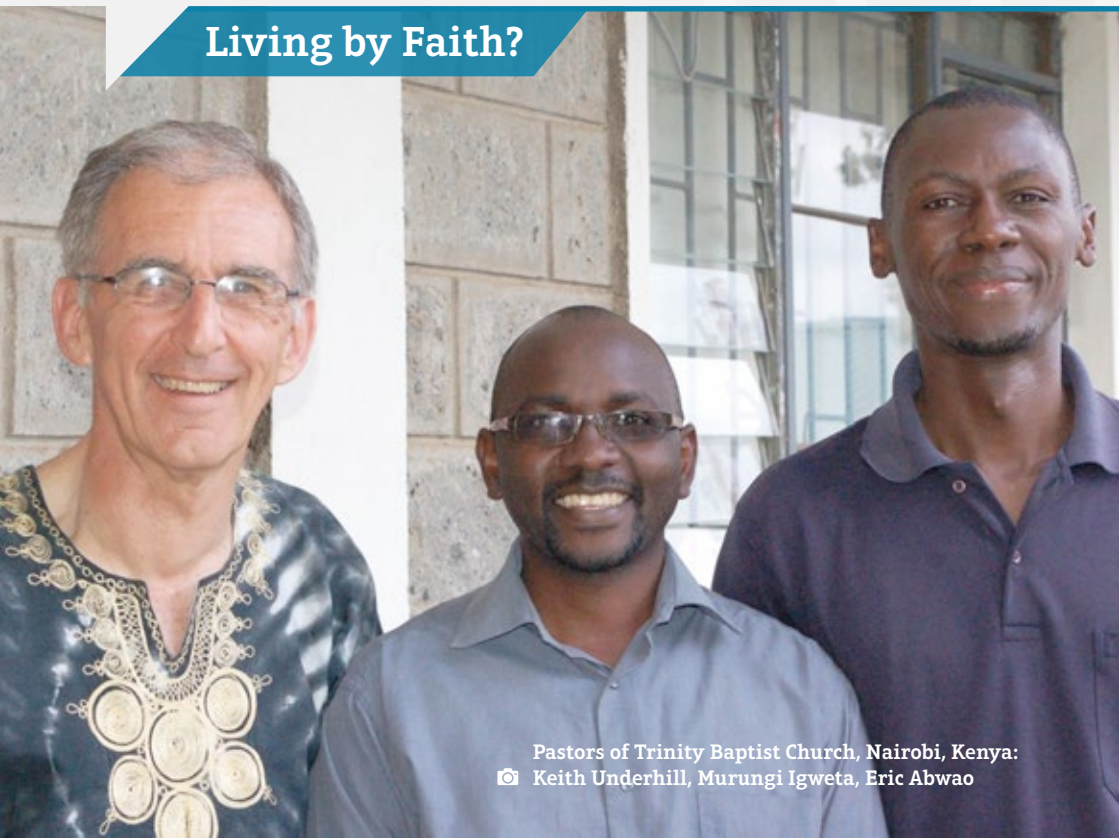


REFORMATION TODAY

rt

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- ▶ Against the Tide in the Power of Weakness
- ▶ Forgiveness

Living by Faith?



Pastors of Trinity Baptist Church, Nairobi, Kenya:
📷 Keith Underhill, Murungi Igweta, Eric Abwao



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Editorial

KEES VAN KRALINGEN

Living by Faith

Faith and uncertain times

In the last issue of *RT* we addressed the question 'What is faith?' In this issue of *RT* we want to continue to think about this question and especially what it means to live by faith in these uncertain times.

At the moment of writing this editorial, the news has broken that Donald Trump has been elected president of the United States of America. Christians in the USA have agonised over the way to vote. Now the result is known. Many questions have already arisen about what this will mean for the people of America and for the world. More may be known by the time you are reading this. In any case, one thing seems certain, from a human perspective we live in turbulent and uncertain times and there are plenty of reasons for concern.

What is happening in the world at the moment? What principles are guiding events in this world? Where can any hope or certainty be found? The Bible gives the answer in Psalm 2. First of all, David as the author (see Acts 4:25) makes a remarkably radical and incisive statement about the nations and the rulers of this world: by definition they rebel against the Lord and

against his Anointed. All they do all the time is aimed at casting away the cords that God has given to restrain their wicked behaviour. By implication we can say that it is only because of God's gracious intervention when this is different. We can recognise so much of this, but before we develop some fatalistic view, we are assured that there is no reason for panic as God is in control. He even laughs at them. This is the laugh of a father who is rightly angry with a rebellious little child, and laughs at the stupidity of the little rebel who thinks it can oppose the all-powerful father.

Well before the rulers have completed or even initiated their wicked plots, the Lord has already set his King on Mount Zion. He will appear in righteous judgment. But the Lord still gives people time to turn from their stupid and wicked ways, to acknowledge the Son of God and to turn to him in repentance and faith.

We can see from Acts 4:23-31 that the early church understood this psalm to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ and everything that happened to him. The book of Revelation cites this psalm to ascertain that the Lamb on the throne will appear in judgment



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and will rule all his opponents with a rod of iron (Rev 2:27). This psalm is one of the most often quoted Old Testament texts in the New Testament, and gives us an amazing and deeply penetrating insight into how this world really works. It helps us not to put our trust in human beings, but only in our Lord and Saviour. Faith in this regard also means knowing that God is on the throne. This is what we are convinced about even though we may not see it (Heb 11:1) when we just look at this world and its rulers, its people, and ... ourselves!

The Old Testament saints experienced the same things in their time. The author of the letter to the Hebrews is very clear about this as we see in the second part of John Palmer's exposition of part of Hebrews 11 and 12 (please see *RT* 274 for part 1). We are called to walk by faith in obedience, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

John Benton's article captures the same truths in a very penetrating and insightful article discussing how we view our times from a Christian perspective. We are up against a very strong tide, but the power for our response lies precisely in our weakness. This is also what Paul experienced (2 Cor 12:10).

I am grateful to Phil Roberts (also one of the trustees of the *Reformation Today Trust*) for his permission to use material he has written on the topic of forgiveness in the form of a series of articles in *RT*. Forgiveness seems an obvious topic for Christians, but when it comes to putting this into practice, things often turn out not so easy. These articles will give us guidance.

We had no space in the last issue of *RT* for

the article on baptism by Joachim Rieck. His message fits with the emphasis on faith: when we are baptised we profess faith in Christ. Baptism is therefore not about us or our feelings, but about Jesus.

Missionary work continues

Even though other news captures the headlines in the common media, Christians are interested in the progress of the gospel in the world. As usual, news about the church and missionary and evangelistic work, together with news about books completes this first issue of *RT* in 2017. The work of APC has seen steady progress in the past year and we pray for our Lord's blessing on this ministry and on all other work to train people for faithful ministry of the gospel in the new year.

Church history

This is the year we remember and celebrate the 16th century Reformation. We can be truly grateful for plenty of resources to help us to think about the work of our Lord as the Head of the church in its history. These resources are offered in the form of many conferences paying attention to this. In addition, books are appearing for this purpose. We are planning to review some of these in the coming issues of *RT*.

Living by faith also in 2017

We have entered another year. We are called to live by faith. We pray that in this new year we will all know, experience and show the truth of Paul's testimony in Galatians 2:20, 'I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.' May the Lord bless you all and keep you in 2017. ■

What is FAITH?

PART 2

More examples of faith

(Continued from part 1 published in the previous issue of *RT*.)

Moses

Hebrews 11:23 reads: 'By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.'

Whose faith caused Moses to be hidden away? His parents' faith caused them to act

in the way they did. They did this because they did not fear that they would suffer punishment from Pharaoh for this, or that Moses would die. They protected their child from being killed. And by extension, we can say they also acted in faith in handing him over to Pharaoh's daughter.

24-27: 'By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the

reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.'

We come to Moses. Faith led him to:

24-25: Choosing Christ, and his people, with persecution, rather than sin, the world, and comfort (this is the attitude behind his actions in Ex 2:11-12).

26: Doing this because he believed the promise of the reward, and that this reward in Christ is of greater value than all earthly gains. Here we see that the faith of these believers was in Christ.

27: So he endured because he saw God by faith in the pillar when unbelievers did not believe that this was the Lord going before them (Ex 13:21-22; compare 16:3; 17:3). Again, God teaches us here the important truth that behind faith in God's Word, leading to obedience, is faith in the God who gave the Word and requires the obedience. Faith is not ultimately 'going by the book' but trusting the one who speaks to us through his book.

During the early 20th century there were great revivals in Korea, and many became Christians, and thus exercised faith in the midst of revival, when God was seen to be powerfully blessing his church. In North Korea now professing Christ leads to terrible persecution, to being locked up in cages with almost no food, and worked literally to death. Christians there have to exercise faith where sight would say, 'God has forgotten us'. We must apply the 'North Korea test' to our faith. If what you think

of as your faith, and what you expect to get as a result of it, doesn't 'work' in both great revival and terrible persecution; in both great material prosperity and terrible privation; then it is not the faith that God gives, or recognises, or rewards.

28: *'By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.'*

Moses' faith led to acts of obedience to God's revealed will, to his commands. The supreme example was carrying out the Passover at the culmination of the 10 plagues (Ex 12:21-23) before the firstborn were destroyed.

The people of Israel

29: *'By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.'*

We do not normally think of the generation of Israelites who left Egypt as an example of faith, but rather of unbelief. Yet here there was a brief exception. They received a command from God to cross the Red Sea (Ex 14:15-18) and obeyed in an albeit temporary faith. This is contrasted with the presumption of the Egyptians. They assumed that they knew that God would allow them across too and so they perished. The contrast between faith and presumption is thus seen here. Presumption is the sin that assumes that, because Christ has died, everyone will be saved and it therefore is no problem to go on living in sin. Such presumption stops people turning to him in faith, until judgment comes in the form of death.

30: *'By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after*

they had been encircled for seven days.'

The next generation received a command from God to conquer Jericho by strange means, revealed to us in Joshua 6:2-5. They obeyed in faith, and so were successful. Many people might tell us to do strange things in the realm of spiritual warfare, to overcome demons, be healed, have success for the gospel, change our society, etc. We must not listen to their ideas. Faith is obeying God's revealed will, revealed in our all-sufficient, complete, Scripture.

Rahab

31: *'By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she gave a friendly welcome to the spies.'*

Rahab acted in faith, as we see in Joshua 2:8-11. She welcomed the spies because she believed God's word that the land had been promised to Israel. This surely included an implied command to help them do this, rather than to hinder them, which she obeyed. Hence, the rest of the citizens were said to be disobedient. They should have left the land and saved their lives. They didn't, so they perished. This is the same sin as coming under conviction of sin, and therefore of God's judgment, but refusing to come to Christ for salvation, instead trusting that one can save oneself.

1. Faith is not a 'leap into the dark' in order to be saved. Saving faith is trust that a propositional revelation of a promise, the gospel, is trustworthy, because the one who has promised it has a proven track record.

God has revealed himself in the Bible as the Creator, and the evidence that this claim is true is that he rules the universe reliably. He has also revealed himself as the Redeemer, and the evidence is that he raised Christ from the dead as he had promised. Saving faith is self-commitment to this God – the one true and living God – so that he will deliver you from your sins.

And many others...

In the next verses, note the contrast between the first part, down to halfway through verse 35, and what comes after this.

32-35a: *'And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the*

sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection.'

In the case of these believers, their faith led to acting because they were looking by faith for the present fulfilment of what God had promised for this life (see 1b). So they:

» Conquered kingdoms:

Gideon (Jdg 6-8); Barak (Jdg 4-5); Samson (Jdg 13-16); Jephthah (Jdg 10-12); David, see summary in 2 Samuel 8:1-14, and 2 Samuel 12:29-31, etc; Samuel (1 Sam 7:10-13).

FAITH IS
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- » **Administered justice:** Gideon (Jdg 8:18-21); Barak (Jdg 5:31); Samson (Jdg 15:20); Jephthah (Jdg 12:7); David (2 Sam 8:15); Samuel (1 Sam 7:15-17).
- » **Gained what was promised:** for example, Elijah (1 Kings 18:1, 41-46). The promised rain came because Elijah in faith confronted Ahab, who was out to kill him (vv17-19), and the prophets of Baal (vv20-40).
- » **Shut the mouth of lions:** Daniel (Dan 6). The angel of God shut the mouth of the lions, v22, but it was a result of Daniel's faith.
- » **Quenched the power of fire:** Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan 3); similarly, what God did as a result of their faith is attributed to them.
- » **Escaped the edge of the sword:** eg David escaped Goliath (1 Sam 17); Israel escaped from the Arameans through Elisha's faith (2 Kings 6:8-23).
- » **Were empowered in weakness, became strong in faith, and made foreign armies yield:** eg Samson (Jdg 16:26-30); Gideon (Jdg 6:11-16, 7:15-18).
- » **Women received back their dead, raised to life again:** the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:17-24); and the Shunammite (2 Kings 4:18-37).

These are great exploits! Are we therefore to learn that if we have enough faith, we shall do similar astounding things? Not at

all! Faith is not a 'whipped up power', but it is trusting God's revealed promises and commands and acting accordingly. It is not because of our lack of faith that we do not follow in the footsteps of the judges, kings and prophets of the Old Testament. It is because these are not the actions which Christians are to expect to do, as the flock of God scattered throughout the world. We are not Israel, God's Old Covenant people, living in the land God gave them, with promises of victory if they had faith. We are called to be faithful even when trials come. Under the New Covenant we will

Faith leads to enduring suffering even unto death, not to achieving mighty physical or spiritual conquests.

have trouble, even though Christ has overcome the world (John 16:33).

Faith on trial

This is why the writer of Hebrews was inspired, without pause, to add the following examples to those that he had just adduced. These are equally people of faith: those who suffered and died. It is significant that when the lessons are applied to Christians in chapter 12, it is how faith leads to enduring suffering even unto

death, not to achieving mighty physical or spiritual conquests.

35b-38: 'Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.'

Faith led these believers to endure, a word which is going to be repeated several times in chapter 12. They endured terrible suffering, because they were looking by faith for a future fulfilment of what God had promised in the next life. This is to follow in the footsteps of Abraham and Moses, more than winning victories is. It is also, as we shall see, to follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So they:

- » **Were tortured,** refusing to be released by denying God, in order to obtain the better resurrection of the faithful. This is probably a reference to some of the Maccabees, who revolted around 170 BC against the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes, who was prophesied in Daniel 11:21-35.¹
- » **Faced mocking and flogging:** as Jeremiah (Jer 20:1-2).
- » **Were chained and imprisoned:** as Jeremiah (Jer 37:11-38:13; 40:1).
- » **Were stoned:** Jeremiah in Egypt, according to a reliable Jewish tradition; Zechariah (2 Chr 24:20-22).
- » **Were sawn asunder:** Isaiah, according to Jewish tradition.
- » **Were slain with the sword:** Uriah son of Shemaiah (Jer 26:20-23).
- » **Went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, afflicted, and persecuted:**

the world was not worthy of them (whereas the world considered them not worthy of it) – wandering over deserts and mountains, living in caves and holes in the ground: again, the Maccabees; see also the prophets of the Lord (1 Kings 18:4); Elijah (1 Kings 19:8-9).

Once again, the 'faith' encouraged by the teachers of the so-called 'prosperity gospel' fails this test. For they would teach that if one has faith, one will never be persecuted. What a terrible thing to teach to believers suffering Muslim persecution in Nigeria, or Iraq, for example: that it's their fault, they just should have had more faith! How clearly this passage shows their soul-destroying error!

Waiting for the promise

As we come to the end of the list of the heroes of the faith, we must remember why they are listed here in the pages of Scripture. It is not just so that we admire them. Rather, we are being admonished by God to act in similar, but better faith; better because living as we do on this side of the Cross, we have clearer light than they on 'the substance of things hoped for' (v1), *future realities*; and 'the evidence of things not seen' (v1), *present realities*. So we read:

39-40: 'And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.'

¹ The history of the Maccabean revolt is recorded in 1 Maccabees. This is not a biblical book; it is in the Apocrypha. However, it is generally recognised to be an accurate history of the events which it covers.

God testified (cf. v2, 39) to their faith. They looked to the eternal promises of God. But they did not receive the *promise* when they died (vv13-16). They were still waiting for it when Christ came. For they could only receive it when the 'better' came – for us, Christians – which God had planned and *revealed*, and which they would fully share with us. (Note the italicised words, which are the key words of all that has gone before). God testifies that those who believe the revealed promises and act on them have the faith which he recognises.

This 'better' they now have. It consists of being perfected, in soul, in the immediate presence of Christ, which is what each believer receives, now, immediately upon death (2 Cor 5:8). Finally, we shall all together receive the full perfection of the resurrection, being made like Christ (1 John 3:1-2).

Application

Look to Jesus

We must go on into chapter 12. The first thirteen verses are the climax, point, and application of all that is taught in 10:19-11:40. Here we learn what we are to do as an expression of our faith, and why. What we are to do is: to endure (vv1-4) and especially, to endure trials as God's discipline (vv5-11). The last two verses (12-13) conclude this.

(1-3): 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the

cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.'

How do we endure trials in faith? First of all by considering the heroes of faith of chapter 11. What we should do is (v 1):

1. See them as *witnesses*: a crowd watching our 'endurance race'. They are not witnesses in a court of law, testifying to God of our faith. They are witnesses of us and our faith but especially they are witnesses to us, testifying that victory by faith is possible. For true faith is what they exercised, not some counterfeit. They obeyed God's commands because they believed his promises. So must we!
2. Throw off all extraneous weight, for example the clothes like athletes did in the first century, running naked. Our clothes here are our sins (compare Col 3:8-9). The idea of 'sin which clings so closely' (ESV) is 'sin, that is most entangling'. It is not that we have one 'besetting' sin, as some have taught; rather, it is that sin itself is most entangling. There are sins of heart and mind which are so entwined to us, that they affect our attitude to everything in life. So we are not to be content with merely rejecting outward sins.
3. Run the race through endurance; see also 2:1; 3:14; 6:11-12; 10:36.

We do this by looking away from ourselves to Jesus (v2). We do not look within ourselves for strength of feelings; this

is not faith! But we do this by looking away – from the scenery, or the other runners – to Jesus. In a sprint race, as two runners approach the line side by side, and if you see one looking sideways at the other, he will be the one who loses the race. The one who looks ahead, with his eyes fixed on the line, will win. We must look to Jesus, our prize, the one who begins our faith, and who perfects it. For he is not only our example here, but he also gives us faith.

He endured the cross, despising its shame because he was looking to the reward of resurrection, ascension and glory and authority at God's right hand, all of which he has received. This was taught also in 1:3.

As we consider him who endured such opposition, we won't grow weary, and our souls won't faint (v3; cf Is 40:31) when we are opposed by sin and persecution. Only in this way will we gain this victory; only by exercising continuous faith in Jesus as Paul did (Gal 2:20).

Struggle against sin

4. 'In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.'

If we are reading this, we are alive; we have not yet endured the most extreme suffering possible: martyrdom. We have not yet struggled against sin to the point, as Jesus did successfully, of having to die rather than to sin. We may have to endure more hardship, a quantity unknown to us. How are we going to be strong enough to

WE MUST LOOK TO JESUS, OUR PRIZE, THE ONE WHO BEGINS OUR FAITH, AND WHO PERFECTS IT.

do this, and not be discouraged by it and give up our profession of Christ?

The discipline of our heavenly Father

5-6: 'And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives".'

The answer is that we need to believe the word of encouragement of Proverbs 3:11-12:

- » That discipline is something to be carefully considered.
- » That we are not to faint (cf v3) in our souls when the Lord rebukes us.
- » Because discipline, scourging, is a sign that he loves us, and accepts us as children.

7-8: 'It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.'

Here God instructs us to endure discipline. When you receive it, he is dealing with you as a child, for earthly fathers all discipline their children. The only exception is an illegitimate child, whom the father does not own as his, so he is not in the household.

This clear biblical teaching destroys the basis for the 'health and wealth' gospel.

A life of unbroken good health and material prosperity, where everything works out as you want it to, may well be a sign of God's rejection, not acceptance! God's way is to give us trials to refine and purify our faith (1 Pet 1:6-7) in order to make us more like his Son, who learnt obedience through suffering (Heb 2:10-11; 5:8). Teaching which says that faith is seen by a trouble-free life is pagan, not Christian. It is unbelief, not faith, which denies that a good God is working for our good when bad things happen to us.

9: 'Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?'

Moreover, we respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us. How much more, then, should we willingly be subject to the Father of our spirits, who is the perfectly good God? For this discipline:

- » Shows that we are his children, so we inherit eternal life!
- » Is designed to give us this life more fully now (John 10:10) for the more we are conformed to Christ, who is the Life (John 14:6) the more we can be said to truly live, as opposed to just existing. This second thought is worked out in the next two verses:

10: 'For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.'

Our fathers who were fallible disciplined

us as they thought best for us. If they were acting aright, they wanted to develop good character in us. We were punished for wrongdoing and rewarded for doing good, in order that we might grow up into good and righteous people. The infallible God always achieves good by his discipline: it means we become holier. Some have

This clear biblical teaching destroys the basis for the 'health and wealth' gospel.

been deluded into thinking that if they have enough faith, they will be happy, and they make this their goal. But the route to true happiness is always through holiness, We need faith, because

11: 'For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.'

On the one hand, discipline doesn't seem to bring joy but grief as it is administered. On the other hand, later it produces the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those trained by it. It does not however produce this in those who rebel in unbelief.

This endurance, we must remember, is only possible by faith, faith in God, accepting his purpose in discipline revealed to us here. This is faith in what we don't see and haven't yet received (11:1). Endurance of hardship (v7) is by faith (v2), faith as in 10:19 onwards, not a counterfeit faith that would not work! How many Christian lives have been wrecked by trying to live by what essentially is a counterfeit faith, which isn't faith in God, and his Word, learning who he is, believing his promises and obeying his commands. When trials come, this counterfeit faith crumbles, and the

profession built on it collapses.

Conclusion

12-13: 'Therefore "Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees" and "Make level paths for your feet", so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.'

As the writer comes to his concluding lessons, he tells us how to respond to all this teaching. We are to:

- » 'Strengthen the hands that have grown weary, and the knees which have grown weak'. This is Isaiah 35:3. However, this is itself an allusion back to Job 4:4. It can be argued that this, and the verse before it, are the earliest description in the Bible of the character of a godly man. This is a message for ourselves, but it is also an absolutely essential part of the conduct of a man of faith that he helps others of God's people who are spiritually struggling. We must so support Christians whose hardships may weaken their faith.

- » 'Make level paths for our feet' (Prov 4:26), so that the spiritually lame do not grow worse by becoming disabled, but rather are healed.

In the verses with which we began at the end of chapter 10 it is clear that all this teaching is given in the context of a church, with believers helping each other in the Christian life. In what we have seen since, it might be easy to become individualistic, and think of our own faith and

its outworking in isolation from other believers. These verses prevent that. Here we are instructed to help each other in the Christian life, and especially to support the weak.

How do we do this? By:

- » Example. How much do some of us owe in our Christian walk to the example of godly believers! How much do some wish that they had been blessed with such role-models!
- » Teaching. Christian teaching should be full of the certainties of what we do not see and what we hope for. It must never be allowed to degenerate into merely moral exhortation, divorced from the character and work of God as he has shown us in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- » Encouragement to endure. This endurance, remember, is only possible by faith in God and his revealed purpose in discipline, as we have been taught here.

If you are enduring in obedience to God's commands, because of faith in his promises, looking to him for your present strength and final glorification, you are living by faith.

Finally, a word to all who know other Christians who seem to have grandiose ideas about their own faith, and who look down on us ordinary Christians who live normal lives and suffer normal trials. If you are enduring in obedience to God's commands, because of faith in his promises, looking to him for your present strength and final glorification, you are living by faith. This is what Galatians 2:20 means. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. ■

Against the Tide

I FOUND THAT THE SCRIPTURES SAID THAT WE OUGHT TO EXPECT PRECISELY THIS CHANGE OF CULTURAL TIDE WHEN A SOCIETY MOVES AWAY FROM GOD - THE MORAL SOCIETY BECOMES THE 'FEEL GOOD' SOCIETY.

Here's a very dramatic picture. There emerging from the sea is a gigantic, muscular, nimble, ferocious dragon with crowns upon his head, hatred in his mind, and blood dripping from his slobbering mouth. Alongside him stand two figures. One is the most beautiful prostitute anyone has ever seen, who adapts herself as appropriate to suit every person's darkest fantasies. From the crass, to the professional, to the intellectual there is no one she cannot seduce. The other figure is an adviser with an evil eye. He is full of the subtlest thinking, the most persuasive communication skills and the most seemingly reasonable of arguments, able to reshape anyone's beliefs by his

propaganda. The beast, the harlot and the false prophet. Together they are determined on world domination and the destruction of humanity to the glory of their master the devil.

And sent to oppose this awesome trio is – a lamb – meek and weak and innocent.

That is something of the stark and disturbing picture in the book of Revelation. And it reminds us that it is actually more than a tide, an impersonal force, which opposes the church as we consider what's going on in our world under the title 'Against the Tide in the Power of Weakness'.

The tide we are up against

Some years ago I read a book by a social commentator, Professor Frank Furedi called *Therapy Culture*. He put forward a thesis and backed it up with evidence that we have moved, are moving from a moral culture (of external generally accepted authoritative norms of behaviour which applied to everyone – be it the 'decent thing' according to polite society, Scouts code of conduct, the Ten Commandments or the rules of what the Party expected from good comrades) – to a therapy culture in which the seat of authority of what is right or wrong is about 'feel good'. It is not that there is no 'morality' but that new 'morality' is all

to do with emotions, doing what 'feels right' for us personally and respecting the feelings of others.

Notice 3 things: 1) the source of moral arbitration has moved from external to internal. 2) It means that what's 'right or wrong' will be different for different people – no absolutes. 3) As Christians who believe that humanity is fallen, to place the arbiter of behaviour inside us, sinners, is crazy, and will inevitably lead to calling good evil and evil good.

I often sum up the change like this. As a child listening to conversations among my parents' peers (60 years ago) there was a general agreement that you tried to live a 'decent' life – you didn't cheat etc. But today the general agreement is that the great thing in life above all else is to 'enjoy yourself'. See the move from moral/decent to therapy/enjoy.

Now Furedi's thesis was interesting; it explained a lot of things, but what impressed me was that I found that the Scriptures said that we ought to expect precisely this change of cultural tide when a society moves away from God – the moral society becomes the 'feel good' society. Let me point out three classic New Testament passages.

Romans 1:18-32

Here the change in society is framed in terms of judgment (1:21-24). They are given over to sexual/sensual lusts. I would bracket all that under 'feel good'. And this in turn leads to the unravelling of creation patterns that God made for good. Men start behaving as women and women as men etc.

So 'feel good' undoes 'true good' – and so society suffers self-harm.

Ephesians 4:17-19

Here something of the mechanism of how this change works is described. Only the life of God (v18) can satisfy the human heart. But turning away from him with hardened hearts, impervious to his divine glory, we try to fill our deepest needs through 'feel good'. Note – having lost sensitivity, they 'give themselves over' to sensuality.

2 Timothy 3:1-5

Here we have another take in terms of end-time society. Made in the image of the God who is love, people are defined by what they love. But as Paul describes the people of the last days, first on the list is v2 'lovers of themselves'. Paul knows all about love yourself, me-ism, etc – and summing up what that comes down to v4 is 'lovers of pleasure (feel good) rather than lovers of God'. And Paul's warning here is that many in the church will get on board – compromise. And that is very destructive of God's cause. He starts talking about society (v2) 'People will be...' but ends talking about the church, 'having a form of godliness but denying its power' (to change lives). The one merges into the other. You cannot see where the world ends and the church begins – no contrast, same values! That's where we are!

Now, given the denial of God in the West, it is this cultural change from moral to therapy culture which lies at the back of all kinds of things from

political correctness, much of the so-called equality and diversity agendas, multi-faith services, to the demise of the Labour Party in the move from principled to pragmatic politics. And at the forefront of this cultural tide has been same-sex relationships, the destruction of the traditional family and now transgenderism. 'If I feel I belong to another gender, despite what my body chemistry may say, then I must have the right to

The very fabric of what we have traditionally seen as humanity and human relationships is being dismantled.

belong to that gender – because me feeling comfortable with myself is what matters.' The very fabric of what we have traditionally seen as humanity and human relationships is being dismantled. 'Feel good, therapy culture' is the driving force of the enormous cultural tsunami we are witnessing.

This shift actually turns the world upside down in a way we can find bewildering – a couple of pertinent examples.

Parenting

'Feel good' means that the goal of good parenting has changed. It has changed from seeking to raise 'good kids' (honest, sportsmanship, hardworking etc) to first and foremost kids who 'feel good about themselves/feel comfortable with themselves'. Now we do need to raise confident children – but believe good boys are happy boys, good girls are happy girls. But the current 'feel good' pop-psychology parenting makes self-esteem, not imposing your ideas the top priority. Today good parents make their children feel good. But listen – how are you the parent ever going to know if your

child feels okay about himself/herself? It will only be if they tell you. So who is in charge now? The answer is not the parent but the child! Upside down. Further 'feel good' culture infiltrates the parents so we don't like things like confrontation because that doesn't make us feel positive.

Church

The faithful Bible-believing church used to be thought a bit crazy – our belief in Jesus' resurrection etc – but they are decent people, believe in honesty and marriage and kindness – so it's okay. They are deluded, a bit hypocritical sometimes, a bit starchy sometimes but they contribute positively to society. But with the advent of 'feel good' that has been reversed. In public opinion we are increasingly no longer seen as 'nice' but 'nasty'.

Albert Mohler in his book *We Cannot Be Silent* (subtitle: Speaking truth to a culture redefining sex, marriage, and the very meaning of right and wrong) puts it like this: 'The Christian church has long been understood by the culture at large to be the guardian of what is right and righteous. But now the situation is fundamentally reversed. The culture generally identifies Christians as on the wrong side of morality. Those who hold to biblical teachings concerning human sexuality are now deposed from the position of the moral high ground.' Why is that? It is because we are holding on to a moral framework of external norms of right and wrong, while the culture has adopted 'feel good' is good.

Now this tide is changing a lot of things in society – more widely.

Institutions

It is leading to the diminishing of the church – yes, but it also leading to the diminishing of many institutions in society – institutions with rules and regulations which no longer fit with society's new outlook – scouts/political parties all decreased.

Individualism

The 'feel good' culture focuses on the individual and is leading to an increasingly fragmented society. To some extent this is driven by technology which is very individualised (use of internet, media). This affects the community, people no longer know their neighbours. We live in a mobile society with our cars and phones. You can be alone in your bedroom and part of the anonymous world of the internet.

Church (again)

Yes, the church is diminishing like many other traditional institutions. But having said that we have to recognise that this cultural tsunami is coming right at us because there is no middle ground for us on the fundamentals. There is no middle ground because the gospel is predicated upon a moral view of life – a world where morals are objective because it was made by a holy God who is there. Our real problem as human beings is a moral one – Adam disobeyed. We are sinners who have broken God's law and therefore broken ourselves. Christ came to atone for our sins – to redeem us from the curse of the law (moral). The cross and therefore our message is only understandable in moral terms. To compromise on the moral framework is to lose the gospel and so all we stand for. So it's coming right at us.

To think about...

Now let me suggest a few things to think about:

First, some commentators see what is happening as unprecedented. Al Mohler says: 'The Christian church in the West now faces a set of challenges that exceeds anything it has experienced in the past.'

Mark Sayers in his book *Disappearing Church* argues that it is foolish to think that our secular society has merely reverted to a kind of paganism which simply needs re-evangelising in the way Paul evangelised the pagans of the 1st-century Mediterranean. We live now in a society that has seen Christianity and has said, 'No – we really don't want that'. Our society is not just pagan, it is explicitly anti-Christian. And that being the case we need to realise that just as we would seek to evangelise others, many are specifically seeking to evangelise us – to get us away from Christ, because we are the nasty guys.

Second, this enormous cultural tide is not likely to change any time soon (apart from a direct intervention of God). It's not going to go away. Al Mohler again: 'There is likely to be no conclusion to this moral revolution in our lifetimes, or in the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren.'

And with the mention of children and grandchildren I ought to say that it is of course those who win the hearts of the

young who win the future. The whole agenda of therapy culture is now looked

upon as 'best practice' in our schools. The contrast between what children hear at school and what they hear at church is no longer just a clash over evolution versus creation. And the 'feel good' culture comes over as very kind/loving – whereas church with its moral stance can be portrayed as harsh and unfeeling.

Third, because this tide is so forceful and so alluring, Christians will need to be very secure in their identities –

knowing who they are in Christ if they are not to be swept away. Yes – we believe in election and the preservation of the saints. But God uses means to bring about his purposes – so bedding Christians down securely in their faith, in the love of God will be of immense importance in coming years. And those Christians will need loving, supportive communities of churches.

Fourth, this may sound like exaggerated scaremongering but I think churches and church leaders need to do some thinking about the possibility of faithful Bible churches being banned. The recent proposal in the UK that government officials from Ofsted vet Sunday Schools has thankfully been shelved for the present but it was ominous. It just struck me the other day: We stand for one way of salvation – non-inclusive. We respect other religions but believe they are untrue. We are against abortion. We stand for male headship in the family and leadership in

THE VERY FABRIC OF WHAT WE HAVE TRADITIONALLY SEEN AS HUMANITY AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IS BEING DISMANTLED

the church. We do not approve of same-sex marriage. We believe God made two genders and everything else is ultimately an aberration. In all honesty how long are organisations like ours going to be allowed to carry on? How long will we be allowed in particular to teach children? The answer must be 'not very long'. Are we prepared for that in any way? If a politically correct government shut our building and forbade us to meet what would we do?

Fifth, I wonder whether we ourselves have been affected by therapy/'feel good' culture in our preaching more than we realise. Do we preach the moral law of God? Moral law is out of fashion with the world. Is it out of fashion with us? If so, why? Are we too quick to come with the remedy of Christ before people know their true sickness? In the 1949 revival on the Scottish island of Lewis, Duncan Campbell it seems would often preach only the law, sin and its consequences in public – and save the gospel for after meetings. He kept it for those who saw their need.

The Power of Weakness

Now not only is this tide coming at us – but it is very strong. It holds all the cards. Media, business, politicians are all queuing up to endorse the tide and to crush anyone who expresses an opposing opinion. And we are weak – like a lamb. So where do we turn? Where do we go? Let me make seven statements for you to chew over,

1. We will find power through weakness only as we acknowledge how desperate is our situation.

I think one of the major problems with the evangelical church is that we are over concerned to be positive and that we

misuse the doctrine of God's sovereignty to think that we can always be fixed without too much trouble. I was meeting with some men involved in church revitalisation/rebuilding failing churches. I love small churches and never want to discourage them. But these wise men said, 'Yes, but a time must come when facts are truly faced, when issues aren't avoided.' And what is true for little churches is true for the whole church in this country. It is only when we acknowledge that we are really in trouble that we are in a position for God to deal with us – because he is the God of truth.

2. We will find power through weakness as we turn our desperation into heartfelt prayer.

Often any recognition of our real situation simply translates into adopting a new strategy. Now new strategies have their place, but we have moved perilously close to trusting in strategies rather than in the living God. Here are some striking words from Stuart Olyott's book *Something must be Known and Felt*: 'Today's Christianity is largely composed of doctrine (believing the right things), ethics (behaving the right way) and methodology (doing church and evangelism in the best possible way). It is a three-legged stool. But it is not the same shape as the three-legged stool of God's Word. There we find that methodology is not of any great importance. The three legs on which biblical religion stands are doctrine, ethics and experience.' He is talking about experience of the living God – which methodology can never replace.

When they realised how desperate things really were then in Judges, Israel cried out to the Lord – fervent prayer – and

the living God answered. We have lots of conferences – do we have conferences for prayer?

3. We will find power through weakness as we cling to the truth of the Scriptures

If our situation, society and church, is prophetically portrayed by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:1-5, then we had better take notice of the rest of the chapter, 2 Timothy 3:14-15. As I have said, many will compromise. They will conclude we are against the tide because we are wrong and have misunderstood the Bible. They will come up with a version of Jesus who is a politically correct Saviour who endorses more or less everything rather than being the agenda – setting Lord of all. But that option is not open to us if we are going to be faithful. We say, 'Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.'

4. We will find power through weakness as we recognise how often in Scripture God comes to the aid of the weak in the face of the strong.

As I say, God seems to have laid on my heart the plight of small churches. During 2015 I read through the Bible with an eye to locating verses and situations pertaining to God helping the small and weak. In the Old Testament I found around 180 places. In the New Testament – which surprised me – I found just over 200. (Perhaps I was becoming better at spotting things.)

It's not just David versus Goliath, or some of the battles in which God's people are outnumbered, under-equipped or whatever – it is virtually all of them. Abraham goes after four kings with just 318 men. Jonathan with just his armour-

bearer went against the Philistines saying, 'Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving whether by many or by few' (1 Sam 14:6). Elisha and his servant stood alone against the army of Aram with horses and chariots which had surrounded them – but Elisha the prophet says, 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes and he saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire around Elisha (2 Kings 6). Sennacherib surrounds Jerusalem and derided its defenders with his propaganda of military statistics – but Hezekiah prays and God intervenes. The soldiers come to Gethsemane to arrest Jesus and as he says 'I AM' they fall backwards to the ground and we know he goes willingly to the cross because he could summon 12 legions of angels if he had wanted.

The whole scenario of God coming to the aid of his obedient but overwhelmingly outnumbered powerless people is a rich but marvellously common theme in Scripture – and it's there to encourage us in situations just like the one we face.

5. We will find power in weakness as we grasp that God is glorified most through weak people.

What does the Lord say to Paul wrestling with his thorn in the flesh? 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' And Paul fills that out, 'Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest upon me.' We have a terrible tendency to take the glory to ourselves – that's why God reduced Gideon's army to just 300. He had told Gideon, 'You have too many men to deliver Midian into your hands. In order that

Israel may not boast against me' – send all those home who are afraid. And of course it is because God is most glorified in weakness that he uses a Lamb against that ferocious dragon. The weakness of God is stronger, not only than man's strength, but all the powers of darkness!

6. We will find power in weakness as we recognise that our all-powerful God is also infinitely wise and creative.

God hears the prayers of his people. Frequently in Scripture as God's people face impossible situations the Lord meets with them to give them a totally new approach to things. We can think of Joshua, Gideon, David and more. Perhaps the Billy Graham crusades were right for the 1950s/60s. Perhaps Alpha / Christianity Explored were the way for the 1990s / 2000s.

But what about now in this situation which is rapidly becoming like nothing we have ever faced before in the West? The encouragement is that the Scripture tells us that the Sovereign God has a way – yes, despair of our situation, despair of ourselves, but don't despair of God. Mark Sayers in his book *Disappearing Church* appears to advocate that it might be right for in some ways the church to do the unthinkable and withdraw from society for a period – to reconstruct ourselves and be renewed by God and then to return. I'm not sure he's right. But if God gives people over – and lets the prodigal go his own way until he's learned his lesson – are there some times when the church has to do the same – to refuse to cast our pearls before swine?

7. We will find power through weakness as we are prepared to lovingly suffer in a Christlike way.

Here we are back at the Lamb facing the dragon – and we are called to follow in his footsteps. We take up the cross and follow him. This is another element which Paul highlights in 2 Timothy 3. Yes, the society of the last days is such that 'all who would live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution'. And Paul highlights his own sufferings in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra – but of course those were the places of breakthrough, where Paul and his friends were able to grow the kingdom and establish churches. For Christians to be willing to suffer they will need to be clear and confident in their identity.

For all its power, secularism and therapy culture have their vulnerable points. Under God there are advantages in what the world sees as disadvantages. We can go against the tide in the power of weakness.

But the temptation will be to go away and say to yourselves, 'But the tide isn't really as bad as he made out – the dragon and his companions aren't so bad.' ■

WE CAN GO AGAINST THE TIDE IN THE POWER OF WEAKNESS.

This paper was originally given at the Equipped317 Conference last summer.

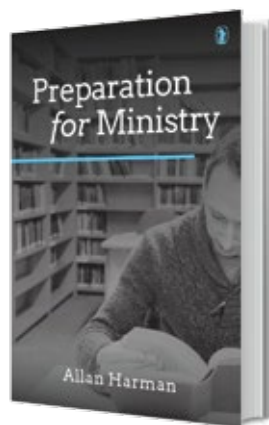
John Benton is the pastor of Chertsey Street Baptist Church in Guildford.



Book Review

Preparation for Ministry

Author: Allan Harman
Publisher: Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2015
ISBN: 978-1-84871-623-0



This is an unusual book: the four appendices are longer than the text. By far the two largest are Spurgeon's 'The Minister's Self-Watch' from *Lectures to My Students* and a lecture by B B Warfield delivered to his Princeton students entitled 'The Religious Life of Theological Students'. The first is aimed at the man who is studying regarding his future ministry; the second, concerning his life in the seminary, and the impact this will have on his future godliness and usefulness. These are worth putting into the hands of any man contemplating entering the ministry. They give much good counsel, and warn against professionalism, dryness and pride.

What of the book itself? This does the same. The author speaks of the call to the ministry, and then how to choose where to study, and how to prepare oneself for it. He then gives advice on how to profit from the course. He moves on into the early

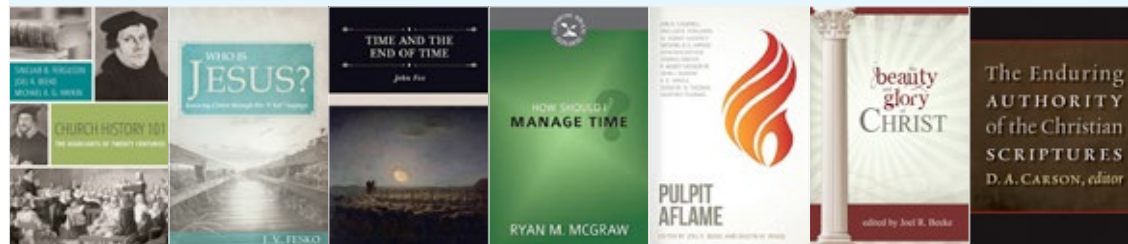
days of the ministry, and a chapter on 'staying fresh'.

All this is in just over forty small pages, so it can be seen straightaway that his aim is not to be exhaustive. Yet there is a lot of good counsel in these pages: spiritual, practical and sane. He covers books to be read, sermon preparation, and much else. I would highly recommend every prospective or new pastor to read this. Those who have been longer in ministry, and those who may be training other men, will also benefit from it.

To conclude with one sample quotation to give the flavour (many could have been selected): 'Good preaching requires good planning. You need to know the Christian maturity of your congregation and at what level you should pitch your preaching. It is always best to err on the side of simplicity and directness.' Sane, practical, and spiritual. ■

New Books

The following books have been published recently and are recommended for your attention:



- Sinclair B Ferguson, Joel R Beeke, Michael A G Haykin, *Church History 101. The Highlights of Twenty Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016) ISBN 978-1-60178-476-6. This is an extremely useful little pocket guide to church history.
- J V Fesko, *Who is Jesus? Knowing Christ through His 'I Am' Sayings* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016) ISBN 978-1-60178-487-2.
- John Fox, *Time and the End of Time* (Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2016) ISBN 978-1-60178-489-6. In our busy times, it is worth reading this exposition of Ephesians 5:16 and Deuteronomy 32:29 by this Puritan author.
- Joel R Beeke, Dustin W Bengte, *Pulpit Aflame* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016) ISBN 978-1-60178-465-0.
- Joel R Beeke (ed.), *The Beauty and Glory of God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016) ISBN 978-1-60178-480-3

In connection with this last mentioned book, the publication of the following major book should be mentioned:

- D A Carson (ed.), *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016) ISBN 978-8028-6576-2. This 1240 page (!) book by 37 contributors covers in 36 chapters a thorough study of biblical authority and a full range of issues connected to it.

A smaller and contemporary booklet on the same subject is:

- Ryan M McGraw, *How Should I Manage Time?* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016) ISBN 978-1-60178-469-8.

We are not able to supply these books; please consult your own bookshop.

HELP! I CANT FORGIVE



A SERIES OF STUDIES ON FORGIVENESS

Preface to the series

As you start to read this article, you probably do so because you recognise a need. Seldom does one consider the subject of forgiveness from a purely theoretical perspective. Forgiveness is something that affects each one of us and challenges us.

All of us will experience a major struggle with forgiveness at some point in our lives. We are continually called upon to forgive one another's thoughtlessness or carelessness,

and yet sometimes the injustices we suffer or injuries we receive make it harder to overlook the offence. As a consequence, bitterness results, relationships are broken, and we may suffer bouts of depression, anger, or worse.

For some, forgiveness would seem almost impossible. Consider the case of a young lady suffering sexual abuse by family members in childhood that has left lasting emotional scars; or the case of the man whose property has been

continually subjected to acts of vandalism. How are they to forgive those who have wrecked their lives? Do they have an obligation to forgive? In such cases it is no longer a matter of saying, 'It's all right, just forget it.' One lives with the consequences and to forgive may be very hard indeed. Is the Bible realistic in its demands?

The origins of this series of studies go back to a phone call I received as a pastor many years ago. Anne (not her real name) had recently lost her mother. She rang me to say that she was greatly troubled by visions she was having of her mother. These disturbed her greatly. As I drove over to see her I was not at all clear as to what to expect, nor how to deal with it. Expecting it to be part of a process of bereavement I prepared to share verses bringing comfort and assurance. But, if I had expected grief and sadness, I was to be shocked by Anne's response. What came out was anger and bitterness.

It appeared that her mother had been a cruel and vindictive woman. Anne, now in her thirties, remembered with absolute clarity the abuse she had received and the constant acts of cruelty. Having done her chores before going out to school, she would be met by a slap round the head upon returning for having omitted some small detail. All this had built up deep resentment in Anne, and now her mother had died without ever having to say sorry or facing up to her continual cruelty – actions that had left enduring marks, blighting Anne's life. Her mother had 'got away with it'. Anne's problem was the deep sense of injustice coupled with the hurt she felt. She could not forget, let alone forgive. The hallucinations she was experiencing were a product of the anger within.

Around the same time my wife and I were seeking to help a young mother with complex problems. We discovered that she had experienced multiple acts of sexual abuse from her father and her brothers as a child. Eventually, her father had been arrested and charged, only to be let off by the court when her mother lied to defend him and claimed that the charges were false and the product of her daughter's imagination. Betrayed by all whom she had reason to trust she eventually met a young man and married. Now that marriage was falling apart due in part to her inability to relate to him. Could she forgive those who had abused her? Should she forgive them even though they were unrepentant? How could she deal with the bitterness that lay within her?

In quoting those two examples I have followed the pattern of many books on the subject of forgiveness that treat it primarily as a counselling matter. The result is that in many cases one is left with a series of techniques interspersed with copious illustrations and stories. The approach in these studies is different. Throughout we shall be considering Bible passages that deal with the issue of forgiveness from different perspectives. We shall study God's forgiveness as our pattern. It will take us to the very heart of the gospel and thus to the core of the new covenant. Our study will lead us to consider how justice relates to forgiveness and whether the concept of vengeance has any place.

But, lest it be thought that these studies are going to be purely theoretical, rest assured that we shall learn how to forgive, the nature of forgiveness, and understand that failure to forgive is a sin.

1. Introduction: The need of forgiveness

No book of religion except the Bible teaches that God completely forgives sin, but there it is frequently taught... (Evangelical Dictionary of Theology)

The idea of the forgiveness of sins is central in the Christian message.

Perhaps no other theme better sums up the content and reaches of the gospel than this (H D McDonald).

It is the new element in a faith which tells, and Christianity overcame by means of its message of forgiveness in which it had no rivals (H R Mackintosh).

Forgiveness is one of the hallmarks of true Christianity.

The world expects Christians to forgive as it is central to our faith. The Bible proclaims forgiveness to be at the very heart of its message:

'Behold the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they will all know Me, from the least of them to

the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more' (Jer 31:31-34).

Jesus also emphasised it in the prayer he taught:

'For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' (Matt 6:14-15).

If forgiveness is so important and central, why is it so little stressed? When salvation is spoken of, we are more inclined to speak of the 'new birth', or of being 'justified', or simply of being 'saved', than

we are to speak of it in terms of having our sins forgiven. Possibly the very term has become devalued. At first sight, the thought of having our sins forgiven does not mean that much, especially in a day when the talk is of our need of spiritual power, signs and wonders. Maybe we have lost the wonder of what it is to have all our sins forgiven.

In the world there is great disagreement over the need of forgiveness. Living, as we do, in a post-Christian age, men and women are not as acutely aware of their sinfulness as in previous generations. Where once there was almost universal acceptance of the moral standard set forth in the Ten Commandments, many now live in complete ignorance of these, or have embraced a philosophy that denies their relevance and absolute enduring validity.

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Forgiveness assumes certain presuppositions:

- » a conscience alarmed by sin;
- » the reality of guilt on account of sin;
- » the existence of a God who sees and will judge sin.

Man today does not seek forgiveness as he sees no need of it, so he has done nothing to require it. There is disagreement as to man's fundamental need. When one denies a personal Creator to whom one is answerable, whose laws must be obeyed, then man's situation is completely misconceived. The modern view is summed up by H D McDonald:

Sin does not so much need to be forgiven as destroyed by eradicating its psychological or sociological causes. And this, the reformer thinks, can be brought about by the evolution of a new and higher type of humanity ... If sin is conceived as an infirmity, or a mistake, or ignorance, or merely a stage in man's development, forgiveness would not be, as Christ's gospel declares it to be, an imperative of religious experience.

The Bible uses very strong and graphic terms to describe the awful reality of human wrongdoing.

In substance it is an attitude of resistance to God; in result it is a state of moral perversion which merits the judgment of God. All sin is an act against God. It is not just mere disregard of some legal requirement, nor the transgression of some ethical code. 'Against thee, thee only, have I sinned' (Ps 51:4). Sin is in essence a rupture in the personal relationship between God

and man. It is a severance of the unseen ties between him and us (H D McDonald).

It is on account of the shallowness of our thinking on spiritual things, our ignorance of the true and living God, and the ease with which we seek to pacify our consciences by other devices, that forgiveness is thought of such little value. Sadly, we do not see our sin and thus neglect the only remedy for the peril we are in.

Though there is nothing more commonly said and owned, than that all men are sinners, and that all the acceptance of a sinner with God is through Jesus Christ; yet I can assure you, that when a person sees and knows what it is to be a sinner, and know what God is, it is a wonderful difficulty to believe that it is possible that such a sinner and such a God should ever meet in peace (Robert Traill).

One may think that man's conscience would surely tell him to seek forgiveness. This is to mistake the way that conscience works apart from the enlightening of the Holy Spirit. There is no forgiveness in nature. Man's conception of natural law governing all things makes him deny the possibility of forgiveness. Forgiveness cannot be discerned from merely observing God's works in nature. Conscience may accurately judge us to have sinned, but as John Owen points out:

'Let self-righteousness be enthroned, and natural conscience desires no more; it is satisfied and pacified.'

In truth, forgiveness is not obvious. Emil Brunner puts it this way:

'Forgiveness is the very opposite of anything which can be taken for granted. Nothing is less obvious than forgiveness ... But if any truth is obvious certainly it is not forgiveness but judgment.'

So we see that forgiveness is neither commonly sought, nor greatly emphasised. Even in Christian circles little has been written on the subject directly, compared with other facets of salvation.

What has been published is to be found mostly in the realm of counselling, where too often forgiveness is taught as a discipline or technique, with little theological foundation. As a consequence, some grave errors are entertained and apparent conflicts between forgiveness and justice are left unresolved. Not only is this dangerous for the counselee, but leaves the way open for the confusion of biblical terms and worldly philosophy.

In this series we shall be considering forgiveness from many angles. We shall endeavour to answer these questions:

According to Scripture, God should be served in special acts of worship in families today in the following three ways:

- » What exactly is forgiveness?
- » Am I obligated to forgive those who do not ask forgiveness of me?
- » Is forgiveness contrary to justice?
- » How can I deal with grudges?
- » How can I forgive the grave hurts and injustices that have damaged me permanently?

- » Is there an obligation to make restitution?
- » How does God view an unforgiving spirit?
- » How do I go about seeking forgiveness?
- » Is there ever a place for vengeance?
- » What are we to make of the 'imprecatory psalms' – those psalms which call down God's wrath?
- » Have I ever a right to prosecute someone?
- » Is hatred ever justified?

I trust as we go through the series we shall find answers to these and other questions, and also learn to put into practice this wonderful grace of forgiveness.

Of all the terms used for God's actions in salvation, it is this that is to have the challenging parallel in our own conduct. We are not commanded to justify others, to atone for them, to redeem them or save them, but we are commanded to forgive them. In fact, our Lord goes as far as to say:

'And when you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your

Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses' (Mark 11:26).

2. What do you mean, Forgive?

It is possibly because we use the word so frequently that we all assume we know what we mean by forgiveness. It is vital that at the outset we attempt to understand what is meant by the term and what forgiveness involves. Here are some attempts:

'The word "forgive" means to wipe the slate

clean, to pardon, to cancel a debt. When we wrong someone, we seek his or her forgiveness in order for the relationship to be restored. It is important to remember that forgiveness is not granted because a person deserves to be forgiven. Instead, it is an act of love, mercy, and grace.'²

'Forgiveness: act or state of ceasing to feel resentment or seek retribution over wrong committed by another.'³

'To forgive someone is to forswear resentment, anger, or other reactions to their having done something that justifies such responses.'⁴

A key verse which provides an excellent breakdown of the essential ingredients is Leviticus 19:18.

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.

Here we find three elements:

1. You shall not take vengeance.
2. You shall not bear a grudge.
3. You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Each of these takes us one step deeper. Vengeance is the outward action of extracting a penalty for the offence. Bearing a grudge is the inward attitude

of resentment and ill will towards the offender. Loving one's neighbour is the positive grace that desires the very best for the offender and governs our actions towards him. So, although this verse does not contain the word forgiveness, I believe it provides three essential ingredients which will inform our study. It also enables us to distinguish the stages of

forgiveness. If someone should deliberately stamp on my foot, my punching them on the nose would be to take vengeance. However, I don't resort to such tactics, but go away muttering and imagining what I would like to do to the fellow; that is bearing a grudge. However, if I look back and see that he has twisted his ankle and is in difficulty, and I go and assist him, paying for a taxi to take him home, then that is love.

TRUE FORGIVENESS IS AN ISSUE OF THE HEART, AND NOT MERELY ONE CONCERNED WITH ACTIONS

Whilst civility and decency may stop us taking revenge, a stronger motive is required to prevent us bearing a grudge. Nothing short of a divine influence, however, can replace feelings of hurt and injustice with genuine selfless love for the offender.

At the outset we can see that true forgiveness is an issue of the heart, and not merely one concerned with actions.

So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses (Matt 18:35).

² <http://www.allaboutgod.com/definition-for-forgiveness-faq.htm>

³ Random House Word Menu © 2010.

⁴ Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, © 2005.

I do not claim that Leviticus 19:18 encompasses all that is involved in forgiveness, as the element of reconciliation is not there, but what it does include is vital in understanding true forgiveness.

Are we to forgive those who do not repent and do not seek forgiveness?

This is a controversial area. Some maintain that, as God does not forgive us unless we repent, the issue is clear: there can be no forgiveness without repentance. On the other hand there are those who claim that the Bible teaches 'unconditional forgiveness' as an aspect of unconditional love.

This disagreement is dealt with in a recently published book by Dr E S Williams, *Christ or Therapy?* In his book Dr Williams takes to task the modern counselling fraternity over their view of depression and the answer to life's problems. Of particular concern to him is the widespread acceptance in both the Christian and non-Christian worlds of the concept of unconditional love.

The concept of unconditional love, Dr Williams argues, only exists in a mythological world in which there is no sin, no evil and no law, in which people are free to live as they like without fear of judgment and punishment. In the real world, unconditional love is no more and no less than licentiousness – an attitude that denies the accepted rules and morals that govern human behaviour. It is an

attitude that allows us to do what we want without sanction or control.⁵

The idea of unconditional love is closely related to that of unconditional forgiveness, as Williams notices:

'It is now widely believed that Christians should forgive all who offend against them. The idea of unconditional forgiveness, encouraged by the Christian counselling movement, has almost become part of the Christian faith. Those who do not express total forgiveness are seen to be harbouring bitterness in their hearts. Unconditional forgiveness, or total forgiveness, is promoted as a therapeutic act that helps Christians achieve inner healing.'⁶

This understanding of forgiveness is unbiblical and damaging according to Dr Williams, and by its tolerance of wrong has a tendency to deny the need for reform and reconciliation, as he states: Forgiveness and reconciliation always go together. *Indeed, the purpose of forgiveness is to restore the relationship that has been broken by sin. Only God's redeemed people know the wonder of forgiveness from sin. While God's forgiveness is undeserved, it certainly is not unconditional, for the Lord's forgiveness is offered only to those who confess their sin and truly repent. 'If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land' (2 Chron 7:14).*

*The condition is clear: 'If my people repent, then I will forgive their sin.' God's forgiveness is conditional upon repentance. Scripture makes it clear – if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8-10). This is God's Truth. This is God's way of forgiveness and there is no other.'*⁷

Concerning our responsibility to unbelievers, Dr Williams says, *'Certainly Christians are commanded to love their enemies (in terms of pity and sympathy) and to pray for them, but not to declare absolution from sin, which is God's prerogative. To take this step may be well-intentioned, but it is mistaken.'*⁸

Now, my reason for quoting quite extensively from Dr Williams' book is that it states the case quite fully and seems to present an unanswerable case to anyone holding that Christians are obligated to forgive, whether or not the individual offender is a believer and whether or not they have sought forgiveness – but is it as clear as Dr Williams makes it?

Firstly, let us agree that it is not our place to pronounce absolution from sin. That is indeed God's prerogative. It was understood correctly by Jesus' hearers as implying his being divine:

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven you.'

And some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, 'Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' (Mark 2:5-7).

But is this what we are considering when obeying the command to forgive? Are we forgiving their debts towards God, or their debts to us?

One thing is certain: we have no justification for taking vengeance, bearing a grudge or failing to act in love towards any.

And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us (Luke 11:4a).

Sin, as a transgression of God's law, can only be forgiven by God himself.

But let us assume that we are not to forgive where there is no repentance. What are we to do then? How are we to act towards that person? It is here that the

verse we began with, Leviticus 19:18, is so helpful. Are we free to take vengeance? No. Are we at liberty to bear a grudge towards them and harbour ill will? Clearly not. May we hate them and act in a way that is detrimental to their ultimate good? Absolutely not. Now, if you take these three elements, not taking vengeance, not bearing a grudge, and yet loving your neighbour as yourself, have we not actually encompassed most of what people mean when they speak of unconditional forgiveness?

But what is missing? Reconciliation. There can be no relationship unless there is

⁵ Williams, p69.

⁶ Williams, p79.

⁷ Williams, p97.

⁸ Williams, p81.

agreement and a desire to live in peace. We can desire reconciliation, and can show our willingness to be reconciled, but it takes both parties to achieve it.

Whether this resolves the disagreement over this aspect of forgiveness, one thing is certain: we have no justification for taking vengeance, bearing a grudge or failing to act in love towards any.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matt 5:43-45).

But you might observe that Leviticus 19:18 says: *You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.*

3. Why should I forgive? The command to forgive

The tendency of most books on the subject of forgiveness is to focus on the therapeutic benefits of forgiveness for the one forgiving. The individual who visits a counsellor may well be suffering many symptoms due to hurts inflicted by others and injustices sustained. Desiring revenge and bearing grudges can have very serious consequences for our mental and emotional health. Forgiveness is therefore seen as a very valuable approach to the relieving of these symptoms.

R T Kendall in his book *Total Forgiveness* describes his own experience: *The wrong that I believe was done to me hit just about every area of my life: my family, my ministry, my very sense of self-worth.'*

He goes on to say, *'Which do I prefer – the peace or the bitterness? I couldn't have it both ways. I began to see that I was the great loser – the impoverished one – by not forgiving. My bitterness wasn't damaging anyone but myself.'*

Some, as we shall examine in more detail later, go as far as to counsel forgiving God if that helps us. What is often overlooked in this approach is that forgiveness is presented to us as a command in Scripture. The verse we have considered, Leviticus 19:18, is part of the Law and not merely presented as suggestions for healthy living. God's word is clear:

And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses (Mark 11:26).

This verse is found in the context of teaching concerning prayer that God hears. What is indicated is the attitude of heart and manner of life that is acceptable to God. It is amazingly without qualification: if you have anything against anyone, forgive.

The consequence of failure to forgive is that we shall not be forgiven. This Jesus stated on more than one occasion. Forgiving others their debts to us is to be

the reflex response to knowing our sins forgiven. Peter on one occasion asked how often he should forgive his brother. Then Peter came to him and said, *'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven' (Matt 18:21-22).*

Some would lessen the force of this by limiting it to believers (ie brothers) but I am not so sure that we should; there is always the danger of falling into the mentality of the Jews to whom Jesus addressed the parable of the good Samaritan in answer to the query, *'Who is my neighbour?'* (Luke 10:29 – quoting, significantly, Leviticus 19:18).

Jesus goes on to tell a parable: *Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you*

owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So my heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses (Matt 18:23-35).

WHAT WE GATHER FROM OUR LORD'S WORDS IS THAT FORGIVENESS IS A REQUIREMENT, A COMMAND, AND TO DISOBEY IT IS TO BE GUILTY OF SIN

What we gather from our Lord's words is that forgiveness is a requirement, a command, and to disobey it is to be guilty of sin. We shall be considering this in greater depth when we look later at the sin of unforgiveness. Whatever the difficulties and whatever the supposed benefits for us personally, forgiveness is first and foremost an act of obedience. Has God asked too much of us? Have we debts owed us that are so large that we cannot forgive them? How is it possible and what are the obstacles we face in forgiving? To these we now turn. ■

(to be continued in the next issue of RT).

Phil Roberts is pastor of Hartshill Bible Church, Stoke-on-Trent, UK.



BAPTISM

IT'S ABOUT JESUS!

Some time ago, as I was reflecting upon the Scriptures in preparation for the baptism of one of our members, I was struck by this truth: 'Baptism is not about yourself – it's all about Jesus!' Let me explain.

For years now I have observed that people tend to approach the matter of baptism from a subjective point of view – from the point of 'me', and how I feel about it, and what my church tradition has to say about it, rather than submitting to the plain teaching and command of Christ in this matter.

The imperative of baptism (Matt 28:18-20) is trivialised when we make baptism a subjective matter. Typical language which reflects this subjective mindset is reflected by words such as these: 'I feel that I need (or need not) to be baptised.' The thought patterns behind these feelings are varied:

- » Some feel the pressure of baptism in accordance with the rules of the church or even perhaps of the Scriptures themselves. Others feel that they will not be pressured by the rules of the church or even by Scripture.
- » Some feel that their infant baptism is a true baptism, irrespective of what Scripture teaches, or what the Lord Jesus has plainly commanded and practised himself.
- » Others who have been baptised as babies will feel that they will go against their parents' commitment by being baptised again as adults.
- » Others feel embarrassed by the thought that they should stand before a church and give their testimony. On this basis a number of people have refused to be baptised.
- » Some may feel that since a well-known person in the church has never submitted to biblical baptism, this also constitutes a reason for them not to be baptised.
- » Still others say, 'Well, I have seen people baptised and a number of those I have seen baptised have fallen away and therefore I feel that baptism isn't that significant after all.'
- » Others may say the same thing in a different way: 'I don't feel

that I should be baptised – just now in case I fall away.’ It goes without saying that baptism should never be considered lightly. It should only be considered by those who have truly been born again.

Let me stop here and point out that at every point people engage in an inward conversation. It is all very feeling-centred and in the end the doctrine of baptism is all about ‘me’.

I challenge you to rethink your approach to the matter of baptism, by putting the Lord Jesus and his Word at the centre of your thinking and feeling.

If you are a true Christian, baptism is not about you. It is even less about how you feel about it. It is all about God and his Son Jesus and what he has commanded YOU concerning it!

Baptism: essential or non-essential to salvation?

Before I move on I must settle one more matter. Many good Christian people point out that baptism is not essential to salvation.

However, just because it is not essential to salvation, some have concluded that it is optional, and therefore it is said (quietly to yourself) that you can make up your mind concerning it. I submit that this is not a helpful conclusion at all.

True, baptism in and of itself does not save. However, New Testament baptism is always connected to salvation. Those that believe are baptised! They are not saved because they are baptised. They are

baptised because they are saved!

So, we cannot separate salvation from baptism, even though we need to be careful not to invert the order. The New Testament pattern is this: baptism always follows salvation, and in that sense it is important that we obediently observe the pattern given us in the Scriptures.

Let no man separate what God has joined together! Do not let your subjective feelings or church tradition deceive you. You must do what is right according to the plain teaching of God’s Word.

Further fundamental questions

I challenge you to stop right here and to ask yourself what you would do with the fact that Jesus himself was baptised (Matt 3:13-17).

- » what do you do with the fact that he commanded all that would believe upon him to be baptised (Matt 28:18-20)?
- » What do you make of the fact that the New Testament Church knows nothing of un-baptised believers?
- » What about the fact that baptism is so closely connected to conversion (Acts 2:38-41)?

Baptism is giving glory to God!

Baptism is not about you – it’s all about Jesus. In his great love he laid down his life for you, granting you new life in him! You are baptised because you are his work of grace.

If perchance you had decided to be converted, then it might be reasonable to expect that you might also decide to be baptised or not to be baptised.

But you know better than that!

You certainly weren’t born again by your own decision (John 1:12-13). God the Father chose you (Eph 1:4); Jesus paid the price of your sin (Eph 1:7); the Holy Spirit made you alive even when you were dead in your sins and transgressions (Eph 2:5; cf. John 3:1-8).

Your salvation is all of God and therefore your baptism should be a testimony to the glory of God. Your baptism is not about you. Your baptism is not simply to provide you with a ‘heavenly insurance policy’ or to satisfy the tradition or expectations of the church or to fulfil requirements for church membership. Your baptism is all about Jesus!

Four ways in which you will glorify God in your baptism

1. You will glorify God through your obedience. Whenever you obey what he commands, you give glory to God. So when he says, ‘Repent ... be baptised’, then you not only obey his Word, but you obey him. It is not just something that you feel strongly about (you may actually not feel it!), but it is a principled, outward demonstration of obedience. This brings glory to God.
2. You will glorify God through proclaiming his forgiveness. When you are baptised, you say to the world ‘God has dealt with my sin. I am forgiven. I did not forgive myself. God forgave me! All glory to God! It’s all about God.’
3. You will glorify God through manifesting the new life which you have received! When you become a Christian, you inherit new life and a new citizenship.

You have become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). To this you testify in your baptism. Could there be a better outward testimony of such an inward spiritual change? The new believer goes down into the water, and rises out of the water, illustrating that the old things are dead and buried. Rising out of the water the new believer says ‘Everything has become new.’ Through believer’s baptism you praise God for your new life and the people who witness your baptism see that and they praise God for what they see. Outsiders see that and they are helped to understand the meaning of true conversion in a powerful way. Glory is brought to God in every way. Ask yourself, ‘How could infant baptism possibly illustrate this powerful, symbolic burial and resurrection with Christ?’

4. You will glorify God by identifying with Christ and the body of Christ! Baptism not only means identification with Christ and with that which Christ has done for us in his death, burial and resurrection. In baptism you are also baptised into that which Jesus loves most, namely his body, the church. By one Spirit we are baptised into one body (1 Cor 12:13). We consciously follow the Lamb in the fellowship of his church – our baptised brothers and sisters. It’s all about him and not about ourselves!

Therefore, let us never forget that baptism was commanded by Christ, and it is an ordinance for all his New Testament people. So if you consider yourself a true believer, then you would want to obey him.

It’s not about you. It is all about Jesus! ■

Joachim Rieck is Pastor of Eastside Baptist Church, Windhoek, Namibia



Update on Recent Conferences

The table gives an overview of conferences held in various locations in South Africa. The total number of books distributed since 2006 now stands at 88,889.

COUNTRY	LOCATION	DELEGATES	BOOKS Sold & Free
South Africa	Mbhokota	24	355
	Daveyrtton	56	753
	Soweto	43	395
	Estcourt	67	183
	East London	20	250
	Queenstown	61	564
	Bloemfontein	24	308

 Cambridge Baptist Church



Report from the Queenstown and East London Conferences:

These conferences took place in these two cities in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The suitable and central venue in Queenstown was Queenstown Baptist Church. The local organiser was Luan Goosen, who for more than 15 years has been a missionary to the Xhosa people in the area. He speaks the Xhosa language fluently. Luan runs Bible Schools in different locations in the Eastern Cape throughout the year, teaching many pastors the Doctrines of Grace.

The main speakers in both conferences were Gary Brady, pastor of Child's Hill Baptist Church in the UK, and Sihle Xulu, associate pastor of Birchleigh Baptist Church in Kempton Park, South Africa. Nico van Zyl served as the acting APC Conference Manager and Rebecca Masekela was the sales and admin lady. Both of the latter are members of Birchleigh Baptist Church (pastored by Irving Steggle, one of the founders and a director of APC).

The number of delegates in Queenstown was 61, a very encouraging number for a first-time conference. The delegates came from widely varying (theological) backgrounds.

Cambridge Baptist Church provided a spacious and very suitable venue for the

three day conference in East London. Twenty delegates attended, most of them from a Pentecostal background.

The theme for both conferences was 'The Biblical Pastor' followed by a third day in East London on 'The Conscience'. The addresses were well received. The Q&A sessions reflected the great need for these conferences, the teaching and the practical application as shown by the following examples of questions asked:

- » How can we be sure that we preach Christ and him crucified to our congregations in the light of all the confusion and modern prophecies?
- » Some pastors participate in slaughtering animals for the ancestors when their family visits them and they are subject to pressure. How do we handle this situation?
- » Should we read only the Bible and not any other books?

The books on offer by APC are all reformed in their doctrinal position, and most, if not all, of the titles would be obtainable from only a few local bookstores. Book sales were very good despite the lack of English, showing the delegates' hunger for sound doctrine. ■

Kenya

Keith Underhill sent us this report about his recent visit to Kenya:



 *Trinity Baptist Church Nairobi*

I was the founding pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, Nairobi (Kenya) from 1978 and remained as a resident pastor there until November 2015. Now living in Liverpool (UK) with my wife and two children, I hope to be able to make visits back 'home' to Kenya to encourage the brethren. I recently returned from one such visit (3 – 28 September).

I taught for six days in our Trinity Pastors' Course (TPC), the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit and Preaching, to the six men who were present. This is a 3-year course of study through the various theological disciplines, involving coming to Nairobi six times a year for teaching, and then going back to the place of ministry laden with books and a file of photocopied



 *Girls of Kamketo Trinity Secondary School, Pokot North*

material! Scores of men have been trained over the years and now minister in various parts of Kenya. There is a great need for such in-depth training where false teaching abounds.

The first 10 days I spent in Nairobi teaching and preaching twice both Sundays. Since I left almost a year ago the Lord has continued to bless the church, regularly adding to the church such as are being saved. There are now more than 110 members, more than half of whom are young adults. Murungi Igweta is the only full-time pastor, assisted by Eric Abwao. I remain a pastor officially, something made possible by the constant use of the electronic media. Please pray for Murungi as there is a very heavy load of responsibility on his shoulders – the regular ministry, pastoring young adults with all their needs and problems, and

being involved in the various churches throughout the country that have been started through TBC.

In a remote part of north-west Kenya along the border with Uganda lies the mountainous region of Pokot North. Here I visited from 15 to 26 September together with brother Cliff Barton, who is from the same church in Liverpool, and who is one of the trustees of the charity TRAIN(Kenya). Christianity began to be introduced into this area only about 40 years ago. There are still yet more remote areas where there are no churches. TBC officially began work here in 2000 and there are now 14 places where there is preaching of the gospel with about 150 baptised believers. The six trained men ministering here, three native Pokot brethren, and three 'internal missionaries' we have sent from other parts of Kenya



📷 Delegates at the Reformed Baptist Association of Kenya (RBAK) held at Osani, 23-26 September 2016

feel overwhelmed by the spiritual and material needs. In addition to the churches, there are 11 primary schools and two secondary schools that we sponsor. This affords wonderful opportunities to bring regularly the true gospel to a couple of thousand children. This is especially true in the boarding secondary schools where we preach each Sunday to all the students.

The last five days we spent in the small village of Osani in the far south-west corner of Kenya near Lake Victoria, where the small church hosted the annual meetings of the Reformed Baptist Association of Kenya (RBAK). The RBAK basically links those who have been trained in the TPC. There were delegates from 13 of the 19 member churches present, with a number of observers. To prevent Nairobi being seen as the HQ, a different member-church hosts

it each year and its pastor becomes the chairman for the RBAK that year. We are all agreed on the 1689 Baptist Confession as expressing our faith. The topic that constantly surfaces is the support of pastors. Most churches give nothing to their pastor(s). This is proving a stubborn mind-set to overcome.

These days continue to be days of freedom and opportunity in Kenya. The internet is a powerful tool, not only for false teaching, but also for the doctrines of grace. Many young adults had all but given up on 'church', not being able to find anywhere where the Word of God was taken seriously, until they were directed by the internet. Please pray especially for TBC, Nairobi and Pastor Murungi, in the pivotal role of spreading the Reformed Faith throughout Kenya and beyond. Please see also www.trainkenya.com where Keith's regular reports are to be found. ■



'God's Glory: Our Joy' Conference A Good Day Spent Thinking of the Best Day!

John Palmer (Leigh), Greater Manchester sent the following report of this annual conference:

Christians from a number of churches gathered as usual on the second Saturday in October at the Emmaus Christian Centre in Warrington. They were there for the 17th annual 'God's Glory: Our Joy' conference.

This year's theme was 'Waiting and Working for Christ's Return'. The main speaker was David Last of Forest Baptist Church in Leytonstone. In two sessions he provoked our thoughts and inspired our hearts. Christ has purchased the church with his own blood to be his bride. God has always planned a marriage between himself in Christ and the new humanity in Christ – the groom and bride. He challenged us, are our churches full of hope, and rejoicing, and love, in the light of this? Does the way we celebrate the Lord's Supper sound the joyous note of 'Until he comes'?

How is the bride to prepare for her wedding day? First of all we know that we are part of, united to, Christ – his co-worker in the New Creation, here, as we gather in those who will be his perfect bride. We will be clothed on that day with

'the righteous deeds of the saints' (Rev 19:6). We are not to be obsessed with, as any bride should not, about our size and weight, if our Bridegroom considers us beautiful!

Crawford Gribben lectures in history at Queen's University, Belfast. He flew over to give us a meaty and enlightening paper on John Owen's eschatology. Owen spent much of his life trying to fit biblical prophecy in Revelation to the events of his day. While the Puritans were in the ascendancy, this seemed possible. When they were defeated at the Restoration in 1660, he had to have a major rethink. In the end, he concluded that we must look forward to Christ's return as the purpose of all prophecy. It is sobering how a man who could write with such close and measured judgment about many deep theological truths could be so haywire on eschatology.

Stephen Rees of Grace Baptist, Stockport, concluded the conference with a sermon on 1 Corinthians 3. As we seek to build churches, we must correctly answer four questions. What is the church for? It is the

place where God lives by his Spirit. Where do we start in building it? With Christ, he binds all together. What does it cost to build a church? Much more if we want it to endure, rather than to have it all burnt up on the Last Day. How do we keep from discouragement in the work? By knowing that what we do for Christ will last for eternity.

This was as always a heart-warming time of teaching and fellowship. Come to next year's if you can! In the meantime, why not access the talks at www.ggoj.org.uk? There was also a follow-up time on the following Friday, for church leaders, giving a useful opportunity for practical consideration of some of the issues raised ■

Rev W Vernon Higham (1926 – 2016)

On 14 September 2016, the Lord called home William Vernon Higham, Pastor Emeritus of the Tabernacle in Cardiff, Wales. Vernon Higham was a gifted preacher, a devoted pastor to his people, and a prolific hymn writer and some of his hymns have become greatly blessed by the Lord and used all over the world. His most famous hymn is 'Great is the gospel of our glorious God'.

A tribute written by one of his closest friends, Pastor Robert Dickie from Michigan, can be found on the ET website:
www.evangelical-times.org/archive/item/8124/Obituaries/Rev--Vernon-Higham--1926-2016. ■



 W Vernon Higham

Alfred Place Baptist Church and Pastor Geoff Thomas

Earlier this year, we published a report about the retirement of Dr Geoff Thomas as pastor of Alfred Place Baptist Church (see *RT270*). Two further recent items of news are worth mentioning.

First of all, the news has reached us that the Lord has called to himself Pastor Thomas's wife Iola Thomas (1941 – 2016). Referring to Romans 13:7-8, Pastor Geoff said the following in his tribute to her at the funeral: 'I owe a very great debt to Iola, and so here I am obeying this apostolic exhortation in honouring and respecting someone very worthy of honour and respect, and discharging a debt of love to her ... It was not her experience of Christ that saved her; it was Christ. It was not her good life and prayers that saved her; it was Christ. It was not her joy that saved her, it was Christ. It was not even her faith that saved her. That was a mere instrument that enabled her to trust in Jesus Christ for everything

in living and in dying and in the glory beyond. Her presence at the feet of Christ today is all because of what Christ was and what he did and does do still.' We pray that the Lord will richly comfort our brother Geoff and all the family with his gracious strength and presence.

The remarkable other piece of news is that Geoff Thomas has been succeeded in the pastorate of Alfred Place Baptist Church by his grandson Rhodri Brady. Rhodri is the son of Pastor Gary Brady (Child's Hill Baptist Church, London) and Eleri (daughter of Geoff and Iola Thomas). Rhodri trained for the ministry at London Seminary. It is a wonderfully encouraging message to realise that the Lord is using three generations of men as preachers of the gospel. We pray that the Lord will bless Rhodri together with his family in the ministry of the gospel, and the church in Aberystwyth as they enter this new phase in the life of the church. ■

Celebrating the Reformation

John Palmer (see page 5) is giving a series of monthly lectures on 'Why the Reformation?' at his church and another during 2017. *RT* hope to put them on

the website. What are you doing to teach about the Reformation and its importance? We will be glad to publish appropriate details. ■



Book Review

We Cannot Be Silent

Speaking Truth to a Culture Redefining Sex, Marriage, and the Very Meaning of Right and Wrong



Author: R. Albert Mohler Jr
Publisher: Thomas Nelson, 2015

The following is an extract from the review by Bill Muehlenberg on his website (<https://billmuehlenberg.com/2016/11/04/review-cannot-silent-albert-mohler/>):

The West is undergoing a monumental moral revolution which is decisively undermining – indeed, destroying – millennia of accumulated cultural, religious and ethical tradition. This is especially found in the sexual revolution which is sweeping everything before its path.

It may be that no revolution has been so far-reaching and so destructive. How the Christian is to understand this, explain it, and resist it, is the focus of this important volume. And Al Mohler is well placed to undertake this task, being one of our finest evangelical cultural observers and commentators.

Major chapters in this book examine in detail the homosexual revolution, the homosexual war on marriage and family, and the transgender revolution. Mohler does an excellent job of assessing and explaining all three.

Mohler reminds us that back at creation God himself made us in his image, with sexual differentiation. “Our identity as man or woman is who we are.” He takes us back to Scripture, reminding us of what the Bible says about human sexuality.

He also looks at how religious liberty is especially being obliterated as the moral revolution runs its reckless and destructive course.

His chapter on the compassionate use of truth is also very helpful. Says Mohler, “We must understand that any compassion severed from truth is false compassion and a lie against the truth. . . . We are called to live the truth, to teach the truth, to be the truth, and to love our neighbours on the basis of that truth.” Now is the time for reformation, not retreat.

Absolutely, and this vitally important volume helps us to do that very thing.

See also the article by John Benton in this issue. ■



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Further Details

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