

# ACCatalyst

Volume 2 June 2008

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liberals listen  
but not hear?

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on conscience  
and conflict

**Great authors:**  
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Confessing the Lord  
Jesus Christ ...

Proclaiming the truth  
...

Renewing the church.



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Front cover: Icon by The Rev. Dr Rob Gallacher.

For explanation, see feature starting page 14

# Clear, accurate and fallacious



Last month Dr Muriel Porter, the well-known religion commentator, wrote in the national press that as a heterosexual woman approaching her 35th wedding anniversary, she regarded the call for recognition of "gay marriage" as a beautiful compliment to the marriage vocation.

Porter put herself at odds with those who, like the Australian Christian Lobby and the Australian Prime Minister, have publicly opposed gay marriage legislation.

The claim that gay marriage will somehow damage heterosexual marriage is "outrageous," she added. Porter argues that conservative Christians do not respect gay people's humanity.

I pause to congratulate Muriel Porter on her approaching 35th wedding anniversary. In these troubled times of high divorce rates, it's encouraging to discover any man or woman who can remain happily married for so long – especially one with so confused an idea of marriage as Muriel holds.

Muriel Porter, I must add, is one of the finest religious controversialists in the country. As her recent article in praise of "gay marriage" shows, the strength of her writing lies in the accuracy and clarity with which she communicates the central fallacies of our times. Indeed, she is not only accurate and clear. She is also funny. I give one example only: her statement that thanks to a conservative war of aggression, homosexuality is today "the great taboo" in the churches. Surely Muriel jests.

If there is a single topic of discussion which has been more heavily overcooked in today's churches than any other, it is homosexuality. Homosexuality has been the single most discussed question in one major denomination, the Uniting Church, since 2003. Anglicans are obsessed with it: as the African church leader asks in the ABC TV comedy series *Absolute Power*, "are there *any* heterosexuals in the Church of England?" (Of course there are: this was merely a joke.) Far from being 'taboo,' issues directly relating to homosexuality are so much-discussed in the churches now that they have become positively passé. I know clergymen who, in the words of Michael Palin in Monty Python's Piranha Brothers sketch, would rather pull their own heads off rather than have yet another discussion about it. And it's not because these clergy are afraid of homosexuality. It's because, in their view, the topic has been done to death.

But the really fallacious part of Muriel Porter's analysis is her argument that "conservative" Christians detest the humanity of homosexual people, as distinct from detesting sexual sins. Let's follow her reasoning: by opposing homosexual acts, which the church does by calling them sins, the church automatically opposes the humanity of those who engage in homosexual acts. Her word for it is "vilification."

In fact, the classical Christian argument is to love the sinner and hate the sin: which leads us to the unpleasant need to spell out what we mean by "sin."

God, who may or may not exist according to agnostics, but who

*Continued on page 8*

# Wesley Dalmar case makes history

In a case now under appeal in NSW, Wesley Mission has been found guilty of discrimination against a same-sex couple who sought to become foster carers.

The couple had contacted Wesley Dalmar Child and Family Care, a service run by Wesley Mission, in 2002, to make enquiries about becoming foster carers.

They were told that an application from a same-sex couple would not be accepted.

The couple then lodged a complaint with the Anti-Discrimination Board alleging discrimination on the ground of homosexuality in the area of services.

In 2006, the complaint was referred to the NSW Administrative Decisions Tribunal.

The Administrative Decisions Tribunal has issued a lengthy ruling. Among other things, the Tribunal found:

- *Wesley Dalmar had committed unlawful discrimination on the ground of homosexuality*
- *the relevant religion in the case is “the religion of the Uniting Church as practised by Wesley Mission”*
- *Wesley Mission had failed to establish that it is a doctrine of the Christian religion that “monogamous heterosexual partnership within marriage” is both the “norm and ideal.”*

“The position taken by Wesley Mission that homosexual people are not suitable to take on the role of foster carers is not universally shared throughout the Church,” the Tribunal also ruled.

The Tribunal said that given the diversity of views about homosexuality among adherents of the Christian religion, the prohibition against homosexual foster carers applied by Wesley Mission cannot be said to be necessary to avoid injury to the religious susceptibilities of

Christians.

Wesley Dalmar was ordered to pay \$5000 damages each to the two complainants in the case.

However the Tribunal did not order Wesley Dalmar to make an apology to the two men, which they had requested in addition to damages.

There are many interesting questions arising from the Wesley Dalmar case. From a broader church point of view, one in particular is most important.

This is the question of who and what is to determine the content of the Christian faith, in general, and of its teachings on important topics, like marriage, in particular.

In an especially significant passage (pp 26-27 of the official transcript,) the Tribunal bluntly stated that even if Wesley Mission had pronounced a doctrine on homosexuality, it would not follow that this doctrine would be a doctrine of the “religion of the Uniting Church.”

Making itself doubly clear, the Tribunal explained: “That Wesley Mission, as with any congregation or group of congregations within the Uniting Church, is free to pronounce doctrine where the Assembly [i.e. the Assembly of the Uniting Church] has not done so, does not elevate any doctrine it might pronounce to a doctrine of the ‘religion of the Uniting Church’.”

Elsewhere in its judgment, the Tribunal said that the Uniting Church Assembly has not made a formal pronouncement of the Church’s doctrinal stance towards homosexuality.

But it also noted that in 2003, the Assembly passed a resolution affirming that it is for local presbyteries to consider ordination applicants, “and to take into account various criteria, including sexual orientation.”

## What about the children?

Another interesting question in the Wesley Dalmar case is what has it got to do with children?

The agency which has been charged with discrimination and, pending appeal, penalised, is an agency dedicated in part to the welfare of children needing foster care.

However in reading the Tribunal’s judgment, the exclusive focus of the legal arguments being presented is that of the rights of adults not to be denied the “service” of being allowed to become foster carers.

With all due respect to the rights of all adults, the question needs to be asked: has human life, including the lives of vulnerable children, now been completely commodified by society – in other words, have some lives reached the point where their only real significance lies in being objects of others’ rights? These questions bear careful consideration.

The Tribunal observed: “It seems that some presbyteries take the view that Christian scriptures and theology prohibit the appointment of homosexuals to the clergy whereas other presbyteries think that there is no scriptural prohibition on homosexual clergy.”

## ACC spreads in South Australia

The ACC’s national chair Rev Dr Max Champion visited South Australia in early June.

During his visit he spoke at Glenunga Uniting Church on ‘the new tolerance.’ and visited Murray Bridge Uniting Church where a new ACC group was formed.

Dr Champion also met with the Moderator of the Uniting Church in South Australia, Rev Rod Dyson.

## Text fails UnitingCare's latest publicity blurb

Reading the new publication from UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania, *Strategic Framework 2008-2010*, is an embarrassing exercise, one which ought not to appear under the Uniting banner. The document is sympathetically illustrated and readable but the text lets it down.

This arm of a nation-wide network of welfare delivery claims to be “the largest non-government provider of community services in Australia.” It boasts 400 agencies, 36,000 staff members and 24,000 volunteers, and two million clients each year. Why, with such an enormous program, does UnitingCare receive so much less public notice than Salvation Army and Catholic programs?

No responsible officer is named and no author is credited with the woolly, repetitive recital of the many causes which the agency calls “God’s mission”. Supposedly a strategy document, this one offers only self-justification that explains almost nothing of what UnitingCare actually does.

The strongest themes to emerge concern the intention to pursue political action. To call this “God’s mission” borders on the fraudulent. Thus: “Our social justice, advocacy work and community welfare services express our belief that God is committed to life now. It is this love of God and neighbour that has sometimes drawn the church into controversial situations.”

There are two problems with this approach. First, Christ is nowhere

## Incorrect name

In the March 2008 edition of *ACCatalyst*, the Christian name of Rev Dr Anita Monro was misreported.

We apologise for the error.

mentioned. Yes, Jesus’ offer of ‘life in all its fullness’ appears, but it relates only to secular goals. This severs the agency from the church it claims to represent, since there can be no ‘Christian’ action apart from Christ. The omission is magnified by the statement that “communities are able to identify what full life means for themselves... that all people can best discern what they need in order to achieve wholeness of mind, body and spirit.”

This is not “God’s mission” but a humanist manifesto bent on supplying people’s wants – real and necessary as they are. There is no hint of the wisdom, authority, guidance and grace that flow from the gospel. What drives a church agency to transpose so meekly the mighty organ notes of the gospel into the shrill warbling of a tin whistle?

Second, being all things to all men (and women) UnitingCare claims to stand at the forefront of Aboriginal rights, the environment and equality and dignity for marginalised people. The marginalised are listed as “ethnic minorities, disabled people and homosexual people”. They are the “poor, outcast and needy.”

Calling homosexuals ‘marginalised’, let alone ‘poor, outcast and needy’ may or may not please members of that vocal, organised and politically powerful sub-culture, but the label is false. A movement cannot be deemed marginalised that has overturned legislation, injected propaganda into schools and won acceptance as an optional way of life out of proportion to its numbers.

And it grows in influence, as illustrated by the case involving Wesley Dalmar and the gay foster carers (see page 3.) Leaving aside the complex legal issues in that case, it’s clear that a novel “right” – the right of a homosexual couple to be treated as a traditional family for the purposes of child-rearing – is being demanded of society, and has a fair chance of being granted by courts and lawmakers. □

## UCA people support right to live: Champion

The National Chair of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, Rev dr Max Champion, has expressed dismay at the views of a UCA spokesman reported in *The Age* newspaper on June 5.

Dr Champion clearly rejected a statement by UCA spokesman on overseas aid Kerry Enright indicating that the church supports removing guidelines which ban funding for pro-abortion services.

Dr Champion said: “Kerry Enright does not have the right to speak with such authority on this matter. The UCA has not determined a policy on this matter.”

The ACC Chair added: “Many concerned members of the Uniting Church, who are generous supporters of Overseas Development Aid, are strongly opposed to lifting the ban. Mr Enright’s comments do not fairly or accurately portray the viewpoint of many faithful members.”

Dr Champion said the ACC is keenly aware of the plight of women in developing nations and concerned for those faced with an unwanted pregnancy.

“However, as the sanctity of life is the fundamental human right, the unborn child should be respected and protected from the time of conception,” he said.

“The women and their families need support to raise children in their communities, not have individualistic western ideas about justice, family and community foisted upon them.”

Dr Champion says it is most regrettable that the impression has been given that debate on abortion in the Uniting Church is over.

“It is not,” he said. “It has just been suppressed. It is also deeply disturbing that a spokesman for a Church which rightly supports the causes of oppressed people against



their oppressors – the weak against the strong – does not express support for policies which uphold and defend the rights of the most vulnerable children.”

Dr Champion added: “I and many people in the Uniting Church have a profound respect for the unborn, and believe human life is of value from the moment of conception to its natural completion. Aid money should be used to fight disease, free people from hunger and improve health. Unborn children are not a disease.”

## ‘God’s mission in a post-Christian world’: national conference theme

Leaders of the church’s mission work across four entirely different fields of operation will be keynote speakers at the 2008 national conference of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations.

The annual general meeting of the ACC will also take place during the conference, which will be held at Coromandel Valley Uniting Church, Coromandel Valley, South Australia from September 11-13.

The main presenters at the conference will be:

- **Keith Garner**, Superintendent/CEO of Wesley Mission in Sydney. As well as leading the Uniting Church’s largest parish, Keith hosts the ‘Rise and Shine’ program on the Nine network every Sunday.
- **Marcia Riordan**, Respect Life Officer for the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne
- **Deane Meatheringham**, Rural Resource Minister for the South Australian UCA synod, and
- **Rob Yule**, a leader of Presbyterian renewal in New Zealand.

Important decisions regarding the future work of the Assembly of

## A new trend in church signs?

A number of UCA churches around Australia are declaring their commitment to the confessing cause. This photo is from Bexley Uniting Church in NSW.



Confessing Congregations will be made at the annual general meeting.

Coromandel Valley is in the Adelaide Hills about 17 kms from Adelaide. Registration rates for the conference will be \$80 (pre-July 18) or \$90 (post-July 18.)

Special rates for groups apply.

For accommodation and transport details, contact Kevin Fielke: ph 08 8278 2608 or 0431 470 343 or email [patanga@picknowl.com.au](mailto:patanga@picknowl.com.au)

## Prayer network

Members of the ACC’s prayer network in many locations around Australia are setting aside time every week to come together to pray for the health of the Uniting Church.

The ACC National Prayer Co-ordinator, The Rev Anne Hibbard, also publishes a regularly updated prayer diary listing important prayer



**Rev. Anne Hibbard**

points for the church for each day of the month. These can be viewed online via the ACC’s website (see p 2.)

The network’s intentions for June include prayers for the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, for the UCA’s President and President-elect, Gregor Henderson and Alistair Macrae and for various ACC congregations and commissions around the country.

## ACC chair to address Bonhoeffer conference

The ACC’s national chair, The Rev Dr Max Champion, will deliver a paper at the Tenth International Bonhoeffer Conference in Prague, Czech Republic, in late July.

Dr Champion’s paper will address *Nihilism and Nature: how Bonhoeffer’s theology illuminates the homosexuality debate.*

Dr Champion will also lead a workshop on confessing movements in the present day.

# Feedback

After one full year of publication, here is some feedback ACCatalyst has received from readers:

☐ *"I wish to complain about the front page of our magazine (March edition featuring 'Sex and the City of God' on the cover.) When we opened the envelope I thought it was a sex magazine and was about to put it in the rubbish ... I am editor of our church paper and I would be sacked if I put such tripe in or on our paper."*

☐ *"The article 'Sex and the City of God' left me wondering what was really being said, even though I agreed with the bits that I could follow."*

☐ *"Great job on ACCatalyst. It is looking like all we were hoping for when we set up the ACC."*

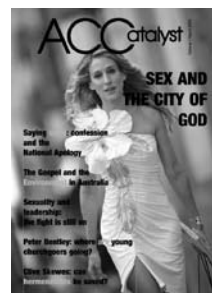
☐ *"Congrats on excellent March issue of ACCatalyst."*

☐ *"Once again, ACCatalyst provides good and worthwhile reading ... ACCatalyst is putting forward refreshingly healthy theological views on a range of subjects."*

☐ *"I am impressed by the quality and content after devouring the first two issues. .... The content is spot on but sometimes understanding is hard work."*

☐ *"I enjoy the ACCatalyst magazine because of the quality of the articles. Just one comment about Vol 1 2007: would it have been better to have a portrait of William Wilberforce as the cover? After all, he was the leading figure of the anti-slavery campaign!"*

Letters to the editor are always welcome.



## Be encouraged!

with Robyn McKay

It was time for my cat Rubey to make the big shift from my Wongyarra house to the Peterborough manse. So it was that the day came when I unceremoniously shoved her into a borrowed cat cage and off we went in the car.

Rubey is not used to car travel and has not been anywhere for nearly four and a half years, and she meowed pitifully for the whole trip, looking terrified.

On arrival at the manse she quickly found my bedroom and hid under the bed, where she remained that night and the next day, while I went about my work.

I waited for her to come out, but she didn't. After some time it dawned on me that I was using the wrong approach. Instead of waiting at a distance for her to come out, I went into the room and got on the floor next to her. Then she came out.

Alongside of me, Rubey was happy to venture out into the big, wide house. As long as I was with her, she could cope with the fear of the unknown. As soon as I stopped paying attention to her, she scuttled off back under the bed again.

There are times in my life and

maybe all of our lives, when we feel like retreating and hiding from the world, because the world can be a scary place, with lots of unknowns. We withdraw from everything, including God, and try and find a safe place to hide.

But God doesn't wait at a distance for us to regain our confidence and crawl out of our hiding place to meet him. God comes to us, gets down on his knees and looks under the bed. God meets us where we are, just as we are, with all of our fears, weaknesses and failings.

He is ready to take our hand and walk with us into the big wide world where he has so many blessings in store for us.

Are we willing to trust him? Will you take his hand and let him lead you?

And, by the way, Rubey has recovered from her trauma, and now she thinks she owns the place. Typical cat!

*Robyn*

# The ACC hopes to 'renew, reform and remind' the church

**Dr Rosalie Hudson**

One of the most important developments in the life of the Uniting Church during 2008 will be the release of a major theological statement from the Doctrine and Theology Commission of the ACC.

The Commission is chaired by Dr Rosalie Hudson. Dr Hudson is an ethicist and theologian who is an Honorary Senior Fellow in the School of Nursing & Social Work at The University of Melbourne.

Care for the dying, the aged and those suffering from dementia are major areas in which she has worked and taught. Her theology is imbued with a deep sense of the uniqueness of every human person.

The purpose of the ACC's Doctrine and Theology Commission is to develop doctrinal and theological resources for members of the church, on important topics such as the Trinity, Scripture and Christology (the theology of who Christ is.)

In view of the many talking points that have emerged from decisions of the Uniting Church's Assembly in recent years, another key role of the ACC Doctrine and Theology Commission is to encourage reformed, evangelical and orthodox Christian education for leaders and lay people.

The Commission is also intended as a resource body which can respond to particular theological questions when they arise, and provide practical teaching and study material to help church members deepen their theological and doctrinal understanding.

Dr Hudson has chaired the

Commission since its first meeting in May 2007. Its major work so far has been drafting a comprehensive statement of theological purpose for the Church.

A draft of the statement was presented at last year's national conference of the ACC, and was warmly received. Some words and phrases were questioned, and the statement is now being re-drafted to reflect the comments of church members at that gathering.

Dr Hudson told *ACCatalyst* that the statement is a response to cultural pressures to depart from an "orthodox and scriptural understanding of Christian faith."

The theological statement will provide a rationale for reminding people of the basic substance of the Christian faith, she said. The Commission hopes it will help educate church members, and act as a basis for preaching.

We asked why she thought the ACC – the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church – was important. She said it is certainly not to focus specially on the issue of homosexuality.

Rather, the importance of the ACC is to remind the Uniting Church of its roots in the Basis of Union of 1976, and as part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

The ACC is not about forming a breakaway church, but about taking strong steps to remind the Uniting Church of its obligations to the wider



**Dr Rosalie Hudson**

ecumenical faith, she said.

It is about renewal of the church from within, rather than breaking off into a separate entity.

This is part of a global pattern. "There is a worldwide trend towards having confessing movements within major churches," Dr Hudson said. The focus of these movements is to pray that the Holy Spirit will "renew and reform and 'remind' the church of what it is meant to be."

The ACC stands against ideas like the belief that 'we no longer need the Creeds,' or that 'we no longer need marriage of one man and one woman for life,' she said.

Dr Hudson is the daughter of a Methodist minister – one of three daughters, in fact. Uniquely, she believes, all three married Methodist ministers.

Her life and her family's life is thus entwined with that of the Uniting Church. She remembers living in a succession of parsonages as a child, and in fact did not have 'her own home' until her husband, John, retired as a minister.

But there are no complaints about this former lifestyle. As a child, the family moved home every three years, but wherever they went there was a "warm community" awaiting them. Similarly, moving to independent

*Continued next page*

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home ownership in later life has had pluses and minuses. There is more freedom but “you lose that sense of community,” Dr Hudson said.

Dr Hudson grew up knowing two things: one, that she wanted to be a nurse, and the other, that she loved theology.

She did not enroll in higher degrees until she was in her 40s, but eventually completed a Bachelor of Applied Science in Nursing and a degree in theology in the same year. Both her PhD and her Masters of the theology dissertation were on the topic of personhood and death.

She has had extensive experience nursing people “to their last breath,” and has often held her own breath during funeral services, feeling



**Dr Rosalie Hudson with members of the ACC Doctrine and Theology Commission at the 2007 ACC National Conference**

shocked at some of the mindless secular platitudes she hears uttered from pulpits.

Having more close experience of death than most people, Dr Hudson rejects the easy thought that death is “just another change in our relationship” with the deceased.

Death, she says, is “a radical discontinuity.” She says our only hope in life and death is Jesus Christ, whose resurrection promise is the foundation of the Christian faith.

Dr Rosalie Hudson is a distinguished scholar, with many works published on topics such as spirituality and ageing, spirituality and dementia and the spiritual needs of family carers. There are more publications to come.



## Clear, accurate and fallacious

Continued from page 2

does according to Christians, is both rational and personal. He designed humanity both with free will and with powerful sexual and reproductive urges. If he had been malicious, God could simply have left humanity to work out for itself how to cope with these sometimes contradictory design features, but he is not, and he didn't, or so Christians believe. Like any reliable manufacturer of top quality gear, he provides a design manual as well. In the attention-grabbing chapter of this manual titled “Sex,” the key word is “marriage.” Sex and marriage go together, and they are intended for reproduction, as well as for pleasure and companionship: this is what the manual states. Christians traditionally call sex acts which are deliberately sterile “sins,” but you could equally call them something else. You could call them user errors. When we engage in any homosexual act, or even in any deliberately sterile sex, regardless of whether we are married, we automatically disobey the instructions in the user manual. This is our free will at work here, of course, as God knows well. It doesn't mean he's happy with us when we do so.

Dr Porter and the liberals, in fact, have got this issue exactly the wrong way about. By denying the traditional Christian view of marriage and sex, which they do in their rush to embrace “homosexual identity,” they precisely deny the humanity of those whom they wish to embrace. They equate a person who engages in homosexual acts with the acts themselves: it is the Church, meanwhile, which calls everyone back to remember who they really are, as much-loved creatures of the divine, endowed by Him with the powers of loving and choosing. That is the essence of our humanity, according to the Christian view. But in a moral universe where people are equated, instead, simply with what they do, there is no place for such a view of humanity. Such a moral universe is more like the cut-throat world of

the employment marketplace in the modern capitalist economy. This is what liberals and supporters of “gay marriage” would inflict on all people who feel same-sex attractions and then act on them. They argue, in effect, that you are what you do. If you *do* gay sex, then that is *who* you are. Some homosexual people may welcome this, but classical Christianity has a different view of identity. It says *who* you are is a child of God, with the pretty impressive powers mentioned above. You are not defined by how you use your reproductive organs, any more than you are defined by the job you do or the kind of car you drive. You're greater than this, even if you think you're not. This view, of course, may be entirely out of touch with the thinking of the modern world. But it is the classical Christian position.

There are many arguments raised against “conventional” marriage today. I have always felt one of the most eloquent to be that there are so many bad marriages. And there certainly are. Every marriage is a bad marriage. This could be because modern society is so loaded with hypocrisy and anger that people within marriage treat each other like dogs rather than like the gods and goddesses they might have thought each other to be on their wedding day. Or it could be that sin is simply a fact of human nature. Modern people may think it a loaded and largely meaningless term from the hypocritical Christian past, but “sin” is actually a pretty useful word. It's a fact of life. It's something that happens every day in the way we treat each other, not only in our cosy homes, but out on the street as well.

Is it a denial of someone's essential humanity to remind him or her they are less than perfect? Surely not. I've had it pointed out to myself often enough, and while it's seldom welcome news, on the whole it helps me to at least think about trying to be a little more humane and a little less difficult to live with and get along with. Maybe it's not working. If so, the fault hardly lies with those who are doing the pointing out. The fault lies in me.

Paul Gray



# Why do they listen and still not hear?

Like many confessing Christians, The Rev. Rob Brennan, Queensland convenor of the ACC, has encountered the frustration of trying to explain an orthodox Christian worldview to fellow church members who just don't "get" what traditional faith is all about.

In a challenging article for the whole church, Brennan examines the deep roots of this problem in the traditions of being "reformed and evangelical."

One persistent difficulty facing confessing Christians when talking to other Christians who support radical revisions in ethics and morality, is that in spite of the best arguments and evidence, they might as well be on Mars.

There is an attitude from them which says: "If we wait long enough or talk long enough then you will see the light and stop causing a fuss."

This attitude can be expressed with arrogant superiority, pastoral patience or irritated anger.

No matter how expressed, the end result is we know they fail to hear what it is we have to say. It is worse if you are not Anglo-Saxon.

Why does it so often feel to confessing Christians that we are wasting our time? And why is it worse for non-anglos?

Over the last couple of decades various explanations of the differences between confessional faith and morally revisionist liberalism have been tried, and haven't really helped. It was assumed at one point that "we" believed the Bible and "they" didn't. That led to some heated exchanges – but no, both sides believe.

Then it was thought how "we" interpreted the Bible was the issue. That has been a bit more productive. Even though there are some obvious differences in how key parts of the Bible are handled between confessional Christians and progressives, there has still been some outrage.

The main example would be the



comment expressed more than once at the last Uniting Church National Assembly: "But I am operating out of the reformed tradition too!" How can it be that people claim with integrity that they operate out of this tradition, while advocating radical revision of morality and ethics contrary to the historical doctrines of the church?

You could argue that they are deluded – but you would be picking a tussle with some very articulate people who can argue their case.

Sadly, I dare to suggest they might be right! They do operate out of the reformed tradition. Why I say this may help to explain why they don't listen, and even why, in one part of Resolution 104, the word "reformed"

was used a number of different ways in the one sentence.

There are two factors that I think contribute to the refusal to take reformed and evangelical arguments seriously. The first is the desire to impose order on a chaotic sea of opinion. The second is grounded in good solid reformed theology, but gives rise to markedly different, and even anti-Biblical conclusions.

## Imposing order

There is no doubt that we live in an era of incredibly diverse opinions. There are myriad differences over doctrine, liturgy, language, social justice issues, sexuality, morality,

violence and many other issues. Opinion ebbs and flows like waves on the seashore. However, much of the diversity of opinion, no matter how passionately held, is as ephemeral as the foam on the waves. It is easy to get carried away with the currents of debate without realising that the pattern of the waves has changed. Two sandbars have moved in recent centuries, and the church has not yet come to terms with their effect on human thinking. The first is how the church interprets the Old Testament, and the second is how theology and science relate. These are arguably the most important foundational theological issues facing the whole church.

Regarding the Old Testament, we can no longer just resort to allegory when it comes to the difficult passages. For example, Song of Songs may speak of the Love of God for the church, but just how are we to understand the more explicit parts with their strange standards of beauty? A solid theological framework is needed to reassess the difficult parts of the Old Testament so that we can continue to understand them as God's good news.

The vindictive psalms are a case in point. Some contemporary academics, while never saying it openly, would in effect like to mirror the early heretic Mani and throw the Old Testament away with its inconvenience. But we remain a people of the Book, whose faith is the result of God's interaction throughout history.

Secondly, theology and science can at times give different accounts of the world and its purpose. Where do people place final authority for determining the truth which will affect their action and public policy? While these big issues await resolution there will continue to be an almost chaotic diversity of ideas and opinions which will depend to some degree on where people begin, their presuppositions and how they either use or are challenged by Scripture.

In the midst of this confusing mass of differing opinions, it is difficult to know what to think. In his book *Believing Three Ways in One God*, Nicholas Lash states that in this last period of modernity we are left

with the Enlightenment legacy of a 'crisis of docility.' That is: "Unless we have the courage to work things out for ourselves, to take as true only that which we have personally ascertained or, perhaps, invented, then meanings and values, descriptions and instructions, imposed by other people, feeding other people's power, will inhibit and enslave us, bind us into fables and falsehoods from the past. Even God's truth, perhaps especially God's truth, is no exception to this rule. Only slaves and children should be teachable or docile."

One of the keystones of the protestant tradition has been that biblically literate, doctrinally knowledgeable believers depending humbly on the witness of the Holy Spirit are equipped to face the challenge of working things out. A biblically literate, doctrinally knowledgeable church is guarded against having meanings and values, descriptions and instructions, imposed on them by other people.

However, today we witness low levels of biblical literacy and doctrinal knowledge in the mainstream churches. Lack of understanding and ownership of a common doctrinal heritage leads to fragmentation of a denominational community. There is a strong temptation, in such a chaotic environment as we have now, to give in to using totalitarian control to keep the diversity in unity. This, however, is self defeating, and it is not the way of servant leadership.

So the first reason for liberal Christians not listening to confessing Christians is to impose order on the church. It almost works when issues become, or are thought to be, too much effort to work out.

Alternatively, it is a tempting tactic to bring a semblance or illusion of order to chaos.

### **Informed theological thinking in the Reformed tradition**

The next question is how do we decide what is right and explain what we believe about moral and ethical issues? In our reformed tradition, we argue that the way to deal with

new issues depends on four things: Scripture, the book of nature, personal experience and the tradition of the church. By and large, we have no problem in considering personal experience and the tradition of the church important, but subjecting them to Scripture is difficult

Trouble develops when we consider the relation of Scripture to the book of nature. I think this issue is the most important. The notion that there are the two books of God's revelation, Scripture and Nature, is a Reformation doctrine. It is in Calvin's Institutes. However when it was developed, it was assumed that, properly interpreted, there could never be any disagreement between the two. Now while we may continue to hope that this may be true, the best of humanity's limited understanding shows some marked disagreement.

Where there is disagreement, the question is which book do we read first? In the reformed tradition, this question has not been resolved. Now this is broader than simply choosing between Genesis or geology and psychology or sin (even though they spring to mind.) The all-embracing question is how we view the world. Is it or is it not a primary source of revelation?

This, like other reformation arguments such as the Calvinist-Arminian debate, has never been resolved, although commitment to their resolution is the spirit of the Basis of Union. Get a few learned ACC people together for a while and the differences become obvious – even though we are all reading Scripture first, unlike the other side of the debate which relies on the "other book of God's revelation", namely what can be learnt from nature or science.

This difference regarding the place of worldview in revelation has overshadowed these other important reformation debates during the past century and a half. So while reformed, evangelical and charismatic people currently work together to confess the gospel of Christ only known through the Bible, in the face of pressure to revise the faith wholesale, our differences still remain.

There is a paragraph in which theologian Karl Barth summarises the heart of the issue well.

Barth concludes that the problem's heart is the assumption of the notion of the two books of God's revelation: "The sun of the Enlightenment ruthlessly exposed what must always come to light sooner or later when this double system is used. When the two books are juxtaposed as sources of our knowledge of the Creator and creation, it is quite useless to recommend the book of grace. The very fact of this juxtaposition means that the book which is actually read and from which the knowledge of the Creator and creation is actually gained is only the one book, i.e., the book of nature. The co-existence of an earthly pleasure with the heavenly necessarily makes the latter superfluous. To set that which is human, worldly and rational alongside that which is Christian is inevitably to expel the latter."

If nature is read as God's revelation alongside Scripture, then Barth suggests Scripture will always end up in second place and might as well not be read at all. You can therefore, strangely, have someone say with integrity both "I reject this biblical command" and "I am operating out of the reformed tradition."

What happens then is that it becomes a contest of worldviews. Westerners can't help themselves in thinking that a western technological worldview has to be better than that of a "fundamentalist" Christian, or that of another culture. Why? Because it has been so effective at explaining and controlling the world around us. Not much changes in that worldview's basic rationality, even if it is devalued in response to anti-technological, ecological, post-modern or new age criticisms. As the dominant worldview in our society, why should it listen to any other? That is the second reason they listen but do not hear.

There are, however, compelling reasons to be suspicious of the western worldview. Those who put the book of nature first should remember that while the western worldview has been effective at explanation and control, it cannot explain everything.

# CLARKSON



The spotlight has been well and truly shining on China's human rights abuses and it seems to be eclipsing the Olympic torch, certainly in some cities of the world.

And I think it should.

We are constantly drenched with sports media, and the Games will be a torrent.

All this can sedate the brain from the fact there are thousands of brave conscience and freedom fighters incarcerated in China's Lao Gai factory prisons, churning out oceans of cheap commodities which are filling our warehouse outlets in every city of Australia.

And it's not only Tibet and the Falun Gong.

It's people like Li Mei, discovered having a Sunday worship service in a non-registered church.

They were showing a Jesus film and praying for a disabled man in a nursing home.

Nine of them got a year to 18 months in prison, and Li was tortured so much as to require a hysterectomy.

Now for a brief moment, with these Olympics, we can look through a crack in the door at the thousands who hold to conscience above comfort in a country that wants us just to be awed by its Olympic razzamatazz, but blind to its human abuse tragedies.

Human beings, and human freedom, is bigger than sport.

Sport doesn't change things. People like Steven Spielberg, who pulled out as creative director over these abuses, is an example.

We can write letters to the editor, to politicians, to the Olympic advertising sponsors, besides prayer.

All this represents something we can do to help change the world.

*Ian Clarkson is a Teacher and Evangelist with Branches Community Church in South Australia. This is from his "Think About It" radio segment which is broadcast regularly on Adelaide radio station Life FM.*

And it has significant flaws. If it could explain and control all, then economics and politics would be so much easier. The confessing Christian needs to remember that God is not committed to any human way of explaining the world. All that we know is subject to God's revision. Even then we need to be careful in addressing issues because we operate out of our own worldview to some extent. A few times at ACC meetings someone starts to say something assuming, "well that is the way things are!" They take a look at a brother or sister from another culture and stop. Now, getting it right takes time, but this is a true start to revising how

we see the world. God is always at work to revise how we see the world. That is part of the gospel. Paul's "be renewed by the transformation of your minds" is not only about thinking about what is right and good. It is also about changing how we think about everything.

We must be open to change – always. But this is not to change to someone else's worldview. We must be open to God's transformation of how we see the world where what we know of the world is open to revision based on the revealed word of God.

Can the people we speak to say the same?





## A stirring message for jaded preachers

P.T. Forsyth's *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* is a landmark book for preachers, but the centenary of its first edition passed without notice. Certainly *Catalyst* overlooked it. Forsyth is forgotten these days when fashionable writers gain brief renown and are soon eclipsed by the next promising innovator.

Peter Taylor Forsyth was a British Congregational minister-theologian whom some called 'the Barthian before Barth'. The book was addressed to preachers then and is no less salutary today than it was in 1907. Forsyth ties preaching to the Bible as a helmsman binds himself to the wheel in a storm at sea, because the Bible is "the supreme preacher to the preacher" as well as the supreme sermon to the church.

He was a paradoxical figure in his day, partly because the astonishing breadth of his knowledge of academia, the arts and politics informed his pastoral ministry in several strategic congregations, and his preaching and teaching. His 23 published books reflect the pulpit more than the lecture hall.

Then as now, Christianity faced the shifting winds of philosophy, theology and science as western societies fell under the spell of inevitable progress, and the confident expectation that modern knowledge would quickly resolve the problems of mankind. Forsyth had no illusions about that utopian dream. With remarkable prescience he anticipated that when calamity struck on the grand scale, it would reveal to Christians, and especially preachers, the vacuity of those liberalising trends in the church that mirrored the optimism of pre-1914 Europe. The great war was that calamity, and its effects were catastrophic.

War and its chaos confronted millions of believers with an agonising choice – either re-think the faith or abandon it altogether. The grim reckoning of slaughter, Forsyth saw, left no place for "sunny or silly piety" but exposed "the deadly inveteracy

# A century later, two still speak to

In 1907 PT Forsyth published *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*. A year later, GK Chesterton published *Orthodoxy*.

of evil, its dereliction by God, its sordid paralysis of all redeeming, self-recuperative power in man, its incurable fatal effect upon the moral order of society."

That is our situation today. For fifty years churchly optimism has construed the collapse of the Constantinian contract between church and state as a liberation. Church leaders have blithely embraced a secularised world, which they misunderstand and idolise, with mission 'models' and management practices that are totally inadequate. Forsyth saw with grim clarity that Protestantism had long lost touch with a faith "which knows what it is about, a positive faith, faith with not only an experience but a content, not glow only but grasp, and mass, and measure." He advises preachers that "A viscous unreflecting faith is for the preacher a faith without footing and therefore without authority. ... It is authority that the world chiefly needs and the preaching of the hour lacks – an authoritative gospel in a humble personality." On all counts he is speaking for today.

Forsyth sidesteps the endless liberal/orthodox dichotomy that infects the Uniting Church. He presents a positive Christianity which "first adjusts man to the holy and then creates the holy in man, and does both through the Cross with its atoning gift of eternal life."

Evangelical theology is not blameless. It "has not really escaped from the idea of orthodoxy, a theology not only elaborate but final, irrevocable, and therefore obscurantist, and therefore robbed of public power." He defines evangelical theology as "any theology which does full justice to the one creative principle of grace. Any theology is evangelical which

does that."

The enemy of positive theology is liberalism which "begins with some rational canon of life or nature to which Christianity has to be cut down or enlarged (as the case may be)". Positive theology "begins with God's gift of a super-logical revelation in Christ's historic person and cross, whose object was not to adjust a contradiction but to resolve a crisis and save a situation of the human soul. For positive theology Christ is the object of faith; for liberal he is but its first and greatest subject, the agent of a faith directed elsewhere than on him. It is really an infinite difference. For only one side can be true."

Forsyth predated Barth and the theologies of crisis. Barth's massive contribution has been muffled by a resurgent churchly liberalism that adapts itself to the shifting winds of secular opinion. Forsyth may be unknown or neglected today, but every preacher would profit from his profound analysis of the cross and the practical style of his writing. He is a genuine prophet whose moral earnestness about the human condition never descends to telling "poor prodigals and black scoundrels they are better than they think, that they have more of Christ in them than they know, and so on."

Rather, Forsyth declares, "As Christ's love to God was greater than his love to man, so his love for God's law was more intense than his sympathy with man's weakness." But it is the cross that floods the world with grace, enabling "A holy God .. to make good the moral law by a personal resource which both honored its affronted but infrangible majesty, and surmounted it in saving love."

Unlike the more famous and

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ACCATALYST

# Christian classics modern people

A century later, two contributors to *ACCatalyst* find these two books still have much to say.

## The world's madness, Christianity's health

In his 2001 book *Soul Survivor: How my faith survived the Church*, bestselling American evangelical author Philip Yancey paid tribute to a handful of influential individuals who helped him see past the shortcomings of Christian culture, to retain his faith and connection to the church. One of these influential personalities was a British journalist and author who had died in 1936, GK Chesterton. When Yancey read Chesterton's writings decades later, they electrified him.

It isn't hard to see why. Where most modern Christian writing is serious, bordering on dull, most of Chesterton's still leaps from the page with a humorous and penetrating wit, even a century after being penned. Yancey says that when someone asked him which single book he would choose to be stranded on a desert island with, Chesterton replied: "Why, *A Practical Guide to Shipbuilding*, of course." Yancey says if he were so stranded, he would choose GK Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*.

*Orthodoxy* was published 100 years ago this year. The title does not refer to the Greek or Russian Orthodox Church, or indeed to the orthodox confessional statements of any particular denomination. When Chesterton penned *Orthodoxy*, he had only recently emerged from a liberal agnostic background to embrace a broad Christian faith. In later years, he joined the Roman Catholic Church, but in 1908, and indeed most of his writing career, he was mainly interested in defending the idea of "classical Christianity," as he called it, against the prevailing intellectual tides of agnosticism, pantheism and

spiritualism. The Christianity he defended was the Christianity of the Apostle's Creed, and he defended it in a way never before attempted.

An Australian authority on Chesterton, Karl Schmude from Champion College in Sydney, says *Orthodoxy* came upon the world at a time when Christianity was at one of its lowest ebbs. "Before Chesterton published *Orthodoxy*, Christianity had been going through a rather rough time, from the Enlightenment right through to the 19th century with its controversies over evolution and biblical criticism," Mr Schmude says. "Then in Chesterton, along came a writer who suddenly made Christianity seem irresistibly logical and appealing to the mind."

Re-reading *Orthodoxy* a century after its first publication, the logic and appeal of Chesterton's approach is easy to find. At every turn, Chesterton debates, reversing the major arguments against Christianity into major arguments against non-Christians. So, for example, modern non-Christians may deride Christianity for being a pessimistic and depressing faith which would deprive people of the joys of life. At first sight this might appear to be so, but on closer inspection, it is the modern, non-Christian philosophies which deprive people of joy, he says.

"The outer ring of Christianity is a rigid guard of ethical abnegations and professional priests; but inside that inhuman guard you will find the old human life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men; for Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom. But in the modern philosophy the case is opposite; it is its outer ring that is obviously artistic and emancipated; its despair is within." This is a continual

theme in Chesterton's writings. Modern non-Christian philosophies offer a supposed liberation of the human spirit when freed from Christian dogma. But given the despair and emptiness of modern life, the emancipation is revealed as fraudulent.

There are two strands to the arguments in *Orthodoxy*: the insanity of modern thought, and the sanity of Christianity. On the madness of the modern world, a pivotal insight is that mental illness does not manifest itself as a "loss of reason" so much as a loss of perspective. "The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason," he says. Chesterton adds that the madman needs the added perspective of a faith in the larger meaning of the universe, as provided by classical Christianity. This is a comment aimed at society overall, though with today's concern over rising rates of individual mental illness, it begins to look less like a simple argument than a major psychological insight.

Chesterton's arguments favouring Christianity over modern alternative creeds are similarly distinctive. He pleads for the authority of Christian tradition, for example, by appealing to our sense of the importance of democracy. "If we attach great importance to the opinion of ordinary men in great unanimity when we are dealing with daily matters, there is no reason why we should disregard it when we are dealing with history or fable. Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead." This argument has obvious application to many of today's moral debates where new "rights" are claimed against the supposed restrictiveness of the past.

Chesterton published a second book in 1908, the novel *The Man Who was Thursday*. Sub-titled 'A Nightmare,' it deals satirically with terrorism and modern political philosophies which advocate violence and suicide. That is also a concern in *Orthodoxy*, particularly in Chapter Three, 'The Suicide of Thought.' Together, these

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**Questions of art** in church life provoke intense discussions in Protestant churches today. This month Warren Clarnette examines the work of a retired minister who is bringing about a meeting between a well-known form of Christian art – icons – and the theology of Protestant giant Charles Wesley.

### Front cover – Redemption by Christ

Our cover features a 15th century icon of Armenian origin. Persian influences appear in the trousers and boots of the figure of Christ, who descends into hell to ‘crush Satan under his feet’ (Rom. 16,20) and raises Adam and Eve into the new creation (signified by the blinding light that shatters the darkness). The cross is both a weapon that strikes the Devil and the only way to salvation. The gates of hell lie shattered at Christ’s feet, while kings and priests observe the dawn of redemption.

*Below: “Christ victorious” (Geneva)*

The devil, dismembered, lies at the feet of Christ who raises Adam in the presence of David and Solomon (left) and John the Baptist with Eve (right), while the righteous rise from the dead. The background of tumbling buildings suggests the impermanence of all human structures. The icon depicts the uncertainty of earthly achievements and utopian dreams alongside the solidity of hope in Christ, apart from whom all else is delusion.

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Twenty years ago Dr Robert Gallacher turned to the raw materials of art – easel, brushes, oil and canvas. It was a form of therapy for a minister in a busy provincial city church, a retreat at a time of personal challenge. What began as a hobby blossomed into a ministry he still regards as “amazing”.

Rob Gallacher’s subject-matter was an unusual choice for a minister of the protestant reformed tradition. He chose to paint neither portraits nor landscapes. Instead, he delved into the mysteries of eastern Christian iconography, and today directs the UCA Icon School Network, runs three schools of icon painting and has earned a reputation across Australia and overseas.

The icon network’s last exhibition drew hundreds of Melbourne viewers and was featured in the national press. But notoriety, numbers, or sales of his work are

*Continued next page*

**Resurrection (below left) – the Eastern tradition meets the words of Charles Wesley.**

**St. George (below right) may be the patron saint of England but his icon appears throughout Europe, Russia and Egypt. The 15th century icon depicted below comes from Novgorod, Russia. It is not the dragon-slaying scene of folklore. The dragon’s head and the knight’s coat bear the same color, which suggests there is something of the saint and the dragon in all of us. Moreover, is the dragon killed? Some maintain that the dragon is not killed but tamed. The lance seems too slender a weapon, signifying that brute force is not enough. Only the power of the white horse, representing Christ, allows goodness to defeat evil. And since the dragon is not dead but overcome, eternal vigilance is required lest its destructive ways return.**



not the aim; it is to discover the power of icons, to learn how in the Orthodox traditions they powerfully convey the depth and inspiration of the gospel to the contemporary world.

“The universal Christian practice that transforms us,” says Gallacher, “is the eucharist, or communion service. But within different traditions there are other ways of being lifted up into the company of heaven.”

Worshippers entering a church decorated with icons immediately sense the communion of saints. “There they are, Mary, the apostles, the Gospel writers, other biblical figures and a host of local saints.” With icons as the focus of prayer, a ‘window to heaven’ is opened and worshippers see beyond the icon to the unseen world of the spirit. “In prayer they commune with the Spirit of Christ or the saint depicted in the icon, and open themselves so that the same Spirit may dwell in them as they pray.”

**T**he link between icons and Methodism is clear to Gallacher, who says congregational singing functions in a similar way to the icon in an Orthodox setting. “As I join the faith community singing God’s praise, I feel uplifted, transported even, rising above my cares and troubles and becoming part of the heavenly company praising God around the throne of grace.” As Charles Wesley put it :

*Changed from glory into glory ‘TIL in heaven we take our place, ‘TIL we cast our crowns before thee LOST in wonder, love and praise.*

A Gallacher icon of the Resurrection shows Christ rising from the dead, according to the tradition. His hand reaches out to Adam and he beckons Eve, calling them to life and lifting them up from their graves. Christ’s feet trample the gates of Hell and the devil is depicted, bound and defeated. Scattered at the foot of the icon are pieces of broken chains, which represent our bonds that have been shattered by the power of the living Lord.

“So I wrote,” says Gallacher, “among the scattered fragments some lines from Charles Wesley:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay FAST bound by sin and nature’s night, MINE eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon gleamed with light. MY chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.*

“The impact of this juxtaposition on those who view it continues to impress me. Here two traditions meet; their icons and our hymns.”

Dr. Gallacher notes that icons have universal appeal. Although the churches of eastern Europe and the Orthodox tradition are foremost in preserving, developing and using icons, they are now a world wide phenomenon. “In our schools we paint variations from Egypt, Africa, Asia and Italy, as well as experimenting with ways of giving the ancient tradition an Australian flavor.”

Perhaps most importantly, icons stand over against culture, with more than a religious challenge to secular society. “My interest was first aroused by a Greek Orthodox theologian describing Renaissance artists as

heretics for painting the outer beauty of the human body at the expense of the spiritual quality which reaches us through the saints.

“My schooling had been that Renaissance artists eventually broke free from the repressive, stagnant authority of the church to liberate the human spirit, and it is this feeling that recurs when I visit art galleries today. They arrange their works in periods, and icons are placed in the Byzantine period before 1400 CE, with the Renaissance and then later developments appearing as improvements on the past up to the present day. This ignores the liturgical function of icons and their living significance across all these periods and to the present day.

**G**allacher says: “Another way in which icons stand against culture applies to the Uniting Church. Its constituent denominations were virtually iconoclastic. The oral tradition of preaching was central, together with congregational singing and perhaps some stained glass in the window, but very little else. A defining moment for me was to go to St. Pierre in Geneva, Calvin’s church. I beheld a magnificent cathedral stripped of all its art work looking stark and bare, and in that moment I knew I did not belong here.”

*Warren Clarnette*

*More on iconography will appear in the next ACCatalyst.*

*In the meantime, comments are invited from contributors on this article, and on how the essentials of faith can be best conveyed today. Ed.*

# Who cares what Andrew Denton says about Christians?

Is God a Republican? Watching *God On My Side* one could take away this impression from the interviews with Christians attending the 63<sup>rd</sup> National Religious Broadcasters Convention in February 2006.

Having recently returned from the USA I found it possible to reflect a little more on this intriguing and stimulating documentary production from Zapruder's Other Films, a reference to the most famous or perhaps infamous short documentary film in cinematic history. The documentary film is centred by the presenter and co-executive producer Andrew Denton, who is well-known to most Australians for the series *Enough Rope*. I have been fascinated by the film for some time, and earlier this year, I was able to speak to the producer and co-writer of *God on My Side*, Jon Casimir. I had a stimulating and genuine conversation about the film, faith, contemporary values and morals, and life in general. This reinforced my interest in highlighting this film as an important development in the Australian film industry. It is a documentary featuring Australians commenting on the religious ethos of another country, one that has had a significant effect on Australian church life over the last 30 years.

Andrew Denton introduces the viewer to the context right from the start.

"Welcome to Texas, and the Gaylord Convention Center - home to the 63<sup>rd</sup> Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters. These are George Bush's people, the



Peter Bentley

evangelical voters who put him over the line, and into the White House. This is a film about how they see the world." (Andrew Denton)

It is an opportunity for Christians to watch how we are perceived – as Denton says "to question where faith can take people" – and have the telescope put on us, or at least on a section of American Christianity.

Publicity material for the production highlights three main points for the visit to this major Christian convention.

"First, it would provide a way to look at George W Bush's America through the lens of faith rather than politics. Second, he had heard that a major exhibit at the 2005 convention was the bombed out shell of Jerusalem Bus 19, blown up by a suicide bomber in 2004 - 11 people died and 50 were injured. .... And third, he thought that

in an age where there is such a focus on Muslim fundamentalism, it might be interesting to shine some light on Christian fundamentalism as well. Not to compare and contrast the two. Not to suggest that they are in any way equal. Just to find out what the local version looked like."

Jon Casimir explained further that the Jerusalem bus bombing was the initial stimulus, as the original article about the exhibition in *Harper's* had caught their attention, and Denton said that he found that idea curious. "I really wanted to find out what kind of person might be attracted to that sort of exhibit," Denton said.

I first saw *God On My Side* at the 2006 Sydney Film Festival, where it premiered. In fact, I was so intrigued by the film – and the audience – that I went to the second screening. Some stylistic and editorial changes were made for the cinema release through Hopscotch Films mainly because it was perceived that the original structured format was not suitable for cinema. If you saw the film on ABC television or on DVD, you also viewed it without the original format, which as I put to Jon Casimir, dramatically affected the story telling, and in my view made it poorer. Casimir agreed with me, and indicated he would have preferred keeping the original format as well.

The original themes centred around the idea of the Book, with sections or chapters. This was an excellent visually structured approach, which also reinforced the foundational exploration of the place of the Bible for Christians as well.

Continuing the ethos of *Enough Rope*, Andrew Denton allows people to speak for themselves. The editing and weaving of the programme then provides a picture and message. Once home in Australia, Jon Casimir indicated the themes became evident from the variety of footage they had taken. Due to the editing and changes mentioned, these 'book chapters' are not as easily identifiable or encapsulating, so it is worth noting below to get the structure of the film.

**Faith** - a personal journey.

This section provided an opportunity to hear comments and ask questions of the ordinary



members and stall holders. It made it clear that faith was not an institutional commitment but a personal faith, and the faith of ordinary Christians had an impact on who ended up in the White House.

**America** - the belief in America being 'God's country.' For most Australians who now live in a country where religious beliefs are rarely prominent, this theme helped to explain the synergy between faith and nationalism in the USA.

**George** - this focuses especially on especially the endorsement of George W. Bush and the Republican Party.

While the film does not say that evangelicals run America, it certainly showed how conservative evangelical Christians provided the support for President Bush's election, and continued to support him with prayer.

Andrew Denton raised questions about this support. Generally it was seen as quite logical that faith would play a part in a person's political life. Brian Godawa, a Hollywood screenplay writer and an active Christian (one of those clearly not supportive of George Bush's politics) helpfully summed this up in the film: "What most people today mean by the separation of Church and State is your religion cannot influence your political involvement whatsoever, which is ludicrous because atheists get to do that, Buddhists ... every other belief system that exists seems to be allowed to influence their decisions. Why couldn't Christians do that as well? The stereotype is, if you believe your Christian faith should influence your political involvement then that means you want to set up a police state and force everybody to become a Christian. That's the ridiculous stereotype that simply isn't true."

**Israel** - this section focuses on support for Israel.

"The biggest booth by far on the convention floor belongs to the Israeli Tourism Ministry. Last year the centerpiece of their exhibit was the wreckage of Jerusalem Bus 19, blown up in a suicide bombing in 2004, in which 11 people died." (Andrew Denton)

This section was particularly focussed on the presence of the Israeli representatives and people, and the positive responses of Christians to

questions asking about the need for the USA to support Israel.

**The Rapture** - a look at the many groups focussing on the end times, usually connected with a perception of future unfolding events in Israel, and hence the follow-on part to the section on Israel itself.

And finally, the conclusion centred on the Bible - **the Book of Books**.

An apt chapter heading, highlighting the uniqueness and exclusive orientation of the Bible, a theme that was considered throughout the film.

Large American conventions can be intriguing places of converging faith, consumerism and entrepreneurial activity. Brian Godawa noted: "It's like Jesus and the money changers. You come in here, and you see the goofiest Jesus trinkets being sold. You know, Jesus cookies, scripture cookies, Jesus chains, necklaces. And in some ways, we reduce Christianity to a consumer product, which is a real negative.

"But on the other hand, at least they have something they believe in, that they want the world to accept, and they're trying to reach out to the world, and communicate that, and you can't knock 'em for that."

There are many fascinating characters in the film, and they were often met simply in the usual way of meeting people - finding them on the floor of a meeting or around the convention areas. Other interviewees, Jon Casimir explained, were obvious from the convention handbook. This meant that they stood out for their intriguing ministry and story, or fitted in with a particular area they wished to explore, like Doug Batchelor and prophecy ministry.

Some figures are clearly used as explanatory leaders, helping to convey broader ideas in the film, or provide nuanced comment. Jos, a stall holder working with radio reaching people in the Arabic lands, is an excellent example of this.

Jos provided a European viewpoint on American Christianity, Zionism, and especially Islamic and Christian faiths, on which he comments: "This is where fundamentalism started. It's a Christian term. We should not confuse the terms. I don't think it's helpful to compare Christian fundamentalism with Muslim fundamentalism because they have a very different outcome.

An average Christian fundamentalist would not condone killing for the sake of religion. The average Muslim fundamentalist can go back to the sources of his own religion and say 'Our prophet was willing to kill for this or that situation, for that reason, so we are entitled to do the same'. " (Jos, Arab Vision)

Phil Cooke, who produces television commercials for people like mega church leader Joel Esteen, as well as running a successful communications business, was chosen for his ground-breaking work in contemporary communication, theology and emphasis on change. If you want to follow him up he provides a regular e-newsletter about change and Christian communication at [www.PhilCooke.com](http://www.PhilCooke.com)

Another clear candidate for the film was Hollywood actress Jennifer O'Neill. As Denton introduced her in the film voice-over: "Jennifer, a veteran of eight marriages and more than 30 films, including *Rio Lobo* and *Summer of '42* would like to see Hollywood put its weight more firmly behind God." (Andrew Denton)

She had a very worldly Hollywood lifestyle before becoming a Christian, as she explains at one point: "I have always believed in marriage. You can tell by how many times I was married. But I have been married nine years now. Is it perfect? No. It takes work. But if you have God at the centre and your husband's here and you're there and you're both going towards God, you'll grow closer together. I now have the tools to know in my heart and without a doubt that my marriage is going to last my lifetime because that's my choice." (Jennifer O'Neill)

The McDuff brothers, a singing trio of evangelists, were simply chosen because they were great story tellers and communicators, and in the DVD, they, along with Doug Batchelor and Jennifer O'Neill, feature in extended interviews.

A major theme which is focussed on toward the end of the film is the question of who is right. It is the continuation of the title, *God On My side*, and in a way asks how can anyone claim this? The biblical reference used for the title is from Romans: "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Certainly from my discussion

# Some words from 'An Evangelical Manifesto'

“... we wish to reposition ourselves in public life. To be Evangelical is to be faithful to the freedom, justice, peace, and well-being that are at the heart of the good news of Jesus. Fundamentalism was world-denying and politically disengaged at its outset, but Evangelicals have made a distinguished contribution to politics—attested by causes such as the abolition of slavery and woman’s suffrage, and by names such as John Jay, John Witherspoon, Frances Willard, and Sojourner Truth in America and William Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury in England.

Today, however, enormous confusion surrounds Evangelicals in public life and we wish to clarify our stand ....”

—from *'An Evangelical Manifesto: the Washington Declaration of Evangelical Identity and Public Commitment,'* May 7, 2008

with Jon Casimir, an underlying theme, arising particularly from the viewpoints of the writers, was a questioning of the view frequently presented in the documentary that there is an exclusive truth (and this truth is found in the Christian faith). The questions, Andrew’s manner and style, and the ethos of the documentary are all undertaken in a respectful and generous manner, but there are limits to this approach, as it could provide an impression of benign tolerance. It could also imply that all beliefs are equally wrong or simply deluded. I was left wondering about the place of judgement in a world of relative tolerance.

Certainly we need more consideration of the fundamental issues which the Church is grappling with today: questions like – are there some beliefs which are foundational and essential for the faith? And which religious beliefs are not only inadequate, but actually wrong?

This theme connects all the specific themes in the film. For example,

near the end Andrew Denton puts the following point to the McDuff brothers: “Your faith is so deep, so heartfelt, so absolute. How can you be sure that you’re right?”

The ‘lead’ brother, in answering, tells of his conversion and his personal experience with the Lord. While others talk about a theory, ‘he knows what he knows because he knows.’

The McDuff brothers have the last spoken word (apart from some amusing end lines in the credits), and this is used to summarise the main word in the documentary. He says simply: “Because. That’s not the word of God.”

There is, however, also a sting in the tail, with the simple presentation of a final biblical reference: “*This is my commandment: that ye love one another as I have loved you.*”

Jon Casimir explained to me that they wanted to use that verse because of their perception that there was “not as much love in the room as there should have been.” I also see it as a contrast with the seemingly intolerant

‘last word’.

Still, the use of this verse is a challenging point. How do we shape up in terms of love, remembering this is Christian love?

This is a reminder for us that our Christian speech must match our action. But it is also a reminder that we need to know what Christian love is. Love may mean we are compelled to tell someone, or some church, what we believe is wrong and to plead for the correction of the wrong.

It is also a reminder for all of us that we need to continue to seek to understand the love that Jesus talks about. This is a love so deep, sacrificial and abiding that people are profoundly changed and keep changing.

One fascinating comment from Jon Casimir was that Andrew Denton obtained two Personal Promise Bibles, one for each of their wives. These are bibles that insert a person’s name in the ‘general’ promises throughout the bible. I encourage people to pray that these Bibles will be well used.

Peter Bentley

## PT Forsyth's 'Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind

*Continued from page 12*

younger contemporary Barth, Forsyth sought not to raise a system of doctrine but to inspire a confident, witnessing, preaching church. Because he desired only the positive proclamation of Christ as "the meeting-point of changeless eternity, and changing history" – a proclamation true not for one time but for every time – his call to preachers rings as true for 2008 as it did in 1907.

Forsyth is rarely obscure. His style is aphoristic, as when he says "the Christian preacher is not the successor of the Greek orator, but of the Hebrew prophet. The orator comes with but an inspiration, the prophet comes with a revelation."

Or "The orator stirs men to rally, the preacher invites them to be redeemed ... The orator, at best, may urge men to love their brother, the

preacher beseeches them first to be reconciled to their Father."

Or "The Bible is, in the first instance, not a voucher but a preacher. It is not a piece of evidence. The Gospels are not like articles in the Dictionary of National Biography, whose first object is accuracy, verified at every point. They are pamphlets, in the service of the Church, and in the interest of the Word. They are engrossed with Christ, not as a fascinating character, but as the Sacrament, the Gospel, to us of the active grace of God."

Or "The only historical Christ [the Gospels] let us see is not a great figure Boswellised, but a risen eternal Christ preached, a human God declared by his worshippers ..."

Or, "Brevity may be the soul of wit, but the preacher is not a wit. And those who say they want little sermon because they are there to worship God and not hear man, have not grasped the rudiments of the first idea of Christian worship ... A Christianity of short sermons is a Christianity of short fibre."

Positive Preaching is a tonic for jaded preachers and a timid church.

Tinged with good humor and deep seriousness, this is a treasure for which every maker of sermons would be eternally grateful, if he or she had the good fortune to possess it.

The book's re-issue in 2003 and 2008 suggests that the message of *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* is not lost altogether in the modern clamour for novelty. One source of the two recent editions is Ridley College Book Shop in Melbourne.

*Warren Clarnette*

## GK Chesterton's 'Orthodoxy'

*Continued from page 13*

books suggest that since losing Christianity, modern men and women have lost not only their sanity, but also their joy. By contrast, Christianity, while imposing limits on their behaviour, grants people the inner freedom and peace so many in the modern world still crave.

While a fearsome opponent of much modern ideology, Chesterton had the added virtue – and perhaps the decisive virtue – of being personally generous towards those he disagreed with. The atheist and socialist George Bernard Shaw, for example, he described as a man with an heroically large heart, but a heart in the wrong place.

Furthermore, Chesterton recognized, as Philip Yancey does today, that Christians themselves are often the worst possible advertisement for Christianity. *The Times*, Yancey recounts, once asked writers for essays on "What's Wrong with the World." Chesterton's entry was the briefest. It read simply: "Dear Sirs, I am. Yours sincerely, GK Chesterton." This reflects not only an ability to raise a laugh, but also an intimate and clear-eyed acquaintance with the classical Christian doctrine of original sin.

"Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian," Chesterton wrote in *Orthodoxy*. The book itself is now a 'gigantic secret' of modern Christian faith.

*Paul Gray*

ACCATALYST

“

**The orator comes with but an inspiration, the prophet comes with a revelation.**

PT FORSYTH

**Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian.**

GK CHESTERTON

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# Conscience and conflict in the Church

THE ST THOMAS MORE'S FORUM PAPERS  
2005-2007

BY VARIOUS CONTRIBUTORS

PUBLISHED BY AND AVAILABLE FROM ST  
THOMAS MORE'S FORUM,  
PO BOX 68  
CAMPBELL ACT 2612.  
PRICE: \$19.95

REVIEWED BY BRIAN EDGAR

The relationship between faith and politics has always been controversial but it is perhaps not surprising that a congregation in the national capital – Canberra's Catholic parish of St Thomas More – should feel a responsibility to explore the religious dimension of the public square.

The parish has published 20 papers by 31 priests, politicians and other people commenting on a diverse range of public issues presented at forums held from 2005-2007. The St Thomas More's Forum Papers do not avoid controversy - which is fitting given that the man whose name they bear was a Catholic decapitated by Protestants for political reasons! We may no longer execute those who disagree over matters of government but nor should we forget the dangers inherent in matters of faith and politics, especially when the distinctions between the two are not clearly drawn.

The naming of these papers is even more appropriate given that several of the more substantial papers (by George Cardinal Pell and Father Thomas Cassidy OP) deal with the place of conscience. Thomas More is often seen, most notably in Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*, as a man of conscience (Bolt has More declare, "What matters not that it's true, but that I believe it.") which is a noble designation but something

of a distortion, a misunderstanding created by reading back a modern, individualist conception of conscience onto one who was put to death because he was much more a man of the church.

At this point it may help readers of ACCatalyst if what is said about the role of both faith and conscience in political issues is related to a typical Uniting Church issue. A good example can be found on the front page of the current (May) edition of *Crosslight*, the Victorian UCA newspaper.

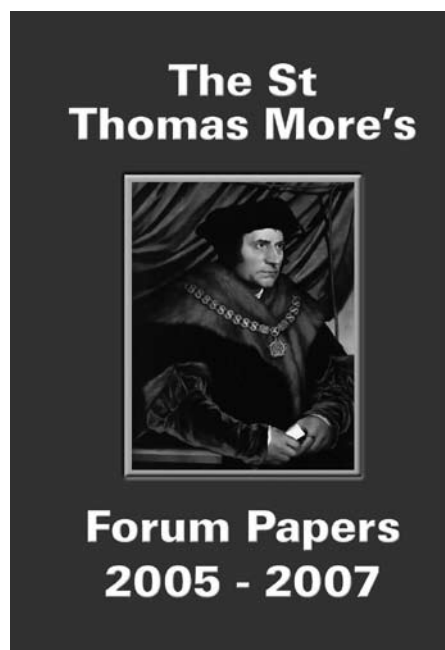
Under the headline "UC urges end to 'redundant' citizenship test" there is an account of a proposal put to the Assembly Standing Committee and the way "the Uniting Church has vowed to fight for the abolition of the federal government's citizenship test". This is undoubtedly a matter of political interest and it is an issue related to broader questions of citizenship, nationalism and community values – all of which are relevant to gospel themes. But this particular issue is also a fairly precise and detailed matter of policy within those complex areas. Is it

one on which the ASC should even be asked to make a judgment? Was consideration given to the possibility of what seems to be a reasonable alternative solution to some of the problematic elements of the original test – that of modifying it, as the current Labor government is suggesting? Why does the UCA, through the ASC, have to vow to eliminate tests? Can Christian values be worked through to such a conclusion where it can confidently be asserted that one approach to this is right and that another is not?

At the most general level it is certainly right to see our faith as relating to all areas of life and the UCA is well aware, and rightly so, of the dangers of separating the spiritual from the political. In defences of the appropriateness of church political action criticism is often levelled at individuals or groups whose spirituality is deficient in this regard. I suspect that much of this is criticism is, however, little more than posturing against dangers which are quite foreign to the UCA where the real danger is not of separating the two, but of conflating them so as to produce the more real danger of a church which has become a political party or a public pressure group. .

Now I must immediately say that I am by no means opposed to a strong and vital relationship between faith and politics. I worked for four years as Director of Public Theology for

**Brian Edgar**



the Evangelical Alliance and have produced faith based statements on a range of political and public issues. But in doing this I find myself in strong agreement with the Rev. Kjell Bondevik, a former Prime Minister of Norway and currently moderator of the WCC Commission on International Affairs who is reported (interestingly, in the same edition of *Crosslight*) as saying that church statements must be rooted in Scripture and Christian values. They must, in that sense be distinctive, as Bondevik says, “I have seen this from the political side, receiving so many statements from the churches... we asked, ‘Why are they saying this as a church?’ These could have been made by any group.”

At this point there is another disclaimer that needs to be made – that I am actually in favour of disposing of the citizenship test myself! This is associated in my thinking with a preference for other forms of educational programs for prospective citizens. The point in raising this issue is thus not to oppose the church or criticise those who produced the statement but to raise questions about a number of important matters: the extent to which church policies ought to reflect political platforms; the effects on church members who, quite reasonably, hold to an alternative point of view; the level of detail appropriate for church pronouncements – as distinct from individual conscience or even departmental action; and the real danger of over-politicising the church.

The church must address public and political matters, but always precisely as the church of Jesus Christ, giving witness only to those implications for life which flow directly from evangelical witness to the crucified and risen Christ Jesus. The church’s public pronouncements must always include a call for people to not only live by good community values but also to recognise Christ’s love as the distinctive motive for action and his Lordship of all as the ultimate goal.

We must be aware of the seductiveness of politics and the way it can seem to be the only real answer for the world. It is easy to begin by promoting good and valuable biblical and theological principles,

and to end up with a detailed policy platform suitable for a political party. Some matters are suitable for church pronouncements, while others are matters for individual conscience.

All of which brings us back to the St Thomas More papers, some of which illuminate our theme of ‘conscience’ in relation to the role of the church as a whole. Firstly, there are papers by politicians (Abbott, Andrews, Rudd, Garrett) usually on the difficulty of being a politician with faith, and these are, in my opinion, of varied quality (from excellent to poor, but I will leave it to readers of the papers to work out what they believe to be the relationship). Then there are papers by various people on how faith personally relates to different aspects of life (business, parenting, media, policing etc) many of them helpful explorations. Finally (in what is my own categorisation), there are papers by priests and academics on more theoretical topics. The most notable are Frank Brennan SJ on bioethics and George Cardinal Pell and Fr Thomas Cassidy OP (separately) on conscience from a Catholic perspective.

The modern notion of conscience has a number of elements which make it distinctive. It is individualist (I suspect it seems intrinsically and naturally so to many people, but that is no biblical view) and inviolable (what matters is personal integrity and authenticity) and subjective (it is about being true to self rather than about truth for the self). While this is my way of expressing the matter it seems to reflect the concerns that Pell and Cassidy discuss. In their context debate revolves around changes in the notion of conscience (modern versus traditional) and the extent to which one may rightly dissent from the teaching of the Catholic church and act on the basis of individual conscience. While conscience is not denied, nor is it allowed to trump the teaching of the church any time it so wishes.

In the context of the UCA the principles at issue are very much the same: the extent to which a modernist understanding of conscience has influenced personal faith behaviour, and the role of the church catholic in establishing the boundaries of scripturally appropriate behaviour.

But, curiously, the roles have now been reversed. It is the church which is acting with an individualist and modernist understanding of conscience and the individual dissenters who are appealing to the teaching of the catholic church. This is seen in the debate about homosexuality where the church only requires sincerity and aims at allowing that personal integrity (of both belief and behaviour) which is so central to modern notions of the self by permitting divergent moral positions. In this the church is acting independently apart from the catholic (that is, universal, not denominational ‘Catholic’) church.

On this view, ‘integrity’ (I fear the word has changed its meaning) to self and conscience is a well developed idea. Almost by definition, according to the modern view, one cannot be wrong (because one has ‘integrity’) if one follows one’s conscience. That is what morality is seen to be about. But less well explored are the more traditional notions of the dangers of conscience and, most critically, the manner in which conscience is formed and the responsibility for that taking place. In biblical terms consciences are far from infallible. The conscience can be strong and Spirit-filled, or it can be weak, seared, blunted and immature. Christians have a duty to inform and enhance their consciences through Scripture, the community and the Holy Spirit.

Once our responsibility for the state of our conscience is clear, and when it is seen as a relative good rather than an absolute guide, then the relationship between individual behaviour and the corporate values of the church is seen in a new light.

It is a sad and somewhat cruel irony when the Assembly insists on individual conscience being the guide on a major matter of sexual morality while definitively providing a corporate ruling on a matter such as the inappropriateness of citizenship tests. And of course, beyond that, it must be remembered that in all this the church’s primary calling is to witness to the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

The St Thomas More’s Forum Papers is a useful collection of papers. □

# A book that shows why humanism isn't enough

PRINCESSES AND PORNSTARS: SEX, POWER, IDENTITY

BY EMILY MAGUIRE

PUBLISHED BY THE TEXT PUBLISHING COMPANY, MELBOURNE

PRICE: \$32.95

REVIEWED BY PETER BENTLEY

Emily Maguire is a young writer, perhaps most prominent in certain church circles for *The Gospel According to Luke* – a novel about faith and life, and love between a pastor of a church (Luke) and a worker at a sexual health clinic. The orientation of the novel was clear to me from the start: it could have been more aptly called *The Gospel According to Emily*. While Maguire has written many articles for newspapers, this is her first major non-fiction work. It reads well, with a mix of personal comment, stories from other people and references from contemporary books. While the direct religious references are not frequent, there is much for believers to consider in this book, as many aspects can be linked to a challenge to Christian ethos and morals.

The title is of course linked to the current debate in our era where pornstars become role models and pornography has become, in some places, so mainstream it is routine. It is also a questioning of the present situation with regard to the place of women and whether real change has taken place: or are women stuck with a choice of being a 'princess' or a 'pornstar'?

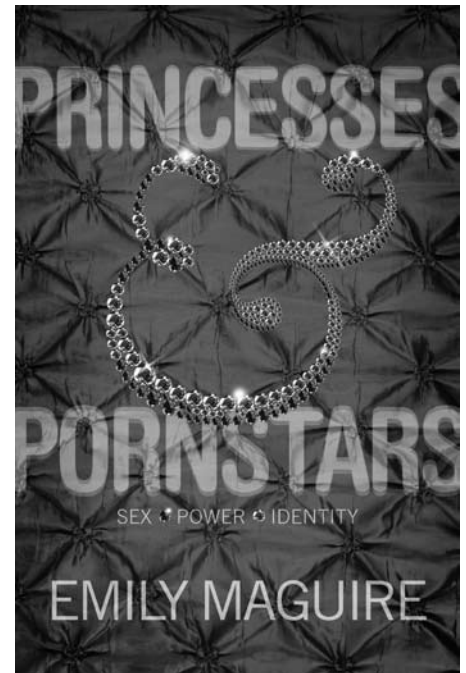


Emily Maguire

The book covers the areas one would expect from a feminist work written in a post-modern culture. It is also presented in a spirit of reasonableness, though I found underlying a didactic quality that was somewhat at odds with the prevailing ethos of supreme tolerance in a post-modern world. Rather than comment on every aspect of the book, I thought it more prudent to comment on the areas that I found more intriguing. For example, the discussion on sex education raised with me one main question. Why do abstinence and modesty movements deny people's sexuality?

Maguire's analysis of pornography suitably fits a post-modern feminist interpretation which wants to harness pornography for what it perceives as 'the right way.' I found this section somewhat naïve, but this may be chalked up to my flawed, male understanding. However, ultimately the idea of harnessing pornography for a positive purpose fails to realise the inherent nature of sin and the pervasive, destructive nature of pornography which never leaves the individual satisfied.

The place of 'women and work' is a continuing theme, but for me this illustrated Maguire's failure to look at the subject in a different way. Emily Maguire perpetuates a focus on 'men and work' which she wants to critique, and in most places thus continues the myth of work as only being that performed by people for money. She may not believe this view of work herself, but the quotations and references are such that money becomes the centre of discussion. This is a common trap for all of us, but I constantly remind



myself that in the church, the majority of 'work' is not paid, and in some cases not counted. We all need to work, and most need to do paid work to pay bills and live. But even if you don't need the money, work is good for you and is part of God's creation.

Questions related to child care and parenting is something that needs more consideration, though, as the author acknowledges, she has decided herself not to have children, she was not able to incorporate personal reflection on these questions.

Now 31, Emily Maguire has been married since she was 20, an interesting fact in itself. Even more intriguing is her attitude to marriage, which she notes as conflicted. "Although I am more in love with my husband now than on the day I married him, if I was making the decision today I would choose not to get married."

After considering her position it was unclear to me what she thought marriage actually was. The main 'wedding' she talks about is one between two of her female friends, which would not have been a legal wedding, but illustrates the popular idea around today of 'recognition services.' This story would have naturally left most readers smiling and thinking how wonderful love is. It certainly begged the question of what marriage is, and simply illustrated to me the focus on individual rights today which renders rites of life as more a personal adventure for each



and any couple in any format they want. It also helped me to consider more the Christian understanding of marriage.

The most significant and devastating chapter is that concerned with body image – ‘The body trap’. Women are airbrushed, nipped, tucked, changed for a day and a new perspective, especially for men. Do we encourage any proper consideration of this tremendous social change which has arisen so dramatically? Is our main theology of beauty telling the bridal party that beauty is something that also comes from within? How can the church help to address this dominant culture?

Overall, I found this work to provide an example of the current logical difficulty that is faced by many promoters of tolerance and love: wonderful concepts that are of course difficult to argue against especially when they are not defined. I could not help but wonder, when I read this book, how can we hold any relationships above others? Why can certain things still be regarded as not helpful, let alone sinful?

As a point for discussion: why are people now so reluctant to critique different forms of relationships, or endorse marriage as both a good and proper ‘institution’ and the appropriate place for sexual relationships? Is it because a post modern society does not provide a consistent moral framework to do so, or are people simply afraid of offending anyone in any type of relationship different to their own?

I am not suggesting that Emily Maguire does not have high standards and a moral framework and understanding. But I was left intrigued as to the authority and basis of her decisions and words of advice.

While I can find points of help in most books, this book is a particularly helpful example of why I believe secular humanism is inadequate. Violence, sexual harassment and discrimination against women will not be ended by good moral education (especially for men) and by a call to better arms. A thing called sin is not easily swayed by helpful advice, no matter how good the prose. □

## Are church modernists Christian? Thomas Oden sets the record straight

DOCTRINAL STANDARDS IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

BY THOMAS ODEN

PUBLISHED BY ABINGDON PRESS

PRICE: \$49.95

REVIEWED BY PAUL LANGKAMP

The United Methodist Church in America, it seems, is plagued by the same sort of ultimately gospel-denying modernists who have influence in the Uniting Church in Australia. Thomas Oden, former professor of theology at Drew University and the author of the relevant reference work on this phenomenon – *Turning Around the Mainline* – has just published a method for checking whether modernists conform to the faith of the classic Christian gospel, presented in the Holy Scriptures, hammered out by six centuries of prayerful deliberation, obedience and debate by the Church Fathers, rediscovered by the reformers and the Anglican divines, and received and lived out in an inimitable way in the Methodist and related churches.

Oden’s book is called *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition*. The first edition was published 20 years

ago and is much revised in this new edition.

The Wesleyan tradition is of no little relevance to the Uniting Church in Australia. The Basis of Union declares that the UCA will “listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons” and “commit her ministers and instructors to study these statements so that the congregation of Christ’s people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture.”

In other words, Wesley’s sermons are doctrinal standards for the Uniting Church. No other churchman is mentioned in the Basis of Union.

In other words, when the UCA says it listens, as its leaders repeatedly said they would listen to the church members during a previous and continuing debate, it must not close its ears to what is loudly and clearly there, as it did to the Bentley Report. The UCA is regulated by what it listens to. Inevitably, it is, by whatever it listens to.

Of course there are more than 44 published sermons of John Wesley’s. In total there are 34 volumes. And the curious reader, for instance, can download a thousand pages of them from ccel.com for US\$2.95 – or get them free if impecunious. Oden explains the exact process by which special ones got selected as regulatory. It happened over many decades and

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**Surely, the ACC has come into existence because the Uniting Church has lost all power of godliness.**

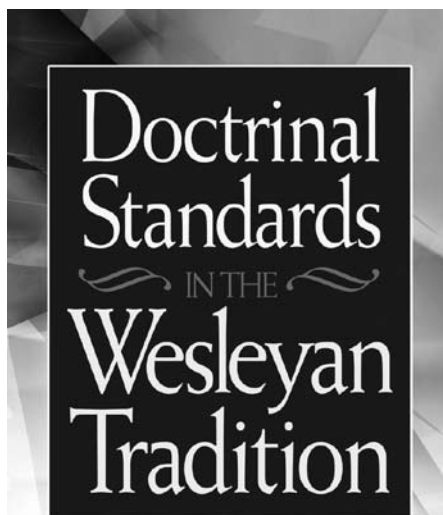
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numerous Methodist councils, on several continents. (Church councils, in the long-run, led by the Holy Spirit, evidently do make good account of our response to the Gospel.) Actually, 55 sermons appealed to Americans as doctrinal standards. The English got it down to 44 – the same ones the UCA has received. It's fascinating reading, and important to know at a time when the winds of change blow ceaselessly every which way.

Oden outlines the topics and themes of the 55. At a glance the reader can see how insights from a former age might have pertinence for us who are "languishing in the oppressive ethos of a secular humanistic elitism." (page 87) Ours is an age in which accumulation and self-satisfaction are paramount. In sermon number 50, for example, Wesley talks about The Use of Money, with Luke 16:9 as his reference. Wesley explained thus how we might receive God's blessed provision of all our needs: "Gain all you can, yet not at the expense of life, health, or strength; save all you can, for gratification increases desire; give away all you can." Can former Methodists among us remember practicing this salutary money ethic? For Wesley, tithing is not the main point. Neither is saving for a rainy day as though God will not provide. It is giving all you can. That is a direct challenge to us, for each of us, in our congregations, in our day and age, when the Uniting Church vigorously promulgates massive saving schemes.

And how relevant is sermon number two, titled, 'The Almost Christian,' preached on July 25, 1741. In it Wesley describes, "The almost Christian (having the form but not the power of godliness) and the altogether Christian (wholly loving God and the neighbour grounded in faith)." Surely, the ACC has come into existence because the UCA most evidently has lost all power of godliness.

The point is, Wesley's sermons were benchmarks for preaching in the Methodist tradition. Oden shows how Methodist preachers were encouraged to develop the themes of Wesley's sermons by further illustration and application. But deviation from Wesley's fundamental analysis was not permitted. It was the Methodist way.



**THOMAS C. ODEN**

There are two other sources of authoritative reference in the Wesleyan tradition. One is Wesley's Notes on the Bible. Wesley had been a tutor of Greek at Oxford University, so he knew his Bible as well as any of his day. His translation of the New Testament became a standard reference for later translations. Of the Notes themselves, Oden has this to say: "The Notes provide a model of translating and interpreting Scripture that remains open to further inquiries in philology, literary analysis, and hermeneutics, a model of earnest listening to the word of God speaking through Scripture that still remains moving and relevant to preaching. Their status does not imply that they were offered then or now as unerring, but as a time-bound offering that joins together knowledge and vital piety."

If this is the tradition that we receive into the Uniting Church, then members are entitled to ask of the Uniting Church's scholarly interpreters, if you aren't joining together knowledge and vital piety for church members' growth in the Christian gospel, what are you doing?

These notes point to another thing, "Scripture is the norm of Christian teaching." (page 127)

Another authoritative reference in the Wesleyan tradition is the "25 Articles". Actually, they are the Church of England's "39 Articles," reduced to 25 by Wesley. Oden explains exactly what changes were made and why. It gets to the core of

Wesley's attitudes to the functioning of the Church, to preaching, to gospel. The way of Wesley on these matters remains a very great confession. Today, Christians who worship in the Wesleyan tradition number more than 80 million.

Wesley's Sermons, Notes and 25 Articles, taken together, were criteria for defence against the dissemination of false doctrine. Oden quotes Bishop Stephen M. Merrill on the subject in 1885: "She does... require subscription to the substantial doctrines of the Gospel, such as are essential to the Christian life. Especially does she require her ministers to 'banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's Word'". There is much in this book which shows a helpful way to deal with erroneous and strange doctrines in the Uniting church.

Oden explains that Wesley's Sermons, his Notes on the Bible, and the 25 Articles, were so fundamental that the architects of American Methodism (and that included input from John Wesley himself who died after the American Revolution in the 1770's) made it exceptionally difficult to alter doctrines. Changing any doctrine required super majorities in successive national councils. Oden wryly notes: "It signifies the consistent seriousness of intent of the constitution writers and legislators of 1808, 1832, 1939 and 1968 to prevent any conceivable diminution of Methodist doctrinal standards, so as to build a fortification that would be virtually impenetrable. Therefore no General Conference can strike the Exception on its own authority without overwhelming concurrence. To date these procedural defenses have been eminently successful."

That illustrates the kind of measured and doctrinally faithful thinking that Methodists have brought into the Uniting Church in Australia. Indeed, Methodism is just part of the wonderful and rich range of Christian resources, tested and tried in other ages and cultures. The ACC and the Uniting Church have at their disposal these resources for meeting the serious challenges of a modern world gone astray.

# After 300 years, a modern heresy is with us still

Peter Sellick

**A**nti-dogmatism is a movement in the Protestant churches that would dismiss the inherited authority of dogmatic theology. It rejects the ancient creeds of the church and the great systems of past and present theology. Anti-dogmatism arose in the Church of England in the late 17th century under the pressure of new thinking in philosophy and natural science.

The figure that overshadows philosophy at that time was John Locke who developed a view of man as an individual responsible for what he believed and dependent on his own senses for all knowledge. For Locke, each man was his own orthodoxy. This was in line with the current optimistic faith in reason on the one hand and the reformation slogan *sola scriptura* on the other. Locke was a serious Christian who insisted on individual experience as the ground of knowledge, and accepted the authority of Scripture. What he did not accept was the post-biblical theological work of the Church. This meant he was silent about the doctrine of the Trinity, perhaps because it was 'extra biblical' and not accessible to human experience. There was an attempt at the time to strip back Christianity to its original composition in order to clear away hundreds of years of scholastic dispute. This meant that the ancient creeds were not seen as necessary to salvation, and could be discarded.

Nothing in theology was to be believed that did not find warrant in

The Rev Dr Peter Sellick, a regular writer on religion, is a former Uniting Church minister. Today he is associate deacon at St Andrew's Anglican church in Subiaco WA. Here he draws on his wide experience of church life to expose one of the main reasons why modern churches have difficulty communicating their message.

Scripture or could not be understood in the light of reason. Of course, the fear of Rome stirred up by the Catholicising leanings of James II fuelled this movement, for was not Rome guilty of abandoning Scripture? The glorious revolution of 1688, in which James was deposed and William and Mary invited to take the throne, opened a new era of toleration in religious ideas which the anti-dogmatists found to their liking.

The other ingredient in this combustible mix was the horror felt at the burning and torture of heretics. A new age was to begin in which the right of Protestants to free belief and discussion was affirmed. Here again, Locke took the lead with his essay "On Toleration," whereas his book "The Reasonableness of Christianity" affirmed that reason and scripture alone were sufficient.

Enlightened thinking in England was different from its counterpart on the continent in that it was a movement from within Protestantism,

with its major contributors being clergymen. In contrast to Enlightenment thinking in France which was opposed to the ancient regime of Church and state, English enlightened thinking produced an alliance between the new thinking and the Church.

But this alliance came at a cost. The old doctrines of the Church, particularly that of the Trinity, were brought before the court of reason, and found wanting. The new age was to be founded not on obscure and insoluble arguments in the early Church and among the medieval scholastics, but in plain common sense according to reason and scripture alone. Opposition to this movement affirmed much of the post-biblical thinking, especially concerning the doctrine of the Trinity.

It can be said that the opposition largely won the day. However, once the seed of anti-dogmatism was sown, it was difficult to eradicate.

**E**xperience of both the Uniting and Anglican churches shows that anti-dogmatism is alive and well. Many clergy in both denominations proudly turn their backs on the formal study of theology. In many congregations, the creeds are never heard in the liturgy and study materials avoid the great theological themes. Dogmatism is understood as standing in the way of pastoral care, and unacceptable



to ordinary believers. The word “dogmatic” has become a pejorative word, meaning ‘inflexible and narrow.’

The reformation slogan *sola scriptura* may have meant something when the Church had lost contact with the gospel, but it opened the way for the dismissal of essential theological developments from the early Church. It was surely not the intention of the reformers that the decisions of the early church concerning God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit were to be discarded. The antidogmatists saw themselves as completing the Reformation, and thus producing a pure and original form of Christianity.

It seems incredible that some take up positions in the Church while proclaiming that they are not theologians. Of course everyone is a theologian: we all have ideas about God, and even the atheist has them. But it is incredible that the ordained can proclaim that theology is largely a waste of time. This means their theology exists only in shorthand, and is not deep. What is left is the beauty of the liturgy in some denominations and a secular version of pastoral care. While the beauty of the liturgy is important, preaching suffers and the liturgy gradually loses its wellsprings. The explanation of the faith, so important in our cerebral age, is compromised. The result is a concentration on our experience of the faith, instead of on the glory of God. So faith becomes pietism.

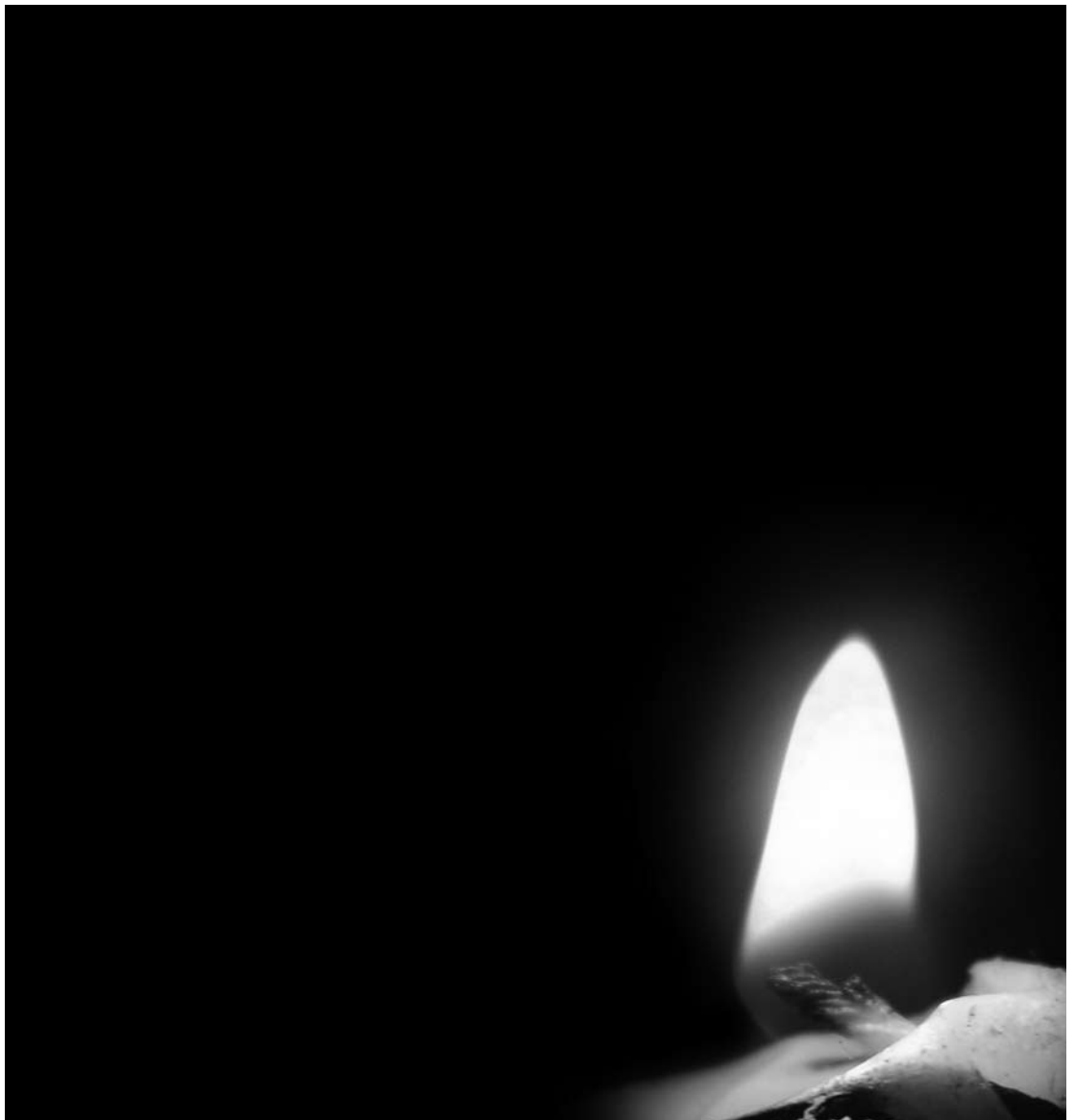
Having no basis in dogmatic theology, pastoral care can only be counselling based on secular theories. We have largely lost the idea that life falls apart because of fundamental theological errors, and that pastoral care was originally a cure

of souls in which right doctrine was inculcated.

Most importantly, we forget that the doctrines of the church were hammered out in response to heresy, and that church and society would be very different if these arguments had not taken place. For example, if Arianism had won the day in the 4th century, Christianity would have been reduced to mere moralism: the art of leading the good life. This is because in Arianism, Jesus was not God and could not be the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, thus abolishing the sacerdotal function of the Church. Without this function there is only morality, which is where the antidogmatists end up. The Church, under these circumstances, becomes the church of St Pelagius. This may be one reason why many churches now see their only relevance to their estranged communities in the good works they do.

In the absence of doctrine, conversation about God quickly becomes folk religion; belief in an almighty being existing outside time and space but somehow able to influence events in time and space. The theology of ancient Greece will be recurrent, and will eventually be found just as wanting as it was the first time around. The God whose name is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the One who was and who is and who is to come, will be replaced by the divine ‘demiurge’ of Aristotle.

Anti-dogmatism represents a crucial loss of Christian culture that will, if its program is carried through, make the church indistinguishable from the culture that surrounds it. Rather than being aliens in a strange land, Christians will be like anyone else living a life of fleeting pleasure in the present, and blind to the world to come. □



# The Pastor calls

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## John Longthorn

The late Rev John Longthorn ministered in Methodist circuits in Victoria, including East Gippsland. Earlier he was a patrol padre with the Methodist Inland Mission. His 'Diary of a Pastor' appeared in 1974-75 in *New Spectator*, the official organ of the Victoria-Methodist Conference. When first published, his tales of pastoral ministry were already half a century old. They are re-published with permission of the editor of *New Spectator*.

### *Part 1: Table Manners*

They were an elderly couple, regular at the small school in which the service was held. They were pleasant, friendly, and of a type, a good type, of a previous generation. They lived away off the main road down towards the coast; halfway, in fact, between the modern road and the old coast road. The coast road had long been washed out for miles. Only the general line was indicated along the shoreward side of the sandhills.

Their farm was mostly low ridges of sand covered with coastal banksia, letting down to the swamps which, in wet weather, cut off all approach to the main line of hills and the sea. In dry weather you could get through, if you knew the approaches. If you did not you could be trapped, not necessarily dangerously. Around the old slab home was a clearing. It was a tribute to labors of past days rather than present striving. The day of striving was done, for them. They had no wireless, no electric light, no refrigerator, no washing machine. They

lived as their long dead parents had lived. They had no neighbours.

Twice a week the old man saddled the aged bay and rode out for the mail. The bay was almost past cantering. The old man did not care. They walked. The man soaked up the beauty; not consciously of course. He was already part of it. At the box by the roadside he took out the meat and the bread and put them, meat first, into the sugar bag. There was seldom

anything else except, every other visit the *Weekly Times*. This was almost the sole contact with the outside world.

Every couple of months or so they would harness up and drive to the road. They would unharness, put the bay into a small paddock near the school. It was not theirs but nobody would mind. The bus would come and they would go for their day in town. Do not be sorry for them. They feared nothing; there was nothing to fear.

They knew a content and a fullness of life the Parson looks for almost in vain today.

The Parson called one day. He was half expected and there was a cooked dinner. As it was set before him he caught a whiff of it which took away his appetite. He looked at the full plate and thought, now or never. Throwing away all the few lessons in behaviour he had learned, he gulped the meat, neglecting entirely the rest, beautifully cooked though it was. As he got the last mouthful down the old man looked up, "Missus, this meat ain't too good." The old couple put their portions carefully aside.



JL