

**THERE'S
PROBABLY
NO GOD.
NOW STOP WORRYING
and enjoy tragedy,
suffering, death ...**

ACCATALYST

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Bushfires: a judgment on public officials

The following editorial was penned in the days immediately after the bushfires of February 7, 2009, which took 209 lives. Despite the passage of some weeks, the editorial is printed here as a solitary comment on a memorable event.

At the time of writing, insanity prevails in the state of Victoria, where every level-headed citizen tries with little success to make sense of the loss of life on February 7.

The death toll from the bushfires puts the average act of terrorism in the shade. The fact is that death on that day visited a largely literate and educated population, whose adult component, if not its children, were well aware of the history of fire in Australia, at least in outline.

Why were the lost still at home on the fateful day? That is the key question for the Royal Commission into the bushfires announced by Victorian Premier John Brumby.

To the ignorant observer safe from the flames, one comment is unavoidable. The 2009 bushfire deaths represent a massive public policy failure. To see how massive, consider the way the tragedy unfolded, from the point of view of an average watcher located in one of Victoria's larger settlements, the city of Melbourne.

Throughout the week of February 2-6, the weather bureau was predicting a day of 43 degrees or more for Saturday February 7. Coming on the heels of three consecutive days of similar temperatures across southern Australia, this prediction was widely noted. Saturday itself burned itself in memory as a day of extraordinary heat, although many Australians living in more northern climates, and a few Saudi Arabians might disagree. Unusual yellow and grey colours in the sky late on the hot afternoon of February 7 suggested disturbing news to come.

No-one was prepared for the knowledge of just how disturbing the news would be. But with the signs of warning so plain to see, even from a distance, how did it come about that hundreds of people were trapped before the fire in this, the information age?

The signs of warning, of course, were much clearer and more detailed than those simply noticed by disinterested onlookers. Southern Australia has been experiencing drought conditions, fire authorities publish regular updates on environmental combustibility and every Australian who arrived here before last week knows bushfire is a summer risk.

In these circumstances, what was lacking was not information about the possibility of disaster, but any urgent sense that the possibility was real. Victoria was in the grip of an illusion on the morning, and even on the afternoon of February 7 – the illusion that human beings could withstand bushfire of a magnitude that was clearly possible, in parts of the state. Clearly, some public official somewhere, backed by knowledge of bushfire risk shared by experts, should have spoken confidently before the morning of February 7, 2009, warning people in the now devastated communities that they should leave. This did not happen, and this is a judgment on public officialdom in the state of Victoria.

Paul Gray

ACCATALYST

Nice type, no brains in atheist ad campaign

You may have seen the advertising campaign on the sides of London buses early this year. In gaily coloured type, it cheekily declared – “There’s probably no God: now stop worrying and enjoy life.”

Another day, and just another sign in this busy world.

But what made this poster campaign memorable was the international publicity it gathered. World media outlets reported the appearance of the London signs as though it were a modern *Eureka!* moment.

No God? At last, all those problems we’ve been having in life can disappear!

But wait: post-God, we still have problems.

Since the poster crusade was launched, other news events have reminded us that even in the middle of our funky modern lives, death and pain are permanent realities.

People die horrible deaths in natural disasters. Anger prompts crimes that shock communities. Grief and suffering caused by a variety of factors *other than* religion remind us of the Hobbesian truth that life is nasty, brutish and short.

The fragile frailty of our existence is no new concept, of course – but our modern consumerist and entertainment-oriented lifestyle seems designed to keep us from noticing the rough end of life’s pineapple.

Last year the Scottish Catholic philosopher John Haldane addressed this problem in a discussion with atheist Philip Adams, broadcast on ABC Radio National.

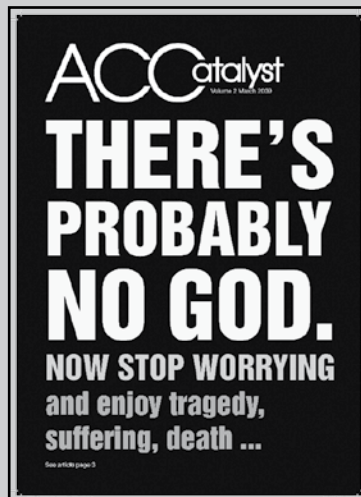
Haldane, author of *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Religion*, argued that one appeal of religion, and of Christianity in particular, is that it offers a “deep account” of the realities of existence.

Cutting to the quick, Haldane observed: “Each and every one of us may find ourselves in circumstances of severe vulnerability, a sense of isolation, a sense of limitation and so on.

“What I am interested in is what religion has to say about that: not the idea that it just rushes in with comfort, because part of what it may rush in with is something that may underline one’s vulnerability.”

Haldane is right: rather than being a security blanket, classical Christianity provides a sobering account of life’s deeper realities. Rather than being a weakness of its cause, this is one of Christianity’s most attractive strengths.

Indeed, in a world increasingly afflicted by trouble, it’s hard to see how you can enjoy life without it.



On the death penalty –

Please, avoid judging others in policy statements

Sir,

I have just read the most recent *ACCatalyst* magazine and was rather surprised and distressed by your editorial [on capital punishment, December 2008.]

In fact I had to read it several times before accepting that you meant what you were saying, rather than being cynical or trying to point out that such extreme ideas were NOT OK. I refer to your statements that murder is ‘the greatest sin’ and is ‘unforgivable’. I could almost physically feel your passion as I read the article. Please don’t mistake me – I am all for passion and emotion, especially in a male evangelical: it’s rare and to be encouraged, but I do expect some Biblical accuracy as well and a lot of grace and mercy.

Murder is not the greatest sin, nor is it unforgivable. Only a man could say the former – most women would class rape as the ‘greatest sin’. ‘The greatest sin’ however, is like fashion, it changes with the culture and era (if I remember rightly, Dante put the greedy and gluttonous in the centre of Hell) and it is therefore dangerous to make any concrete statement about the degree of depravity of a sin. Jesus did point out that being angry with someone was the equivalent of killing them. Not to indicate the degree of the sin, but to point out that we, as humans, should not judge others. Secondly Jesus was quite clear that the ONLY unforgivable sin was that of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Christians have been arguing for over 2000 years now just what that means. Perhaps it’s wise to avoid the ‘unforgivable sin’ statement as well.

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There are 10 commandments. In the Old Testament several of these were punishable by death (and therefore regarded as 'worse' than the others). There were other sins also that are listed in the Torah as punishable by death. As far as I was aware Jesus came to complete the law so there was no more need to make such statements as you have made. Our task is to offer the grace, mercy and forgiveness that Jesus died to achieve.

May I also point out that ALL life is sacred. God created an entire earthly ecosystem BEFORE he created humans. Humans were not permitted to kill animals, except for sacrifice, before the flood. Humankind was meant to be vegetarian. Perhaps next time you hoe into a steak or battery chicken breast, or buy a product that in its manufacture or use has destroyed or polluted God's creation, you might like to also think of the sacrilege you are committing. This might make you and the other judgmental Christians out there realize just how depraved we all are (and I include myself in this).

I am, personally, very strongly against the death penalty and would also prefer if abortions were not part of our community life. I strongly believe we must be merciful to the perpetrators as well as the victims, as we ourselves are as sinful as they.

I have held women who have had abortions and shared their grief. They felt there was no other alternative because the 'Christian' culture we are all born into in the West is so judgmental and lacks love. Basically many women believe they will have no support to bear and maintain a child and so abort it. They are frightened. How many frightened, pregnant women have you invited into your home for 18 years of support?

I have also ministered to Genocide perpetrators in Rwanda. And each time I think of the faces of those men, who had come to Christ while in gaol, I shudder at your words. Is it not bad enough that each of them must

live with the crimes they committed, without a pious evangelical telling them their crimes are unforgivable?!

Perhaps we should all learn to take the planks out of our own eyes and be more merciful towards each other and

then we might really be evangelizing, telling the good news of Christ: life to the full, forgiveness of sins and a merciful Kingdom to inhabit.

*Deborah Bushell
Richmond, NSW*

Obama and Gaza: trust no-one

The long-dead journalist HL Mencken pronounced a caustic doctrine about public life which deserves remembrance in the present day. Mencken's idea was that under democracy, all public officials are frauds and do not deserve respect.

In early 2009 the leading public official of the day in the democratic world is US President Barack Obama. Fashion has declared the President, a man of prodigious talents and an extraordinarily interesting personal background, to be virtually the closest thing to a secular saint possessed by today's world.

But Mencken's doctrine cannot be denied – as the affair of Gaza reminds us. In the weeks immediately before Obama was sworn in as President last January, Israel's government launched a major military operation in Gaza.

Ostensibly necessitated by the firing of rockets by Hamas into Israeli territory, the offensive had all the smell of a convenient war. Like the invasion of Iraq by the USA in March 2003, most intelligent observers asked of the latest Gaza offensive the single most pertinent question: why now?

Intelligent observers also knew the answer – because Israel's government wanted a last, hard hit at Hamas while President George W Bush, a figure tolerant of its most bellicose intentions, was still the boss in the White House. With the 'new broom' embodied by Obama's Presidency about to sweep the world, a serious Gaza offensive during or after the Obama Inauguration would have been most undiplomatic.

Of course, "undiplomatic" here refers to Israel's relations with the United States – not to Israel's relations with the Palestinians or the Arab world. Whether the Gaza offensive helped or hindered the latter cause is a question for Middle East experts to dissect.

We are concerned primarily with the democratic West, and what the Gaza episode says about President – then President-elect – Barack Obama.

Although not officially installed at the time, Obama had immense authority to make public statements or otherwise exert influence against Israel's Gaza adventure.

He maintained a fence-sitter's silence. So in the first serious moral test of his public life since last November's election, Obama failed miserably.

For all the talk of Obama bringing change to America's public life, the new President's Gaza position made him indistinguishable from a lengthy line of forgettable Washington war-mongers.

We hope for better from the President in future. Indeed, we earnestly pray for it.

□

Abortion, Bonhoeffer and our secret guilt

*Theology struggles
for the right
words in crucial
ethical debates*

When theologians talk among themselves they share a common solidarity of belief. They indulge in the good sense of their arguments, but about peripheral questions not unlike the number of angels that can dance on the point of a pin. For atheists and other non-believers these are points of no importance.

For them the real problem of religious talk is a three-letter word on everyone's lips except in relation to life's deeper questions. 'God' is a word that is so much taken for granted by Christians that non-believers recoil from treating it seriously.

The banality of 'God' is one reason why parliaments base abortion laws on the secular virtues of compassion, tolerance and a woman's rights – that impregnable citadel which resists all arguments. The religious sensitivity and moral principles of politicians make little impact on Australia's epidemic of abortions. 'God' has nothing to do with it.

This is a problem for Christians. Discussing theology and abortion in the same breath is like asking a mathematician to prove the genius of Beethoven's fifth symphony. It can be done, perhaps, but only at the cost of dismantling the history of musical criticism and expanding the field of aesthetics beyond recognition.

Abortion involves a similar

displacement. Its religious dimension has been aborted because it has become another medical intervention alongside survival procedures, life-enhancing techniques and cosmetic adjustments. No special regard is paid to the long-term effects on aborting mothers, their partners or husbands, their families and society at large. Some of those outcomes

were described by Marcia Riordan in *ACCatalyst* (December 2008 – The untold story of post-abortion trauma). Foremost among them are women's grief and the loneliness of having no-one to share their feelings with, especially family members who urged abortion in the first place.

An 'epidemic of abortions' is no

Continued next page

Religious awe and changing climate

Blame started to emerge even as stories of Black Saturday heroism and loss flooded the media. Recrimination surfaced even before the extent of death and destruction was known. Blame, like guilt, is hard-wired in the human psyche.

That it's bad form to look for culprits after natural calamities was no deterrence. Indeed, instead of guilty hands being raised, some tried to paint themselves as prophets justified by events. If anyone thought the Greens might have considered a modest mea culpa for their notorious propaganda against clearing forest floors they were kidding themselves. The Greens showed no remorse. Senator Brown even claimed, with prophetic assurance, that the fires justified his party's warnings about global warming.

But he went too far. He seemed to forget that invincible belief in human culpability – whether for climatic events or the rape of nature – is as unscientific as assuming that natural disasters must be a judgment on humanity. In the absence of God, sentence can be pronounced only by Nature personified.

By accepting mankind's guilt for global climatic events we are obliged to confess a moral delinquency from which no-one is excused. Only a handful of people live self-sufficiently far from the swarming anthills of metropolis and vibrant rural communities. These are the modern children of Noah; the only ones worthy of rescue from the coming holocaust.

The doctrine that global civilisation has brought the world to the point of catastrophe combines three sorts of unscientific thinking. One is an unmistakable whiff of irrationalism. Another is fear of the unknown, inflated to justify political actions that are minuscule compared with the forces of nature that actually determine the climate. The third is an anonymous guilt that seeks relief or consolation in the rituals of self-accusation and collective absolution. That is the meaning of the ramshackle schemes now under debate to penalise industry for fouling the atmosphere, and everyone else for living and breathing.

Climate change rituals now dominate the politics of every developed country. Absolution is promised through penitence expressed in simpler living and acceptance of the higher costs it will require. A religious dread, mordant and oppressive, has taken hold of our civilisation, and the gods who rule tides and temperature are no less terrifying than those who struck fear into the hearts of the ancients.

Bad conscience explains the conceit that makes climatic variations the handiwork of man. Unless this faith is consigned to the dustbins of dubious theory, history will record an outbreak of 21st century insanity to match the burning of witches and the inquisition. How could it happen in an educated and pragmatic society?

□

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exaggeration. Ross Carter, in an essay on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's teaching on abortion, noted that "abortion is not an uncommon practice in Australia .." He states that according to the Better Health website (whose accuracy is guaranteed by the Victorian Government), 80-100,000 surgical abortions are performed in Australia each year.

Carter says a recent survey of abortion in Australia describes it as a "routine and massive destruction of human life .. in our society."

Bonhoeffer's views appear in his unfinished manuscript, later published in English under the title *Ethics*. Carter writes that "Bonhoeffer takes what I think is the sensible and right view about this matter when he writes that 'discussion of the question whether a human being is already present confuses the simple fact that, in any case, God wills to create a human being ..'" This is to say that in the normal course of events, and with the right conditions, a fertilized egg will go on to be born and called a child."

The martyred theologian, much admired by Prime Minister Rudd among hosts of others, makes the fatal mistake of introducing 'God' in a debate where even angels fear to tread. "God wills to create a human being" has no place in the modern market of ideas. So, writing 60 years ago, what can Bonhoeffer add to the debate?

The answer is, by talking about society. Bonhoeffer, says Carter, links 'our creation as humans' with 'a fundamental sociality.' 'Sociality' rings bells in an age of sociological ferment. Carter describes Bonhoeffer's view that the human person comes into being only when embedded in sociality, and the collective person comes into being only through individuals. The person is not absorbed into the collective, and is not free from it either.

Bonhoeffer's language offends because it inserts divinity into the equation, by claiming that human society is completed only in Jesus

Christ, and to destroy the body in the womb or outside it destroys society. Nevertheless, he is as ethically sensitive as the best of modern secularists. He insists that "what makes us human is that we stand in ethical relationship to others. In the restored sociality of humanity, vicarious representative action will be the life principle."

These are fine sentiments from a condemned man who hoped for a renewed society after the war. He did not witness the harvest of the 20th century's "grand social experiment to see what life is like when we reject

God" – Stalin's genocide, cold war and religious hate. He did not foresee the Irish 'troubles', Africa's chaos, ethnic cleansing, New York's Twin Towers and Bali, and so much more.

A secular world has no defence against such horrors. It does not understand Christianity's disposition to believe, against all evidence, in inexhaustible newness.

Bonhoeffer's hopes were not realised, but martyrdom was not his greatest legacy. There is no more practical counsel than his confidence that history is embraced by God's

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The internet: heaven for morons

Many people are concerned about the moral effects the internet is having by increasing public access to pornography. Less-noticed is the effect the web is having on public acceptance of the concept of truth itself.

Farhad Manjoo outlines the problem in a recent book called *True Enough: Learning to live in a post-fact society*.

Manjoo takes two separate news themes of modern times – the 2004 US Presidential election and the ongoing AIDS challenge – to demonstrate a disturbing trend.

The trend is that increasingly, people are choosing to believe insane nonsense about important issues and events, and doing so because the internet gives them plenty of madcap 'facts' to justify whatever opinion they choose to believe.

Manjoo's book opens with the tragic story of a three-year-old girl who died from AIDS – untreated by Western medicine until too late – because the child's well-educated HIV-positive mother adhered to an internet-fuelled conspiracy theory denying the link between HIV and AIDS.

The story fits into a broader picture – large numbers of people sign on to conspiracy theories of every kind.

Another concerned the 2004 Democratic Party Presidential candidate, John Kerry. Kerry was a decorated American war hero from Vietnam.

However, because of an internet-based disinformation campaign by Kerry opponents, many Americans became persuaded that Kerry's war record was fraudulent. Manjoo claims this campaign contributed to Kerry's two-point electoral defeat by George W. Bush.

True Enough argues that media fragmentation in the digital age is a major factor in the spread of conspiracy theories. Until the 1980s, major news networks dominated the spread of information. For all their weaknesses, the networks at least agreed on the importance of spreading established facts.

In the internet age, "facts" are more fluid. Healthy scepticism becomes unhealthy paranoia. Increasingly, people seek comfort and safety from a confusing world in web communities of the like-minded and ill-informed.

Pilate's question – what is truth – has a disturbing answer in the internet age: truth is whatever you want it to be. Just click here.



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forgiveness, and that 'God' cannot be thought about apart from humanity. Nor can the world be thought about without God.

This is not religious piety or sociological theory. It is the theological realism that political theories and secular hopes have dispensed with. It explains why the abortion epidemic produces secret guilt and anxiety. It explains our lost social cohesion, and our collective unease about what is being done to the unborn, their mothers and their families.

Millikan to address next ACC national conference

The Annual Conference of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations for 2009, incorporating the AGM, will be held from 1.30pm on Thursday 3 September to 12.30pm on Saturday 5 September at Alexandra Headland on Queensland's Sunshine Coast.

Entitled 'The Church is dead – Long live the Church!' it features a keynote address by the Rev Dr David Millikan, Uniting Church minister at Balmain in Sydney, a former Head of Religious Broadcasting at the ABC and an author and film maker. He will speak on 'Hope and the Failure of the Liberal Experiment.'

Other speakers include the Rev Dr Brian Edgar, Prof. of Theological Studies at Asbury College, USA and former Lecturer in Theology at Bible College of Victoria, who will speak on 'Human Rights and Social Justice', and Church historian the Rev Dr Ian Breward who will speak on 'Reformation in the Church.'

Accommodation is at a Uniting Church campsite situated 10 minutes from Maroochydore Airport and with facilities for couples and families. Costs will be as affordable as possible. Full details of the program will be available after Easter. □

Abortion rights: the eugenics connection

One of Barack Obama's first actions as President of the United States has added to the ongoing debate about abortion legislation.

Obama has repealed a policy which prevented federal money being given to international organisations which perform abortions or provide family planning where abortion is presented as a viable option.

The 'Mexico City policy', first introduced in 1984 by President Ronald Reagan, has a long history of controversy, with several US presidents taking action to repeal or reinstate it during their first days in office.

After Reagan put the policy in place, Democrat Bill Clinton revoked it in 1993. Republican George Bush then reinstated the policy in 2001 as one of his first acts as president.

Obama's repeal of the policy came one day after the 36th anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling in the case *Roe vs Wade* which legalised abortion in the US.

Obama's action has been condemned by anti-abortion groups, who believe that US taxpayer money should not be used to promote or aid groups which provide abortion.

However, some argue that the Mexico City policy was detrimental to the populations of developing countries.

Groups which were previously prevented from receiving US aid also work to provide health clinics and work against HIV/AIDS.

Views on the new reform are symptomatic of the continuing debate over any piece of legislation relating to abortion.

While the assumption of many people is that abortion is mainly a question of individual rights versus the dictates of group morality, other views are emerging.

For example, a recent book from a scholarly US publisher puts forward a challenging view on the issue of the history of abortion legalisation.

By Their Fruits: Eugenics, Population Control, and the Abortion Campaign, published by Catholic University of America Press in 2008, examines the links between eugenics movements and the abortion campaign in Britain.

The author, Ann Farmer, is an independent writer and researcher.

The philosophy of eugenics is strongly associated in the public mind with Nazi Germany and the Nazi view that the state should take action to reduce the number of 'undesirable' members of the population.

Farmer argues that groups lobbying for legalised abortion in the UK were not motivated by a desire for women's rights, or concern about the dangers of backstreet abortion, but rather aimed to reduce the number of 'dysgenic' or undesirable births through termination of pregnancies.

Farmer contends that the controversial Abortion Act of 1967, which legalised abortion by registered practitioners in the UK, was supported chiefly by eugenicists.

By Their Fruits aims to correct the widely-held view that it was feminist groups who were instrumental in bringing about the Abortion Act.

Farmer writes that in the years after the legislation was introduced in Britain, abortion was used as a means of population control by the state, and targeted working-class women. □

Policy on Freedom of Religion and Belief poses challenge for churches

Uniting Justice, the National Agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, has submitted a 46 page document on Freedom of Religion and Belief to the Human Rights Commission. It is an extensive piece of work which draws on UN declarations of human rights and various statements and decisions

made by the UCA over the years.

While proposing strong legislation to protect religious conscience in a multi-faith society, it is most critical of what it calls 'extremist' Christian groups. It is virtually silent on other forms of extremism, religious and secular, which vilify Christianity.

The submission subtly presents diversity and inclusivity as being of the essence of Christian faith, but offers little protection for Christians who, not unreasonably, believe that Christ is 'the way, the truth and the life.' Thus it favours 'liberalism' against 'evangelicalism' in the Church and the

community.

This is particularly evident in section 7.6 in discussion of 'sexualities' and the 'rights of nature' where it becomes clear that the post-modern concept of 'rights' trumps the specifically Christian concept of 'righteousness.'

Members of the UCA have a responsibility to study this document carefully. Ill-considered federal legislation on this sensitive issue may result in changes which restrict the Church's mandate to preach the Gospel to all nations and discourage robust and respectful dialogue. It would be a pity if an unintended consequence were to be the illiberal treatment of Christians in Australia and abroad.

What follows on this page is a submission to the Freedom of Religion and Belief inquiry from the Social Responsibility Commission of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations.

ACC Social Responsibility Commission submission on Freedom of Religion and Belief

1. In order to secure freedom of religion in Australia it is important that the AHRC draw the attention of all Governments to the United Nations Framework for freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the General Assembly of the United Nations (Dec 10, 1948) states in Article 18, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." The United Nations Framework represented by

The Pastor calls, by John Longthorn

A little rain

Fred was a bachelor. If he had been roped by some strong-armed, broad-beamed lass he might have done better. He was not the sort that toiletries for men would have done anything for, even had they been invented. On the thistle farm he was either too early or too late. Some years he was both. These were the seasons he would start early, break down, finish late. But he did have one good year.

This is how it came about. Towards the end of October he was in the store. There was a fellow there in a city suit. Fred said later, "He was a good bloke. He said 'Come on over and see if she's open.' Seeing she was never closed you couldn't say they were lucky. It happened that the 'good bloke' was an insurance agent, and that he had seen Fred's crop on his way in from a regular customer. It took only one drink for Fred to have his crop insured for everything except erysipelas and bandy legs. This, of course, was in the days before wheat boards, silos and economics.

Anyway, Fred came at the idea like a hungry trout. He was flattered to be asked and went home feeling like big business.

It came up very fast just on dark. There was thunder and lightning, rain and hail. It blew hard until just before dawn. Fred's crop was slashed to ribbons. When Fred got up a little late he looked out of the window. It took a while to penetrate, before he began to sing. The cat took off through the bottom of the wire door. The dog stayed to make it a duet. It was hard to say which had the better voice. The dog was better on the long high ones.

Fred didn't care. He saw in his mind's eye the bank manager lifting his hat to him in the street. He warbled, 'Into every life a little rain must fall.'

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

the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights together with the Siracusa Principles and the Religion Declaration, are not of themselves or as a matter of right, part of the domestic law of Australia. As part of the body of international law, however, such documents should be regarded as defining Australia's obligations in respect of freedom of religion.

2. If the Commonwealth Government should consider legislating for freedom of thought, conscience and religion, then such a law should: comply with International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Articles 18(1), 18(2), 18(3), 18(4), 20, 25 and 27 with the limitations of Article 18(3) strictly defined according to the Siracusa Principles (United Nations, Economic and Social Council, U.N. Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Siracusa Principles on the Limitation and Derogation of Provisions in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Annex, UN Doc E/CN.4/1984/4 (1984)).

3. There are grounds for concern about some of the motives which appear to have led to this review of freedom of religion. The Review does not appear to be the result of public concern given the revelation in Senate Estimates by the Race Discrimination Commissioner that there have been a "very minimal" number of complaints from the public concerning threats to freedom of religion in Australia. Yet some of the questions asked in the Review's discussion paper seem to imply that there ought to be greater limitation on religious expression and answers from the Sex Discrimination Commissioner in Senate Estimates seem to point to an intention to remove or narrow exemptions that are perceived to limit gender equality, but which, in fact, guarantee freedom of religious expression.

4. If the Commonwealth Government should consider legislating for freedom of thought,

conscience and religion, then such a law should provide all religious organisations, including faith based schools and other organisations with a faith based mission or purpose, the freedom of positive selection, i.e., the right to advertise for and select staff, whether teaching, professional or otherwise, who will own the beliefs, values and codes of conduct of that faith based school, organisation or community.

5. If the Commonwealth Government should consider legislating for freedom of thought, conscience and religion, then such

a law should guarantee freedom of conscience in the provision of goods and services. It should be unlawful to discriminate against a person or engage in disciplinary action, if that person refuses to provide a service or to perform other work that violates his or her conscience, or is inconsistent with his or her religious beliefs. The same freedom of conscience should extend to faith based organisations.

Yours respectfully,

*Social Responsibility Commission
Assembly of Confessing Congregations
within the Uniting Church in Australia*

Encouragement

with Robyn McKay

There are some things that don't go away when you pretend they are not there. The smallest caltrop plant, if ignored can turn into a monster that, within the space of a few summers can take over your garden or spread across a paddock, and pity help the innocent bare-foot person who comes wandering along.

I have a thing about caltrop. For six months each year I patrol my south fence line, the Murray Town church yard and the farm where I work like a vigilante and as I remove every plant and every prickle I feel a sense of triumph, knowing that I have stopped one from reproducing itself. And, yes, I have discovered that the back yard of the Peterborough Manse has caltrop. It doesn't look like it because the plants are dead, because it's winter. But the prickles are there, and I would bet my grandmother that there are seeds underground just waiting until the warmer weather to germinate and attempt once again to take over the world. Maybe they are hidden, but they have not gone away.

Conflict, like caltrop is nasty and destructive and most of us would prefer to live without it. But most of the time, conflict, like caltrop will not go away by itself. Sometimes we just have to deal with it, even when we would rather not.

Conflict might start off between two people, but before you know it whole families, whole churches, even whole nations are involved. It's a nasty thing. Sometimes of course conflict is necessary to right a wrong, and sometimes we are involved through no fault of our own. Other times it may be that our anger has blurred our judgement and we are unwittingly adding to the problem.

But thankfully God is bigger than our conflicts. Jesus is the prince of peace, which doesn't just mean he likes peace, it means he can bring peace into a situation. God can sort out our messes even when we can't.

We need to be willing to let God be the gardener who comes into our situations and deals with the caltrop of conflict, and replace it with his flowers of the humility to say sorry and the grace to forgive, as well as the strength to stand firm when we need to, and peace to withstand the conflict that we cannot change. He's a good God!

Robyn

Proposed changes to Uniting Church Constitution

In a letter to Presbytery and Synod Secretaries on 8 December 2008 the Rev Terence Corkin, General Secretary of the Uniting Church's National Assembly, said that a number of constitutional amendments would be coming before the church's Twelfth Assembly in July.

In particular a new preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution is being proposed, the details of which were circulated to Presbyteries and Synods early in 2009. Responses are being sought by the end of April. The Task Group appointed to consider constitutional changes after the Eleventh Assembly (2006) will collate them in time for presentation to, and decision by, Assembly in July.

The proposed new preamble is designed to acknowledge the clash between the early settlers and indigenous people and to cement relationships of justice and integrity in the ongoing mission of the Church. However, the proposal to consider a new preamble was not included in the task group's terms of reference. The task group was established to report on simplifying the Constitution and report to the Twelfth Assembly. There was no suggestion that a new Preamble was needed, or that it should be considered and amended separately from the Constitution.

The proposal also appears to be at odds with the Basis of Union on which the Constitution depends, which is not the case with the existing Preamble which links the two documents.

Despite good intentions, the wording raises many pastoral, theological, historical, cultural and legal questions which must be addressed. It is not clear why a preamble is necessary, particularly when a Covenanting Statement and response from Congress was sealed at the Seventh Assembly (1994) in a service of Holy Communion. (www.

assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/covenanting/covenantingstatement), and when the Eleventh Assembly (2006) resolved 'to give thanks to God for the covenantal relationship that exists between Congress and the rest of the Church' and to recognise the work done in 'renewing the covenant.'

The National Council of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations has asked the Cross Cultural Commission and the Doctrine and Theology Commission to make a timely response to the

proposal.

Among the more significant matters referred for consideration and report by the Eleventh Assembly (2006) was resolution 06.23, a) i & ii b} and c}. This concerns ways in which 'matters vital to the life of the church' may be dealt with in future. It remains to be seen whether the recommendations enhance or hinder robust dialogue in the councils of the church.

Changes to this clause of the

Continued next page

'Values' is the latest feelgood word

At a recent conference about governance, a well-known public person opened the conference with a brief speech.

In two or three minutes the person praised the conference participants for representing organizations which were committed to diversity and inclusivity.

In a subsequent speech the sponsor of the event informed the conference that the sponsoring company, like the conference participants, had strong 'values.'

In expressing these sentiments each speaker was undoubtedly sincere – but what was expressed were sentiments.

What was being evoked was a mood; a feeling that diversity, inclusiveness and 'values' were very good things and that each participant would know this because of the emotional idealism and refined feeling that would be awakened in each person as they heard the qualities being mentioned.

In other words it was by the evocation of these traits that participants knew who they were, and that they and their organizations were involved in doing good.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with assuring people that they are virtuous.

But the programs of every organization affect others and are involved in giving shape to the societies in which we must live.

For example, to assert that a group has 'values' to which it is deeply attached tells us nothing about what that body does, or what it will do.

Spontaneous sentiments are understandable but if their specific content is not articulated, they can engender social moods in which policies are made that are of very little practical use.

Worse still, groups can be caught up in these social moods and enact programs that coerce those who do not become excited at the sound of a basically inarticulate sentiment.

Perhaps this is an unnecessary worry, but it is important to give words about 'values' – words that obviously now evoke a vague kind of public moral sensibility – some concrete, rational content.

Those people who are, in one way or another, involved in public committees and public debate, should insist on greater clarity about just what 'values' means.



Continued from page 10

Constitution must comply with the governing clause in this regard, namely, paragraph 15(e) of the Basis of Union, which states:

It is obligatory for it (the Assembly) to seek the concurrence of other councils, and on occasion of the congregations of the Church, on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church.

The Assembly is obliged to seek concurrence.

Sexuality and Leadership debate

Despite strong support for a proposal from seven Presbyteries and the Queensland Synod to the Eleventh Assembly (2006), originally sponsored by The Reforming Alliance, and later endorsed by the ACC, it appears that the Assembly Standing Committee has no intention of pursuing the matter at the Twelfth Assembly. (www.confessingcongregations.com)

It has accepted the recommendation of the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine that a further period of at least 3 or 4 years be undertaken in order to determine the doctrinal issues involved in relation to same-sex sexual relationships.

The urgency of resolving the doctrinal issues for our relations with ecumenical partners, as recommended by ACC leaders Ian Breward, Max Champion and Rosalie Hudson at two Assembly Working Group on Doctrine consultations, was not recognised.

Meanwhile the ASC must explain why it accepted the minutes of the Eleventh Assembly (2006) without listing the names of the 48 people who dissented from Resolution 06.41, as required by a specific resolution which was passed at the Assembly but unaccountably was deleted from the official minutes.

Frequent requests by ACC to have this rectified have been ignored. □

CLARKSON

Almost every news report tells us the financial crisis will worsen. And it will worsen essentially because people aren't spending enough.

This is what makes this recession so different from the Great Depression, with which it is often compared.

In the Great Depression there was nothing to buy. Now, there's plenty to buy but consumers have to be prodded and poked and stimulated to spend.

Thus, the USA, which seems to be causing much of this, has a decline of around 20 per cent in business and software spending, a 23 per cent decline in home-building and 22 per cent decline in cars, furniture and appliances.

Large companies are shedding employees by the thousands, as a result. The UK is experiencing the biggest shrinking of its economy while China has halved its growth rate.

Meanwhile governments are dumping their surplus in the pockets of consumers to stimulate spending, to stimulate production, to try and chase ever-increasing gross national product while global unemployment is expected to increase to some 51 million in the developed world.

Could it be we are actually sick of spending: just overflowing with 'stuff.' We want a bit of a recess.

Several years ago, we heard of anti-clutter counsellors being employed by jaded consumers and as someone put it, many consumers are simply buying stuff that isn't needed, with money they haven't got, to impress people they hardly know!

And that just dulls our souls.

Maybe we want to do things a whole lot differently.

Maybe its time to have a recess from consumer excess.

Perhaps we could think again about the weekly Sabbath and the seven-year Jubilee when, in biblical days, the whole economy rested and the people lived quietly from a rested land.

Yes, our economies are far more sophisticated today, but the principle in all of this is that we can do with less for our bodies, but we need more for our souls.

Think about it.



Put not your faith in 'Doubt'

The recent cinema release *Doubt* (2008) is the film version of a popular play.

John Patrick Shanley is the author, and *Doubt* won a Tony Award for Best Play in 2005 as well as a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Shanley has had limited film directing experience, and his first film was roundly condemned (*Joe Versus the Volcano* – 1990). He has mainly been a writer and this shows. I believe *Doubt* is one of those examples of a film that should have been left as a play. The dialogue and style is not suited to the 'cutting' that a film demands. I also wonder if Shanley has mostly let his two star actors, both of whom are Academy Award winners, take the roles and fashion this film for themselves.

Set in 1964, the year after the Kennedy assassination, we are introduced to a section of America still reeling from a sense of despair. Father Flynn reminds his congregation that "when you are lost you are not alone", and goes on to say "doubt is as powerful as certainty". The film explores the issues that arise in the context of belief, but specifically considers the behaviour and attitudes of a priest toward a student. Are they pure intentions? Has something happened?

Philip Seymour Hoffman is Father Brendan Flynn, the Parish priest, who is accused of having an unhealthy relationship with a new boy in the school. Meryl Streep is Sister Aloysius Beaver, principal of St Nicholas's, the working-class Catholic school in the Bronx, which is run by her order, the Sisters of Charity. She is the accuser and judge as well. At no point does the viewer see critical evidence, and this is the cornerstone of the matter as the certainty of Sister Aloysius is put against Father Flynn who answers the accusations.

We first meet Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius in the church where he is giving the homily on doubt. She is seen walking along the pews making sure the students are listening. Sister Aloysius is an 'old school' Catholic: no singing of pagan songs like Frosty the Snowman at Christmas for her. Father Flynn urges getting with the new times. The church has to change, though specifics are not given, except for being friendlier. This idea is later expanded to include the Christian concept of love.

The homilies are critical points. After one encounter with Sister Aloysius, Father Flynn gets an idea for a sermon which he pastorally shares with her – his next theme will be 'intolerance'.

Amy Adams is Sister James. She plays the character in between – torn between certainty and doubt. The film is dedicated to one of Shanley's early teachers, Sister Margaret McEntee, who went by the name Sister James before choosing her present female name as a response to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. She is the young, innocent and naïve one. Viola Davis plays Mrs Miller, the mother of the boy at the centre of the drama, Donald Miller.

The other main 'character' in this film is the weather – particularly the wind, but there are also two light-globes which ominously die at critical sentences. These and some other elements are used as fairly heavy handed symbols.

Critics have almost universally lauded the acting, but I have to disagree. The characters do not have enough development to expose them to convey the depth needed for their critical scenes. The two main actors struck me as people trying to come to terms with playing a person of faith, rather than being persons of faith

trying to come to terms with doubt.

At the end I was left wondering who doubts more, or For whom doubt tolls, or whether anything really mattered. I found this film unconvincing – not because Shanley wants the audience to see that there are not any easy answers, but simply because I just could not see the characters as compelling enough to convey these positions.

When I heard of this work, I was first reminded of a book by well-known evangelical speaker Os Guinness – *Doubt: Faith in Two Minds* which was published in 1976. It became a popular book at Christian groups in universities in the 1980s, and was republished as *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt*, in 1996. This is a clever title and more fully explains his position, which is to consider and help people understand the types of doubt. The purpose is to help people believe: to be an apologist in the real sense of the word. Guinness provides critical comment for those who doubt simply for the sake of doubting without actually coming to grips with some of the personal reasons and issues related to their own doubts.

I want to close this review by quoting the story of a real doubter, not from this play, but from the Bible. This is the story of the original 'doubting Thomas':

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Peter Bentley

Easter and the true meaning of 'awesome'

THE Gospel reading for Easter Day says nothing about the traditional Easter joy. There is only the empty tomb, the angel's incredible explanation, and the women too terrified to tell what they have seen. Lest we be tempted to retort that there is more, that 'he rose early on the first day of the week ..' [16: 9] let us note that Mark's Gospel concludes, abruptly, at the eighth verse. The original ending is lost. The remaining section [vv. 9 - 19] was added later by another writer.

Thus the conclusion of Mark's Gospel which remains with us has two themes which characterise the followers of Jesus throughout the story – fear, and inability to believe. We should pay attention to these themes and resist the urge to rush on to the glad news about the risen Lord. Such news is appropriate only when we have reflected on the women's fear and their lack of faith.

Fear is a familiar experience for the people around Jesus. At least three times Mark tells us that fear is evident – in the stilling of the storm [4: 41], after the demoniac is restored to health [5: 15] and as Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem for the last time [10: 32]. Now, at the empty tomb, the women are afraid. What is this fear which recurs so persistently in Mark's Gospel? It is not mere anxiety about personal safety. It is not apprehension about the future. The fear which overwhelms people as they witness the words and deeds of Jesus is nothing less than the sense of awe and dread which accompanies the presence of the holy God.

In the storm, in the healing of the madman, in the awe-inspiring determination of Jesus as he moves on to Jerusalem, and in the stillness of an empty grave, Jesus' contemporaries know they are confronted by the

incomprehensible height and depth of life, by the overwhelming presence of God. Today we have made ourselves strangers to this experience. We no longer understand the otherness of God in our desire to know him only in nearness. We prefer to solve mysteries rather than to stand in awe of them.

Not only that. We prefer to reduce the gap between ourselves and others. So we cultivate intimacy in human relationships. We use first names as

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Thanks to the absence of awe we can address the Lord of all creation in language appropriate for the sales assistant.

the universal mode of address once the barriers of formality have been breached, and sometimes even before then. We regard it as a sign of religious devotion or progress in faith that we should be on speaking terms with God as well as with our neighbor, that we can speak familiarly with the Father. Thanks to the absence of awe we can address the Lord of all creation (in private, or even in public worship) in language equally appropriate for the sales assistant, the odd job man or the boss. We have outgrown the notion of 'the presence of God' as an occasion for grave self-examination, so that instead we treat it as a condition natural to mankind, or as a synonym for civic or religious uprightness.

In the second place the women cannot comprehend, and so are unable to believe. 'Do not be amazed (some translations say alarmed or afraid)' is the angel's first word [16: 6]. The women cannot accept this advice. No amount of reassurance can overcome

their lack of understanding. So why do they not believe the message that 'He has risen, he is not here' [v. 6] ? The evidence of the empty tomb stares them in the face. There is also the word of an angel. Not even these can penetrate the armour of unbelief. Only the risen Lord can open their understanding, as Jesus once opened the eyes of the blind.

Thus Mark ends his Gospel where it began, with the theme of man's

inability to believe, even if the unbeliever is also a disciple. Leaving aside, therefore, the postscript to the Gospel in verses 9 to 19, we find a remarkable message in Mark's closing chapter. These women, the first to discover that the tomb is empty, keep the news to themselves as if it were a guilty secret. For nobody expected that the tomb would be empty. And, since in a Jewish court women were not permitted to bear witness, nobody would believe the evidence of their eyes. We can only conclude that faith in the resurrection does not depend on the empty tomb or the word of a human witness or angelic messenger. Faith springs to life only because the living One encounters his disciples.

Nothing has changed since then.

From a series on Mark's Gospel, this commentary first appeared in Church & Nation on 11.4.79. The series was reprinted in Take & Read, the Year of Mark, published in 1998 by The Forum on Faith & Society.

Love and hope are tragedy's hardest questions

The major national event of early 2009 was the February 7 bushfires. In a 'church and nation' publication such as ACCatalyst, a theological perspective on such major events is demanded.

Accordingly, we here offer an edited version of a sermon preached within days of February 7 by Rev Dr Max Champion.

We gather to worship God this day, at the end of a week that has shaken our State. As we worship we think of the dead, the grieving, the homeless, and those who are stunned by the terrible events of last weekend.

We also bring to mind the sacrifice of people who have fought the fires, provided relief and been so generous

in response.

Today the readings and the sermon will focus on some of the theological and human questions which arise from such an event.

I was unsure during the week about what I should preach on, having addressed in this place the issues after September 11, the Bali Bombing and

also the Asian Tsunami. The subject is fraught with difficulties – theological and pastoral – not least because words are so inadequate and no explanation is adequate. I commend to you two pieces for your consideration during the week. The poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: an extraordinary piece, called 'The Powers of Good' written four months before he was hanged in a Gestapo prison (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p400). That was the result of human evil! The other is an article by journalist, Barney Zwartz, in *The Age*, 12 Feb 09, where he addresses these issues briefly and in a very profound way.

At times like this prayer itself is difficult – but necessary. Let us then come before God in prayer.

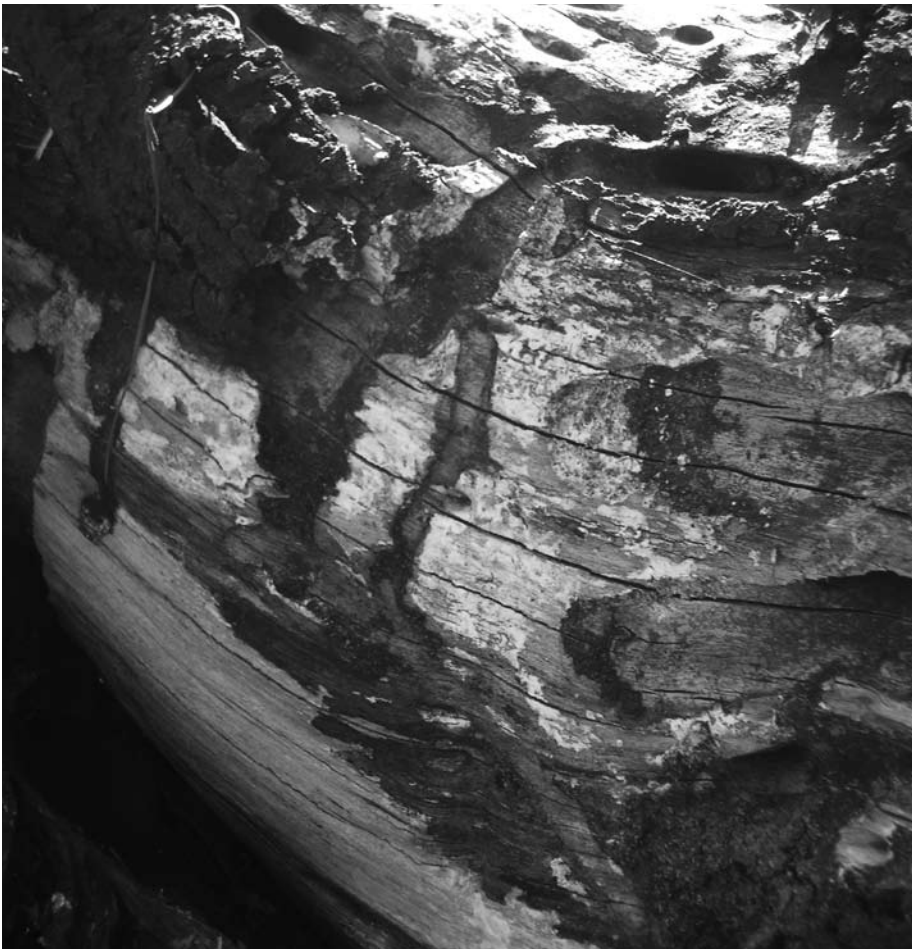
‘ We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await for adoption as sons and daughters, the redemption of our bodies.’ (Romans)

Unspeakable horror! Unbearable suffering and loss! Unimaginable grief! Words fail. Senses are numbed.

Life is futile and God seems absent. We want 'explanations'. Are these horrific events the result of blind fate or the will of God? Is it a sign of divine judgment? Do we have to choose between God who is compassionate but powerless and God who is Almighty but uncaring? Shouldn't we do the honest thing and abandon belief in God altogether?

A number of questions need to be separated as we think about these disturbing events.

First, is there a direct link between the victims of tragedy and sin? Pastor



Danny Nalliah of 'Catch the Fire' Ministries thinks so: attributing the fires to God's punishment for State Parliament decriminalising abortion.

There is also an Islamic website that says that they are Allah's punishment for Australia going to war in Iraq.

In Luke 13 Jesus utterly rejects this kind of logic (Luke 13:1f). It is bad theology – and bad taste! Uniting Church President Gregor Henderson is right to say that Nalliah's claim is 'ludicrous, abhorrent and misunderstands the nature of God.' No. The brutal massacre of Jewish worshippers (a result of human evil) and the collapse of a building (a natural catastrophe) do not tell us anything about the sin (or the faith) of the victims. They are not any worse (or any better) than those who survived! We cannot draw conclusions between horrific deaths and the character of those who perished.

Nor is there any guarantee that the faithful will be spared suffering. As God 'makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust', so suffering caused by natural disasters is no respecter of persons. Remember the story of Job: a man of impeccable faith suffers terrible affliction. He rejects the bad theology of his friends who try to 'explain' his plight by what he has done or not done. At the end he simply reaffirms his faith in God as sovereign Lord. No explanation; only a calling to faithfulness amid his suffering.

Jesus sees catastrophes as stark reminders that all of us are called to live in the period of grace between our birth and death – whenever that may be or however it may happen. Elsewhere he calls disciples 'to love their enemies, to pray for those who persecute them'. His ministry is marked by grace to sinners, judgment on the self-righteous, healing of many forms of natural (or unnatural?) affliction and calming the terrors of nature. He binds the wounds of the broken-hearted and provides rest for troubled souls. He launches an assault on all that is evil – all that is not God's will.

He does speak of a Last Judgment when faith and goodness will be rewarded and unbelief and evil punished. 'When did we find you hungry and thirsty?' There are passages which speak of God's holy anger (wrath) against persistent idolatry and inhumanity. In Exodus the drowning of cruel Egyptian oppressors is ascribed to the intervention of God, as is the flood which faithful Noah survives. The new thing in Christ is that final judgment of all – faithful and faithless alike – belongs to God at the consummation of history and that it will be made by the One who loved sinful humanity so deeply that he entered into our broken world and took evil upon himself so that we might be reconciled to God. That changes the whole notion of judgment, condemnation and punishment. No. There is no link between horrific suffering and faith or unbelief.

Second, if there is no simple cause-and-effect relation between natural catastrophes and sin, then how should we react? The fragility, brutality, vulnerability and brevity of life which are starkly highlighted in natural disasters should impress on us the urgency of responding to the grace of God. Time is short. People must decide where they stand in relation to Christ's love for them. Nobody has unlimited time in which to accept the invitation. If we are pre-occupied with explanations, then we won't see that time given to us is a time of grace in which God is to be worshipped and Christ obeyed in serving our neighbours.

If we are constantly asking, 'Why?' then we won't be open to God's presence in making us aware of the beauty and terror of nature. Bishop JV Taylor says that it is the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to Christ and 'the brother or sister in Christ, the fellow-man, the point of need or the heart-breaking brutality and the equally heart-breaking beauty of the world'. He 'opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality. If one is closed up against being hurt, or

blind towards one's fellow men, one is inevitably shut off from God also.' The sacrifice, kindness, generosity and support of so many people since the catastrophic infernos are signs of Christ-like compassion for which we should be thankful!

In his book *The Traces of God in a Frequently Hostile World*, Diogenes Allen says that 'suffering at the hands of nature may be an opportunity for contact with God'. It may be 'redemptive', forcing us to realise that we are not the all-controlling centre of the universe but are called to bear one another's often terrible burdens.

Third, in all of this, how do we understand the relation between 'God' and 'Nature'? Insurance policies cover damages caused by 'Acts of God'. We refer to 'Mother Nature' to explain the beauty and terror of nature. The popular view is that 'Nature' and 'God' are equivalent explanations for what happens in the world. It often doesn't seem to matter to us which term we use. In Christianity, however, God is Sovereign Lord of all things – including nature. God is not a nature God (who is found in earth, water, wind and fire) but the Creator and Redeemer of all things.

If this is so, then, contrary to our first impression that in such events God is absent or powerless, we may glimpse the presence of God through the fire and smoke of this apocalyptic event. And here we must tread extremely carefully lest we downplay the ferocity of the fires and the unimaginable suffering, anguish or grief experienced by the dead, the badly injured and survivors, and give cheap comfort but no hope.

Nature, like human beings, has been created by God with relative autonomy from God. That is, God doesn't direct its activity as we might program a robot. Nature sustains life. Without earth, wind, water and fire and the general laws of nature, we could not exist! Without bodies we couldn't marry and raise families. We couldn't make things, work, enjoy

leisure, behold beauty or be involved in community life. But as we have seen, nature by its very structure also threatens life! Fire generates energy and warmth for our bodies and communities, but it also incinerates our bodies, homes and towns.

It does matter whether we refer to 'God' or 'Mother Nature'. We must understand this double aspect of 'nature' in relation to the purposes of God as embodied in Jesus. This is the key. We are to delight in the beauty of nature. We are also to support those who mourn and to be glad that Christ has endured affliction and triumphed over it 'for us'. We are to seek God's presence in the midst of suffering.

This would be cheap comfort – cheap comfort indeed – for the victims of last weekend's inferno if it were not for the fact that, in his beloved Son, God the Father has already experienced the horror of nature. The body of Christ was subject to natural forces. He had nowhere to lay his head. He wept at the death of his friend. He lamented the unbelief of religious leaders. He was despised and rejected. On the Cross Jesus experienced the most severe 'affliction': extreme physical pain, mental anguish, social rejection, contempt, degradation. He experienced the most severe separation from his Father without breaking contact with him.

At the moment of greatest separation – 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' – the unity of Father and Son in love is maintained by the Son's readiness to take on himself our 'affliction.' This is confirmed in the Resurrection where the body of Jesus, 'by nature' dead, buried and decayed, is raised to life as a sign of hope for us and the whole creation.

If it were not for the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, then last weekend's horrific events would force us to stop believing in God! That would be the honest thing to do. That is why the historical event of Jesus Christ must be the centrepiece of the Church's preaching, worship and service. Far from being

a disposable relic of primitive faith, as Bishop Spong and others are constantly telling us it is, this event is the only basis on which human beings may live in hope in the midst of historical conflicts and catastrophic natural disasters.

Put it this way:

☐ The Gospel of the Incarnation (God's becoming flesh with us) assures us that God, out of love for sinful, fragile human beings, has entered into the real world. God is not detached from his fallible children or broken creation.

☐ The Gospel of the Cross assures us that God has suffered affliction; that, as The Apostles' Creed puts it, 'He has descended into hell.' Surely 'hell' is what happened last weekend! God not only identifies with us when we go through 'hell' but, in love for us, bears our hell.

☐ The Gospel of the Resurrection assures us that, despite the worst that befalls us, affliction and death are not the end. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is a sign of hope for all charred bodies.

The incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus must be at the centre of our thinking and acting in what we do in the Church as a sign of hope for the world. Apart from the particular historical event of Jesus Christ – the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord – we would have no grounds for hope amid these calamitous firestorms. 'Mother Nature' in all her fury would have triumphed. God would be absent. There would be no ultimate future for charred bodies, grieving relatives or shattered communities, notwithstanding the welcome signs of heroism and community spirit being displayed.

There is no guarantee that we shall feel God's gracious presence in the midst of suffering. God will seem silent, absent, dead or malevolent to us and particularly to people directly affected by these dreadful events.

What has been said doesn't minimise the terror of what has happened. It doesn't give easy and comfortable answers to urgent

questions about human suffering and the will of God. But it does give us grounds to begin to see that not even 'catastrophes' of nature, like the terrifying infernos, will ultimately thwart God's purpose for all bodies and for everybody.

If this approach doesn't commend itself, consider the problems for those who do not believe it:

☐ Some believe that evil is an illusion. Tell that to the fire victims!

☐ Some believe that good and evil come from the same source. No. God hates evil.

☐ Some believe that God is a detached Creator who got the whole thing going but doesn't give a damn now; others think that we are completely subject to natural processes, that there is no God and that the universe is ruled by an impersonal Fate. How comforting!

☐ Some believe that human beings ultimately control nature. Wishful thinking.

Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection still does not explain why such terrible suffering takes place. But it does assure us that our afflictions are taken up into Christ's suffering. Therefore we may live by hope even in the midst of the most dreadful circumstances and also have our eyes opened to the pressing needs of those who are suffering terrible affliction now.

The extraordinary generosity and self-sacrifice of so many people in the catastrophic firestorms is a sign (in a society which often mocks Christianity) that something of Christ's self-giving love is present amidst unimaginable horror and suffering. It remains to be seen whether they will continue to be sustained by Christ-centred hope in 'the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:23). May it be our prayer that they and we shall be sustained by the hope that has come in Jesus Christ, Lord of heaven and earth.

Max Champion is minister in the St John's Uniting Church, Mt Waverley, Victoria, Australia. Champion is Chairman of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the UCA.

A message to the churches: get with the times

Keith Garner

The world in which we live has radically changed ... and that change is irreversible. We see it all around us - in the realm of technology, in the changing aspects of society across the world and in the way people think.

Kevin Costner stars in the film *Field of Dreams* which tells of an Iowa farmer called Ray Kinsella. All his life, he was searching for his dreams. Then one day, his dreams came looking for him. He was asked, in his dreams, to build a baseball pitch in his cornfield, on which the ghosts of players of a long-dead team would reappear. The team was made up of some of the famous Chicago White Sox team who were banned from the World Series in 1919 for throwing the series.

In the movie, 70 years later, the team played to a high standard - but, of course, the shape of the field, the rules of the game and so on remained exactly the same. In life, things are very different! - if you can imagine your great-grandparents living in the present context, they may need a whole re-education program. Many things we do have changed beyond all recognition. So has our view of the

Rev Keith Garner, superintendent of Wesley Mission in Sydney, addressed the Assembly of Confessing Congregations 2008 national conference – a conference dedicated to the theme of mission in a post-Christian world.

Here is his full address.

world and our own understanding of our place within it.

The title of this address – mission in a post-Christian world – causes me a degree of concern, because it might suggest that we once lived in an idyllic Christian environment. Such a world was not created by Constantine or by Christian influence in our - or other - cultures.

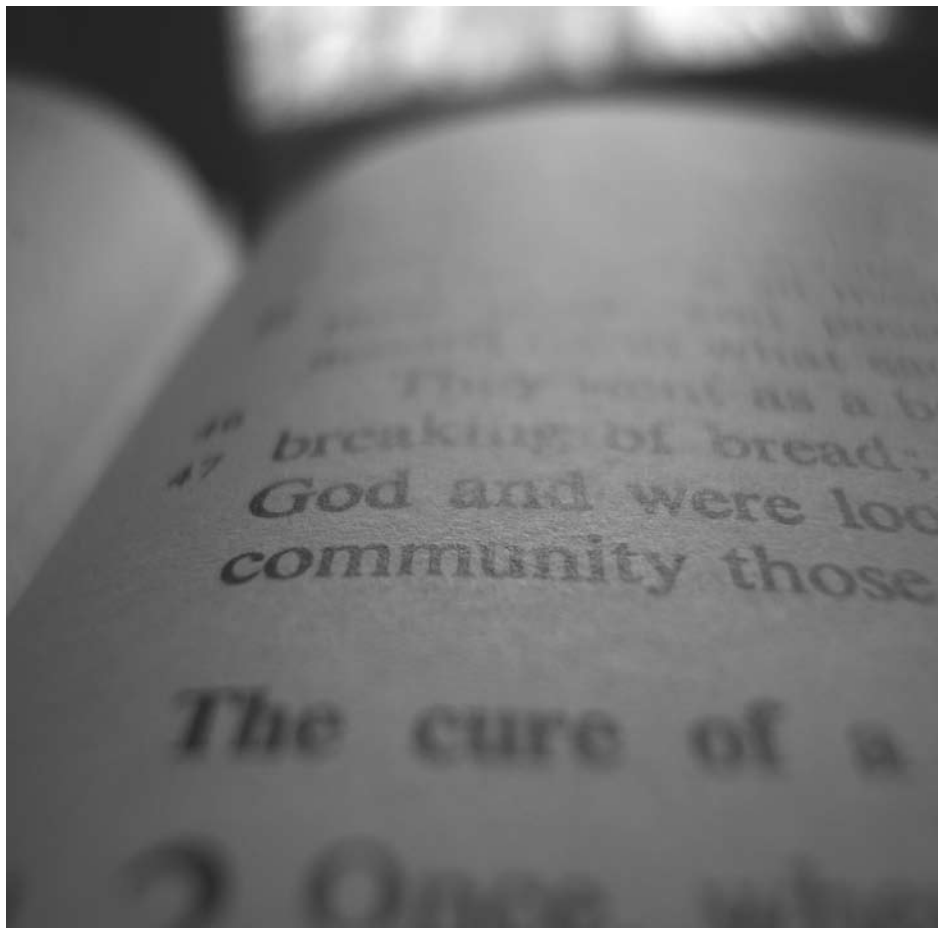
The Uniting Church, for example, has lived its whole life in the context of a church that has been in decline all across the developed world. We beat ourselves up mercilessly about this!

Michael Frost contends, 'Taken as a socio-political reality, Christendom has been in decline for the last 250 years - so much so that contemporary Western culture has been called by

many historians (secular and Christian) the "post-Christian" culture.'

This whole area is much more concerning than the removal of nativity scenes from shopping centres and the decline in influence of the clergy and Christian leadership in general. It questions the very acceptance of some of the values that have given shape to our life together and our sense of community.

We may well be entering an era when we



shall re-discover what it is to embrace a more radical, revolutionary and dynamic community of compassion as those who follow Jesus Christ.

'Christendom' is a term given to a religious culture which has dominated Western culture since the fourth century. It was supposedly promoted from being a marginalised, subversive and persecuted movement to being the official religion of the Roman Empire. From having to meet in secret in people's homes, or in the catacombs under the cities, it took on the grandest temples in the Empire. G K Chesterton observed, "The

cosiness between church and state is good for the state and bad for the church."

We come to the close of Matthew's gospel and we are placed in the context of a mountainside. It was a setting that would be replete with meaning for the early disciples and those in the earliest Christian communities. Jesus had made arrangements to meet the disciples (v.16) and it is a place that exposed both their inner desires and their obvious struggles, exemplified in the words that tell us "some worshipped but some had their doubts" (v.17).

It was a very challenging time as the disciples, who were aware of his risen power, began to anticipate the momentous journey ahead. When Jesus Christ spelled out what was to happen by way of a command ... it would put their struggles and ill-conceived perceptions into real perspective.

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28: 19-20)

Despite the fact that we have witnessed change in each and every generation, there are some things that do not change - and at the heart of the unchangeable is the Great Commission. It is by holding firm to the unchanging that we are able to tackle with confidence the future with all its inevitable change.

There are those who question the historicity of these concluding instructions of Jesus, suggesting they reflect a confessional aspect of the early church and that, if Jesus had explicitly given the disciples a worldwide mission, they would have been fearless in their taking it up. Such a view has too small a picture of the work of the Holy Spirit which would be gifted to the disciples. Let us look at the Great Commission in the light of our own mission into the future:-

We remind ourselves that we have a mandate or direction from Jesus Christ himself. It is a mandate that empowers us and reminds us of first principles.

If there are two aspects of the Christian life that we need to recover in a new generation then I would define them as:-

☐ A sense of call - which results in a recapture of both vocation and purpose. Call is not just a religious way of talking about vocation - it is a reminder of One who empowers us in a God-given purpose.

☐ An understanding of authority - which results in a rediscovery of vision

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and purpose. We need to examine this more closely.

We resist the concept of authority because the word is associated with obedience and the lack of choice. There is no joy attached to doing something just because you have been told to do it. However, when we take the conversation out of the context of 'authoritarianism' we would have to say that the calling of Jesus Christ is at the heart of all we say and do.

As we unpick the many complexities we have brought to the work in which we are engaged, we find that behind everything is an essential call from Jesus Christ.

When the Lord instructed his disciples to go into all the world, there was no word about institutions, buildings and programs. There was no instruction about style of worship, cell group program or particular leadership pattern. These things have become the response to the call.

We have a mandate from Jesus Christ which:-

□ we can ignore, because many things can saturate our time and formulate our priorities - and consequently allow us to forego the call of Christ. One of the ways of ignoring the call of Jesus Christ is to complain about the setting in which we find ourselves, find the fall guys of our culture who really are the problem to the church; most of them are either politicians or work in the media. The final prop for many people is the belief that at least Christianity is recognised as making a difference to being an upstanding citizen. There are fewer and fewer reasons for respectable citizens to choose to join the Christian community. In the end, the Christian thing is a faith matter.

□ requires contextualising. The words and ideas of yesterday will not be enough for the future. We will need to hold firm to the core of the gospel and sit free on a ride that can at times be uncomfortable - but ultimately will be rewarding.

□ must be taken to all the world. The world is not only geographical, but sociological, philosophical and missiological. There is no area of life,

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In 'Field of Dreams', 70 years later the team played to a high standard – but of course, the shape of the field and the rules of the game remained exactly the same. In life, things are very different!

thought and outreach which we can duck out of. 'The world' is more than spatial - and is actually found in different ways in a city like Sydney ... and indeed all across Australia.

There is unquestionably an absence of healthy authority in our twenty-first century Western world. Into such a vacuum so many unhealthy expressions of fundamentalism have stepped in, claiming allegiance from unsuspecting people.

The kingdom of God lay at the heart of the teaching of Jesus and this kingdom was within his disciples - and

is within his people today. It would be foolish to assume that the claims of Christ are established in more than a minority of people today, but the signs of his Spirit's presence cannot be ignored.

His kingdom exists alongside and within human cultures and societies, focused in women and men in whom the Spirit of God dwells. Such a presence is quiet, unobtrusive and yet is dynamic in the way it changes the world around.

During the past year, I have spent a number of days each month visiting



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our many sites and endeavouring to really understand what makes our people tick. I cannot tell you how proud I am of the way our folks really do mission and minister to people in need.

□ I think of the young person who has lived with abuse and turns to one of our centres to find friendship and those who can mentor him in a most creative way.

□ I think of the person in financial debt who is crushed by the reality of the situation in which they find themselves, but someone sits and

listens and, through a mixture of compassionate care and professional expertise, is able to provide a way for that person to walk out with dignity to face the challenge, knowing they are not alone.

□ I think of the young people attending one of our centres, who have never known what it is to talk about themselves to others with any degree of sensitivity and purposefulness - until one of our art therapists helps them to discover that they can talk about themselves ... and they not only make some models that

describe themselves, but they stand up before a thousand young people at school to share their story.

In these areas too we become conscious of the work of the Holy Spirit, calling us to share with people at their point of need.

The Greek verb that is translated 'go' is not actually just a command, but a present participle - 'going'. So a better translation might be - 'While you are going, make disciples of all nations.' Of course, that is the only way to go into all the world!

'Making disciples' is a far more accurate description of the mission we have been called to deliver than 'adding numbers', 'planting churches' or 'making members'. The very concept that originates in Jesus moves people along in the work of the Holy Spirit which transforms life. If ever there was a time when we needed to be concerned about our spiritual wellbeing it is now.

□ In July 2008, we released our Report on Homelessness which clearly recognised the diverse needs of human beings. Making disciples is about reaching out to the total experience of people ... and, therefore, their complete need.

□ We know all too well that Christian communities which only concentrate on the heart and the spiritual needs of people leave those people with ultimate dissatisfaction. A whole gospel is needed for a whole person.

□ We must not underestimate the importance of spiritual nurture. Not very long ago I found myself in a prison setting with men from Pacific Islands testifying to the fact they had now found Christ in prison, but recalling what they had been taught as children and young people. We never waste the gospel - for it takes root in people's lives. I couldn't help but think of the parable of the sower!

We are quite clear that we have a mission which God has given to us - and failing to deliver has consequences. However, we are called to do it together. In Aged Care, working alongside those who long for independence of life, in our

community and family services, in education and in our congregations ... all of us are aware that we are called to help people grow as human beings in our response to God in Christ.

Karl Barth famously asserted that faithful discipleship required living with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. This saying was from an interview with *Time* magazine in 1967. The imagery suited Barth's generation, of course. Today, we might more easily refer to the electronic means of websites and blogs, television and movies ... and so on. The real issue is - Being a Christian in a world that is changing beyond all recognition.

We must not look back with sentimentality. There is a lovely story of an 87-year-old woman who was interviewed on television. She was asked, "What were things like in your day?" Smiling, she replied firmly: "This is my day!"

As I talk about the changing aspects of our mission, I cannot avoid asking questions about the core belief and value that unites all our generations, for alongside the changing features of our missionary context are the unchanging truths of the gospel.

The on-going allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

The continual outpouring of love and compassion through a committed and involved people.

The perpetual sense of grace which is mediated through the ministry of the whole people of God.

The maintaining of the importance of family life as the basic unit of care, nurture and the celebration of human life.

Christians are often the most resistant to change, but through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we are enabled to become part of a changing world. Set in the heart of the city, we recognise it is changing all around us.

In Manchester in the United Kingdom in 1988, less than a thousand people lived in the city centre. Ten years later the figure had more than doubled to 2,100. Another decade on and the population is nearing 18,000 in the city centre; the growth rate is 25% a year - and this is March 2009

being replicated across the world.

In February 2008, we passed the point at which more than half the world's population now lives in a city and, according to the United Nations' Population Fund, by 2030 the number of city inhabitants will be about 60 per cent. When thinking about mission we cannot ignore this fact. The other side of this is that those who don't live in cities face particular challenges ... our rural and outback communities often are starved of resources.

The new city dwellers cover the whole spectrum of life. The "desperate poor" are moving into our cities. John Drane calls them

"individuals for whom life cannot get any worse, and who might just manage to find a better life for themselves in the relative anonymity of an urban environment." Alongside them are those who Richard Florida called "the creative class". Some have named them "the urban tribes", often younger people who come together to create new kinds of community. Christians are sometimes harsh regarding a trendy expression of life, more often than not because they just don't understand it. The poor, the trendy and the rich live alongside each other. Modern cities across Australia bear all these hallmarks.

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Despite the fact that we have witnessed change in each and every generation, there are some things that do not change – and at the heart of the unchangeable is the Great Commission.

What is true for the city is undeniably applicable in the smaller communities, often remote and inaccessible. It is here that the Christian community must be willing to place a priority. Whilst we are attracted to the mega-church model, or persuaded that the solution is a gathered regional model, we will discard so many important aspects of our Australian culture.

The term 'disciple' was the most popular term for the early followers of Jesus. We need to recognise that it means

far more than being 'a convert' or 'a believer'. A useful term might be the concept of 'apprentice'. A disciple attaches herself or himself to a leader and identifies with them in learning and living. This was the pattern of the New Testament community (2 Timothy 2: 1-2).

The Great Commission has a wonderful roundness about it which touches the whole of life. It resonates with the way we understand 'word and deed'. The proclaiming of the gospel in 'teaching and preaching' is placed alongside the sacramental sign of 'welcome':-

We live in a church atmosphere that views the 'doing' aspect of mission as an indication of faith, rather than the real thing itself! As a result, we can feel like a minority when we believe it is part and parcel of the Good News. The linking of the two was the way that Jesus exercised his ministry. Forgiveness of sin was a word and an action; healing was a physical transformation, but also an inner-restoration ... and salvation covered the whole spectrum of life.

Salvation in the New Testament is a material and spiritual deliverance that brings people to a place of wholeness.

Word and Deed will continue to challenge people who insist on separating them.

An outdated model of mission puts our work into neat silos - where mission sits in one area, welfare in another, and so on. Despite the fact that the model has run its course, it



Making disciples is about reaching out to the total experience of people, and their complete need.

does not have a sound theological base and needs to be challenged. In the mission of Jesus, we see his total concern for the needs of people. As in the Great Commission, we are given a wider scope for the mission. No longer is it to be restricted to what was described as "the lost sheep of Israel" - all the restrictive limitations have been dropped. God has opened up a new way for us to understand our mission - which is to ALL people.

Word and Deed remains the viable option to respond to human need.

Of course, there will still be those who engage in mission by a sincere concern to retreat in prayer into small communities - and those who will use the badge and brand of the church to set up social welfare agencies, often being concerned to keep 'God talk' to a minimum.

However, for close on 200 years there have been those of us who have contended that Word and Deed belong together. After returning from Herrnhut in Saxony following his evangelical conversion in May 1738, John Wesley was convinced that God was bringing about what he called "an awakening" to the world. Such an

experience encouraged him to push back on the unhelpful restrictions and controls being placed upon him. He wrote in a letter in March 1739:

"I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far, I mean that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right and my bounden duty to declare unto all who are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation."

The Christian community needs to be bold enough to grasp another model of mission which reaches out in a meaningful way, is willing to name the Name of Jesus Christ, and is prepared to call people into a new and living way.

Dreams of 'the good old days', when everyone attended Sunday school and you could command audiences of thousands for evangelistic missions, will not ring the bells any more. They create a warm nostalgia, even stir up a temporary response, but they do not call a nation and a people to put their trust in Jesus Christ.

I opened this address with the assertion that the world has radically changed. We can respond to the call to mission and we can equip ourselves for a twenty-first century call - or we can sit back and revel in our history. Only the first is a living option.

I am sure we are all called to be a community of faith with practical expression today. The call is for everyone. Hudson Taylor left Pitt Street Methodist Church in Barnsley, Yorkshire, to be a founder of the China Inland Mission. The story is told of a schoolteacher from Scotland with only one leg, who came forward and offered himself for service in China. "Why do you, with only one leg, think of going as a missionary?" asked Taylor. "I do not see those with two legs going, so I must," replied George Stott. He was accepted. □

A deluded hope : Re-writing the Gospels to find a Jesus who suits us

Paul Barnett

This article by historian and former Anglican bishop of North Sydney Paul Barnett explores the ideas of the progressive Christian movement, the Jesus Seminar. It is an edited version of a chapter of a book co-authored with Peter Jensen. Barnett's full chapter examines the ideas of the Jesus Seminar alongside those of two influential 'revisionist' authors, John Selby Spong and Barbara Thiering.

The Jesus Seminar is a group of scholars, most of whom are Americans, who first met in 1985 under the leadership of Dr Robert Funk. Their initial question was 'What did Jesus really say?' which they answered in a book called *The Five Gospels* (1993). By color coding sayings of Jesus from red (authentic) through pink and grey to black (inauthentic) the Seminar believes it is disclosing the 'real' Jesus. It believes a radical and new Jesus, the 'forgotten' Jesus, is emerging from its researches into the Gospels.

The Jesus Seminar has become widely known especially through the writings of John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. The Seminar has cleverly exploited the internet. Despite its high media profile, the majority of biblical scholars are not persuaded by the Seminar's radical proposals.

The parables of Jesus are where we are supposed to hear the authentic 'voice print' of Jesus. According to the Seminar this Jesus is a 'sage', an enigmatic wise man, who is more recognisable as a member of the Greek Cynic philosophic tradition than as one of the prophets of Israel. The Cynics, who took their name from the Greek word *kyon*, 'dog',

were so named because of their anti-social behavior and their criticisms of mainstream Greek society. According to the Jesus Seminar, Jesus does not speak about himself, nor about the future; the kingdom is only here and now as you radically trust the Father upon hearing the pithy words of this Galilean. His intention is to subvert existing political structures to bring about 'bottom up' social reform.

The Seminar proposes that some churches held to beliefs about Jesus as he really was. But the early church moved on from this 'real Jesus', preferring instead the end-time worldview of John the Baptist. This means the Christianity of the New Testament is a perversion, owing more to the Jewish apocalyptic of John the Baptist and the corrupting influence of the apostle Paul than the so-called 'real Jesus'. The 'real Jesus' is now the 'forgotten Jesus'. Thus in discovering the 'forgotten Jesus', the Jesus Seminar has driven a wedge between John the Baptist and Jesus, on one hand, and Jesus and Paul, on the other. This is outright and arbitrary revisionism. This is the Jesus the Jesus Seminar wanted to find.

First, the Jesus Seminar is *selective* in its use of sources.

The Seminar follows two basic

texts - 'Q' and the Gospel of Thomas. 'Q' is a hypothetical sayings source said to underlie Matthew and Luke (with 250 verses in all). It is called 'Q' from the German *Quelle*, a 'fountain' or 'spring'. 'Q' is a collection of Jesus' teachings which follows the same sequence as Mark, though it has little to say about Jesus' death or his resurrection. The Seminar seizes on this as evidence of a cross-free, resurrection-free faith.

The Gospel of Thomas is an Egyptian text written c. AD 200, though the dating is debated. The early church fathers reject the Gospel of Thomas as a genuine gospel. The text of the fourth century Coptic version was discovered in Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945 and published in 1959. It is a collection of rephrased bits and pieces from about half of the books of the New Testament including dreamy Gnostic sayings from the mouth of Jesus. The Gospel of Thomas lacks reference to Jesus' death or resurrection.

The Seminar seizes on the fact that neither 'Q' nor the Gospel of Thomas mention Jesus' death and resurrection. This, they say, is close to the 'real' Jesus.

At the same time the Seminar virtually ignores the Gospel of Mark, which is regarded as the earliest to be written. Mark, of course, has much to say about who Jesus is as the Son of God, that he 'must' die and be raised on the third day. Yet Mark has effectively been omitted because its portrait of Jesus does not fit within the frame predetermined by the Jesus Seminar. Only one sentence from the entire Gospel of Mark is judged worthy of 'red letter' treatment: 'Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and God what belongs to God'. No other saying in Mark is considered authentic by the Jesus Seminar.

Second, the Jesus Seminar is *arbitrary*.

The Seminar uses the so-called 'criterion of dissimilarity', by which

a saying of Jesus is judged authentic only when it is *dissimilar*. 'Dissimilar to what?' you ask. Dissimilar to two things - earlier Jewish tradition on one hand, and later Christian tradition on the other. In other words, this criterion demands that Jesus cannot have spoken as a Jewish man of those times. Likewise it demands that we must reject any later church teaching alleged to be from Jesus' lips because it may have been read back to Jesus from the liturgical or credal life of the early church. Thus Jesus *did* say 'Love your enemies' because that was not current Jewish teaching, and he probably did not say 'take, eat, this is my body', because this arises out of the liturgical tradition of the early church.

By the 'criterion of dissimilarity' the Jesus Seminar automatically eliminates 82 per cent of Jesus' sayings in the Gospels because they are either too Jewish or too Christian. What foolishness. It demands, first, that Jesus was not a Jewish man who was part of the Judaism of his time, and second, that his teachings did not shape the movement he founded.

Third, the Jesus Seminar is guilty of *circular argument*.

When Dr Funk was in Sydney I heard him claim that the Jesus Seminar was committed to scholarship. But in the same breath it was clear that he approached the whole enterprise as a disillusioned Christian, one who had essentially given up on anything resembling an orthodox faith. The churches are tired, the seminaries are tired, the university departments of theology are tired and the academic journals are tired. Funk confessed he was looking for something new, a new Jesus, not the tired 'old' Jesus, but the 'real' Jesus. He confessed that he was looking for an inclusive Jesus who would be right for our pluralistic and multicultural times when we must stop claiming that Jesus is unique.

When Funk set out on his personal odyssey he knew what he did *not* want to find, the Jesus of orthodoxy, the 'Christ of faith'. Inevitably, therefore, he found what he was looking for. The Jesus Seminar is rather like a

Royal Commission with such narrow terms of reference that only certain conclusions could be reached. Funk and the Jesus Seminar are trapped in their own loop, hemmed in by their own circularity.

Fourth, the Jesus Seminar *fails to understand the dynamics of history*.

The Seminar fails to ask and answer fundamental questions. For example, why was Jesus of Nazareth *crucified*? The Romans reserved crucifixion as a severe punishment for revolutionaries and slaves and as a deterrent for the lower orders. A self-styled Messiah of the Jews, or one that could be cast in that role, was exactly the type of person the Romans would crucify. It must be regarded as a secure fact of history that Jesus was crucified under the words which stated the crime for which he was charged: King of the Jews. The Romans saw Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and a political threat. So how do we get from the parables to the Jesus who stands accused as Messiah and is crucified for the capital crime of treason against the emperor Tiberius?

A second example of failure to understand the dynamics of history relates to the rise of earliest Christianity. Here the writings of Paul are very important. Several of Paul's letters – Galatians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians – can be dated pre-50, that is, only twenty years or less after Jesus. The historical information in these early letters is very valuable since it is innocently rather than intentionally conveyed.

From Galatians, his earliest letter, the following emerges. Paul states that before his conversion he persecuted 'the church of God' and attempted to destroy 'the faith' (Galatians 1:13, 23). This occurred in the months immediately after Jesus. Only three years later he met the 'apostles' Peter and James (1:19). In other words, 'the church of God' and 'the faith' were already in place before Paul persecuted them, and most likely, 'the apostles' also. Paul did not invent 'the faith' and 'the church' as liberals claim, for he attempted to destroy them.

All of this raises the question : what launched 'the church of God' and 'the faith', both of which were so offensive to Saul? Remember these were launched within months of Jesus, in all probability, back-to-back with him, as the book of Acts teaches. The answer, of course, is that it - 'the faith' - must have corresponded closely with the Jesus we find in the four Gospels. The feeble mystic of the Jesus Seminar could never launch the kind of movement earliest Christianity immediately became.

The so-called 'real' Jesus of the Jesus Seminar is a religious wimp, who would never have been crucified as 'king of the Jews', nor been the catalyst for a movement that the zealot Saul attempted to destroy, and which subsequently changed the course of history. The Jesus Seminar fails completely to understand the dynamics of history.

Over the years I have visited the lands of the Bible several times. I firmly believe the events of the Bible are rooted in history. The places where the events happened can be visited. They have mostly been continuously settled since Bible times. Their names have not changed. Bethlehem is still Bethlehem and the Jordan River is still the Jordan River.

The route taken by the escaping Hebrews in the Sinai Desert and up the 'Kings' Highway' can be re-traced, ticking off the place names as you go. You can mark on a map the territory occupied by the Hebrews east of Jordan from the Arnon Gorge to Mt Hermon. It is also possible to trace the travels of Jesus in Galilee, Gaulanitis, Transjordan and Judaea, and the journeys of Peter in Palestine and of Paul in Asia Minor and Greece. The authenticity of the places supports the authenticity of the events, and the authenticity of the events supports the authenticity of the theology.

Secular history and archaeology dovetail with the biblical narrative and biblical places and vice versa. The name 'Rameses', the Pharaoh who was Egypt's greatest builder and who (probably) was the oppressor of the Hebrews, is found in Genesis, Exodus

and Numbers. On the other hand, the name of 'David' from the Bible appears in inscriptions in the region of Dan, but also in Luxor, Egypt. The ministry of Jesus fits exactly in the complex history of the three decades immediately following the death of Herod the Great. Inscriptions bearing the names of Caiaphas the High Priest and Pontius Pilate the Prefect have been unearthed in the last thirty or so years and sit side by side in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Thiering, Spong and the Jesus Seminar would be glad if the Bible were unhistorical. They could then easily treat its events as myth, allowing them to reconstruct those events in any theological direction they chose. But the reality is that the Bible in both its testaments is deeply historical. The acts of God did happen within real history involving real people at real places. The Exodus was a real event and the bodily resurrection of Jesus was real and the God of the Bible is a real Redeemer, rescuing a lost nation and saving lost people.

My title, 'A Deluded Hope?' and my review of Thiering, Spong and the Jesus Seminar may puzzle you. You may think, 'Why talk about Jesus and the *past*, as they do, when the topic is about the *future*, about *hope*?'

The answer is that if Jesus was not the Son of God, did not proclaim the Kingdom of God, did not die for our sins, was not raised from the dead on the third day, then there is no hope. There is no hope in the sense that Christians understand it, which is the sure hope of eternal life in the Kingdom of God. No hope for our loved ones who have died as Christians. No hope for us.

By attacking the historical Jesus, Thiering, Spong and the Jesus Seminar are attacking hope. The bottom line for them is that Jesus is just a man who lived and died just as each one of us lives and dies. This world and this life is all there is. There is no hope beyond this world. This inference running through Thiering, Spong and the Jesus Seminar is that Christian believers are deluded. Our hope is a delusion because Jesus as the critics

understand him is a delusion.

Over recent years as I approached in turn Thiering, Spong and the Jesus Seminar I have experienced a sense of anxiety. What if I were to find something in their writings that proves them to be right? That would mean that I am wrong and have built my whole life on a delusion, that I have been urging people to commit themselves to something and someone that isn't true. I know that Jesus is the linchpin that holds the whole Bible together and that to remove him means the end of everything Christians have believed.

But I need not have worried. Each of these writings is so defective, and its methodology so bizarre, that I am comforted that if this is the best - or worst - they can do, then frankly it is pathetic. Thiering's *peshar* approach pushing everything through the eye of the Qumran needle is patently weird. Spong's borrowed *midrash* method is easily recognisable reductionism, a device to shrink Jesus to a manageable size. By moving the goalposts the Jesus Seminar finds a Jesus they went looking for. These three have been driven to such transparently defective approaches because of the stubborn facts of history about Jesus and the rise of earliest Christianity.

Those historical facts in the New Testament demand straightforward reading. The style of writing adopted by the Gospel authors is close to the style adopted by other biographies of the period, for example Suetonius' biographies of the Twelve Caesars. This is unvarnished biographical writing of those times. If we don't apply *peshar* or *midrash* to Suetonius, according to the whim of the reader, then we must not do this to the Gospels. If we base our understanding of the Emperor Tiberius on all of the sources available to us, we must not pick and choose the sources about Jesus to suit our purposes, as the Jesus Seminar does.

Ask yourself about cause and effect, about the dynamics of history. Could the puny Jesus of Thiering, Spong and the Jesus Seminar have launched the mighty ship of earliest

Christianity, Paul's exhausting mission to the Gentiles and the writing of the twenty-seven mostly major pieces of literature we call the New Testament? The answer must be a resounding 'no'. It is not the 'no' of blind Christian dogmatism but the 'no' of cool reason and logic. Great movements do not just happen. Great movements have great founders, great and inspiring leaders. So ask yourself: could Jesus according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have launched this movement? The answer must be a confident 'yes'.

The apostle Paul encountered doubt about future hope among the Corinthians. He told them the obvious, that 'if for *this life* only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied' (1 Corinthians 15:19). If Jesus is not the Christ, whom God raised from the dead, we Christians are indeed to be pitied. We have lived our whole lives towards a future that simply does not exist, a delusion. And that future would not exist if Thiering, Spong and the Jesus Seminar were right. But they are not right. Their strange methods and their weird reconstructions are themselves the evidence of their delusion.

If he was wrong about Jesus, Paul would have been the most deluded of people. He would have staked his whole life and endured incredible sufferings, from his fellow-Jews in particular, on a lie at worst, a misunderstanding at best. He must have checked and re-checked the basic facts about Jesus many times, as indeed he had ample opportunity to do. Hear him as he assures the worried Corinthians:

*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead,
the first fruits of those who have died.
For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.
But each in his own order:
Christ the first fruits, then at his coming
those who belong to Christ.*

There is no delusion here.
Paul Barnett is author of 'Jesus and the logic of history.'

Who's afraid of the big, 'bad' Professor?

Dinesh D'Souza

I write this fresh from debating bioethicist Peter Singer on “Can we be moral without God?” at Singer’s home campus, Princeton University.

Singer is a mild-mannered fellow who speaks calmly and lucidly. Yet you wouldn’t have to read his work too long to find his extreme positions.

He cheerfully advocates infanticide and euthanasia and, in almost the same breath, favors animal rights. Even most liberals would have qualms about third-trimester abortions; Singer does not hesitate to advocate what may be termed fourth-trimester abortions, i.e., the killing of infants after they are born.

Singer writes, “My colleague Helga Kuhse and I suggest that a period of 28 days after birth might be allowed before an infant is accepted as having the same right to life as others.”

Singer argues that even pigs, chickens, and fish have more signs of consciousness and rationality—and, consequently, a greater claim to rights—than do fetuses, newborn

infants, and people with mental disabilities. “Rats are indisputably more aware of their surroundings, and more able to respond in purposeful and complex ways to things they like or dislike, than a fetus at 10- or even 32-weeks gestation. . . . The calf, the pig, and the much-derided chicken come out well ahead of the fetus at any stage of pregnancy.”

Some people consider Singer a provocateur who says outrageous things just to get attention. But Singer is deadly serious about his views and—as emerged in our debate—has a consistent rational basis for his controversial positions.

To understand Singer, it’s helpful to contrast him with “New Atheists” like Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins. The New Atheists say we can get rid of God but preserve morality. They insist that no one needs God in order to be good; atheists can act no less virtuously than Christians. (And indeed, some atheists do put

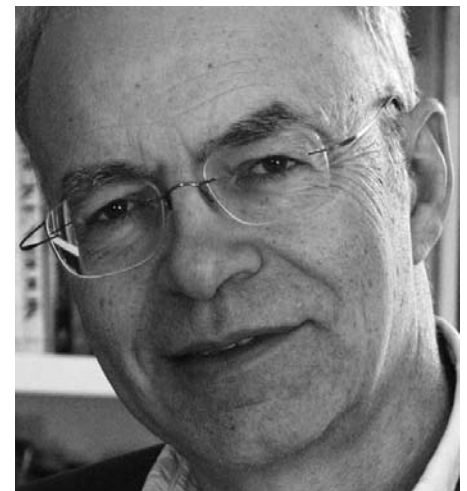
Christians to shame.) Even while repudiating the Christian God, Dawkins has publicly called himself a “cultural Christian.”

But this position creates a problem outlined more than a century ago by the atheist philosopher Nietzsche. The death of God, Nietzsche argued, means that all the Christian values that have shaped the West rest on a mythical foundation.

One may, out of habit, continue to live according to these values for a while. Over time, however, the values will decay, and if they are not replaced by new values, man will truly have to face the prospect of nihilism, what Nietzsche termed “the abyss.”

Nietzsche’s argument is illustrated in considering two of the central principles of Western civilization: “All men are created equal” and “Human life is precious.”

Nietzsche attributes both ideas



Professor Peter Singer

Singer's latest radical idea: feed the poor

Peter Singer claims there are 855 million wealthy people in the world today. If all of them continually gave a tiny proportion of their wealth to the right causes, world poverty would be wiped out. The argument is put with force by Singer in *The Life You Can Save*, a new book whose sale proceeds go to Oxfam.

The huge number of the world’s wealthy is explained by Singer according to the following logic: if we consider any person living above average income levels in a ‘wealthy’ country as “rich,” then 855 million people is the number of rich polluting the planet today.

So what is a ‘wealthy’ country? With some daring, Singer takes the poorest nation of the “rich club” of Western Europe, North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand as his benchmark. That’s Portugal.

So if you’re wealthier than a middle-income Portuguese, you’re rich. Now people may quibble with Singer’s figures, but there is no avoiding the fact that the world’s most logical atheist is now serving the wealthy West with a hard-to-ignore appeal to get serious about its values and feed the poor.

Does the controversial professor practice what he preaches? By all accounts, Singer himself gives generously to Oxfam.

to Christianity. It is because we are created equal and in the image of God that our lives have moral worth and that we share the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Nietzsche's warning was that none of these values makes sense without the background moral framework against which they were formulated. A post-Christian West, he argued, must go back to the ethical drawing board and reconsider its most cherished values, which include its traditional belief in the equal dignity of every human life. Singer resolutely takes up a Nietzschean call for a "transvaluation of values," with a full awareness of the radical implications. He argues that we are not creations of God but rather mere Darwinian primates. We exist on an unbroken continuum with animals.

Christianity, he says, arbitrarily separated man and animal, placing human life on a pedestal and consigning the animals to the status of tools for human well-being. Now, Singer says, we must remove *Homo sapiens* from this privileged position and restore the natural order.

This translates into more rights for animals and less special treatment for human beings. There is a grim consistency in Singer's call to extend rights to the apes while removing traditional protections for unwanted children, people with mental disabilities, and the noncontributing elderly.

Some of Singer's critics have called him a Nazi and compared his proposals to Hitler's schemes for eliminating those perceived as unwanted and unfit.

A careful reading of his work, however, shows that Singer is no Hitler. He doesn't want state-sponsored killings. Rather, he wants the decision to kill to be made by private individuals like you and me. Instead of government-conducted genocide, Singer favors free-market homicide.

Why haven't the atheists embraced Peter Singer? I suspect it is because they fear that his unpalatable views will discredit the cause of atheism.

What they haven't considered,

however, is whether Singer, virtually alone among their numbers, is uncompromisingly working out the implications of living in a truly secular society, one completely purged of Christian and transcendental foundations. In Singer, we may be

witnessing someone both horrifying and yet somehow refreshing: an intellectually honest atheist.

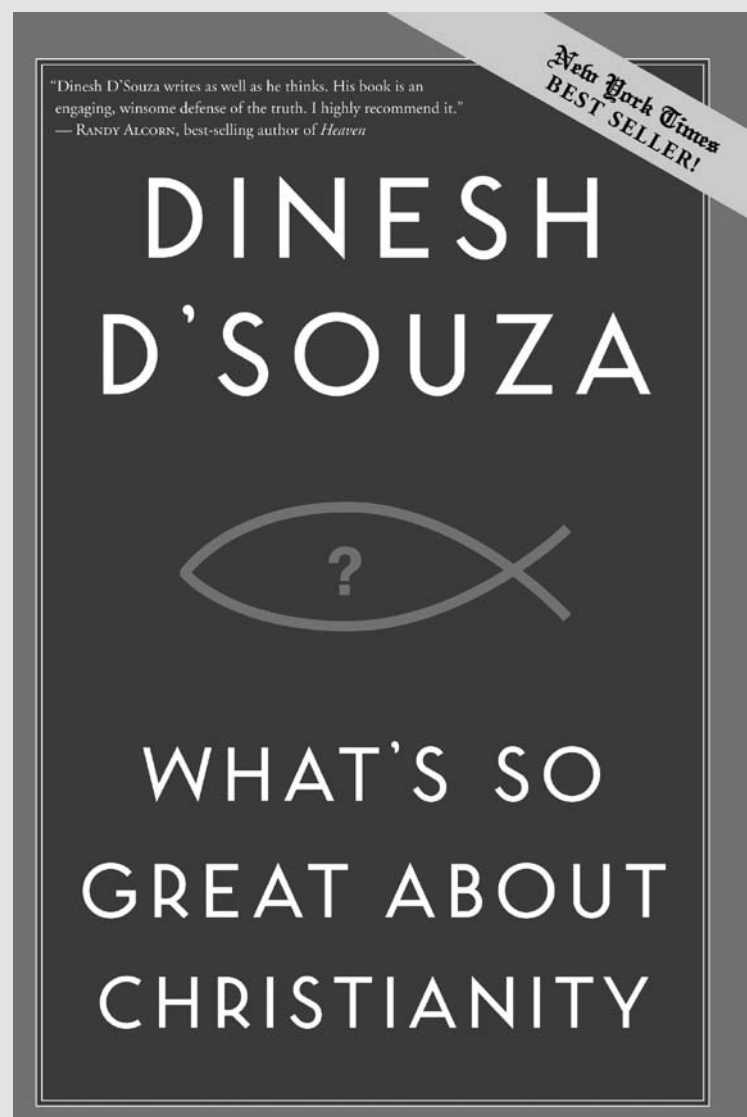
Dinesh D'Souza is an American author and columnist. This article was originally published by 'Christianity Today' and is reprinted by permission of the author.

Books by Dinesh D'Souza

His scholarship has been compared with that of CS Lewis. D'Souza addresses hard questions about the relevance of Christianity in the modern world, treating with a sceptical eye both Christianity and the sceptics who dismiss Christianity as irrelevant today.

For further information on the books and other work of Dinesh D'Souza, visit:

www.dineshdsouza.com.





Regeneration in the high plains after bushfire, west of Dargo, Victoria
Photograph Helene Mortlock