



Assembly of  
**Confessing Congregations**  
within the Uniting Church in Australia

# Faith that Works

## *Studies in the Letter of James*

Brian Edgar

Assembly of Confessing Congregations  
Social Responsibility Commission

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## *Studies in the Letter of James*

ACC Bible Study No. 3

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## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

The first study in this Bible study guide provides background material on the book of James and its themes. It does not deal with a specific passage from the book but is presented in such a way that it can be used as a group study. Alternatively, it can be used by either the leader or group members as a background chapter and resource material, with the remaining five studies being used for group study. Each study provides a series of questions for group discussion.

The studies follow a thematic pattern and so some studies focus on a number of related passages from James. Remember that even if you have read it before the most important part of any study is to read the book right through. Make sure you do this before the study, or perhaps even together at the study.

## STUDY ONE

### INTRODUCING JAMES

*In the days when map-making was a very rudimentary and inexact science and much of the world was unexplored, map-makers represented all the unknown areas with symbols of terrifying dragons, monsters and big fish! This uncharted, unknown territory was to be avoided!*

*When one adventurous commander of a battalion of Roman soldiers found himself at the edge of the known world he didn't want to turn around and go back, but neither did he want to pursue his course without further instruction. So, he despatched a messenger back to Rome with the urgent request, 'Send new orders! We are off the map!'*

Today, with rapid scientific, technological and cultural developments the ethical challenges we face mean we can find ourselves in a similar position to those Roman soldiers – off the map and facing unknown dangers. And where will we find the right direction?

This study will help us find the compass points as we journey forward into uncharted territory using the Letter of James as a guide. This epistle is often admired as being a powerful reminder of the need for faith to be active and practical. In what is often a very blunt and forthright manner, the epistle of James presents a profound challenge to both the church and the wider community about the way that we live.

The text says that the letter comes from 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ' but does not identify which James is actually the author. Traditionally, it is understood to be James the brother of the Lord Jesus (see Matthew 13:55; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19; 2:9) and that remains the most likely option. Other possibilities, however, include James son of Zebedee and the brother of John (see Mark 1:19 and Acts 12:2) and James the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:18; 15:40) or even some other James. However, given the general agreement of the earliest commentators, these are less likely options.

The letter is addressed to 'the twelve tribes scattered among the nations' or 'in the dispersion'. In a Jewish context this is a term initially used of the twelve tribes of Israel after the nation was scattered throughout the world as a result of the Exile. There was significant widespread settlement – a diaspora – outside Palestine down to the time of the Romans. However, in a Christian context

this term refers to the Church because the early Christian teachers and writers clearly saw the Church as inheriting the promises of God to Israel. Believers are 'children of Abraham' (Galatians 3:7) and the disciples represent the twelve tribes of 'the new Israel' (see Mark 3:13-19; Matthew 19:28). Consequently, the letter is addressed to the Christian diaspora: believers in every place throughout the world and in every age. This letter has direct implications for the life of the Church today.

- What are the major ethical issues which you or the people in your group think the Church and society face today? The danger of identifying these issues is that of raising false expectations that this series of studies will be able to cover everything! On the other hand, it may be a useful exercise for the future direction of the group to hear what others identify as being of primary importance.
- It is often suggested that James 1:27 and 2:20 sum up the book of James. How would you sum it up? You may want to look at this question again when you get to the end of the studies.

***My notes:***

## **A. Faith and good works together**

The letter's focus upon religion as good works has led some to think that it down-plays the importance of 'faith' (the person of Christ, the role of belief etc.) by concentrating too much on the 'effects' (action, good works etc.) which should flow from faith. Consequently, the letter has a controversial history. In 1522 the Reformer Martin Luther called it an 'epistle of straw' which should not be in the Bible. He had two main problems with it.

Luther complained that despite containing valuable advice, James does not direct our attention to Jesus Christ as the One in whom God's undeserved mercy for all has been decisively revealed. In one sense this is justified as Christ is mentioned in only two verses (1:1 and 2:1) but this criticism can be overstressed. First, the style and content of any writing depends upon the context in which it is written and the author's intention and awareness of the knowledge and needs of the audience. The book of James should not be judged deficient simply because it deals with other aspects of the Christian life in a way different from other parts of Scripture. Secondly, apart from the explicit references to Christ there are numerous implicit references to Christ and allusions to the Gospels which are not specifically sourced. For example, in the first chapter of James one can find either direct reference or allusions to the teaching of Jesus in verses 1, 2 (Matthew 5:11,12), 4 (Matthew 5:48), 5 (Luke 11:9), 6 (Matthew 22:21,22), 12, 17, 20, 21, 22 and 23. You might want to work out in your study group the allusions in the last half dozen references.

Luther also argued that 'in direct opposition to St Paul and all the rest of the Bible it ascribes justification to works ... Not once does it give Christians any instruction or reminder of the passion, resurrection or spirit of Christ ... (It) only drives you to the law and its works.' This criticism of James in regard to justification can be answered, however, by noting he was writing in a very different context from Paul and therefore has a different aim. Paul wants to make the point that our religious and moral deeds cannot free us from the power of self-centredness and make us acceptable to God. Only God's act of sheer grace, supremely displayed in Jesus Christ, enables us to be free, justified and grateful people. James, on the other hand, is challenging a serious misunderstanding of Paul's expression of the central Christian conviction that we are 'justified by faith' and not by our deeds (Romans 4:3). He wants to show that faith and action belong inextricably together; that trust in God and love for others can't be separated in practice. He is particularly anxious to correct a one-sided view of faith which does not issue in love. He is critical of people who 'say' they have faith but whose 'deeds' say otherwise (James 2:1-5, 8-10,15-18).

There is no need to see a kind of conflict between Paul's stress on faith (and not works) as the basis of salvation and James' focus upon works (without which faith is useless). Paul himself insisted on faith being shown in good works (Romans 12; Galatians 5:13-26) but, because some people misunderstood this fundamental point James finds it necessary to urge his fellow Christians not to rest on their laurels, but to get on with the work of obedience. He is particularly worried about a false separation between faith and works which keeps faith to the religious-private part of life and works to the secular-public part. Against this he argues that genuine faith brings forth works of love in the whole of life.

- Is there anything you do not understand in this? Is there anything new for you? What do you mean when you talk about 'faith'?
- To what extent do you see James' understanding of faith and works as being consistent with other parts of the Scripture? What would we miss out on if the epistle of James was not a part of the Bible? Do you find yourself more attracted to Paul's teaching or to that of James? What danger is there in following that way of thinking?
- Is engaging in a study like this likely to lead to precisely what James is arguing *against*, that is, is it becoming a study on the intellectual aspects of faith without sufficient attention being paid to actual *action*? Is there, therefore, anything you need to do in response to, or in addition to, this study?

***My notes:***



## **B. The social responsibility of the Church**

The Church lives authentically when it lives in accord with scriptural teaching. In Scripture the Church learns of the salvation of God which comes through Jesus Christ, the empowering work of the Spirit and of the nature of life together as a community. This includes our awareness of a responsibility to the world in which we live. As the Statement to the Nation of the Inaugural Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (1977) clearly indicates, 'A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the Church.' Christians have a responsibility towards society, a responsibility that is fundamental to the life and mission of the Church. This responsibility includes a calling to evangelism and a responsibility for social action. It is important to give careful consideration to the nature of this responsibility to ensure that it is exercised in accordance with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Social Responsibility Commission (SRC) of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations (ACC) has therefore produced this series of studies in order to encourage members and others to uphold basic Christian values and principles. A concern for the life of both Church and society is a core factor in the life of the ACC.

- What role does Scripture play in forming your Christian life and understanding? To what extent do you see the Church striving to live according to scriptural principles?
- The ACC has adopted a statement on 'The Church's Social Responsibility' which can be found in an appendix to these studies. You may wish to read it as it may provide some help in these studies.

***My notes:***

## STUDY TWO

### VALUING PEOPLE

*A toddler dubbed 'Pumpkin' before she was identified as Qian Xun Xue, was found abandoned at Melbourne's Southern Cross railway station. Security camera footage shows her entering the station with a man later identified as her father who casually left her behind, took an escalator and left the station. He journeyed to the airport and flew out of the country.*

**For this study please read James 1:9-11; 2:1-13; 4:11,12.** One way of summing up these passages is as follows: To God, all people are of value, therefore we should not judge or speak against other believers, nor show favouritism on the grounds of wealth or social status. Wealth may be short-lived and brings particular temptations; poverty may bring particular blessings.

- You may have seen a picture of 'Pumpkin' with her father in the station as it was widely broadcast. What emotions do you experience when you see something like this on your TV? What should our response be?
- How would you sum up James' understanding of the Christian attitude towards people? See James 1:9-11.
- If I devalue others, what is going on inside me?

***My notes:***

## A. Humility and poverty

Chapter One has a lot to say about the life qualities which believers ought to possess including humility, endurance, maturity, wisdom and faith. James particularly values humility in relation to both poverty of spirit (humility) and material poverty (see 1:9-11). This advice about material poverty is not only an example of the trials referred to earlier (1:2) but is also an example that our behaviour is based on the presence of personal qualities (1:3-8).

James stresses the moral responsibilities associated with wealth (see 1:9,10, 17; 2:2; 4:13-17; 5:1-6). We tend to think of poverty as the absence of goods, but biblically, while poverty certainly involves that, it is also seen as a situation of dependence. It is a social notion. That is, poverty has to do with the absence of a family or community. Hence 'the poor' are the widowed, the fatherless, the outcast and so forth (see, for example, Exodus 22:22 and 23:6,9 and subsequent prophetic judgments in Amos 2:6-8; Isaiah 3:14,15 and Jeremiah 22:13-16). Poverty is an affront to the God of the Covenant who is understood to be on the side of the poor and oppressed. In James 2:5 the reference to the poor 'in the eyes of world' indicates that he is not referring to a spiritualised form of poverty when he speaks of those who are chosen to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom.

Jesus of Nazareth (poor? middle-class? working-class?) identified with and ministered to the poor: the unclean, the ill, the despised and rejected and those with no status. The reason for the blessing of the poor lies neither in their material circumstances nor in their spiritual disposition but because God desires to make his Kingdom a kingdom of love and justice for the poor.

James presents us with a challenge in dealing with the poor of the world. God has a special burden for those who suffer although it can hardly be taken to mean that God does not love others. See for example James' attitude to Abraham and Job (2:21-23; 5:11), both of whom were very wealthy. However, we must be careful as it is so easy to believe that Jesus is expressing a general truth which does not apply to us and search for some escape hatch that will allow us to avoid the challenging impact of these words which are consistent with the words of Jesus and the rest of Scripture (e.g. Luke 6:20 and Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

- There was a cartoon in Punch magazine which showed two monks walking together through cloisters while one says to the other, 'There's not much you can teach me about humility.' What do we need to learn about humility?

- To what extent do you think the term 'God's bias towards the poor' expresses what James is saying?
- What are the temptations of wealth? Does poverty also bring particular temptations? Why are the materially poor more likely to be 'rich in faith' than the wealthy?
- If poverty is a social problem then what is the solution? What do we learn from James and the example of Jesus?
- Which of these do you find appropriate for a Christian? What is your own approach?
  - a. *Indifference and inaction – nothing other than the most trivial acts of giving;*
  - b. *complete poverty – the total renunciation of possessions (see Luke 18:18-34);*
  - c. *significant generosity – a modification of our attitudes and actions (2 Corinthians 8);*
  - d. *simple lifestyle – becoming more like the poorer parts of the community (Acts 4:32);*
  - e. *personal balance – 'give me neither poverty nor riches' (see Proverbs 30:8-10);*
  - f. *discernment and obedience – a serious listening to God and a willingness to be obedient.*

***My notes:***

## **B. Discrimination and the royal law**

See James 2:1-13. Issues of rank and status loom very large in some cultures and this was certainly the case in the Roman Empire and thus there were significant implications for the young Church which comprised many people who were slaves or of low status (1 Corinthians 1:26). But for those in Christ there can be no discrimination between races, ranks of society or gender because these things play no part in salvation (Galatians 3:27-29).

Some years ago, the claim to be 'discriminating' was probably understood positively as a process of choosing the best and rejecting the inferior. Today it is more likely to refer to inappropriate distinctions and treatment and it almost always has very negative connotations. Yet there remain situations where choosing is good and necessary. Christians want to choose the best, based on an understanding of God's will and sometimes this can lead to a conflict with the social values of the day.

The Covenant Service which many churches still use was initiated by John Wesley in 1755 at a time when issues surrounding the proper recognition of social status were a major preoccupation and loss of rank or inappropriate recognition was a truly terrifying prospect. The central Covenant Prayer which called for a willingness to be placed in the wrong order of society ('Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you...') was not merely a form of words but actually a brave, heroic self-sacrifice. We would be deceiving ourselves if we thought our society did not have unjust discrimination.

- What are the obsessions we have and the distinctions we make with regard to social relationships today?
- Sometimes the wider community can be very critical of the Church for exercising 'discrimination', and yet, on the other hand, the wider community does, at times, recognise the need for 'positive discrimination'. In what areas does Church and/or society discriminate unjustly or inappropriately?
- What principles do we use in deciding whether a process of discrimination is appropriate or not? What do we learn from James about discrimination?
- What guidance do the passages from James give in terms of relationships with Indigenous communities?

***My notes:***

### **C. The law of liberty**

Although 'law' and 'liberty' are often seen as being opposed, when Christians obey 'the royal law' (2:8 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself') they are 'free' because it is also 'the law that gives liberty' (2:12) which enables people to become what they are called to be. For example, if a bird (if it could think) exercises the 'liberty' to walk everywhere, it is only 'free' in a very limited sense, and is not in fact 'free' to be what it really is and able to soar through the sky.

James 2:10 says that 'whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it'. James is making a point which the Lord Jesus makes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:19). James points out that we are all accountable to God.

None of the New Testament writers allow for people to pick and choose which laws they obey. Yet there are laws which Christians do not follow today (such as Old Testament laws about food and New Testament rules about head covering in church. See 1 Corinthians 11). This situation has led some to say that no one universally applies all biblical principles and therefore (for example) that prohibitions against homosexual activity are no more valid than the law to

stone blasphemers (as per Leviticus 24:16). This interpretation is, however, theologically naïve in that it does not show understanding of the tradition of the Church or historic principles of interpretation. In particular it fails to show understanding of the changes brought about by the life and death of Jesus Christ and the New Covenant. On the one hand there can be no arbitrary selection of laws to obey but, on the other hand, there has to be an appropriate theological interpretation of all law, especially in the light of the person of Jesus Christ. Christians read the Old Testament through Christ.

- When we live as God has called us then we are truly free. How would you explain the hymn 'Make me a captive Lord, and then I shall be free'?
- Are laws such as the Ten Commandments restrictive or liberating?
- Are there aspects of the law which are ignored today?
- What are the implications of all people being accountable for their failure to keep the law perfectly?
- To what extent do you pick and choose which laws to follow? What differences are there in terms of expectations with regard to obedience by Christians and others?

***My notes:***

## STUDY THREE

### UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF

*There is a story about a man who, in ancient Greece, ran a busy guest house. On one occasion a traveller passing by who stopped for a rest and a meal told his host how he was going from Sparta to Athens to find a better home and neighbours for the people in Sparta were a miserable, complaining and greedy lot. The owner of the guest house told him not to bother because the people of Athens were just as miserable and greedy!*

*Later another traveller passed by and he too stopped for a rest. He was also going from Sparta to Athens. 'How did you find the people of Sparta?' asked the man in the guest house, 'Oh, they are a fine bunch of people', he replied, 'I am sad to leave them, but I have work to do in Athens. I hope the people there will be kind and friendly.'*

*'Don't worry,' said the man in the guest house, 'You'll find they are as good and helpful and generous as the people in Sparta.'*

The moral is not hard to figure out! In considering our relationships with others we need to start with ourselves. As Stephen Covey says, we should work 'inside-out'. This means to 'start first with self – to start with the most inside part of self – with your paradigms, your character, and your motives. So if you want to have a happy marriage, be the kind of person who generates positive energy and sidesteps negative energy. If you want to have a more pleasant, cooperative teenager, be a more understanding, empathic, consistent, loving parent. If you want to have more freedom, more latitude in your job, be a more responsible, helpful, contributing employee. If you want to be trusted, be trustworthy. If you want the secondary greatness of public recognition, focus on the primary — greatness of character' (*Principle-Centred Leadership*, p.63).

**For this study please read James 3:13 - 4:3. It is possible to sum up this passage by saying that what we do and say springs from who we are. God-given wisdom will issue in deeds done in humility. If we are controlled by God our speech and actions will come from pure motives and will honour God, being peaceable and full of mercy – these are expressions of the royal law of love.**



- It is a very challenging question to ask, 'Who am I when I am in the presence of God?'
- What is there about me that God wants to change?

***My notes:***

## **A. True and false wisdom**

Throughout the epistle, James appears to be addressing issues raised by other teachers who claim to be wise but who do not live out what they believe (James 2:14; 3:1) and who have created divisions within the church (4:2). James addresses all the people with this situation in mind and so we get a contrast between two kinds of wisdom: true and false. However, James does not really allow that what they say is wisdom at all (3:15).

Wisdom is an important Old Testament theme. It is supreme, very practical and is connected with the ability to do what is right and to avoid evil (Proverbs 4:7; Psalms 37:30; 90:12; Ecclesiastes 2:12,13). Solomon was blessed by God because he sought nothing from God other than wisdom (2 Chronicles 1:10). Wisdom is found within, but it is not there naturally as the kind of wisdom James is talking about comes from above, from God. So, if we lack wisdom we should seek it from God (James 1:5-8, also see Proverbs 1:7).

False wisdom (3:14,15) is connected with bad attitudes and results in distorted relationships with other people. True wisdom (3:13) shows itself in deeds (also see 1 Peter 2:12, 3:2), not just in any deeds, but more precisely in deeds done with humility (also see Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:2). While good deeds are the immediate result of wisdom, humility is its primary characteristic.

- Skim the 'wisdom' passages in Proverbs chapters 2 - 4. How can they be related to 'the wisdom that comes from heaven' in our James passage?
- Reflect on the words associated with false wisdom in James 3:14-16: envy, selfish ambition, earthly, unspiritual, of the devil, disorder, evil practices. Do you find these in evidence anywhere? In considering where we see them, to what extent are we able to be completely objective?
- Wisdom, which is knowing how to act in a particular situation, comes from God, but what is needed for that to happen? How do you understand what James 1:5 says about wisdom?
- If false wisdom is evidenced by poor relationships who do you go to when looking for wisdom?

***My notes:***

It is often said in formal studies that there are three fundamental approaches to living ethically. All of them have some biblical justification and a brief consideration of them will help us understand James. The first approach determines what to do by considering the consequences of one's actions. Ethical choices are made by considering what will produce the best outcome. This process is known as utilitarianism or consequentialism and we can see this operating when Paul discusses whether or not to eat meat that has been offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8). The question is whether the action does good or causes someone else to stumble. A second approach is to focus on our duty to live according to laws or rules or principles. The right action to be taken is determined by following some standards irrespective of the consequences. One ought always to tell the truth, not steal etc. Living according to the Ten Commandments is an example of deontological ethics (as it is technically known).

In the third approach the focus is on the character of the person involved and not just about making the right decisions. It has more to do with who we are as people and while we may still need to choose one course of action over another the decision-making process is primarily guided by intuitive and internal processes. Virtue ethics is more about who we are than what we do. This is where the book of James comes in. It has an emphasis on the need for wisdom and humility, gentleness and peacefulness. These things produce good works (James 3:13,18).

- Often the first two approaches will produce the same answer. Sometimes though they can conflict. Consider some situations where that might occur?
- When and how does one develop character? Spend some time reflecting on the actual content of 'the wisdom from above' in James 3:17. It is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.
- We are always confronting new situations. Have you had the opportunity to discern the right (godly?) course of action in some challenging situations? How did things work out?

***My notes:***

## B. Conflicts and coveting

James 4:1-3 talks about conflicts 'among you': that is, within the people of God. It is sometimes important to speak clearly to defend a right understanding of the gospel (Acts 15), to protect people who are disadvantaged or discriminated against (James 2) or to rebuke those who have sinned (1 Corinthians 5) but the kind of conflict James is talking about emerges from 'your desires' which include greed and covetousness and not from a proper concern for holiness. He even refers to murder – although it may well be that the language is somewhat metaphorical – as when he refers to cravings being 'at battle within you' (also see, for example, Matthew Matthew 5:21, 22) where hatred is treated in the same way as murder). Nonetheless, James uses strong language to describe the deep moral significance of inappropriate behaviour in times of dispute and there is a message here for us all. One cannot, for instance, evade the gist of this passage simply by saying 'well, I have never killed anyone'.

James discusses the sinful nature of coveting something on the one hand (you have cravings and covet and cause conflicts), and the appropriateness of asking for it on the other ('you do not have because you do not ask')! That almost seems contradictory! The difference is that coveting means inappropriately wanting something which emerges from our 'cravings'. A selfish craving (even when dressed up as a noble enterprise, such as a desire for 'wisdom') which is brought before God in prayer will be dealt with appropriately! After all, God 'jealously longs for the spirit that he has caused to dwell in us' (James 4:5) and will give more grace to the one who is humble (James 4:6): that is, the one who does not assume their rights but asks the Lord.

But this warning does not mean that God is stingy or mean. In fact, he gives generously and is always ready to listen (Matthew 7:7). We should be asking God rather than coveting and if we do we will receive far more than we could imagine! As Paul said, 'Now to him who by the power at work within us *is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine* to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever, Amen.' (Ephesians 3:20,21) Although asking does not mean we always get whatever we expect it does mean that we are prepared to subject our desires to God and allow him to determine what is good for us. It will lead to a far greater blessing than we could expect. Prayer is not a means to enrich ourselves. It is a way of serving God and others, drawing near to God (James 4:8) and reflecting the divine image in us.

- What should happen when a right and necessary debate in a church is conducted appropriately? What will prevent 'conflicts and disputes'?
- Can you identify times and ways when you or your church either 'ask wrongly' or 'do not ask' enough? What should we be asking for?

***My notes:***

## STUDY FOUR

### SUBMITTING TO GOD

*There was a soldier who was called to fight in a fierce battle. It was a test of strength which only one side could win. The enemy prevailed and he was forced to submit to a greater power than his own. Defeated, submissive, he could no longer resist and became passive – not helping or hindering but simply obeying when he had to. Is this how you view your submission to God?*

*There was another man who determined to become a soldier. He was motivated and committed and he wanted to fight for his country. And so he willingly submitted to the authority of commanders he respected. He ceased being passive and was soon actively and willingly engaged in working with the army and obeying all the orders he was given. Is this how you view your submission to God?*

*There was a third man who was not a soldier at all. He was a lover – a man falling deeply in love with a woman. He was motivated and committed and passionately loving. He became involved and even ‘engaged’ and voluntarily submitted to his lover in that he would do anything for her – whether it was ‘for richer for poorer, in sickness or in health’. He committed himself to love and serve her until death. Out of this submission came all kinds of attitudes and actions over many years. Is this how you view your submission to God?*

**For this study please read James 4:1-10.** This passage tells us that if our first aim in life is to fulfil our own desires then we will set ourselves against other believers and against God. In doing this we are becoming friends of the world and enemies of God. Therefore we are to submit to God and thus be purified, repentant and humble.

- What strikes you as of major significance in these verses from James?

***My notes:***

## A. What does 'submission' mean?

The heart of this passage lies in 4:7 where James says, 'Submit yourselves, then, to God.' The English word 'submit' has certain connotations which may not exactly reflect what was originally meant unless one understands it in the right context, as in the three situations described above. All three examples share in the general sense of 'submission' but in each case it is something done with very different motives and different outcomes.

- We can perhaps see something of the kind of 'reluctant submission' to a greater power, as illustrated in the first example above, in the submission of evil powers to Christ (Colossians 1:16).
- The more positive and responsive 'obedient submission' of the second example can be seen in the way that a citizen is to 'submit' to proper government and therefore live appropriately (Romans 13:1).
- The third sense of 'loving submission' can be found in the voluntary and mutual submission of all believers (Ephesians 5:21) and of those who are married (Ephesians 5:22 and 25). This is a submission which emerges from love and results in joyful care and service. This is also the kind of submission which is closest to both the 'submission' of Jesus to the Father (John 14:31) and of believers to God (James 4:7).

Just as it would be foolish to read into the first example of 'reluctant submission' the kind of attitudes found in the other examples, so it would be wrong to interpret our submission to God purely in terms of the kind of submission illustrated in the first two examples, without any recognition of the fact that God does not just rule us as a victorious king, but also loves us as his precious bride. But a focus on the third sense does not mean that the other senses of submission are completely inappropriate. Christian writer C S Lewis was an atheist for many years, but eventually his reflections on the possibility of faith led him to belief, though he later described himself as perhaps 'the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England'.

- How have you understood what it means to 'submit to God'?
- What, in practice, will it mean for you now?
- Do you know of biblical or other good examples of what it means to submit to God?

## ***My notes:***

### **B. Attitudes**

The call to submit to God came as a result of problems outlined in 4:1-4 concerning conflicts in the Church. These were discussed in the previous study and at this point it is sufficient to note that the fundamental problem, which had to be addressed by the command to submit to God, lay in the presence of the wrong personal attitudes. Different translations structure the sentences differently, but it seems that the two main phrases are similar in structure:

- you want something – but you don't get it – so you kill;
- you covet something – but you can't have it – so you quarrel and fight.

What is it that they want and covet? Given that it follows a description of wisdom (3:13-18) and that this is a constant theme throughout the letter (1:5) and that there are references to arguing, favouritism and warnings to teachers (1:19; 2:1; 3:1), it is probably the case that people were vying to be considered 'wise' (asking for wisdom) and to be 'teachers' (coveting this position). They were seeking position, leadership status and authority. In short they were motivated by self-interest. Even prayer was contaminated with this attitude so that it became a way of obtaining something for oneself. 'When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (4:3).' The problem lay in personal attitudes (also see 1 Peter 2:11; Romans 7:21; Galatians 5:17) and so the answer lies in changing them.

James uses two pictures of negative relationship with God to stress the depth of the problem. They become 'adulterers' (4:4), which is a well-known OT way of describing someone unfaithful to God (see Hosea 9:1 and Jeremiah 3:7-10) and 'enemies' of God (4:4). These are strong words. They become 'friends of the world' when they should be 'friends with God' or 'friends with Christ'. There is an old saying, 'A man is known by the friends he keeps,' and Jesus was well known as 'the friend of sinners and tax collectors' (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). He also took the amazing step of telling his disciples that they were no longer his servants but his friends (John 15:10-15; also see Luke 12:4). And so if they were to be his friends they had to be friends of Jesus' other friends as well. In other words,



friendship with Jesus leads to service of others. In fact, friendship leads to the highest sacrifices. It leads to far greater service than servanthood alone does. Note that it is in the context of *friendship* that Jesus elaborates on the love that leads to a sacrificial death, 'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. (John 15:12-14)'

In 4:5 James quotes from the Old Testament but it is difficult to know where this verse is. Could it be a very free translation of Exodus 34:14? The point is that our spirits are envious (of those with 'wisdom', who are considered to be 'teachers'?) but God is gracious, especially to those who are humble (and do not think too much of themselves ahead of others) and who submit to God.

Submission to God is defined by the following commands to 'resist the devil' (a negative action) and 'come near to God' (a positive action). This is what we are to do in response to God's grace (4:6-8). The answer to our very human problems does not lie in changing ourselves but in allowing God to change us. We have a responsibility in this and James specifies a list of even more precise commands which can be summarised as:

- cleanse your hands; purify your hearts;
  - lament and mourn; humble yourselves.
- 
- Are all church disputes the result of attitude problems? Where attitudes are wrong, what is to be done about it?
  - Compare what James says about how we 'resist the devil' with the advice given in Ephesians 6:10-20. What are we to do?
  - Look at the commands, 'Cleanse, purify, lament and humble yourselves.' What exactly does each one actually involve us in doing?
  - What implications are there in what James says here, for the social work and witness of the Church?

***My notes:***

## STUDY FIVE

### SERVING THE DISADVANTAGED

One of the most popular of Graham Kendrick's contemporary songs is 'The Servant King'. It begins in this way:

*From heaven you came, helpless babe,  
Entered our world, your glory veiled;  
Not to be served but to serve,  
And give your life that we might live.  
This is our God, the servant king.*

This song seems to have resonated with many people because it puts together two concepts which, humanly speaking, are not found together in the one person. One is either a king or a servant, but not both. But God sent Jesus to be a servant-king! The implications of this for us are profound. If this is how Christ lives, then should we not do the same?

*So let us learn how to serve,  
And in our lives enthrone him;  
Each other's needs to prefer,  
For it is Christ we're serving.*

**For this study please read James 1:19-27; 2:14-26; 4:17 - 5:6** which can be summed up in the following way: it is not enough to know God's word, we are under obligation to obey it. This obligation will mean living a pure life; controlling the tongue; and taking care of the defenceless and poor. Our actions give evidence of our faith. Faith without deeds is dead. Failure to do the good we should is sin. An example: wealthy people who underpay their employees are like murderers and will be punished.

- What can help us be people who, as the song says, 'each other's needs prefer'?

***My notes:***

## A. Hearing and doing

In 1:19-21 there are three sets of instructions the hearers are to note. First, they are to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger (see also Colossians 3:8 and Ephesians 4:26,31). At one level it can be said that it is always better to make sure that one's brain is in gear before speaking. And at a deeper level it is also true that real wisdom is connected with a degree of restraint and discretion rather than with haste and verbosity. This wisdom will naturally be connected with a lack of haste when it comes to anger. Anger is not ruled out – it would, in fact, be a failure of character not to sometimes be angry at sin and unrighteousness – but too often anger is simply the result of a failure of personal control.

The second instruction is to 'get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent'. This is a theme found elsewhere as, for example, in Colossians 3:8 and Ephesians 4:25. Christian holiness means the removal of sinful behaviour and Christians must extend every effort in doing this. But at the same time it must be recognised that no one can remove sinful behaviour from their lives by themselves – holiness comes through reliance on the grace and strength of God, and that means that we must connect this instruction with the third one, to 'humbly accept the word planted in you'. This is 'the word of truth' (1:18 and also see Colossians 3:16) and it refers to what should be a deep-rooted ('planted in you') rather than superficial knowledge and understanding of the ways of God known through the working of the Holy Spirit within our lives.

Those who have the word implanted in them will act on it. In 1:19-25 James speaks of hearing and doing the word and the point is fairly obvious: not acting on what we know is wrong, and those who do act appropriately will be blessed (1:25). An analogy is drawn between someone with a mirror and a believer with the Word. The person who looks into the mirror and sees their reflection is like someone who looks into the Word and sees 'the perfect law' but then goes away and forgets about it rather than someone who stays and continues looking into it. What the believer sees in the Word is 'the perfect law that gives freedom' (discussed above in study 2 on 'Valuing People') – this law is presumably 'the royal law' (James 2:8) of loving one's neighbour as oneself.

In his *IVP New Testament Commentary on James*, George Stulac asks how one might only be a hearer today. He suggests that in our age it can happen in different ways:

- by being relativistic – believing that there is no absolute truth and that these (and other) biblical injunctions ‘might be right for you but not for me’ or that ‘they might have been right then but today is different’;
  - by being superstitious – treating the words of Scripture as magical as though reading and reciting them will alone suffice (in the way that the ark of the covenant was treated: see 1 Samuel 4:3);
  - by being emotional – reading the Scripture for emotional comfort rather than as an active guide to living (remember that it is the job of the preacher or teacher ‘to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable’ FP Dunne);
  - by being theoretical – treating the writing of Scripture as an interesting but essentially historical and philosophical treatise, something to be read and respected but not personally transforming.
- 
- What helps you ‘do’ as well as ‘hear’?
  - When is anger right? And when is it wrong?
  - To what extent are you aware of ‘the implanted word’ in you? Do you see it in others?
  - Should we see Christians as being ‘better people’ by ridding themselves of evil?
  - Discuss Stulac’s list of ways we can avoid acting on the word.

***My notes:***

## B. Faith and works

James 2:14-26 deals with faith and works. In section B of the first study there is a discussion of this issue. There is no room for apathy towards good works within the life of the Church. The call is for a faith that is enlivened by the way believers live. Faith without works is dead but faith with works is alive! And this lack of apathy should be clear to those outside the Church. Some people who do not believe are actively atheist – like Christians they are acting on their beliefs. And often Christians see active atheism as the greatest enemy. But it may well be that there is an even greater threat from ‘apatheism’ rather than atheism. This is the situation of many who simply couldn’t care less whether God exists or not. And their apathy can be confirmed if they perceive the Church to be apathetic in its own life. They will say, ‘What difference does it all make? None, as far as I can see.’ True faith should be seen to be active. As Paul said, ‘The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6)’

‘Can such faith save them?’ (2:14). This is a somewhat provocative question because James is saying that there is a sense in which the answer is ‘no’ – unless it is faith that issues in works. There are four stories here to illustrate the point: concerning the one who does not help the brother or sister in need (v.15-17), the demons that believe but do not obey God (v.19) and Abraham (v.21) and Rahab (v.25) who were justified by works. (In Jewish tradition Rahab married Joshua and became an ancestor of Jeremiah and Ezekiel; in the Christian tradition she is an ancestor of Jesus – Matthew 1:5). The first two examples are negative in that they provide illustrations of a failure to act, while the latter two show how right actions demonstrate the reality of genuine faith.

The New Testament speaks of salvation in three tenses. Christians have been saved by grace through faith (Romans 3:23-25; Ephesians 2:8); Christians are in the process of being saved as faith is demonstrated in love and action (1 Corinthians 1:18; Philippians 2:12); Christians will be saved at the final consummation of all things (Romans 8:21-23; 13:11; Philippians 3:20). Salvation is not just a matter of sitting, waiting and doing nothing.

- What does this passage say to our contemporary Church and culture?
- James gives a number of positive and negative examples of his message; can you think of any contemporary ones?

***My notes:***

### **C. An Example of knowing the need but failing to act**

This theme is picked up again in 4:17: anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin. The general principle is immediately followed by a very specific example (5:1-6): the use (or non-use) of wealth. This example deals with sinning by default. It is about sins of omission rather than sins of commission – a distinction which deepens the understanding of what sin is. And the example used has profound relevance to wealthy Western countries today, at least as much as in the life of the early Church.

When James addresses ‘you rich people’ (5:1) he is almost certainly addressing Christian believers (just as he is addressing Christians who thoughtlessly plan their business in 4:13: ‘Come you who say....’). The message is not dissimilar to the words of the prophets (such as Amos) to the people of Israel. These are hard words but they need to be heard and acted on. There was some discussion of the issues involved in section B of the second study above.

At the time of writing there is some debate in the newspapers about the Federal Government’s proposal to means-test certain government benefits and whether this proposal means that people with an income of \$150,000pa are ‘rich’ or not. Some argued that this was not sufficient to define someone as rich and that the level ought to be higher. One correspondent said of his own income of over \$150,000, ‘I’m not rich, I earned it.’

- James is prepared to discuss the details of the sin of the misuse of wealth. It is seen in: hoarding your possessions (5:2-3); dishonesty: theft and fraud (5:4); indulgence (5:5 – which is similar to gluttony as a sin); spiritual insensitivity (5:6 – condemning the righteous); and
- injustice (5:6).

It should be noted that one does not have to be actively misusing money to commit sin – it is enough to hoard it in order to be guilty of the Lord's condemnation.

The general meaning of v. 6 is clear (you should not oppose that which is righteous in any way) but the particular situation it refers to is not so clear: who is being condemned and/or murdered? Whatever it referred to (if, indeed, there is a more precise meaning) it may be phrased in this way to bring to mind the Lord Jesus who was the righteous one who was condemned and murdered.

- When does 'saving' become 'hoarding'? Who is 'wealthy'?
- What do you think James would want to say to you about your use of wealth?
- Some churches proclaim or subtly endorse the so-called 'prosperity gospel', where wealth is seen as a sign of blessing. How does this fit with James' teaching?
- What relevance does 5:1-6 have for agreements between employers and employees? What is the message for Christian business people? For Christian employees?
- In 2 Corinthians 8 Paul has an extended passage dealing with the proper use of wealth. Read it with James in mind and list the principles that it contains. How do we decide whether it is right to spend on certain things or in certain ways?

***My notes:***

## STUDY SIX

### CHANGING THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

*In the film Chocolat, the mayor of a small French village is a powerful, controlling person, and everyone lives under a blanket of fear and uncertainty. There is not a splash of colour anywhere, not a single tree or flower. The wind howls and the stone walls and cobblestone streets are all grey. The mayor also dominates the church which he believes should stand for discipline, commitment, rigour and self-denial. This harsh approach has sucked all of the life out of the community.*

*Into this austere situation come Vianne and her daughter, both enveloped in bright red capes contrasting with the bleak grey. It is her foolhardy intention to open a chocolate shop in this sad town – and in the middle of Lent, no less, when the mayor enforces the strict custom of self-denial.*

*Vianne starts making chocolate creations bringing forth aroma, life and colour. The mayor names this as sinful and decides that she must be run out of town. But Vianne is going to transform this community and the chocolate that she dispenses becomes a symbol for grace. There is a couple whose marriage has drifted into a passionless arrangement of cleaning house and preparing meals, but when Vianne serves them special chocolates their love is revived. Vianne orchestrates a meeting between a grandmother and her grandchild who have been kept apart for many years and serves them hot chocolate – grace – and they come together. A couple torn apart by violence and alcoholism become Vianne's greatest challenge. Vianne takes in the escaping, fragile wife and loves her back to wholeness, and teaches her how to make chocolate – how to be a giver of grace also. The mayor is incensed and takes the husband in and seeks to transform him by rules and harshness, by education and discipline, but totally fails.*

The film presents two possibilities — the Church can either be a stone fortress, characterised by rules, heaviness and duty, or it can be like the chocolate shop, bringing life, hope, colour and meaning.

- How do we see ourselves, as the Church? How does the world see us? How will we live — as a fortress or a chocolate shop?

**For this study please read James 4:11-17 and 5:7-20.** These passages warn against judging and speaking evil about one another. We are not to speak against



or judge our brother or sister: God is the lawgiver and judge. Life is uncertain and we cannot control the future, so we should depend on God. Our life is in his hands. Our confidence should be in God, even as we wait patiently for Christ's coming. To fail to do what we know is right is sin. Boasting and failing to recognise our fragility and dependence upon God leads to futility. We should be patient in suffering and in waiting for the Lord to return. And, finally, the prayer of faith will bring healing.

***My notes:***

### **A. On not judging or boasting**

In 4:11-17 there are two parts which deal with warnings about what one says, first about another and then, secondly, about tomorrow. The instruction not to speak evil against other people is straightforward. The assumption seems to be that in doing this we are judging them and finding them – probably falsely, it seems – guilty of some sin. When we try and judge other people according to the standards of the law we run the risk of misunderstanding the situation because we do not know either the full circumstances or the heart and mind of the people involved. So when we pronounce judgment we set ourselves up against the law and the lawgiver who knows everything – which is a dangerous thing to do!

The second warning about what we say relates to planning for the future without any regard to God. Many people will remember the custom of adding (DV) to

statements about the future. It stood for *Deo volente*, the Latin meaning 'God willing' and was meant to be a reminder against any thought that we control the future by what we do. Verses 13-17 are not opposed to planning but to arrogance. The belief in planning, strategy, tactics, mission statements and so forth is deeply ingrained in our culture. We must be sure that what we believe is expressed in the way that we live. Being over-worked, over-stressed, over-committed can be, *de facto*, an admission of a belief in the absolute necessity of what *we do*.

You may have heard the saying, if the devil can't make you sin he'll make you busy! (Does this mean that being less active is automatically more spiritual?)

- Does this warning against speaking evil about people mean that we can never make any judgements about people or situations? Or simply that we must do so carefully or in some more considered way? Compare with the warning about not planning the future: does this mean that we should not plan? Or only that we should not plan with particular attitudes?
- What actions or attitudes would positively express our belief in God's control of the future?
- In the midst of this discussion there is a sobering reminder of the brevity of human life (v.14). What does this verse say to us?

***My notes:***

## **B. Patience in waiting for the Lord**

In 5:7-11 James emphasises the need for patience as we wait for the second coming of our Lord. This passage develops the idea that we are to 'submit to God' in everything. His timing is right and we should accept that and wait with patience for his return, even if in the meantime we face suffering (a theme he has had from the beginning, see 1:2). He uses an analogy to make the point. The patient farmer waits for the crops to come from the earth which are watered with the early (autumn) and late (spring) rains. We are to be patient like the farmer, waiting for the Lord to come to produce a great harvest (of righteousness, see 3:18). Just as one cannot make the rains come one cannot make the Lord appear.

The statement on the Church's Social Responsibility from the Assembly of Confessing Congregations has as its final paragraph:

*As Christians we are to respond to the call of the Lord Jesus Christ by living appropriately and acting responsibly in accordance with the values of the Kingdom of God. While the needs of the world provide good reason for Christian action the fundamental motivation comes from the Lord Jesus Christ who is the foundation of our life and faith. He is the one who strengthens us and who enables our action, and it is he who directs and guides our belief and behaviour. In exercising that responsibility to society which is fundamental to the mission of the Church it is essential that, as far as possible, we work together in unity with Christians in other denominations and organisations, and also that we avoid those divisions which can separate the various aspects of the Gospel and integrate word and deed. We remember the words of the Lord Jesus, 'You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).' However, we cannot assume that everything depends on the action of the Church in the world. Christians cannot create a perfect society or bring in the Kingdom of God. The Church thus exercises its social responsibility by witnessing to the redemptive work of Christ and looking forward to the consummation of all things in him.*

James speaks of the coming Lord as the judge (5:9). This is not a popular theme, but one which ought not to be ignored. And while the reality of judgement of those things which are wrong or unjust must not be played down (this is, after all, the reason for it being mentioned, just as it is mentioned elsewhere, see for example, 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 25:31-46) nor should we forget that the coming again of the Lord Jesus means meeting with One who loves us and who is our friend.

- James urges patience in waiting for the Lord. What does he fear is the alternative to patient waiting?
- As well as James 4:17 look at 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 25:31-46 to explore the basis on which God judges.
- Discuss the final sentence of the Social Responsibility statement: 'The Church thus exercises its social responsibility by witnessing to the redemptive work of Christ and looking forward to the consummation of all things in him.'

***My notes:***

## C. The Prayer of Faith

James concludes with a discussion of healing. Perhaps such an emphasis follows on well from the previous discussion of suffering (5:7-12) which is itself a return to a primary theme (see 1:2-4). Note that the sick call the elders of the church – not some special charismatic healers but simply the recognised ministers of the church. After all, it is not the one who prays who heals, but God.

The elders are to pray and to anoint the one who is sick with oil in the name of the Lord. The ancient world generally believed that oil had significant medicinal qualities (see, for instance, Luke 10:34). So was the oil to be used in a medicinal capacity? Or in a symbolic one, signifying the presence of the Lord (as in Psalm 23:5)? The latter seems likely as the anointing is done ‘in the name of the Lord’ with confession and prayer.

The language used has a double meaning. It can refer to being ‘made well’ or ‘being saved’, being ‘raised’ from the sick bed as well as being given a resurrection life, and being ‘healed’ spiritually as well as physically (verses 15,16). There is clearly a deep connection between the physical and the spiritual. This connection is also seen in the relationship between the confession of sins and the physical/spiritual healing of the individual.

And we do not have to choose between the two. The end result is meant to be both physical and spiritual. The one who is described as sick is obviously seen as physically unwell (probably seriously, as they call the elders to them) and then they are healed. But they also confess their sins and so are forgiven and spiritually strengthened. Confessing one’s sins means humility and a readiness for God. It is the opposite of arrogance and presumption.

The nature of the prayer of faith or ‘the prayer offered in faith’ is much debated. Certainly people can be healed in the absence of real faith, certainly on the part of the one healed (see John 5:13 and Luke 7:11-15) but Jesus also taught that faith is an important dimension in prayer (Mark 11:22-24). Thus, while avoiding ‘faithism’ (an unwarranted expectation that everything we ask for will be given in exactly the way we want and expect) there is no doubt that in this prayer of faith there is a degree of certainty (‘will save ... will raise’) which is impressive. ‘The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.’

At the same time, there is a reminder that patience in suffering is appropriate, as it produces endurance and maturity (James 1:2-4). CH Spurgeon said, ‘I venture to say that the greatest earthly blessing that God can give to any of us is health,

with the exception of sickness. Sickness has frequently been of more use to the saints of God than health has.'

As in other parts of the New Testament there is a connection between sin and sickness or suffering. But the nature of this connection must be expressed carefully. Many Jews saw a direct, almost one-to-one connection between sin and sickness (see the account of the man born blind in John 9:2) but this is repudiated by Jesus (John 9:3 and also Luke 13:2 where those killed by the fall of the tower of Siloam are not worse sinners than others). One cannot say that a person's sickness is the result of their sin. But nor can one deny a connection between the sin of the world and the sickness and suffering of the world as indicated by the need for confession here and in Luke 13:5. There appears to be a more corporate dimension to this relationship between sin and suffering.

The final paragraph (5:19,20) is an encouragement to care for those who have wandered from the truth of the gospel. One who is brought back to the truth is saved from death and their sins are covered (i.e. forgiven, Romans 4:7; Psalm 32:1). The fact that there is eternal death is another powerful motivation to deal with sin and seek the truth.

- To what extent does spiritual healing, that is, calling the elders together and praying in faith have the same place in the life of the Church today, in our medically technological era, as in the time of the New Testament?
- What is your reaction to the quote from Spurgeon?
- What will help us to 'pray in faith'?
- Does it seem too presumptuous or too difficult today to call back those we see 'wandering from the truth'?

***My notes:***

(End of *Faith that Works* studies)

## **Assembly of Confessing Congregations**

### SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY COMMISSION

## THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

***'A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the Church.'***

*(Statement to the Nation of the Inaugural Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1977)*

As this statement clearly says, Christians have a responsibility towards society which is fundamental to the life and mission of the Church. Therefore it is important to give careful consideration to the nature of this responsibility to ensure that it is exercised in accordance with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Along with the Statement to the Nation the Social Responsibility Commission affirms 'our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles' because a concern for the life of both church and society is a core factor in the life of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations.

### **Built upon the Lord Jesus Christ**

Principles of social responsibility are not based on any form of abstract reasoning, cultural presuppositions or perceptions of need which operate in any way independently of the biblical testimony because the life of the church, including its understanding of social responsibility, is based upon Jesus Christ and 'on the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments'. Moreover, the church 'has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way'. In this way the Basis of Union provides a firm foundation for understanding the character of the social responsibility of the church being 'built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ'.

*The Uniting Church acknowledges that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin. (Basis of Union, Section 3)*

The Uniting Church acknowledges that its faith and obedience are regulated by the Scriptures which are unique prophetic and apostolic testimony. 'When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witness.' This approach involves an understanding of the whole testimony of Scripture including the recognition of God as Creator and humanity as sinful, the imago dei and the male-female nature of humanity, the calling of Israel as God's people, the establishment of a covenant relationship, the fulfilment of God's purposes in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the life of the church as the Body of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit and the ultimate consummation of all things.

The biblical witness not only gives a rationale for engaging socially and doing justice (Micah 6:8; Luke 4:18) but also provides a foundation for understanding the nature of social relationships and the form and content of the society to which we witness (Matthew 5 - 7; Romans 12 - 15) as well as defining our responsibility towards the whole of creation (Rom. 8:19-25). Christian social policies of the Uniting Church must be in accord with evangelical, reformed and orthodox teaching concerning social relationships as attested in Scripture. We oppose attitudes and policies which fail to respect the biblical understanding of the nature and dignity of people, whether they are general social attitudes, government policies concerning, for example, mandatory detention of asylum seekers, or policies of the church concerning sexuality. Christian principles of social responsibility and social justice are not simply versions of secular or humanist thinking but must be grounded in an understanding of God's action in Jesus Christ.

The nature of Christian social responsibility has been well spoken of in these terms:

*'We call one another back to the centrality of Jesus Christ. His life of sacrificial service is the pattern for Christian discipleship. In his life and through his death Jesus modelled identification with the poor and inclusion of the other. On the cross God shows us how seriously he takes justice, reconciling both rich and poor to himself as he meets the demands of his justice. We serve by the power of the risen Lord through the Spirit as we journey with the poor, finding our hope in the subjection of all things under Christ and the final defeat of evil. We confess that all too often we have failed to live a life worthy of this gospel.'*  
(Micah Declaration on Integral Mission)



## **Living between the times**

The Basis of Union reminds us that 'The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring' and so lives in hope, constantly looking forward to the perfect life of the future Kingdom.

While we share with Christ in ministry we are not able to substitute our work for God's action.

- The Church must not be so focussed on its present social responsibility that it either believes that the presence of the Kingdom depends solely on our action in the world, or loses sight of God's future.
- But nor should the Church be so focussed on the future that we become unconcerned about the present.

It is important to avoid both passivity ('we can't achieve anything') and over expectation ('we can bring in the Kingdom').

The Church is to live and witness as a sign and foretaste of the Kingdom of God. Christians are to care for people and seek justice, but the hope of a new creation and a new humanity in Christ encourages Christians to see this as only one part of the Church's witness to the redemptive work of Christ. Life in the Spirit and the Christian calling to serve God means sharing in the vision of the reconciliation of all things. Christians serve Christ through a ministry to the world but the Church cannot bring in the Kingdom of God, create a perfect society or replace the role of the state. We look forward to the consummation of all things 'which Christ will bring'.

Unfortunately, this understanding of Christian social responsibility has been challenged by the Enlightenment view that truth concerning the human condition is to be found in the capacity of human reason alone, a view which eliminates God's ultimate purposes from the understanding of the nature and place of humanity in the world. Through the humanity of God's Son our humanity is reconstituted according to its created purpose in such a manner that he becomes the medium by which God relates to humanity. This lies at the heart of the Christian understanding of human freedom and purpose. Any consideration of the meaning of terms such as 'social justice' or 'social responsibility' is vacuous unless they are understood in the context of the community brought into existence by God's creating and reconciling grace in Israel fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

## The nature of the gospel

This community which is brought into being by the call of God on the basis of the grace shown in Jesus Christ and enlivened by the Holy Spirit is called to respond in faith in its own life and in relationship to the world. The church is *to be* a fellowship of reconciliation, engaging in prayer and worship and confessing Jesus as Lord over its own life. The Church also has a task *to do* for it confesses 'Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity' and therefore the church seeks to be 'an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself'.

The Church's social responsibility is thus an integral part of its response to Christ who gave himself to the world to create 'a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds' (Titus 2:7-14). This ministry of the Church is part of the reconciliation of all things in Christ and closely related to the evangelical call 'that people may trust God as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord'. It is not so much the case that the gospel 'has social implications' as much as the gospel has intrinsically a dimension of social responsibility. Any understanding of the social responsibility of the Church which neglects the evangelistic call for all to 'acknowledge Jesus as Lord' has unhelpfully divided the gospel. 'Faith' and 'works' are intimately connected (James 2:14-17) and good works and sound doctrine go together (Titus 2:9-10).

Unfortunately, the Gospel ('the good news' or 'the evangel') of the Lord Jesus Christ has commonly been divided into 'evangelism' (often connected with the language of 'conversion' and 'justification') and 'social action' (often using the language of 'transformation' and 'justice'). Their relationship has been understood variously with some stressing evangelism (either asserting that 'evangelism' is the only real responsibility of the Church, or that it has a logical priority with social action being an implication of conversion). Others have acted as though 'social justice' is either the only real responsibility of the Church with 'evangelism' as unnecessary (or perhaps as the primary responsibility, with 'evangelism' as secondary or a mere possibility).

Others have sought the better route of relating these two dimensions in 'partnership' (*Lausanne Paper on Evangelism and Social Responsibility*) or as 'integrated' (*Micah Declaration on Integral Mission*) aspects of the one gospel. This is very appropriate as the concept of 'righteousness' (or 'justification') is connected both to being justified (or 'being made righteous' in terms of evangelism and conversion – Romans 3:26; 5:1) and to acting justly (as in 'doing justice' and being engaged in acts of social responsibility – Romans 6:13,22;

2 Corinthians 3:9). In short, the Church's gospel ministry of 'evangelism' and 'social responsibility' is a single ministry. These two dimensions cannot exist independently of each other. Although it may be possible to begin with one rather than the other, and although they may temporarily exist separately, they are fundamentally connected. The proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ has social consequences and social action has evangelistic implications. They are part of the one Gospel life of the Church.

*'Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world we betray the word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world. Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together. As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task.'*  
(Micah Declaration on Integral Mission)

The Church has a distinctive gospel ministry and it is important that the Church's activity does not just become another form of social work, indistinguishable from that of other organisations or government departments. The Church's social responsibility includes, but extends beyond, physical needs and relates to people's full humanity as spiritual beings made in the image of God and called to be reconciled to Christ. The very appropriate desire to avoid what is referred to negatively as 'proselytism' (the imposition of the gospel) has implications for the way the Church ministers to people, but it cannot mean that evangelism must be left aside. It is always the responsibility of the Church to witness to Jesus Christ.

## **Holiness and social responsibility**

The Church's ministry of social responsibility is one dimension of Christian holiness. While holiness is often related to the life of the individual, scriptural holiness is more than personal. Individual attitudes and actions are closely related to social relationships and responsibilities. The Gospel calls for the transformation of individuals and society. There is no holiness but 'social holiness'. Christian virtues, including the 'fruit of the spirit' (Galatians 5:22,23), are often understood as relating to individuals, but grace, love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness and so forth, have great application at a social level as well. Consequently a comprehensive Christian social responsibility not only involves critical or 'negative' or 'prophetic' statements (although a 'negative' assessment can in fact be an essential part of a very positive approach) but also points towards and positively demonstrates a life-affirming and Spirit-filled way of life. The removal of war, injustice and inequality is an essential part of our social responsibility, but their absence alone is not the same as having peace, justice or equality in the fuller, biblical sense that involves the presence of God and the life and values of the Kingdom.

In critiquing social attitudes, behaviours and policies which are contrary to the Gospel, and in advocating and supporting those values and actions which are consistent with it, there is no intention to impose on society, compel the adoption of all Christian values or seek Church control of social or governmental offices. Nonetheless, the Church offers the Gospel and its values to society, promotes them and does all it can in an endeavour to see the Gospel lived out in every way, and to bring glory to God.

In doing this there are four dimensions of life and community which continually need to be drawn together.

First, there is the individual dimension of each person's relationship with God in Jesus Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit: hearts receive God's love (Romans 5:5), lives are transformed (Romans 12:2) and the Spirit guides (Galatians 5:25). Without this relationship with God in Christ all attempts at developing a Christian social responsibility are well-meaning but ultimately futile.

Secondly, an authentic Christian social responsibility will involve 'works of mercy', that is, acts of practical care for individuals and families which follow the example of Jesus and the apostles (Matthew 25:31-45; Acts 6:1-7). 'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?' (James 2:15).

Thirdly, Christian social responsibility not only works with specific situations as they arise, it also aims at dealing with the social, structural causes of such problems. Removing the causes of human need means seeking justice in social, political and economic arenas. This may be by a direct challenge to an unjust policy or law or, as the apostle Paul did in his appeal to Philemon concerning his slave Onesimus, by an indirect call to live by Christian principles (Philemon 4-16).

Finally, there is a need to examine the ideological underpinnings which produce a society's structures, actions and attitudes. Paul does this for example in his critique of Colossian society (e.g. Colossians 2:6-23). This necessarily involves the church in a thorough process of self-examination because cultural influences and principles which are inimical to the Gospel can be absorbed into the thinking of the Church. For example, in recent times good words and concepts such as diversity, discrimination, compassion, inclusivity and tolerance have been changed in meaning and emphasis in such a way as to undermine the Church's understanding of social responsibility. Engaging at all four of these levels is by no means easy, but it is essential.

## **Conclusion**

As Christians we are to respond to the call of the Lord Jesus Christ by living appropriately and acting responsibly in accordance with the values of the Kingdom of God. While the needs of the world provide good reason for Christian action the fundamental motivation comes from the Lord Jesus Christ who is the foundation of our life and faith. He is the one who strengthens us and who enables our action, and it is he who directs and guides our belief and behaviour. In exercising that responsibility to society which is fundamental to the mission of the church it is essential that, as far as possible, we work together in unity with Christians in other denominations and organisations, and also that we avoid those divisions which can separate the various aspects of the Gospel and integrate word and deed. We remember the words of the Lord Jesus, 'You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.' (Matthew 5:14-16). However, we cannot assume that everything depends on the action of the Church in the world. Christians cannot create a perfect society or bring in the Kingdom of God. The Church thus exercises its social responsibility by witnessing to the redemptive work of Christ and looking forward to the consummation of all things in him.

## **Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia**

At the national meeting of members of Reforming Alliance within the Uniting Church and Evangelical Members within the Uniting Church on 12th July 2006, it was resolved to establish The Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia.

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia shall be committed to:

1. ensuring that matters of doctrine are determined according to the teachings of Scripture within the reformed, evangelical and orthodox tradition of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church;
2. providing orthodox leadership in doctrine, theology, ethics, worship, pastoral care, social responsibility, mission and evangelism;
3. restoring and maintaining ecumenical relations;
4. engaging the Gospel of Jesus Christ with Australia's multi-cultural and pluralist society;
5. establishing national and state bodies to implement the following objectives:
  - a. encourage the provision of reformed, evangelical and orthodox ministry of Word, sacrament and pastoral care in Confessing Congregations;
  - b. encourage reformed, evangelical and orthodox Christian Education for leaders and lay people;
  - c. bring a vigorous biblical perspective to contemporary public issues in a society that is increasingly ignorant about or hostile to orthodox Christianity;
  - d. foster relationships of reconciliation and cooperation with members of indigenous congregations;
  - e. foster relationships of cooperation and partnership with members of migrant ethnic congregations;
  - f. provide lines of communication with members of the National Council of Churches in Australia, Partner Churches in Pacific and Asian Region, and encourage local inter-church cooperation;
  - g. create an association of Confessing Ministry Workers and assist in the placement of suitable ministry agents in Confessing Congregations;
  - h. assist and encourage the establishment of new Confessing Congregations;

- i. develop a simple administrative structure which serves to liberate the congregations to fulfil Christ's mission.
  - j. distribute a regular publication for communication, education and encouragement;
  - k. be a faithful steward of the resources entrusted to it from the Confessing Congregations.
6. We take this action as a means to express our sole loyalty and obedience to Jesus Christ, and adherence to The Basis of Union.

There are more resources at the Assembly of Confessing Congregations website:  
[www.confessingcongregations.com](http://www.confessingcongregations.com)

## About the Author

Brian Edgar is an ordained Minister of the Word of the Uniting Church in Australia. He is currently Professor of Theological Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary (USA) but, thanks to air travel which allows him to conduct intensives and the internet through which he teaches online, he remains basically resident in Melbourne, Australia.

Brian is married to Barbara and has two daughters and one son-in-law. He worships at North Ringwood Uniting Church and is convenor of the Social Responsibility Commission of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations and a Fellow of ISCAST (Christians in Science and Technology).

Prior to his current ministry he spent four years as Director of Public Theology for the Australian Evangelical Alliance and for 18 years before that lectured at the Bible College of Victoria.

He is the author of *The Message of the Trinity* in the IVP 'The Bible Speaks Today' series.



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