

# REFORMATION TODAY



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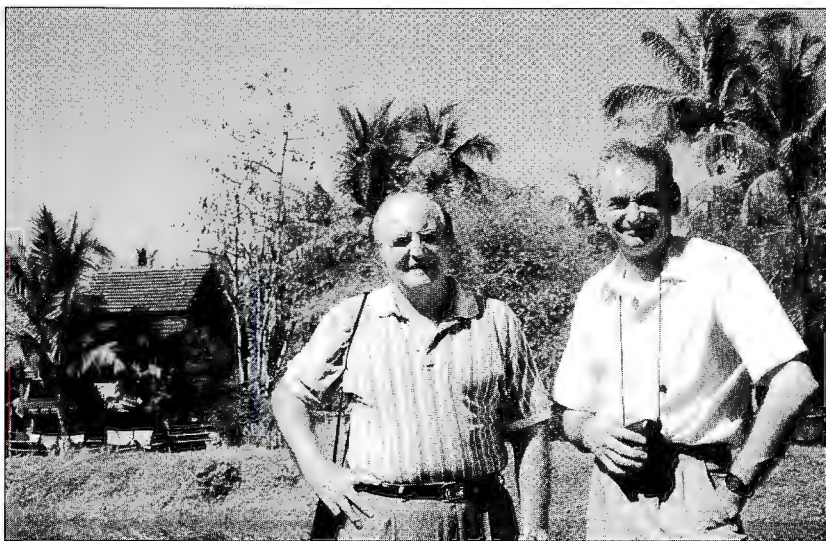
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*Contributors in this issue:*

*Dr John K La Shell* is pastor of Grace Community Church, Allentown, PA, USA. The church has just voted to come into fellowship with the IFRB.

*Geoff Thomas* is pastor of Alfred Place Baptist Church, Aberystwyth, Wales and is well known as a widely travelled conference speaker.

*Bob Sheehan* is pastor of the Evangelical Church, Welwyn, UK. He lectures at the EMF (European Missionary Fellowship) School of Evangelism and is a frequent contributor to *RT*. Pastor Sheehan has just returned from ministry in South Africa and reports that he is very impressed by the work of reformation in that country. He is to be the principal speaker at the forthcoming Carey family conference in August, see notice, page 39.



*On the left is Pastor Jay Baker of San Antonio, Texas, USA, with Russell Bridges who is pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church, Bolton, UK*

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Front cover:

*On the left is Michael Zahau, who pastors an RB church in Yangon but also has a wider ministry. On the right is Gho Khan Dal, an RB pastor in Kalembo, Myanmar. Russell Bridges provides us with a report on Myanmar in the News section.*

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# Editorial

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This editorial is devoted to introducing the subject matter of this issue and explaining the relevance and connection of the articles.

## *The Pressing Priorities of Prayer and Preaching*

We begin with this subject because it forms a natural introduction to what follows. The two main distractions besetting the churches today are outlined. About half of the world-wide evangelical Church is Pentecostal or Charismatic (for definitions of these terms see OPERATION WORLD pages 652ff). This Pentecostal sector is severely afflicted with the distractions of the pseudo-revival and crazy behaviour of the Toronto and Pensacola (Brownsville) 'revivals' (see page 38). The other half is conservative but often side-tracked by the Church Growth Movement (see review page 35). This first article concludes with cogent reasons why prayer and powerful expository preaching must be kept in the central place.

## *Holy Visions: Delusion or Devotion*

John La Shell begins with the story of the famous evangelist Sundar Singh. He deals gently and sensitively with the mystical side of Singh's life and from there proceeds to a most helpful and edifying exposition of the place of the extraordinary in the Bible and in church history, with special attention given to the all-important matter of how we are to detect the true from the spurious. Keep reading because Dr La Shell returns to Sundar Singh and assesses whether the visionary side was detrimental or not. This subject is relevant. For instance while in Indonesia a tutor in a Bible College told me that Jesus had appeared to him on seven different occasions. The way in which he told this seemed to me to claim self-importance. For Jesus to take the trouble to do this must make this person important! I found this disconcerting and recalled that Christ is supposed to have appeared to Luther. Luther sent that Christ packing saying, 'Begone, Satan. I have the Word of God!'

## *Continuing Prophecy – a response to Wayne Grudem*

In RT144 I reviewed Wayne Grudem's 1264 page Systematic Theology and there described it as a great work. It is consistently and robustly Reformed

throughout in the doctrines of salvation (soteriology). The doctrine that departs from historic evangelicalism is 75 pages devoted to the non-cessationist position concerning extraordinary spiritual gifts (cf pages 1016ff). Bob Sheehan examines Wayne Grudem's half-way prophecy position. You will have to decide for yourself whether Bob Sheehan is conclusive and convincing.

A rider is needful with regard to Wayne Grudem. He is a friend not an enemy. He is powerful on the theme of biblical inerrancy. He is a champion in the field of holding to the biblical teaching on male-female complementarity and in resisting the ordination of women elders. He attends a Reformed church. On the matter of cessationism he is eclectic (states opposing views to his own fairly). Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones changed his position on cessationism. Don Carson is a non-cessationist and many of our Reformed Baptist pastors are the same. I am a cessationist and base my position on biblical theology, that is the apostles and the extraordinary gifts they were given (2 Cor 12:12), were unique, and attempts to repeat that are misguided.

#### *'Prophecies' Today – a survey by Geoff Thomas*

This material follows directly on from Bob Sheehan because it illustrates the plausibility of so-called 'prophetic words' today by which many are deceived. Of course misuse of a thing does not prove it to be wrong. But Geoff Thomas' article shows how thankful we can be that we have just one source of final authority.

#### *Power Preaching for Church Growth*

It is our policy to look for crucial books and concentrate on relevance. This is David Eby's first book and it is a gem. It forms the basis of the opening article, *The Pressing Priorities of Prayer and Preaching*, and is partner to it.

#### *The Pensacola (Brownsville) 'Revival'*

The most damaging form of fanaticism, both in terms of a bad testimony in the eyes of the world, and in terms of dividing churches, over the last three or four years has been the practices and claims of the so-called Toronto Blessing. This movement has divided most Pentecostal churches as well as many other churches that have allowed the devices of the Toronto movement to invade their churches. Running concurrently is the so-called Pensacola revival movement. This is also known as the Brownsville revival.

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# **The Pressing Priorities of Prayer and Preaching**

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## *Editor*

Commenting on the book of Acts, Calvin suggested of the apostles that 'more was achieved by these few contemptible little men against all the stormiest commotions of the world, with the humble sound of the human voice, than if God had thundered openly from heaven'.

From the day of Pentecost onward when 3,000 were added to the Church the preaching of the apostles was used to establish churches in Judea, Samaria, and then to the borders of the then known world. Prayer and preaching were the primary tools used.

## **Strategies used to suppress preaching**

The adversary employed a variety of strategies to silence these preachers.

The first strategy was physical persecution. The Sadducees were leaders in this opposition (Acts 4:1-20). The apostles resolutely refused to stop preaching. Later when they were summoned to appear before the Sanhedrin they refused. After being flogged they returned home (Acts 6:40). This scenario is in danger of being repeated in Israel today (see News).

The second strategy of Satan was to infiltrate moral corruption into the Church. The Lord himself intervened to exercise discipline. Peter said to Sapphira, 'Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?' 'Yes,' she said, 'that is the price.' Peter said to her, 'How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.' At that moment she fell down at his feet and died.

The third strategy was to undermine the effectiveness of the apostles by burdening them down with administration. All pastors and elders are inevitably involved in administration. As the membership of a church grows the time involved in seeking to meet pastoral needs can become overwhelming. How did the apostles handle this crisis? We read in Acts 6 that deacons were elected to take charge of the administration and so free the apostles for their calling. This decision is eloquently expressed in the words:



*'Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and ministry of the word' (Acts 6:4).*

Distractions that have beset the evangelical churches of the West are similar. Very often administration absorbs the time of the pastor and thus the quality of his preaching declines. Every preacher knows intuitively and experientially that feeble content will never produce powerful preaching.<sup>1</sup> The answer to this problem is a practical one.

It would be enlightening to trace out the strategies used by Satan to distract the leaders of the Christian Church from their principal calling. In the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox denominations evangelical preaching is almost extinct. I will not digress but pass over nearly 2,000 years of Church history and come to our generation. What are the main strategies to divert ministers from the pressing responsibility of prayer and preaching?

### **The Vineyard Movement and the Toronto Blessing**

A major distraction which has caused countless churches, especially Pentecostal and Charismatic churches (for definitions of these terms see OPERATION WORLD pages 652ff) to deviate from the apostolic priorities of prayer and preaching is obsession with signs, wonders and miracles. The denomination known as the Vineyard Movement exemplifies this trend. The apostles were endued with the genuine gift of miracle working. The book of Acts is studded with stupendous miracles attested in such a public fashion that even the enemies of Christ's gospel simply could not gainsay them. These wonders are enshrined in the infallible Word of God.

After all the attention and hype that have been given to miracles today, we do not have one outstanding miracle that has been etched into American or British public life. We should note well that the apostles in Jerusalem did not say that deacons should be appointed in order that they, the apostles, be freed to concentrate on perfecting and putting to use their stupendous miraculous powers. No! they were resolved to attend to the work of prayer and preaching.

Out of the Vineyard movement has emerged the movement known as the Toronto Blessing,<sup>2</sup> the leaders of which are quite contemptuous of the idea that Acts 6:4 should typify the Christian ministry. Along similar lines to the Toronto Blessing movement is the Brownsville revival of Pensacola (see page

38) which is characterised by an obsession with crazy behaviour and contorted practices which have no warrant from Scripture.

It is true that the Christian ministry is often exhausting because of the demands of prayer and study, not to mention the nervous energy expended in attending to the spiritual needs of the flock. John Kilpatrick of the Brownsville movement maintains that prior to the current phenomena taking place in his church he was burned out, worn out and tired out. Randy Clark of the Toronto movement expressed similar emotions. There are natural and effective remedies for over-tired pastors or preachers. Why abandon the pressing priorities of prayer and preaching to devote one's time to dabbling with psychic phenomena?

### **The Church Growth Movement**

If the Pentecostal churches have been side-tracked from the priorities of prayer and preaching, the majority of conservative evangelical churches have been side-tracked by the Church Growth Movement. While travelling in Australia and ministering in the cities of Perth, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, I was informed time and time again that interest in the Reformed faith had receded. The sale of Reformed expository books has declined. The majority of evangelical ministers prefer Church Growth books and Church Growth methods. Demand for shallow books predominates there as it does in the USA. I was impressed with the massive expansion of Australian cities especially Melbourne and Sydney, now each with a population of over three million. Reformers are urgently needed in Australia.

The Church Growth Movement began in earnest during the period 1965-1971 with the expansion of Fuller Theological Seminary out of which the ideas were disseminated. From 1971 the ideas spread rapidly, as John MacArthur Jr notes: 'For several decades the Church Growth Movement has had a profound influence on evangelicalism world-wide. Ministry philosophy, mission strategy, worship styles, and even seminary curricula have all been shaped by this extremely influential movement.'<sup>3</sup>

What are the effects of this movement? Again John MacArthur Jr expresses this vividly:

An overpowering surge of ardent pragmatism is sweeping through evangelicalism. Traditional methodology – most notably preaching – is being discarded or downplayed in favour of newer means, such as drama, dance,

comedy, variety, side-show histrionics, pop-psychology, and other entertainment forms. The newer methods supposedly are more 'effective' – that is, they draw a bigger crowd. And since for many the chief criterion for gauging the success of a church has become attendance figures, whatever pulls in the most people is accepted without critical analysis as *good*. That is pragmatism...

The experts are now telling us that pastors and church leaders who want to be successful must concentrate their energies in this new direction. Provide non-Christians with an agreeable, inoffensive environment. Give them freedom, tolerance, and anonymity; always be positive and benevolent. If you must have a sermon, keep it brief and amusing. Don't be preachy and authoritative. Above all, keep everyone entertained. Churches following this pattern will see numerical growth, we're assured; those that ignore it are doomed to decline.<sup>4</sup>

Why is the Church Growth Movement so attractive?

Every pastor and church leader, who takes the Bible seriously, wants his church to grow. He craves to be in a place where people are responsive to spiritual things. He longs to see a steady current of men and women of all ages coming to Christ and knitting into the local body of believers. In fact, a lack of this aspiration would be grounds for disqualification from the ministry. That's why the Church Growth Movement books sell. That's why seminaries and Bible colleges have created courses on Church Growth; every pastor hungers for church growth.<sup>5</sup>

With these desires ministers of the gospel observe that it is increasingly difficult to make an impact on contemporary secular post-modernist culture. The radical marketers are quick to make their sales and drive forward the chariot of Church Growth methodology. The subtle propaganda used is to convey the notion that the traditional evangelical methods are old fashioned and worn out. The solution is a new kind of market driven Church with a radical new approach to worship, evangelism, programmes, philosophy, ministry and preaching.

As for the preaching part the trend encouraged is to be brief and as attractive as possible – be informal, and sprinkle your brief message with stories and anecdotes. Adorn the whole with good humour. If you make them laugh they are likely to come back. But hard-line tactics of making people feel bad as sinners is hardly the way to attract outsiders to return. The feel good factor is vital. People's self esteem needs to be boosted. The stress on sacrifice,



obedience, and costly discipleship such as leaving all to follow Christ is unappealing to say the least.

Characteristic of the Church Growth Movement is pragmatism – ‘if it works it must be right’ – and a preoccupation with methods, the minimisation of theology and a de-emphasis on the priority of prayer as a necessity for effective evangelism.<sup>6</sup>

Common sense and imagination is not the preserve of the Church Growth Movement. We do not believe in cobwebs, 18th century toilets, archaic plumbing, Victorian dados, institutional dark green and dark brown paint. We believe in attractive church architecture. In our dreams we visualise beautiful structures and spaces. We believe in well-prepared music which is biblical, joyful and refreshing. We heartily believe in the development and use of the gifts of the members of Christ’s body. We believe in evangelistic dinners followed by direct preaching. We believe in visiting as many homes as we are able, and of course we believe in cheerful stewards to welcome visitors. But what are all these without pervasive prayer and powerful preaching?

### **The Pressing Priorities of Prayer and Preaching**

James E Rosscup, author of chapter four in the excellent volume titled *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*,<sup>7</sup> surveys books on preaching with the specific objective of examining how these books deal with prayer. He refers for instance to a book by Don Wardlaw, *Preaching Biblically*, and claims there is no attempt whatever to relate preaching to prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit. I have in front of me a recent book which may well be the finest technical book available to date on the science of preaching and homiletics.<sup>8</sup> Prayer is only mentioned once. It is not as though the author is against prayer. He simply takes it for granted. Very different is Gardiner Spring’s *The Power of the Pulpit*<sup>9</sup> which is entirely devoted to the place of prayer in preaching.

The affirmation of the apostles (Acts 6:4) presses upon us the continued priorities of prayer and preaching in that order. Prayer comes first. Prayer is our way of expressing dependence on the Holy Spirit. Prayer is communion with the three Persons of the Trinity.

Prayer is utterly vital in sermon preparation. Everything in preparation for preaching must be pervaded by prayer. This prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit relates to labour in the exegesis of the text, the use of reliable sources, the stimulus of the mind in breadth of reading, labouring for expository and

lucid teaching content, making every effort to obtain a clear striking outline which is faithful to the text or passage. This can involve writing out the message and memorising it so as not to depend on notes. All this relates to the presentation of the message of the Word of God to needy people. Will there be unction? Will there be freedom and will this message transform the lives of the hearers? Prayer is central and vital in the application of preaching as Richard Baxter reminds us:

Prayer must carry on our work as well as preaching: he preacheth not heartily to his people, that prayeth not earnestly for them. If we prevail not with God to give them faith and repentance we shall never prevail with them to believe and repent, – our whole work must be carried on under a deep sense of our own insufficiency, and of our entire dependence on Christ. We must go for light, and life, and strength to him who sends us on the work. And when we feel our own faith weak, and our hearts dull, and unsuitable to so great a work as we have to do, we must have recourse to him, and say, ‘Lord, wilt thou send me with such an unbelieving heart to persuade others to believe? Must I daily plead with sinners about everlasting life and everlasting death, and have no more belief or feeling of these weighty things myself? Oh, send me not naked and unprovided to the work; but, as thou commandest me to do it, furnish me with a spirit suitable thereto.’<sup>10</sup>

Richard Baxter’s amazing and effective ministry at Kidderminster was a ministry conducted under the pressing need to keep to the priorities of prayer and preaching. May we follow suit.

## References

- 1 David Eby, *Power Preaching for Church Growth*, Focus, Scotland, 1996, p55.
- 2 Nick Needham, *The Origin of the Toronto Blessing*, RT148. The development of the movement and the connection between the leaders, Essek Kenjon, Kenneth Hagin, Ray McCauley, Benny Hinn, Rodney Howard Browne, Randy Clark and John Arnott, is clearly laid out.
- 3 David Eby, *ibid*, p5.
- 4 John F McArthur Jr, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993, pp XIII, 45.
- 5 David Eby, *ibid*, preface, p9.
- 6 *ibid*, p98 and footnote 190.
- 7 John MacArthur, Jr. and the Master’s Seminary Faculty, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, WORD, 410 page hardback.
- 8 Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centred Preaching*, Baker, 375 page hardback, 1994.
- 9 Gardiner Spring, *The Power of the Pulpit*, Banner of Truth, a reprint in 1986.
- 10 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, Banner of Truth paperback edition, p122.

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## Holy Visions: Delusion or Devotion?

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*John K La Shell*

He was a teenager. He was an Indian. He was a Sikh. His name was Sundar Singh.

Sikhs combine Hinduism with elements of Islam, but Sundar Singh was not satisfied with what he had learned of his ancestral faith. His heart ached for God. Even as a teen he practised the strict disciplines of yoga in a futile effort to still the restlessness of his heart. Although he found momentary relief at times, doubt and great mental anguish continued to plague him.



*Dr John K La Shell*

When Sundar was exposed to Christianity through a mission school, he angrily rejected everything he heard. To demonstrate his hostility he even tore up a Gospel and burned it in the presence of his family. His own testimony continues:

Though, according to my ideas at that time, I thought I had done a good deed in burning the Gospel, yet my unrest of heart increased, and for two days after that I was very miserable. On the third day, when I felt I could bear it no longer, I got up at three in the morning, and after bathing, I prayed that if there was a God at all he would reveal himself to me, and show me the way of salvation, and end this unrest of my soul. I firmly made up my mind that, if this prayer was not answered, I would before daylight go down to the railway, and place my head on the line before the incoming train.

I remained till about half past four praying and waiting and expecting to see Krishna or Buddha or some other Avatar of the Hindu religion; they appeared not, but a light was shining in the room . . . the light increased in intensity and took the form of a globe of light above the ground, and in this light there appeared, not the form I expected, but the living Christ whom I had counted as dead. To all eternity I shall never forget his glorious and loving face, nor the few words which he spoke: "Why do you persecute me? See, I have died

on the Cross for you and for the whole world.” These words were burned into my heart as by lightning, and I fell on the ground before him. My heart was filled with inexpressible joy and peace, and my whole life was entirely changed.<sup>1</sup>

Sundar Singh went on to become a holy man, a Sadhu, whose itinerant ministry took him throughout India and into Tibet. In later years he said, ‘I have had visions, and I know how to distinguish them, but Jesus I have only seen once.’<sup>2</sup> Many people were converted, and there were reports of several miracles being worked through him. When his reputation spread outside of India, he began to travel and preach in Europe, the United States, China, Japan and elsewhere. In spite of his great fame, his long-time acquaintances (both Indian and European) repeatedly insisted that he lived a life of consistent devotion to Jesus Christ. He spent several hours each day in prayer. With a Bible and a spare robe (which he washed in hotel sinks) he was ready to encompass the globe.

Sundar Singh (1889-1929) is one of the best-known, most pious Christians in the twentieth century to claim extraordinary visions. He is no kin to these modern charlatans who boldly shout, ‘I have seen Christ. Send me money.’ Because of his exemplary life, his claims convey a greater impression of authenticity than most. What are we to make of him? Should we seek similar experiences? If we were only more holy, would we see visions or even the Lord Himself? How does God reveal the glory of Christ?

The primary means by which God shows us the glory of His Son is the Word of God as it is applied by the Holy Spirit and appropriated by faith. However, here I will examine extraordinary manifestations of the glory of Christ, both in the Bible and in history.

## **Extraordinary Experiences in the Bible**

Special revelations are just that. They are given to special people, for special purposes, and accompanied by special proofs.

### *1. Special people*

The apostles and others who saw the risen Christ were ‘witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God’, says Peter (Acts 10:41). Stephen, who ‘saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God’ (Acts 7:55), was one of the first servants of the Church, a powerful preacher and the first martyr in Christian

history. He was a special person whose influence was apparently crucial in the conversion of the apostle Paul.

The great missionary to the Gentiles was, in turn, privileged to see the Lord when he was converted. Notice what Paul says. After recounting the appearances of Christ to five hundred brethren and to the other apostles, he continues, 'And last of all, as it were to one untimely born, he appeared to me also' (I Cor 15:8). Without insisting that Christ would never appear again before his second advent, Paul indicates how special his experience really was. In the more than twenty years since his conversion the Lord had shown himself to no one else.

The final revelation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament was given to the apostle John, but it is not clear that this was the same sort of event as His appearance to Paul. When Jesus spoke to Paul on the Damascus road, those who were with him saw the light and heard a voice, but they could neither understand the message nor see the Lord Himself.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus Christ broke into the space-time of Paul and his companions with an objective appearance. John's experience, however, as recorded in the beginning of Revelation seems to be a different kind of event. In the first place, John says that he was 'in the Spirit' (v10), a phrase which suggests an altered state of consciousness such as a God-given trance. Second, the details of what he saw are rather unusual, to say the least. Does the Lord normally have a sword protruding from His mouth? These two considerations suggest that John was given a vision which was largely subjective; it occurred inside his own head. If that is so, then the apostle Paul was probably the last person to see the actual body of the risen Christ.

## *2. Special purposes*

Paul's extraordinary experiences were given to him to qualify him for his life's work. It was necessary to see the risen Christ in order to be an apostle (1 Cor 9:1ff), and he mentions additional revelations primarily in order to reinforce his apostolic authority. (See 2 Cor 12:1-9 which is part of a lengthy defence of his ministry.) Another special word from the Lord diverted Paul from his planned field of labour into his great ministry in Europe. The Holy Spirit prevented him (in some unspecified manner) from entering Asia or Bithynia, but then a 'certain man of Macedonia' appeared to Paul in a vision, imploring his help (Acts 16:6-10). This redirection of the apostle Paul was a momentous event. European history would not have been the same if God had sent him east instead of west.

In the life of Paul we see an illustration of the truth that God gives extraordinary



experiences to special people for special purposes. Many people, however, wonder about the possibility of minor revelations for minor needs. God does not promise to lead us by impulses or feelings; that is not His normal method. Such a conclusion is reinforced by the experience of the apostle Paul. He did not normally receive unusual guidance on his travels. Most of his movements were directed by practical considerations. In the New Testament we see him leaving towns or sending workers on the basis of a prudent evaluation of the situation. One example will suffice.<sup>4</sup>

Paul fled Thessalonica because of Jewish persecution (Acts 17:1-10). When he became concerned about the progress of that infant church, he planned to return but, he said, ‘Satan thwarted us... Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone; and we sent Timothy... to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith’ (1 Thess 2:18; 3:1-2).

In the ordinary activities of life God wants us to base our decisions on scriptural commands, on the principles of wisdom, and on our own desires (in that order).

I do not deny that God may impress an unusual course of action upon our minds. It is abundantly clear that people have sometimes been moved to send money or to pray or to go to a certain place, and that unexpected blessing has attended obedience to those impulses. However, Scripture gives us no clear examples of such experiences and no reassurances that we can safely trust our impulses. Psychotics, worshipers of false gods, and some rather normal non-Christians also testify to the presence of powerful inward urges. How do we know that our impulses are any different from theirs? We do not. We dare not elevate our feelings to the status of divine revelation. All we can do is test them by the Word of God and by the principles of wisdom. If they pass those tests, and if inexplicable or supernatural good follows, we shall give God the credit.

The special revelations recorded in Scripture, and particularly visions of the glory of Christ, were given to special people for special purposes. They also came with unique accreditation.

### *3. Special proofs*

When God accredits his messengers, three kinds of evidence are normally combined. (Balaam, described in Numbers 22-24, is an exception.)

#### *(i) The character of the messenger*

Several times the apostle Paul pointed to his patience, diligence, honesty and compassion as proof of his sincerity. The gospel did not come, he wrote, ‘in word

only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake' (1 Thess 1:5, see also 2 Thess 2:10,11). Certainly it is possible to be sincere and to lead people astray, but we have every right to question the supposed revelations of people whose ministries are marred by evident pride, greed and lust for power.

*(ii) The career of the messenger*

Paul is again our model, for he pointed to two kinds of fruit as evidence that he was an apostle. The first was the changed lives of his converts: 'Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men' (2 Cor 3:1-2). Second was the miraculous power which attended his ministry. He insisted that 'the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles' (2 Cor 12:12). Both of these points are also made in Romans 15:15-21.

Many ordinary ministers labour in difficult fields with few converts and no miracles, but in the Scripture God provided supernatural accreditation to accompany special revelation. Even those Old Testament prophets who were rejected by Israel gave either signs or short-term prophecies to lend credibility to their long-range predictions.

*(iii) The contents of the message*

Finally, God's messengers must pass the truth test. That is, their prophecies never contradict the Word of God, and their predictions always come to pass (Gal 1:6-9; Deut 18:20-22). People in our day who claim to have a 'word of wisdom' or a miraculous message are not one hundred percent accurate. They err. Some of them will admit that this is the case; others must be caught, but few of them see the consequences of their mistaken 'prophecies'. God sends no semi-reliable messengers. If a 'prophet' does not have the divine authority of an apostle, he has no special authority at all, and we should not call his message a revelation in the narrow, technical sense of that word.<sup>5</sup>

The absolute accuracy of God's messengers was an essential part of the proof which accompanied special revelation in the Bible. A wider recognition of this fact would benefit many gullible Christians whose lives have been thrown into turmoil by well-meaning but spurious 'prophecies'.

In the Bible extraordinary experiences were given to special people, for special purposes, with special proofs. Now we must turn to the pages of history, for many eminent men and women have claimed that God has spoken to them or shown himself to them in some unusual way.

## Extraordinary Experiences in History

My approach in this section will be first to indicate the nature and diversity of unusual religious experiences and then to suggest some parameters for understanding them.

### *Extraordinary experiences described*

#### *(i) They vary in form and intensity*

At the lowest level are those impulses reported in all ages by people who feel that God has directed them or has given them some unique assurance of his love. During the Great Awakening in New England Jonathan Edwards encountered a number of people who claimed that sweet promises from the Bible came suddenly to mind. Such persons sometimes said, 'I did not know at first that it was Scripture; I did not remember that ever I had read it... One scripture came flowing in after another, and so texts all over the Bible... filled me full as I could hold: I could not but stand and admire: the tears flowed; I was full of joy, and could not doubt any longer.'<sup>6</sup> As Edwards noted, some of these subjects proved to have lasting faith in Christ, but others did not.

#### *(ii) They come with great assurance*

The people I know who have reported strong impressions of a supernatural presence or voice have one thing in common. They are sure of their experience. This seems generally to be the case. With a perverse twist of logic people are able to justify their revelation no matter how it may occur. If an impulse, vision, or voice comes spontaneously, while they are occupied with some other task, they take it as evidence that the revelation is not psychologically self-induced, but if their experience arises during a period of intense prayer or meditation, they assume that their holy intentions protect them from delusion. Only rarely can people be led to admit error in their supernatural visitations, even when it is obvious to others. One exception was Obbe Philips.

About 1560 Obbe recorded recollections of his earlier involvement in the radical wing of the Reformation. The believers with whom he associated were certain that the time of the end was near.

'Now when these teachings and consolations with all the fantasies, dreams, revelations, and visions daily occurred among the brethren, there was no little joy and expectation among us, hoping all would be true and fulfilled, for we were all unsuspecting, innocent, simple, without guile or cunning, and were not aware of any false visions, prophets, and revelations. We supposed in our simplicity that if

we guarded ourselves against the papists, Lutherans, and Zwinglians, then all was well and we need have no cares. Thereby a man's experience brings him great wisdom.'<sup>7</sup>

Oh, that such great wisdom might be more generally shared by God's children! Jesus did not call us to be as harmful as serpents and as foolish as doves. Earnestness and sincerity are no proof against deception.

*(iii) They occur in all major religions*

'Even greater suspicion is cast upon unusual religious experiences by the fact that precisely the same things occur among serious followers of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, to say nothing of the minor cults and religions of the world. Visions and voices are simply interpreted within the religious context of the men and women who hear and see them. As Miss Underhill notes, "The great mystics are faithful sons of the great religions"'.<sup>8</sup>

See if you can guess the background of the following vision.

'I seemed at first in a state of utter blankness; then came flashes of intense light alternating with blackness, and with a keen vision of what was going on in the room around me, but no sensation of touch. I thought that I was near death; when, suddenly, my soul became aware of God, who was manifestly dealing with me, handling me, so to speak, in an intense personal present reality. I felt him streaming in like light upon me... I cannot describe the ecstasy I felt.'<sup>9</sup>

This sudden apprehension of the presence of God did not come through the mystical techniques of any religious tradition, but under the influence of chloroform. I bring it in here to illustrate how far such experiences are from being conclusive proof of the truth of any religious dogmas. What belongs alike to all religions as well as to anaesthesia is really the property of none of them. Precisely the same mystical experience may be interpreted in a Christian or a Buddhist fashion depending on the background of the person who has it.

*iv. They are often mixed with error*

Extraordinary revelations throughout history frequently contain inaccuracies of fact or contradict genuinely revealed truth. This is true even in those who clearly seem to be Christian people.

It is time to return to Sadhu Sundar Singh. He claimed to have received many visions after his conversion. However, several of the 'truths' communicated to him in this fashion were contrary to Scripture. For example, he believed that no one

suffers in hell forever, but all are finally united to God. On occasion he suggested that perhaps the devil and a very few others are eternally shut out of heaven.<sup>10</sup>

Second, he claimed that he talked frequently with the spirit of Emmanuel Swedenborg (d. 1772), whom he considered to be a wonderful man.<sup>11</sup> Swedenborg, however, denied original sin, the doctrine of the Trinity, justification by faith, the bodily resurrection and the future bodily return of Christ. (He claimed that the second coming was spiritual and that it occurred in 1757). Perhaps Sundar Singh was not fully aware of these teachings of Swedenborg, or he may have reinterpreted Swedenborg's writings in the light of his own beliefs. This is the other side, the negative side, of the story of Sundar Singh.

As we consider the whole spectrum of extraordinary spiritual revelations, from impulses to automatic writing, we must conclude that even though they convey great assurance to those who have them, they are quite unreliable as indicators of truth.

### **Extraordinary experiences analysed**

The preceding survey of mystical experiences suggests two guidelines which ought to be observed in any analysis of them. First, our explanation ought to cover similar phenomena reported by Christians and by non-Christians. It is not very convincing to use one hypothesis for friends and another for adversaries. Second, we need an explanation which does not question the integrity of everyone who makes such startling claims. The existence of some deceivers cannot cloud the evident sincerity of the great mystics.

It therefore seems inadequate to suggest that all revelations to non-Christians are from the devil, while revelations made to Christians may be from God or from the devil. It is certainly true that Satan and his hosts can give lying visions and prophecies. (But 1 Kings 22 shows that the enemy must receive divine permission to deceive). Still, invoking the devil does not help us to understand the psychological processes at work within the visionary, nor does it explain how sincere Christians can be misled even when they are diligently seeking the Lord.

A far better explanation was given by Jonathan Edwards during the Great Awakening of the 1740s. He taught that visions and voices naturally arise in the imaginations of some people when their minds are greatly excited or disturbed. This mental disruption may come from the devil, or from physical causes such as



illness (remember the chloroform?); or it may be self-induced by various physical, mental or spiritual exertions. When all of these avenues have been explored, there still remains the possibility that the spiritual excitement of the mind comes from genuine contact with God.

When God deals with a person and he begins to realise and receive some great scriptural truth, he may become wonderfully lifted up in his love for God. While his heart is flowing out toward God, purely natural visions may easily be stimulated in his imagination. At this point he needs to heed the warning of Edwards:

‘Some are ready to interpret such things wrongly, and to lay too much weight on them, as prophetic visions, divine revelations, and sometimes significations from heaven of what shall come to pass; which the issue, in some instances I have known, has shown to be otherwise. But yet, it appears to me that such things are evidently sometimes from the Spirit of God, though indirectly; that is, their extraordinary frame of mind, and that strong and lively sense of divine things which is the occasion of them, is from his Spirit; and also as the mind continues in its holy frame, and retains a divine sense of the excellency of spiritual things even in its rapture; which holy frame and sense is from the Spirit of God, though the imaginations that attend it are but accidental, and therefore there is commonly something or other in them that is confused, improper, and false.’<sup>12</sup>

This psychological explanation of impulses, visions and voices can be applied to cover a wide variety of experiences without invalidating the Christian’s real fellowship with Christ. People who have unusual religious experiences in which Christ is prominent need not be genuine Christians. Emotional distress in their personal lives or the charged atmosphere of a religious revival could easily produce the psychic energy necessary to induce impulses, visions or voices in their imaginations.

### **How should you and I relate to extraordinary experiences which appear to be revelations from God?**

The preceding study allows us to formulate several conclusions.

First, do not seek them. God has never promised to give us impulses or visions or voices, so we must not expect to be guided or to behold the glory of Christ in that way.

Second, do not trust them. If you have such experiences, do not treat them as authoritative messages from God and do not base any important decisions on them. Always check any apparent directions from God with the Scripture and with the scriptural principles of wisdom (including the principle of seeking wise counsel).

Third, do not forbid them. If you have experiences which draw you closer to God, praise him for that deeper fellowship. Recognise, however, that the precise form of the impulse, vision or voice may have come from your own heart.

Fourth, seek the glory of Christ in a deeper understanding of the Word of God and a closer application of it to your own life. The true glory of Christ is seen by faith alone. Even the most spectacular vision of the Lord is only a heightening of your natural faculties, and you may have that while remaining spiritually barren or immature. When you see Christ by faith through the Scriptures, you will necessarily be changed 'from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:18).

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- 1 A J Apasamy, *Sundar Singh: A Biography*, Madras, India: Christian Literature Society, 1970, p 21.
- 2 Friedrich Heiler, *The Gospel of Sundar Singh*, trans. by Olive Wyon, Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1970, p38.
- 3 This is the common and most probable method of harmonising Acts 9:7 and 22:9. The Greek of these verses states that Paul's fellow travellers both 'heard the voice' and 'did not hear the voice' of the Lord. However, the word 'voice' occurs in the genitive case in Acts 9:7 and in the accusative in 22:9. The genitive signifies something partial: they heard but did not understand.
- 4 For further examples see Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1980) chapter 11.
- 5 These illustrations of the principle of freedom are based on Friesen and Maxson, chapter 10.
- 6 Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise concerning The Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, revised and corrected by Edward Hickman (Reprint edn., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974 [1834]) vol 1, p249.
- 7 George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal, eds, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957) p213.
- 8 Underhill, p96.
- 9 Quoted by William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902, The Modern Library (New York: Random House, Inc, 1929) p382.
- 10 Heiler, *The Gospel of Sundar Singh*, pp185-186.
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# Continuing Prophecy

*A response to Wayne Grudem  
by Bob Sheehan*

The publication of Dr Grudem's *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*<sup>1</sup> in 1982 first suggested to the Christian public in general that there were two types of prophecy mentioned in the Bible. The first, best illustrated by the Old Testament prophets, involved authoritative speech with the introductory formula, 'Thus says the Lord', and consisted of God's very words. The second, best illustrated by the New Testament prophets, did not use this formula and involved an initial revelation from the Spirit expressed in human words. The first type was infallible prophecy; the second was fallible prophecy.

The recent publication of Dr Grudem's *Systematic Theology* has renewed the debate<sup>2</sup> because he devotes twelve pages (pp1049-1061) to a defence of continuing prophecy. What are his arguments and are they valid?

*1. Dr Grudem argues that the standard Old Testament formula, 'Thus says the Lord', so distinctive of prophecies which were authoritative and infallible, is 'nowhere spoken in the New Testament by any prophets in the New Testament churches' (p1055). Therefore the prophets had a different authority and level of accuracy.*



*Bob Sheehan*

Dr Grudem knows his Bible well enough to expect an immediate challenge. Did not the New Testament prophet Agabus introduce his New Testament prophecy with, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit' (Acts 21:11)? Dr Grudem acknowledges that it 'is true that Agabus uses a similar phrase' (p1056). In his two cited works, Dr Grudem gives five possible solutions to this problem. In 1982 he preferred the fourth solution; in 1994 he gives a new answer.

In 1982 the four solutions were, in summary:

- (i) Luke's reporting was confused.
- (ii) Agabus was equivalent in authority to the Old Testament prophets (the historic position which Grudem opposes).

(iii) It is permissible to preface fallible prophecy with the formula, 'Thus says the Lord', reserved in the Old Testament for infallible prophecy. Dr Grudem rejects this solution because, 'Thus says the Lord' 'is used too frequently in the Septuagint as a messenger formula for those who claimed a divine authority of actual words to make this solution likely'.<sup>3</sup> Please take special note of this statement because it will become very important when we consider solution five.

(iv) 'Agabus, perhaps in trying to imitate the OT prophets or other NT prophets who claimed a divine authority of actual words, wrongly used an introductory formula which was inappropriate to his status as a prophet with lesser authority.'<sup>4</sup> This was Dr Grudem's preferred solution in 1982. Agabus had ideas above his station and used the formula incorrectly.

(v) In his *Systematic Theology*, Dr Grudem has changed his ground entirely. Although he still accepts that 'Thus says the Lord' is the common Old Testament phrase preceding the very words of God (pp 1050,1055), the words 'thus says' are used by Christian writers just after the time of the New Testament to introduce very general paraphrases of greatly expanded interpretations of what was being reported... The phrase can mean, 'This is generally what the Holy Spirit is saying to us' (p1056).

What an amazing transition! 'Thus says the Lord' once meant that the words

which followed are the very words of God but by the time the New Testament had just been completed it meant, 'This is the Holy Spirit's general idea'! But the fact is that 'thus says' (*tade legei*) is used in Revelation (cf. 2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7 and 14).

The fact is, however, that the allusions to early Christian literature cited by Dr Grudem to prove his case do nothing of the sort. His first reference is to Ignatius' *Epistle to the Philadelphians* 7:1-2 (p1056). In its context, Ignatius is referring to his visit to the Philadelphians and what he had taught them about church order. He recalls, 'I cried out when I was with you, I spoke with a great voice, with God's own voice... I had no knowledge of this from any human being, but the Spirit was preaching, and saying this.' Does Ignatius' claim to speak with God's own voice, that his teaching was the Spirit preaching, and does his use of the statement *saying this* (equivalent to *thus says*) suggest he believed he was speaking authoritatively or giving a general idea? Let the reader judge!

Dr Grudem's three citations from the *Epistle of Barnabas* 6:8; 9:2,5 (p1056) are even less supportive of his claim. Barnabas 6:8 reads, 'What does the other Prophet Moses say to them, "Behold, thus says the Lord, enter into the good land which the Lord swore that he would give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and inherit it, a land flowing with milk and honey"'. This is a quotation of parts of Exodus 33:1-3. It is not a general idea in fallible words which could mislead!

In Barnabas 9:2 he uses the formula, 'Thus says the Lord' in the context of quotations from Psalms, Isaiah and Jeremiah. In Barnabas 9:5, 'Thus says the Lord' is used in a quotation from Jeremiah 4:3-4. Let the reader judge whether using 'Thus says the Lord' in contexts which gather quotations and allusions from Holy Scripture gives the phrase the loose meaning, 'This is generally what the Holy Spirit is saying to us', as Dr Grudem claims, or whether it retains its usual authoritative meaning derived from the Old Testament use. Dr Grudem, I respectfully submit, has not proved his case but rather undermined it by his suggestions. The introductory formula used by Agabus is the destruction of his new idea of dual level prophets and prophecy.

2. *Dr Grudem argues that the Old Testament prophets were replaced by the New Testament apostles and, therefore, the New Testament prophets must have had another role (p1050).*

Of course we have no desire to undermine the New Testament apostles, nor to deny their unique role in the Christian Church. They did have an undoubted authority even over the New Testament prophets (1 Cor 14:37) because the apostles had all truth, whereas the prophets were only granted a partial understanding of the truth.

Nevertheless the New Testament prophets are closely associated with the apostles in a manner that is not true of anyone else. Together they are the recipients of the mystery of Christ (Eph

3:5) and are the foundation of the Church (Eph 2:20).

In both of his cited works, Dr Grudem seeks to undermine the significance of these verses. He asserts that it is grammatically possible (and it is) that in Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5 the Greek should be read not apostles *and* prophets, but, apostles *who were* prophets (p1052). In this way, the apostle-prophets received revelation and are the foundation of the Church, and these passages have nothing to do with the secondary, fallible type of prophet which Dr Grudem posits.

However, what is grammatically possible is not always contextually *probable!* In Ephesians 4:11 apostles and prophets are indisputably distinct groups. Why would Paul in one letter be so confusing as to write of apostle-prophets, *a category of person nowhere else defined in Scripture (!)*, and then go on to write of apostles and prophets who were distinct? Indeed, Dr Grudem himself acknowledges that, 'the words prophet and prophecy... was not the ordinary terminology used for the apostles' (p1051).

In a lengthy footnote (p1051 n4), Dr Grudem acknowledges that his suggested grammatical interpretation of these verses may not be correct but, amazingly asserts, in any case, that, 'I do not think that Eph. 2:20 has much relevance to the entire discussion of the nature of the gift of prophecy.' Yet he recognises that, however we understand the prophets in Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5,



'these prophets are ones who provided the foundation of the Church and therefore these are prophets who spoke infallible words'. This concession is remarkable! He now acknowledges that there could be New Testament prophets who spoke infallible words and who are part of the foundation on which the Church is built.

Grasp what is being said! The prophets of Ephesians 2:20; 3:5 prophesied infallibly. Yet they do not have *much relevance to the entire discussion of the nature of the gift of prophecy*. It is an interesting procedure to seek to undermine or declare irrelevant those verses which contradict the theory being posited!

3. *Dr Grudem argues that by New Testament times the meaning of the words prophet and prophecy had changed. Whereas in Old Testament days a prophet was 'one who speaks God's very words', by New Testament days it meant 'one who speaks on the basis of some external influence'.*

To support his contention, Dr Grudem lists six examples from secular Greek usage, contemporary to the New Testament age, in which philosophers, teachers, botanists, medical 'quacks' and written history are referred to as 'prophets'. But what does this prove? Only that in the secular Greek world the word prophet had a very wide meaning, being used for almost anyone or anything that claimed to speak with authority. To claim to speak with authority is not the same as claiming to

speak on the basis of some external influence, as Dr Grudem contends.

It is also difficult to see why, if the *secular* use of the word meant someone who spoke with authority, the *biblical* use must be identical. What was more influential on the New Testament meaning of words, the Old Testament or secular Greek? Surely the Old Testament!

Dr Grudem presses his case by trying to demonstrate that in the New Testament this secular use is found. His New Testament evidence produces two examples only. The soldiers who hit our Lord called on him to prophesy (Luke 22:64). Paul described the Cretan poet Epimenides as a prophet (Titus 1:12).

Let us weigh the evidence. Is the use of a word on the lips of sadistic, pagan soldiers to determine its normal biblical usage? When a modern young person calls something *wicked*, meaning that it is really good, does that mean that what modern Christian books mean by wicked is something to be commended?

Why did Paul refer to Epimenides as a Cretan prophet? Was it because Paul believed that Epimenides was a man divinely inspired with authoritative words? Not at all! Was it because his people considered him divinely inspired? Yes it was! Not only did Plutarch consider him one of the seven wise men of the ancient world but Plato described him as 'that divinely inspired Epimenides'.<sup>5</sup> Paul used the word prophet to describe a man considered to be divinely inspired.

We have seen that in its secular use the Greeks did refer to someone who spoke authoritatively as a prophet. They also referred to some as prophets because they considered them to be divinely inspired. In the Old Testament, however, to be a prophet was more than to claim to speak with authority. By his examples, Dr Grudem has failed to prove his contention that in the New Testament, 'commonly the words prophet and prophecy were used of ordinary Christians who spoke not with absolute divine authority, but simply to report something that God had laid on their hearts or brought to their minds' (p1051). The evidence he has produced proves no such thing!

*4. Dr Grudem's final argument is that there is evidence in the New Testament that the authority of New Testament prophets and prophecy was not particularly great at all. 'This ordinary gift of prophecy had authority less than that of the Bible, and even less than that of recognised Bible teaching in the church'(p1051f).*

The fact that prophets had less authority in the church than Bible teachers is a strange conclusion when we consider that in the list of gifts, prophets are always placed *after* the apostles and *before* teachers (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11). When the church had its true prophets, they had a proper position under the apostles but before the teachers (Acts 13:1).

The reason for Dr Grudem's order is not biblical but pragmatic. Harsh

experience of the realities concerning modern prophets has taught him that when the so-called prophets begin to run the church the Bible teachers are side-lined. Hence his need to devote a section of the *Theology* to advising church leaders on how to control the prophets they unleash! (pp1060-1061).

Dr Grudem uses two texts to show that New Testament prophecies were of a mixed nature in their content, resembling the infamous curate's egg which was good in parts and rotten in others! The proof texts are 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21, where the church is exhorted not to despise prophesying, to test everything and to hold on to what is good, and 1 Corinthians 14:29 where the prophets are allowed to speak and the others are exhorted to judge or weigh.

Neither text, however, proves the point. The reason for testing all prophecies was not to distinguish in an individual prophecy between the good parts and the bad, but to distinguish between those that came from God and those which were spurious. Lest it should be claimed that the origin of a prophecy should be obvious, let us note that 1 Corinthians 12:1-3 tells us that some people, claiming to be inspired of God, were actually declaring our Lord to be anathema! Paul had to tell the Corinthians that this could not be of God! Some people, when obsessed with the supernatural, leave all their powers of discernment at the church door!

In 2 Thessalonians 2:2, Paul had to

issue a warning against prophecies which declared that the Day of the Lord had already arrived and to condemn them as false. It was the phenomenon of false prophecies, not of mixed prophecies, which required tests to be made. Even in Old Testament days there were tests to be applied to those who had prophesied (Deut 13:1ff; 18:21-22).

What of 1 Corinthians 14:29? What are the others to judge (AV), or weigh (NIV)? It is reprehensible that the NIV supplies the words, 'what is said' after the verb weigh, even though they appear in not a single Greek manuscript. This translator's addition is supported by Dr Grudem but it is an imposition on the original. The Greek verb is *diakrino*. It is found frequently in the New Testament to refer to distinctions made between people. God made no discrimination between the Jews and the Gentiles when he gave both the Spirit (Acts 15:9). James condemned those Christians who discriminated in their welcome and treatment in the church between the rich and the poor (James 2:3-4).

Paul's use of this verb in 1 Corinthians is, of course, particularly significant. God had discriminated between the Corinthians and others by his actions (4:7). In disputes among Christians other Christians should discriminate between the contending parties (6:5). For this reason, when we consider 1 Corinthians 14:29, the discrimination to which we are called, is not between messages (as Dr Grudem contends) but

between messengers. False and true prophets had to be distinguished.

### **Agabus again!**

In contending for a mixed prophecy, Dr Grudem's main proof texts concern Agabus (Acts 21:4,10-11). According to Dr Grudem, Agabus, who has already been subjected to five varying interpretations, is under scrutiny again, because his prophecy was inaccurate in its details and somewhat erroneous (p1052). According to Acts 21:11, Agabus prophesied (if we translate it rather literally), 'The man whose belt this is, in this way the Jews will bind in Jerusalem and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' When Paul arrived in Jerusalem he was attacked by a Jewish mob, rescued by the intervention of the Romans, and bound by order of the Roman soldiers (Acts 21:33; 22:39). If the Romans bound him, not the Jews, and the Romans rescued him, rather than him being delivered up to them, was not Agabus inaccurate?

Great care has to be taken with prophetic language. As a premillennialist, Dr Grudem would, of course, want to emphasise literalism in detail, but prophetic literalism has led to all sorts of problems in interpreting Scripture.

The comments of R C H Lenski written before anyone had ever heard of mixed prophecies and therefore, written with no relationship to the debate in view, are interesting, 'The girdle was used to bind up the long, loose outer robe when

one walked rapidly or worked. The binding of both feet and hands, then, meant that for a time Paul would not be able to travel or to work at will as he had heretofore. Any work that he now did would be done as a prisoner.<sup>6</sup>

For Dr Lenski, the prophecy was a *symbolic* statement of restriction, not a foretelling of literal events. Paul's work would be hindered firstly by the Jews, then the Gentiles, as together they imprisoned him. Hence there are no inaccuracies! Those who would be quick to demand that the prophecy must be fulfilled literally have their own problems. Agabus took Paul's *belt* and bound him with it and prophesied that he would be bound *in this way*. In fact he was bound by the Romans with *two chains*, not a belt (Acts 21:33). On what sure basis can it be stated that the Jews did not tie up Paul with his belt as they attacked him and dragged him out of the city (Acts 21:30-31)? A restrained victim would be much more vulnerable than one who had free hands and legs to resist! Did not the Jews deliver up Paul to the Romans? When they saw the soldiers arrive they stopped beating him and he was arrested. Their victim had become the responsibility of the Romans (Acts 21:32ff).

My own preference is to follow the lead given by Dr Lenski. There is no biblical requirement to impose literalism on the fulfilment of prophecies. Dr Grudem has not, therefore, demonstrated that Agabus is an example of a prophet of the mixed variety.

## Disobeying the Spirit?

The last string to Dr Grudem's bow is Acts 21:4 where Paul was told through the Spirit not to go to Jerusalem, but went. Candidly, this passage is a difficulty of interpretation for everyone.

Dr Grudem's simple comment is, 'This seems to be a reference to prophecy directed towards Paul, but Paul disobeyed it.' Notice the hesitancy of *seems*. He continues, 'He would never have done this if this prophecy contained God's very words and had authority equal to Scripture' (p1052). In his earliest cited work, Dr Grudem explained that he believed that the Holy Spirit had given a warning of the sufferings that Paul would face (cf Acts 20:23), but these prophets had added their own interpretation to it, which was a false command not to go to Jerusalem. Paul detected this and so ignored it (pp78,149). Therefore, to Dr Grudem, 'through the Spirit' meant, as a result of a message received from the Spirit. 'Through the Spirit' referred only to the source of the message and not the message as it was finally given. This was therefore *not* a prophecy with good and bad mixed in it, but a totally misleading prophecy, a false prophecy. The humans who delivered the message distorted the Spirit's meaning. Again, therefore, Dr Grudem has changed his ground in his two books and has adopted a more extreme position in his later work.

Many commentators, who would not accept Dr Grudem's idea of mixed

prophecy, accept that in this passage 'through the Spirit' means 'speaking by the spirit of prophecy' which they identify with the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Also, many accept that the disciples received a message of troubles for Paul at Jerusalem and drew a false inference from it. John Calvin comments, 'It is no wonder that those who are strong in the gift of prophecy are sometimes lacking in judgment and courage.'<sup>8</sup>

Dr Alexander comments, 'This was not a divine command to Paul, but an inference of the disciples from the fact, which was revealed to them, that Paul would be in great danger.'<sup>9</sup> Dr Lenski agrees, 'The disciples understood the Spirit's words as a warning which they should transmit to Paul.'<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Dr Robinson comments, 'The Spirit reveals the trials Paul would undergo, and the brothers took it on themselves to attempt to persuade him not to proceed.'<sup>11</sup>

What, then, is the difference between Dr Grudem's latest interpretation of this passage and the other interpreters quoted? All are agreed that the Spirit had revealed the dangers awaiting Paul

and that the disciples, with no ill intent, but sometimes out of misguided love for Paul (cf Matt 16:22), had drawn a false inference. All are agreed that Paul felt entirely free to reject this inference.

The difference is that Dr Grudem would call this false inference *prophecy* and see it as part and parcel of normal prophetic life to have these mistakes. The rest would see it as an inference from prophecies but not view the inference itself as prophecy. The difference is the chasm between the hit-and-miss philosophy of prophets and prophecy espoused by Dr Grudem and the certainties of prophets and prophecy declared by historic Christianity.

## Conclusion

It is my contention that Dr Grudem has failed to prove his case for a continuing type of secondary, mixed prophecy. His arguments do not corroborate his thesis. Until better evidence is produced the curate's egg of pseudo-prophecy must be ignored for the wholesome food of God's infallible Word.

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## 'Prophecies' Today

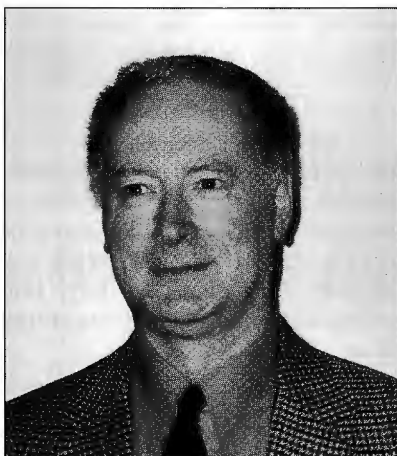
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*Geoff Thomas*

Neil Babcox vividly describes those occasions when he imagined the words he was speaking were prophecies: 'I have to admit there was something distinctly romantic about this notion of prophesying. There you are standing in succession to the prophets of the Bible. Samuel and Elijah saw your day coming and were glad. True, your lips are unclean, but they have been touched by a live fire from off the altar. Like Isaiah, you have heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And you responded, "Here am I. Send me!"'<sup>1</sup>

Tens of thousands of post-New Testament 'prophecies' have been recorded. One Miss Cardale arose in Edward Irving's congregation and cried, 'He shall reveal it! He shall reveal it! Yea, heed it! Yea, heed it! Ye are yet in the wilderness. Despise not his word! Despise not his word! Not one jot or tittle shall pass away!'<sup>2</sup> And the writer himself was at the local Elim church in Aberystwyth when this prophecy was given, 'God wants our hearts to break, and our tears to fall like rain.' No one seemed moved when we chatted afterwards... 'Nice to see you, Pastor Thomas. How's Mrs Thomas?'

Neil Babcox is one of a number of people converted through friends who were in the Charismatic movement who have gone on to be gripped by Scripture



*Geoff Thomas*

as God's final Word. Babcox became convinced that he had been deluded and that his former words were not prophecies at all. 'What evidence was there that we were not just following our own spirits instead of the Spirit of God? I could find no evidence in the Bible that prophecies were communicated by mere intuitive or subjective impressions. And yet, in nearly all cases this is how ours were received. And these impressions and intuitions could not be authenticated in any kind of objective sense.'<sup>3</sup>

Is not biblical prophecy binding on every Christian? Is it not a sin to question it? We are not free to doubt the fact that the prophecies of Elijah, Amos or Agabus came from the throne of the universe. Our consciences must receive them as the very words of God, and

preachers nail such prophecies to the consciences of an entire congregation. That may never be done with any post-New Testament 'prophecy'. No church member could ever be disciplined for rejecting the claim that someone like Miss Cardale had spoken a divine prophecy, even if the sentiments expressed were all true. All spoken truths are not prophecies. Neither may any church bind another congregation to accept words spoken in its meeting as a 'prophecy' and break fellowship with it if that conviction were rejected. Let the cults behave in that way. Our consciences are bound by the Bible alone.

### **The Source of Contemporary Prophecy**

But what is the source of prophecies, and how is it that at times they seem to be remarkably relevant?

1. *Biblical imagery.* The Bible itself is full of vital themes like peace, war, redemption, a new age, death and eternity. These are set in the context of the most striking metaphors such as fire, light, wind, snow, seeds, buildings, animals, plants, birth, adoption, inheritance, drought, sickness, healing and so on. The boundaries of the Bible are the ends of the world and all of humanity. Anyone familiar with Christianity speaks in terms of such pictures. Effective communication concerns the imaginative use of the truths of the Bible. The Scriptures create vivid utterances. For example, at the 1918 Armistice the Foreign Secretary, Curzon, prophesied, 'The world's great age begins anew.' It is biblical imagery

misused. It was a quote from Shelley. Another failed prophecy.

2. *The Christian life.* The life of the believer is well-known. It consists of battling with the world, remaining sin and the devil. There are great promises which the believer must plead, and there are the resources of the indwelling Christ, and the believer's limitless access to him. Any statements about our Christian lives are going to deal with those battles and encouragements. Why dignify them with the name of 'prophecy'?

3. *Christian service.* The duties of the believer are also familiar to everyone who knows the Bible. So exhortations to face up to our responsibilities more diligently will have a prophetic ring. One day I took a book of Spurgeon's sermons at random, opened it by chance, and after a few paragraphs found the following words, 'We must open our arms to the people around; we must go out into the open air to them; we must and will preach God's gospel to them. Let, then, the people around listen to the word of the gospel; and may it be said, "That place is the cathedral of Southwark!" So it is now. Out of it goes a blessing; God is pouring out a blessing upon it.'<sup>4</sup> In certain circles today that would be deemed a 'prophecy'. It is simply the impromptu utterance of a man with a pastor's heart, steeped in the Word of God, full of the Holy Spirit, exhorting his congregation to obedience. Such words are heard in ten thousand pulpits each Sunday even as they have been for almost 2,000 years – without anyone dubbing them 'prophecies'. Spurgeon and all who speak as he did display true

prophetic preaching. But that is not what those who believe in the restoration of the special gift of a prophet are claiming.

## Personal Predictions

There are 'prophecies' which some 'prophets' will make concerning a member of the audience which appear to indicate a mysterious knowledge of that person's background and problems. How can these be understood? Are such words to be considered the real thing?

Ian Roland is a 'psychic buster' who works with several English university laboratories who are studying paranormal claims. He explains the specific techniques fortune tellers use which indicate their clever understanding of human nature and the way our minds work.<sup>5</sup> He points out how people who put themselves in circumstances where they will hear predictions are already conditioned to expect the dramatic. They unfortunately will never be able to forget those intense words which the one speaking to them claimed were coming from another world. Subsequently, like Babcox, they may come to disparage that whole interlude and be embarrassed by the gullibility they displayed. They certainly will be unable to forget the 'prophecy', but memorability does not mean revelation.

## How do predictors operate?

1. *Barnum statements*. Named after a famous American showman who had something for everyone, they are

statements about someone's personality that most people feel are true about themselves, but not, and this is the clever bit, about most other people. Examples include, 'You have to learn the hard way that you have to be very careful to whom in the fellowship you can tell your innermost thoughts,' or, 'You have a particular concern about one of your children.' or, 'You don't find singleness easy.'

2. *Jacques statements*. Named after the Shakespearean character who spoke of the seven ages of man, these can supply evidence of seemingly amazing insight. The fact is that people tend to do similar things at certain times in their lives. Most people had a fairly serious accident when they were young – or almost had one. Or know someone close who did! There is also a moral uniformity and spiritual pattern to the lives of Christians. So to say, 'The hopes you once had about the future have not been realised, have they?' will bring a nod from every believer. Most churches are sad because someone has fallen away, and glad because another has begun to attend.

3. *Onion skins*. This is a familiar analogy used by those who teach that prophecies are with us today. They say, a 'prophecy' is given but there are several possible layers of meaning. What is the divine heart of the message? Ah, some outer skins of this prophecy are a little damaged, the statements are a little muddled, so layer after layer must be peeled away until the ultimate pared-down core-utterance is discovered. That becomes acceptable to the individual and to the congregation. The elders are encouraged to do

this work of onion-peeling until they feel the perfect heart of the 'prophecy' has been reached. It is this which is announced to the congregation as being the real thing.

4. *Greener grass*. Ian Roland explains these as 'statements based on the fact that we all are interested in what we do not have'. So to people outside the church predictions are made that they who, for example, live in a town one day will live in the country, and vice versa. Or a career woman will have a child, and a mother will have a career. In a congregation a prediction might be that the local pastor is going to travel. 'Greener grass' prophecies are always about great future blessing for that church – new excitements just around the corner never seen before. How different was Spurgeon's view of the future: 'We are only at the beginning of an era of mingled unbelief and fanaticism. The hurricane is coming. Men have ceased to be guided by the Word, and claim to be themselves prophets.'<sup>6</sup>

We are all making continual assumptions about the Church and the world. We see sudden spurts in understanding and growth. We frequently meet coincidences, and gullible Christians give them significance far above their reality. Coincidences are not all that rare. For example it only takes 23 people to be present in a room for two

of them to have the same birthday. Christians should not base a marriage on that. Dr French, a psychologist in Goldsmith's College, says, 'If you don't know the probability of something happening you are more likely to rate something as paranormal when in fact it is only chance.' Christ himself said in the parable of the Good Samaritan, 'And by chance there came down a certain priest that way' (Luke 10:31). The Lord Jesus was recognising that unplanned occurrences happen constantly.

In any congregation, without any claim to have 'prophets', in the preaching and in private exhortations one Christian is influencing another. Thus the church is served and its members perfected for lives of good works. The charisma of the direct revelation has been withdrawn, like the gift of an apostle, because the Word and the Spirit are working in every gospel congregation now maintain that ministry continually, and at some seasons in remarkable ways. Today's 'prophecies' are either words and sentiments directly from the Scriptures, or broad statements which have a fair chance of being true, or they are 'prophecies' which are wrong, and quickly forgotten. All this seems to be a poor basis to give Christians advice or build a courageous congregation. That is why little is reported about the claim of local church 'prophecies', and never will be.

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- 2 *The Life of Edward Irving*, Arnold Dallimore, p126.
- 3 Babcox, p55.

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# News

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## Israel

The Israeli government has been presented with a private member's bill, which if passed, will effectively crush any public expression of Jewish faith in Jesus in the modern State of Israel.

For some time there has been anti-missionary legislation which prohibits material esteemed as coercion to encourage a change of religion. This existing law is regarded as weak by the Ultra-Orthodox community who have wanted to amend this law for some time. They have been unable to introduce new legislation for want of interest and support. This situation was changed by the arrival of Morris Cerullo. His clumsy and foolish 'ministry' in Israel caused a huge backlash which provided national outrage resulting in proposed new legislation which requires four readings before becoming law.

This means that it would be illegal to publish or distribute material intended to persuade people to change their religion. Those found guilty would be liable to one year in prison!

Such law, if passed (and May 19th is the crucial date), will constitute a human rights abuse against Jews and Arabs living in Israel who believe in Jesus. It will transgress article 18 and 19 of the universal declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. It will renege on the Israeli Charter of

May 14th 1948 that the State of Israel '... will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens without distinction of race, creed or sex; will guarantee full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture...' It will also be in conflict with the European Union which calls for the safeguarding of Human Rights and Freedom of Speech.

The government is now trying to lull protest to sleep by informing those who write in protest that it opposed the bill on the two occasions it was presented to a select committee. The grim reality is that 78 out of the 120 Knesset members have said they will support the Bill.

Mr Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, has a parliamentary majority. He can ensure that the bill is firmly set aside whether in committee or in the course of the first reading. He can make a statement to the effect that, however strongly he disagrees with the message of the Messianic Jews and evangelical Christians, Israel is a democracy in which all viewpoints have a right to be heard – and that should not change! He can warn against the medieval fundamentalism which is a grotesque evil in countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia.

It would be an irony of massive proportions if such a law of religious intolerance were passed considering the unique suffering of the Jewish people themselves.

Already Jewish Christians are facing persecution. Andrei Milesch completed his basic training with honours and was assigned to a leading unit of the Israeli army, but has been removed because it was discovered that he had converted to Christianity – as though Christians are not to be trusted in battle-worthy units of the army!

A couple from Jerusalem that immigrated to Israel in the mid 1980s have had their passports withheld until they sign a statement to the effect that they have no connections with Messianic or evangelical organisations.

All this reminds us of that dark period in English history 1662-1689 when the Anglican Church decided to enforce conformity. Among the many who suffered was John Bunyan. He was imprisoned for twelve years for refusing to conform. It was in the Bedford prison that he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which after the Bible is the best selling book of all time. Michael Watts illustrates vividly the utter folly of that religious intolerance. (See his book *The Dissenters*, published by Oxford University Press. See also the review of his work in *RT156*).

Please write to your MP or to the Israeli Embassy. (In Britain the address is Embassy of Israel, 2 Palace Green, LONDON W8 4BQ), as well as direct to The Prime Minister Mr Netanyahu, Mr Ehud Barak, Mr Shimon Peres, and Mr Zvieli who is Secretary General of the Labour Party. The address for all of these is simply: The Knesset, Jerusalem, Israel. Be brief and friendly. Simply express your concern in two or three paragraphs.

We need to urge that the way to deal

with religious fanatics or with those who we disagree with is to be well informed. Freedom includes the right to decline material. That is one thing. Sending people to prison is another.

### **USA – Reformed Baptist Fellowship**

On March 11, 1997, more than 100 pastors and messengers from churches throughout the USA and Canada met at Cornerstone Bible Fellowship church at Mesa, Arizona, in order to observe the constituting of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America (ARBCA). Twenty-four churches formally joined, and twenty-five others participated as official observers, a step necessary prior to joining the Association. This meeting was the culmination of many hopes among RBs, who have desired to organise a national association for many years. A previous meeting, held at Fayetteville, Georgia, in November, 1996, had produced a constitution which served as the basis for the actions in Mesa. Churches that participated in the Fayetteville meeting or who were members of the existing Reformed Baptist Missions Services organisation provided the constituting nucleus of ARBCA.

Desiring to demonstrate the 'strict-subscriptionist' nature of their organisation, the messengers of the churches forming the new Association adopted as their doctrinal standard the Second Baptist Confession of Faith – the 1689.

The Association is intended to provide 'a fellowship in which churches of common confession may find mutual encouragement, assistance, edification,

and counsel, and may participate in co-operative efforts such as ministerial training, publications, church planting, and other such efforts.

An Administrative Council consisting of eleven pastors and laymen was chosen, charged with directing all the various tasks necessary for the Association to function.

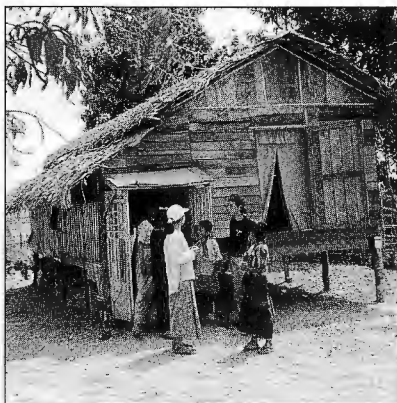
Two pastors from member churches, Earl Blackburn of Trinity Reformed Baptist Church, La Mirada, California, and James Renihan addressed the meeting. Pastor Blackburn in a most suitable way based his address on the confrontation between David and Goliath. Pastor Renihan drew material from English Baptist history. With exceptional insight he compared the Bristol and London Associations.

We rejoice in this expression of unity and co-operation.

## Myanmar

*A report by Russell Bridges*

On Tuesday 11th February Pastors Jay Baker, Erroll Hulse and Russell Bridges flew out of Heathrow by Brunei Air 767 via Abu Dhabi to Yangon (formerly Rangoon), the capital city of Myanmar. Yangon is a city of between 3 and 4 million on the north bank of the Ayeyarwaddy river. The original town is built in a grid pattern with north/south streets and east/west roads. The larger part of downtown Yangon reflects the British influence with typically colonial style architecture. However the overall impression is of years of neglect. We met an elderly British veteran who has spent over 50 years in Myanmar. He spoke of former



*A typical home, which also serves as a church, in the rural area of Yangon*

years and mourned the decline of the city which, according to him had, in the 50s, been 'the finest in the Far East'. In a sense the dilapidation of the city gives a clue to the economic state of the country which, after 50 years of military rule is one of the poorest countries in the world.

We were met at the airport by Solomon Ceu Cam of the inter-denominational Missionary Theological Seminary (MTS) and Missionary Church of Yangon. Solomon is the principal of MTS which is situated in the city suburbs. On Saturday 15th we had been invited to share in the graduation ceremony. Erroll preached on the challenge of Ezekiel 33. It was a real privilege to see the results of this small but significant work. The training is basic but the College library would be totally inadequate for students in the West. Wherever we went we were able to give a small number of books to pastors. Sending literature is one of the chief ways we can help the churches of Myanmar. Generally the cost of living is very low compared to the West but



land and building costs are similar to ours which leads to insecurity for pastors and churches as tenancies can be terminated without explanation.

A similar dilemma is faced by Reformed Baptist Pastor Michael Zahau. His house is not far from the MTS. Amenities are basic and there is no running water. 50 metres away there is an open waste disposal area. His front room doubles up as a church and we were delighted to be able to share in the Sunday services. It was good to see so many children (Michael has 8), and young people too. Until recently Michael also ran a small theological college but the building is no longer available and without a venue it will not be possible to continue.

Leaving Yangon we travelled by train to Mandalay on what Erroll has dubbed the 'bucking bronco ride'! There was little opportunity during the overnight journey to see the scenery of the plain area. Coming into the outskirts of Mandalay we were reminded of the strength of Buddhism with begging priests on every corner. Mandalay is somewhat of a Mecca for Buddhism, but the priests were not the only beggars.

Searching for any evidence of Adoniram Judson we sought out the Judson Memorial Church. The assistant pastor was very helpful. He showed us round the church and seminary which again were very basic. Back at our hotel we were glad to find a vibrant group of men including Ngun Tlung who had received our communication. Pastor Tlung's church in Mandalay has about

400 members. They have been meeting in an Anglican church building but its availability was due to cease in March. They will have to find a new location for which they expect to pay about \$130 per month.

Ill health caused an early return to Yangon for Jay and myself while Erroll travelled on further north to Kalemmyo and the churches of Zam Kam Kual, Gho Khan Dal and Michael Zahau. Every church seems to want to have its own seminary and we felt the need to encourage more co-operation between church groups that fundamentally are in agreement theologically.

Kalemmyo is on the edge of the Chin state. There are a great variety of languages and dialects in Myanmar (90 in all) but virtually all the people we met were Chin. These peoples largely inhabit the north-west of the country where it borders on the Indian state of Mesoram. Foreigners are not allowed to travel into the Chin state. 80 to 90% of the Chin are Christian and this is not just cultural. Clearly there has been a great revival among the Chin people. Originally they were driven out of Mongolia by warring factors and settled in India and Burma.

Our guide was a Chin who seemed proud of the fact that his ancestors were head-hunters but now it is souls they are hunting. There is a much higher level of devotion than we have in most of our churches. However the majority of work they are doing seems to be among their own Chin people while the main body of the country remains under the grip of Buddhism.

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# Power Preaching for Church Growth

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– *the role of preaching in growing churches*. David Eby, Mentor imprint by Christian Focus, Scotland, 1996, pp190, pbk.

*A review article by the editor*

Writing in the foreword John MacArthur Jr declares, ‘For several decades the Church Growth Movement has had a profound influence on evangelicalism world-wide. Ministry philosophy, mission strategy, worship styles, and even seminary curricula have all been shaped by this extremely influential movement. ... This book is a perceptive and sobering analysis of what is surely the movement’s most glaring deficiency – a near total lack of any emphasis on preaching. ... At times it even seems as if the Church Growth Movement views powerful preaching as a liability. Lightweight, shallow, entertaining homilies are held up as the goal rather than strong biblical exposition – power preaching, as Dave Eby calls it. And as he points out, this tendency to minimise preaching is surely the Achilles heel of the Church Growth Movement.’

Writing in the introduction David Eby asks: ‘Do pastors and church leaders today really need a wake-up call to return to the apostolic priorities of preaching and prayer as the primary means to accomplish church growth? Are preachers really in danger of becoming infatuated with success models and sociological methodologies to achieve results? Are pastors truly tempted to down-grade and neglect the weapons of prayer and the Word in an age that promises success through innovative management techniques?’ He responds: ‘The answer to these questions is a resounding yes. I know because I am a pastor and over the last thirty years of ministry I have felt the pressure of pragmatism. I have also talked and listened to scores of pastors who feel the same weight’ (page 8).

David Eby describes the extent of his study of over sixty books on the Church. Reference to preaching and prayer when found is only fleeting and superficial. He confesses that his book was written with a deep conviction that something radically unhealthy has been happening in Western Christianity this century: ‘we have been gradually and increasingly losing our love and nerve for

preaching. In recent years a shiny brass marching band has led an impressive military parade, known as the Church Growth Movement, down the evangelical mainstreet. This striking procession has displayed an imposing array of glistening modern weapons, all designed to accomplish growing churches and robust evangelism. But the trumpet of preaching has not been at the forefront of the band' (page 139).

The major part of his book consists of an exposition of what is involved in powerful preaching and how that relates to the place of prayer. For instance he refers to the different ways in which Luke describes preaching:

'Luke employs forty-five different verbs to describe the communication of God's Word from preacher to people. Ministry of the Word is simply to 'speak' or 'say' the Word; to announce the good news to groups or individuals; to teach and instruct believers; to proclaim publicly; to discuss, argue, and reason; to solemnly testify as if in a courtroom; to publicly proclaim as an authoritative, formal herald; to speak freely, boldly and confidently, to exhort, encourage, and comfort with the Word; and to seek to persuade and win over' (page 34).

In opening up the primacy of prayer the author shows how this pertained in the book of Acts. How did the Church face her first labour crisis and the need for workers? She prayed (Acts 24-26).

How did the Church preserve all the fruit that came on the Day of Pentecost? She was devoted to praying as one of the primary means (Acts 2:42).

How did the Church stand against physical persecution? She prayed (Acts 4:24-30). How did the Church combat the temptation for her leadership to neglect prayer? She reaffirmed the apostolic priority of prayer (Acts 6:1-6).

How did the Church stand against political pressure expressed in the execution and imprisonment of her leaders? She prayed (Acts 12:1-12).

How did the Church launch her first missionary effort? She prayed (Acts 13:1-3).

Of course prayer is not mechanical. It is part of and comes out of union with Christ. Prayer is partner to piety. 'Every pastor knows in his heart of hearts that the key to power preaching is robust personal piety. He knows the same truth from his experience. Powerful preaching does not happen in a vacuum. It always stands with a godly, holy life. The wagon of ardent preaching is always pulled by the horse of strong communion with God' (page 79).

Each of the eighteen chapters concludes with ‘quotations for your encouragement’. Here are a few.

- In Acts 6:4 the priorities are laid down once and forever. This is the primary task of the Church, the primary task of the leaders of the Church... and we must not allow anything to deflect us from this, however good the cause, however great the need (D Martyn Lloyd-Jones).

*To be a great preacher a man must be nothing else* (James W Alexander).

- The most important thing happening in the world at any given time is the preaching of the gospel (James M Boice).

*The pulpit is powerless where the Cross of Christ is not magnified. Christ must be the theme, the scope, the life, the soul of the pulpit* (Gardiner Spring).

*Laughter seems to have replaced repentance as the goal of many preachers* (John Piper).

- ‘How is it?’ said a minister to an actor, ‘that your performances, which are but pictures of the imagination, produce so much more effect than our sermons, which are all realities?’ ‘Because,’ said the actor, ‘we represent fictions as though they were realities, and you preach realities as though they were fictions’ (John Angell James).

*Nothing so transforms the spirit of a man as communion with God. Those are most like unto God that converse most frequently with him* (John Flavel).

- In times of revival the Spirit of God accompanies preaching with a kind of irresistible force; hearers feel themselves in the immediate presence of God; the Word of God becomes of infinite importance to their minds; simple truths concerning Christ, the nearness of eternity and the awfulness of being in an unconverted state (Iain Murray).

*The real life of the Church is revival in history* (Paul E G Cook).

David Eby’s timely book is highly commended by John MacArthur, John Piper, Stuart Olyott, John Blanchard, John Armstrong, and Michael Horton.

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## The Pensacola 'Revival'

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### *Editor*

Immense claims are being made for what is going on in the Brownsville Assembly in Pensacola, Florida, USA, a parallel of the Airport Church in Toronto which has spread what is known as the Toronto Blessing. It is claimed that over a million people have made a pilgrimage to Brownsville to see what is going on there.

The principal leader is John Kilpatrick, ordained by the Assemblies of God and pastor of the Brownsville congregation. The second leader is Stephen Hill, a Pentecostal evangelist who has held crusades in South America, Spain and Russia.

It is claimed that the Brownsville 'revival' of Pensacola has eclipsed the 'revival' of Toronto at Pastor John Arnott's fellowship (formerly known as the Airport Vineyard Church). Kilpatrick and Hill have both indicated that this 'revival' is as important as, if not more important than, the revivals in the book of Acts. It is bigger and better than all previous revivals, these being just a foundation for this 'end times move of God'. Kilpatrick stresses the scope of this 'revival' thus:

'I've got a sneaking feeling like one or two things is about to happen and both of them are great. I said I've got a sneaking feeling like one or two things is about to happen and both of them are great. Either, either God is going to perpetuate this revival and it's going to keep going deeper and deeper and higher and higher and longer and longer. Or either the clouds are about to split and Jesus is about to come. [Congregation responds with cheers.] Hallelujah!'<sup>1</sup>

The hype that is self-generated is terrific. Such are these claims that we think of the words of warning of our Lord to the generation just prior to the fall of Jerusalem: 'So if anyone tells you, "There he is, out in the desert," do not go out; or, "Here he is, in the inner rooms," do not believe it.'

It has been claimed that this 'revival' is the one predicted by the super-church Korean mystic Yonggi Cho who gave a prophecy in Seattle in 1991:

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'I became deeply concerned about the spiritual decline in America. I began to pray even more earnestly for revival in these United States. As I prayed, I felt the Lord prompt me to get a map of America, and to point my finger on the map. I found myself pointing to Pensacola in the Florida panhandle.'<sup>2</sup>

## Principal features

Two main features characterise the activity at Brownsville. The first is slaying in the spirit. (I use a small 's' for spirit because the slaying is humanly manipulated). The professional name for this is epidemic hysteria which is not confined to religion. There is a struggle to find words which convey to ordinary people what takes place. Is this slaying in the spirit dabbling in paranormal phenomena? Is it a mixture of manipulation, human suggestibility and heightened expectation? Textbooks are obtainable at Brownsville including one which explains procedures for 'catchers', that is, those responsible for catching those slain in the spirit.

'When you walk behind a person, gently touch the shoulders to let them know you are there in preparation to catch them. Remove your hands afterwards. If the person falls, hold your hands on their back just above the waist – not under the arms. Do not touch a person while they are receiving prayer... Look for open areas before you begin to pray. This will avoid falling on others. Please do not block the aisles. If an individual is in the aisle and they are "slain in the Spirit" they should be laid uphill.'<sup>3</sup>

'A videotape of the service shows that as Hill takes the pulpit people begin to pass out and go into frantic convulsions. The convulsing, spastic, vibrating

bodies are carried to the platform at Hill's instruction. As they are lined across the stage in this orgy of voyeurism, Hill tells the congregation, "These folks are interceding for you."

Some of the claims are more extreme than in the Toronto Blessing. Hill claims that a current of electricity has thrown him four feet into the air. Hill reports that '...there's nothing a catcher can do if a lady a hundred feet away is hit by the power of God, is thrown up against the wall and wakes up with a knot on her head.'<sup>4</sup> Hill attributes these phenomena to Jesus but the character of such practice is to be identified with occult or poltergeist activity.

The second main feature is the simulation of conversion in the form of professions of faith. Without any presentation of the gospel message Hill uses the altar call and screams at people to come forward. Inflated reports tell of hundreds coming forward. For many years confusion has prevailed as to what is conveyed by coming forward. For some it is rededication. For others it is commitment. Some go forward regularly. Tom Nettles told me that as a boy growing up in a Southern Baptist church he responded to the altar call and went forward every week. It is well known in America that in the mega-churches that sustain an entertainment type ministry and where the altar call is used at most services memberships remain static. Those who leave out the back door equal the number that come in the front door by way of commitment.

Exaggerated claims have come from the platform of Brownsville about the dramatic effect of the 'revival' on Pensacola. Investigation has shown that the statistics for crime, robberies, forcible sex offences, assault, drug possession and traffic fatalities have all increased over the period 1991-1996.

## Conclusion

Overall the Bible has been abandoned and disordered malpractice has taken centre stage.

Let us not be distracted by fanaticism but hold firm to the priorities of prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4).

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