

# ACC Catalyst

ASSEMBLY OF CONFESSING CONGREGATIONS OF THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA



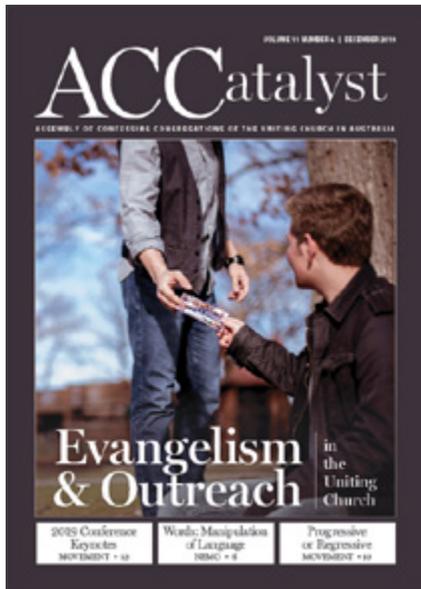
## Evangelism & Outreach

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the  
Uniting  
Church

2019 Conference  
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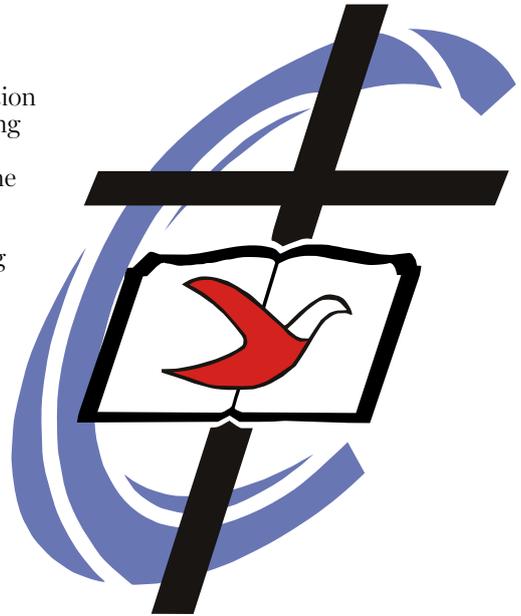


Cover photo - Ben White / Unsplash

## EDITORIAL

I hope you find this fuller edition a blessing for summer reading with amazing contributions from a wonderful program at the 2019 ACC National Conference in September. Conference presentations are also becoming available on-line – google the ACC YouTube website. A helpful way to share with your members. It is a new era for the ACC and we are looking forward to new directions and involvement of new members in the life of the confessing movement.

Peace and grace,  
**Peter Bentley**



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# Super Dads

by Robyn Painter

Robyn Painter ministers in the Peterborough community

The movie “True Lies” is about a man who is a spy, but is so secretive about it that even his wife and teenage daughter have no idea. They think he is a computer salesman with the most boring job in the world. He’s always home late from work. They arrange a special birthday tea for him, and despite promising to be there he doesn’t come home in time. They think he’s forgetful and caught up talking about computers. They have no idea he’s actually been chasing terrorists around the city and has had to fight for his life.

The daughter, Dana, has no respect for her Dad. He’s boring and insipid, she thinks - that is, until the day she is kidnapped by terrorists. They take her to a high rise building, and she escapes onto the roof with a terrorist chasing her. There is a crane on the roof and she climbs it and walks out on the arm, a long, long way above the ground. She loses her footing and hangs on for dear life, screaming for help. She gets the shock of her life when her Dad turns up in a Marine AV-8B Harrier jet to rescue her. Later

she discovers her father has saved America from a nuclear attack. Not surprisingly, her opinion of him changes dramatically.

I guess it’s normal for children to see their dads as heroes, and for teenagers to be disappointed when they discover their dads are just normal people. I suspect as Christians we are guilty of the opposite fault. We have a Father who IS a superhero. God, our Father made this world with all its complex ecosystems and abundant life forms. It is him who has kept this world going day after day, second after second. It is God our Father who changed the course of history by sending his son to earth. It is God our Father who rules the universe - our Dad! Does that make you feel special? It should! He loves us, more than any earthly Father could.



If we really understand who God is and what he has done and what he is capable of we will treat him with respect and honour, because we will realise that he is worthy of it. It was God the Father who made us and saved us from our sins and whose redemption and forgiveness are big enough and powerful enough to include the whole world - if they are willing to accept it.

We are privileged people, we are children of a super hero!

# Winners!

ACCatalyst received two awards at the 2019 Australasian Religious Press Awards.

**Best Original Illustration GOLD Award** for Hilary Sandeman in ACCatalyst March 2018: *“Taming the Tongue”*

The judge wrote “The illustration told the story! It was simple and immediately effective. Well done!”

**BRONZE Award** for *“Signs of the Times,”* by Peter Bentley: ACCatalyst, March 2018 (below).

The judge wrote “An insightful commentary on the changing meaning of the age-old words “love” and “marriage” in connection with the 2017 same-sex marriage plebiscite – discussing prominent signs, an obscene mural and sadly, hypocritical attacks by some churches on the right of others to declare their biblical beliefs.”

**Below: former Catalyst editor John Sandeman accepting Hilary’s award.**

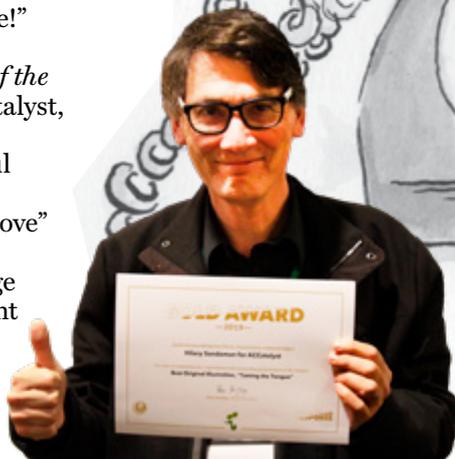


Photo supplied

## THE BENTLEY REPORT

# Signs of the Times

Peter Bentley  
ACC National Director



*I think one of the issues with the recent revision of marriage is that many people find it hard to understand how words have changed and change so quickly. Words are increasingly fluid today – much like gender is regarded in certain circles.*

### Love is Love?

For example take the University of Sydney advertising campaign in 2017 linked in to the marriage debate: “Unlearn Love”. The meaning could be taken several ways, but I am sure that the university was not saying that the love of two men is not love. I believe they were saying that married love is not what you always thought it was, and that now the idea is to challenge the status quo and develop new ideas and ways of expression.



I always find it helpful in this new era of re-defining words to ask people when they say anyone can be married to ask them what marriage is and gently probe their response. The same with the word ‘love’. Love can be love, and it may even be ‘in the air’, but perhaps those of us in the church could help the wider society learn more about the types of love mentioned in the bible?

### Marriage and Gender

Among dozens of signs and slogans in Newtown, this was the clearest in its revisionist context. The move away from the understanding of marriage as a natural biological union from which children are produced and nurtured moves marriage to a context of romantic love and individual fulfilment where being male or female does not matter. Sameness is promoted rather than complementarity.



### Ridicule of belief

I am wondering if understanding of, or even basic awareness of the deepness of belief for people of faith could become increasingly rare? On the day of the marriage survey announcement a mural was proudly unveiled on the back of the Botany View Hotel in Newtown, Sydney. The designer Scott Marsh chose to celebrate the day by denigrating two prominent Catholic figures as well as the Catholic faith. Tony Abbott was illustrated wearing a bridal dress and tiara along with an allusion to performing a sexual act with the straw in the bottle of wine, as well as being



from some of my discussions around the area was that while people were very upset at the ‘vandalism’ of the mural, some could not understand that the mural had been offensive in the first place.

### Marriage and Religion

I am aware from photos or comments sent to the ACC office that at least 12 Uniting Churches (half in Victoria) campaigned in a public way for the Yes side in the Marriage Plebiscite. Paddington UC had two prominent signs displayed. As I mentioned in my last column, reading some of the social media criticism of ACC simply sending a pastoral letter to its members, I wondered why these same UC members were oddly silent on the public promotion by some churches advocating the Yes side. Clearly these critics have plenty of time to spend on social media making barbed comments, but little time to explore the dictionary definition of the word ‘irony’.



depicted placing his hand down the pants of a buffed up Cardinal George Pell as a lifeguard wearing a rainbow swimsuit. Needless to say this caused considerable reaction - within 24 hours the mural had been splashed with white paint and then later painted over with black paint, with some wording left (The Happy Ending). In the days following people added to the black canvas with a wide range of insults and swearwords. One intriguing aspect



PUBLIC SQUARE

BY PSEUDO-MAXIMUS

# Nihilism

*Can Church and University meet the challenge?*<sup>1</sup>

*In those days there was  
no king in Israel; all  
the people did what was  
right in their own eyes.  
(Judges 21:25)*

Nothing is new. Belief in ‘nothing’ is old. Three millennia ago, nihilism was rife among the Hebrews. God was mocked and people were brutalized as ‘libertarians’ placed the truth at their disposal (Judges 1-25). In Two millennia ago, the Christian community was infiltrated by leaders teaching ‘destructive heresies’ which denied the presence of God in Jesus and equated God’s grace with freedom to do what you liked (2 Peter 2:1ff).

Sounds familiar. Our post-modern world is built-on the idea that self-assertion is the basic ‘reality’ so that any claim to know ‘the truth’ is a smoke screen for the abuse of power. A central plank in the platform of secularist dogma is that ‘conservative,’ that is, orthodox Christianity, which is committed to the truth, is unhealthy, repressive and oppressive because it deprives us of our freedom and identity.

Today, in the church and academia, it is an article of faith that ‘reality’ is a social construct, not a true description of ‘the state of things.’ This assumption, which affects every sphere of cultural activity, has been gaining acceptance in ‘the West’ for a long time.

**In Twilight of  
the Gods (1888)  
Nietzsche attacked  
universal reason and  
Christian faith for  
stifling our desires.  
He described  
philosophers  
as ‘honourable  
idolaters of concepts  
who kill the life in  
what they worship’  
and the church as  
‘hostile to life’ in its  
opposition to pride,  
power and desire.  
As the prophet of  
post-modernity,  
he speaks for  
contemporary  
nihilists in church  
and society for  
whom ‘freedom’  
means the right to  
choose one’s own  
truth.**

This way of thinking is so deeply embedded in the social fabric that truth, like God, is understood as the projection of personal and group opinions or desires. I only experience ‘truth for me’ when ‘my’ emotional needs or social aspirations are satisfied in matters of faith, politics, sexuality and justice. Ironically, the freedom to choose is now the one ‘truth’ that cannot be challenged. Nihilism – belief in no-thing – has become an unchallengeable dogma. It is the fundamentalism of our age.

The situation is serious for Church and University alike. If, as post-modernity contends, the claims of reason and faith are no more than thinly disguised fronts for subjective desires, then neither the truth of God nor the reality of our life in the world can be known. This signals the end of both ‘theology’ as a discipline committed to articulating the knowledge of God and ‘liberal humanism’ as a scholarly tradition committed to universal principles of knowledge. The process is so advanced that the situation is unlikely to be rehabilitated anytime soon. For now, as in earlier days, the love of truth has been put on hold.

## Where, then, may hope to be found?

A way beyond post-modernity, for University and Church, may be discerned in the Gospel of John where freedom is linked to truth in the person of Christ. ‘If you continue in my word,’ says Jesus, ‘you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free’ (8:31&32). This doesn’t seem to be very promising in an age where people believe that faith in Jesus belongs is merely a private opinion or an attempt to assert power in the public arena.

There are good reasons for being cynical about the truth claims of churches and Western colonial societies. Many people have suffered, and continue to suffer, because of terrible abuses of power perpetrated in their names. It is vital, therefore, to see that ‘the truth’ to which John points is ‘supremely personal’ and ‘liberating.’ It is the foundation of what it means to live ‘in the world’ in the light of grace. He directs us to the One who is ‘the way, the truth, and the life.’ The truth is not oppressive, but life-giving. The ‘personal’ char-

<sup>1</sup>This article is a greatly edited version of a sermon preached in Queens College Chapel, University of Melbourne, in April 2003. Subsequent events in Australian public life confirm the need for a deeper analysis of nihilism.

acter of God has been embodied in Christ whose power was revealed in the weakness of the Cross.

Sadly, the presence of God's Christ-embodied grace is often trivialized in the church and the community. It becomes what Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace'; the proclamation of God's unconditional mercy without the command to give our lives freely and gladly in the service of the truth.

Post-modern 'nihilists' think that this way is 'oppressive'. It undercuts their dogmatic belief that 'self-assertion' and 'individual freedom' are sacrosanct. This is unfortunate because 'genuine freedom' is only possible when we admit the harm caused by our 'will to power' (Nietzsche) and acknowledge the power of God's redemptive grace in Christ.

It seems strange, even offensive, to suggest that openness to Christ is the clue to the quest for truth and freedom in a University setting. Indeed, at the end of the age of Christendom, it sounds very 'religious' and somewhat disconnected from the purpose of a University College, albeit one with a Christian heritage. It is, however, precisely the church's 'being encountered by the truth' in a critical and liberating way that suggests the pattern for our encounter with truth in every area of human endeavor.

This does not mean that academic work is to proceed on the basis that God is the 'God of the gaps.' That 'god' is merely a substitute for what we do not yet understand. No. The 'ultimate truth' about our God-given purpose and destiny frees us to investigate the world without fearing the intervention of the gods. Thus, we may freely use our powers of mind, heart and will to let the truth reveal itself to us in every field.

To see 'truth' like this is to be open to unexpected disclosures of reality, to be curious about the splendour of the given world and to be humbled by the grandeur and importance of the tasks with which we have been entrusted. It is to be free from pre-occupation with satisfying our own desires and forcing the 'truth' to serve our 'nihilistic' ends.

Such an approach to the truth must be nurtured in church and University today. The tragic divide must be crossed for the sake of 'reason' and 'faith' which are both under attack. We must expect vigorous and heated debate between old sparring partners, but the continuing threat of nihilism in the post-modern world makes it an urgent and necessary venture.

## Beloved

1 John 4:7

*"Beloved, let us love one another."*

*"Beloved"* is the Living Word's name for each of us who follow Jesus.

Let us not be afraid to use it.

It expresses our unity with God and each other because he loves all of us who follow him.

This places our relationship to each other on a godly level.

It means that our *"beloved"* relationship is different from any other links we have in this world.

John rightly reminds us that *"Love is from God"*.

Jesus made this love a royal commandment.

*"This is My commandment, that you love one another"*.

Although these words were spoken to the 11 in the Upper Room before his crucifixion, they apply to us all.

Jesus knew that the disciples' love for him and each other would bind them one to another and strengthen them in the difficult days ahead.

If the Christian Church, down through the ages, had taken seriously this commandment of Jesus it would not be in such a divided state as it is today.

Paul says

*"nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus"*.

What a joyful thought it is to be convinced there is nothing in God's creation that can separate us from his love.

*Reverend Bob Imms is a member of the ACC Southern Cluster in Tasmania.*

# Nemo

One of the major frustrations for an orthodox/conservative/traditional Christian who wants to participate in debate on contemporary issues is the way in which those who are usually on the other side of these debates have misappropriated and manipulated, corrupted and confused words and symbols as part of a systematic assault on traditional beliefs and values, including liberal democratic and Christian ones.

This starts with what most of them call themselves: ‘progressives’. They tend to be green-left in politics and hyper-liberal in theology. Their self-chosen label for themselves automatically implies a label for those who disagree with them as unprogressive or reactionary. In addition, they invent dishonest labels to pin on those who disagree and use euphemisms or linguistic subversion to dismantle common understanding. “Reproductive health” has become a euphemism for ‘abortion’. In the early noughties, “Brights” was taken up by the four horsemen of the atheist apocalypse (Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and Harris) to describe themselves, since “atheist” was seen as negative. It flopped because the only thing these people agreed about was – well, negative – the denial of God. (They really weren’t so bright after all)

‘Gay’ was an early coinage. The opposite of “straight” is actually “bent”, but that won’t do. It’s as if the heterosexual 98% were sad – possibly because they were deprived of a useful old word.

‘Homophobia’ was a masterstroke. Though widely accepted as meaningful, it is based on a distortion of the Greek words on which it is based. A phobia (e.g., of enclosed spaces, heights, spiders) properly speaking is a morbid dread, a psychological condition amenable to therapy. It has been distorted to mean “hatred of homosexuals”, “phobia” suggesting that opponents of their broader agenda were not just haters but also



## Words: The Manipulation of Language

Image: Florian Glowogger / Unsplash

psychologically ill. (The parallels to the use of mental institutionalism to treat dissent in the old USSR are alarming)

‘Marriage equality’ was another zinger. It didn’t seem to matter that in fact legal equality already existed. The dishonest campaign simply redefined a word in common understanding and social reality for time immemorial. Attempts to point out these obvious facts were ignored or shouted down. (To increase the offence, Noah’s rainbow was redefined as well)

‘Love is love’ was a meaningless half-truth put to work in the same cause. It is a pea-and-thimble trick, another example of the deceitful conflating of disparate concepts to win an argument. The English language unfortunately has only one word to serve for four Greek ones, which distinguish erotic love, brotherly love, sacrificial love and empathic love. We all know instinctively that, even in our culture, all love is not the same.

‘Fundamentalist’, which once referred to the defence of conservative Protestant beliefs in *The Fundamentals* (1910-15), is now indiscriminately applied by dominant media and academic voices to snake-handlers, Islamic suicide bombers, Pentecostals, sectarian Hindu mobs and others. It has become a “progressive” swear word. Guilt by association is a powerful debating tool, but essentially deceitful. (Note my use of the term ‘orthodox/conservative/traditional Christian’)

George Orwell warned us in *1984* (1949) about how a dictatorship will narrow language to make critical thought impossible. Three years earlier, in his essay “Politics and the English Language”, he wrote that “[the English language] ... becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slov-

eliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.” Even earlier, Lewis Carroll was just as prescient. “When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master — that’s all” (*Through the Looking-Glass* 1872).

The philosophical and academic fuel powering much of the debauching of our language since Orwell is the amorphous and widespread movement often described as post-modernism. Sadly, it has promoted the ‘social constructivism’ theory spoon-fed by teachers to students over the last generation, that is instilling in future teachers the idea that we construct reality. There is no objective reality: society constructs reality out of words. Influenced by Marxism, this is feeding into ‘identity politics’ whereby different groups battle over the right to define reality their way. Power over language thus gives a group power over society.

Words are very important to us Christians. Especially the Word. Clarity of words should matter to us almost as much as purity of faith and life. We must not let our ‘progressive’ interlocutors dictate terms through linguistic sleight of hand. A fair question might be, “What do you mean by that, actually?” It is usually they who are concealing their irrationality. As an old Hawaiian adage says: “ka olele no ke ola, i ka olele no ka make” (“in language [lit, words] there is life, in language there is death”). We’re on the side of life.

*An occasional column from an ACC member who appreciates Polynesian wisdom.*

A young child with short brown hair, wearing a purple cardigan over a yellow and white patterned shirt and light blue pants, is climbing a tree branch. The child is looking down and to the right. The background is a soft-focus green and blue, suggesting an outdoor setting with trees and sky.

# Safe or Sainly

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Ian  
Clarkson

UCA Minister - South Australia

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We are in the season when the general public is most inclined to sense the scent of general grace, the greatest gift of heaven and all heaven in that gift. But will we unwrap it and explore its fantastic dimensions of joy? Or are we so obsessed with binding ourselves and our kids into the stifling confinement of 'being safe' everywhere and all the time.

Kids used to walk or ride bikes to school. Now there are queues of SUVs dropping off and picking up. Even parents carrying their kids' bags for them. 'Safe' is everywhere and yes, it is good to be safe. We push safeness onto our kids as a religion. The online 'Conversation' ran a piece 'Is it safe to let our kids climb trees? Let's ask the experts!' So out came the surgeon, environmental educator, injury epidemiologist, plus others, to all agree 'yes it's OK so long as parents supervise'. Wow- how did we get on without experts? Now little Billy can scale the apricot tree in the backyard because a bunch of experts have put their tick on it.

But, if we were really committed to safety for our kids a lot more men and women would resist easy adultery, separation and divorce just because they found someone fresh in place of the 'old' or 'too familiar' spouse. Fact: parents who stay together and raise their kids in a loving God-trusting home do best for the next generation on every parameter of social

well-being.

If we were keen for our kid's safeness, we would build their spiritual fibre by taking them to church to experience and learn worship. We would acquaint them with the biographies of the great radicals and martyrs who changed nations for the good through faith. We would set aside time at meals for prayers; prayers of thanksgiving to God the provider of every good thing. We would teach and show by example how to call out to the Lord of all mercy and grace to answer us in our distress and daily problems.

Do our kids know the Lord's Prayer, the Great Command, the resurrection truths? That is basic. Do they hear the Psalms read at home by their father and applied with seriousness and care? Is the home, because of this trust, a moral fortress of love and truth imbued with powerful weapons against the flighty dark and evil thoughts of the age that attack and devastate mental health? It can be, so simply.

If these dimensions are absent all the safe stuff becomes shallow and short-lived. Our present human and multi-billion-dollar crisis in suicide and depression runs rampant in this shallowness. Human beings are more than consumers and statistics. They are souls, and the human soul cries for more than the change and decay provided by being 'safe'. Death, disease, dysfunction and despair stalk, plus a myriad of calamities. We need more. Our kids need more.

In the sixteenth century Pascal, the brilliant mind who discovered both the rudiments of the computer and the concept of matter under pressure (kilopascals) was also a deep student of Scripture. He concluded that the greatest danger for any human was not to be a saint; that is, to miss understanding that they are created to know God and to learn the language of heaven. For the sake of our errant kids or grandkids let us devote ourselves to showing the way to true safety.

# Evangelism

*& outreach in the Uniting Church*

Steve  
Everist

Minister of the Word  
Pittwater UC



I was encouraged by the presentation at our Presbytery meeting on May 29 signalling a renewed commitment to evangelism.

One of the things I've noticed doing consultations over the years is that most of our people believe that faith sharing is something that they should be doing and they tick the box in congregational mission plans, but 99% of the time they simply don't do it. This is evidence of a cognitive dissonance, where the beliefs we profess do not align well with the beliefs we live, which generally indicates a conflict in the area of our key values. In other words, we think we should be doing evangelism but negative feelings arising from value conflicts undermine our best intentions.

Over the years I've identified three distinct value conflicts that I believe undermine the Uniting Churches capacity for evangelism.

- 1 The UC struggles with evangelism because deep down it feels too difficult
- 2 The UC struggles with evangelism because deep down it feels wrong
- 3 The UC struggles with evangelism because deep down we feel uncertain

I also believe that there are concrete steps that can be taken to alleviate these conflicts and help the UC community to feel more able to engage with evangelism.

## 1. The UC struggles with evangelism because deep down it feels too difficult

The value conflict is that we believe we should do evangelism but deep down we suspect that we actually can't do it, and we are more than a little afraid of the whole idea. The research suggests we are not alone in this. According to NCLS data the denomination with the highest proportion of members actively seeking out opportunities to share their faith (Four Square Pentecostal) only make up 30% of all members

of that denomination. In the Uniting Church that figure dips to 8% (Mission under the Microscope: 2000, p62). Which is to say that generally most believers find evangelism difficult but we find it a bit more difficult than most.

Look, I really understand the almost phobic fear that sometimes grips a person at the thought of sharing faith because that's the way I used to feel. For some time I refused to admit it to myself and while I refused to admit it to myself I simply practised avoidance. The breakthrough came when I confronted the simple truth that my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ commissioned me and others to make disciples and that prompted me to confront my fear. Naming that fear and making it the focus of spiritual reflection and prayer helped me to discover what most people discover about fear, that it's mostly smoke and mirrors, it's imagined more than real. What also helped me was clear and helpful group training in faith sharing that reduced my fear and grew my confidence in baby steps.

### *Moving forward*

- a. Congregations engaging in honest conversations about how people feel about evangelism.
- b. Training and exposure challenges that de-mystify evangelism and break down the practice of evangelism into clear and achievable steps (this was what the old "gossiping the gospel" program was seeking to achieve)

## 2. The UC struggles with evangelism because deep down it feels wrong

The value conflict is that Australians live in a hyper individualistic culture in which the wider communities' highest value is individual freedom including the freedom to believe whatever one wishes to believe. Anything that challenges that central value feels wrong to us and evangelism feels like it challenges the beliefs of others. However, like fear, this value conflict is more about perception than reality and is driven mostly by a bible bashing caricature of evangelism that fails to respect people's personal beliefs. There is no reason why the good news about Jesus cannot be shared in ways that are totally respectful of people's beliefs.

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, (1 Peter 3:15)

### *Moving forward*

- a. Congregations engaging in honest conversations about the morality of sharing beliefs in our culture

b. Training that helps to frame respectful faith conversations.

### 3. The UC struggles with evangelism because deep down we feel uncertain

Of the three value conflicts this is the trickiest to get a handle on. This conflict is between the gospel imperative to share the good news and the theological culture of the Uniting Church which casts doubt on how confident we can be about the foundations of our faith. The tricky part is that we are talking about our own theological framework and frameworks are notoriously difficult to critique because they are the tools by which we critique things.

For the last century or so the main educators and culture setters of our church, i.e. “Ministers of the Word” have been trained in a biblical theological methodology we call the historical critical method which in turn has drip fed our people through the weekly sermon and is the foundation of our shared theological culture. One of the essential characteristics of the historical-critical method is its use of doubt as a methodological tool. Expressed simply we have examined scripture through the lens of unflinching doubt. For example; did Jesus say such and such or was that the voice of the early church? Was there ever a Davidic kingdom or was that a mythologising reading of an ideal Kingdom? Can we possibly accept Matthew’s view of a virgin birth? These are all interesting questions but when you use doubt as a methodological tool it leaves a distinctive mark on your theological discourse and culture.

As a result of generations of theological educators telling people they are not sure about a whole lot of things in the scriptural record, it is always going to be difficult to convince UC people to do something like evangelism that already feels difficult and even a little wrong and then you add a sense that our foundations are a little uncertain, then you end up with a whole lot of disincentive to do anything brave like sharing your faith.

For the last 25 years I have served in the congregations of Turramurra and Pittwater, two congregations who have actively and successfully encouraged personal faith

sharing as well as programmed evangelism such as Alpha and MOPS. One of the reasons why these two churches have been able to find some traction with evangelism is in no small part due to the different nature of their theological culture which has given people a greater sense of confidence in the foundations of the gospel and that we have something worth sharing.

#### *Moving forward*

- a. Congregations engaging in honest conversations about the trustworthiness and importance of the gospel message
- b. Preachers and teachers getting together and discussing ways of building people’s confidence in the gospel
- c. Exposing people to courses like Alpha and NUA (Irish Scripture Union course) that present a clear and memorable enunciation of the gospel

Finally, culture change is always difficult because culture is powerful and it eats our best strategies for breakfast. I have observed that those who have been effective in changing and re-creating church cultures, people like John Bell (Iona), Nicky Gumbel (Holy Trinity Brompton), Craig Groeschel (Life Church), Andy Stanley (Northpoint Community Church), Tim Keller (Redeemer Presbyterian), and Erwin McManus (Mosaic) are all people who do four things very well:

- 1 They empathise with people and help them feel understood
- 2 They develop coherent and compelling rationales for why we cannot keep on doing what we are doing
- 3 They cast coherent and compelling visions for what the new community looks like and why it’s worth risking everything.
- 4 They do all this within a biblical/theological framework that helps the community plot its life in vital connection with the big picture life of God and God’s Kingdom.



Image: Malcolm Lightbody / Unsplash

# Progressive *or* Regressive *Christianity*

## Rev Ted Curnow

(Retired) Minister of the Word  
Victoria



**I**t all began when Bishop John Shelby Spong concluded that the historic Christian faith was just too rigid, and it needed a make-over. Spong advocated a radical reappraisal of traditional Christianity for what is largely a secular human rights agenda. Over time the term **'Progressive Christianity'** has emerged and been adopted by many around the world and within the Uniting Church to describe what is said to be a relevant, creative approach towards new ways of understanding traditional Christian belief. (*According to the Wikipedia web site 'Progressive Christianity' is currently officially aligned with the Uniting Church in Australia*) The interesting irony however is that with all the focus being on a tolerant, trendy, relevant humanitarian agency, churches embracing the new ideology, including the Uniting Church, are now numbered among some of the fastest-declining churches in Australia.

The significance of the word 'progressive' in a sociological sense is rather deceptive in that it misrepresents and downplays the very gospel the church exists to proclaim. It implies and claims that the traditional Christian faith has served its purpose, it is now old fashioned, restrictive, irrelevant and even repressive.

While church halls are seen as facilities to serve the community and are ventures for everything from cake decorating, square dancing and yoga to art classes, the use of church facilities for specific Christian purposes seems to have been replaced with much-needed new income streams from property hire and fees.

In an attempt to be contemporary and to move beyond *'the faith once delivered to the saints'*, a new updated version of Christianity (that can no longer really be called 'Christian') has emerged. By adding the adjective 'progressive' as a prefix to the word 'Christianity', it is hoped that the projected *make-over* will present a new image of a dynamic, relevant institution that has now come of

age. The reality is that this development is neither 'new' or 'progressive'.

Battles over the faith have stretched over centuries so it should not surprise us that sincere people within the church with a low regard of the Bible as sacred revelation reject many crucial teachings of Christianity and consider themselves to be now liberating the church. This is seen as similar to the way that the early church liberated people from the bondage of ancient Judaism, and so today in a similar way it is done by reinventing or rejecting essential themes grounded in New Testament Christianity.

The sad thing is that many young people in the Uniting Church, rather than first responding to the challenge to accept Jesus Christ as Lord are attracted to social justice issues and to react against what are simply regarded as old-world prejudices and biases. They are also vulnerable because they rightly know that all Christians should have a heart of solidarity for those who are marginalised and outcast.

Others see progress as liberating the church from being mistakenly locked into thinking that all truth has been discovered. This means the 'new progressives' are intent on reshaping the inherited Christian gospel in a desperate attempt to relate to a post-modern world. While it is true, as the old hymn says, *'The Lord has yet more light and truth to break froth from his word,'* instead of humbly seeking the aid of the Holy Spirit, the approach that parades itself as new and creative, in reality is more 'regressive' than 'progressive.' It is no more than old theological liberalism dressed up to appeal to human rationalism and activism. In the name of relevance, it is a return to 'reason' and passion as being the only guide in matters of religion. In other words, Progressive Christianity seeks to be practical and to reason away anything that is supernatural in the records of sacred history in order to appeal to the contemporary mindset.

The old liberalism dressed itself in denying the miraculous while the new garment in the form of Progressive Christianity parades itself with an overlay of being both enlightened and relevant to the 21st century. Os Guinness notes:

*"After two hundred years of earnest dedication to reinventing the faith and church to being more relevant in the world, we are confronted by an embarrassing fact: Never have Christians pursued relevance more strenuously; never have Christians been more irrelevant."*

In his book *"The Gagging of God"*, D.A. Carson writes:



Prominent progressive (now retired) Bishop John Shelby Spong

*“Study after study has shown that pursuing relevance may achieve a certain instant ‘success.’”*

Yet he states that such apparent success “... is frequently the advance warning to bitter failure in the long run. A prime example would be many mainline churches that sought greater social impact and respectability but ended up being devoured by liberal theology and denying the gospel. ... As Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, each new era brings with it new temptations to ‘conform to the world’ and new opportunities to be ‘transformed by the renewing of your mind’ so that we can know God’s will for us in our time.”

## Middle Ground Denial.

*Decision* magazine from The Billy Graham Association points out that today the new liberalism under the progressive banner is gradually encroaching on more conservative churches amid a culture that paints Biblical values as oppressive and bigoted. (*Decision*, June 2019) However while church attendees may not be used to making new faith choices, it needs to be clear that a Christianity that simply reflects and conforms to secular cultural trends is a counterfeit gospel. In churches with an ageing membership many are still not used to having to distinguish between secular social trends and the core Christian gospel. Like it or not, today we are forced to respond to the political/social shifts of our time that appeal to an inclusiveness that leaves us with no option but to either affirm the lifestyle embodied in the LGBTQ movement or to affirm the unique revelation and teaching of Holy Scripture.

For many faithful people raised in the tradition of the Uniting Church these confronting issues of prevailing culture are just too emotional and tricky. Bill Muehlenberg puts it rather bluntly:

*“The brutal fact is that in this Christian country not one person in a hundred has the faintest notion what the church teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus Christ.”*

With years of church attending but limited instruction in the core elements of the faith, when facing real social issues involving life or death or sexual ethics, it is just easier for many to seek ‘middle ground’. For many it is easier not to rock the boat and to decide not to decide.

There is a certain naivete among some church attendees that suggests that the world’s values are neutral and harm-

less and that it’s more a matter of convenience and how one feels about the issues of the day. Muehlenberg suggests that some think of Christianity as a *vague idealistic aspiration of a simple consoling kind* -- instead of a ‘tough, complex doctrine steeped in a drastic, uncompromising realism’. In other words, it is not a matter of how issues like abortion on demand or homosexual practice sit with us, it is a matter of discerning how God’s world works best through the unique guide of Christian revelation.

To say ‘the world is changing so we must adapt’ is just a simplistic way of rebuking the traditional church for not keeping up with the world. Progressive Christianity and the Uniting Church is all about how the church must conform to the reality of this age. The Uniting Church has become a culture driven church where the consumer becomes all important instead of being led by Christ and his Word.

Instead of exposing a culture that is drifting from its Christian heritage there is a complete reversal by some within the church who charge those who respect biblical revelation as being hostile towards God and subversive to contemporary society. Ironically this was like the way early Christians were thought of by the established Roman Empire.

R.A. Mohler Jr. of Kentucky says:

*“These are issues in which there is no middle ground. There is no middle ground between affirming and denying the bodily resurrection of Christ. There’s also no middle ground between defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman and saying it can be something else ... so Christians are going to have to answer with the full measure of conviction, or they’re just on a slower track than some others to denying the faith.”*

## Theological Liberalism.

From the very beginning Jesus warned the disciples about impostors and distortions in terms of the wolf who snatches and scatters the flock. He stressed the importance of obeying his teaching (John 10:23-24). From the outset the early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles teaching. (Acts 2:42). The church was exhorted to hold to sound teaching. Right doctrine was stressed and regarded as vital from the very beginning. (Galatians 1:6-9, 1 Timothy 6:3-5, 2 John 1:9-10). However, the church has always lived with heresy, apostasy and revisionists of some sort. In linking ‘Progressive Christianity’

continued over...

# Progressive or Regressive Christianity

with old liberalism Muehlenberg says:

*“Heresy is always as old as the hills and so we have nothing new here. But as Peter cautioned, ‘Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion for someone to devour.’ (1 Peter 5:8)*

Those promoting a progressive form of Christianity use Christian words and concepts with sincerity, but words are stripped of their rich biblical content. J. Gresham Machen in *Christianity and Liberalism* goes as far as saying:

*‘despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology modern liberalism is not only a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions.’*

Well before the formation of the Uniting Church the traditions from which it arose were all greatly influenced by this sort of thinking. In fact, during the 19th and 20th century, liberal movements were mostly tailored towards the theologically-educated but in our time the appeal for revision comes from social change as much as it comes from radical theology. With this brand of faith still clearly impacting the church it is worth elaborating on how liberalism currently shapes the roots and direction of Uniting Church thinking.

Muehlenberg provides a brief overview.

“Springing from movements such as the German Enlightenment, human reason became the source of all truth as opposed to biblical revelation. Mankind, aided and abetted by science and rationality, became the authority of all things, not Scripture. Enlightenment naturalism replaced biblical supernaturalism. Thus, the Bible was criticised as being outdated and errant, and core doctrinal truths were downplayed or denied. And the miraculous-- including the resurrection of Jesus- was strongly attacked.”

Today’s progressive Christianity basically runs on a similar watered-down agenda. Muehlenberg continues:

“The Bible is not (regarded as) a divine record of revelation, but a human testament of religion and Christian doctrine is not the God-given word which must create and control Christian experience ... Liberalism swept away entirely the gospel of the supernatural redemption of sinners by God’s sovereign grace. It reduced grace to nature, divine revelation to human revelation, faith in Christ to following His example, and receiving new life to turning over a new leaf; it turned supernatural Christianity into one more form of natural religion, a thin mixture of morals and mysticism.

Liberalism in the modern church represents a return to an un-Christian and sub-Christian form of the religious life. ... In the 1930s when H. Richard Niebuhr was lamenting the emptiness of liberal Protestant theology he nicely summed it up as something in which ‘a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of Christ

without a Cross.” Despite having much in common with left wing politics, it has been said that progressive Christians focus on a theology that shuns certainty and celebrates a mystery that is essentially a different gospel.

## Being Birthed in Liberalism

By the latter part of the 20th century and during my youth, liberalism was well entrenched in the Methodist Church. During three formative years in a Bible College, I explored and was bathed in the background and texts of scripture. My faith journey was marked by a sharp contrast between the riches of the revealed historic faith and an invading church liberalism that rationalised the biblical texts. While the process towards my ordination as a minister of religion took place during the exciting birth of the Uniting Church in 1977, I was left in no doubt I was entering a formal ecclesial institution that was also being chastened and reproved by the providential hand of God.

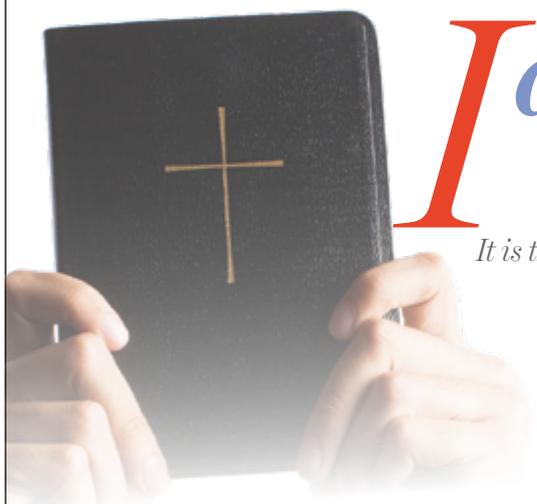
With the new Basis of Union playing down the final authority of the Bible and the Church’s evangelical heritage, I understood the mixed bag in hand. There was all the potential of leaving past baggage behind and of embracing the birth of a new church but also the pain of a church being chastened by a recalcitrant liberalism. I was excited by the biblical concepts expressed in the new Basis of Union and of a church opened to new horizons. While I was about to become a professional clergyman, the concept of every member being equipped by the Spirit to be a minister was a radical concept that I embraced with enthusiasm. I made my contribution to the challenge and creatively participated in that period that forged the early unique identity of the new Australian born institution.

By 1986 Rev John Harrison, in his book fittingly described the first ten years of the Uniting Church as a ‘baptism of fire’, a tumultuous time. With the passing of time, as someone of evangelical persuasion serving in a largely liberal church, I ministered in a context marked by ecclesial schizophrenia, experiencing both the rich benefits and the painful chastening of the hand of God within the Uniting Church. I have witnessed the potential of a new historic direction, but also a distinct turning towards a marginalising and hostile rejection of faithful members and colleagues who have embraced biblical faith values.

While there are those who passionately hold the view that the flexibility and numerical decline of the Uniting Church is actually evidence of its vitality and relevance in a changing world, I stand with those who pray for the renewal of an institution that excels in social dynamic but that has lost its first love, its core message and heart. I pray for a church with a passion to proclaim the good news of Jesus in a dying world and in a bold way that makes it distinct from the ever-increasing neo-pagan patterns of Australian Society.



Also see: [www.tedcurnowhistory.wordpress.com](http://www.tedcurnowhistory.wordpress.com)



# I am not ashamed of the Gospel

*It is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.*

Keynote Address  
ACC Conference  
Tuesday 24th September 2019

Hedley  
Fihaki

ACC National Chair



*Romans 1: 16*

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel,  
because it is the power of God that brings  
salvation to everyone who believes...*

**I**t is interesting or perhaps surprising that Paul writes, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel.'

Why not say positively, 'I am immensely proud of the gospel'?

But Paul does not say, 'I am immensely proud of the gospel', he says, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel.'

As we know, Paul of all people, had very good reason to be embarrassed and ashamed of the gospel. Not only that, but he had good reason to even abandon the gospel.

Why?

Because the gospel had been a source of suffering for Paul. For example, Paul says in 2 Cor. 11: 23-28:

"..... I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move.

I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.

I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

But, despite the gospel being a source of 'suffering' for Paul, he does not see it as a reason to be ashamed or embarrassed, or a reason for distancing himself from the gospel.

Why?

Because Paul knows and has experienced firsthand the gospel as the 'power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes' (Romans 1: 16).

It is why we hear Paul saying things such as (2 Cor 4: 7-9):

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

We see suffering as such a negative thing in our Western culture today, but Paul says (Romans 5: 3-5):

but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

And, so despite the gospel being a source of suffering for Paul, it does not make him ashamed of the gospel; instead, it spurs him all the more into preaching the gospel as the power of God that brings salvation to all who believe.

The prophet Jeremiah similarly experienced the 'gospel', in terms of it being the Word of God - as a source of suffering.

In Jeremiah 20: 8, Jeremiah says that the:

'Word of the Lord has brought me nothing but insult and abuse all day long.'

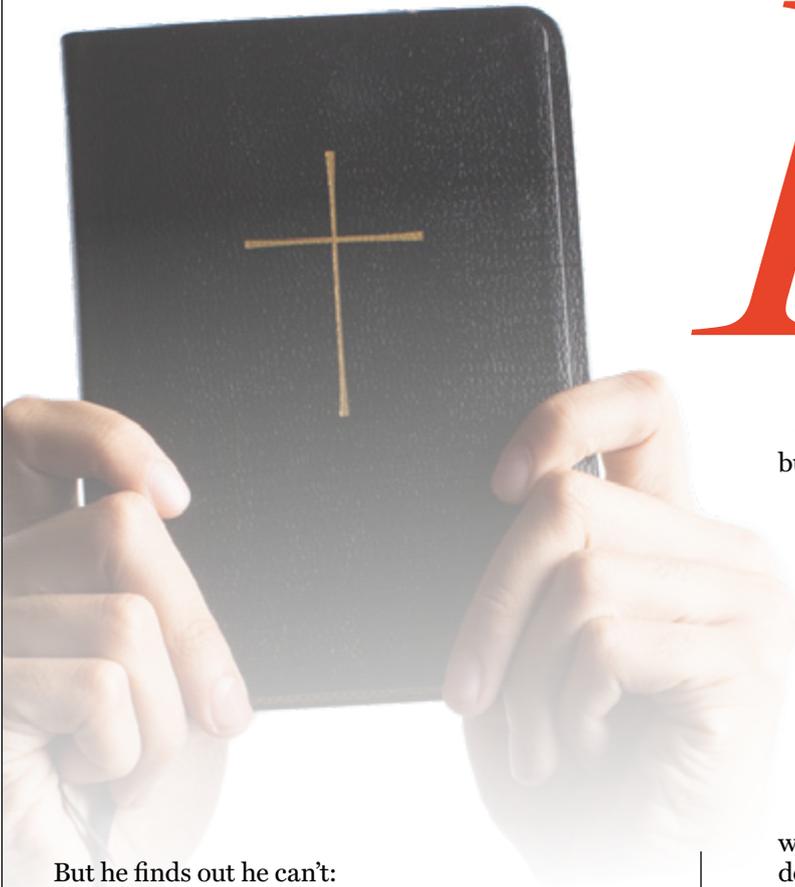
And, he cries out to God:

'Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame? (Jer. 20: 18).'

At one-point Jeremiah wants to say:

'I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name.'

[cont over...]



# I am not of the God

*It is the power of God that brings so*

But he finds out he can't:

But if I say, "I will not mention his word  
or speak anymore in his name,"  
his word is in my heart like a fire,  
a fire shut up in my bones.  
I am weary of holding it in;  
indeed, I cannot. (Jer. 20: 19)

That is, despite his personal feelings of wanting to leave the prophetic ministry because of the insults and the abuse that he was receiving for speaking out God's Word, Jeremiah says that he cannot:

The Word of God in his heart was like fire, so he knew that he could not contain it within his heart - it had to be released.

And so, Jeremiah, like Paul (and many others in the bible), in a paradoxical way, experienced the gospel and the Word of God as the source of their 'suffering', but, also, simultaneously, as the basis for them experiencing the power of God for salvation.

It is important to note that it is the gospel itself that is the source of our suffering. It is not 'us' as Christians per se. That is, it is not our method of delivery or our method of engagement, as such, that is the cause of our problems.

Of course, we know that if we are not loving and kind and compassionate to others, then, naturally people will hate us. But, the issue before us and the hate that we experience, for example, as the ACC, is not one in relation to 'method' or the way we go about our evangelism.

The gospel itself is by nature offensive and divisive.

And, this point is essential to understand. The gospel itself, even as the good news about Jesus as the Messiah the Son of God, is by nature offensive and divisive.

It is why Jesus said in these words (Matt 10: 34 - 36):

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring  
peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace,

but a sword.

For I have come to turn

"a man against his father,  
a daughter against her mother,  
a daughter-in-law against her mother-  
in-law—  
a man's enemies will be the members  
of his own household."

Jesus also said (John 15: 18 - 19):

"If the world hates you, keep in mind  
that it hated me first. If you belonged to the  
world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you  
do not belong to the world, but I have chosen  
you out of the world. *That is why* the world  
hates you."

We don't have to look for the reason why we are hated. Jesus makes it very clear. You are hated because I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Remember during the marriage plebiscite debate, we were hated before we even spoke a word.

We were labelled as homophobes and bigots just for holding to the view that marriage is between a man and a woman. And, it didn't matter how well or how nicely you tried to explain why you believe what you believe, you were just hated.

Simply to say, that it is not our method of engagement that is the issue. It is the gospel itself and the truth that is by nature offensive and divisive.

It is why it is likened to a sword in the bible.

Hebrews 4: 12 puts it well:

'For the word of God is alive and active.  
Sharper than any double-edged sword, it  
penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit,  
joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and  
attitudes of the heart.'

Truth divides!

And, we are simply called to decide which side will we stand left or right; truth or falsehood; Christ alone or religious and ethical diversity.

Which side will you stand for?

On the 13th of July 2018, the 15th Assembly of the Uniting Church adopted 'religious and ethical diversity' (R64) as the basis for redefining our biblical understanding of marriage, and then sought to try to sell it to the church under the deceptive label of 'two integrities'.

The Assembly of the Uniting Church says that it has

# ashamed gospel

salvation to everyone who believes.

'decided to hold two equal but distinct statements of belief on marriage'.<sup>1</sup>

Is it possible to hold two 'distinct' statements of belief on marriage under the 'one' Assembly?

Let me put the question in another way using an example that I used during one of our youth group bible studies:

If the game we are all engaged in now is 'soccer' and we are the Soccer Board, is it possible for us as the board to have two equal and distinct statements of belief in regard to the rule about 'not using our hands in the game'?

For example, is it possible for us as the Soccer Board to allow some players to use their hands and other players to 'not' use their hands?

Or, is this specific rule about 'not using your hands' such a rule that we cannot allow for a diversity of opinion and practice on it because if we did, it would ultimately change the nature of the game?

Simply to say, that there are some rules we can change, but there are also some rules that you cannot change if you wish to maintain our distinct identity.

Those rules that you cannot change are rules that we would call, using Uniting Church Basis of Union language, rules that 'enter into the substance of the faith'. If you change a matter that enters into the substance of the faith, then, you change the very nature or the very essence of the faith itself.

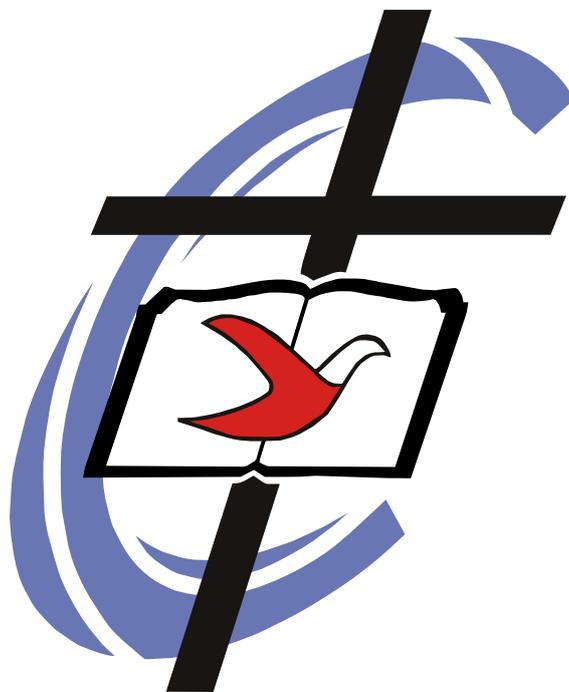
In the Uniting Church's Basis of Union, paragraph 14 it talks about

'adherence to the Basis of Union' as being a "willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this Basis. Such adherence allows for difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith.

The ACC has already stated very clearly that Marriage is a matter that enters into the substance of the faith. Therefore, we cannot allow a diversity of opinion on this matter. Because if we did, it would change the nature of the Uniting Church. And, that is exactly what has happened.

The Tongans and the Samoans in the Uniting Church are particularly angry because we came into the Uniting Church believing that the game we are playing is Ruby Union, the game that they play in heaven.

But, now the nature of the game has been changed. The Assembly is now saying that Ruby Union must be an inclusive sport and that we must include soccer



players and Aussie Rules players etc., all at the same time on the one field.

But we are like saying, hey, get off the field, go and play your own sport. If you want to play soccer, go and play soccer. If you want to play Aussie Rules, go and play Aussie Rules. But, stop trying to tell us that we are all playing the same sport using the same rules.

Two distinct statements of belief about a matter that enters into the substance of the faith, such as marriage, cannot both coexist within the one 'Assembly'.

Two distinct statements of belief must lead to two distinct Assemblies.

Note: the Assembly as a council of the UCA is the only council that can make determinations in matters of doctrine. Synods cannot. Presbyteries cannot. Congregations cannot. Only the Assembly.

It is why we chose the name 'Assembly of Confessing Congregations' to highlight the root of problem, as well as highlight the way forward in terms of a solution, that the matter must be tackled from an assembly level.

The Assembly of the Uniting Church I believe is ashamed of the gospel.

It is ashamed of the gospel, because Assembly wrongly thinks that to hold to the belief that marriage is exclusively between a man and a woman excludes people from the church. It therefore preaches a gospel based on 'inclusion'.

Yes, the gospel is about inclusion, but it is much more than that. It is about repentance, transformation, being born again, holiness, righteousness, reconciliation and salvation.

To be able to continue to preach this gospel, our Assembly as the ACC must be distinct in its very nature, and in its very core in relation to what we believe and how we will move forward into the future. Otherwise, we will continue to live a life of contradiction within the Uniting Church.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide our conversations and our deliberations about our next step (just our next step – no more, no less) into the future.

And, may we never be ashamed of the gospel. Why? Because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. Amen.



# I am not ashamed of the Gospel

*It is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.*

Keynote Address  
ACC Conference  
Wednesday 25th September 2019

## Wendy Francis

QLD State Officer - ACL



Probably all have worship songs that resonate deeply within our hearts. One of my recent favourites has been “O Praise the Name”. *For endless days we will sing Your praise, Oh Lord, oh Lord our God. It speaks to me of the deep sense of awe and wonder that we have when we praise God.* This song was co-written by Hillsong’s worship leader, Marty Sampson. So, when Marty announced his decision to walk away from his Christian faith a few weeks ago, I, along with many others I’m sure, felt saddened and confused. Marty chose Instagram to state that he was “*genuinely losing his faith and it didn’t bother him*”.

His announcement came shortly after another high-profile Christian leader, Josh Harris, also used Instagram to announce that he was “*no longer a Christian*”. Josh authored several books that had an enormous impact on the Christian church. But he now says he has, “*undergone a massive shift in regard to his faith in Jesus*”. He wrote, “*by all measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian*”.

So, what causes seemingly committed Christians to turn their back on their faith? I’m not wanting to condemn either of these men, or anyone else for that matter. Only God knows their heart. But as we look at what they are saying, there is one major problem which emerges that I think we need to pay careful attention to. Marty Sampson cites as one of the reasons he lost his faith, his struggle with what he sees as “*contradictions in the Bible*”.

Among the issues identified by Josh Harris as to why he has walked away from Christianity, is his concern for the LBGTIQ+ community. He said he regrets standing against same-sex marriage and that he believes his writing and speaking has contributed to a culture of exclusion and bigotry.

For both men, their hopes and expectations in what they believed have not been realised. In their minds, God

hasn’t operated in the way they thought He should. It seems clear by reading their statements that they are disillusioned with God, with other believers, but above all, they have lost confidence in the Bible as being the infallible word of God.

Can I pause here for a brief comment on the Confessing Congregations movement. Thank you for your commitment to biblical truth. Thank you for your theological statement on your website that followers of Christ are called to be obedient to Christ and submit to his authority attested in Holy Scripture. Your Constitution confirms repeatedly that the only basis on which we can truly claim to be Christ’s followers is by committing ourselves to upholding the Scriptures’ prophetic and apostolic testimony to Christ as the final authority for faith and life. Your constitution calls on the Uniting Church to determine matters of doctrine and ethics according to the teaching of the Scriptures and you are committed to providing biblically-grounded leadership.

Does that mean that you and I understand everything we read? I don’t think so. I’ve been a Christian for over 50 years and I still grapple with passages that I find hard to understand. Even the apostle Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:16 that Paul’s letters contain “*things which are hard to understand*”, things which Peter said, “*ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other scriptures to their own destruction*”.

But even when we don’t understand it fully, to reject God’s Word is not an option for a child of God. In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul tells Timothy that ALL scripture is God-breathed.

The Bible is not just the ideas and opinions of mortal men. Peter drives home the same point in 2 Peter 1:20-21 - *Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpreta-*



Marty Sampson

Image: Facebook

*tion of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.* Jesus, when he prayed on the night before he went to the cross prayed for his disciples and asked his Father, “*Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth* (John 17:17). The Psalmist, 1000 years earlier was gripped by the same conviction when he said of God’s Word “*all your words are true!*” Psalm 119:160.

So how can it be that people who claim to be a child of God, show disdain for what is written in the Word of God? I think there are 3 main reasons that this happens –

**Firstly**, the Bible presents a picture of God that they don’t like. Most people have no problem with an image of a God who is loving, gracious and forgiving. The problem is, that this is only one aspect of the biblical picture of God. When people are confronted by parts of the Bible that speak of God’s judgement against sin, many are left feeling uncomfortable. Some try to characterize the God of the New Testament as being loving and merciful, in comparison to the God of the Old Testament who is harsh and cruel.

But there is no difference between the God of the NT and the God of the OT. He is one and the same. He is, without a doubt loving and merciful, as Exodus 34:6 says – The Lord is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness and rebellion. Compare that to 2 Peter 3:18 which tells us that The Lord is patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. Yes, the Bible, the O and New Testaments, tells us of God’s condemnation of sin. But it also tells us of his gracious provision of forgiveness and salvation to all who will repent.

**The second reason** I think people reject the Bible is that it presents a picture of the world that they can’t accept. Some people say you can’t trust the Bible because it doesn’t line up with science. They question: ‘How anyone can believe the Genesis account of creation when science has proved the ‘big bang’ theory and evolution?’ For a start, the theory of evolution is just that – a theory. There is no proof. I know there are divided opinions even amongst Bible-believing Christians on whether the Genesis record is literal or symbolic. For my part I have absolutely no problem at all in accepting the literal Genesis record of creation. But whichever way you look at creation, it is God who created the world and all that is in it.

Then others will say that the Bible’s prescription on sex and sexuality are way too narrow-minded and bigoted for them to accept. For many Australians, the Word of God no longer sits comfortably with them. It is outdated, out of step with the society we live in. You just have to look at what happened to Israel Folau to see the truth of that.

**A third reason** the Bible is rejected is that the church so often does not live up to the teachings within its pages. The Bible teaches so much about personal purity and holiness, but many describe those who follow the Bible as hypocrites. And in many cases, fair enough! Marty Sampson drew attention to the number of preachers who fall! And yes, this is absolutely tragic - church leaders who preach one thing from the platform, then live by an entirely different standard in their private and secret lives. It is devastating. The Royal Commission into institutionalised sexual abuse also damaged the reputation of the church enormously.

So how do we respond to those who would have us abandon our adherence to the whole Bible as the Word of God? Well, I think what is important is that we identify the problem with this position. When we deny the truth in God’s Word, we set ourselves up as the final judge of what is truth! It presumes to place ourselves above God as the one who will decide what is good and what is evil. This was at the heart of Satan’s first temptation back in the Garden of Eden!

Remember the serpent came to Eve, and accused God of not telling the truth? Eve had told the serpent that God had said not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden and that if they did, they would die. But the serpent contradicted God and said, “You won’t die! God said that because He knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God – knowing good and evil!”

Satan convinces Eve that she and Adam can be their own gods, deciding what is good and what is evil. This was the first sin of humanity – presuming to set themselves up as the final authority of what is right and what is wrong! An appeal to pride. We can be our own gods. We can decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. Is it any wonder that in the Bible we repeatedly hear God say that he resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

So, what has our pride, our determinedness to make our own rules, to be our own gods, led to?

- the trashing of marriage as the lifelong commitment between one man and one woman
- the legalisation of same sex marriage
- the exploitation of vulnerable people in Prostitution and trafficking
- Abortion up to birth
- euthanasia of our most vulnerable
- the scourge of pornography
- and the madness of gender fluidity

As a society we have largely abandoned God, and this is the result of that. But God has not abandoned us. And his Word, the Bible, is living and relevant, and has the answers for life. It shows us the way back to God, outlines our need as individuals to come to a personal belief in the fulness of who Jesus is, and our need to repent and surrender our lives to Him. But the Bible is not only about personal transformation. It is also about transforming culture. In the pages of the Bible we are called to be light and salt. We are called to bring shalom to the cities where we live. We are called to speak truth in our public spaces.

In Isaiah 59 it is recorded for us that “truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found.” It then goes on to say that, “The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene”.

God wants his people to be those who speak truth in the public space. And the reason for this comes later in the same chapter: “The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins”. When God’s Word is accepted as truth, and that truth is spoken, God takes that truth and draws people to repentance. We have gathered here over the past few days as those who acknowledge the authority of God’s Word. As such we cannot condone any watering down of the truth written there.

That’s the solution, the answer to any who are tempted to give up on their faith, to doubt the veracity of

[cont over...]

# I am not ashamed of the Gospel

*It is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.*

God's truth found in that Word – the Bible. The answer to disillusionment is for us to continually, humbly, position ourselves under the authority of God's Word.

One of the ways is doing just what we've been doing together for the past couple of days: gathering with God's people and sitting under the teaching of God's Word. But more than just hearing from a preacher, it's important that we do as the Bereans did in Acts 17. When Paul preached to them from the Scriptures, they kept going back to the Word for themselves to check it out, to see if what he was saying was what the Word was actually saying! They were determined to scrutinise every teaching in the light of God's Word. And then there's our own devotional times. To ensure that we are living under the authority of God's Word, we should spend time reading it for ourselves every day!

And as we do that, God will challenge us to speak out those truths. Here in our nation, we still operate under a democracy, which means that we still can speak truth into our public space. Let me share some current opportunities with you.

**Prostitution** is the choice of those with the fewest choices, mostly women and girls – many of whom have been weakened by poverty, drug addiction, sexual abuse, coercion, or slavery. The Northern Territory government is proposing to legalise brothels and prostitution in the Territory with a Sex Industry Bill 2019. It is impossible to view the practice of prostitution as anything other than commercialised exploitation of vulnerable people. The public were invited to contribute to this inquiry.

The South Australian government is also considering a prostitution bill that, if passed would most certainly contribute to the trafficking and exploitation of vulnerable women and children. We need to help those trapped in this exploitative industry, not entrench them. Use this form to send a message directly to the SA parliament [acl.org.au/cm\\_sa\\_decrimpros1](http://acl.org.au/cm_sa_decrimpros1) (Note: debate resumed on 30 October 2019).

**Life issues** – during the recent abortion debate in NSW, at a Pro-Choice Alliance rally in Sydney, attendees chanted “we will fight, we will win, throw the fetus in the bin”. Abortion is the leading cause of death in Australia. We have an estimated 70,000 annual abortion deaths, significantly more than deaths from cancer (47,753), heart disease (18,590), smoking (15,000), suicide (3,128), the road toll (1,050), homicide (414) or drowning (249). It equates to more than 191 children each day. 95% of these abortions are performed on physically healthy women carrying healthy children. This is not about shame. In fact, which one of us is free of even the sin of murder when Jesus said if you hate your brother it is the same as murder? But humanity thrives when we choose life. Legalised assisted suicide has been introduced in Victoria through euthanasia legislation that is also being considered in Western Australia and Queensland. In both States, Members of Parliament want to hear from

their constituents. It's so important to be a voice in this space for life.

Our federal parliament is also running an inquiry into how best to protect Australian children from online harms, particularly regarding gambling and pornography.

Perhaps one of the most troubling issues today is that of gender fluidity. It's only recently, and only regarding human beings, that the concept of male and female has become controversial. The idea that gender is fluid and something you can choose is part of a newly-established orthodoxy. To contradict this new orthodoxy is considered to be a form of heresy. In what is a new experiment, this orthodoxy abides by a set of rules that would appear to be straight out of a Marxist handbook. Our children are guinea pigs in this experiment. And the laboratories are our educational facilities where our children are targeted by preachers of post-truth doctrine. We must do everything we can to take back this ground and speak truth to this blatant lie that is causing so much confusion and lifelong misery. Romans 1:25 says it well when it says that *they exchanged the truth for a lie*.

Evidence that children are being confused by early, and constant, exposure to transgenderism is not hard to find. Referrals of Australian children to gender identity clinics have skyrocketed in the past five years and experts are warning that the huge spike is, in part, due to the promotion of transgender issues in educational facilities which encourage children to question their identity. The largest increase is in Queensland.

Children are being forced to ‘unlearn’ the difference between boys and girls. Kids too young to know what a puberty blocker even is, are being directed by adults into renouncing their natal sex. Educators are normalising the use of hormonal treatments to solve complex issues related to mental health and identity. This is even though without medical intervention around 90% of children who are confused about their gender will embrace their natal sex through puberty: a process which, of course, is prevented by puberty blockers. Children who are confused about their gender need our respect, our love, our understanding. Above all they need the truth. Gender dysphoria has been likened to someone suffering from an eating disorder such as anorexia. To help someone with anorexia, you do not go along with their confused state of mind and agree they need to lose some more weight! Neither do you tell them to eat a cream bun and get over it! You walk with them on what can be a long journey – lovingly, carefully, but truthfully. That is the pathway to recovery and freedom.

The implications of gender fluid ideology in sport is astounding. Virtually all elite sports are segregated into male and female competitions for obvious reasons. The male body is optimized for physical performance. The female body is built to be able to bear children. Not all women do bear children, but our bodies are created to cater for that possibility. But ignoring this, sporting groups from kids right up to the Olympics now allow men who identify as women to compete against women.

There's a lot of talk these days about empowering women – this is not how you do it.

Earlier this year at the 16th Pacific Games in Samoa, the winner of the women's 87kg division in weightlifting was Hubbard, a man identifying as a woman. Stowers came 2nd, denied the gold medal by lifting 7kg less than the male winner. When Hubbard was asked about competing against women, he responded: "I think you have to be true to yourself." Hubbard previously represented NZ in weightlifting as a man. This time he represented NZ as a woman.

This is a denial of the existence of objective truth. That is not an option for the child of God. The Bible tells us that God created man and woman. So does science by the way. There are two sexes with XX and XY chromosomes. Anything outside of that is a genetic abnormality that can still be classified as male or female based on the presence or absence of the Y chromosome. There is no Z, there is no W. Cosmetic surgery and cross-sex hormones can't change us into the opposite sex. They can affect appearances. They can stunt or damage outward expressions of our reproductive organs. But they cannot turn someone from one sex into the other. Princeton philosopher Robert P. George put it like this, "*Changing sexes is a metaphysical impossibility because it is a biological impossibility*". Sex is NOT a spectrum. Sex change is physically impossible. Transgendered men do not become women, nor do transgendered women become men. All become feminised men or masculinised women, counterfeits or impersonators of the sex that they want to identify as. To assert anything else is a cruel lie that will never provide the long-term wholeness and happiness that people seek. But this assault on the truth of male

and female is taking over our public spaces.

In November last year, Australian Labor Senator, Louise Pratt, stated that "*Drag queen story time is a wonderful idea that celebrates diversity and I know that children and families will really enjoy this family-friendly celebration of LGBTI culture.*" Senator Pratt is currently the Chair of the Senate Standing Committee which oversees Education. If this is happening in your local library, speak up.

There are so many ways that we can speak truth in public. And this is what God intends for us to do! But it can't be OUR truth. It must be based on the Word of God – the Bible. And so, it's important for us to firstly examine our own hearts in relation to God's Truth: Psalm 119:11 says "*I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you*". We need to be committed personally to immersing ourselves in the Truth. But then, we are not meant to keep it to ourselves. In Philippians 2:15-16, Paul exhorts God's children to be "*blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.*"

Hold firmly to the Word of Life. And speak Truth to a nation that is in desperate need of Truth. Because it is only truth that brings Freedom.

*Wendy Francis is the Queensland State Director for the Australian Christian Lobby.*

Resources on these areas can be found under 'Issues' on the ACL website, and the website 'Them Before Us' (with Katy Faust)

# Conference memories

## *Praying for the Arise Youth Network leaders*



Image: Dean Whittaker

# Two of anything?

Peter Bentley

ACC National Director



## 1. Decision of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania on Voluntary Assisted Dying.

Many ACC members have expressed their amazement and grief at the decision of the Vic-Tas Synod in July 2019 to resolve that (among many parts and different provisions) *“exploring, accessing, and conscientiously objecting to voluntary assisted dying are all within the range of faithful Christian responses to the Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2017.”* And ... *“give permission within Victoria to UCA institutions (Uniting VicTas and Uniting AgeWell) and the UCA-affiliated hospital group (Epworth HealthCare) to make voluntary assisted dying allowable within the context of their facilities and services for their patients, clients and residents, under the conditions described in the Victorian Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2017.”* Note: the full decision is available on the Vic-Tas website.

The decision reflects the now foundational idea of ‘two integrities’ (or ‘new fundamentalist doctrine’) that was used as the basis for the change to marriage and is taking on a life of its own. One wonders what will be the next matter that will utilise this context?

The situation within the whole Uniting Church is even stranger when one considers that the Synod of Queensland at its Synod meeting in May 2019 considered this matter and stated that *“... we do not support the legalisation of voluntary assisted dying in Queensland. If legalised, our facilities will not provide this as a service and our staff, in the course of their employment, will not participate in medical acts to end a life through voluntary assisted dying.”*

The ACC has a position paper on these areas of contemporary debate, and it is commended to you for understanding the orthodox Christian position on euthanasia and assisted suicide. See under Resources on the ACC website – ‘Statements and Papers on Social Issues’, or contact the ACC office for a printed copy.

No matter how many provisos and warm sounding statements are also made in the same resolution about life, palliative care and conscience, they are negated by



approving of what is voluntary assisted suicide. This term is preferable to ‘voluntary assisted dying’ which gives an appearance of abstract neutrality – somewhat bizarre given the personal context.

Please pray for the members, staff of Uniting Church facilities and residents in Victoria as the implications of this decision are considered and come forth.

## 2. Bills concerning Abortion

In another area of ‘life matters’, many members would be familiar with the extensive debate in the NSW Parliament and South Australian members would be aware of matters before the SA Parliament from the pastoral letters/columns of the SA moderator and material in the Synod news (including the helpful provision of past decisions in the Synod and other material for reference, noted with the usual disclaimer about the variety of UC views).

You can read ACC’s position statement on abortion. This is a helpful reference document for all UCA members. You can download a copy from the ACC website or request a printed copy from the ACC office.

It must be somewhat confusing for people in Australia when they hear contradictory positions within the Uniting Church on these matters. Unfortunately, it contributes to the further erosion of the importance of beliefs overall. I am often asked in usually a negative or derisive way why ACC has made comment on ‘life matters’ and upholds ‘conservative’ positions. My answer is simply, not because traditional positions are supposed to be upheld by conservative people, but because they are integral to the sovereignty, grace and mercy of God.

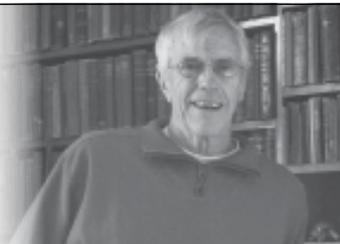


# Unity & Institutionalism

*Leaders in the United Methodist church are continuing to discuss and negotiate ways that United Methodism can best serve the Church of Jesus Christ in the months and years ahead. There is an attempt to find some consensus on various ways forward that will be presented to the next General Conference in May 2020. The following is an attempt to clarify some realities that must be taken into consideration as decisions are made about the UM future.*

## Dr Riley Case

United Methodist (Retired)



**T**he kind of unity described in the New Testament is quite different from much of that advocated by the institutional church.

Many of us believe our church leaders are understanding “unity” as denominational institutionalism instead of the New Testament unity of oneness in Christ based on a commitment to shared beliefs and values.

I have been a part of Methodism’s evangelical renewal efforts for over 50 years. I responded to Chuck Keysor’s original article in the *Christian Advocate* in July 1966. That article would launch the Good News Movement. The institutional church at that time saw evangelicalism (always labelled then as “fundamentalism”) as a dying relic of the past and basically refused to take evangelicals very seriously. Keysor (and others), very much aware of the evangelical ferment of the times, understood that evangelicalism not only was not dying but instead was the future for Protestantism in America and, for that matter, across the globe. Originally, Methodism in the New World

defined the American form of evangelicalism. A great part of Methodism has always been faithful to that original vision. The goals of Good News at that time were quite modest: recognition of the evangelical world and of evangelicals and the contribution they could make as the church moved into the EUB merger and the forming of a new United Methodist Church.

While a number of church leaders in the late 1960s gave guarded encouragement to the new evangelical movement, others had concerns. Their concerns were about “divisiveness.” The church needed support, not dissension. Politically the nation had passed through the Joe McCarthy era and some were thinking evangelicals (“fundamentalists”) might introduce an era of religious witch-hunts.

This issue was addressed by the United Methodist Reporter which, as an independent UM-related news outlet, was itself sometimes criticized for not being supportive enough of the denominational agenda. In an editorial (9-24-1970) the editor, Spurgeon Dunnam, wrote:

... Are evangelicals a divisive force within the church? Yes, they are divisive. Divisive in the same way as Jesus was divisive to first century Judaism. Divisive in the same way Martin Luther was to sixteenth century Catholicism. Divisive in the same way that John Wesley was to eighteenth century Anglicanism. And, strangely enough, divisive in the same way that many liberal “church renewalists” are to Methodism in our own day. A survey of Methodism in America today reveals these basic thrusts. One is devoted primarily to the status quo. To these, the institution called Methodism is given first priority.

[cont over...]



# Unity & Institutionalism

It must be protected at all costs from any threats of change from any direction...

Dunnam understood that the greatest tension in the church was not evangelicals versus the social activists, but evangelicals and social activists versus the status quo institutionalists. It is curious that for the past fifty years a major criticism of evangelical renewal groups is that they are divisive, meaning among other things, that their support of the major vision of Methodism (“You have nothing to do but save souls”) sometimes places them at odds with United Methodist institutional revisionism.

In our present day there is discussion over the church’s stand on sexual morality. The “status quo” is the position called “compatibilist,” a position that identifies those who, regardless of how they feel about the practice of homosexuality, believe that it is a minor issue as far as church values are concerned. They also believe that, for the sake of “unity” (read “status quo institutionalism”), the church should be more inclusive and open-minded so that we might move forward as one big happy family. Unfortunately, we have not for some time been living as one big happy family. We have such different understandings of what UM doctrine and moral life is that we often cannot even carry on intelligent conversation. But the “big happy family” position is that advanced by the “centrists,” the “Mainstream UMs,” and the American bishops and the boards and agencies. “Unity” is living under an institutional big tent. That was the approach of the disastrous One Church Plan, evidently the only plan the many of the bishops and centrists would seriously consider as a way forward before the 2019 General Conference. The plan called for doing away with all negative references in the Discipline to homosexual practice, letting everyone live as they pleased and maintaining the institutional status quo complete with the present Council of Bishops, the boards and agencies and the seminaries being able to carry on as usual.

One historical reference. In the 1840s, when the issue was slavery, the divisive troublemakers were the abolitionists who in our day would be labelled “incompatibilists.” They (and others) dared to bring petitions to the 1844 General Conference to force bishops and the church to follow the Discipline in regard to slaveholders. At the time the bishops, always the “compatibilists,” would not even discipline one of their own who was a slaveholder. The bishops, ever seeking ways to hold the church together, urged more study and more discussion. Their position was basically an 1840s version of the One Church Plan.

Reality check: the status quo is not working. Doesn’t the loss of 5 million American UM members in the last 50 years tell us anything? Any “Way Forward” must allow for expressions of Biblical unity based on shared values and beliefs. Social institutionalism in America as an important expression of societal cohesiveness has been in decline for several decades.

Surely it is being observed that social clubs, organizations and institutions which, until recently, provided so-

cial cohesiveness for many people, are having a rough time of it. Fraternal organizations like the Masons and Eastern Star, service organizations like Rotary as well as established institutional churches have been declining. Denominational labels no longer inspire loyalty. Within Protestantism many growing local churches have de-emphasized denominational labels. Baptist churches are self-identifying as “community churches.” Often these groups don’t even use the word “church.” They are “Abundant Life Ministries” or “Worship Centers.” When UM churches have de-emphasized the “Methodist” brand name they have come under criticism from institutionalists who believe that de-emphasizing the word “Methodist” is a form of disloyalty. And yet our parishioners these days change churches for the slightest of reasons and have less brand loyalty than ever before.

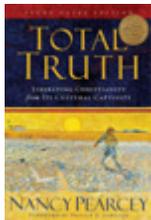
Interestingly, this phenomenon is not so evident outside the US. African churches and churches in the Philippines believe that the UM cross and flame communicates that which is good in religion. They have indicated they do not want to give up the denominational label. At this point a lot of conversation needs to take place.

In addition to the fact that the church is hopelessly divided and that institutional “unity” (loyalty) simply is not working the way it once did, at least in America, it should be evident that the time is ripe in United Methodism for the possibility of real renewal. No matter what our theology we need new structures, new visions and new ways of being in ministry together. For progressives perhaps this is a time for freedom to revise a new set of doctrinal standards (or perhaps for affirming the absence of any standards) that they can in good conscience support. While evangelicals would see no need in any revised standards (we are committed to these as they are), there would be interest in new institutional structures. There would be interest in designated giving, in initiating programs from the bottom up instead of from the top down, and for allowing churches to use resources that may have been developed outside the denominational structures. This would be possible if the denomination were able to allow realignment and the opportunity to start afresh. According to the survey done by Mainstream UMs, only 17% of evangelicals presently hold a favourable view of the boards and agencies. This is no way to run a church. Many in the church, including those same centrists and progressives, understand this.

Since the 2019 General Conference there has been willingness to talk seriously about some form of amicable separation. This would offer an opportunity to open the doors of change for new expressions of the Spirit of God.

*Dr Riley Case is a retired United Methodist minister. He writes ‘Happenings Around the Church’ for the Confessing Movement within the United Methodist Church in the USA. This article was first circulated by on 26 September 2019 and is reprinted with their permission.*

# Public or private?



## Total Truth

Crossway Books  
2005

Written by Nancy Pearcey

Is religion only a private matter, or does God belong in the public arena?

*Total Truth* by Nancy Pearcey, in examining this question, follows in the line of, and further develops, Francis Schaeffer's *How Should We Then Live* and Charles Colson's *How Now Shall We Live*, both of which would be known to many readers.

Subtitled *Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, *Total Truth* presents a readable and insightful challenge to evangelical Christians to understand all of society and life through a Christian (biblical) worldview rather than a secular one Christians have adopted. That secular worldview is limited to our culture and binds Christians, who restrict their faith to only the private sphere, leaving it at Church each Sunday.

As our worldview governs our thinking, Pearcey encourages readers to develop and apply a biblical worldview to all of life, arguing that this gives us "a biblically informed perspective on all reality," – a *Total Truth* – which enables us to see things more clearly and which we can take into our daily life and the world in which we live, i.e., the public sphere. In this way, Christianity can challenge, redeem and renew culture.

*Total Truth* comprises 4 parts. Part 1 explains how to build a Christian worldview by starting at the begin-

ning – in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth – and the Bible's teaching that God is the only source of the whole created order, and seeing all of history through Creation, Fall, and Redemption. From here Part 2 examines Creation and science; Part 3 the decline of Christian thought over the ages; and Part 4 how to apply a Christian worldview, and integrate our faith, in all of life and daily living under the Lordship of Christ.

Pearcey shows what this *Total Truth* means for areas of family, business, public policy, education, arts, science, music, law, politics and Christian involvement in society. She "walk(s) you through practical, workable steps for crafting a Christian worldview in your own life and work" and applying it "to cut through the bewildering maze of ideas and ideologies we encounter in a postmodern world. The purpose .... is nothing less than to liberate Christianity from its cultural captivity, unleashing its power to transform the world."

She believes: "The most effective work .... is done by ordinary Christians fulfilling God's calling to reform culture within their local spheres of influence – their families, churches, schools, neighbourhoods, work-places, ... and civic institutions."

Although written in 2004, *Total Truth* is a book highly relevant today. The foundation and explanations laid down by Pearcey are most helpful for Christians in the present day in understanding that God belongs in the public arena and in their responding to the push to exclude the Christian faith from the public square.

*Owen Davis is an active ACC member in South Australia, providing help and advice to the ACC over many years.*

# Leading like Jesus



## The Leadership of Jesus

Written by  
Peter McGuigan

Although set in the life and mission of The Salvation Army, this is a very accessible book for all those who are involved in the life of the 'institutional' church and the wider pastoral ministry. It has enabled me to reflect on my own experience as I heard the honest and open reflections of someone writing frankly from within their own context. Each short chapter has a focus on one aspect of

leadership, for example, delegation, vision, stress, making decisions, and they all go straight to the point, so the book is ideal for busy people and each has related questions for further reflection, making it a helpful study guide as well.

I particularly found the chapter 'The Elephant in the Room' very helpful, and the amazingly succinct reflection on the nature of authority. The whole collection, based on past articles by Peter McGuigan is built upon four aspects of 'leading like Jesus', that highlight following Jesus is the foundation of leading.

**Humility** - with a helpful focus on listening.

**Conviction** - highlighting that we need to be sure of what we believe and

how are beliefs are related to the Kingdom of God.

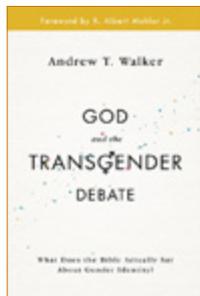
**Courage** - I appreciated the link to history and one example is the amazing story of the campaign by Bramwell and Florence Booth with journalist W.T. Stead, Editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette* highlighting the scourge of sex trafficking and under-age marriage in the 1880s. It is worth highlighting the life and witness of Stead in Christian publications for his wider public Christian ministry.

**Integrity** - yes, as Peter McGuigan says the "most important of benchmarks". Sadly, too many leaders have succumbed to things that have taken away their integrity.

This well-produced volume about following Jesus and leading like him is summed up in the sub-title: *Spiritual Incarnational Countercultural*.

*Reviewed by Peter Bentley.*

# What does the Bible say?



## God & the Transgender Debate

Written by Andrew T. Walker

As Christians think about how we respond to transgender issues, many have fallen into two opposite errors. On one extreme, many have forsaken the truth of the Bible and let go of God's good design of humanity as male and female, affirming things that we ought not to affirm. On the other extreme, many Christians have forsaken the grace we find in the Bible and have affirmed biblical truths but done so in a way that is unloving and out of line with the gospel of grace. Both of these extremes are dangerous because real love requires both truth and grace. It requires that we speak truth, even when that truth may be hard to hear. But it also requires that we speak it with grace and compassion, with kindness and genuine love for others. So, when it comes to conversations around transgender issues, how can we engage with both truth and grace? One really helpful place to start is *God and the Transgender Debate* by Andrew T. Walker. In this book, Walker shows us that it is possible to steer clear of both extremes, helping us to hold firmly to the truth of the Bible and what it has to say about gender, but doing so in a way that exudes compassion, love, and an understanding of how difficult struggles with gender dysphoria can be.

## Compassion Without Compromise

One of the most striking and praiseworthy features of this book is that it is saturated with grace. Sharing about how writing this book was a transformational and eye-opening experience for him personally, Walker reflects,

'I think Jesus's compassion and gentleness are especially needed when addressing a topic like this, because the testimonies of people who experience these conflicts demonstrate real distress... While I'm not afraid to share a strong opinion, if it can't be mediated through a tone of compassion, mercy, and gentleness, it may not be an opinion worth sharing.'

This perfectly sums the approach of this book. The opening page (and whole opening chapter) sets the tone for the whole book by pointing us to Jesus, who was known for spending time with 'sinners' and invites us to come to him and find rest (Matthew 11:28-30). When it comes to conversations around transgender issues, he asks, 'What would Jesus do? He would listen to us, and he would love us, and when he disagreed with us, it would always and only be out of compassion.' (p. 15)

This book demonstrates that it's possible to have compassion without compromise. And it demonstrates that loving others doesn't mean letting go of the truth of the Bible, even when those truths can sometimes be hard to hear.

## The Bigger Picture

Walker spends a good chunk of the book looking at what the Bible has to say, helping to place transgender issues within the bigger picture of God's redemptive story. He not only looks at individual verses that speak to issues of gender, but also helps us see the importance of the broad sweep of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. Creation shows us that God's design of humanity as male and female is deeply good. The Fall reminds us that our experience of this good design is marred and imperfect – though God's blueprint remains. Redemption shows us that Jesus has saved us and paved the way for the world to be made right again – though in the meantime we continue to struggle as we take up our cross and follow our Saviour. The New Creation shows us that we can have hope, because one day we will be freed from the effects of the fall and everything will be made right.

Walker argues that experiencing

gender dysphoria is not something people choose, but rather a result of the fallen world we live in. At the same time, he points out that we do sin if we act on those feelings in such a way that rejects God's good design of gender. These are truths that are no doubt very difficult for many people to hear. But time and time again Walker points us back to the hope that we find in Jesus, even amidst the struggles and pain that this life may bring.

## Tough Questions

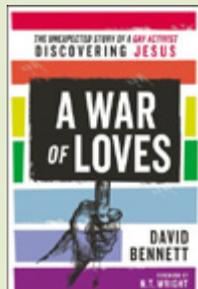
Another reason to commend *God and the Transgender Debate* is that it is intensely practical. It has a chapter devoted to 'Tough Questions': How should we think about pronouns? What about people who are intersex? Is taking hormones to manage dysphoria ever appropriate? Can someone be transgender and Christian? Walker provides helpful answers to all these questions (and others) with love and wisdom. He's also got a whole chapter on 'Speaking to Children', helping us think through in very practical ways how we have conversations with the next generation about transgender issues. Rather than keeping the discussion in the realm of theory, Walker does a great job at bringing things down to earth. He has lots to say in challenging the church about how we respond to transgender issues, and what we can do to engage more lovingly. He has a whole chapter on what it might look like for someone who struggles with gender dysphoria to follow Jesus. So, if you're looking for a practical guide on responding to transgender issues as a Christian, you can't do better than this book.

As Christians, we need to work hard at engaging with the transgender conversation in a way that is saturated with truth and grace. And if you want to be equipped to do that better, *God and the Transgender Debate* is a great place to start.

*Reprinted with permission – from Essentials: the journal of the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion*

Ben Smart, WA

# A War of Loves



## A War of Loves

Zondervan  
2018

Written by David Bennett

I first became aware of David Bennett because my old friend from school is his cousin. So when his book was published, I asked for a copy to read and review. David calls himself a celibate gay Christian. This is a problematic term for many of us. How can someone use the label “gay” and be a Christian committed to celibacy?

David’s book is mostly an autobiography, honestly sharing his journey from his younger years when he first became aware of his same-sex attraction, through his years as a gay activist and then how he discovered Jesus. His description of his conversion was of an overwhelming experience of the love of God pouring all over him. In chapter 8, “Experiencing the Love of God” he says when he finally agrees for a Christian friend to pray for him, not expecting anything to happen,

“I entered into a stillness, a peace. Soon I felt a soft tingling on the crown of my head that slowly intensified, as if someone was pouring oil over me. The warm sensation ran down my entire body like a current of water. It was unlike anything I’ve ever felt.

In a moment, in that experience so totally from outside me, so totally unasked, for everything turned upside down in my mind. All my searching in religion, in relationships, in atheism - none of it compared to this love coursing through me like electricity. For the first time I knew God was real and that he loved me. *This changes everything, I realised.*”

David then narrates his gradual movement through churches which affirmed his gay lifestyle (never mentioning denominations) to the place he is now – committed to celibacy. He still experiences the temptation of same-sex attraction, but chooses, in God’s strength, not to entertain or act on it. Ever since discovering Jesus, David has had an intimate relationship with God and often hears God’s voice to him. In chapter 17, with the telling title “God’s Greater Romance”, when wrestling with the physical loneliness of celibacy and longing for bodily intimacy, David hears God’s quiet whisper: “*My Church is meant to be that body to you.*” David was sceptical but the book chronicles his journey to finding fulfilment in brotherly Christian love in his church. Are our churches places where the lonely or isolated find a family, find intimacy? The book is an encouragement to all Christians - no matter what our sexual attractions are - as it relates David’s growing dependence on God. For example, by page 150 he says “that night I submitted my life to the Lordship

of Christ anew, yet another incremental marker on my road. I now knew I had to leave these other churches for my heart to be clean. While that did not mean severing friendships with people I cared about, it did mean cutting the ties of official fellowship and attendance as a sign of my new commitment.

In subsequent weeks most of the people from these churches harshly criticised my choice to be celibate. It was so hard. I loved these people! But I didn’t turn back. The freedom I found was worth it.”

At the ACC conference in September this year, I met one of our speakers - James Parker, who God has also brought out of the gay lifestyle. I had a good talk with him, and James said he knew of David but could not agree with him that “gay Christian” was a helpful description of his identity. James is now happily married with a child and like David rejoices in how God has rescued him out of the gay scene. I wonder if when David is older, he may no longer call himself a gay Christian?

I follow David on Facebook and so have seen that David has immersed himself in theological studies and has commenced a doctorate at Oxford University. He also has an active ministry of evangelism into the LGBTQI community.

“Unless we learn how to accept others without affirming everything, we have lost the art of conversation, because we’re suppressing our honest opinions. We can accept and affirm people without affirming *all* of their desires or beliefs, or accepting their actions.

Jesus was teaching me that I could offer both love and truth as I shared my story.

You see, love without truth is not love at all.

And truth without love?

Well, it’s not truth.” (p.213 - 214)

*A War of Loves* has two appendices which are handy for those who wish to go into greater detail. They are 1. “What I Learned the Scriptures Really Say about Homosexuality” and 2. “Desiring and Imaging God: The Challenges.” The whole book interlaces his personal story with his teaching from Scripture.

It is an excellent resource from a young Australian Christian man brought up in a godly home, who finds life is very difficult yet has reached acceptance and joy in who he is in Christ. The short Glossary explains many terms in a helpful way including the four Sides or groups of Christians who have or have had same-sex attraction. David calls himself a Side B Christian. I think James Parker would be what David calls Side X which means God has totally removed his same-sex attraction and replaced it with love for his wife.

Both David and James need our encouragement to continue their ministries. James needs to write a book! But, in the meantime, you can listen to his talk at the ACC conference which is on YouTube ([youtube.com/watch?v=neVJAc3BM3Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=neVJAc3BM3Y)).

Read #AWarOfLoves!

Anne Weeks is a minister’s wife at Belrose, NSW

## REFLECTION

# A Word for Today

***“Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ”***  
*(Ephesians 3:8).*

When a person is gripped by the gospel as they receive Jesus, they receive an impossible virtue: humility. The natural state of sinful humans is pride - the thought that we are smarter and better than others. But the gospel brings us the knowledge that we are helpless without Jesus - we are totally reliant on him and that, of ourselves we are dead. Knowing this we can see that we are no better than anyone else, in fact, the conviction of the Holy Spirit makes us consider ourselves the least of God’s people. And as we look at unbelievers we say, “there but for the grace of God go I”. We know we’ve been saved by grace

and we can’t look down even on sinners. This humility gives us our rightful place under God, in his family of believers, and as those who bear witness to his name in the world.

### Prayer

*Heavenly Father, we so love to make everything revolve around all that we’ve done and will do. It is easy for us to pump ourselves up and forget that you have done everything for us and have given us all the gifts and qualities that we have. Father, we are totally helpless without the breath that you put in our nostrils and the Spirit that is alive in us. Father, gently humble us with the reminder of your grace and mercy on our lives and helping us remember daily that we are totally reliant upon you. Amen.*

*Devotionals are provided by Rev. Derek Schiller (Minister of the Word at St George Uniting Church, Qld), and are available via an APP for iPhone or Android. Each day a new devotion is provided. You can download the APP from the St George or ACC Website.*



## THIS IS THE ACC

### Who we are

Within the Uniting Church context of a very broad range of theology and practice, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations is a nationwide body of congregations and individuals whose vision is confessing the Lord Jesus Christ, proclaiming the truth, renewing the church.

*Our goals include*

- Encouraging the confession of Christ according to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, as that faith is described in the UCA’s Basis of Union.
- Providing resources, seminars and conferences to build up believers, develop their gifts, and equip them for life, mission and works of service.
- Encouraging Christian believers in earnest prayer through our Prayer Network.
- Encouraging younger members of the Uniting Church in their faith and participation.
- Communicating about current events and issues through our website, our national magazine *ACCatalyst* and local newsletters.

### The objectives of the ACC

The objects of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations are:

- a) To confess Christ according to the catholic, reformed and evangelical heritage in the Basis of Union, by:
  - i) upholding the Scriptures’ prophetic and apostolic testimony to Christ as the final authority for the Uniting Church’s faith and life;
  - ii) calling the Uniting Church to determine matters

of doctrine and ethics according to the teaching of the Scriptures and the faith as understood by the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church;

iii) calling the councils and congregations of the Uniting Church to uphold the Basis of Union and Constitution:

iv) providing biblically-grounded leadership in partnership with other confessing movements;

v) developing ecumenical partnerships for the more effective proclamation of the Gospel in our pluralist nation; and

vi) establishing national, state and territory bodies to implement the Charter as approved by the inaugural meeting of the Association, and seeking the renewal of the Uniting Church.

b) To undertake such religious, educational or other charitable activities which are incidental to the above objectives.

### How to join us

Membership rates for supporting members:

- ☎ Concession (single or couple):  
\$20.00 pa. (financial year basis)
- ☎ Full (single or couples):  
\$40.00 p.a. (*see website*)

☎ Contact (02) 9550 5358.

☎ Email: [accoffice@confessingcongregations.com](mailto:accoffice@confessingcongregations.com)

☎ Post: PO Box 968 Newtown NSW 2042

# School of Faith

Basis of Union and prepare to lead studies on the Basis in terms of biblical sources and practical application at the local level

**T**he School of Faith is currently in discussion with Kingsley College about a partnership in providing a course designed for the training of lay preachers, including a formational subject customised for us 'Wesleyan Leadership and the Basis of Union'. The principal of Kingsley College, Rev Kevin Brown attended the recent ACC conference and spoke about the proposed course as part of the School of Faith presentation.

The School of Faith is looking for expressions of interest for the ministry of 'ACC Lay Preacher' from among our members. ACC congregations are asked to pray for a new generation of leaders and to discern who these candidates might be.

Candidates for the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Lay Preachers Course will

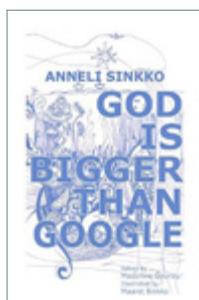
- be an active member of a local worshipping community
- receive ongoing supervision from an ACC mentor
- become familiar with the

ACC Lay Preachers in active ministry will be asked to:

- accept the spiritual oversight and discipline of a presbytery (or network) approved by the ACC
- attend sessions on the Uniting Church Code of Ethics for Lay Preachers and Safe Church Practices (or equivalent as may be negotiated with the ACC)
- engage in continuing education

More information and a registration leaflet are available on the School of Faith website.

 [confessingschooloffaith.com/acc-lay-preachers](http://confessingschooloffaith.com/acc-lay-preachers)



## God is Bigger than Google

Written by Rev Anneli Sinkko

**G**od is Bigger than Google is, at 133 pages, a gentle and somewhat biographic précis of retired Uniting Church minister, Anneli Sinkko's experience of Christianity.

Anneli did not set out to create a

theological treatise, and yet it is full of theological truth and goodness. Anneli did not set out to write about herself as the centre of a biography, and yet we learn a lot about her within the book's pages. What stands out to me is that the hero of her book is Jesus – and we learn what her relationship with him looks like, sounds like, and feels like. She courageously lets us into her life's experience with Christ.

I would liken this book to a personal convo with the author and the reader; just sharing her stories about the very real relationship with Christ that she has. Her writing style is careful but relaxed. Anneli has

the happy knack of writing in such a way that a learned theologian and a died-in-the-wool sceptic will each gain important ideas that will make them think.

I am indebted to Anneli for allowing me to review this book. My encouragement would be to anyone who comes across this volume – do yourself a favour – purchase or download a copy. You'll be glad you did.

God is bigger than Google is available for Kindle and in paperback.

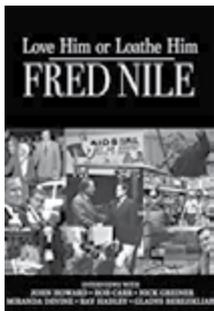
*Dr David Pohlmann is the Pastor at Mt Louisa Community Church, Townsville.*



# A Modern Retelling

Reviews by Peter Bentley

Image: IMDb

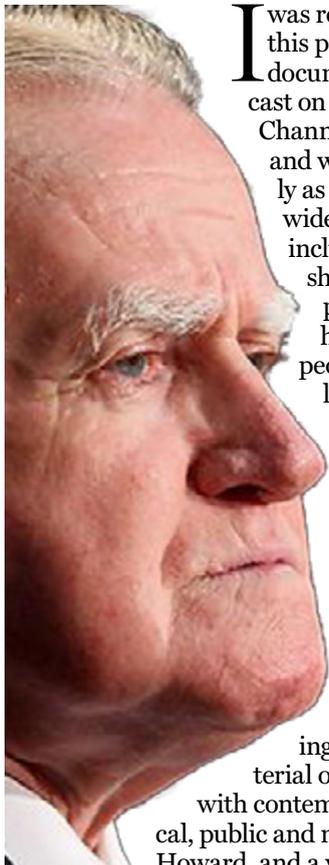


## Love Him or Loathe Him: Fred Nile (2018)

**Starring:** Fred Nile, John Howard, Bob Carr, Archbishop Glenn Davies

**Written by:** Richard Attieh

**Directed by:** Richard Attieh



I was recently provided with a copy of this professional and well-produced documentary that has been broadcast on the Australian Christian Channel. The film is illuminating and well worth viewing, particularly as it helps to illustrate Fred Nile's wider range of matters of interest, including significant relationships and support for indigenous people, and concern for public health issues. There are few people in contemporary political life that have had more written and communicated about them than The Reverend Hon. Fred Nile MLC. The documentary gives a helpful and succinct overview of Fred Nile's ministry and life, with an amazing range of commentary via short interviews with people other than Fred Nile himself. The focus is on telling his story using excerpts from television material over many years, interspersed with contemporary comments from political, public and media figures, including John Howard, and a wide range of NSW politicians.



## Little Women (2018)

**Starring:** Sarah Devonport, Lea Thompson, Allie Jennings

**From an original story by:** Louisa May Alcott

**Written by:** Clare Niederpruem

**Directed by:** Clare Niederpruem

## A gentle film for the holidays.

This *Little Women* is the latest film based on the Louisa May Alcott novel and made before the launch of a re-made traditional version. What makes this version distinct is that it has a modern setting and the four sisters are all women of the 21st century. The key question is still there though - what do you want to do in your life? I found this fascinating as marriage is still the context, rather than relationships, and today this consideration of faithful male - female marriage is a counter-cultural approach to the individualistic trend of looking to your own fulfilment.

There are some whimsical moments, including a really lovely cat, and aspects that will resonate with people in Australia, even though it is an American setting. The role of fantasy and fable are brought into a modern setting though without the usual focus on horror or desecration. It is a helpful and gentle family film in a time when the idea is developing that there is no need have a family or perhaps even be part of one. In this film there are positive models of women and men. The father is now a military doctor and is often away, and the mother and children clearly all have love and support for him and each other, and together exemplify a faithful bond of unity. I see this *Little Women* primarily as a good film for mothers and daughters to see together and talk about - it could lead to deeper conversations about what is really important in this short life we are given by God.