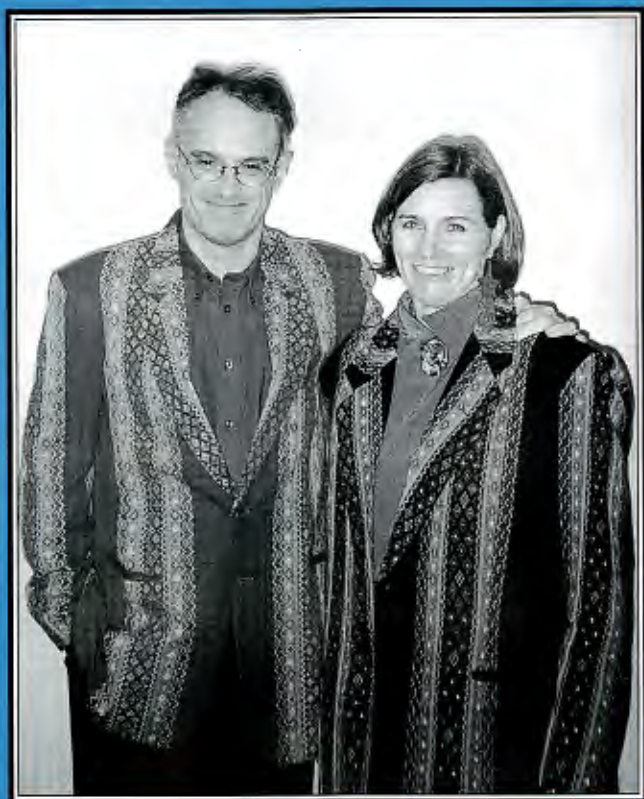

REFORMATION TODAY

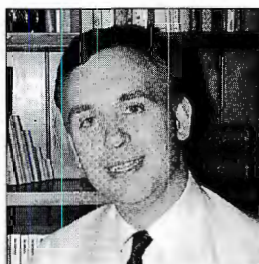


JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1999

167



Robert Letham



Kenneth Ross



David Streater

Contributors to this issue:

Dr Robert Letham is senior minister of Emmanuel Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware, USA. His recent articles 'Post-Modernism and the Christian Faith' were much appreciated. One sixteen year-old testified that those articles enabled him to understand the drift and pressures of secular life. Dr Letham is author of The Work of Christ in the IVP Contours of Theology series.

Before taking the pastorate of Elgin Baptist church, Scotland in 1993, Kenneth Ross worked as a research scientist at Aberdeen University Medical School.

From 1991 to 1998 David Streater was secretary of the Church Society in which capacity he was called upon to act as a spokesman for the mass media representing the Reformed wing of the Church of England. He is at present minister of Odell Parish Church in Bedfordshire. He has many years of pastoral experience both in England and South Africa.

2000

The Carey Conference -- January 11th-14th

The annual Carey Conference is booked for January 11th-14th, 2000, at the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick. The Carey Conference began in 1970. Since then Reformed Baptists have become an entity round the world. This occasion provides us with an opportunity to review our history and at the same time seek to redress our weaknesses. Planning the Conference is a priority and a brochure with subjects and speakers is planned for February 1999. The subjects under consideration include the following: The highs and lows of Reformed Baptist history; The local church, the prayer meeting and evangelism; Plus and minus in eldership; The role of the Confession and catechism in the local church; A local church missionary policy and the unfinished task; The New Covenant and baptism (an update and inter-action).

Sponsorship is sought to assist pastors from developing countries to join us at this Conference. Over the years non-Baptists have enriched the Conference both as speakers and attendees and the organisers stress more than ever that we desire inter-church fellowship at Carey.

Front cover: *Kenneth Brownell and his wife Alison wearing traditional Burmese blazers. Dr Brownell has ministered frequently in Burma and Sarawak (see news).*

Editorial

The Holy Trinity and You

God is Trinity. This truth lies at the heart of all our thinking and all our religion. This truth separates us from every other religion. It is the truth number one that unites Christians across the centuries and across the world. It is seldom expounded. When you read the article you will see that Bob Letham refers to an untypical statement of Doctor Martyn Lloyd-Jones who probably doubted the ability of current preachers to expound in a lively and adequate way on the Trinity (see p3). During the 1960s I used to preach at Mrs Lloyd-Jones' ladies' meetings. A check through my diary shows that I was not the culprit! - but would not hesitate to preach on the Trinity to any group evangelistically. Bob Letham's article is magnificent because it embraces the best of all subjects, God himself! At some points alertness is required, 'girding up the loins of your mind' (KJV and NKJV), or as in the NIV, 'prepare your minds for action'. A check in the new resource, *The Finder*, a 280 page bound volume of indices for *Reformation Today*, *The Banner of Truth* and *The Westminster/Puritan Conference Papers*, shows not a single entry for the Trinity which is the cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith.¹

What about Alpha?

Isn't Alpha old news now? No! According to Alpha organisers the recent £1 million advertising campaign to promote the Alpha course has been a huge success. It is claimed that course attendance has increased by sixty percent! Alpha is more relevant than ever. It is recommended by Roman Catholic leaders as well as Joel Edwards of the Evangelical Alliance and by R T Kendall of Westminster Chapel.

Kenneth Ross, pastor of the Baptist church in Elgin, Scotland, manages in a short space to evaluate the substance and direction of the Alpha course. Recent versions of Alpha are more careful with regard to Charismatic teaching and practice. According to Chris Hand, 'Alpha is essentially a form of liberalism.' (*Falling Short - the Alpha Course examined*, Day One, 100 pages, 1998, £4.50, p97). Liberalism is assessed by what it omits. On

that basis Kenneth Ross's chapter by chapter examination would agree with Chris Hand's verdict.

Any criticism of evangelistic effort should be prefaced by self-examination. What are you doing in your church? Are your efforts better than Alpha? We can be thankful that a better course than Alpha is available (see page 20).

Grievous Wolves

David Streater highlights the reality that authoritarian abuse in churches is not confined by denominational or geographical frontiers. Connectional denominations, Presbyterian and Episcopal, should, but do not always, provide protection from the misuse of power since these systems maintain courts of appeal.

Some believers who have been subject to bad experiences have resolved never again to engage in formal church membership in an independent church. In our church we have known several families like that but gradually trust is restored and at the end of the day membership will always involve personal trust of godly leaders.

It is well known that it is virtually impossible to cure authoritarianism which, by its very nature, cannot be contradicted. It takes high ground. It is unimpeachable. Any challenge of a ruling is flawed already. Who dares question infallible rule? For this reason even the bravest hearts often opt to retreat.

Why then address this subject? It is important to provide pastoral care, sympathy and help for those who have been injured. Then, people need to be warned about abuse and how to avoid it. To do this they need to exercise discernment as our Lord told us to do (Matt 7:15 and 10:16). Finally we must not limit the Holy Spirit. He is able to bring about repentance even in those who have erred. They may not be wolves at all but shepherds who have fallen into the sin of abusing their power. Great are the advantages of reconciliation.

1 Available from Tentmaker Publications, 121 Hartshill Road, Stoke on Trent, Staffs, ST4 7LU at £9.95 including postage and packing.

The Holy Trinity and You

Dr Robert Letham

The Trinity and current neglect

To many the Trinity is little more than a mathematical riddle, a mystery for advanced philosophers or sophisticated theologians. This attitude is exemplified by Martyn Lloyd-Jones who strongly disapproved of a man who once addressed a women's meeting on the subject. The Doctor insisted he would have been better advised to have concentrated on something more evangelistic and less abstruse.¹ It is my belief that, if we make this into a general principle, we are wrong. After all, the God we worship has revealed himself to be triune. We therefore live and breathe in a trinitarian context. Why should this be reserved for a handful of advanced intellectuals?

The reality of the existing muddle can hardly be minimised. A prominent evangelical Anglican wrote to *The Times* in June 1992 recounting how, preparing a sermon for Trinity Sunday on the Trinity, he searched for some intelligible comparison to help his congregation, and found it on television watching cricket, England v Pakistan at Lord's. Ian Salisbury, the England leg-spinner, bowled successively a leg break, a googly, and a flipper (a top-spinner). There, purred the delighted vicar, was a perfect analogy – one person expressing himself in three different ways! Before I had opportunity to send off a response to the editor a half dozen or so others had pounced to point out that this was to resurrect the ancient heresy of modalism. Modalism, simply put, claimed that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were merely ways God revealed himself and did not represent eternal antecedent realities in God himself. These were not eternal, personal distinctions in the unity of God. On the contrary, they were temporary guises, like an actor assuming different roles at different times. The problem with this, of course, was that if that were so we would have no genuine knowledge of God for he would be something other in himself than he had revealed himself to be. If this is the case with a church leader, is it any wonder that confusion and lack of interest reign in the pew?

We are not helped by the state of public worship, whether traditional or contemporary. Examine any hymn or chorus book you can find and search for clearly trinitarian compositions. You won't find many. Ask yourself how many items could equally be sung by Unitarians, orthodox Jews or Muslims. You will be surprised. Let's name a few – traditional favourites that have stood the test of time and have established themselves as part of the canon of Anglo-Saxon hymnody. 'My God, how wonderful thou art', 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven', 'Immortal, invisible, God only wise', 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation', even (dare I say it?) 'Great is thy faithfulness' – only theistic, at best very implicitly binitarian, 'How great thou art' (at best binitarian). We could go on. Of course, we may bring to these texts trinitarian assumptions and so interpret them, although I dare say only a very few may do so, but this is not present in the text. In view of the integral connection between theology and worship, taught by the fathers, this is a serious matter. Nor is the situation assuaged by separate sections in hymnals for hymns to Christ and the Holy Spirit. We shall note that focusing on the three persons in isolation is as wrong-headed as to concentrate on the unity of God without distinction.

The Trinity in biblical history

The God who has made himself known for our salvation and unfolds progressively his self-revelation has revealed himself to be triune. He unfolds progressively his self-revelation in covenant history. At each stage he names himself, in the Abrahamic covenant as *El Shaddai* (God Almighty, Gen 17:1), in the Mosaic covenant as *ehyeh* (Exod 3:14, cf *y'vah* 6:3). At the apex of redemptive history, Jesus came to fulfil the promises of the Old Testament. Matthew records how the whole world, not only Israel, is the locus of the new covenant, inaugurated by Jesus. Indeed, many Israelites would be cast out of the covenant community while the Gentiles were now to be part of it (cf 8:11-12). As the Mosaic covenant was inaugurated with the sprinkling of covenantal blood, so the new covenant is founded in the blood of Jesus (26:27-29). At the end of his Gospel Matthew recounts how the nations of the world are to be made disciples, with the new covenant sacrament of baptism. This baptism is 'into the one name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit'. Thus, Jesus in connection with the new covenant sacrament of baptism names God as the one God who is the Father, the Son, and the

Holy Spirit. This is God's crowning self-revelation – to which all that preceded points. Retrospectively, it casts light on all that went before (like a detective mystery discloses in the final scene the clues that make sense of the entire story).

The Trinity in dogmatic formulation

The Church, after many struggles, eventually reached agreement on the doctrine of the Trinity at the Council of Constantinople (381). The one God is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These are distinct persons, not merely attributes. They are eternal, never having a beginning. They are equal, each possessing fully the same identical divine essence. Yet they are distinct, not separate. They mutually indwell one another. The Father is *in* the Son, the Son is *in* the Father, the Father is *in* the Holy Spirit, and so on. The three occupy the same divine space. Thus, the Trinity entails unity.

The dynamics of trinitarian worship

When we look at the Godhead . . . that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the persons in whom the Godhead dwells, and at those who tirelessly and with equal glory have their being from the first cause [*he means the Father*] – there are three whom we worship. (Gregory Nazianzen, *Fifth Theological Oration*, 14.)

. . . one essence, one divinity, one power, one will, one energy, one beginning, one authority, one dominion, one sovereignty, *made known in three perfect subsistences and adored with one adoration* . . . united without confusion and divided without separation [my italics]. (John of Damascus, *De Orthodoxa Fidei*, 1:8.)

i. The trinitarian basis and ground of worship

Our worship is grounded on who God is and what he has done. The Father has sent the Son 'for us and our salvation'. This is seen prominently in John, chapters 5, 10 and 17, but Paul also directs attention to it in Romans 8:32. In turn, the Father together with the Son

has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the Church. The focus of the Spirit's ministry is to speak of Christ the Son. This is summarised clearly in Galatians 4:4-6. 'When the fullness of time had come God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that they might receive the inheritance of sons. And because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father".' Here lies the basic premise of all God's works – *from the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit*. As Cyril of Alexandria states in his *Commentary on John*, 'All things proceed from the Father, but wholly through the Son in the Spirit.'

ii. *Our response*

First we look at Ephesians 2:18, 'Through him [Christ] we both [Jew and Gentile] have access by the Holy Spirit to the Father.' Access to God is ultimately access to the Father. This is through Christ, the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5). Paul has pointed out that Christ made reconciliation by the cross (v14), tearing down the dividing wall between God and ourselves due to sin, and between Jew and Gentile due to the ceremonial law. Again, it is the Spirit who gives us life in place of death (cf v1), raising us with Christ (vv 6-7) and graciously granting faith (vv 8-10). Calvin held that the principal work of the Holy Spirit is to give faith. Thus he enables us to worship God and so serve him in the world. It is a cardinal teaching of Scripture that saving faith is the gift of God, given by the Spirit (John 6:44, Eph 2:1-10, 1 Cor 12:3). Here is the reverse movement to that described before as the ground of the Church's worship – *by the Holy Spirit through Christ to the Father*. This encompasses the entirety of our response to, and relationship with, God – from worship through the whole field of Christian experience.

Secondly we examine John 4:23-24. The question of the Samaritan woman concerned the proper place of worship, whether it was Jerusalem (the Jews) or Mount Gerizim (the Samaritans). Jesus supports Jerusalem, indicating that the Jews worshipped according to knowledge while the Samaritans did not. However, now the time had arrived when this distinction was to be superseded. True worshippers now worship the Father in spirit and in truth. This can hardly mean merely that a particular location is irrelevant, or that true worship can

now occur anywhere. Nor is the reference to spirit to be interpreted of the human spirit, as if true worship were purely inward and externals of no consequence. Instead, we should bear in mind the extensive teaching Jesus gives in the fourth Gospel on the Holy Spirit, concentrated later in chapters 14-16. In this connection, Jesus is saying that true worship is directed to the Father in the Holy Spirit.

‘It is an extraordinary statement, but it is nonetheless true, that the spirit is frequently spoken of as the place of them that are being sanctified . . . This is the special and peculiar place of true worship . . . In what place do we offer it? In the Holy Spirit. . . It follows that the Spirit is truly the place of the saints and the saint is the proper place for the Spirit, offering himself as he does for the indwelling of God, and called God’s temple.’ (Basil the Great, *De Spiritu Sancto*, 26:62.)

Again, when we ask what is meant here by ‘truth’ do we have to look any further than John’s record of Jesus as the embodiment of truth (14:6), as the true light coming into the world (1:9), ‘full of grace and truth’ (1:14), who brought grace and truth into the world (1:17)? Jesus here is pointing implicitly, as Paul, to new covenant worship as trinitarian. We worship the Father in the Holy Spirit and in the fullness of truth, his incarnate Son. (See Athanasius, *Ad Serapion*, 1:33 for a similar explanation.)

Putting it another way, from the other side, *the worship of the Church is the communion of the Holy Trinity with us his people*. We are inclined to view worship as what we do, but in reality it is *first and foremost* something the triune God does, our actions initiated and encompassed by his. The author of Hebrews refers to Christ offering himself up unblemished to the Father ‘in or by the eternal Spirit’ (9:14), better understood of the Holy Spirit than the spirit or state of mind motivating Jesus, since the text already refers to Jesus’ action in relation to God [the Father]. Further, since our salvation is received in union with Christ, what is his by nature is made ours by grace. Thus in his self-offering to the Father, described here in Hebrews, he offers us in him. We are thereby enabled to share in the relation he has with the Father (our Father in heaven, our Father by grace because he is firstly Jesus’ Father by nature). Christ is, in reality, the one true worshipper,² our worship being a participation in his. A focus on our worship, on what we do, is inherently Pelagian. Further, our worship is by *the Holy Spirit*

in Christ. As John Thompson argues, 'If one understands the New Testament and the view it gives of how we meet with and know God and worship him as triune, then worship is not primarily our act but, like our salvation, is God's gift before or as it is our task.'³

The worship of the Church is thus not only grounded on the mediation of Christ but takes place in union with and through his mediatorial work and continued intercession. Behind this lies the incarnation (the Son of God did not simply indwell human nature but came as man, permanently assuming unabbreviated human nature – sin apart), the vicarious humanity of Christ (he took our place in every way – including in worship, since as man he owed it to the Father), his full and complete obedience to the Father by the Holy Spirit, and his continuing high priestly intercession as expounded in John 17 and Hebrews.

Worshipping the three in the unity of the Godhead

Therefore, since Christian worship is determined, initiated and shaped by, and directed to, the Holy Trinity, *we worship the three with one undivided act of adoration.* In reflecting on our worship of the three, we must remember that the three coinhere, mutually indwell each other in the unity of the *undivided* Trinity. Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oration on Holy Baptism*, 41, provides a vital principle to guide us all – 'No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One.' Calvin cites this passage in his *Institutes*, for it is an essential safeguard against tritheism on the one hand or relapsing into a bare theism on the other. It alerts us to the danger of hymns and prayers addressed to an undifferentiated 'God' and also to one person at the expense of the others.

Some say the only distinction of the persons is the ineffable eternal begetting of the Son by the Father and the procession of the Holy Spirit. This is not so. Only the second person became incarnate, not the Father nor the Holy Spirit. Only the Spirit came at Pentecost, not the Son nor the Father. Only the Father, not the Spirit, sent the Son. If the incarnation could equally have taken place with Father or Spirit as the subject, would that not reduce the Holy Trinity to arbitrariness? Is there

something *appropriate* in the Son's becoming incarnate? If so, will not this distinctiveness lend sharpness to our worship?

There are good grounds for believing that these economic (referring to God's work in creation, providence and grace) distinctions rest on prior ontological (God's own being – who he is in himself) foundations.

- If it were not so, in the background would be the question of whether some other God were lurking behind what he had revealed himself to be. Besides, if the Son's incarnation were arbitrary, the implications for the faithfulness and reliability of God would be far-reaching.
- Philippians 2:5-11 connects the humiliation of the incarnate Christ with his refusal to use his status 'in the form of God' to be exploited for his own advantage, unlike Adam in the garden. This refusal is expressed firstly in his decision to become incarnate, to take 'the form of a servant'.
- Hebrews 5 points to Christ's not taking on himself the honour of becoming high priest but instead being appointed by the Father. His high priestly work began with his becoming man (cf 4:14f, 5:7-8, 10:5f) and thus his appointment as high priest refers to intra-trinitarian realities antecedent to his incarnation.
- The Son assumed human nature not for the years of time alone, then to discard it, but for the whole of eternity. This is not restricted to the economic or only limited effect. It implies and entails that there is something in the Son that made it appropriate that he, rather than the Father or the Holy Spirit, should become incarnate.
- As Gerald Bray argues, a living relationship with God requires that each of the persons be honoured and adored in the context of their revealed relations with each other.⁴ Our worship is to be shaped by whom we worship.

What can we know of the Trinity?

As we consider this we must be struck by our ignorance. We haven't got a clue what goes on within the Holy Trinity – it is completely beyond

us. It is like dipping a teacup into the Atlantic ocean. Besides the vastness of the ocean, the water in our teacup is infinitesimal. But yet – the water in the teacup *is* the Atlantic ocean, insofar as it is a true sample. It is true we don't, and can never, know the inner workings of the Trinity. But *we do know* what the Son is like – he did not seek his own advantage but humbled himself, becoming obedient to the death of the cross for our sake (Phil 2:5ff). We know that he created and sustains the laws of physics. *We do know* what the Holy Spirit is like, for we know that in the midst of the turmoil of everyday life love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, patience are the fruit of the Spirit, hallmarks of his own character produced in us on a creaturely level. *We do know* that the Father chose that his kingdom be initiated and advanced by the Son and the Spirit. We know, in Pannenberg's words, that 'as Jesus glorifies the Father and not himself . . . so the Spirit glorifies not himself but the Son, and in him the Father . . . The Father hands over his kingdom to the Son and receives it back from him. The Son is obedient to the Father and he thereby glorifies him. The Spirit fills the Son and glorifies him in his obedience to the Father.'⁵ We know, as Calvin put it, that the will of the Father differs not in the slightest from what he has revealed in his Word. And as we think of the three in their distinctness, we recall that they indwell each other in undivided union.

At the same time, we will be wise to exercise restraint. We are treading on holy ground. The dangers are great. We can too easily end up searching for created analogies and distorting our understanding of God. Even Augustine, who sought to explain the Trinity in terms of the inner psychology of the human mind, ended up with an overpowering focus on the unity of God and bequeathed a difficulty for the Western Church in doing justice to the personal distinctions. The surest route to take is to be content with the teaching of Scripture or what 'by good and necessary consequence may be deduced' from it.⁶

Some points to ponder

i. *Perichoresis and the Charismatic Movement.* Richard B Gaffin, discussing the Charismatic Movement, points to its tendency to separate the Holy Spirit from Christ. He counters this by pointing to the close connection Paul draws between Christ and the Spirit.⁷ This

argument is undergirded by the patristic teaching on *perichoresis*, the mutual indwelling of the persons, all occupying the same divine space. The Father is *in* the Son, the Son is *in* the Father, the Holy Spirit is *in* the Son and the Father, the Father is *in* the Holy Spirit, and the Son is *in* the Holy Spirit. Thus to worship one person *at the expense of* the others is to divide the undivided Trinity.

ii. *General theistic worship is defective worship.* A common focus on ‘God’, undefined and undifferentiated, tends to dominate Christian worship and thinking. This is defective. Western hymnody needs more trinitarian hymns. This issue will help to refocus, transcend, and ultimately resolve today’s tension between traditional and contemporary worship.

iii. *Prayer is – among other things – exploration of the Holy Trinity.* Christian experience is trinitarian, prayer very centrally included. One wonders how much of the decline in appreciation of the Trinity is due to exclusively unguided extemporaneous prayer? At times of theological strength and spiritual vitality this may be fine but when decline sets in there is nothing then to check it. The great prayers devised by the Reformed Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, and above all the ancient trinitarian prayer, the *Te Deum*, dating from the early centuries of the Church, can be very helpful guides.

iv. *We need to recover Calvin’s and the Westminster Confession’s view of the Lord’s Supper and develop it further in a trinitarian direction.* Both taught that the faithful feed on Christ in faith by the Holy Spirit, and thus in union with Christ the Son we share in his access to the Father. This is worlds apart from an act of purely mental recollection of the human Jesus. The element of communion (1 Cor 10:17) is essential to grasp to vitalise our experience of the Holy Trinity.

v. *Chief of all, the Trinity must be preached and must shape preaching.* Preaching is the high point of worship. Not only must the Trinity be preached but all preaching must be shaped by the active recognition that the God whose Word is proclaimed is triune. A trinitarian mindset must become as integral to the preacher as the air we breathe.

vi. *We must work towards a correspondence between tacit and articulated knowledge and experience.* Michael Polanyi, in *The Tacit Dimension* (1958) argues for the existence of what he calls tacit knowledge, a basic level of pre-articulated knowledge. In short, he suggests, we know more than can be expressed. This explains how we can think and work towards a solution of a problem, the identity of which we cannot clearly put in words, for if we knew the precise identity of the problem we would not need to work towards its solution, while if we did not know its identity we could not work towards a solution. In Polanyi's terms, the experience of the Christian Church is trinitarian, even if its assimilation into forms of teaching and worship is less than it might be. Our argument is that this needs to be brought to expression more thoroughly so that it becomes part of the Church's articulated consciousness. In time, there will then be a correspondence between the reality itself on the one hand (God the Holy Trinity), what is tacitly believed and known on the other, and finally with what is confessed, believed, and taught.

vii. *The effects of this may be far-reaching* – on theology, worship, prayer, our worldview and so on. It will impact on our view of creation (personal, diversified in its unity, demonstrating the glories of our one-in-many God) and the way we treat people (for the Holy Trinity requires us to treat others as persons with whom we are in inescapable communion). The connection with missions is clear, particularly among Islamic peoples. The Muslim doctrine of God has no place for diversity-in-unity, nor for personal relations. It cannot therefore do justice to the nature of the universe. Historically Christians have shied away from focusing on the Trinity because of the immediate objections Islamic people raise. However, these objections are made in any case. Besides, the Trinity serves as a potent source of criticism of Islam and its incapacity to explain the world around us. The question of who God is is crucial to spreading the gospel.

References

- 1 D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Zondervan, 1972), p 145.
- 2 Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (Longmans, 1949), p 91ff.
- 3 John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 1994), pp 99-101.
- 4 Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p 246.
- 5 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1991), 1:315.
- 6 *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1:VI.
- 7 Richard B. Gaffin, Jr 'Challenges of the Charismatic Movement to the Reformed Tradition', *Ordained Servant* 7:1998, 48-57.

What about Alpha?

Kenneth Ross

Introduction

Few readers of *Reformation Today* will not have heard of the Alpha course. Described by its developers as an introduction to the Christian faith, 'Alpha' (see editorial) has been gathering momentum over the past four years. This autumn, its profile has been further raised by the 'Alpha initiative', an advertising and marketing push which has spent in the region of one million pounds on 'giving everyone in the UK an opportunity to attend an Alpha course'. Alpha has been adopted by almost all church groupings within the UK, including congregations within denominations which would previously have had little or no involvement in ecumenical initiatives. Alpha has also been warmly embraced by many Roman Catholic bishops and their dioceses, and the courses are now being actively promoted throughout North America and South Africa.

Church leaders are under pressure to face up to the Alpha course. *'Why is our church not doing Alpha?'* is a question pastors are increasingly being asked. Often, other local churches are involved, and many of the more evangelistically-minded members of our congregations are asking; *'What can be wrong with a course which appears to be bringing so many people into the Church?'*

A significant amount of comment has appeared in print concerning Alpha; much of what has been written has voiced firm support, other writers have

been asking critical questions, and others have come out in strong condemnation. In this article, I will describe the background to Alpha, then consider its content and emphasis and conclude by considering some lessons that emerge.

What is Alpha – where did it come from?

Alpha is the name given to a teaching course which uses material developed and published by Holy Trinity Church, Brompton (HTB), an Anglican congregation in Central London. A number of years ago, a series of studies was devised at HTB to provide basic teaching concerning the gospel, and Christian living. It was used primarily as material for communicants' classes within their own congregation, and did not attract any significant interest beyond their own parish. This situation changed when Nicky Gumbel, an old Etonian and former barrister, joined the church staff. Alpha was soon turned into an evangelistic tool; the lessons were rewritten and were presented within the context of an informal evening. Participants would gather for a meal, following which Nicky Gumbel would present a talk on subjects including Christ's death, prayer, guidance, healing and the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Alpha is made up of 15 lessons and central to the course strategy is a day conference, or weekend away, in which three lessons, dealing with the person and work of the Holy Spirit, are presented. Most

supporters of Alpha identify this 'weekend' as the key to the success of the whole course. Interest in Alpha grew as HTB began to publicise, through various channels, the success of its course. Nicky Gumbel published a book, called *Questions of Life*, in 1993, in which the content of the course was expanded chapter by chapter. Attractively styled workbooks are produced for participants, along with leader's guides, and the clear expectation is that these materials will be used by any churches wishing themselves to run an Alpha course. Nicky Gumbel is a winsome and persuasive communicator, and it soon became apparent that there was a market for video tapes of him presenting the course. These could be purchased, and local groups then use them in the running of their own 'Alpha' course, with Nicky Gumbel as the presenter.

In late 1993, events across the Atlantic were to raise the national profile of Holy Trinity, Brompton in a way which the Alpha course had not yet done. A Vineyard church, meeting near Toronto Airport, had begun to practise the mass slaying in the Spirit phenomenon which had previously been the domain of the 'Word Faith' teachers, and American tele-evangelists. The falling down and shaking which characterised many of these meetings were supplemented by strange physical manifestations including people making animal-type sounds, and hysterical laughter. The phenomenon was claimed to be a movement of the Holy Spirit, and was soon to be known throughout the world as the 'Toronto Blessing'. Any who tried to point out that this 'outpouring of the Spirit' was in fact rooted in a movement masterminded by teachers of heresy, were sidelined as guilty of

quenching the Spirit. Staff members at HTB were quick to experience the phenomenon themselves, and soon HTB was spearheading the spread of 'Toronto Blessing' around the UK. Some media coverage presented this as a breath of fresh air revitalising an otherwise staid, upper class Church of England congregation, when, in fact, HTB had been for some time on the vanguard of Charismatic renewal. Nicky Gumbel's Alpha videos were well peppered with positive references to the 'Toronto' phenomenon, and the two became linked in many peoples' minds. It is unfair to suggest that participation in an Alpha course will automatically lead to someone experiencing Toronto-type phenomena. There is however a clear expectation contained within the Team Training Manual that phenomena, especially in the form of unintelligible sounds (tongues), will happen at the closing session of the Holy Spirit weekend/day conference.¹

Course content

In any attempt to assess the teaching contained within the Alpha course, one must be aware that the content of the printed participants' workbooks and leaders' guides has changed over time. In the same way, the original video collection has been superseded by a new set, in which Nicky Gumbel makes little or no reference to the Toronto phenomenon *per se*. In this section, I plan to comment upon the content of the Alpha course, as contained within both the *Participant's Manual* (reprinted Sept. '97),² and the *Team Training Manual* (4th edition, Sept. '97). These are, to the best of my knowledge, the most recent editions of the Alpha material.

I will refer on occasion to the *Youth Manual* (New edition, Sept. '97) and also to the accompanying *Youth Leader's Manual* (New edition, Nov. '97). If we are to do justice to Alpha it is essential to evaluate the content.

Lesson 1: Christianity: boring, untrue and irrelevant?

In lesson 1, the participant is challenged to face up to the fact that life without Christ is incomplete. It is very much an introduction time for the group. The only scripture used is John 14:6 – Jesus the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Lesson 2: Who is Jesus?

This lesson looks at the person of Christ, his humanity and deity, his life, death and resurrection. Scripture verses from the Gospels are cited to support each aspect. The teaching provides a satisfactory résumé, and provides a good foundation for the next lesson.

Lesson 3: Why did Jesus die?

In this lesson, the cross-work of Christ is presented through the sub-headings 'Man's Greatest Need', 'What has God Done?' and 'What the Cross Achieved'. The section headings speak of justification as a paying of sin's penalty, redemption as the breaking of sin's power, atonement as the removing of sin's pollution, and reconciliation as the barrier of sin being destroyed. There is no mention of Christ's death turning away God's wrath, because Alpha has no concept of the wrath of God. The allegation in a

number of articles that 'Alpha is soft on sin' is certainly supported by examination of this lesson. Sin is portrayed simply as that which stops us having a relationship with God, and Jesus did what was necessary for that relationship to be restored. We have sadly moved a long way from Jonathan Edwards' 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God'. The need for conviction of sin, repentance and saving faith is omitted entirely, and one is left with the impression that all that is required to become a Christian is to give mental assent to the teaching of lessons 1, 2 and 3.

Lesson 4: How can I be sure of my faith?

This is the question which lesson 4 seeks to answer. There is a tacit assumption that somewhere prior to this point, the participant has become a Christian. The lesson lists a number of promises from God's Word, speaking of his presence, and his prerogative to give life, and defines faith as daring to believe these promises. We are reminded that Christ bore our sins, although again the very concept of repentance is missing. Instead, the lesson proceeds with a list of the feelings which should convince us that we are Christians. These include a new love for God, a 'sense' of forgiveness, and a new concern for others. Finally, Romans 8:15,16 is cited as grounds for a 'deep personal conviction' that we are God's children. To a certain extent, the teaching of this lesson is sound; its weakness lies in the fact that it is essentially experiential, and does not appear to require any preceding conviction of sin or repentance toward God. Alpha course leaders could find

themselves urging unregenerate people to trust their feelings, rather than trust Christ for salvation.

Lesson 5: Why and how should I read the Bible?

Lesson 6: Why and how do I pray?

Taken together, these two lessons carry the Alpha course very consciously into the typical subject matter of a 'Nurture' course for new converts rather than an evangelistic tool for the unsaved. The teaching is sound, and the verses cited generally support the points being made. All of this is fine, but there is still the nagging question, 'Where is salvation?' There has been no point at which the unconverted person has had to stop and take stock of where he or she stands before God. At what point is there personal commitment?

Lesson 7: How does God guide us?

We are reminded that God has promised that he will guide us, along the paths which he has planned for us. The bulk of the lesson is given over to experiential means of guidance, including not only strong impressions and feelings, but also the more exotic examples of visions/pictures, angels, and audible voices. The fact that examples of each of these can be found in Scripture leads to an unquestioning assumption that we too should expect to be guided by them today. Reference is also made to seeking the counsel of others. That is helpful depending on those who lead. Nicky Gumbel comments, 'We should consult people on the basis of their spiritual authority.'³ Yes, but what if some leaders place feelings above Scripture

and others practise 'heavy shepherding'?

Lesson 8: Who is the Holy Spirit

Lesson 9: What does the Holy Spirit do?

Lesson 10: How can I be filled with the Spirit?

In general, the part of the Alpha course that has been treated with most suspicion by those of a non-Charismatic perspective has been lessons 8, 9 and 10. These lessons provide teaching on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Whereas the preceding lessons have been taught one at a time, usually on a weekly basis, Alpha suggests that these three lessons should be taught over the course of a weekend, or at a day conference. The content of lesson 8, *Who is the Holy Spirit?*, describes the activity of the Holy Spirit both in the Old Testament, and in the time of Christ. It concludes with the observation that Pentecost saw the disciples filled with the Spirit, resulting in new languages, new boldness and new power. The conclusion states that we live in the age of the Spirit, and that God has promised to give his Spirit to every Christian. The lesson suggests for further reading Jackie Pullinger's book *Chasing the Dragon*. This account of her experiences among drug addicts in Hong Kong cannot in any way be considered as a reliable text-book on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The book appears to be recommended on the basis of its liberal references to the phenomena that she identifies as evidence of the Spirit's work.

Lesson 9, *What does the Holy Spirit do?* draws together various aspects of

the New Testament's teaching on the work of the Spirit. References to Romans 8 appear on a number of occasions, in relation to our forgiveness and adoption in Christ. Spiritual gifts receive only a brief mention, and the lesson concludes by stating that whilst every Christian has the Holy Spirit, not every Christian is filled.

As a consequence of Lesson 9's conclusion, Lesson 10 focuses on how the Christian can be filled with the Holy Spirit. Pentecost and the subsequent outpourings of the Spirit in Samaria and Ephesus are cited as examples of what happens when people experience the Holy Spirit. The explicit use of the word 'experience' is significant, for it reveals the clear expectation that the filling of the Spirit will be accompanied by some form of sentient action. The importance of the fruit of the Spirit in a believer's life appears to be only mentioned in passing, for the lesson moves quickly on to praise, before majoring on the phenomenon of 'tongues speaking', which Alpha unquestioningly identifies as the New Testament gift of languages or tongues. In recent reprints of the Alpha Manual (the participant's workbook), a small section states that not all Christians speak in tongues, that tongues are not necessarily a sign of being filled with the Spirit, that there are no first or second-class Christians, and that tongues is not the most important gift.⁴ This 'disclaimer' may well satisfy some users of the course, giving the impression that 'Alpha' does not push tongues. Examination of the Team Training Manual (the course leader's guide) at this point gives a very different perspective, with detailed directions as to how a leader

may coach participants to begin speaking in 'tongues'. Lesson 10 finishes with identifying 3 common hindrances to being filled with the Spirit; doubt, fear and inadequacy. Luke 11: 9-13 is cited as support for this assertion, yet no reference whatsoever is made to disobedience in the believer. Sin, the very thing which will hinder a believer truly knowing the fullness of the Spirit in their life, has not really come into the discussion. It is here that we perhaps see most clearly the serious misrepresentation which Alpha makes concerning the work of the Spirit in a believer's life. The filling of the Spirit, according to Alpha, is to be recognised by an enablement to utter ecstatic speech. The 'ministry' session where this ability is sought after brings the 'Holy Spirit' day or weekend to a climax. Sadly, careful consideration of the course to this point gives the clear impression that initiation into the practice of tongues speaking has been given a much greater profile than repentance toward God and saving faith in Christ was ever given at an earlier stage in the course.

Lesson 11: How can I resist evil?

In this lesson we expect to find teaching on the believer's struggle with indwelling sin. However, of this reality Alpha has no concept. Instead, the first half of the lesson deals with the devil and his tactics. There is a section on the believer's spiritual armour (from Ephesians 6), and the lesson concludes with teaching on spiritual warfare, not only through prayer, but also through action (the examples given of such action are gospel preaching, casting out demons, and healing the sick). As will be seen when we examine a later

lesson, Alpha assumes that all Spirit-filled believers should expect to be able to heal the sick. False expectations are created that easily lead to fanaticism. Initial enthusiasm can easily lead to disillusionment when the realisation dawns that life is not as simple as that. The Christian life is a life of faith involving disappointment.

Lesson 12: Why and how should we tell others?

Lesson 12 focuses upon personal evangelism. Basic points are made, but the Charismatic agenda appears again when the heading 'Power' is introduced, with the sub-point, 'A miracle arouses great interest.' Acts 3 is cited in support of this assertion. Paul's deference about miraculous signs (1 Cor 1:22,23) receives no mention.

This lesson concludes with a typical 'decision prayer'. It is here, in the wording of the prayer, that the concept of repentance appears for the first time. It is in the context of equipping believers to lead others to Christ, rather than in the earlier part of the course where the participant is being challenged with the gospel for themselves. This reinforces the sense that the Alpha course is intent on initiating participants into the Charismatic/Pentecostal practice of tongues speaking.

Lesson 13: Does God heal today?

Old Testament and New Testament passages are cited to convince the reader that God does heal today. Selected Church fathers are mentioned,

as evidence that miraculous healings were still being claimed after the apostles had all died. The Restorationist view of the miraculous is promoted. The lesson then moves on to the practice of healing. 'Words of knowledge' are advocated for healing. There is the suggestion that we might receive 'pictures', 'sympathy pains', have words 'formed on our tongue' etc. Scriptures which would query all this are simply bypassed. Of three books suggested, two are John Wimber's, *Power Healing* and *Power Evangelism* – the other, an account of someone's own healing. Ron Dunn's recent book, *Will God Heal Me?* (Kingsway) is faithful to Scripture. It is the absence of such recommendations that flaws Alpha.

Lesson 14: What is the Church?

This lesson begins by identifying baptism as the visible sign of belonging in the Church. There is no distinction made between New Testament baptism (the baptism of believers), and paedobaptist practices. Alpha's estimate of the Church, numbering some 1.7 billion members, demands an extremely broad definition of the term 'Church'. To arrive at this figure requires the recognition of all religious groups and systems who would lay claim to the term 'Christian'. Ecumenical unity is high on the Alpha agenda, and this will be discussed under a separate heading.

Lesson 15: How can I make the most of the rest of my life?

This intriguing question completes the Alpha course. The lesson is based upon

Romans 12, and is essentially a call to holiness in our daily lives. The lesson speaks of making a break with the past and making a new start. This section is quoted in answer to the criticism that Alpha bypasses repentance. How can repentance begin here when 'filling of the Spirit' came six weeks before? If repentance was dealt with in the first instance then progressive sanctification would be the theme of lesson 15.

General considerations

Since Alpha is successful, surely it must be right?

Alpha is self-applauding. Typical of Charismatic papers, *Alpha News* carries accounts of healings, mended relationships, and folks with a whole new interest in church life.⁵ It is distributed free of charge in most 'Christian' bookshops.

Often those steering and leading the courses are better than the courses themselves, and leaders in one way or another fill in biblical teaching which accounts for many happy instances of changed lives.

Yet the man-centred character of Alpha necessitates careful appraisal.

In *Alpha News* Nov '97 – Feb '98, Ambrose Griffiths, the Roman Catholic bishop of Hexham and Newcastle writes 'Why is it (Alpha) successful? - Alpha meets people where they are. It befriends them. They feel affirmed and they enjoy it. Because they enjoy it and are enthused by it, they then invite their friends to attend the next course and so it grows.' This explanation points to

important human features. We need to be friendly. Enthusiasm is a valuable commodity. Invitation of friends is vital. All this is fine providing the necessity of the new birth and justification by faith is handled truly. *The Economist*⁶ makes a telling comment, 'Once under way, Alpha's success appears to lie more in its structure than its content.'

Alpha wants to see all Christians united – isn't that commendable?

In Nicky Gumbel's article in the May '95 issue of *Renewal*, he makes the comment that 'we are seeing Roman Catholics coming now, as well as Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, United Reformed, Pentecostals... nobody is suspicious of anybody else. Everybody is working together...' Gumbel is not here referring to people attending courses, but to church leaders attending training events in preparation for running Alpha courses. He continues, 'I long for the day when we drop all these labels and just regard ourselves as Christians.' Nicky Gumbel's comments are not the only instructive ones at this point. A Roman Catholic Bishop states⁷: 'Alpha does not contain anything that is directly opposed to any Catholic teaching.' Sadly, he is right, for Alpha does not teach that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Alpha does not teach the gospel which the Reformers, the apostles before them, even which Christ himself taught. Alpha teaches a diluted gospel, a different gospel, which is no gospel at all. It is only on such a 'lowest common denominator' basis that Alpha can be embraced by Roman Catholic and Liberal churches.

What can we learn from Alpha?

The basic format of Alpha creates an opportunity for friendship and trust to develop outside of the framework of established worship patterns. There is no reason why we should not create a similar environment in which to introduce the true gospel. The manner in which we introduce the gospel can be simple and direct; our purpose should be plain from the outset – sharing the gospel should never be a hidden agenda.

The Alpha copyright agreement expressly forbids changes being made to the content of the course, and demands that any course where changes have been made should not be called Alpha. Is there a suitable alternative? One publisher whose courses can be unreservedly recommended is St. Matthias Press (telephone 0181-942-0880). Their *Christianity Explained* course (six sessions based on Mark's Gospel) has been widely used in both the UK and Australia. It is clear, and does not confuse the gospel message with

Christian discipleship in the way that Alpha does. *Simply Christianity* (also from St. Matthias Press) is a new five-session course based on Luke's Gospel, which uses a very similar format to Alpha, and includes an attractively designed *Participant's Manual*.

To do nothing as leaders, when others around us perceive an opportunity, is a situation we should avoid. In an article on leadership in a church plant situation, written by Richard Coekin (one of the ministers at Emmanuel Dundonald church in Wimbledon), he comments, '*Those with zeal and opportunity for evangelism become progressively frustrated with a lack of direction. Rebellious pressure groups are bound then to develop to champion their proposed strategy, whether it is Alpha, the Internet or Holiday Clubs.*'⁸ Alpha's apparent success may well galvanise some churches to look at possible effective ways of arresting the climate of indifference that prevails. The work of St Matthias Press commended above may well be the way forward for some.

References

- 1 p16 of the Alpha Team Training Manual states '*Stay facing the person you are praying for and ask the Holy Spirit to come. Welcome Him when you see signs of His working... Encourage the person to start to speak in another language – tell him/her you will do so yourself.*'
- 2 Although the manual describes this as a reprint, it is in fact a revision, with some sections added, perhaps to answer criticisms of the course.
- 3 *Questions of Life*, (p 117).
- 4 This 'not all Christians speak in tongues' disclaimer does not appear in earlier print runs of the participant's guide, and it must surely be of particular concern that it does not appear in the latest copies of the '*Youth Alpha*' workbook, aimed at teenagers.
- 5 Published by Holy Trinity, Brompton, sponsored by Kingsway Publishers. Kingsway is the publisher of *Questions of Life*, the book written by Nicky Gumbel, on which the Alpha course is based.
- 6 'Alpha Plus – can a mixture of evangelism and modern marketing techniques save the Church of England?' *The Economist*, November 7th, 1998 p.35.
- 7 Bishop Ambrose Griffiths of Hexham and Newcastle; 'Why I recommend Alpha so strongly,' *Alpha News*, Nov '97 – Feb '98.
- 8 Leading a Church Plant (Richard Coekin) *The Briefing*, Nov 28 1997 p10.

Grievous Wolves

An examination of the phenomenon of 'heavy shepherding' in the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ.

by David Streater

The phrase 'heavy shepherding' is the name which has been given to a method of pastoral care that has strong authoritarian emphases and uses serious disciplinary measures within a local congregation. The error (for that is what it is), is not confined to one particular country or region, or even denomination. As the name suggests the main emphasis is on the actions of the pastoral leadership. It is worked out largely in dis-fellowshipping, shunning and excommunicating members who are regarded as recalcitrant. Biblical authority is claimed for this authoritarian exercise of discipline although the scriptures cited tend to be very selective.

The objection is immediately made that discipline is one of the marks of the Church. Indeed it is. The three marks of the Church are the pure preaching of the Word of God, the proper administration of the sacraments, the Lord's Supper and baptism, and the exercise of New Testament discipline. We draw a distinction between the disciplinary methods of the New Testament and that exercised under the Mosaic covenant. We believe that while the demands of the Moral Law remain the same for the Christian, the immediate penalties for its breach are changed in this life, although not in eternity (1 Cor 6: 9, cf John 8:1-11). Repentance, restoration and reconciliation are the immediate objects of discipline in the New Testament Church (Gal 6:1,2).¹

1. The Underlying Text

Those readers who are familiar with the Authorised Version (KJV) will recognise that the title of this article is taken from a phrase found in Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus (Acts 20:29). The New King James Version and the New International Version translate the phrase as 'savage wolves' which unmixes the metaphor but may well miss the point that the apostle is making. We can be sure that Paul used the phrase with a good reason just as Luke reports it (Acts 21:1). We should note what is known today in the media as a 'soundbite'.

The early 1534 English translation by William Tyndale which the compilers of the Authorised Version (KJV) borrowed without acknowledgement, has a marginal note emphasising the phrase ‘grievous wolves’. Of course, Tyndale is translating directly from the Greek and it is when we look at the underlying text that we realise that there may be a more specific meaning than just ‘savage’, even though to our ears, accustomed to English usage, ‘savage wolves’ might well appear right.² The actual phrase in the Greek reads *lukoi bareis*. Both words are important.

2. *The Context*

Paul’s address consists of a rehearsal of his own conduct amid many trials (verses 18 and 19). He reminds the elders of his faithfulness to the gospel message (verses 20 and 21). He tells them of his future plans (verse 22), and confirms his determination to be a witness to the Lord Jesus Christ whatever the cost, testifying to the grace of the gospel (verses 23 and 24). He declares that the elders will not see him again in this life (verse 25). He exhorts them to a similar attitude by watching over their own spiritual walk as men appointed by the Holy Spirit to shepherd the flock of God because it has been purchased by Christ’s blood (verses 26-28).

In verse 29 the apostle warns the elders of dangers that will arise in two areas. The latter part of the verse speaks of heretical teachers coming from their own congregations but it is the former clause, ‘grievous wolves not sparing the flock’, with which this article is concerned. The question is who are they and what do they do? How can they be recognised?

3. *The Identity*

Obviously, the word ‘wolf’ is used metaphorically and contrasts with the idea of sheep and shepherds. It is a familiar biblical image. While shepherds protect the flock, the nature of the wolf is to destroy. The Lord warns, ‘Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious (Greek = greedy) wolves. By their fruits you will recognise them’ (Matt 7:15,16).

The Greek word that Tyndale translates as grievous (*barus*) denotes something heavy and burdensome.³ The idea in the apostle’s mind that Tyndale brings out in his translation may well be that the false shepherds lay heavy burdens upon

the backs of Christ's people that cause the people of God great grief. They are therefore 'grievous wolves'⁴ who do not spare the flock.

Our Lord warns the multitude and the disciples of the activities of the scribes and the Pharisees (Mt 23:4). 'They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders' (Tyndale's translation). The same idea is present in the Lord's teaching as in Paul's farewell address which, put simply, is that such burdens cause grief.

We are now in a position to consider the answer to the questions as to the identity of the 'heavy shepherds' (grievous wolves). The main element is the laying of burdens upon people that cause grief. The Pharisees' attitude was a legalistic one seeking salvation by works of merit and holding others in contempt. Pharisaism equals a self-righteous legalism. There are sometimes those who hold a very elevated view of their own authority and take a very legalistic attitude to offences both real or apparent. In a fine article on authoritarianism in the Church, Steve Martin expounds the sins of the shepherds as idolatry (the sinful desire to always be in control), prayerlessness, unbelief (lack of faith that the Holy Spirit will do his own work in believers) lack of love for the sheep and pride.⁵ [Steve Martin also in this context expounds on the sins of some church members: idol-worship (elevating leaders unbiblically), servile fear in not standing for principle when abused by the leadership, and not living by faith in Christ (undue reliance on elders to make decisions for them)].

While heavy shepherding may vary in detail from one situation to another from personal observation I would summarise some of the main features as follows and urge that all elderships take careful heed to avoid every semblance of erroneous practice.

Firstly avoid any emphasis on authoritarian leadership rather than Christlike service (1 Cor 4:1-5). Jay Adams in his generally useful trilogy goes sadly astray at this point when he confuses the work of Christ for his Church against the powers arrayed against it.⁶

Secondly avoid tendencies to rely on discipline rather than loving exhortation. Pastoral leadership must, by its very nature, be more akin to the medical profession than to the law courts. In a medical practice the purpose is healing. In law courts the primary purpose of magistrates is to uphold justice and pass sentences of punishment and retribution.

Thirdly avoid elevating minor matters to crisis proportions. Avoid exposing personal and private sins. Avoid unnecessary humiliation of those who have erred. Remember the way our Lord handled the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11).

Fourthly avoid intrusion and prying into areas of private life that are not the business of the leadership such as marriage, finance, diet, place of residence, vocation and recreation. Obviously there can be exceptional circumstances but our attitude should be affectionate and pastoral.

Fifthly be highly sensitive to family tensions especially where there are differences of faith in a family. Never exploit such differences. Always pray for and encourage marriage and family unity.

Sixthly remember that liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment is as much a part of our Reformed heritage as the doctrines of grace.

Conclusions

The appointment of elders according to the stipulations of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 lies at the heart of this issue. In most denominations primary criteria for the Christian ministry are academic ability, eloquence in the pulpit and administrative skills. While we believe in an educated ministry, prefer powerful preaching to boring preaching and appreciate efficiently run churches, we neglect at our peril the personal and pastoral qualities which are essential for all elders. A shepherdly heart is the very first requirement when scrutinising the biblical requirements. A caring loving spirit points to the heart of a shepherd. A 'wolf' thinks in terms of his own pride, appetites and gains. Tyndale's translation 'grievous wolves', born from the experience of mediaeval Rome, remains sadly true today in a small minority of Reformed and evangelical congregations.

There is however another explanation. Truly called pastors or elders can learn bad habits. For instance Romans 16:17 is misunderstood. That text warns to watch out for those who cause divisions. This surely refers to a sinister promotion of error rather than to every difference of opinion and interpretation of which there are many in most churches. Romans 16:17 is misused to uphold a severe attitude toward differences and also to what is regarded as disaffection

Recommended Books

Bill James

**The Finished Work of Christ:
Themes from Romans 1-8**

Francis Schaeffer; IVP (UK) 1998;
£12.99, 239pp hardback

This volume has been prepared from tapes of Bible studies conducted by Francis Schaeffer for a handful of students in Lausanne in the 1960s. It is a verse by verse explanation of Romans, with the Bible verses (KJV) printed in full. The text reads easily and provides a simple explanation of the message

of the apostle. There are contemporary illustrations through-out, and insights characteristic of Schaeffer, for example:

If we think of the unsaved world being under the wrath of God merely as an intellectual concept, remaining unstirred emotionally, we have already entered the door of dead orthodoxy. These people are my fellow humans, and they are under the wrath of God (p49).

The peace of God is not a mystical thing on top of a pillar or at a Bible

Continued from previous page

for whatever reason. Disaffection should be dealt with by love and patience not force or authority (excommunication). If the leaders involved are true shepherds, and not wolves, they will surely repent and seek to promote reconciliation in instances where they have misused their authority. For that we should pray fervently.

References

- 1 Highly commended is Don Garlington's exposition of Galatians 6:1-5 and related passages, *Our Baptist Heritage*, Chapel Library, 1993.
- 2 cf Wordsworth's Greek Testament with notes.
- 3 Vine W E, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Oliphants, London, 1965, p179.
- 4 Tyndale has a happy ability to bring out in translation from the Greek to the English the underlying meaning in language which has become part of everyday speech. See Daniell D, *William Tyndale, A Biography*, Yale University Press, 1994.
- 5 *The Founders' Journal*, Issue 15, 1994.
- 6 *Shepherding God's Flock*, vol 3, P&R, 1975 page 8. Adams translates Psalm 2, 9 as 'You shall smash them with an iron rod' and transposes this into the manner in which elders shall rule. The following chapters need to be read. It is not surprising that 'heavy shepherding' occurs when one starts with this presupposition.

conference, but the reality of the finished work of Jesus in the midst of history (p134).

There is no proof whatsoever that our greatest natural talent is going to be the key to our service. It may be so, but it also may not be so. If a person can speak to hundreds or thousands of people, he or she may need to die to self and be willing not to speak to hundreds or thousands of people. It is only when we are... dead to self in that which seems to be good as well as that which is bad, that we're ready to be alive and useful in God's service (p166 on Rom 6:10).

The serious Bible student or preacher will have to read this volume alongside a detailed commentary. But in an age when modern commentaries are often bereft of contemporary application or illustration for communicating in a relevant manner, Schaeffer's studies designed for students are a helpful companion. General and Scripture indices are included.

God's Passion for His Glory

John Piper; IVP (UK) 1998; £12.99
266pp hardback

This book is subtitled *Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards*. In the shallowness of modern evangelical-

ism, Piper is concerned that we recover the God-centredness, the focus on doctrine and truth, that characterised Edwards' writings. Even his thorough and exacting style is commended as stimulating us to deeper thought.

A brief biography gives us an overview of Edwards' life, with insights into his 'Resolutions', his piety, ministry, and spiritual life. Then Piper shows us how this man has been the most influential figure in his own life in developing his views on the priority of God's glory, and the pursuit of joy in God himself. We are introduced to Edwards' writings *Essay on the Trinity, Freedom of the Will* (with subsequent controversy with Finney), *The Nature of True Virtue, A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, and others. We are pointed to Edwards' perspective on the transformation of culture (and even asked how he would use the internet today!).

But most of all, for Piper, it is *The End for which God Created the World* which captures the essence of Edwards' thought. Over half of the book is taken up with an attractive reprinting of this work, helpfully broken up into sections with headings. (This treatise is already in print from Banner of Truth, albeit without the headings and in tiny typeface.)

This is a book to be read, enjoyed, and given away.

Losing our Virtue

David Wells; Eerdmans (USA) / IVP (UK) 1998; £9.99, 228pp pb

Following on from his landmark books *No Place for Truth* and *God in the Wasteland* David Wells now sets his sights on the moral vision of the contemporary Church. Once again his insights are enlightening and penetrating.

Our modern society is dominated by technology, pragmatism and efficiency, which lacks a coherent religious base, and is therefore devoid of moral absolutes. Wells quotes statistics which suggest that while the great majority of Americans believe they keep the Ten Commandments, 74% say they would steal without compunction, 64% would lie for their own advantage, 53% would commit adultery given the chance, 41% intend to use recreational drugs and 30% cheat on their taxes. Personal autonomy and tolerance are the watchwords. The only sanctions are those enacted against those who speak for moral values, lest they cause offence. The contemporary obsession is with finding oneself, personality development, consumerism and psychology.

Meanwhile the Church has lost its confidence in the Word of God to address the world with relevance and power. More than that, the Church has lost its sense of sin. There is a loss of the sense of real objective guilt which needs to be forgiven; a loss of the sense that our fundamental problem is moral and our need is for acceptance by God through Christ alone. The priority now is on a psychologised message which makes us feel good; the emphasis is on a sense of well-being and happiness, being 'healed' of all distress and pain. Now the search is not for truth so much as power. The sense of the divine is conveyed more by emotions and bodily actions than by the truth of the gospel as the way of access into God's presence.

What is the remedy? Wells returns to the New Testament, and holds up Luther's view of guilt, and conscience. He points us to Christ as the answer to our guilt and shame. And he urges a recovery of character, or moral integrity as our chief defining characteristic. If we seek honour, then it is honour given by God.

Wells' breadth of reading is impressive (over 11 pages of bibliography), and his cultural analysis is astute. This is a worthwhile and stimulating book.

A Tribute to Bill Clark



Editor

Bill Clark was suddenly called home on 8th November. Bill began his life of extraordinary devotion and service of our Lord Jesus Christ as a missionary in France. There he was instrumental in planting and building up a substantial church of about sixty members in Marseille. He mastered the French language so well that he was as fluent in that language as he was in English. His early years of missionary service were spent with the European Missionary Fellowship. He maintained his links with EMF which has a training school for pastors at Guessens, Welwyn, UK. EMF represents a network of like-minded free grace churches across Europe.

When Bill returned to England in 1974 to take up the leadership role of the then small and struggling *Evangelical Press* it was on condition that he could continue his missionary work especially into French-speaking countries in Africa. His gospel radio work in French reached about twenty- six nations round the world. In human terms innumerable souls in

these lands owe their knowledge of saving truth to this vigorous radio work, a labour which developed into extensive correspondence and in some countries to the provision of correspondence courses for preachers.

Bill Clark was multi-gifted. Besides having the gift of music he was an expert in electronics and radio. He personally organised all the technical side of his work including direct radio links. For several years he spoke almost daily by direct radio link to missionary friends in the Ivory Coast. Of many third world countries in which Bill ministered, Ivory Coast was a favourite. The price in terms of health was heavy (acute malaria). Latterly, in spite of being treated for cancer, he worked ceaselessly and continued his travels. Only recently, 1998, he ministered in Haiti.

Bill was the driving force for *Evangelical Press* in England and in pioneering *Europress* in France which now supplies sixty titles. For EP he developed a publishing work in Russia. His son David, who has a leading role in EP, now visits Russia to encourage the work there.

In recent years Bill co-pastored with Prof Edgar Andrews the Campus Church of Welwyn Garden City. Stephen Bignall, a young pastor from Australia, has taken up the pastoral leadership of the Campus Church.

Besides being a man of dynamic missionary passion, Bill Clark was a warm-hearted family man. We extend our sympathy to his wife Evelyn, his children Paul, David and Janine and to his grandchildren.

News

South Africa

Editor

During six weeks in South Africa I saw confirmed the anxiety among South Africans concerning violent crime and falling moral standards (Western post-modernism) which in fact are now almost as low as here in the UK. But there are also marked encouragements. There are tremendous opportunities to promote the gospel to all language groups. Many seize the opportunity. For instance the Durban North Baptist Church (Dennis Hustedt) has been working in a squatter camp not far away. The government deeming that area unsafe have moved the squatters into a township of basic housing and offered the Durban North Baptist Church a site for a new church centrally placed in the new township, an opportunity gladly taken. I will mention one further encouragement that will interest our readers. Nico van der Walt leads the Afrikaans-speaking Antipas Baptist Church in Vereniging. I was privileged to preach at Antipas on Lord's day morning 4th October and then accompany Nico to the newly formed assembly (1998), an Afrikaans church in Hazelwood, Pretoria where 120 gathered. I preached on Revelation 3:20. Churches, especially new churches, need to be well built in doctrinal proportions. The doctrines of grace combined with the full and free offers of the gospel form an essential part of our heritage.



Nico van der Walt

Indonesia

From Eric Michael currently visiting in Jakarta

It is sad to see all the evidences of disruption having taken place over the past months. The burning of churches has been horrendous. I have seen photos of the Baptist Church where Widiyanto (IFRB member) has served and talked to one of the members. The mobs tried to break into the church and set it afire. They first tore down the iron fence and gates. There were people inside having a meeting and most were able to flee from the back of the church. As the mob was trying to break into the church local non-Christian residents pleaded with them to stop, saying, 'These people have been good to us, giving us food and other help.' What a good testimony, being used of God to calm down the fury of the attackers. Yet

about 15 other churches were not so spared in God's sovereign purpose. Stephen Tong was going to have his big Christmas program in a large Jakarta hotel. But after the burnings is instead having the program in one of the large shells of a church which has only the walls standing after being gutted out by fire. During the service he will seek to raise money to help rebuild the church.

I spoke to Amin Tjung, who is having expanding ministries and seeing growth in his Palembang congregation.

During the November 22, 1998 rioting in Jakarta, 7 churches were vandalised then burned. Eighteen churches were vandalised and damaged. Six Christian schools were burned or otherwise damaged.

President Habibie has condemned the burnings and vandalism as 'unforgivable', saying he was outraged because no religion tolerated such shameful acts (*Jakarta Post*, 27 Nov). International protests have been made, including from the Vatican.

We are asked to pray for church leaders as they give their responses and lead their people in this situation, that the love and patience of Christ will be very evident. Many face enormous repair bills, which are all the more difficult to meet in the current economic crisis, in which many of their members have lost their jobs or businesses.

Prayer is requested too for continuing safety especially in Jakarta, not only from further actions against churches but also in the accelerating incidence of crime in the city, especially street crime. Robberies (some with violence) have taken place recently in taxis, on buses, at street junctions, and on the city toll road, which is frequently used for getting to and from the airport. Foreigners have been amongst those robbed and some areas of the city must be avoided.

Shops are usually open normally and there is adequate food, although prices in local currency are still much higher than they were before the economic crisis began. However, the financial situation has moderated a little of late with the strengthening of the rupiah. It is said that there is gradual progress in the economy towards a turn-around, though at present growth is still negative. Improvement is urgently needed not only for the future of the nation as a whole, but also to help reduce crime resulting from dire poverty.

The *OMF Indonesia Crisis Relief Fund* is channelling increasing amounts to those in need through various sympathetic organisations. OMF addresses where gifts may be sent are:

OMF, Station Approach, Borough Green, Sevenoaks, Kent TN15 8BG, UK.

OMF, 10 West Dry Creek Circle, Littleton, CO 80120-4413, USA.

Good News from Burma and Sarawak

Dr Ken Brownell, pastor of the East London Tabernacle, accomplished a busy preaching itinerary in Burma and Sarawak in August-September 1998.

In Burma Ken was accompanied by David Prothero, pastor of Rickstones Evangelical Church in Witham in Essex. This was Ken's 5th visit to Burma and 6th to Sarawak. A visit was made to Mandalay, Burma, for ministry to churches there. The Mandalay Baptist Church, pastored by Ngun Tkung, is relatively new and has 500 members.

For the first time that we know of, a two day interdenominational conference was organised for pastors and was attended by about 180. It was held at the Siyin Baptist Church, pastored by Pastor Lam Cim Thang. Dr Brownell found that his Reformed theology was new to many of the visitors as the prevalent outlook in Burma is Arminian and Dispensationalist. There was a very good spirit in the conference and a desire to search the Scriptures. The exposition of John 3 stirred up discussion about the new birth and the sovereignty of God. A desire was expressed to support future similar conferences.

The following Sunday Ken and David visited Immanuel Baptist Church on the main square of downtown Rangoon. This church was founded by Adoniram Judson in 1813. Paul Johns took on the pastorate in 1988 when the traditionally

English-speaking congregation was in a very low state. He introduced a Burmese service which now draws about 1500 people every Sunday while the 8.30 a.m. English service at which Kenneth and David both preached regularly draws 1000. Pastor Johns hopes to host a conference next year. He is an enthusiastic supporter of the Evangelical Bible Seminary and takes a courageous stand for the gospel.

Much of Ken and David's itinerary consisted of ministry in Bible colleges including the Evangelical Bible Seminary in Rangoon which aims to be a first class institution and one of the priorities is to build up the library. Michael Chongluai is the president and the seminary is located in North Dagon on the eastern edge of Rangoon. There are about 80 students preparing for BTh and MDiv degrees. They come from all ethnic groups in Burma and also from most of the denominations. Dr Brownell is committed to working with the seminary in years to come and considers this the best way to promote biblical evangelicalism in Burma.

While lecturing at another school, Grace Theological Seminary, Ken was arrested by police and taken away for questioning. Happily he was released when it became clear that his purpose was religious rather than political.

Such incidents are a reminder of the universally escalating violation of human rights which is brought to our attention on the mass media and which is faithfully documented by *Christian*

ALL AMERICAN SUBSCRIBERS!

Please note

It is with great sadness and regret that we have to inform you that *Great Christian Books* are bankrupt and have ceased trading. GCB have acted as agents for *Reformation Today* since 1988 and from 1978-1988 under their original title *Puritan Reformed*. We have been very grateful for their promotion of *RT* and efficient handling of our business.

Please will our USA subscribers note that they should now use our other USA agents, Bill Ascol and Tom Lutz. (Details on back inside cover opposite).

Would any subscriber who has renewed through *Great Christian Books* since the end of September 1998 please let us know, either through one of the US agents, or directly to Stan Thompson in the UK, so that we can make sure that your subscriptions are maintained. It is unlikely that we have been informed of any renewals since that time.

News *(continued from previous page)*

Solidarity Worldwide which works for the religious liberty of persecuted Christians, helping others suffering repression, children in need and victims of disaster throughout the world. Their address is; PO Box 99 New Malden, Surrey KT3 3YF and their website at: <http://www.csw.org.uk>

After David returned home Ken flew to Kuching in Sarawak and reported: I stayed with Nicholas and Janet Patrick. Nicholas is 'Martin' in Bill and Shirley Lee's book *Drunk before Dawn*, the story of evangelical missions in Borneo. Today Nicholas is a civil servant and he is still very active in Christian work. As one of the first Ibans to become a Christian, he has much to tell about the remarkable advance of the

gospel in Sarawak. I spoke on 'The Covenants of God' at the Kuching Evangelical Church.

The churches in Sarawak are full of life and growing fast but weak in biblical preaching. There is a real hunger for the Word and it is a joy to be among such Christians. The economic crisis in Asia is affecting everyone and has made many Christians re-examine their priorities. It is vital to get good books and tapes to these people.

(Concerning Burma, The name preferred by the military government is Myanmar, but Burma is used by Dr Brownell since it is understandable that many indigenous people prefer the older name.)

Editor
Assistant Editor
Associate Editors

ERROLL HULSE, 75 Woodhill Road, Leeds LS16 7BZ
 BILL JAMES, 9 Epsom Road, Leamington Spa CV32 7AR
 DAVID KINGDON, UK, JIM VAN ZYL, SA
 TOM NETTLES, USA, JOHN CAMPBELL, AUSTRALIA
 DON GARLINGTON, MICHAEL HAYKIN, CANADA

Rates

1 year £12.00 – 2 years £20.00

Subscriptions
 UK & EUROPE

Agents

Stan Thompson

200 Appley Lane North, Appley Bridge,
 Wigan WN6 9DY, UK.
 e-mail: StanatRT@aol.com

1 year £12.00 – 2 years £20.00

IRISH REPUBLIC

Matthew Brennan

116 Willow Heights, CLONMEL,
 Co Tipperary.

1 year \$20.00 – 2 years \$35.00

AUSTRALIA

Ray Levick

27 Coven Avenue, Bayswater North,
 Victoria 3153.

1 year \$25.00 – 2 years \$45.00

NEW ZEALAND

Sovereign Grace Books

P.O. Box 62-159, Sylvia Park,
 Auckland 60.

1 year \$19.00 – 2 years \$32.00

USA

Tom Lutz

Edgewood Baptist Church,
 3743 Nichol Avenue, Anderson, IN 46011.

1 year \$15.00 – 2 years \$27.00

BRAZIL (USA \$)

Bill Ascol

457 Mohican Lane, Shreveport, LA 71106.

1 year \$21.00 – 2 years \$37.00

CANADA

Richard Denham

CP81, CEP 12201,
 São José dos Campos, SP.

1 year R60.00 – 2 years R110.00

SOUTH AFRICA

Max Latchford

302 - 13860 70th Ave, Surrey, BC, V3W 051.

1 year \$30.00 – 2 years \$50.00
 (Singa \$)

SINGAPORE
 AND MALAYSIA

Roland Eskinazi

PO Box 619,
 Germiston 1400.

1 year Rp. 30,000 –
 2 years Rp. 50,000

INDONESIA

Shalom Church

42 Sheldford Road # 01-10
 Watten Estate, Singapore 288435.

Momentum Christian Literature

Jl Cideng Timur 5A-B,
 Jakarta Pusat 10150.

(Please make cheque payable to Momentum CL)

Single copies one-sixth the above in each case which includes postage.

For airmail add £4.50 sterling equivalent p.a.

Gifts are welcomed and those who wish to support the Magazine should make out their cheques to "Reformation Today".

"Reformation Today" is registered as a charity no. 1017000

Bound volumes available: 91-110 and 111-130 each £22 or \$35, 131-148 £25 or \$40, post free
 cut here

SUBSCRIPTION FORM

Tick

Please send to:

Reformation
 Today

1 year	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 years	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name:

Address:

Bound

Volume

91-110	<input type="checkbox"/>
111-130	<input type="checkbox"/>
131-148	<input type="checkbox"/>

I enclose Your name and address:

Please enclose gift card Yes/No

Please send me a receipt Yes/No

RT

1999

No.167

Jan-Feb

CONTENTS

1 Editorial

3 The Holy Trinity and You

Bob Letham

13 What about Alpha?

Kenneth Ross

21 Grievous Wolves

David Streater

25 Recommended Books

Bill James

28 A Tribute to Bill Clark

Editor

29 News