).

Those called to labour in church planting must possess unusual stamina and tenacity since discouragement rises up in many shapes and forms. The adversary detests the truth and will employ every means to distract and dishearten pastors. It is therefore necessary for them to appreciate the vital nature of their work and never lose sight of the fact that they have always to hand the unsearchable riches of Christ. In expounding Ephesians 3:8, Thomas Brooks delightfully reminds us of the ways in which Christ is rich. He is rich because of the portion the Father has given him. To Benjamin, Joseph gave five times as much as to the others, but to Jesus the Father has given the kingdoms of this world, over which he will reign forever and forever (Rev 11:15). Moreover Jesus is rich because he alone can keep open house for the relief and supply of so vast a number of creatures in heaven and on earth (Ps 145:16). Further he is rich because he enriches all his believing people in all their faculties of affection, mind and will, and that constantly. Yet despite all he has given, he himself is neither poorer nor weaker (Thomas Brooks, *Works*, volume 3, pages 150ff).

Young churches

Returning to my opening sentence, Heritage Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia is an example of a newly planted church. This church is only two years old. It is led by Pastor Steve Martin and has a congregation of about 80. Atlanta is a very large city (two and a half million inhabitants), surrounded with suburbs widely ranged over about 30 miles. To find churches with a reformed, caring ministry is exceedingly difficult. David Vaughn who served for six years in Ivory Coast, West Africa, has recently been assisting Steve Martin. With his wife Nicki and baby Caroline, David is soon to leave for church planting work in Chalon-sur-Saone, France, an area in which evangelical and reformed churches are even more rare.



Dean Olive

Another example of a young newly planted church is Grace Baptist Church, Madison, Huntsville, northern Alabama, led by Dean Olive. The membership has been able to hire a handsome building (see front cover) which is a great advantage to them in their work. Dean spent several years in Suffolk before venturing on the church planting enterprise in Madison. He cherishes memories of his time in England and especially values the Carey Conference for ministers and the annual Westminster Conference in London. Some families travel 50 miles to Madison in order to have the benefit of a reformed ministry. While at Huntsville I enjoyed a pastor's sabbath rest (Monday), a most welcome day which included a drive to Huntsville where I relished seeing period architecture in the form

of some stately Southern homes built around 1830-1840.

In the Tulsa area of the State of Oklahoma I spent two days with a group of ministers. Among these were pastors Walter Johnson (Sapulpa), Dennis Gunderson of Tanglewood and Keith Heck of Bartleville, in whose churches I had the privilege of preaching. In each case there was eagerness to know about the worldwide Reformed Baptist movement and the International Fellowship of Reformed Baptists. It is an advantage to have a local fellowship of like minded ministers and encouraging to know of similar developments in other parts of the world.

The Banner of Truth Conference held at Rhodes College, Memphis, is especially valued by pastors who have no local fraternal of like minded men.

This year 160 attended, approximately a one-third mix each of Reformed Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed and Reformed Baptists. The number was twice that of last year but nevertheless for a country with five times the population of the UK low in comparison with the Banner Conference at Leicester, UK, where at a midday session this year I made an estimate of 400 (including day visitors). Apart from sluggish morning prayer meetings the Banner Conference at Memphis represented ministry of the highest all round standard, thoroughly inspiring and spiritually edifying. Bill Wenger of Carlisle led the singing and always chose appropriate hymns and songs.

We are still blessed by the Reformed theological renewal which began in the late fifties. From there being virtually no Reformed literature available in the fifties, in 1991 we now have a comprehensive range of excellent literature appropriate to our needs. This means we are required to be much more prayerful and thoughtful in the way we select materials (including cassettes) to share with others.

While at Memphis I discussed the whole Reformed scene with Fred Huebner, director of Cumberland Valley Books. He told me that one of the most encouraging features on the American scene is the Founders' Movement among the Southern Baptists. Their growing conference meets annually at the same venue, Rhodes College, Memphis.

My tour included a visit to Cape Coral, Florida, where I ministered in one of



*Pastor Keith Heck and
his wife Carol*

the churches of the Founders' Movement led by Tom Ascol. He is assisted by Ernie Reisinger who is a prince among the brothers and who all his life has enjoyed a unique ministry of encouragement which includes the main thrust of planning the annual Founders' Conference at Memphis. I am grateful to Ernie for drawing my attention to the need to clarify the distinction between the way of faith and the warrant of faith. He lent me his notes which form the basis of the article on page 28. While I was at Cape Coral, Tom Ascol organised a prayer breakfast for ministers. What a splendid idea! Preaching, prayer, songs of praise, fellowship, with hot muffins and coffee.

The churches reported above are young, reformed in teaching without being sectarian. They are all refreshing as they are well led with flexibility

yet having the discipline of membership requirements. I esteem it an enormous privilege to be able to pray for and encourage these churches and their leaders and families. In an age of religious chaos it is a delight to find churches based firmly on Scripture and joined to the historic stream of Christianity.

The God we proclaim

What is the nature of your God? That is the first question of all religion. Since we were created by the Trinity we are able to receive a knowledge of the three Persons. As Christians we are influenced by our knowledge of God triune in all our worship and practice. As Bob Letham explains in his superlative exposition, all true knowledge of God is through the incarnate Christ and is trinitarian in character. He sketches the history of the doctrine and points to cracks in the foundations. He suggests that even Warfield was close to modalism.

We too have been influenced by imbalanced concepts and sometimes more radically than we think. Have we been thinking of God primarily in terms of the Great Judge? Have we fallen short in the way we portray the love of God as revealed in Christ? Have we been subject to a steely neo-Calvinism which is characterised by its severity and insensitivity? To meditate on the nature of God triune in relation to ourselves is the most profound exercise in which we can ever engage. Readers are urged to take up this matter and think the issues through giving prime place to self-examination.

Baptist Theologians

In the review article I refer to Carl F H Henry and the thoroughness with which he deals with the positions as expounded by Bultmann, Brunner and Barth. His six volume work *God, Revelation and Authority* (3,000 pages) was described by the religious editor of the *New York Times* as 'the most important work of evangelical theology in modern times'. This assessment is well deserved since Henry writes decisively, lucidly and comprehensively and in a most readable style, as he refutes the principal theological driftings and theological deviations of our contemporary bewildered age. In addition to the above Dr Henry discusses the treatments of Gerhard von Rad, Paul Tillich, Oscar Cullman, Jurgan Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, James Barr, C H Dodd and Shubert Ogden. In doing so he confirms the validity of evangelical theology. Though God is greater than, and ontologically prior to his revelation, Henry consistently begins with revelation as the epistemological starting point for Christian theology. In his own words, 'revelation is the basic epistemological axiom', that is the foundation for any theological investigation, or any search for truth. 'Divine revelation,' he declares, 'is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included; reason is the instrument for recognising it; Scripture is its verifying principle.' One of my correspondents who formerly loved reform theology was led astray by James Barr in particular. Brother if you read this, note that through Dr Henry's exposition there is a pathway by which you will be able to find your way home.

The God we Proclaim

By Robert Letham, Minister, Emmanuel Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware, USA. Dr Letham was formerly senior lecturer in Christian doctrine at the London Bible College, and lecturer in Systematic Theology at the Westminster Theological College, Philadelphia.

‘Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me . . .”’ (John 14:5,6, NIV).

Our Lord’s words to Thomas are among the most crucial he ever uttered. He affirms most emphatically that there is only one way to God, and that it is through him. Beyond that, he discloses to us the very heart of the works and ways of God.

All true knowledge of God is through the incarnate Christ

First of all, Jesus’ words to Thomas underline the fact that all true knowledge of God is through the incarnate Christ. No one comes to the Father except through Jesus of Nazareth. There is no direct way to God in himself. We only have access through the eternal Son made flesh ‘for us and our salvation’. We cannot see God as he is. No one can look on him and live. We could not bear it. He lives in light unapproachable. However, he came to our level. The Word became flesh. He took human nature into union with himself. God made himself known not as God but as man!

This means that we cannot know God in his blinding holiness, his all-encompassing sovereignty or his vast omnipotence. We know him through his freely chosen weakness, ‘in the form of a servant’. In the incarnation, the Son took on limits. As a human fetus, he had absolutely no power to influence events. After his birth, he was totally dependent on his human parents! He needed to be fed, changed, carried and pacified. As he grew, he who made the universe became obedient to the authority of the creature, his parents. He learned to grow in obedience to the Father. He submitted to suffering. Although he was the Son, since he was incarnate he could not do everything. He could only be in one place at one time. There were restrictions on what he could do, on what he could know. He was vulnerable. We know from the Gospels that he was

often misunderstood. Yet it is only through him, the incarnate Jesus, that we can know God.

All true knowledge of God is trinitarian

Secondly, Jesus indicates that all true knowledge of God is trinitarian. Jesus was accustomed to call God his Father. This was revolutionary, for no Jew dared express his or her relationship with Yahweh in so direct and intimate a fashion. Behind this was Jesus' consciousness of a fellowship and, indeed, a union with God (his Father) from eternity (e.g. Jn 17:5, 21-24). In his reply to Thomas, he points out that knowledge of, and a relationship to, God as Father is possible for us too. Indeed, this is the goal of all Yahweh's dealings with Israel and of all that Jesus himself had come to do. However, no one can know the Father unless it is through Jesus. In relation to the Father, Jesus called himself the Son (e.g. Jn 5:19f). Anyone who wants to know God must know him as Father through his Son. Moreover, later in this discourse when Jesus warns his disciples of his imminent departure he encourages them by the promise of the presence of 'another Counsellor, the Spirit of truth' (vv 16-27) who will testify of Jesus and lead the disciples into the truth. The Holy Spirit leads us to the Son through whom we have access to the Father. No one can know God truly apart from this. All true knowledge of God is trinitarian.

This is confirmed by that most basic of Christian experiences, prayer. Every time we pray to God, we pray through the mediation of Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and man. Each time, the Holy Spirit leads us, making intercession with 'unspeakable groanings' (Rom 8:25,26). As Paul says, 'Through him [Christ] we both [Jew and Gentile] have access by one Spirit to the Father' (Eph 2:18). Prayer is the reverse process of the movement of God towards us in grace. The Father sent the Son into the world in the incarnation, while the Father and the Son sent the Spirit at Pentecost. In turn, the Spirit creates faith within us, leading us to Christ the Son and through him to the Father. Not only is all true knowledge of God trinitarian but it is so at the most basic of all levels.

In effect, this means that the God we know and proclaim lives in union and communion, in a mutual fellowship in the unity of himself. He is one, his unity existing in perfect reciprocal personal love between the three. In turn, we are introduced into this fellowship, given to participate in a creaturely manner in the life of God himself. Of course, we remain human. Yet the brunt of Jesus' high priestly prayer is that the Father would grant to those he gave him to be in him even as he is in the Father

and the Father in him. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus refers to the fellowship and mutual coinherence of the Father and the Son. Indeed, this is the ground for all Jesus' claims of equality and identity with the Father. Now he prays that those the Father has given him will, by grace, participate in this sublime mutual love and eternal concord. Our relationship with God is grounded on the eternal intra-trinitarian relations of Father, Son and Spirit.

What of the Old Testament? Obviously, the Trinity was not yet revealed. Even to us, looking back through the spectacles of the New Testament, its foreshadowing is at best obscure. Israel was of course quite ignorant of these things. The stress throughout was on the one living God and his unity. 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God . . . is one' (Deut 6:4) was the keynote and well learned it was, for by the time of Jesus many had great difficulty in appreciating his deity. However, Abraham, Moses and David all followed the same God and believed his revelation. At each stage of covenantal administration God disclosed a new name for himself – 'El Shaddai' (God Almighty; Gen 17:1) in the Abrahamic covenant, 'Yhwh' (Yahweh; Ex 3:14) in the Mosaic covenant. Against that background, in the new covenant he reveals his one name of 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (Matt 28:19). All that went before led up to this. God's triunity is last in order because it is first in importance, like the climax of a detective mystery which discloses retroactively the significance of all that went before. While the revelation developed, the reality was continuous.

The reality of God's triunity has important implications. It means, for instance, that love, fellowship and communion are central to who he is. Whatever he may be to sinners, in himself he is pure unbroken love and goodness. Of course, due to the entrance of sin into the human race, God exhibits just and holy wrath towards all that is hostile to him. This is an inescapable reality. However, these are characteristics that exist in relation to his creation and its aberrant conduct. They can hardly be part of the eternal relations of Father, Son and Spirit in the unity of his being! They are, so to speak, adventitious since, while genuine manifestations of the character of God, they are occasioned by realities external to God himself.

A summary

To sum up: all true knowledge of God is both trinitarian and incarnational. Moreover, Jesus shows us that our entire relation to God must be refracted through this grid, and this alone. Our whole view of God is therefore to be shaped through the incarnate Jesus and thus in the

fellowship to which he introduces us in which, through the Holy Spirit, we have access to the Father in him. Whatever else he reveals of himself must be seen in this light. His goodness and love are primary, made known in his freely becoming dependent, vulnerable and weak on our account.

The understanding of God in the Western church

The church's understanding of the Trinity developed over a period of time. It was forged in a series of controversies culminating in the Council of Constantinople in 381. The church did not invent the doctrine. As Jaroslav Pelikan demonstrated, it expressed what the church had always believed, confessed and taught. It was a response to erroneous teachings which were seen as jeopardizing salvation. By combating error, the church was able to refine and develop its understanding of what it had believed all along.¹

Behind the dogma presented at Constantinople lay the epic work of a group we call the Cappadocians – Gregory of Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great. The focus of all three was on the history of salvation, on God's progressive self-revelation in biblical history. They also drew attention to the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the unity of God. However, the legacy bequeathed to later generations originated elsewhere. In time, the Western church (Rome and Protestantism) came to be dominated by the ideas of Augustine (354-430). Augustine developed a famous psychological analogy of the Trinity. This was the heart of his view of God.

For Augustine, the Trinity is seen in terms of the human mind. There is the triad in the mind of memory, understanding and will. These are not three minds, but one. They are three only in so far as they are related to one another. In reality, they constitute one thing. Augustine's doctrine of God was built on God's unity, in effect on an impersonal foundation separated from his historic manifestation of the history of redemption. As a result, Augustine had great difficulty with the three. His analogy is close to modalism, the idea that the Father, Son and Spirit are not eternal but merely three masks adopted by the one God for purposes of salvation, rather like an actor assuming now one persona, now another, but remaining himself in isolation from the roles he plays.

Moreover, Augustine had a hard time believing that God could identify with the material world. He was heavily influenced by the Greek philosophy of neo-Platonism, which held that matter was inferior to the spirit. Thus, Augustine denied that the appearances of God in human

form in Genesis as ‘the angel of the Lord’ were genuine revelations of God in human flesh, foreshadowing the incarnation. Instead, he held them to be angelic, spiritual.

Our inheritance in the West, both in church and society, has been heavily influenced, for good and ill, by Augustine. In particular, his trinitarian arguments have created problems which even the best have found difficult to evade. At worst, the Trinity has seemed to many little more than a mathematical puzzle, a question of relating one and three. It has encouraged unbelief by propounding a fundamentally impersonal doctrine of God.² Even Warfield, in an article on the Trinity³, is close to modalism when he suggests that the relations between Father, Son and Spirit revealed in the history of salvation may simply result from a covenant in the Godhead and not therefore represent eternal, antecedent realities in God himself. Even theologians like Bavinck and Berkhof do not consider the Trinity until after lengthy discussions of the attributes of God (his omnipotence, omniscience, justice, grace, holiness and so on), much of which could equally be written by a Muslim, orthodox Jew or unitarian. At worst, the great nineteenth century German Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1864), in his major work *The Christian Faith*, relegated the Trinity to an appendix.

Our understanding of what God is like is crucial for a range of matters. In particular, there are some aspects of God’s character which we are called to share, such as holiness, love, justice and mercy. Obviously, we as creatures can only exhibit these on a finite, creaturely scale. Moreover, due to sin we depend utterly on God’s Spirit to produce them in us. Until our salvation is complete and sin eradicated, at best there can be only a dim reflection of what ought to be. Nevertheless, there is a true communication of God’s love, faithfulness and holiness, as we are able to receive them. Because of this, there is a connection between what we think God to be like, and the ethical and personal characteristics we consider most worthy of emulation. If we consider God to be supremely loving we will surely seek to develop in love to God and others. In effect, all the aspects of God’s character are mutually defining. Thus, his love is just love, merciful love, faithful love, holy love; his holiness is loving holiness, omnipotent holiness, just holiness . . . and so on. However, in practice preachers, theologians, churches and individuals have often tended (wrongly) to isolate some such characteristic and elevate it above others. Consequences are then likely to occur in a wide area. Moreover, behind it all lurks the question of how far such a procedure is faithful to the claims of Jesus in his reply to Thomas.

God as sovereign ruler

The Western church has been dominated by questions of law, power and sovereignty. Ever since the lawyer Tertullian (c.160/70-c.215/20) introduced Roman law into the theological heart of the church, these issues have been at the forefront of attention. The doctrines of the atonement and justification were developed in the West, and legal categories largely shaped them. The Roman Catholic church was coloured institutionally by canon law. The Reformation was fought around disputes concerning the highest source of authority. This is more an observation than a criticism. However, it is a feature we should note very carefully so as to understand ways in which we think, often unconsciously, in other areas.

In terms of its understanding of God, power loomed large. In late medieval times, a primitive covenant theology was unfolded by a tendency known as the *via moderna* around questions of God's absolute power (his omnipotence, his ability to do anything he pleases) and his ordained power (his freely chosen covenant whereby he binds himself to act according to ways he himself has determined). Against the backcloth of issues concerning the primacy of God's mind or God's will, the Reformation debates took place. Questions of predestination loomed large at times thereafter. Reformed theology has always seen the sovereignty of God over all creation as a key element in biblical revelation. The renewal of Reformed thinking in Britain and North America during the past generation has often been accompanied (rightly so) by great emphasis on God's sovereignty.

As with all movements of rediscovery, there are dangers of over-reaction, of failure to set important truths, now vividly recovered, within their wider context. In the past, seeing the whole theological, ecclesiastical and cultural spectrum refracted through a lens coloured by power, sovereignty and law had produced the overweening power of the Roman ecclesiastical machine. Latter day neo-Calvinists face a similar danger. Too easily the sovereignty of God over all can filter through to the church level in the form of the sovereignty of God's representatives (the local elders) over all. Hangups over the sovereignty of God, seen in constant polemics against those who see things differently, can affect the way people are treated. The sovereignty of the elders or session will then be asserted with equally renewed vigour. In some charismatic groups, such as the Restoration movement in Britain (some of which have a grasp of the sovereignty of God), the church rulers assume authority over their members' career decisions, their choice of spouse, their living quarters and even their private transportation! Lacking is the kind of

vulnerability evidenced by Jesus. The communion of love and mutual fellowship which mirrors (albeit with utter inadequacy) the trinitarian life of God is relegated in favour of an insistence on obedience to the elders' *diktat*, no questions asked. Many readers will know only too well situations like this. Abuses can creep in, sometimes with dire consequences. Often the problem has started way back, with a faulty doctrine of God.

The point is this: if sovereignty is magnified to a masterful dominance in our belief about God, how are we to distinguish what we believe from that of a Muslim? Islam has a powerful stress on God's sovereignty! We see the outcome at times in the frightening fatalism of the Ayatollahs. No, the hallmark of the Christian doctrine of God is its trinitarianism (with the loving eternal fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit – something completely absent in Islam) and the incarnation (absurd to the Muslim). Of course, we believe in God's sovereignty and heartily endorse the Canons of Dort! But the gateway to the high mystery of predestination is via the blood shed on the cross, the cry of the Son to the Father (in the Spirit) 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' and the love which was eternally present within the triune being of God. This is something about which Islam knows nothing. Regrettably, one wonders whether some latter-day 'Calvinists' know much about it either.

God as judge

Some Reformed thinkers have maintained that justice is the primary attribute of God and that all else, his love and goodness included, are subordinate. Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) is sometimes held responsible for this. Meredith Kline hinted at it when he wrote, 'Merciful he may be according to his sovereign will; but all his works are in righteousness and truth.' Here, the apostle Paul can be called in support when he writes that the main problem in our justification was that the justice of God might be satisfied (Rom 3:25,26).

What follows is in no way intended to subtract from the clear biblical teaching on God's justice, nor from the corresponding truth that God is our judge. Nevertheless, there are serious problems attendant on thinking of God primarily as a judge. Pastorally, I am aware that there are many people who think precisely this way. The main difficulty is that a judge is quintessentially an administrator of justice. He is supposed to be dispassionate and disinterested. His task is to preside over the case before him with magisterial detachment. If he feels any emotion over the matter he must hide it and keep it from affecting his judgment. Afterwards he goes home to his wife and family, has dinner, reads the

paper and perhaps attends a concert. If we relate to God mainly as judge, it will have devastating effects on our faith. After all, he may have pronounced a favourable verdict on your case but he will still retain a frowning face. He will be emotionally detached. He will have invested hardly a pound of personal capital in your acquittal. He remains stern and judicial. Those who think this way (there are, unfortunately many) have little sense of assurance of salvation, little real love for God and a minimal desire to serve him. Overstressing the distributive justice of God breeds spiritual cripples.

This was the fate of Martin Luther before his evangelical breakthrough in 1514-1515. He saw God as rewarding those who had done their best and punishing the rest. The problem was this: how could he ever know that he had done his best?! As a result, he became obsessed with his own personal salvation. In fact, this experience left its mark on Luther for the rest of his life. It affected his theology and that of his followers. In Lutheranism as a whole there has been little sense of the claims of Christ on society, most attention being directed to individual personal salvation and a replication of Luther's own experience.

God as contentless love

We have stressed the biblical teaching that God is love from eternity. His love has content, real flesh and bones which give substance to it in a way which we can grasp. The cross of Christ demonstrates his love supremely as self-sacrificing love for sinners (Rom 5:8). However, in the nineteenth century, a tendency emerged to focus on the love of God without doctrinal content. Christianity was reduced to ethics. The justice of God was bypassed. Instead of the cross being seen (among other things) as the satisfaction of the claims of a holy God for man's sins, it was redefined merely as an example of selfless love, something for us to follow in our relationships with others. This was held by the movement known as liberalism, begun by Schleiermacher and carried on by such as Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). It held sway until just after the First World War, when Karl Barth burst on the scene, but it continued to have influence from pulpits long after. Indeed, the situation ethics popular in the sixties were an outflow of liberalism's preoccupation with love, divorced from normative content. In fact, we can still see evidence of its impact today.

This concern for love was accompanied by a general rejection of the supernatural. Behind its surface teaching was a worldview, stemming from Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Newtonian physics, which held that the universe was a closed system of cause and effect. Thus events in

the world could only be explained in terms of observable causes. Under these assumptions, there could be no place for miracle.⁵ Thus, the teaching of the Bible, in which miracle played a prominent part, was open to widespread criticism and re-evaluation. Doctrine was reduced to a bare minimum, acceptable to this anti-supernaturalist mentality. The result was a benign God who loved everybody and was angry with nobody. Thus, human behaviour was answerable only to the claims of love. Law and God-given norms belonged to a primitive religious mind. The key question to ask in any ethical dilemma was, 'What promotes love'? We have seen the results of this thinking in the permissive society and the frightening consequences which follow in its wake. We see its effects from time to time in permissive reports by committees of prominent ecclesiastics. Once God is stripped of standards, human society follows in his (or her) footsteps.

God in the struggle against injustice

Since around 1970 a movement has grown, originating in Latin America, attempting to relate Christianity with the struggles of poor and oppressed people groups. The appalling poverty of marginalised peoples in Latin America aroused many Catholic priests to a response based on wide ranging biblical exegesis and varying doses of Marxist social analysis, in which they argued that God has a preferential love for the poor. Scholars such as Juan Luis Segundo, Gustavo Gutierrez and Jon Sobrino have been in the vanguard. Similar application has been made to the situation of North American blacks by James Cone, the blacks of South Africa by Allan Boesak, and to women by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Reuther.

We do not have space to evaluate these movements here. Just one example will be possible. Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the plain 'Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Lk 6:20) is held by Jon Sobrino to have priority over Matthew's spiritualising interpretation 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' (Matt 5:3). However, the Sermon on the plain was delivered to Jesus' *disciples* (Lk 6:20). The poverty in question cannot legitimately be torn from its connection with discipleship without altering its character. This is, in my estimation, a serious flaw in the Latin American liberation theology. For all its commendable attempts to bring the Christian faith into the crushing grass-roots problems of the two-thirds world, it has universalised the context of God's concern for societal justice without adequately rooting it in the gospel. God loves the poor, pure and simple. The rich and privileged he calls to join the struggle against oppression, which was

Jesus' great mission. Christian behaviour is mainly (not exclusively) corporate, societal, politically oriented. But at root, God loves the poor *qua* poor.

All this stems from liberation theology's view of God. As a whole, its exponents are little concerned for the realm of eternity or the spirit. Theirs is a thorough-going historical position. In fact, there is little they say about God as such. The focus is on the history of Israel and of Jesus of Nazareth. It is a this-worldly movement. It follows that the brunt of its message is that doing comes before knowing, that changing oppressive structures has precedence over personal spiritual concerns. In many respects, this is an important and necessary corrective against a Christianity that had become increasingly confined to the private world of the individual soul and connived at gross inequality and brutal repression in society. Its evident weaknesses include a connection of sorts with Marxism, something that sounds strangely old-fashioned now, and an eclipse of eternity by time. However, the point I want to stress is that liberation theology's view of God, as one who identifies with the poor in their struggle for justice is directly connected to its practical programme. The question of which came first, the understanding of God or the programme, is not so significant as the connection.

God in contemporary neo-Calvinism

We noted above that the last generation has witnessed a renewed interest in the Reformed faith in Britain and North America. Many who have been caught up in this movement have emerged from traditions not noted for their affinity with Calvin. As a consequence, it is common to see an admixture of Reformed theology and other elements left over from previous backgrounds. A frequent influence is pietism, in which there is a dominant interest in personal spiritual experience but little attention to the impact of the gospel on science, church, culture and society. In North America, there are a number of preachers who convey a mix of fundamentalist oratory, pietism and a Calvinist doctrine of salvation.

The varied backgrounds from which elements in neo-Calvinism have come in part explain another dominant feature of the movement. When switching allegiance to new teaching it is very easy to over-compensate for the newness of one's insights by moving to the extreme of the new position, as if to demonstrate to oneself and to others that one really has embraced the new concerns. When to that natural tendency we add the

permissiveness of today's world, the breakdown of authority on a wide level in schools and in the home, there is potential for a move to the extreme right. By this I do not necessarily mean the political right. Rather I have in mind a right wing authoritarianism, which reacts against the fragmentation of society, the breakdown of marriages, the corruption of many of the young by drugs and the headlong flight from biblical ethics. Faced by many people becoming Christian from broken homes and ill-disciplined lives, the obvious pastoral response is to provide in the church what these people have lacked in their homes, schools, peer groups and culture: a clearly defined, highly disciplined structure for living under the authority of Christ's representatives, the elders of the local church. Combined with fiercely held convictions on the sovereignty, holiness and supreme majesty of God (whom the elders personally represent to the congregation!), there is a recipe for a totalitarian spiritual dictatorship. The long term effect of such a situation will be nothing short of devastating. In Lord Acton's words, 'All power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. We might add, 'Unchecked spiritual power corrupts spiritually'. Where these ingredients come together in an independent church, there can be no check against the inevitable abuses of church authority. There are many today all over the world who have witnessed or experienced shocking evils perpetrated in the name of Christ and the Reformed faith by elders claiming to be his representatives, but whose authority is unchecked by any outside body. As Diotrephes loved to have the pre-eminence, throwing his weight around and harming many (3 Jn 9,10), so a modern-day Diotrephes can have a field day feeding off his people's widespread distaste for a decadent culture and their new-found love of powerful Reformed doctrine.

It is my suggestion that the root of these and other problems begins with a faulty view of God. In particular, the root problem is an unwitting attempt to sidestep the incarnation. Yes, we all believe in it. We stand for the virgin birth. We know that Christ is human as well as divine. However, the incarnation has too rarely been given the *theological significance* Scripture gives it. While Jesus tells us that there is no way to God other than through him, the *incarnate* Son, we still try to approach God direct via his sovereignty and supreme holiness, reading everything else in that light. As a consequence we hear the terrifying thunder, but we look in vain for the humility, meekness, tenderheartedness and gentleness of Jesus.

Of course, God is holy, sovereign and just. We should attest this with undiminished vigour. But our Lord has taught us that we should

understand the sovereignty and holiness of God by means of his incarnation and his loving triune communion. That was how Martin Luther emerged from his personal struggles, when he saw that God's justice (in Rom 1:17) was that made known in Christ for our salvation, which far from standing over us like an unyielding tyrant actually reaches down in pardoning grace and makes over to us the righteousness of Christ himself. Perhaps one of the reasons we see little of the vulnerability of the incarnate Jesus in our modern-day Diotrephes is that we have not seen how vital is the incarnation to our doctrine of God. God did not make himself known as superman but as a helpless human baby, a growing child obedient to his parents, a condemned man on a Roman cross, not as a supremo but a servant.

Jesus' own reassuring words are crucial: 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matt 11:29, NIV). This Jesus is the only way to God. He himself is one with the Father from eternity and so makes known what God is like. As man, he is the perfect human embodiment of the faithful response God requires of us. Of him it was written long in advance, 'A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out (Isa 42:3). For our part, he calls us to follow in his steps, to 'live a life of love, just as Christ loved us'.

Notes

- ¹ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1:172-225.
- ² See Colin Gunton, 'Augustine, The Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990), 33-58.
- ³ 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity', in Samuel G Craig (ed). *Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield: Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 22-59, esp. 53ff.
- ⁴ Meredith G Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 33.
- ⁵ This worldview was eclipsed by the revolution in physics brought about by Einstein. The theories of relativity established the interchangeability of energy and matter and the primacy of light. Thus, the observable can only be understood in terms of the non-observable space-time metric field. Moreover, the static universe of Newtonian physics was no longer seen to fit the reality of a universe more dynamic and open than had previously been thought. Moreover, Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty indicated the limitations of all human scientific measurements and highlighted the point that the observer is as much a part of the scene as that which is to be observed, his or her presence having a direct impact on the reality under investigation.

Baptist Theologians

A Review

Large sized hardback volume (weight 1.4 kg!), 703 pages. Broadman Press, editors Timothy George and David Dockery. Available from: Cumberland Valley Books, PO Box 613, Carlisle, PA 17013, USA.

Timothy George and the Beeson School of Divinity

Timothy George, co-editor of this comprehensive book and author of the opening chapter 'The Renewal of Baptist Theology', as well as biographies of John Gill and James P Boyce, is well known and appreciated by the leaders of the Founders' Movement (see editorial). His principal work is the excellent volume *Theology of the Reformers* published by Broadman Press, Nashville, Tennessee. In *Theology of the Reformers*, George examines the times leading to the Reformation and then considers Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Menno Simons.

Since 1988 Timothy George has been the Dean of the Beeson School of Divinity, Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama, USA. This seminary was bequeathed a 40 million dollar legacy by a Methodist, Ralph Waldo Beeson, who died recently aged about 90. This year there are 63 postgraduate students working for the accredited MDiv and eight full-time professors.

George declares: 'We are a school of the church and of the university. We



Timothy George

believe that the advantages of theological education in the midst of a Christian university are considerable. Samford University is owned and operated by the Alabama Baptist State Convention. The Baptist Faith and Message is the guiding confessional document of our school. We seek to relate in a positive way with all of the boards, agencies and great missionary ventures of the Southern Baptist Convention. At the same time, we are also interdenominational. We welcome students from all Christian traditions and desire to be a resource in ministry for the entire Body of Christ.'

David Dockery who is an editor with the Broadman Press, Nashville,

Tennessee is author of the final chapter 'Baptist Theology and Theologians' and the biography of Millard J Erickson. The excellent chapter on Richard Furman (1755-1825) is contributed by Tom Nettles.

The contents of the book

There are 33 brief biographies. In each there is a fairly thorough statement of the doctrine taught by the subject of the biography, which in turn is followed by an evaluation. The word 'Theologians' in the title is misleading. The title 'BAPTIST LEADERS' would have been more apt since most of the subjects were famous for their leadership, their preaching, as apologists (for example Bernard Ramm, Edward Carnell and Clark Pinnock), or for some other distinctive emphasis rather than as theologians in the overall formulative or systematic sense which was the case with J L Dagg, J P Boyce and A H Strong and more recently George Eldon Ladd.

John Bunyan and Benjamin Keach are the only representatives from the 17th century, and John Gill, Isaac Backus and Andrew Fuller from the 18th century. There are seven from the last century: Furman, Dagg, Pendleton, Mell, J R Graves, J P Boyce, and C H Spurgeon. All the others, 21 in all, belong to our century although A H Strong (1839-1921) and B H Carroll (1834-1914) overlap.

As we would expect there is a strong American bias. Johann Oncken the great German leader is absent and so is A W Pink, the most prolific evangelical writer of this century. Alexander Carson is missing and so

are Robert and James Haldane whose biographies have recently been published in a single bound volume by the Banner of Truth (706 pages, £12.95). Abraham Booth and F B Meyer are also missing and several shining stars from the American firmament such as John Leland, John A Broadus and Basil Manly Jr. However David Dockery in his concluding essay discusses the problem of inclusion and in a helpful nine page panoramic summary of Baptist history mentions the above names and others who could well have been included in this compendium.

The value of the volume

There is a fourfold value: 1. *Biographical*. To read about these leaders is informative, stimulating and enjoyable. 2. *Bibliographical*. The books and main articles of each leader are tabulated. 3. *Doctrinal*. In almost all cases the doctrine of the subjects is precisely stated and evaluated. In a time when truth is blurred this is most refreshing. 4. *Historical*. Thirty-three lives covering about 350 years provide an overview by which we can more readily see where Baptists in particular have left their biblical foundations.

From their inception in England, Baptists were divided between those who followed the Reformation and those who were Arminian. Those of the Reformation tradition, the Particular Baptists, outnumbered the General Baptists by two to one. The Particular Baptists, today known as Reformed Baptists, can point to faithful exponents of their position as described in the 1689 Confession or the Philadelphia Confession from

their inception during the 17th century to the present day.

Using the book it will be helpful to outline the main deviations from that position.

Arminianism. Up until the ministry of E Y Mullins (1860-1928), president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1899 to 1928, the doctrines of grace prevailed within the Southern Baptist Convention. Tom Nettles in his book *By His Grace and for His Glory* describes how Mullins compromised the doctrines at the crucial points (pp. 246-256). The truth of sovereign grace was eclipsed and is only now being rediscovered. Subsequently Southern Baptist leaders like Dale Moody (1915-), who denies all five points of Calvinism, predominate. Similar is Herschel Hobbs, who has been massively influential in Southern Baptist life. Hobbs quotes Mullins to support his denial of the doctrines of grace.

Dispensationalism. Present day leaders like Adrian Rogers are not only extremely hostile to the doctrine of election but place dispensationalism high on their list of priorities. That which was never an issue in Baptist history has now become a priority, and sometimes a point of division. This is a most regrettable aberration. However there are signs in America that the tide is beginning to turn against dispensationalism.

Landmarkism. The leading architects of Landmarkism, the idea that Baptists form the exclusively true church and can be traced with a clear



Augustus Strong (1839-1921)

lineage all the way from the apostles to the present day, are included in Baptist Theologians, J M Pendleton (1811-1891) and J R Graves (1820-1893). B H Carroll was moderately Landmark. Dr James McGoldrick whose articles have appeared in *RT* has written a treatise which argues convincingly that it is impossible to maintain the idea of a clear line of Baptists through the Middle Ages.

Liberalism. During the 1880s it became clear that a landslide into liberalism was taking place. Spurgeon sounded the alarm but there was no way in which he could stop the avalanche. We live among the spiritual ruins caused by modernism. Walter Rauschenbusch (1868-1954) and H. Wheeler Robinson (1872-1945), both well described in the volume, are typical representatives of the liberal movement. Wheeler Robinson, an Old Testament scholar, became prin-

principal of Regent's Park College in London in 1920. The school moved to Oxford in 1927 and Robinson held the principal's post until his retirement in 1942.

Fundamentalism. To attempt to stem the tide of liberalism there arose in America the Fundamentalist movement. A leader among them was William Bell Riley (1861-1947). After holding small country pastorates in Indiana, Riley moved to minister in Chicago and then to First Baptist Church, Minneapolis. Three hundred were added to the membership which stood at 585. By the time he retired the membership stood at 3,550. In 1923 Riley, T T Shields of Canada and J Frank Norris of Texas formed the Baptist Bible Union in order to take a more aggressive stance against liberalism. But modernism is not defeated by belligerence and certainly not by simply asserting fundamentals. B B Warfield was more effective than the fundamentalists in refuting liberalism because all his work was reasoned from a confessional basis which represents the truth in a fully cohesive and comprehensive way. By 1926 Baptist fundamentalists had failed to expel the modernists from the Baptist Convention. Norris was the most sensational of the fundamentalist leaders. He raised premillennialism to the level of essential theological belief.

It is important that we should be able to see clearly where the Church has generally deviated. In this connection Kurt A Richardson's evaluation of A H Strong falls short of the true picture. A H Strong was president and professor of the Rochester Theological

Seminary for 40 years. Tom Nettles shows that Strong knowingly allowed Rochester to be sold out to modernism (see *By His Grace and for His Glory* pages 240ff). Similarly Fisher Humphrey's evaluation of E Y Mullins does little to show his pivotal power in influence. Again Nettles' treatment is clearer (*ibid* pages 246ff) and helps us understand how in general Baptists have moved away from substantial definitive doctrine to shallowness which has been extremely detrimental.

Outstanding Features

More than ever we need reformation and revival today. In that quest we can be guided by God-given leaders of the past. Of these, Isaac Backus and Andrew Fuller (both 1724-1806), Richard Furman, John L Dagg, J P Boyce and C H Spurgeon are among the most instructive and inspiring. *Cathcart's Encyclopedia* says of Richard Furman (1755-1825), 'Probably no minister of any denomination has ever exerted a wider, more varied, or more beneficent influence.' Furman was an enormous influence for unity and the advance of associational life, not at the expense of truth. Furman was constant and consistent in his wholehearted commitment to the reformed faith and confessional theology.

Carl F H Henry

Of all the theologians considered in this book Carl Henry is the most significant in contemporary terms. Henry has addressed the most crucial issues of our day and defended the Faith where it is most under pressure. Henry's defence of biblical inerrancy

is the most thorough in evangelical literature. His six volume magnum opus *God, Revelation and Authority* deals thoroughly with the positions held by Bultmann, Brunner and Barth. In his evaluation Albert Mohler has this to say: 'Carl Henry has emerged as a major influence in 20th century theology. His influence, extended through his voluminous writings and public exposure, has shaped the evangelical movement to a degree unmatched by any other evangelical theologian of the period. His staunch defence of classical theism, biblical authority, and the role of the church in society have earned him the respect of evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike.' Henry has chided Baptists for their 'theological amnesia' and calls for a revival of vigorous theology among them.

C H Spurgeon

Within his sketch of Spurgeon's life, Lewis A Drummond describes graphically the visitation of the Spirit at New Park Street (1855-60). He draws attention to the need to evaluate that visitation in the light of the 1858-59 revival. For three years 1,000 people were turned away every Sunday from the 10,000 capacity Surrey Gardens Music Hall. Fervent prayers and sound doctrine lay behind the harvest of that time, a harvest of souls from every sector of society. Drummond is the only contributor not to provide references for his quotations. This is frustrating since the sources are necessary. Perhaps some ardent student will produce an inspiring work on the period 1855-1860 coming to grips with the revival of that period and Spurgeon's ministry relative to it.



*Carl F H Henry (1913-)
Photo courtesy of Word Books Inc.*

1992 is the 100th anniversary of Spurgeon's death. We should be reminded again of his relevance, a preacher who held unwaveringly and fervently to the doctrines of grace, never used the altar call, was never assisted by special music, and yet was so extraordinarily effective. Is there any way we can explain that in natural terms? Lewis A Drummond concludes his study with the following evaluation which will also form a fitting conclusion to this review:

'So "The Last of the Puritans" made his contribution; and the legacy lingers on. The question is constantly raised: Would Spurgeon with his Calvinistic theology be effective in today's urban, secular world? The religious Victorian age is past, to be sure, and he was a man of that century. Yet, in the opinion of this

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Romania

Increasingly students from Eastern and Western Europe are meeting together with two-way benefit. The International Fellowship of Evangelical Students arranged a conference in Holland in March which provided a historic opportunity and in particular Scottish students from university and college CUs are hoping to forge closer links with their Romanian counterparts.

Leeds Reformed Baptist Church continues to enjoy close connections through *Caring for Life International* (tel 0532 612131/679422) and the Christian children's homes in Romania. Three Romanian members of staff with two of the children visited Britain recently and it was a joy to be with them. Several of our members have been in Romania. Currently Graham Sharkey is supervising the work being done at the children's home and other helpers at present there are Jean Brown, CFL worker from Garston Bridge Church, Liverpool, Cathy Griffiths from Leeds and a young man from Pollard Park Church, Bradford. CFL urgently needs the help of skilled craftsmen, plumbers, electricians, builders and joiners, to



Graham Sharkey

work on refurbishing children's homes. They should be prepared to spend at least three weeks there.

Pastor Doru Popa from the Baptist Church in Arad will be one of the speakers at this year's Carey Family Conference and other friends from Romania are also planning to attend.

Malaysia

Pastor Ho Eng Ghee now leads the Sri Serdang Church. The two daughter churches, Sri Hartemas and Subang

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writer Spurgeon would have been most effective in the present era — and for the very reasons he was effective 100 years ago, as were the Puritans in their age. First, he was culturally a man of his day; hence, he knew how to communicate to it. Second, he had a firm grasp on the essential gospel. His theology held him in good stead. This is perennially important — and relevant. Third, he was a man of God

with a contagious spirituality. People always respond to that in a minister. And he ministered to people in their real needs. Finally, he faithfully believed in and preached the “whole counsel of God” — the Holy Scriptures. And he did it all in an informative fashion that ministered to people where they actually were in life. That sort of ministry is always alive, relevant, and responded to in any age.’



Poh Boon Sing and his wife Goody and boys



Jaya, have officially constituted as separate churches while continuing with close fellowship and united projects. Pastor Poh Boon Sing is leading the two new churches. A shoplot has been rented as a meeting place at Subang Jaya. Pastor Poh reports: 'Attendance at both Sri Hartemas and Subang Jaya continues to be encouraging. We are praying that there will be conversions before the end of the year and that the believers who have been coming will commit themselves to membership with our congregations.'

The annual church camp and Reformed Ministers' Conference continue and pastors Poh and Ho remain diligent in training young men for Christian leadership as well as travelling to encourage scattered believers. The emergence of another 1689 church in Malaysia under the leadership of pastor Peter Kek has been the cause of rejoicing. This new church is already undertaking further church planting work. The literature work continues and Poh's new book *Fragments from Kamuntung — 325 days in police custody* is currently available from Good News Enterprise (see back cover for address. (From Jan. 1992 the address will be

106 Jalan BS 5/3, Taman Bukit Serdang, 43300 Seri Kembangan, Malaysia.)

Updates following on from last issue

Yugoslavia and Albania

Good news! In *RT121* we described the zeal to spread sound Christian literature by a Macedonian pastor.

We have since received news of answers to prayer from Simo Ralevic who has faithfully printed and distributed such literature in Yugoslavia over many years. We repeat the map from issue 121 as it highlights the geographical situation. Simo says, 'At last God has opened a wonderful door for me into Albania. I brought hundreds of pieces of Christian literature and New Testaments (in Albanian) and gave them freely to people. I also preached freely. Pray for me. I have been surprised what God is doing here. I must print thousands more.'

Simo lives only a short distance from the Albanian border and speaks the Albanian language. He is therefore well equipped in every way to open up a great work there. Prayerful and financial support is surely owing to our brother at this time of unparalleled opportunity.

The Kurds

Operation Mobilisation, 'The Quinta', Weston Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire, SY10 7LT, UK, has published a thorough and helpful leaflet on the Kurds which is available on request from SCAN at the above address. OM reports:

'By mid-April there were more than half a million Kurds fleeing from Saddam's troops in the Turkish border area. Many of you were deeply moved as you watched their pitiful flight on TV – barefoot in snow and mud, many dying from exposure and disease.

'The Turkish press reported some refugees saying, "No one loves us – and now even God has deserted us." We prayed the Lord would open a door for us to go and tell them how much God loves them through Jesus Christ. Shortly afterwards Christian relief organisations Samaritan's Purse, Samaritan International and Global Care contacted us with offers of finance and supplies. Quickly deciding to call ourselves "Operation Mercy" we got permission to enter the camps, and largely spent the first week distributing tents and blankets to those who needed them. What should we do then? We were not professionals with sought after skills, so we styled ourselves "Servant Evangelists".

'Servants because every day we would ask the other specialist agencies what they wanted us to do, and so around 30 of us in two camps found ourselves digging latrines, disinfecting tents, picking up rubbish as well as washing patients and burning blankets in the field hospitals. It was exhausting and some of us got violently sick – as you would expect in a camp of 100,000 people with little water and very few toilets.

'That hard work gained a sympathetic hearing for our evangelists. While other

western agencies dismissed the importance of spiritual realities, many of the Kurds themselves were asking questions about God and religion. Secular western doctors were horrified when a group of Korean doctors came in with us and prayed over their patients – but the Kurdish mothers were thrilled! We gave out hundreds of Arabic New Testaments, and nobody ever refused one. There were some orthodox Christian refugees too, and their priests encouraged us to have children's meetings – as a result hundreds of Christian and Muslim children learnt Bible stories and sang choruses. To crown it all three individuals prayed for salvation. . . .

'The phase is now over as the refugees have gone back home and the camps have been closed down. Operation Mercy is now working in northern Iraq under the auspices of the UN. We are running a clinic in a village called Begova, providing health care as people come home to an area devastated by Iraqi soldiers, and providing social services in the camps in Zakho. This continues to provide opportunities to minister to spiritual as well as physical needs. We do not know how this is going to develop once the Allied forces leave in the near future and the situation is already tense.

'Praise God that in the midst of great darkness some Kurds have had an opportunity to see the Lord's light.

'Pray about the future of Operation Mercy – if it is to continue in Iraq we need visas from the Baghdad government and long-term personnel.

'Pray for God's salvation for the Kurdish people – in a spiritual, physical and political sense.'

We are encouraged also to know of Reformed Baptist Peter Pikkert being fully involved in this work. Peter is well equipped linguistically.

Treasures in Earthen Vessels

Notes of a sermon preached by David P Kingdon on the occasion of the ordination to the ministry of Russell Bridges.

'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us' (2 Corinthians 4:7 NIV).

Of all Paul's letters, 1 and 2 Corinthians reveal most to us of his understanding of his ministry as an apostle in particular and of his ministry in general. The reason is not hard to find: his ministry was under attack. He was regarded as a nobody. 'Some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing"' (2 Cor 10:10). He was not a trained speaker (2 Cor 11:6) and he refused to manipulate his audiences (2 Cor 4:2). He defended himself not by showing his superiority (2 Cor 10:12,13), but by setting forth his understanding of his apostolic ministry: that power was displayed in his very weakness (2 Cor 12:9). It is this self-understanding that is so helpful for us today.

1 How Paul regards himself and his ministry

What is the treasure of which Paul speaks in verse 7? What is the treasure which he carries in the clay pot of his frail and mortal body? This treasure of which Paul speaks is the gospel of Christ (vv. 3,4). It is the good news of Jesus Christ as Lord (v. 5). We note some of the characteristics of this gospel revealed in this passage

a) It is a *preached* message: 'We do not *preach* ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord' (v. 5). Preaching is never out-moded, even though some regard it as old-fashioned. God has ordained that through the foolishness of the preached message sinners will be saved (1 Cor 1:21). We should never be diverted from preaching. The best energies of pastors should be devoted to prayer and preaching.

b) It is a message which centres on Jesus Christ as Lord (v. 5). The treasure of the gospel is always to be Jesus-focused and Jesus-shaped. 'We preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor 1:23). We preach the shame and agony of the cross, but especially the glorious double exchange which this achieved: our sins laid upon him, and his righteousness reckoned to

our account. But as Peter made clear in the first Christian sermon, we preach Jesus as raised and exalted and reigning (Acts 2:32-36), the one who commands all to repent (Acts 2:38).

c) It is a *revealed* message, 'the word of God' (v. 2). This treasure is not our word about him, but his authoritative word to us. It is not a human discovery, but a divine revelation. It is not to be altered to make it acceptable to modern man and woman. There is a 'given-ness' about the gospel which puts every preacher under solemn obligation to pass it on to his listeners unaltered. Every true preacher stands beneath the word of God, not above it.

d) The message is a message of *truth*: 'By setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God' (v. 2). This treasure is not to be subject to diplomatic trimming. It is to be set forth directly and boldly. It is not to be subtracted from. We preach under God's eye so we dare not, we cannot trim the truth.

e) But supremely, we see from this passage that the gospel is *treasure* (v. 7). It is in a real sense not our treasure, but God's, yet he has put us in trust with it in order to share it. Unlike earthly treasure, it is never diminished by being shared, for it is inexhaustible. It is the treasure of the riches of God's grace (Eph 1:3). It represents all of the infinite fullness that divine love bestows on rebels who come to Christ (Eph 2:19). This treasure is conveyed by Paul and by all who preach the gospel (he does not say, 'I have this treasure', rather he uses the inclusive 'we'). It is conveyed to those who are bankrupt in order to enrich them beyond anything they could imagine. This is the glorious privilege and responsibility of preaching the gospel.

But let us mark well precisely what Paul says here, for it affects his whole view of the ministry, and of himself.

i) There is an immense disproportion between the value of the treasure and the meanness of its container. This treasure does not come in an ornate golden casket, but rather in cheap and ordinary clay pots, intended for common use. Could not God have devised a better means of conveying the gospel to men and women? Why choose clay jars? The reason is clear. Because God himself would have it this way. Nothing is allowed to diminish the worth of this treasure, and especially not the personality, nor the ability, nor the charisma of the preacher. All the

glory must go where it belongs, to God himself. If God blesses the preaching of the gospel it is as foolish to claim credit as for an ordinary clay pot containing diamonds to take pride in itself.

ii) This disproportion, the meanness of the container when compared with the worth of the treasure, is no accident. 'We have' could easily be misconstrued as 'we happen to have'. But it is according to God's purpose that it should be so. The AV is clear here; 'that (in order that) the excellency of the power might be of God and not of us.' God has ordained that the treasure of the gospel should always be contained in jars of clay. Why? That the all-surpassing power of the gospel should be clearly seen to be of God and not of us. The results of gospel preaching cannot possibly be accounted for in human terms. When we preach, the God who said, 'Let there be light' at creation, shines light into the hearts and minds of sinners, and lives are transformed. When we preach, the power of God is at work, and the very glory of God comes to take up residence in the hearts of men and women who turn to Christ.

iii) This disproportion must never be forgotten. We must never forget the 'clayness' of our humanity. It is very easy for ministers who are enjoying some success to forget this and become full of pride. It is easy but fatal, because God will not share his glory. Ministers must cultivate a sense of their earthiness and weakness, and then a sense of wonder at the condescension of God at using them. One godly minister known to me never went into the pulpit without praying: 'God be merciful to me a sinner' and then saying to himself: 'I believe in the Holy Ghost.'

2 How God's people are to regard ministers of the gospel

This text does not just speak to ministers of the gospel as to how they should regard their ministry and themselves. It speaks to God's people as to how we should regard ministers. They are but clay pots. Some idolise their ministers, placing them upon pedestals on which they do not belong. Others have romantic views of ministers, regarding them as ethereal spirits who can live on air while occupying a position intermediate between men and angels. But ministers are just human, they need prayer, that the power of Christ may rest upon them. They must always be aware of their own weakness. This side of glory we do not exchange weakness for power. It is always God's power displayed *in* our weakness. Denney writes of those 'so clever that God could make no use of them; they could never do His work, because they were so lost in admiration of their own'. (Denney, *2 Corinthians*, p.160). Ministers are subject to weariness, to pressure, they are just as vulnerable as others.

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The Warrant of Faith and the Way of Faith

One of the famous sermons by Charles Haddon Spurgeon was called 'The Warrant of Faith'. This he preached on Lord's Day morning September 20 1863 and is sermon number 531 in the series that eventually reached 3492. Spurgeon was young, only 29 years old. In it he criticised some of the Puritans. This is what he said:

'The warrant of our faith in Christ reasons thus: "You are not saved by what you do but by what Christ did; but then you have no right to trust in Christ unless there is something good in you which shall entitle you to trust in him." Now, this legal reasoning I oppose. I believe such teaching to contain in it the essence of Popish self-righteousness. The warrant for a sinner to believe in Christ is not in himself in any sense or in any manner, but in the fact that he is commanded there and then to believe on Jesus Christ. Some preachers in the Puritanic times, whose shoe latches I am not worthy to unloose, erred much in this matter. I refer not only to Alleine and Baxter, who are far better preachers of the law than of the gospel, but I include men far sounder in the faith than they, such as Rogers of Dedham, Shepherd, the author of *The Sound Believer*, and especially the American, Thomas Hooker, who has written a book upon qualifications for coming to Christ. These excellent men had a fear of preaching the gospel to any except those whom they styled "sensible sinners", and consequently kept hundreds of their hearers sitting in

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They are clay pots, not tempered steel. We should not expect the performance of a steel container from a clay pot. We will not get it, and we are unrealistic to expect it. And we are quarrelling with the sovereignty of God if we are looking for steel 'super-ministers'. He himself has chosen to place his treasure into clay pots. Clay jars are easily broken. And God has ordained it this way. He has not designated angels for this task. He has chosen ordinary men. How could angels enter into our feelings, and understand our temptations? But when the preacher proclaims the gospel, do not focus on the weakness of the messenger, rather rejoice in the treasure itself. Let us make sure that we have appropriated this wonderful treasure, and not forget to give thanks for those who are happy to be our servants for Jesus' sake (v. 5).

darkness when they might have rejoiced in the light. They preached repentance and hatred of sin as the warrant of the sinner's trusting to Christ. According to them, a sinner might reason thus—"I possess such-and-such a degree of sensibility on account of sin, therefore I have a right to trust in Christ." Now, I venture to affirm that such reasoning is seasoned with fatal error.'

Was the young Spurgeon right in his criticism? I would suggest only partially right for in this sermon he does not make an adequate distinction between two vital principles, namely, the warrant of faith and the way of faith. I will explain this distinction clearly, but at the outset will put it simply like this. When you teach your children you read the Bible to them and teach them to read it. You pray with them and teach them to pray themselves. You, with countless other parents, probably use a catechism, and seek that they should benefit from that as it leads to further questions and answers and discussion. You may also sing with them and worship the Lord with them by way of singing. Yet you do not teach them that their doing these things earns them credit nor that they in themselves give the right to come to God the Father through Jesus Christ for salvation. No, all these means form the way to faith and that is a very different thing to the warrant of faith. The warrant of faith is God's command to all people everywhere to repent and believe only on account of what he the Almighty One has provided in the great sacrifice of his Son.

When we read the Puritans or any other body of worthy Bible expositors for that matter, we will find frequent exhortations by them to attend to the ways by which faith comes. Attend to preaching. Mix with Christians. Read your Bible. Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. All that forms the way of faith but all that does not constitute the warrant of faith. When the Philippian jailor cried out in an agony of conviction, 'What must I do to be saved?' the shortest, clearest and best answer was given, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.' Paul and Silas did not say, Go and read the prophet Isaiah and he will show you the way of salvation. They did not say, Wait until next Lord's Day and go to church and you will be saved. There is nothing wrong with counsel about the way of faith and what we need to do to get saving faith but that counsel always needs to be given in the light of the warrant of faith, that is, God will always have all sinners believe at once and trust only in what he has provided for them in the person and work of his Son. Let us look more closely at the distinction between the warrant of faith and the way of faith.

What is the warrant of faith?

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary gives six categories of usage for the noun warrant. *The Oxford Reference Dictionary* gives two, the first of which accurately describes the theological meaning we ascribe to the word warrant: a thing that authorises an action. For instance, for a police officer to arrest a person for an offence he requires to have a warrant authorising his action. When we come to faith, what right does the sinner have to believe in Christ? The answer to that can be provided in the text; 'And this is God's command, that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ' (1 Jn 3:23). The warrant is God's command that we believe, and nothing we do in ourselves provides the warrant to believe. There is no merit of any kind whatsoever in ourselves that gives us the right to believe. The fact that we are altogether sinful points to our need to repent and believe.

What is the way of faith?

As we saw from the article 'Saving Faith in the 20th Century' (RT 121) there is a faith which is only nominal and there is a faith which joins the sinner to Christ and which is thereby saving faith. There is a faith which is no more than assent. There is an easy faith which we call 'easy believism faith'. Multitudes today are led by the altar call system into easy believism and thereby to the fatal peril of false assurance. That is misguided and cruel. We know from the Scriptures that we are always to encourage all sinners to believe but if we are to be faithful to them we must show them who Christ is, and how great their need is. We must not indulge in short cuts or over-simplifications. That is why we have to be careful about the way of faith.

The way of faith is really the way to saving faith. That way comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom 10). Hence we have to exhort unbelievers to hear and heed the Scriptures. With regard to that we can note passages like Proverbs 1:20-33 and 8:1-36. Wisdom which we can take as Christ personified pleads that all sinners everywhere listen to instruction. Wisdom urges that we heed the counsel until salvation is assured. Likewise in the great mandate of the free invitations and offers of the gospel that Isaiah 55 is there is exhortation to listen, to hear, to seek, to call, to turn. Listening, hearing, seeking, calling, turning, all these are the way to faith, but in and of themselves they never form the warrant of faith.

Jesus dealt with Nicodemus by showing him the way of faith and that he was powerless to save himself. He told him to look to the serpent raised

up on a stick and urged that he look outside himself to the Father's provision for salvation. Jesus did not try to rush him into something he did not yet understand; rather he guided him in the way of faith.

Likewise with the rich young ruler, Jesus showed him the way of faith by pointing him in the direction of learning the futility of his own riches. He told him to go home and sell all and then come to be a learner. That was pointing him to the way of faith. Jesus would fail the test of some of the Southern Baptist leaders who incessantly attempt to get people to make a profession of faith before such people know what faith is or the demands of the life of faith. Making a decision is one thing: the possession of a faith which unites the sinner to Christ for time and eternity is another. There must be care and prayer about teaching the way of faith.

Hence when the Puritans or other preachers urged the use of what we call the means of grace, they did not intend that those means were to be regarded as a qualification to believe. They never taught that these means were to be esteemed as meritorious. Attending church, listening to preaching, reformation of life, self examination in the light of the ten commandments, meditation on the coming great judgment day; these are all to do with the way of faith. Yet without intermission there is always that call of God to the immediate duty of repentance and faith which in itself is the warrant of faith.

Christian parents soon discover that it is impossible to create saving faith in their offspring. Only God can do that. A child can walk down the aisle many times but that does not create saving faith. Yet godly parents never cease to urge that children walk in the way of faith, that is always follow the means of grace by which saving faith is bestowed by God.

Preparationism

Before regenerating sinners, the Holy Spirit imparts knowledge. How can a person believe unless he knows what to believe? In most cases the Holy Spirit engenders a conviction of sin and need, and in some cases brings about quite a degree of reformation of life in the sinner before the new birth. Some have been known to quit blaspheming and to become truly attentive and serious about spiritual subjects before actually experiencing that great change we call the new birth. This work is sometimes called prevenient grace and sometimes it is known as preparation to conversion.

It is possible to fall into the trap of thinking that a deep conviction of sin provides the right or warrant of faith in such a way as to think that it is no

earthly use trusting in Christ for my salvation until I first have a previous deep conviction and sorrow for my sin. That is not only erroneous but even if it were right, who could ever tell whether they had enough conviction or sufficient sorrow? If acceptance has to come by something I have to perform or some quality in myself then my position is hopeless.

The Warrant of Faith and the First London Confession

Paragraph 25 of the First London Confession of Faith of 1646 expresses clearly that the warrant of faith is God's command and lies in nothing we can do ourselves:

'The preaching of the gospel to the conversion of sinners is absolutely free; no way requiring as absolutely necessary any qualifications, preparations, or terrors of the law, or preceding ministry of the law, but only and alone the naked soul, a sinner and ungodly, to receive Christ crucified, dead and buried, and risen again; who is made a prince and a Saviour for such sinners as through the gospel shall be brought to believe on Him.'

Was Spurgeon right in his criticism?

In theology Spurgeon was Puritan to the marrow. He built up the largest private collection of Puritan theology in Britain. Spurgeon pointed to writers like Shepherd. Bearing the above-described distinction in mind we would need to examine Shepherd's writings for ourselves. Personally I do not think that Alleine and Baxter deserve Spurgeon's strictures. It would have been better to make the distinction that has just been made between the way of faith and the warrant of faith. The Puritans more than any other body of preachers were competent in distinguishing things that contrast or differ and were masters in the art of balance. Nevertheless there were differences among them just as we have differences today. We should always strive to be clear in our understanding and application of the truth.

Augustus Toplady admirably expresses the truth of the sinner's emptiness and the manner in which he needs to apply for mercy. As we come to Christ for mercy and by him to our heavenly Father for salvation we know that our guilt is the only qualification we have:

*'Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die!'*

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