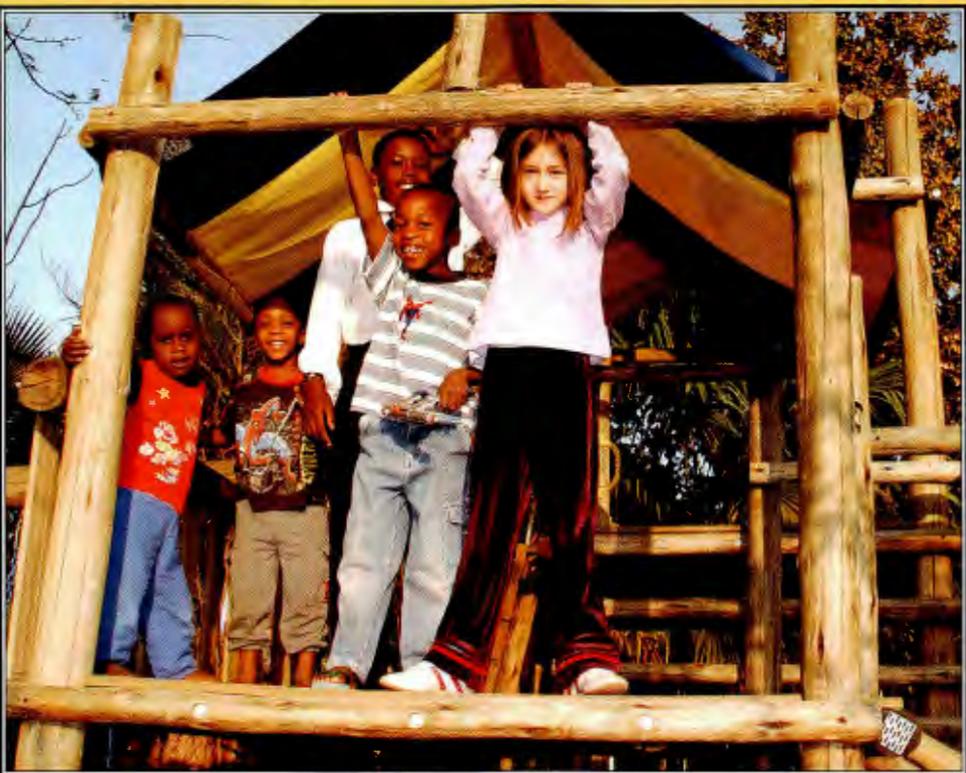


# REFORMATION TODAY



NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2004

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Joel Beeke is President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (see front cover RT 201) and pastor of Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is also editorial director of Reformation Heritage Books.



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Martin Rizley is an associate pastor of the Texarkana Reformed Baptist Church in Texarkana, Arkansas. After graduating from the Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi (M. Div. in Missions, 1988), he moved to Spain, where he served as a missionary for seven years the last five of which were spent working with the European Missionary Fellowship (EMF) as a local church evangelist in the town of Alcázar de San Juan. In May of 2003 Martin was called to serve in the Reformed Baptist Church of Texarkana, where he presently lives with his wife Paola and daughter Melody.

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Front Cover Picture *A description of the orphanage work for AIDS victims undertaken by Tshepo Ya Bana (Hope for Children) was printed on the front inside cover of RT 196. Kezia, daughter of Neil and Leah Hulse, is featured with children at Tshepo Ya Bana on the new climbing frame that has been donated to the work. From the left is Tshepo, Matowe, Jackson (son of Sarah and Lucky who work for Hope for Children) and Kagiso. Those interested in supporting Hope for Children can receive detailed information from Mark Harding's newsletter – e mail [marchris@iafrica.com](mailto:marchris@iafrica.com)*

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## Editorial - A Significant Anniversary

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This editorial focuses on the 200th anniversary of the founding of the *British and Foreign Bible Society*.

The story can be traced back to a young Welsh girl, Mary Jones who hungered for a Bible of her own. It was a vain hope as money was scarce. But her desire grew and she became even more determined. She started saving money so that she could buy her own copy.

It took six years, but finally she had enough to realise her dream. She was 16 and needed to walk to Bala, over 25 miles away, to buy her Bible. Excited, Mary set off and finally reached the home of Thomas Charles, only to be told he had no more Bibles for sale. Heartbroken, she began to weep. Her despair touched Mr Charles, who found a Bible to give her. This stirred him to think what could be done for others such as Mary.

Thomas Charles was central to the founding of a Bible Society. His tale of Mary saving her pennies and then walking across Welsh mountains, helped to inspire others to a vision of God's Word being made available all across the world. Four years after Mary received her Bible, *The British*



*Thomas Charles of Bala*

*and Foreign Bible Society* was founded in London. William Wilberforce, the politician famous for his work to abolish slavery, was influential in the founding of the Society in 1804. But here I will tell the story of Thomas Charles.

### **Thomas Charles (1755-1814)**

From about 1735 onwards the south of Wales was blessed with a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Many thousands were converted under the ministries of Daniel Rowland,

William Williams and Howell Harris. By way of contrast, the north of Wales remained hard and barren and the cause of Christ was small and weak. The conversion of just one soul proved to be vital. In 1741 Howell Harris preached in a private house in Bala, North Wales. The service was disrupted and Harris was nearly killed by an angry mob. Under Harris' preaching on that occasion, a woman by the name of Jane Jones was converted. Jane and her husband David would have remained unknown except for the fact that their only child Sarah, born 16 years after their marriage in 1753 was to become the wife of Thomas Charles. Sarah was famous for her personality, her attractiveness, and her zeal for the gospel.

Thomas Charles, born in South Wales, was converted under Daniel Rowland, who was regarded as the Welsh equivalent of George Whitefield for powerful eloquent preaching. Charles said that when he heard Rowland his 'mind was overwhelmed and overpowered with amazement' and the change in him was like a blind man receiving his sight. Charles trained at Oxford for the ministry. One summer vacation he spent with the famous hymn writer John Newton of Olney who was to have a major influence on his life. Charles fell in love with Sarah Jones when he visited Bala in 1778. At that time he was a curate in the Church of England in Somerset. When he proposed marriage to Sarah she

responded with the confession that she was unable to extricate herself from Bala. So Charles gave up his position in Somerset and married Sarah in 1783. Now being unemployed in Bala he sought to find a curacy in churches in North Wales. Such was the hatred of the gospel in the dead, formal churches, that on three occasions in preaching 'with a view' he lasted no longer than two Sundays! The response to his preaching in one of these churches is described by Charles, 'Last Sunday, the whole parish, with two or three of the principal inhabitants at their head, came and accosted me in a rougher strain than I have ever been used to before. They insisted on my preaching no more in their church; for they added, "You have cursed us enough already!"'

These Anglican doors being firmly locked, in 1784, Charles, aged 29, cast in his lot with the tiny humble band of Calvinistic Methodists in Bala. He became an itinerant preacher among them. A year later Charles reported that the heavens had opened and thousands were flocking to hear the gospel he preached. Charles was a prodigious worker and organised circulating schools to teach children how to read. After about nine months, Charles believed the time had come to teach young people to read the Bible. Charles also pioneered Sunday Schools which were an extension of day schools. He wrote a catechism which ran to 85 editions by 1900.

It was the shortage of Bibles, illustrated by the story of Mary Jones walking 25 miles barefoot, that drove Charles to organise a society for the propagation of the Scriptures. Consequently the *British and Foreign Bible Society* was born in 1804. A visit to that Bible Society website reveals that by 1904, 181 million copies of Scripture had been printed. A more contemporary statistic is that 30 million Bibles have been printed in China since 1987. There are now 130 Bible Societies in a grouping known as the United Bible Societies. These are mixed, being ecumenical (World Council of Churches) and liberal in theology. There are many other Bible societies which have not fallen victim to higher criticism. The current estimate for Bible translation is 383 languages with the whole Bible (which number represents the main languages spoken by 91 percent of the world population), 987 with the New Testament and a further 891 languages with a portion of Scripture.

### **Revival in Bala and North Wales**

In 1791 a glorious revival broke out in Bala and spread across North Wales. Here is Charles' description:

'Here in our town of Bala for some time back, we have had a very great, powerful, and glorious outpouring of the Spirit of our God on the people in general, especially young people. Concern for the state and welfare of the soul is become the general

condition of the country. Scores of the wildest and most inconsiderate of the people have been awakened... This glorious work began on Sunday afternoon, in the chapel where I preached twice that day, and cannot say that there was anything particular in the ministry of that day, more than what I had often experienced among dear people here. But, toward the close of the evening service, the Spirit of God seemed to work in a very powerful manner on the minds of great numbers present who never appeared before to seek the Lord's face; but now, there was a general and loud crying, "What must I do to be saved?", and, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." And about nine or ten o'clock at night there was nothing to be heard from one end of the town to the other but the cries and groans of the people in distress of soul. And the very same night a spirit of deep conviction and serious concern fell upon whole congregations in this neighbourhood.'

'In the course of the following week we had nothing but prayer meetings, and general concern about eternal things swallowed up all other concerns. And the spirit of conviction spread so rapidly that there was hardly a young person in the neighbourhood but began to enquire, 'What will become of me?' The work has continued to go on with unabated power and glory, spreading from one town to another, all around this part of the country. New conquests are gained every week and new captives

brought in. A dispensation so glorious, I never beheld, nor indeed expected to see in my day... Whilst it stirs up the dormant enmity against our Lord, yet the coming of the Lord amongst us has been with such majesty, glory, and irresistible power, that even his avowed enemies would be glad to hide themselves from the brightness of his coming... It is an easy and delightful work to preach the glorious gospel here in these days for many are the fervent prayers put up by the people for the preacher; and they hear the word for eternity. Divine truths have their own infinite weight and importance in the minds of the people. Beams of divine light, together with irresistible energy, accompany every truth delivered... I bless God for these days, and would not have been without seeing that which I now see in the land - no; not for the world.'

This year 1791 proved to be of the greatest importance in many respects. It marked the beginning of revivals which continued in several districts of North Wales over three following years and, more occasionally, similar scenes were to be seen there repeatedly over the next forty years. The moral change was immense and permanent for several generations to come.

In Charles' memoirs we glean a further description of this time. 'The whole country is in a manner emerging from a state of great ignorance and barbarity, to

civilisation and piety... Bibles without end are called for, are read diligently, learned by heart, and searched into with unwearied diligence and care. Instead of vain amusements, dancing, card-playing, interludes, quarrelling, barbarous and most cruel fighting we now have prayer meetings, our congregations are crowded, and public catechising is become pleasant, familiar and profitable.'

This revival is a vivid example and reminder of the reality of spiritual awakening. What the Holy Spirit wrought then he is well able to repeat today in our times of declension. We should note the fact that all this came about through small beginnings. Also we should observe that the Lord honours hard work. A further lesson is the Lord uses humble instruments. Thomas Charles was deeply humbled by being rejected in his early efforts to gain entrance into the Church of England. He wrote in depth about spiritual pride and humility. These and many expositions and letters by Charles are contained in a Banner of Truth book published in 1993 with the title *Thomas Charles, Spiritual Counsels selected from his letters and papers by Edward Morgan*. This is a small size cloth bound book which runs to 475 pages and is full of excellent material. There is a 25 page biographical introduction by Iain Murray which adds much value to the book which is available at £12.95.

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## Scriptural Warrant for Prayer Meetings

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Joel R Beeke

‘We shall never see much change for the better in our churches in general till the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of Christians.’ So wrote Charles Spurgeon in his famous address ‘Only a Prayer Meeting’.<sup>1</sup>

By ‘the prayer meeting’ Spurgeon meant a formal meeting of members of a Christian congregation at stated times for the purpose of engaging in united prayer. Such meetings are the focus of this article; hence I use ‘corporate prayer’ below as referring to these meetings in distinction from formal worship services.

Prayer meetings in America have fallen on hard times. Less than ten percent of members now meet for prayer in churches that once had vibrant, Spirit-led meetings. In many churches, prayer meetings have become cold and boring. Other churches have never developed the tradition of meeting regularly for corporate prayer.

Lewis Thompson was right when he wrote in his *The Prayer-Meeting and Its Improvement* (1878), ‘If it is true that the active piety of a church rises no higher than it manifests itself in the prayer-meeting, so that here, as on a barometer, all changes in spiritual life are faithfully recorded, then certainly too much attention cannot be given by both pastor and people to the conducting of the prayer-meeting.’<sup>2</sup>

It is time to reassess the importance of prayer meetings, for the church that does not earnestly pray together cannot hope to experience reformation and revival. Have we forgotten that the Reformation era churches often held daily morning and evening services for preaching and prayer? Is it surprising that the Reformed faith has experienced more revival in Korea than anywhere else in the world in the last half-century when Christians there gather 365 mornings a year for prayer (at 5 a.m. in the summer and 6 a.m. in the winter)? Let us take a closer look at prayer meetings, specifically at their scriptural warrant in regular congregational meetings, with the earnest plea that God will convict us that we have lost our first love in this and enlighten us to remember from where we have fallen, how we should repent, and in what way we may do again the first works (Rev 2:4-5).

The warrant for corporate prayer is rooted in Scripture. In his book on the

history of prayer meetings, J B Johnston asserts that corporate prayer is rooted in Genesis 4:26, where we read, 'Then began men to call upon the name of the LORD.' Johnston writes, 'Men, moved by grace, would then, as now, find enjoyment in social prayer, and would, consequently, be led by its power to practice it as now.'<sup>3</sup>

The patriarchs also engaged in corporate prayer. Genesis 21:33 says Abraham 'planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there upon the name of the LORD, the everlasting God'. That kind of group prayer in groves, often called 'proseucha' (places of prayer distinct from sacrificial altars), continued throughout the patriarchal period, though later they were idolatrously abused (Deut 16:21). David and his friends engaged in corporate prayer (Ps 4:13, 14; 66:16), as did devout Jews in Babylon (Ps 137:1-2). In Nehemiah 9 at least eleven Levites took turns praying and confessing sin to the Lord before the children of Israel (vv. 4-5). Even the sailors who threw Jonah overboard first corporately called upon the name of Jehovah (Jonah 1:14).

Malachi 3:16-17 asserts the importance of meeting for spiritual fellowship, in which prayer very likely had a part: 'Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name.' John Brown of Haddington concluded from this text that God was heartily pleased with corporate prayer; he said God 'hearkens to, and hears, and honourably records, what is said; and esteems and spares the conscientious attenders'.<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament continues to model corporate prayer. Services of prayer were held each morning in the synagogues of the Jews and in the Temple. More importantly Jesus often led his disciples in corporate prayer, both before his death (Luke 9:18) and after his resurrection (John 20:19, 26). Gethsemane appears to have been one of Christ's favorite places to pray (John 18:1-2).

Jesus himself provides an explicit mandate for prayer meetings in Matthew 18:19-20: 'If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' The Greek verb for 'agree' that is used here is *sumphoneo* which means 'to sound together'. This word is often used to depict the harmony of musical instruments sounding together, from which we derive the word 'symphony'. Jesus says that if you should voice petitions together with fellow believers, he will do what they ask, providing, of course, it be in accord with his will (1 John 5:14). In a sermon titled 'The Social Prayer-Meeting' preached in 1844, Edwin F Hatfield of New York said the Matthew text suggests that 'any number of praying souls, two or more, have much greater reason to expect

success when they pray together than when they pray for the same things separately.’<sup>5</sup>

Peter Masters goes a step further, asserting that Matthew 18:19-20 is not only a promise given by Christ, but also an ordinance commanded by Christ. He writes, ‘When the Lord uttered these words, He was instructing the disciples about church affairs, particularly the procedure for dealing with misconduct in the church. He was not speaking to a casual handful of believers, as though giving an optional prayer opportunity to those who wished to meet informally (although His promise certainly includes this). He was giving official instructions to His churches. He was inaugurating the duty of corporate prayer.’<sup>6</sup>

The mandate for prayer meetings is particularly reinforced in the book of Acts through the practice of the New Testament Church. Acts 1 and 2 show us that the church prayer meeting, blessed by the Spirit, gave birth to Pentecost. After Jesus’ ascension to heaven, the disciples continued earnestly in prayer until the Spirit was poured out: ‘These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren’ (Acts 1:14). On the day of Pentecost 3,000 were converted as a fruit of the disciples collectively voicing their petitions and longings. After Pentecost the disciples continued steadfastly ‘in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers’ (2:42). When Satan afflicted the early church with fierce persecution, the New Testament Church met corporately for prayer until the Lord heard their cries and filled them with boldness to continue preaching (4:24-31). Acts 4:24 says, ‘They lifted up their voice to God with one accord.’ The Greek word used here actually means ‘a concert of voices’.

Persecution raged again, however. When James was beheaded and Peter was imprisoned, believers once more sought God’s guidance in prayer meetings. They prayed earnestly for eight days in several different locations right up to the hour that Peter was to be executed. The Lord then wondrously intervened by sending an angel to deliver the apostle (Acts 12:7). As soon as Peter was freed from prison, he went straight to the prayer meeting. Obviously he knew where the believers would be gathered. The church, much like us today, could scarcely believe that God had answered their prayers and brought Peter back to them, unharmed (v.16).

When the church was spreading in Acts 13, certain prophets and teachers at Antioch, including Barnabas and other notable leaders, ministered, fasted and prayed together. As they were so engaged, the Holy Ghost revealed that he wanted Barnabas and Saul to be separated for his mission work (vv. 1-2). Verse 3 says, ‘When they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them,

they sent them away.’ The Greek scholar AT Robinson asserts that the Greek actually speaks of ‘many upturned faces’. The portrait painted here is one of numerous unitedly upturned faces, appealing to God in heaven. Paul would later acknowledge in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 that the prayers of the saints were one of the most important reasons he was able to persevere in the ministry.

Acts 16 tells us how the first church in Europe was born in a women’s prayer meeting as Lydia’s heart opened to the gospel message (Acts 16:13-15). Later, Paul and Silas held a midnight prayer meeting in jail. As the disciples ‘prayed and sang praises unto God’, other prisoners were listening (Acts 16:25). God responded to those prayers by sending an earthquake that set Paul and Silas free. The jailer and his family were converted. The gospel triumphed, and the church was comforted (vv. 26-40). God once more placed his benediction on prayer meetings.

The New Testament epistles commend prayer meetings, too. Johnston says Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 probably refer to prayer meetings. Though these texts are subject to various interpretations, there are other examples of New Testament churches in the epistles that appear to have engaged in corporate prayer, such as the churches of Aquila, Nymphas, and Philemon (1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Phil. 12). The epistles also encourage corporate prayer by repeatedly using the second person plural when calling believers to prayer (Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:1-2; 1 Pet. 4:7).

The practice of the New Testament Church shows that prayer meetings should support the stated assemblies for worship rather than compete with them. They have important but ancillary function to the assembling of the church around the proclamation of the Scriptures.

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<sup>1</sup> *Only a Prayer-meeting* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> *The Prayer-Meeting and Its Improvement*, Lewis O Thompson, (Chicago: W G Holmes, 1878).

<sup>3</sup> J B Johnston, *The Prayer-Meeting and Its History, as Identified with the Life and Power of Godliness, and the Revival of Religion* (Pittsburgh: United Presbyterian Board 1870).

<sup>4</sup> John Brown, ‘Divine Warrants, Advantages, Ends and Rules of Fellowship Meetings for Prayer and Spiritual Conference’, in *Christian Journal* (London 1765).

<sup>5</sup> ‘The Social Prayer-Meeting’, in *American National Preacher* 8, 18 (1844).

Meetings for Prayer and Spiritual Conference, in *Christian Journal* (London 1765).

<sup>6</sup> *The Power of the Prayer Meeting* (London: Sword & Trowel, 1995), 19.

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## What Do We Pray For?

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### What do we pray for in the second petition of the Lord's Prayer?

*Matt 6:9-13*

*Your kingdom come*

Two observations need to be made as a preface to this question.

A. In this petition we pray from a position of acknowledging that the whole world lies under the dominion of the wicked one (1 John 5:19). The nations are deceived. Appalling political corruption prevails in many countries and genocide is committed without correction as in Sudan, Congo and Zimbabwe. Persecution of Christians abounds especially in countries dominated by Islam. In some countries like Saudi Arabia Christianity is not tolerated in any shape or form.

B. We do not pray for a political kingdom. The kingdom is within us. This is a spiritual kingdom in which every believer is united to King Jesus. This kingdom of union with him increases every day as souls all over the world are born again of the Holy Spirit.

So what should we pray for in this second petition of six in the Lord's prayer?

1. In this petition we pray for the kingdom of sin and Satan to be destroyed. We are to pray for the downfall of false religions. There is biblical encouragement for this since Paul assures us that Christ will destroy all dominion, authority and power and put all his enemies under his

feet after which he will come and destroy that last great enemy, death. Especially do we pray for the liberation of many peoples from the false prophet. We are to pray for the bastions of Buddhism and Hinduism to disintegrate and for the reviving powers of the river of living waters (see Ezekiel 47) to flow over lands where multitudes die in darkness such as the province of Bihar in India.

2. In this second petition we are to pray for kings and for all those in authority (1 Tim 2:1-4). Many governments in the world are corrupt and tyrannical. We must pray for this to be redressed, for evil, self-serving rulers and diabolical regimes to be removed and replaced by shepherds who care for the people (Ezek 34).

3. In this petition we are to pray fervently for the gospel to be propagated throughout the world especially to every unreached people group. We must pray for our missionaries labouring in the heat and burden of the day and often exposed to dangers and pray too for an army of gifted, called missionaries to be raised up to serve in the harvest field. Psalm two vividly describes the enmity and opposition of the rulers and kings of the earth. But the Father has installed his King on Zion, his holy hill. The Father says to his Son, 'Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession' (Ps 2:8). Daniel 2:44 is relevant, 'In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another

people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it itself will endure forever.' Satanic powers rage against this but Revelation 19:16 declares that the name written on his robe and on his thigh is KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. Jesus said that all power had been given to him in heaven and on earth.

4. In this second petition we are to pray for the fullness of the Gentiles to be brought in. The increase of Christians in China is believed to be the greatest in the history of the Christian Church. What vast potential awaits to be unleashed when freedom comes! Urgent prayer must be made for the liberation of China. Then we note that the ingathering of the Gentiles of Africa, Asia and Latin America over the last hundred years has been unprecedented, in some countries one hundred fold! All these new believers need to be fed with reliable, biblical, soul-nourishing materials. The great uncludes the command, 'and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'

5. In this petition we are to pray for the conversion of the Jews. The Jews inhabit some of the most influential centres of the world: New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, London, Manchester, Paris, Amsterdam, Johannesburg, Sydney, Buenos Aires, Paris, Madrid, Rabat, Tel Aviv and Berlin (the latter in spite of the holocaust). A great conversion work among them will have an impact which is like life from the dead (Romans 11:12,15, 25ff.). The diaspora is surprisingly widespread. Some examples are Peru (5,100), Panama (7,000) and Mexico (49,000).

6. In this second petition we are to pray for the reformation (purification) of the Church and her renewal. Western Europe is in sharp spiritual decline. This needs to be reversed. We pray for his kingdom to come on earth. Western Europe especially the UK and France represent the decline of his kingdom on earth.

7. In this petition for our Lord's kingdom to come we are to pray for Roman Catholics to be converted and abandon the anti-biblical traditions and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, the Mass, the worship of Mary and the soul-destroying heresy of baptismal regeneration. With sound reason all the Reformers and Puritans regarded the papacy as antichrist. That idea is not politically correct in today's ecumenical climate but historically it is correct.

Likewise we should pray for those sleeping the sleep of death in the Greek Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Churches. It is noteworthy that over ninety percent of the ten million population of Greece belong to the Greek Orthodox Church but only three percent ever attend.

8. In this second petition of the Lord's Prayer we are to pray for the hastening of the return of Christ. He promised to be with us every day with all his power to the very end (Matt 28:16-20). He warned us that it is impossible to calculate the day he returns (Matt 24:36). What he implied surely is that when we have fulfilled his command to disciple all nations then he will return.

*The above outline is based largely on the Westminster Larger Catechism Question 191.*

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## News

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*Dr Samuel Kharrat*

### **Lebanon and Cyprus**

*by Keith Noldt who is pastor of the Grace Chinese Christian Church, Kogarah, NSW, Australia.*

I recently spent two weeks in Cyprus with the Middle East Reformed Fellowship (MERF) as the 'guest instructor' for the Elders' and Leaders' Study Term held at the *John Calvin Centre*, Larnaca. I had been invited to do so by Rev Victor Atallah, the General Director, who also suggested that I might travel to Cyprus via Lebanon and spend a few days with Dr Samuel Kharrat who is a Baptist minister. Among many other responsibilities, he is also one of the

Directors of MERF. I spent three interesting days with Samuel and his wife, Rhoda, a most gracious couple. (See RT 161).

Samuel oversees MERF's recording studio in Beirut. He also conducts a Christian counselling ministry in the city and lectures on that subject at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary. This seminary, also located in Beirut, serves the Arabic-speaking churches throughout the Middle East so our brother's ministry is quite strategic.

There are about 28 Baptist churches in Lebanon which Pastor Kharrat told me

were all Reformed. He said, 'There is no Arminianism among them.' It occurred to me that the reason for such an assessment might be that, in a nation dominated by Muslims, Greek Orthodox and Maronite Catholic, only a robust theology would survive.

Samuel's main ministry is as the pastor of the Evangelical Baptist Church in the town of Bikfaya, high on the escarpment overlooking Beirut. The church was formed 50 years ago and Dr Kharrat has been the pastor for the past 25 years after the former pastor emigrated to the USA. On 22 August 2004 the church will celebrate its jubilee. Over the years the church has planted three daughter churches which are now independent. For many years the activities at Bikfaya were carried out in a building which contains a small chapel, accommodation for the pastor's family and Sunday School rooms. It also contains a bomb shelter dating from the sad days when such a structure was needed by the family during the civil war. A much-needed new church building has been constructed. I was privileged to preach to the congregation meeting there and to share warm fellowship with them. My preaching was translated into Arabic by Pastor Kharrat. The singing was wonderful - strong, yet controlled - using both western and eastern tunes with an electronic organ and one violin. The service began with the Lord's Prayer sung to an eastern tune that had been composed by a former member several years ago. It was fascinatingly beautiful. I felt I was with people who believed that true Christian worship was a privilege not to be treated lightly.

I then moved on to Cyprus where it was a privilege to be involved in MERF's work.

Readers are directed to <http://www.merf.org> for information. The 20 elders attending the 'study term' were from evangelical churches in Egypt, Syria and the Sudan. It was like a two-week Banner of Truth, or Carey Conference! I lectured twice each day for 8 days which, to be honest, was rather tiring by the end. But, under God, the significance of the task and the potential for good provided the necessary energy. Pastor Atallah and James Folkerts, a young Canadian seminary graduate, were the other speakers. It is good to be reminded that, in all that we read and hear about the Middle East situation, God has his people there. Though Christians are a minority and in some countries the churches are few in number, they are there in that troubled region. Let us not forget to pray for them.

## **Russia**

Two 12 year old girls were found dead, still holding hands together, while trying to escape from school number one in Beslan, southern Russia after it was seized by gunmen demanding Chechen independence. They were cousins whose fathers, Pastor Taimuraz Totiev, and Sergey Totiev, are leaders in the Russian Baptist Church in Beslan. Eight of their children were caught up in the local school terrorist attack that shocked the nation and the world. Of the remaining six, one was found alive, one is seriously injured in hospital and four children are still missing, feared dead. The two cousins died Friday 3 September during a gun battle between Russian forces storming the school and Islamic terrorists demanding independence for neighbouring Chechnya which claimed

the lives of 326 people, half of whom were children. The final death toll is expected to be closer to 400. The Totiev brothers mourn the deaths of their children whilst challenging calls for revenge. Pastor Taimuraz Totiev's five children were in the school. Of those, his 15-year old daughter was found alive, but her sister (aged 12) died from gunshot wounds in her back. Taimuraz's remaining three children are still missing. Sergey Totiev – an elder in the church – had three of his five children in the school. His 12-year old daughter was also shot dead (in the back). Sergey's son was seriously injured and is in hospital, having lost his sight in both eyes and his third child is still unaccounted for.

A memorial service was held in front of the homes of the Totievs, who are neighbours. Between 1,500 and 2,000 people gathered in front of their homes, including many Christians who came from other areas to support the Totievs, who are loved very much by local people. Neighbours of the Totiev family told the parents with tears in their eyes: 'You lost your children, but we feel they were our children too. They were shining lights in our street.' As others in the crowd began cursing and vowing to take revenge against the terrorists, Pastor Sergey stood up at the end of the service and said: 'Yes, we have suffered an irreplaceable loss, but we cannot take revenge. As Christians, the Bible teaches us that we must forgive. Vengeance is in God's hands.' One *Russian Ministries* team member described it as 'the most powerful sermon and witness that has perhaps ever been heard in that community'.

## Korea



*Ronny and SuChen Franke with their daughter Faith.*

August 2004 - Ronny and SuChen Franke, along with their two-year-old daughter Faith, have been sent to this unlikely place to win Chinese migrant labourers for Christ, and train them in the Reformed faith. Despite difficulties Ronny was able to make contacts and develop relationships with some of the students. The Frankes live 30 miles south of the gigantic city of Seoul. Young Chinese adults enjoy regular times of fellowship in the Frankes' home where Reformed doctrine is much discussed. Most of them were taught by Ronny in the seminary (before he was forced to end his relationship with the school due to doctrinal and methodical differences). They were attracted to his teaching. He is now discipling the students during the week and they will carry the teaching back to their homeland when they leave Korea.

The Frankes have now found fellowship in the *Overseas Chinese Church* of Suwon which is pastored by brother Amos Wang with a dignified worship and a genuine heart for the preaching and application of Holy Scripture. Ronny is preaching in the Chinese language to 20

believers every other Lord's Day and also teaches Sunday School as well as organising evangelism outreach in a densely populated Chinese area. He spends Saturday afternoons on the streets of Ansan preaching the gospel. This has opened the door to teach on Saturday nights for a Chinese church of about 20 members which is currently without a pastor.

Each Tuesday the Franks go with workers from the *International Seamens Mission* to give out Bibles and gospel tracts and invite the sailors to a Chinese gospel service in the evening.

## **Namibia**

*Editor.*

The fourth Grace Conference was held August 3-5 at Eastside Baptist Church, Windhoek, where Joachim Rieck is the pastor. Pastor Rieck is in a good position to host this conference being supported by a strong eldership and a sixty-member church. I observed that all the members are well grounded. The church has developed a fifty page church constitution filled with all kinds of helpful items to enthuse the members to be active and zealous in their various roles within the body. About forty pastors came from all over Namibia, a vast country three and a half times the size of the UK but with only 1.8 million people most of whom live in the north near Angola. About half of Namibians are Ovambo people and this was reflected in the conference. Laban Mashekele was quite brilliant at translating. Conrad Mbewe from Lusaka provided three powerful expositions on preaching Christ. He stressed particularly the need for evangelistic preaching. My

role in the conference was to provide a variety of materials, including an overview of world missions, an explanation of what postmodernism is all about, a paper on Jonathan Edwards as the theologian of revival and a paper on the nature of the local church.

Perhaps the greatest encouragement was to have opportunity to hear of church growth by way of the old fashioned way of preaching and teaching. The conference was inter-denominational in character and there was an excellent spirit of unity. On one evening preceding the conference I was invited to preach at the church pastored by Laban. The appetite for the Word was exceptional and the enjoyment of the worship of God most refreshing, African in style, uninhibited, but all firmly WORD based.

For most of the pastors the conference is the annual opportunity to procure literature and to benefit from the fellowship of other ministers before taking fairly extensive journeys home. Everyone was very well cared for with regard to hospitality which was provided by several churches in Windhoek.

## **Israel**

*David Rushworth-Smith.*

*Many people in Europe and America are unaware that Bethlehem has been under siege for four years, resulting in extreme hardship for the beleaguered Christians whose families have lived there since the birth of the Saviour.*

On August 9, 2004, there was an unusual demonstration of love for the besieged believers in Bethlehem, when 2,500

Christians from Korea walked in procession from Jerusalem to Bethlehem along what was once a busy road.

Last Christmas, as a result of a national appeal, 60 students from Korea visited Bethlehem as a goodwill gesture, singing in Manger Square and visiting families in their houses. When they went home and back to their colleges, they spread the word about the desperate needs of those who are still following the Saviour in the town of his birth. Their appeals in Korean churches and on Korean college campuses stirred others to offer to make the journey this summer, and also next Christmas. As a result, this August, some of the hotels in Bethlehem, which have been closed for lack of trade have been packed to capacity.

On August 4, 500 Koreans sang and danced in their national costumes in front of an animated crowd, which was clearly moved emotionally by this demonstration of friendship and support. Then, on August 9, 500 Koreans inside Bethlehem travelled to Jerusalem to be joined by a further 2,000 who had arrived and all together they walked into Bethlehem, singing as they slowly covered the four miles.

Since Ariel Sharon has announced to the citizens of his country that evangelical Christians are the best friends that his country could have, these believers from Korea must be welcomed into Israel despite challenges by the security police, and also be allowed to carry out humanitarian work in and around Bethlehem. The contributions of these zealous Christians from Korea, whose vocal prayers touched the hearts of all

who heard them, cannot be overlooked by anyone who loves the Holy Land.

Christians in China are now also planning to take the initiative and send people in a concerted effort to preach the gospel to all the residents of the Holy Land, regardless of background and ethnic differences. Christians from Italy travel to Bethlehem regularly, as do Christians from Greece. By staying in a Bethlehem hotel, as well as by visiting the beleaguered believers in their homes, these 'pilgrims' are showing solidarity and care.

Are Christians in Britain this committed?

## **England**

The annual Carey Family Conference held at Clovelly Hall was fully subscribed again this year.

John Benton editor of *Evangelical Times* was the principal preacher. Andrew King preached at the conference, he and Cora his wife having come from Brazil where they are now settled. The conference was much blessed and conversions among the young people have been subsequently reported.

The Carey Family Conf in 2005 is 1 August to 6 August 2005. Those attending also have the option of coming early for a 'quiet weekend' (30, 31 July). The bookings are no longer being organised by Phil Harman who has handed the baton to Richard Hart and his brother-in-law Chris Atkinson.

Details from Chris at christophera@ntlworld.com

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## What Do Miserable Christians Sing?

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*Carl Trueman*

Many of us despise the health, wealth and happiness teachings of the American televangelists and their pernicious British counterparts, as scandalous blasphemy. The idea that Christianity, at whose centre stands the Suffering Servant, the man who had nowhere to lay his head, and the one who was obedient to death, even death on the cross, should be used to justify the idolatrous greed of affluent Westerners simply beggars belief. Indeed, so contemptible is this school of thought that I will not waste precious space by dignifying it with a reasoned response.

Nevertheless, there is a real danger that these heretical teachings have seeped into evangelical life in an imperceptible yet devastating way, affecting not so much our theology as our horizons of expectation. We live, after all, in a society whose values are precisely those of health, wealth and happiness. Look at the number of medical dramas and documentaries on television: is our obsession with the medical profession not a function of our obsession with health? Listen to the politicians: New Labour finance ministers say they want to reward 'risk takers'. Are they referring to the men and women who work in the slums with the drug addicts, who bravely stand against the paramilitary control of their communities in Ulster, who go to areas of conflict and put their lives on the line, who take 'real risks'? Of course not. They mean the entrepreneurs and the 'wealth creators', often those whose sole motive (whatever the altruistic rhetoric) is personal profit and whose only 'risks' are the irresponsible financial speculations in which they indulge with the hard earned savings and pensions of others. These are the counterfeit 'risk takers' that society must apparently prioritise and reward with tax breaks, gongs, and social status. If the real risk takers need money, they can always queue up with their begging bowls outside the Ministry of Greed, ask the National Lottery, and take their turn with the rest of society's no-hopers and second-class causes. And look at the veritable explosion in the litigation and compensation arena: once upon a time, compensation was linked to loss of earnings; now it is often apparently linked to loss of comfort and happiness, with all of the trivial court cases that inevitably brings in its wake. Health, wealth and happiness are, the three modern obsessions, the three modern idols.

Where does the Church stand in all this? Where do we as individual Christians put ourselves in relation to what is going on? One could write a huge tome on the subject. I will confine my observations to just one or two 'litmus tests'.

First, let us look at the contemporary language of worship. Now, worship is a difficult subject and, being a peace-loving sort of chap who always steers well clear of controversy, I would hate to say anything controversial at this point about the relative merits of hymns and choruses, of organs and music bands etc. Having experienced, and generally appreciated, worship across the whole evangelical spectrum, from Charismatic to Reformed, I am myself less concerned here with the form of worship than I am with its content. Thus, I would like to make just one observation: the Psalms, the Bible's own hymnbook, have almost entirely dropped from view in the contemporary Western evangelical scene. I am not certain why this should be, but I have an instinctive feeling that it has more than a little to do with the fact that a high proportion of the psalter is taken up with lamentation, with feeling sad, unhappy, tormented, and broken. In modern Western culture these are simply not emotions which have much credibility: sure, people still feel these things, but to admit that they are a normal part of one's everyday life is tantamount to admitting that one has failed in today's health, wealth and happiness society. And of course, if one does admit to them, one must neither accept them nor take any personal responsibility for them: one must blame one's parents, sue one's employer, pop a pill, or check into a clinic in order to have such dysfunctional emotions soothed and one's self-image restored.

Now, one would not expect the world to have much time for the weakness of the psalmists' cries. It is very disturbing, however, when these cries of lamentation disappear from the language and worship of the Church. Perhaps the Western Church feels no need to lament, but then it is sadly deluded about how healthy it really is in terms of numbers, influence and spiritual maturity. Perhaps, and this is more likely, it has drunk so deeply at the well of modern Western materialism that it simply does not know what to do with such cries and regards them as little short of embarrassing. Yet the human condition is a poor one, and Christians who are aware of the deceitfulness of the human heart and are looking for a better country should know this. A diet of unremittingly jolly choruses and hymns inevitably creates an unrealistic horizon of expectation which sees the normative Christian life as one long triumphalist street party, a theologically incorrect and a pastorally disastrous scenario in a world of broken individuals. Has an unconscious belief that Christianity is, or at least should be, all about health,

wealth and happiness silently corrupted the content of our worship? Few Christians in areas where the Church has been strongest over recent decades - China, Africa, Eastern Europe - would regard uninterrupted emotional highs as normal Christian experience. Indeed, the biblical portraits of believers give no room to such a notion. Look at Abraham, Joseph, David, Jeremiah and the detailed account of the psalmists' experiences. Much agony, much lamentation, occasional despair - and joy, when it manifests itself, is very different from the frothy triumphalism that has infected so much of our modern Western Christianity. In the Psalms, God has given the Church a language which allows it to express even the deepest agonies of the human soul in the context of worship. Does our contemporary language of worship reflect the horizon of expectation regarding the believer's experience which the psalter proposes as normative? If not, why not? Is it because the comfortable values of Western middle-class consumerism have silently infiltrated the Church and made us consider such cries irrelevant, embarrassing, and signs of abject failure?

I did once suggest at a church meeting that the Psalms should take a higher priority in evangelical worship than they generally do, and was told in no uncertain terms by one indignant person that such a view betrayed a heart that had no interest in evangelism. On the contrary, I believe it is the exclusion of the experiences and expectations of the psalmists from our worship, and thus from our horizons of expectation, which has in a large part crippled the evangelistic efforts of the Church in the West and turned us all into spiritual pigmies. By excluding the cries of loneliness, dispossession, and desolation from its worship, the Church has effectively silenced and excluded the voices of those who are themselves lonely, dispossessed and desolate, both inside and outside the Church. By so doing, it has implicitly endorsed the banal aspirations of consumerism, generated an insipid, trivial and unrealistically triumphalist Christianity, and confirmed its impeccable credentials as a club for the complacent. In the last year I have asked three very different evangelical audiences what miserable Christians can sing in church. On each occasion my question has elicited uproarious laughter, as if the idea of a broken-hearted, lonely, or despairing Christian was so absurd as to be comical - and yet I posed the question in all seriousness. Is it any wonder that British evangelicalism, from the Reformed to the Charismatic, is almost entirely a comfortable, middle class phenomenon?

One might also look at the content of prayers, those we speak in private and those at the church meeting. How often did Abraham, Moses and Paul pray for health, for worldly success, for personal happiness and satisfaction? How do the concerns of these men compare with the content and priorities

of our own prayers? Do our intercessions, despite the pious theological padding, unwittingly mimic the blasphemous priorities of the Elmer Ganttrys of this world who peddle a pernicious gospel of health, wealth and happiness?

Then, look at our own aspirations. I often chat to theological students and ask them what they intend to do on completion of their work. Many say they think they will enjoy teaching RE, some say that they are looking forward to doing research. Very few say, in the first instance, they want to serve the Church. Now, one can serve the Church in both of the aforementioned ways, but is it not significant that their first reaction is not to express themselves in terms of service but in terms of personal satisfaction? And the Church as a whole is little better: big houses, flash cars, double incomes, all feature in the dreams of many of us, wrapped up as we are in making personal comfort and satisfaction our primary goal. Yet we should not build our lives on the basis of personal satisfaction but on the vision of self-sacrifice and service that the Bible lays before us. Given the choice, what would many of us involved in the professional theological sphere, students and academics rather do: speak at a major academic gathering and hob-nob with the great and the good, or talk to the church youth group? Mmany times we can do both, but what if we had to make a choice? The answer will speak eloquently of where our real treasure is stored. Has the gospel of our own personal ambition not upstaged the gospel of sacrificial service? It is faithfulness, not happiness or worldly reputation, which is the criterion of Christian success.

The Church in the West is caught in a maelstrom of decline. One might suggest a whole variety of ways to overcome this. Some suggest we need to be more 'postmodern' in our worship; others suggest we need to rethink how the gospel is communicated. I confess to being sceptical about these proposals, not because they are too radical but because they are not radical enough. They reduce the causes for decline to the level of methodology or sociology and offer relatively painless remedies to what is, if we are honest, a very serious, even terminal, disease. Indeed, those who see the problem exclusively in these terms are merely replicating the kind of solutions which the very health, wealth and happiness culture itself would propose. In the consumer culture, Christianity is a product, and poor sales can therefore be overcome by new management, better packaging and more astute marketing. Now I am not suggesting that sociologists and postmodernists have nothing useful to tell us. We must, of course, take care that we present the gospel in a way in which society can understand it (though to describe that as 'common sense' rather than 'postmodern', 'postevangelical' or 'post-whatever' would seem on the whole to be less obscure, but we must

remember that to reduce Western Christianity's difficulties to the level of bad technique is to miss the point: the real problem is ultimately one of morality, not methodology. Quite simply, the evangelical Church has sold its soul to the values of Western society and prostituted itself before the Golden Calf of materialism. Our current decline is thus not in the final analysis simply the result of secularisation; it is ultimately the result of the active judgment of God upon that secularisation. We have bought into the idolatry of the secular values of health, wealth and happiness, and until we all, on both the individual and corporate level, realise this, repent of it, and give ourselves in painful, sacrificial service to the Lord who bought us, we will see no improvement.

How can we do this? First, let us all learn once again to lament. Read the Psalms over and over until you have the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax necessary to lay your heart before God in lamentation. If we do this, we will have the resources to cope with our own times of suffering, despair and heartbreak and keep worshipping and trusting even through the blackest of days and will also develop a greater understanding of fellow Christians and their agonies of, say, bereavement, depression, or despair. You may be called to be a witness of God's unconditional mercy and grace to the unloved and the unlovely. For such were some of you.

Second, seek to make the priorities of the biblical prayers the priorities of your own prayers. We can read all the trendy sociology and postmodern primers available and they may give valuable technical insights, but unless your preaching, studies, church life, family life, indeed, every aspect, is soaked in prayer and reflects the priorities of the Bible, they will be of no profit to you or to anybody else.

Finally, as regards personal ambitions and life-plans, 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!'

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## Common Grace

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*Martin Rizley*

### *The Benefits and Limitations of Common Grace*

Normally, when Christians think or speak about the grace of God, it is with regard to the gift of *salvation in Christ*. We confess that we have been saved 'by grace', which means that we have been put into a right relationship with God solely by God's *unmerited favour* that he has shown to us in Christ Jesus. The New Testament is full of passages which speak of God's grace in the context of salvation.

*'For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God' (Eph 2:8). '...who saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity' (2 Tim 1:9). 'For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men' (Titus 2:11).*

There are many more such verses. However, the Greek word for 'grace' (charis) has a wide application in the New Testament and can refer to the bestowal of favour or goodwill in other contexts that don't have anything to do with eternal salvation. For example, in Acts 7:9-10, we read that Joseph found *grace* (charin) before Pharaoh, which led to his being made governor over Egypt and all the household of Pharaoh. The first Christians in Jerusalem found *grace* (charin) with all the people and continued to multiply as the Lord added to their number.

If the word 'grace' in the New Testament can refer to the bestowal of favour in a variety of contexts, then it is surely the best word to describe God's *own* bestowal of benefits on mankind, *apart from the gift of salvation itself*. We may see any expression of undeserved kindness as an expression of his grace.

The free favour which God shows to all who live in this world, whether or not they believe is called by theologians 'common grace'. Common grace may be defined as the undeserved favour that God shows to all humanity, by which he cares continually for the human race and pours out on all alike blessings that improve life here on earth. It is called 'common' grace because it is common to mankind; its benefits are experienced by the whole human race without distinction of persons.

One striking illustration of common grace is in Acts 28:1-10. This passage gives the experience of the apostle Paul on the island of Malta in the Mediterranean Sea just a short distance (58 miles) from the southern coast of Sicily. Still today in Malta there is a place known as 'St. Paul's Bay', which, according to tradition, is the place where the apostle Paul came ashore.

He had been travelling in an Alexandrian ship with 275 other men some of whom were prisoners. Paul too was travelling as a prisoner of the Roman Empire expecting to present his case before Caesar in Rome. A violent wind had driven the ship off course. For two weeks the sailors fought for their lives. They fasted without seeing the sun or stars for many days. In the fight to keep the ship afloat, they threw out the sails, the cargo and the ship's tackle.

They felt desperate and lost all hope of saving themselves. Just then the apostle Paul spoke of God's promise to save all who were in the ship. He encouraged them to keep up their courage and eat, since God's promise would not fail to come to pass. When the ship came to Malta, it struck a reef where two seas met, and the prow of the ship stuck fast in a sand bar. It began to break up, and the centurion who was supervising gave the order to abandon ship. Some swam to shore. Others floated on planks and on various items from the ship, but all were brought safely to land, just as Paul had foretold.

When they arrived, it was cold and raining. No one knew where they were. Shortly, the island's inhabitants began to arrive. In the Greek text they are called 'barbaroi', from which we get our English word 'barbarian'. We often use the word 'barbarian' to describe a person who is savage, crude and illiterate. The Greeks and Romans used the word 'barbaroi' to refer to all foreigners who spoke in another tongue. Anyone who was not of Greek

culture, language or descent was generally considered a ‘barbarian’. The thing to note about these Maltese ‘barbarians’ is their unusual friendliness and hospitality. Luke says in v.2 that ‘the natives showed us extraordinary kindness’.

What do we learn from these islanders about the benefits and the limitations of God’s common grace?

## 1 The Benefits of Common Grace

*By virtue of God’s common grace, sinful men are enabled by God to perform works which are outwardly good and beneficial to others.*

We see this in the way the islanders treated Paul and his companions. They could have killed them out of distrust or malice. They could have ignored them. However, by virtue of God’s common grace, they were enabled to treat Paul and the others with extraordinary kindness. Notice what they did.

First, they kindled a fire because of the cold and the rain that was falling (v. 2).

Next, they provided the men with shelter, dry clothing and food. Although the text does not say so explicitly, the expressions ‘*extraordinary kindness*’ and ‘*received us all*’ suggest that they supplied the physical needs of the shipwrecked men. Later we see a man named Publius doing the same thing. Publius is described in verse 7 as (literally) ‘*the first man of the island*’. This seems to identify Publius as the Roman governor of Malta. He was undoubtedly a man of considerable wealth, because he owned lands on that part of the island where the ship ran aground. Luke tells us that this man ‘*welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days*’. The ‘us’ refers most likely to a select group who were invited to stay in Publius’ house, not to all 276 men who were on the ship.

Publius and others illustrate how God enables non-believers to do things that are good. This divine help of the unregenerate to perform works that are *relatively* ‘good’ is a fruit of God’s *common grace*. By it human beings who neither know nor love God often show a human sympathy toward those in need and offer them help. Sometimes, they are moved to perform

acts of great heroism to benefit others. Perhaps the best recent illustration of this took place on September 11, 2001, when a number of firemen in New York city risked their lives to enter the twin towers to save people who were in danger. What they did was heroic, but we cannot assume that all those men who died in the act of saving others were regenerated by the Spirit. We cannot suppose that all who performed heroic acts that day were motivated by faith or by the love of God; yet what they did, in outward terms, was a 'good work'.

Can we speak of ungodly men doing good works? Jesus does so in Luke 6:33 when he says that 'sinners' do good to some people in some circumstances. By 'sinners' Jesus means unconverted, ungodly people. The 'good' which they perform must be understood in outward terms as *works which benefit others*. Jesus does not mean that the ungodly perform works that are truly 'good' in a spiritual sense. For a work to be *truly* good in God's sight, it must spring from spiritual motives; faith in Christ, love for God, gratitude for his grace, and the desire to glorify God with one's life. Only believers are capable of performing such works. When a heart lacks godly motives, the works that an individual performs may still be 'good' in a relative way, because they benefit others, but they fall short of being good in a spiritual sense.

Many Reformed creeds and catechisms uphold this view of good works. For example, in response to question 91 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, '*But what are good works?*,' the answer is: '*Only those which proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to his glory. . .*' The *London Confession of 1689* makes this assessment of the works of unbelievers: '*Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner according to the word, nor to a right end, the glory of God, are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, nor make a man meet to receive grace from God, and yet their neglect is more sinful and displeasing to God.*'

Scripture, therefore, affirms that God works by his *common grace* in unbelievers so that they bring forth works that are outwardly 'good' and beneficial to others. That is what we see in Acts 28. The Maltese natives were moved by a natural human sympathy to help Paul and his

companions, even though they did not know or love the true God. As believers, we should feel profoundly grateful for this work of divine grace, because it keeps the world from being as bad a place to live in as it would be otherwise. By virtue of God's common grace, many who do not know, worship, or love the true God are enabled to make positive contributions to society that bless all of mankind.

Consider the many cultural, technological and philanthropic achievements of unbelievers which have contributed to the betterment of society:

1. *Culture.* I am a devotee of classical music, and it has often amazed me that so much of the world's most beautiful music has been composed by men who were unbelievers. One thinks of classical 'greats' like Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms, none of whom professed faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. How much poorer our world would be without the musical achievements of these gifted, yet unbelieving, composers! Another striking example is the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. Even though he was a self-professed atheist who later 'mellowed' into an agnostic, his musical output included many hymns and choral works for the Church. He even edited an English hymnal, to which he contributed original tunes, such as the popular 'Sine Nomine', which is most often associated with the hymn 'For All the Saints'.

When I was a young Christian, I used to wonder if it was wrong or sinful for me to enjoy listening to music written by unbelieving composers. I wondered if I should listen only to music written by Christians; for I reasoned, how could I benefit from the artistic creations of those who did not know God? I was confused because I did not yet understand that God's common grace enables unbelievers to make positive contributions to society and culture from which all may benefit. If honey can be drawn from a dead lion (Judges 14:8), then surely God can bring forth works of beauty and value even from those who are spiritually dead.

2. *Technology.* It would be impossible to list all the technological achievements of men whose brilliant and inquisitive minds were sadly darkened with respect to God. We should be grateful for medical and scientific advances that greatly improve life on earth, thanks to God's *common grace* at work in the lives and research laboratories of many unbelieving scientists.

3. *Philanthropy.* Many cultural and technological endeavours have received funding from unbelieving philanthropists. Some men and women have given vast sums of money to scientific research or patronage of the arts. Once again thanks must go to God, who moves even the ungodly to promote worthy causes. These examples are sufficient to show that God enables ungodly men to perform works which are outwardly 'good' and help others. But God's common grace does even more.

*By God's common grace, even the ungodly are able, in some measure, to distinguish good and evil, and are often motivated by fear of punishment, to shun evil.*

Acts 28:3-4 illustrates this. As Paul gathered a bundle of sticks for the fire, he was bitten by a venomous snake. The islanders probably knew that the men on the ship were prisoners, destined to be condemned by the Roman government for their evil deeds. When they saw Paul bitten, therefore, they assumed that he was receiving divine judgment for some evil act of his. In other words, they manifested an awareness of a *moral order* in the universe.

How does God keep alive in men's consciences the distinction between good and evil? In part by the light of general revelation. Paul teaches in Romans that God, in common grace, has written principles of righteousness from his moral law on the consciences of all men. This understanding of what is right and wrong influences what men do. *'For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them'* (Rom 2:14-15). When unbelievers act, their consciences accuse or defend their actions. A voice within says, 'This action is good; that action is bad.' When unbelievers practise wicked deeds, *'they know the ordinance of God, that those who practise such things are worthy of death'* (Rom 1:32).

Beyond the light of nature God also uses the influence of society to keep before men the distinction between good and evil. Human government (Rom 13:1-4) combines with public opinion to condemn certain behaviour and to approve others.

Still another means of moral instruction is the manifestation of God's wrath. We see this by divine judgments such as diseases, plagues, famines and natural disasters. Venereal diseases associated with sexual promiscuity, and the devastating AIDS epidemic, both show God's displeasure with certain lifestyles lived outside the boundaries of his law.

In surveying the benefits of God's common grace, Louis Berkhof lists six fruits of this marvellous work of God.

- 1) The sentence of eternal death is postponed, that is, sinful men are given 'room for repentance' without being sent immediately to hell.
- 2) Sin is restrained.
- 3) Outward and civil righteousness is performed.
- 4) Some sense of truth, goodness and beauty is preserved.
- 5) Cultural achievements progress.
- 6) Natural earthly blessings are enjoyed.

The benefits of common grace are many. By means of it '*God provides for the needs of His creatures, restrains human society from becoming altogether intolerable and ungovernable, and makes it possible for humankind, although fallen, to live together in a generally orderly and co-operative manner, to show mutual forbearance, and to cultivate together the scientific, cultural, and economic pursuits of civilisation.*' (*The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Book House, 1991, p. 210).

## **2 The Limitations of Common Grace**

Acts 28:1-10, however, shows us just as clearly the *limitations* of common grace. Paul's experience there confirms the fact that no matter how many benefits God showers on sinful humanity by his common grace, not one of those benefits can usher a human soul into the kingdom of God. Not one lost sinner has ever been saved by the blessings of common grace. In order to be saved, we must receive a higher outpouring of divine favour, which comes by God's *special grace*.

What are the limitations of common grace that are evident in this passage? What is it that common grace *cannot* do?

A. *Common grace never brings a man to a true knowledge of God, nor to deliverance from spiritual bondage and darkness.*

We see this in the Maltese natives. They perceived a moral order in the universe, but they did not recognise that its source was the *one true God*, Maker of heaven and earth. When they said of Paul in verse 4, '*Justice has not allowed him to live,*' they were not referring to the justice of God, but rather to the goddess Dike, whom the ancient pagans believed was the personification of justice and vengeance. As friendly as these islanders were, therefore, they were at heart pagans and polytheists. God's general revelation, suppressed within their unrighteous hearts, had not led them out of the darkness of polytheism.

We see this even more clearly when Paul did not die from his snakebite. Luke says in verse 6, '*After they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.*'

If God has revealed himself clearly to all men through the light of nature, why do large numbers believe in many gods? Paul explains in Romans 1:21-23 that when men who know the true God do not worship him rightly nor give him thanks, their minds become darkened, and they end up exchanging the true God for idols. They are ignorant of God, but their ignorance is culpable, because it arises from a heart which has hardened itself (Eph 4:18).

Common grace cannot liberate men from a darkened mind. By common grace God pours out many external blessings on humanity, but none of those blessings by themselves can change the human heart. Only the special grace of regeneration, given in connection with the preaching of the gospel, can do that.

B. *Common grace does not make men interpret rightly the acts of God.*

The natives missed the point of Paul's healing. They credited Paul with his own healing and declared him to be a god. The real source of Paul's healing, of course, was God himself. God wanted to confirm by this miracle the apostolic authority of Paul but they were blind to that fact.

Common grace could not lead them to a true interpretation of the acts of God.

This is why the world's religions never lead men to salvation. Although people around the world perceive God at work in the world, their sinful blindness leads them to misinterpret his works. For example, Hindus interpret death as a prelude to reincarnation, rather than as a prelude to final judgment. Unbelievers generally interpret God's longsuffering and patience as an indication that God is indifferent to sin, when in fact he is giving men the opportunity to repent before it is too late. By common grace alone man will never attain to a right interpretation of God's works. For that men need the gospel, and although our text does not say so explicitly, there can be little doubt that Paul preached the gospel to these islanders.

How can we be sure of that? In verses 8-10 we read of healings that Paul performed on Malta. We know that as a general rule Paul did not heal people without preaching the gospel to them. He wanted them to know the source of his healing power. Moreover, since the natives had judged him to be a god (v. 6), Paul would have felt under divine obligation to correct this false notion. He could not allow their erroneous image of him to go unchallenged (cf. Acts 14:11-15). There is no question, therefore, that Paul preached the gospel to these people, for otherwise he would have left them in the dark. He knew that, however kind and generous they had been to him, without the gospel, they remained '*without hope and without God in the world*' (Eph 2:12). Nothing but the gospel could deliver them from their spiritual lostness or bring them the benefits of salvation.

### ***Conclusion:***

Let us finally ask the question: why is it so important for Christians to value this doctrine?

1. *Without an understanding of common grace, we are at a loss to explain many things in the world around us.*

How can we explain the comparatively orderly life in the world, seeing that the whole world lies under the curse of sin? How is it that the earth yields precious fruit in rich abundance and does not simply bring forth

thorns and thistles? How can we account for it that sinful man 'still retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil, and shows some regard for virtue and good outward behaviour'? What explanation can be given of the special gifts and talents with which the natural man is endowed, and of the development of science and art by those who are entirely devoid of the new life that is in Christ Jesus? How can we explain the religious aspirations of men everywhere, even of those who did not come in touch with the Christian religion? How can the unregenerate still speak the truth, do good to others, and lead outwardly virtuous lives? (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 432).

2. *It helps us to live in the world and to enjoy the benefits which unregenerate men bring to us through the gifts and endowments that God has given them.*

If we understand common grace, we do not have to adopt a totally negative and rejecting attitude toward the cultural and technological achievements of the ungodly. We can enjoy objects of value and beauty, no matter who has produced them. We can benefit from the insights which God has given to unbelievers in different areas and disciplines, because God has given them understanding of his world and truth to some degree, even though he has not enlightened them with the knowledge of Christ and his salvation.

3. *It impresses us with the urgency of evangelistic outreach, since human 'goodness' is no indication that men genuinely know or love God or enjoy the forgiveness of sins.*

A saving knowledge of God comes only through the gospel. Knowing that will fill us with a sense of urgency to make the gospel known. As we proclaim the gospel to the lost, we will not only warn men of God's wrath and judgment, but also remind them of his abundant goodness which they have already enjoyed through the blessings of common grace. We show them the great evil of '*thinking lightly of the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience*', warning them that if they persist in hardening their hearts against the grace of God, they will '*treasure up wrath for themselves in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God*' (Rom 2:4-5).

Let us give thanks and praise to God for every manifestation of his grace to our rebellious, sinful and undeserving race!

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## Review

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**Bible Software 6** - Software for Biblical Exegesis and Research  
BibleWorks LLC, 2003  
www.bibleworks.com \$299

### Online Bible

www.onlinebible.net  
(N. American site)  
www.onlinebible.org (European site)

There is a variety of Bible software currently available. Here two packages are reviewed which provide contrasting capabilities for different needs.

Bible Software is in the premier league of Bible software - the package of choice for scholars and serious Bible students. The programme includes a large number of English Bible versions, including KJV, NIV (British and American), NKJV, NLT, ESV, and even Tyndale's New Testament - all immediately available without additional charge. There is a full range of search facilities. Various translations can be viewed simultaneously, and the results of text searches compared; a colour highlighting facility is available. Also included are the texts of Josephus and the Apostolic Fathers (in Greek and English), Matthew Henry's commentary, and even the Westminster Standards - all fully searchable just like a Bible text. (Doubtless the 1689 Confession will appear in a future update?)

This software really comes into its own for those with a working knowledge of biblical languages. The NT and Septuagint are available in Greek (in a variety of texts), and the OT text in Hebrew (including accents). Here searches can be made not only for words and phrases, but also for grammatical forms. For those feeling a little intimidated by such a demanding array of language tools there are practical helps. When you pass your mouse over a Greek or Hebrew word, the English translation and parsing of the form automatically appear. At the click of the mouse you are immediately taken to the appropriate entry in the Lexicons included in the programme (BDB and TWOT for Hebrew, and Thayer, Louw-Nida, Friberg and abridged Liddell & Scott for Greek). You can even access the appropriate reference in Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, or Burton's Greek Moods and Tenses. This means that you can routinely refer to the original languages in sermon preparation without constant use of reference volumes. If you are inspired to brush up your grasp of the languages, this software includes sets of flashcards to memorise vocabulary, and an introductory course in Hebrew. A sentence diagramming module is provided for those who learned this technique in seminary and remember its usefulness. There are even more

modules which can be added if desired - including the latest editions of the BDAG Greek Lexicon, HALOT (Hebrew & Aramaic), and Waltke and O'Connor's Biblical Hebrew Syntax. The prices of these modules seem expensive, but work out cheaper than the printed volumes, and have the added advantage of search capabilities.

With such an array of tools and facilities at your disposal it is unsurprising that the package comes with a user manual of over 400 pages. However, there is no need to be intimidated. The software works in different 'modes' - beginner, standard, and power-user, so you choose what you can cope with. I found it best to watch the videos supplied on CD which give a helpful overview of the software, and then just plunge in and find my way around which was soon achieved in standard mode. In other words, the programme is user-friendly and practical. This is a very impressive package.

There will be some, however, who do not want or cannot afford such sophisticated language tools. For these, the Online Bible is highly recommended. It is available as a CD, or downloaded free from the website. There is not the same range of resources available as BibleWorks, and facilities such as grammatical searching are absent. If you want to do serious work with the original languages this is not the package for you; nevertheless this is still a

powerful resource. There is a range of English Bible versions (although more modern texts such as NIV require the purchase of unlock codes), Greek texts of the NT and LXX, and the Hebrew OT. Clicking on a word in the biblical text will bring up the appropriate entry in Easton's Bible Dictionary, or reference to a basic lexicon with some translation and Greek parsing information (via Strong's numbering system). There are good search facilities, and a number of dictionaries and other reference works can be displayed simultaneously. These include Matthew Henry, Robertson's Word Pictures, Treasury of David, plus a variety of resources posted to the site by users. Calvin's commentaries are available for a very small charge.

For the user who does not need advanced language facilities the Online Bible is an effective tool. The programme will occasionally remind you to go to the website to download the latest update. This is free of charge; a very modest donation may be requested but is not required.

There is not space here to mention all the software currently available. A detailed comparison of some of the leading packages was published in JETS last year and can be viewed online at:

[www.bibleworks.com/downloads/JETS09-2003.pdf](http://www.bibleworks.com/downloads/JETS09-2003.pdf) (case sensitive)

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