

Deal Pentecostal Church Training School

Reference Material

Study 5 New Birth

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The New Birth

Petts, David, *You'd Better Believe It, Mattersey*, Mattersey Hall, 1999.
(Ch.12, pp74-78, *The New Birth*)

One of the most exciting facts about the wonderful salvation that God has so graciously provided for us is that although it is simple enough for a child to receive it, it is nevertheless so infinitely complex that our minds fail to grasp its full significance. In fact, so great is the theme of salvation that the Bible must approach it from many angles, presenting its many different aspects to us in a great variety of ways. In the last two chapters, for example, we saw that we are saved by faith in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we were able to list no fewer than eight different benefits which are ours simply because Jesus died for us.

We must now turn our attention to another closely connected subject — the new birth, or 'regeneration'. When we receive Jesus as our Saviour, we are not only saved from our sins and their consequences, but we actually become a new creation in Christ (2Corinthians 5:17) and this comes about by our being born again.

New life needed

In John 3 Jesus made it abundantly plain that if we are to enter heaven, we must be born again (verses 3, 5, 7).

Nicodemus was not only a deeply religious man, but he would have been well educated by the standards of his day and a man of considerable social and political position. He even acknowledged that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God. He recognised that the miracles that Jesus was performing were undoubtedly an indication that God was with him (v.2). Yet it was to this man that Jesus solemnly declared, You must be born again (v.7). In fact, if anyone is to see the kingdom of God, they must be born again (v.3).

Jesus is here teaching very clearly that our education, our social or political position, even our religion, will not save us. Whatever we do, we are so far short of God's standards and glory that our only hope is to become an entirely new person altogether! We must be born again! We must become a new creation. Ephesians 2 tells us that before we were saved we were dead in sins (v.1), but that by God's grace he has made us alive (v.5), and this he did when we put our trust in Christ as Saviour (v.8). We are no longer objects of wrath (v.3), but have been born again into God's family and are now children of God.

New life provided

As we have seen in earlier chapters, it is God who has made full provision for our salvation by sending his Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. It is God who has saved us. We have done nothing towards it. It is all of his grace. And what is true of what Jesus did at Calvary is true of our conversion. It was God who took the initiative. The new birth has its origin in the will of God. We are children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God (John 1:13). He chose to give us birth through the word of truth (James 1:18). It is the will of God that men and women be born again. The new birth is not of natural descent - it cannot be inherited from our parents. It is not of human decision — it is in no way a natural event. It is not by a husband's will — it cannot be humanly imparted. God and God alone can regenerate. This fact is emphasised by the frequently recurring phrase born of God (John 1:13, 1 John 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 4, 18), and the expressions born of the Spirit (John 3:5) and rebirth by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5) show us which person of the Godhead is the agent of the new birth. We are born again by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

But what is the instrument the Spirit uses? James 1:18 tells us that he gave us rebirth through the word of truth, and 1 Peter 1:23 assures us that we are born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. The preaching of the word of God under the anointing of the Holy Spirit creates by God's grace an opportunity for the sinner to repent and believe the gospel. If he does so, he is instantaneously regenerated by the Holy Spirit. He is born again. Passages such as John 3:1-16, John 1:12-13, and 1 John 5:1 make it clear that it is those who believe who are born of God, and that, therefore, the new birth is an instantaneous and complete work of the Holy Spirit upon initial faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

New life in action

The first great result of our being born again is that we immediately become children of God (John 1:12-13).

Accordingly we are made partakers of the divine nature and should show that nature in our lives. The two great aspects of God's personality which John emphasises in his first letter are love and righteousness, and he naturally expects those who are born of God to manifest these qualities (1 John 4:7, 1 John 2:29).

If we really are the children of God then we should live like it. And that means living in victory. The world around us will claim our attention and our loyalty. But we have been born anew. We belong to a different society. We are members of the heavenly family. Everyone who is born of God is victorious over the world (1 John 5:4).

Sin will always be present to tempt us. But we are dead to sin and alive to God (Romans 6:11) and consequently we do not habitually practise sin because God's nature is in us because we are born of God (1 John 3:9). This verse does not mean

that if we sin at all we cannot possibly be born again. It refers to habitual attitudes, not to occasional actions. John was writing his letter to combat the Gnostic heresy that taught that knowledge was superior to righteousness and that right living was not important! Christians do sin, but, thank God, 1 John 1:9 tells us that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness.

However, God has made provision for us to live in victory. He has implanted within us his own divine nature. We have been born again. We are his children. Our old sinful nature was crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6) and we need no longer listen to its desires. We are new creatures in Christ. Old things have passed away. All things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17). That is why we not only have victory over the world and over sin; we also have victory over the devil:

We know that anyone born of God does not deliberately and knowingly practise committing sin, but the One who was begotten of God carefully watches over and protects him — Christ's divine presence within him preserves against the evil — and the wicked one does not lay hold, get a grip on him or touch him (1 John 5:18, Amplified Bible).

There is absolutely no need to live in defeat! We are born again. We are born of GOD! Let us live as his children. We should live in victory!

Forgiveness

Petzer, M., *Forgiveness*. 1994.

Introduction

The majority of us have always believed that God forgives. It is just that we have had serious doubts about how far that forgiveness extends and how long it can hold out for in the face of persistent sinning.

For most of us, we measure how far we have gone when we think about God's capacity for forgiveness (or the limits thereof) rather than the lengths God went to in order to establish solid, unquestionable, legal grounds for our eternal forgiveness. In short, we are far more preoccupied with our wrongdoing than with Jesus' finished work.

The Foundation Of Forgiveness

Forgiveness never has depended on man's performance but on Jesus' death burial and resurrection. We are not forgiven because we did things worthy of forgiveness, but because Jesus paid for our sin. It is our blood-bought right to be forgiven for all our sin. According to the New Testament, neither feelings of regret nor sorrow but faith in the finished work of Jesus is the only ground for forgiveness.

The Bible says that, "*without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*"^{Hebrews 9:22}. No, you cannot pray long enough, cry hard enough, plead sincerely enough, promise never-to-do-it-again enough, regret enough or even fast enough for forgiveness. If any of these were the basis for forgiveness, then Jesus need not have died. Forgiveness and salvation would be available without his shed blood. Just as it says, "*If righteousness comes through the Law [good works], then Christ died needlessly*"^{Galatians 2:21}. Will we make a Christ out of our repentance and regret? These are too vague and inexact conditions to stir up any

faith. How will you ever know if you have repented or regretted enough to be forgiven? This would move forgiveness out of the realm of faith in a final sacrifice and into the area of mere speculation and emotion. A forgiveness based upon variable human opinion and speculation, which have no absolutes, is totally unacceptable for faith since there can be no faith in the undefined. No, it is by faith and by faith alone. No human additives, but confidence in what God has done.

No Record Of Our Sins?

"... God was reconciling the world to himself, not charging men's transgressions to their account." ^{2 Corinthians 5:19} Or as the expanded translation of the New Testament puts it, *"Not putting down on the liability side of their ledger their trespasses."* God is not making a case against you. God is not making a list of your sins so that he can call you into account for them. He is not saving them up so that he can confront us with them and make us pay for them. God is not calling man into account for sins, but to account for his gift of life in Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist introduced Jesus to us as *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* ^{John 1:29}. John writes in his first epistle that Jesus is *"the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world"* ^{John 2:2}.

We are confronted in these verses with the startling truth that not only is God not holding the believer's sins against him, but he is also not holding the world's sins against it. When Jesus died he paid not only for the believer's sins (because there were no believers when he died) but he also died and removed the unbelievers' sins. Just as it says that *"God gives proof of his love to us in Christ's dying for us while we were still sinners"* ^{Romans 5:28}. As surely as he died for all men, just so surely have all men had their sins dealt with. Jesus has settled the sin issue

for all men. There is no outstanding debt or any unpaid account as far as man's sin is concerned. "*It is finished*" was more than just a cry of relief, it was a statement of fact!

Total Forgiveness

Scripture tells us that we were made alive together with him after he had "*forgiven us all our transgressions*" and "*cancelled out the certificate of debt*" *Colossians 2:13-14*. Yes, the certificate of debt or the invoice has been cancelled. It is as if we had never been billed. As if we had never owed anything. Sins that are forgiven are sins that are cancelled. They do not exist.

Most believers can accept that they have been forgiven of all their pre-salvation sins but what about our subsequent sins?

Firstly, Jesus died for all our sins. When did he die for our sins? The day we believed? No! He died for them approximately 2000 years ago. Jesus did not go to the cross and die for your sins the day you believed and were saved, but 2000 years before you were saved. When Jesus died for your sins 2000 years ago, how many of your sins were pre-salvation sins then? Yes, it is true, Jesus not only died for sins that were committed but also for sins that were yet to be committed.

Secondly, God is eternal, not only unrestricted by time, but time-less. Whenever God speaks, he speaks from his own point of view which is eternal. For him "all" is "all!" Without the restriction of past, present and future. In short, God's "all" is an unqualified "all" without any disclaimer attached to it.

In order for you to visualize this more clearly, imagine a long line that stretches to your left as far as you can see it and still continues. Next, continue the same line to your right as far as you can see it and it still continues. Now, place a 12" ruler on the line. This is time on the background of eternity. Now place your left hand at the beginning of the ruler. You are now at the beginning of time. Next, place your right hand at

the end of the ruler. You are now at the beginning of time and the end of time at the same time! From this perspective, your "all" includes all of time. Just so with God. When he dealt with all sin it was with absolute knowledge. God does not learn anything, he has always known everything. Because God already knows everything, his knowledge cannot increase. No sin you can commit can catch him by surprise. He knows every sin that has been committed and will be committed and because of this he is thoroughly qualified to have placed all our sins upon his Son. We will never do anything that he has not already made provision for. Total forgiveness!

The Perfect Sacrifice

The old covenant required constant repetition of the sacrifice because the sacrifice was limited in its consequences. It paid for the sins that were committed most recently by the individual or, as in the yearly atonement, it paid for the sins committed by the nation of Israel for the entire previous year. This left those under the old covenant with the unhappy situation of always having to live on credit for the next year. So the old covenant sacrifices were only concerned with former sins never with future sins. As such it was an imperfect covenant. The book of Hebrews calls it imperfect simply because it did not deal with future sins. (Hebrews 7:11,19; 9:9; 10:1)

More than this, the scripture reveals that the sacrifices were themselves never the actual basis for forgiveness. On the basis of them God merely "*passed over the sins previously committed*" *Romans 3:25*. The sacrifices were only "shadows" of the perfect sacrifice and the perfect sacrifice would, when He came, have to pay for these sins also so that God could be just in having passed them over.

Remember that it is on the basis of justice satisfied and punishment served that sins are forgiven. God could not just forget men's sins. He had to punish them to uphold his justice. So, through Jesus, he dealt with sin and its punishment. By this he established the fact of his having forgiven men, as a righteous thing for him to have done. Since there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood, if there is still a need for more forgiveness then there must be another sacrifice brought. It is precisely this reasoning that caused the believers in the book of Hebrews to return to the old covenant sacrifices. For them, the blood of Jesus was no more effective than the blood of bulls and goats in that it only paid for their former sins. Subsequent sins therefore, needed subsequent sacrifices.

The only alternative to animal sacrifices, as far as they were concerned, is that Jesus should come down from heaven and die again. The writer of the book of Hebrews points out that this is unnecessary, since Jesus' sacrifice is perpetually valid. That is, no future sin, no matter how bad, can invalidate its effects and require an additional sacrifice. His single sacrifice has pre-empted all possible sins and paid for them for "all time." The book of Hebrews emphasizes no less than nine times from chapter 7 to chapter 10 that Jesus died once, for all sin, for all men, for all time. Thus he terminates the necessity for any additional sacrifice and the old covenant that required it. (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12,26-28; 10:2,10,12,14)

What About The Unforgivable Sin?

While the whole background of the argument in the book of Hebrews is still fresh in our minds, let us deal with the two difficult scriptures found there. In Hebrews 6 the teaching on the impossibility of renewal to repentance has specific reference to the rejection of the perfect sacrifice. If the new

covenant is rejected, not by open rejection, but by insisting on adhering to the old covenant sacrifices, there is no power available in the old covenant to bring about a changed life. Since the animal sacrifice is a shadow of the final perfect sacrifice of Christ, the repetition of the animal sacrifice is in effect a crucifying again of Christ in the type of the animal sacrifice. The writer could not possibly be meaning that there could be a literal crucifying of Jesus for a second time, or that he could even ever be made to die for sin for a second time. He insists that Jesus has died once for all.

This brings us to the verse in chapter 10. Chapter 10 is the great culminating chapter on the perfect sacrifice, that perfectly deals with sin and therefore never needs repetition since repetition is a mark of imperfection. No new sacrifice is needed because "we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" Hebrews 10:10. More than this, "He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified" Hebrews 10:14. In the light of these two great truths the Holy Spirit brings us the revelation that "where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin" Hebrews 10:18. He does not mean by this that sin has exhausted or used up the effect of the offering, but that the offering has exhausted the effect of sin!

It is because of this that God says, "*Their sins and iniquities will I remember no more*" Hebrews 10:17. Not because God is forgetful, but because the perfect sacrifice has so perfectly dealt with our sin that God no longer remembers what no longer exists.

It is in this context that we must understand "*there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins*" Hebrews 10:26. No sin can ever annul the validity of the perfect sacrifice except the rejection of the perfect sacrifice - Jesus. This is another repetition of the truth already alluded to in chapter 6. That is, that subsequent sins

will not need a subsequent sacrifice. Jesus is the end of the need of all sacrifice.

The sin of these people here is that they have rejected the perfect sacrifice. They have "*counted the blood... an unholy thing*" ^{Hebrews 10:29}. That is, they have regarded it as defective or ineffective in some way. This they did by relying upon animal sacrifices again, the very thing that the book of Hebrews was written to stop them from doing. Do you think the blood to be an "unholy thing?" Short lived in its effect and usefulness? Something to be used and discarded like you did with the dead animal you brought last year? Is he not the One who saves to the uttermost [perfectly] since He always lives to make intercession for us? (Hebrews 7:25)

Jesus' Teaching On The Unforgivable Sin

Jesus' teaching on the unforgivable sin in Matthew 12:32 and in Mark 3:28,29 has been a source of turmoil for many believers. For the sake of clarity it is first necessary that we eliminate what it is not.

Firstly, this does not refer to a perpetual sin repeated to the point where there is no longer forgiveness available because the believer has gone "too far." This is not a sin that was once forgiven but now can no longer be forgiven. The scripture clearly says that "*all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men*" ^{Mark 3:28,29}, but he who offends in this sin "never has forgiveness". That is, this sin was never forgivable in the first place.

Secondly, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot refer to making fun or mocking at the working of the Spirit. The large crowd which gathered on the day of Pentecost mocked those who were filled with the Spirit by saying that they were drunk. A great number of these mockers, if not most, were part of the 3000 converts after Peter's sermon.

Thirdly, some have suggested that because the scripture says that Jesus was saying this because they were saying, "*He has an unclean spirit,*" that this is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. But it is evident that this insult was aimed at the Son of Man. He clearly was the subject of their mockery. And "*whoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him*" ^{Matthew 12:32}. So what is this unforgivable sin then?

The words, "*have insulted the Spirit of grace*" ^{Hebrews 10:29} give us the necessary insight. The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the rejection of the New Covenant also called the "*ministry of the Spirit*" ^{2 Corinthians 3:8}. In short, a refusal to believe in Jesus and so receive him. This hardness of heart being evidenced by the need to explain away all supernatural phenomenon worked by the Holy Spirit to confirm that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Those who refuse to trust in Jesus for salvation commit the sin that never has forgiveness neither now nor forever.

What About Confession Of Sins?

There has been much abuse of confession which we cannot go into now, but we will deal with some fallacies and insecurities that have arisen because of the incorrect understanding of this doctrine.

Salvation depends on the believer confessing Jesus as Lord, (Romans 10:9,10 and Matthew 10:32,33) and not on him confessing all his sin. Salvation would then depend upon the effectiveness of the memory of men. Under the old covenant every time someone wanted to approach God, he had to confess sin because that is what stood between him and God. In the new covenant they have to confess Jesus because that is who now stands between them and God. **Sin no longer stands between man and God because Jesus' work of**

taking the sin of the world away is a success. If sin is still there, then his work is a failure.

If man must confess all sin to be saved, what would happen if he forgot one? How could he ever be sure that he had remembered them all?

What would happen to a believer that died before he had a chance to confess just one sin? If we must confess every sin or else be unforgiven, would that mean that he would be lost forever and go to hell? Nonsense! We have already asserted that forgiveness is ours through what Jesus already did. We are the forgiven because we have placed our faith in Jesus as saviour and not because we remembered to confess every sin we ever have done. (Ephesians 1:7 Colossians 2:13)

Does that mean that there is no confession of sin, that it is unnecessary? If confession were unnecessary, there would be no purpose for "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" ^{1John 1:9}.

So what is confession and how does it fit in?

Firstly, why is God just in forgiving our sin? Because we remembered to confess them? In any court of law, mere admission of guilt is not the basis of pardon. Release is only obtained after the payment of the penalty. Would a judge be regarded as a just judge if he excused a murderer because he admitted to the crime? Never! Just so, God's justice in forgiving is founded upon the fact that Jesus has already paid the penalty for every sin and not because of confession.

Next, we need to have a better understanding of the word "confess" as used in the New Testament. According to W.E. Vine's Dictionary of New Testament Words, the widest used meaning of the word "confession" is to speak openly and freely as the result of "deep conviction of facts." In the case in hand, it is quite obvious that those facts, according to the

context, are the forgiveness provided by Jesus' shed blood and personal sacrifice. "*The blood of Jesus... cleanses us from all sin,*" ^{1John 1:7} and "*he is the propitiation for our sins... also... for the whole world,*" ^{1John 2:2} are two verses that 1John 1:9 is sandwiched between. These are the facts about which there is deep conviction expressed in confession.

Lastly, what is the Greek meaning of the word? The Greek word "homologeō" means to think the same thing and therefore to speak the same thing. To be united in thought and speech. In fact, to think and speak the same thing about our sins as what God does is the basis of forgiveness. If we think and speak the same things as God does about our sins, then our forgiveness will be a reality for us.

Jesus declared to the prostitute in John chapter 8 that she was uncondemned and forgiven yet she did not even come to him but was dragged there against her own will and she never confessed her sin to him.

The cripple man lowered through the roof was forgiven when Jesus saw the faith of the ones who had brought him there. There is no mention of him confessing his sins and yet he was immediately declared forgiven (Mark 2:3-5). Confession was not a requirement for forgiveness in either of these cases.

The Prodigal Son: An Illustration Of Forgiveness

Everyone is familiar with this parable, but a closer look at it will be a great blessing.

The two sons illustrate the two types of people under the old and new covenants and through the father's actions there is an illustration of the heart of the Father as the Law was never able to reveal him.

In this story, when the younger, malcontent son comes to his senses, he carefully rehearses his confession of sin and unworthiness but he never gets a chance to confess. Before

he even has time to explain why he is coming home, the Father runs out to meet him (a most undignified thing for an old man to do in middle eastern culture) and embraces him and kisses that wayward son. No, he does not make him work in the fields for a couple of weeks first to see if he is really serious about repenting. He restores him to a position that seems to be even better than the one he had before he had left. The one who had no inheritance, now shares in all of the Father's wealth and forgiveness.

Does this sound all too much? It was so for the older son. His self-righteous wailing bemoaned the Father's generosity, calling him unfair and only stopping short of calling the Father's actions unrighteous. A perfect example of the self-righteous legalist's attitude to the freely given grace of God. Come forgiven one! Know, believe and confess that you are the forgiven and you too will experience the joy of your salvation.

Mike Petzer 1994

Canty's "I Was Just Thinking".

Once Saved, Always Saved?

Canty, G., www.canty.org.uk (*IWT 3, Once saved, always saved?*)

Recently I had the privilege of a Baptist invitation but to spell out my views on "Predestination".

Two churches in Ireland agreed to unite, then one insisted the Unity Document must include a clause declaring that John Wesley had gone to hell, he being a non-Calvinist! Kind thought!

Theological writings on the subject of Divine election are vast. One of the latest volumes of Systematic Theology, that by Wayne Gruden, uses 15 pages even to outline the subject. Minds more incisive than mine have pondered the questions

involved so what was left for me to say? However, I have reactions to years of exposure to these questions, so to offer my thoughts to an interested group asking questions, was an opportunity.

First. I am suspicious of hard-cast views on predestination, and on other debateable issues. Protagonists have taken firm positions totally opposite to one another. How can they both be so sure? In the past such certainty has been horrible. The pages of church history smoke with the battle and mayhem of conflict. Merciless miseries have overtaken inoffensive people just for mere ideas passing through their head. Claiming to be Christian, bigots have domineered and foisted upon others, even whole nations, views that in the nature of things cannot be other than unsettled questions, resorting even to government laws to force belief with fire and sword. The associated subject of , grace, for example, has been debated with appalling lack of grace.

Second. I am suspicious because election theories have led to such rationalising and doctrines formed by logical deduction. The doctrine of double predestination is certainly not set out in Scripture but is a logical deduction.

Anyway a story will illustrate. A Baptist minister told me that after the first service in his new pastorate a young man puzzled him with a curious question:

"Are you a supralapsarian or an infralapsarian". His theology was not so advanced. He did not know what either was, so he thought, "I'll plump for the big chap" and replied, "Oh I'm a supralapsarian". Fortunately for his whole future acceptance he had said what was wanted.

If you are wondering, a supralapsarian argues logically that Divine election took place long before the fall and God allowed sin so that he could save elected people, while an

infralapsarian believes God allowed sin and decided afterwards to save people. So - now you know - yes? It makes me not believe in logic.

Third. The Bible certainly reveals God as sovereign, and His will overarches all human life and the universe. He created all things with a purpose and that purpose must eventually be realised. But certainly also the Bible describes us all as free beings, God holding us responsible for whatever we do. God cannot be charged with evil or with obliging anyone to commit evil. Even if prophets detail what we should do, we can't blame them or God for what we do.

Fourth. Pre-determination went on in the mind and heart of God. It took into account all considerations, reasons, factors, circumstances and even meanings involved. God alone knows how human freedom and God's sovereignty are possible, and our attempts to pre-empt God's own eternal mind on that matter is arrogant impertinence that can only lead, as it has, to frightful pride and strife.

Only recently has science even seen contraries things can be related. The logically impossible can be witnessed and still beyond understand. The universe is queerer than we CAN think. How can one atomic particle communicate instantly across infinite space to another - even if it is another! - when light itself would take millions of years to cross the space between? Jesus himself said that if we speak of earthly things and cannot understand them, how can we understand if we speak of heavenly things? An element in the fall was the devil's promise that the tree of knowledge would make them as gods. It is still there - we must equal the infinite, and we will take the nearest guess and transmogrify it into a divine revelation when it is only a human dogma. Humility says, "I don't know!"

Fifth. Election is by God and unless He tells us, nobody will know whether they are elected or not. Those with strong ideas of election have tried to find assurance of salvation by performing good works to prove to themselves they are saved. They rest their hopes of salvation on their will to do good, making void the Word of God.

Sixth. Scripture clearly indicates that we are saved by believing, and that we can have the assurance of salvation. The Bible certainly sets forth the possibility of knowing we are saved, here and now. "We know that we have received eternal life," says John. Salvation and the mind of infinite God carry mysteries. So do most of the things God does, from the quark of an atom to the greatest stellar galaxy, from light to love. But we can enjoy it all, and not bother our heads about the how's and why's. God will always be beyond our thinking, but faith's hand touches the crucified hand of our Lord, and we know His grasp will never let us go. The Bible is written for human assurance and faith.

Suppose Wesley Came Back!

Canty, G., www.canty.org.uk (*IWT 7, Suppose Wesley came back*)

I once preached in George Whitfield's pulpit. (He was dead then!). Earlier in my preaching ambitions, by way of experiment I thought of memorising and delivering one of this mighty man's sermon. Reading it I soon realised it would suit my congregation like a meal of hard ships' biscuits. I decided to move up a century and I chose one of Spurgeon's 19th century masterpieces. This I managed to commit it to memory and delivered it verbatim.

I waited for amazed reactions to my eloquence. They came - from just one newly converted lady, complaining "Why didn't you preach like you usually do?" Well of course, Spurgeon

spoke brilliantly to his own generation. God sent me to do my best for my own generation - well, some of them!

I've heard prayers enough asking God to send another Wesley. (On horseback?) Would he really draw 20,000 miners spellbound at Moorfields again? And no microphone? Time doesn't change, but times do and times change people. That is why I contributed thousands of my old sermon notes to enhance the nation's waste retrieval. My preaching began at 14 - to stoics, bless them! Since then, powerful new influences like sculptors have carved out the shape of modern man - war, technology, education, new culture. Space travel alone has planted a new instinct in us, a sense of wider worlds. My first sermon wouldn't do today!

Have you heard of 'contextualising'? Well, stay with me, but it often means placing the Gospel 'in context' of one's hearers, making it suit them. Of course people alter, so should not the message alter? Actually that is ridiculous because people don't change in that way at all, any more than they change by not needing to breathe. The truth stays the truth and obviously it can't be adjusted because we happen to have been re-shaped. We always need the truth. It is basic to our nature, like water, food, sleep, music, beauty and love.

Human nature can never become so different that the truth doesn't apply any more. Two and two will always be four and we shall never want it to be five. The modern man is a TV and Press brain-washed species, but he is not yet an alien species. God made the Gospel for humans and we are still human. We die without water, and likewise without God we never really live - people only kid themselves they do. It is true for ever that "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God".

The pulpit is where Christian values, morals and belief can be upheld. If not, use it as firewood. My own bookshelf carries temptations to an easier, liberalised Gospel of popular interest. Dr. Thomas Bowdler produced "The Family Shakespeare" a sanitized edition with all words eliminated he thought improper. If we (or our songs) bowdlerise the Gospel, performing excision on words like blood, conversion, redemption, repentance, we would be left with a useless "the whole counsel of God". Preachers can preach aspects of truth but select lines that don't carry the heart blood of the Gospel. The world's merry-go-round is like a potter's wheel constantly reshaping us all, but we are still vessel of clay made to carry the wine of God's eternal Word. We are stewards of the mysteries of God. How we present those mysteries is left to our wisdom, but the object is to conform the world to Christ. Diplomacy is not our job. Our friendships should not leave unconverted people supposing that any differences between them and Christians is just a matter of viewpoint. We betray them and the truth. "Be ye not confirmed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" Romans 12:2. Reading articles on 'identity' by Christian leaders there was little about Christianity being human identity with Christ. Baptism pictures it. We are saved by identifying with Him in His death and have life by becoming children of the resurrection. The shame of Jonah was that the heathen shipmen had to wake him up to ask who His God was - he a prophet of God! My late wife used to try to identify born again Christians on television and in real life had a pretty shrew eye. Darkness cloaks the corruption around us, but our faces are towards the rising sun. We should be noticeable. Sitting in local ministerial fraternals where I knew nobody, listening with one half of my brain and the other part seeking

occupation, I wondered which denomination each minister belonged. Neat dress - Anglican. Tweed jacket, Methodist, Jeans and tea-shirt and sandals, URC. The same but with shoes, Baptist, Dressed nicely, Pentecostals and smaller groups wanting to give a good impression among the clergy. Clothes may or may not tell us what a man is. We are exhorted to 'put on' Christ, which means a positive act, studying to be like Him. We don't like people "putting it on", using an accent which is not theirs, or acting above themselves. But nobody was ever put off by anybody 'putting on' Christ. He is what we aim to be like. They say even a dog becomes in some way like its owner - or is it the other way round sometimes?

The searching question is whether people notice our identity with Christ? Can it be said of us "They took notice of them that they had been with Jesus."?

Fads!

Canty, G., www.canty.org.uk (*IWT 15, Fads*)

A book being hyped is against "Fads" - the disapproving name for charismatic innovations and fashions. Full page advertising encomiums, and my own feeling about 'fads' prompted me to buy a copy. I went through it, and as my deplorable habit is, I scribbled comments on the fair page and passed a few on to the author, Baptist pastor Ian Stackhouse of Guildford. The book carries high praise from ten eminent scholars – mostly Baptist, including David Pawson, Dr. Nigel Wright, (Spurgeon's College) Greg Haslam (Westminster Chapel) and Canon Tom Smail. This is not a review and any way my voice would hardly be noticed in such glamorous company.

The ground bass for his theme is that 'fads' are taking over the charismatic churches, pushing normal Christian concerns

aside with the fond hope of swift growth and revival. He calls for a return to basic pastoral work, the 'means of grace', worship, and the 'sacraments'.

I've said myself that methods convert nobody and cannot bring a sales rush through church doors. Hopes of such easy church expansion are naïve. Ian Stackhouse says things like that in his 250 pages. Methods, church structures, schemes and new machinery produce no more than old-fashioned manpower Gospel witness. New births begin with the Word, according to 1 Peter 1:23.

I once listed quick-result schemes but new ones appear on the market with the latest book. Ian Stackhouse feels that 'fads' absorb effort that should be spent building the right sort of church which will then impact the outside world. Presumably he is in a position to judge charismatic motives but my own experience leaves me hesitant, and he does not produce any actual evidence to convince me of his judgment.

Having written several books on the call to preach the Gospel, one with a circulation of about four million, I looked for encouragement for evangelism in the Stackhouse book, but found little emphasis. He writes in scholastic style and with little Scriptural quotation.

It is incontestable that the Bible provokes us to reach out with the Gospel as our major activity. The Lord came from heaven to seek and save by the will of the Father. To be motivated by the same aim can hardly be incorrect. Listening to 'God Channel' television preachers, either my luck is out or invariably I find them saying less and less about the Gospel and ministering more and more along the lines Ian Stackhouse suggests. But surely - isn't that itself another 'fad'? Arthur Wallace promoted the idea that revival only needed new church structures – 'new wine skins' as he misinterpreted

Christ's words. That theory created church upheaval 20 years ago. The idea that new schemes will bring crowds en masse to church is utopian.

Nevertheless I insist that that is no reason to refuse new means. If churches adopt a 'fad' to win converts, successful or not, it is a healthy sign. Paul said "*that by all means I might save some*". 'Fads' for the supreme purpose of Gospel witness are justified. Always of course if the fad itself is not a distortion of Scripture teaching, for I have objected to some on those grounds, as for instance schemes with cult-like features. How can we perfect a church if we neglect Christ's last great command to preach the Gospel to every creature?

Why Make Christianity So Hard?

Canty, G., www.canty.org.uk (*IWT 17, Why make Christianity so hard?*)
Jesus did say "My yoke is easy" but when originally jammed on my neck I found it cumbrous and anything but velvet lined. True, that was a while ago, and I have lived long enough to learn, and enjoy, what Jesus meant. But my impression is that an awful lot of folk don't want it easy. Making it hard brings them credit. They remind me of Isaiah 46:1, '*Bel bows down, Nebo stoops!*'

New Testament people seemed such successful Christians, real five-minute-mile-marathon-super-athletes. I was a panting pedestrian compared to them. Their language, "*joy unspeakable and full of glory*", and "*God who gives us the victory*", contrasted with my apologies at the end of every day, pleading that God would overlook my shortcomings and help me to remember the rules better tomorrow. I made the rules myself, and wrote them kneeling in prayer.

The Anglican Prayer Book speaks of miserable sinners, but I was then more the miserable saint type with a pose of perpetual penitence. At least, I thought, I do confess my

frailties, which is quite humble, quite a virtue! Of course I never doubted that God loved me, just as I never doubted at 7 years old that my Irish mother loved me, but she still chased me down the street with a stick.

Jesus said "*Come unto me and I will give you rest*". The word 'rest' filtered through my church experience as an achievement to be attained at some indefinite future. Rest would only follow labour, after I kept up with the religious programme dumped on me. Worse, I was never sure I had done all I should. Had I unknowingly slipped up somewhere? Actually more often than not I knew very well I had, and felt God could not count on me or make me one of His blue-eyed boys, as if He ever had one at all! Saved by believing, sanctified by straining.

I wished the Bible mentioned people struggling like me to keep on the right side of the Lord. It did not oblige me with such examples, but I had friends like that who believed God's smile was reserved for rare souls, people who had reached the higher Christian standards. I visualised the Christian life as mountaineering, always with one more peak up ahead.

There was the example of Paul the apostle. I sympathised with his heart-cry: "*What a wretched man I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?*" But he immediately swept his

conscience clean: "*Thanks be to God- through Jesus Christ our Lord. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*"

Romans 7:24/25. He never expressed any depression over weaknesses, no bewailing his poor spirituality, no remorse, no mortification, no self-deprecation. He showed every sign of assurance that God really went along with him. How did he do that?

One Bible phrase did occur to me, '*afflict your souls*'. It justified me every night at prayer time. It is found in Scripture, but only in the AV of Leviticus. The NIV doesn't say "afflict" but

'deny yourselves'. The actual Hebrew says *'humble yourselves, deny yourselves, fast'*, and when we ask what we should fast from, the answer is – from work! *"You must not do any work ... it is a Sabbath of rest"*. No workaholics! The Old Testament 'types and shadows' carry the same message. Leviticus 16.25 lays it down that priests approaching God must wear linen, for coolness and bathe first. That is to avoid perspiration. Sweat is evidence of hard work and God doesn't want it to be hard work to come to Him. Strenuous effort and hard searching only give us something to boast about, and it doesn't look good about God as if He is sullen, indifferent, playing hide and seek with us as if He didn't want us to find Him. That is not the Bible God. It is the God only of mystics waiting and straining to hear Him. The Lord did not say "Labour pleases me" His favourites are not masochists wearing hair-shirts. The Word is "Call upon Him while He may be found". The Bible is the world's happiest book. It took me time to adjust my perspectives to take in the whole Bible landscape. Ultra-holiness culture clung. It would take a chapter to outline it. But I gradually wriggled out of my religious straight jacket. Did that jacket reflect a God of freedom and deliverance whose disposition is pure joy? I played in a classical music orchestra but resigned because I didn't believe God approved of my taking part in public concerts. I even stayed away from a Gospel service because the pastor wanted the orchestra I led to play a hymn tune on their own, no singing. Well, the Pharisees tithed table condiments. I have found that life holds more realistic challenges, pride, jealousy, envy, adultery, covetousness and also the call to greater virtues such as loving our neighbour which was not meant to be a performance too wearing. Old Testament religion had its observances but was quite leisurely, no churches, no services, no Bibles to read,

worship only at the Temple, doing nothing in the Sabbath and only a '*Sabbath day's journey*' of about 1000 yards. They tithed and ate their tithe at the Temple two or three times a year! But all took the Sabbath, the day of rest, and turned it into an oppressive legal obligation. We still do that kind of thing. Christianity becomes something to carry instead of wings to carry us. Soar like the eagles?

A lady recently came to me distressed. She had witnessed to people but without success. Her pastor had said that bearing fruit meant soul winning, and without such 'fruit' they would appear empty handed and shamed before the Lord in heaven. It laid a heavy burden on this good soul. It was inventive theology.

Prayer is specially looked upon as a way to please God. Is that what it is? A labour? How do we know we have prayed enough to please God? The more the prayer the more we please Him? In the two hundred references to prayer in the New Testament not one suggests it. We are exhorted to pray, but God's attitude towards us is not set out as proportionate to the time we spend on our knees.

Expressions can mislead us. They say "prayer is power" meaning prayer *time* is power, the longer the prayer the more the power, two hours twice the power of one hour.

Depending on praying enough to have power means we never know we have power. We need a sign. Only the Holy Spirit is power, and He gives a sign. We can't manipulate Him to double His presence by praying twice as long.

By waiting in prayer can we gain more of God? It is said so. But again when do we know we have we prayed enough? How long must we wait to get more? How much more of God do we get? It makes it hard to be the sort of Christian we imagine we should be. My reading of Scripture shows we

should grow in grace and in knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, but I don't find 'waiting in prayer' suggested as the Scriptural means.

What is God like? Does He need a clamour at His gate to notice us? Is Christianity that hard? Is the Lord too preoccupied with a heavenly agenda to attend to us?

I miss my wife because she was always there to turn to anytime. To speak to her I did not need to make a performance of it as if I was hailing a passing ship. God is just as present as any wife, our great ever-present Comforter.

Prayer doesn't need to be prefaced by appeals to Him to come and hear us. Of course He hears us. He can't NOT hear us, for He is not deaf or occupied miles away. The pagan prophets of Baal had to cry out "Hear us, O Baal!" from morning to night. Elijah's prayer was totally different, brief, assured. He knew God was listening. The fire fell at once. We don't need to cry like the Psalmists, in the age before the Spirit was given, "Awake O Lord!" (Ps.44:23)

We turn to God without any preamble, a very present help. He is the 'There God,' as Ezekiel said. Run to Him and He runs faster to us, like the father ran to the Prodigal. God came to Jacob, challenged and wrestled with him. Jacob did not go searching for God. The Bible God needs no finding, no chasing. He is the God who does the finding. "Adam, where are you?" We can't claim the credit when we know Him – He found us.

God doesn't arrange for the Christian life to be hard. It is not a system for gaining credits. Circumstances impose hardships upon us, not God. He is not an inflictor of trouble, but a deliverer. The devil slips the insinuation into Christian teaching that God sends trials. He certainly allows us to be tried, but God is not in the business of planning trouble. "*In*

the world you will have tribulation, but fear not for I have overcome the world."

God may ask us to take the Gospel and face danger, to accept a commission that necessarily involves hardship, because the circumstances are like that. Then let a man deny Himself and take up his cross. But to make difficulties or load ourselves to breaking point with endeavour and religious duties is gratuitous and lures nobody into the Kingdom. Some sing "Let me burn out for thee, dear Lord". Too many pastors are going down with burn outs. Reinhard Bonnke says "God does not want ash heaps". Reinhard also said that God doesn't want us to be horses, that includes pastors.

The Lord knows our frame, that we are dust. He filled the world and life with good things and '*no good thing will He withhold from them that love Him*'. Is God happy when we refuse His good things, and make righteousness so sorely unattractive? Eternal life means quality lifestyle, companionship with God, the source of all goodness.

What is Converted?

Corbett, Andrew, *What is Converted*, www.andrewcorbett.net 2006

Great Conversions Of The Bible

Recently an Australian Federal Parliamentarian declared he and his Party should be regarded as truly representing the Christian vote of Australians. He then went on to more or less state that his understanding of Christianity was not the same as that of Evangelicals- who regard conversion as an essential - instead, his idea of Christianity was one of improving social conditions and promoting wealth-equity throughout society. He seemed to be criticising Evangelicals for preaching a Gospel of "conversion". He wanted to champion a Christianity after the fashion of the great Deitrich

Bonhoeffer. Is conversion necessary or not to be an authentic Christian?

In John Bunyan's unequalled classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, he tells of a man named Pilgrim who starts a life journey after innocently praying. As a result of praying he becomes aware of a burden on his back which he then realised had always been there. It seems to Pilgrim as if the burden becomes increasingly heavier. No matter how hard he tries he cannot free himself from this burden. He embarks on a journey to find relief. He meets Evangelist who points him to a hill called Golgotha. It is there that he meets a Saviour and realises that this Saviour's blood still flows. As he gazes into the face of the Saviour he is struck by the epiphany that this Saviour is dying for him. "For me He dies! For me He dies!" cries Pilgrim. And as the blood of the Saviour flows toward him the burden of sin, guilt and shame snaps off his back and rolls down the hill. At that point Pilgrim is converted!

So passionately did John Bunyan believe that Christianity could only be entered into via conversion that he was prepared to be jailed for that belief! It was in that prison cell that he wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* which champions the Biblical doctrine that salvation was by God's gifts of grace and faith resulting in: regeneration (conversion). Those who disagree with Bunyan about the need for conversion and yet still regard themselves as Christians are often happy to wear the label universalist. They regard that since one man, Adam, brought the world involuntarily into sin, likewise the whole world has been universally saved by one man: Jesus Christ.

And what a difference between our sin and God's generous gift of forgiveness. For this one man, Adam, brought death to many through his sin. But this other man, Jesus Christ, brought forgiveness to many through God's bountiful gift. Romans 5:15

In resolving this dispute we must acknowledge that the stakes are potentially infinitely high! Eternal destinies are perhaps at risk by our opinions about this crucial matter. Our objective frame of reference and source of primary information to determine the truth of how we are saved is the Bible. Therefore, does the Bible really promote the concept of conversion unto salvation, or does the Bible present a universal salvation which makes conversion unnecessary? This debate is further confused by the experiences of some genuine Christians who either had a very dramatic conversion experience which they can identify occurring at a specific moment, and those Christians who have no idea when or if they ever had a conversion experience and could never identify a single moment when a conversion may have happened. So what do we mean when we say "converted"? It was perhaps Ezekiel who described it best when he prophesied about the salvation wrought by Christ-

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 36:26

The New Testament develops the Bible's description of this 'newness' with such contrasting metaphors as darkness to light -

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son Colossians 1:13

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. 1Peter 2:9

Death to life -

The sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over us, but all who receive God's wonderful, gracious gift of righteousness will live in

triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:17 (NLT)

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. 1John 3:14

The universalist argues that this is everyone's standing before God due to the Cross. The Evangelical argues that this is only the experience of the elect (that is, those who have accepted Christ and been regenerated by the Holy Spirit). The problem that the universalist faces in sustaining their case from Scripture is Scripture. Scripture seems to present Christianity as commencing with a translation (from something to something else) experience. The metaphors that the Bible uses to describe this include, from death to life (Rom. 6:13), from darkness to light, from the domain of Satan to the Kingdom of God (Col. 1:13), from sin to holiness (Rom. 6:22).

The Bible presents every person, despite their social standing, in need of salvation. In fact, all too often it is those who think that by virtue of their social standing they are more valuable to God- and therefore deserving of His salvation. Paul laments that-

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 1Corinthians 1:26

Yet God can save anyone- even a King. In the Old Testament we have the account of the most wicked King eventually turning to God in repentance. His story is wonderful example of the greatest conversions in the Bible.

The story of King Manasseh is one of the saddest episodes of Judah's history. He was born during Hezekiah's, his father, final years, which were deplorably squandered by Hezekiah leaving Manasseh with little more than contempt for God. He

demonstrated this contempt by committing some of the grossest acts of indecency and human rights violations imaginable. Perhaps the most vile of these included his assassination of Isaiah the prophet. This is the Talmudic account of that murderous rampage (which should be considered legendary rather than mythical) -

Manasseh killed Isaiah. Manasseh said to Isaiah, "Moses, thy master, said, 'There shall no man see God and live' [Ex. xxxiii. 20, Hebr.]; but thou hast said, 'I saw the Lord seated upon his throne'" (Isa. vi. 1, Hebr.); and went on to point out other contradictions—as between Deut. iv. 7 and Isa. lv. 6; between Ex. xxxiii. 26 and II Kings xx. 6. Isaiah thought: "I know that he will not accept my explanations; why should I increase his guilt?" He then uttered the Unpronounceable Name, a cedar-tree opened, and Isaiah disappeared within it. Then Manasseh ordered the cedar to be sawn asunder, and when the saw reached his mouth Isaiah died; thus was he punished for having said, "I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Yeb. 49b). The Jewish Encyclopaedia

Manasseh sacrificed his children in illegal and pagan rituals. He established and promoted lewd sexual activity, called "the high places" all in the name religious practice He brought pagan objects of worship into the Temple precinct which may have seemed to bring some degree of legitimacy to His wickedness.

And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had broken down, and he erected altars to the Baals, and made Asherahs, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. And he built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem shall my name be forever." And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of

the LORD. And he burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. 2Chronicles 33:2-6

Many people today are justifying their sexual proclivities, religiousising their worldview, and excusing themselves from the ordinary standards of decency- especially when it comes to the weakest and most vulnerable in our society: children. This is what Manasseh did.

But God knew what it would take to bring Manasseh to repentance! You may be praying for a strayed loved one to turn to Christ and think they are beyond redemption. But God thinks otherwise! he knows how to bring them home. Firstly, we notice that God spoke to Manasseh and Judah.

The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention. 2Chronicles 33:10

This was most probably and at least through Isaiah the prophet. But Manasseh and Judah would not listen to God. We then observe that God gave them over to their enemies. In this sense, God "sent" their enemies to attack them-

Therefore the LORD brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon. 2Chronicles 33:11

This is reminiscent of what Paul wrote in Romans 1 where it says that certain people who rebelled against God's will and continually refused to repent were "given up" by God to fully indulge their sin-

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, Romans 1:24

When the Assyrians came and attacked Manasseh and took him captive, this was a great tragedy. We don't often associate tragedy with God's gracious dealings. But God knew that this is what it would take to bring Manasseh to repentance. It's often amazing how things sometimes seem to turn for the worse when we pray for someone to turn to God. I have read this passage perhaps hundreds of times. When I ponder this episode I wonder what Isaiah did prior to his execution. I wonder whether he prayed for Manasseh. I wonder he prayed for Manasseh to repent. If so, the events that transpired almost immediately after his death were an unforeseeable answer to prayer. God used tragedy to humble Manasseh and bring him to repentance.

It appears in Scripture that God generally uses three broad approaches to lead people to repentance.

Firstly, Romans 2:4 says that God uses kindness to lead people to repentance.

Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? Romans 2:4

Secondly, it appears that God uses miracles to bring people to repentance. Christ expresses His disappointment that many of the cities in which He performed miracles did not repent-

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities where he had done most of his miracles, because they hadn't turned from their sins and turned to God. Matthew 11:20

Thirdly, God uses tragedy to bring people to repentance. We see this in the life of Manasseh and the events that transpired in Jerusalem leading up to 70AD during the 42 month bombardment and attack by the Romans in which Israel experienced its great tribulation spoken of by Christ in Matthew 24. The Book of Revelation put it this way-

Everyone was burned by this blast of heat, and they cursed the name of God, who sent all of these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory. Revelation 16:9

It could be argued that God used at least two of these three means, and possibly all three, to bring Manasseh to repentance. What Jeremiah doesn't record in Second Kings, Ezra draws the attention of the reader to in Second Chronicles. Manasseh humbled himself, prayed to God, repented, and confessed his need for God.

And when he was in distress, he entreated the favour of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.

He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God. 2Chronicles 33:12-13

Manasseh's conversion resulted in him reforming religious activity in Judah. He rebuilt the Temple altars and made repairs to the House of the Lord. His conversion was so dramatic that it should be regarded as one of the greatest conversions of the Bible. His conversion should encourage the modern believer to keep praying for those who do not know God. It should similarly encourage those who have doubts about God to experiment with prayer. Secondly, Manasseh's conversion should give us reason to have hope for a better future for ourselves and our communities because it shows us the extraordinary lengths that God will go to, to rescue people from seemingly hopeless situations.

God is in the business of conversion. He loves to convert people. He loves to rescue those who cry out to Him in humility. To those people, including Parliamentarians, who ridicule us Evangelicals for promoting Christianity as a matter of conversion, Manasseh presents a problem. But not only

Manasseh, several others as well, which we explore in further instalments. It might also be worth noting that Dietrich Bonhoeffer would sound a loud "Amen!" He made this extremely clear in his book "Life Together" where he stressed the need for conversion and pointed out that the Christian community should only be considered as being constituted of those who have been converted. It is my prayer that we will see many thousands of people authentically converted to Christ all around the world. Amen.

© Dr. Andrew Corbett, November 23rd 2006

The Root of all Atheism

Professor Richard Dawkins has become the pin-up boy of western atheists. His latest offerings for his religiously devoted band of atheists includes his best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, and DVD- *The Root of All Evil*. His arguments are passionate, clear and simple. He appeals to the lack of intellectual rigour in any religious belief, the socially destructive nature of religion, and ability of mankind to live harmoniously and well without any reference at all to God. His arguments are not new. Atheistic Philosophers have been making the same arguments for centuries. But intellectuals like Dawkins have become increasingly perturbed by the large numbers of intellectuals who are "crossing over" - now professing a belief in God and becoming "religious". One of the most notable intellectuals to recently abandon atheism and embrace theism (a belief in God) was Professor Antony Flew. He was an ardent atheist who wrote and lectured prolifically on the reasons why atheism was rational and religion wasn't. He would debate all-comers. And I'd like to begin this next sentence with- "Then one day..." but the change didn't necessarily result from just one day. It was

perhaps the result of Greg Habermas patiently debating and talking with Antony Flew for weeks, months and years that eventually made its impact. Professor Flew, previously acknowledged as the world's leading atheist could no longer argue with any intellectual integrity for atheism. He cited the overwhelming "evidence" for abandoning his atheism and becoming a "theist" (a believer in God).

The impact upon atheists at the news of the conversion of Prof. Flew to theism could be likened to how Christians might feel if Evangelist Bill Graham announced that he was abandoning Christianity and converting to Islam! Antony Flew's decision jolted the worldwide community of intellectual atheists. But he's not the only one to "cross over". Emeritus Professor of Evolutionary Chemistry at San Francisco State University, Dean Kenyan, began to have doubts about his own text book on evolutionary chemical biology when he realised that there was a growing body of evidence for life having both a beginning and a 'beginner'. He too became a theist. Then there are the people who are regarded as leading intellectuals in their field who are also avid Christians. One of the most troubling examples of a Christian intellectual to people like Richard Dawkins is Dr Alistair McGrath.

*In 2004 McGrath suggested in *The Twilight of Atheism* that atheism was in decline. He has been highly critical of Richard Dawkins, calling him "embarrassingly ignorant of Christian theology". His book: *The Dawkins Delusion? – a response to Dawkins's The God Delusion – was published by SPCK in February 2007, and the two had public debate recently on the topic, "Does religious belief damage the health of a society, or is it necessary to provide the moral and ethical foundations of a healthy society?"* Wikipedia*

Richard Dawkins regards religion as irrational and intellectually unsustainable. He conversely regards science as

totally rational and always intellectually defensible. He makes this astonishing statement about anyone who doesn't quite see it the same way-

"If you meet anyone who doesn't believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid, brainwashed, insane or wicked--but I'd rather not consider that." quoting Richard Dawkins, in Darwin Strikes Back, page 14, by Thomas Woodward

Is Religion The Greatest Cause Of Bloodshed?

This is one of Richard Dawkins most strenuous claims. Religion creates wars...Wars kill good people...Therefore, Religion is wrong. It would seem on the surface of it that such a statement was self-sustaining considering recent events in Northern Ireland, Afghanistan, Iraq and Tibet. From a historical perspective, the Crusades and Counter-Crusades seem to add weight to this argument. I can't speak on behalf of other religions. I will therefore restrict my response to this argument from a Christian perspective.

The Crusades Prove That Religion Is Deadly...

How "Christian" were the medieval crusades? How "Christian" were the crusaders? The Crusades had nothing to do with Biblical Christianity! There is absolutely no supporting concept in the New Testament for believing that favour with God is linked to occupying the right real estate (that is, Jerusalem). Neither is there any supporting passage for the use of violence against those who don't believe like Christians. There simply is no concept in the New Testament of a "Holy War". The Crusaders actually violated the Scriptures to conduct their Crusades! It would appear that the Medieval Crusades had more to do with power than promoting a certain religious belief.

Other 'Religious' Wars

The same principles as stated for dismissing the Crusades as "Christian" are used for other religious wars. Christianity is not advanced by military might, but by persuasive preaching through various media. While a nation or an army might be described as "Christian" when it goes into combat, it doesn't make its military action "Christian". It would also be wrong to assume that every combatant from that nation is also Christian or even conducting themselves in a Christian fashion.

Atheistic Wars

Something Richard Dawkins seems to omit about his "war arguments" is that by far most of the military violence committed has been done by atheists for atheistic reasons! The First World War of the Twentieth Century was not a religious war, neither was the Second World War, nor the Korean War, nor the Vietnam War, nor the Afghan War. Added to this are the atrocities orchestrated by atheists such as Stalin, Pol Pot, and Idi Amin. This argument actually comes back to bite Dawkins since most the warfare bloodshed, and especially that of the twentieth century, have been committed by atheists for atheistic reasons. On behalf of Christians it can be categorically stated that whenever any military action is conducted in the name of Christianity it is a violation of what Christ taught not obedience to it! The New Testament makes no provision for "Holy War"- despite what Richard Dawkins might claim.

Knowledge Versus Belief

Richard Dawkins criticises religion, and Christianity in particular, as lacking intellectual rigour. Religion, to Dawkins, is about blind and ignorant faith. This faith is not reasonable, according to Dawkins, since it is not scientifically verifiable. But that logic is self-defeating since that very reasoning is not

scientific! It also reflects a belief of Richard Dawkins. That is, he believes that beliefs aren't that important.

For those Christians who have not moved from 'belief in' to 'knowledge of' God, the arguments of Dawkins may rock their faith. The solution is to examine and test the claims of Christ and His Word for credibility and reliability. Christianity is not about 'blind faith' which promotes hostility and bloodshed. It is grounded in historic facts which can be tested by the scientific method. Its claims to transform a life can be tested by experience. The Bible urges us to move from beliefs to knowledge.

Do you not know...?Romans 6:16

I want to know Christ...Philippians 3:10

But it's not the kind of knowledge of which Richard Dawkins speaks. The knowledge that the Bible refers to is the kind of knowledge that is a conviction not merely an assent to certain facts. Dawkins' arguments have been dismissed as irrational, biased and unscientific by both Christian and non-Christian thinkers. The evidence for the God of the Bible is growing from what biologists, bio-chemists, cosmologists, astronomers are now discovering. A recent gathering of such secular scientists in Europe released a paper stating that naturalistic explanations could not explain how life and matter began. They acknowledged that since there was once nothing (before what scientists call the "Big Bang"), it was completely illogical to suggest that everything came from nothing. As time goes on we can expect that the evidence will increasingly rebut Richard Dawkins' arguments and show that religion is not the root of all evil in society, and that it might well be irrationalism that is at the root of atheism, not Christianity.

Dr. Andrew Corbett

How pagan is Christianity?

"We are also making an outrageous proposal: that the church in its contemporary, institutional form has neither a biblical nor a historical right to function as it does." "Pagan Christianity", Frank Viola & George Barna, Tyndale 2007:xx

So begins the recently released highly controversial book by Frank Viola and George Barna. These authors then live up to these opening words in their Preface- that is, their assessment of the contemporary church is indeed: outrageous!

It's rare that a Publisher commences book with a disclaimer by virtually saying we are publishing this even though we don't agree with it. This type of disclaimer is especially rare for a publisher such as Tyndale. After reading this book I understood why Tyndale were so apprehensive in publishing it. While this was puzzling, what I found most puzzling was that George Barna put his name to it! One can only wonder at the damage this book has done to his reputation.

The Claims Of Christian Paganism

A "Pagan" is someone who is *either ignorant or has wilfully rejected the truth and as a result is an idolater* (worships idols). This is the word that the authors have chosen to use to describe modern Christianity. It is, as they admit, an outrageous claim. Here's a summary of their charges against modern Christianity-

- The modern church is not abiding by the Scriptures despite its ardent claims to the contrary
- Church buildings are essentially idols
- The Order of Worship in churches today suffocates the spiritual life of believers
- The Sermon is the most stifling instrument to Christian maturity

- The concept of Pastor is the greatest hindrance there is to Christian ministry
- Getting dressed up for church is hypocritical and ungodly
- Contemporary church music is stupefying for genuine worship
- Tithing is nothing more than a continuation of the Old Covenant's sacrificial Laws and is therefore now obsolete
- Paying Pastors a salary denies the Priesthood of all believers
- Baptism classes are a man-made invention that breaches the command of Christ to be baptised immediately
- Christian ministers over-emphasise the need for education to be a Christian minister
- The New Testament is not meant to be used for proof-texting, but in its overall message which should be understood within the context of the relationship of the author and the audience.

A Faulty Foundational Premise

The authors build their case on a few premises. One of these premises is that the New Testament does not prescribe an order of service for how a church should worship. But then they weave through the entire book reasons why they believe the Church is worshipping in an ungodly way.

The other premise is that the earliest church was "the purest form" of Church "before it was tainted and corrupted" (page xviii). But within one chapter of this statement they acknowledge that when the church is planted cross-culturally it legitimately adopts structures and worship patterns that relate to its culture-

Also, just because a practice is picked up from culture does not make it wrong in and of itself, though we must be discerning. As author

Frank Senn notes, "We cannot avoid bringing our culture to church with us; it is a part of our very being. But in the light of tradition we need to sort out those cultural influences that contribute to the integrity of Christian worship from those that detract from it."

(Page xxiv)

Whenever I hear somebody make the thoughtless appeal for the modern Church to return to the church model of the Book of Acts, I always wonder which chapter of the Book of Acts are they referring to? In every chapter of Acts we see the Church growing, developing, changing, and confronting new problems that require doctrinal refinement and structural adjustment. The authors more than suggest that not even God can correct His Church when it deviates from His glory-

The contemporary church is like a jet airplane that has no capacity for in-flight course corrections. Pagan Christianity, (Page xxx)

The other main premise of the book is that all traditional leadership models of church government are evil (pagan).

This premise is based on the authors' narrow understanding of what the priesthood of all believers means.

Based on these premises, which we will scrutinise soon, the authors make some outrageous assertions about the modern Church. These assertions are supposedly supported by their appeal to Scripture and history. But these appeals to Scripture are generally based on very poor exegesis (interpretation of the Scripture) and the authors' use of Church History, to justify their criticisms, which is at times, appalling.

With such glaringly bad argumentation and extremely shallow support for such arguments, you would think that those who are supposed to be Biblically-literate would be able to discern this straight away. But amazingly, it has bowled over many believers and brought great confusion to many good-hearted pastors who have not known how to respond to this attack.

First, The Good Points

Viola and Barna criticise superficial Christianity and its resultant forms of corporate worship. They give an example of a family getting dressed up to go to church after the Dad yelling at his kids to get ready and abusing his wife for not organising their children early enough. In his rush to get his family to church on time he gets a speeding ticket. Arriving late and flustered and angry he commands his family to smile as soon as they get out of the car and to walk into the church happy. When they get into their church they are joined by the other smiling, happy, families and are then preached at by the pastor who tells his flock- *we do everything by the Book- the Bible is our ultimate guide!* Viola and Barna present this as the stereotypical, church-going, American family. And if they are right, their criticisms of it are more than justified.

The second major positive about this book is its critique of the modern role of "pastor". The authors rightly identify that the New Testament does not prescribe for churches to be led by a pastor much less for one man to wear the over 30 "hats" (the various responsibilities that pastors are expected to fulfil) that pastors are expected to wear. They attribute the high rate of ministry burn-out among pastors as the inevitable result of such unBiblical expectations by congregations.

Another positive aspect of the book is the insistence that the authors place on the priesthood of all believers.

Where The Book Is Nearly Right

The authors claim that the modern Church has strayed too far from the path laid down by the original Church. This path, they claim, is where every believer has equal opportunity to contribute to the direction and ministry of the fellowship. Any member of the fellowship can bring a teaching, lead a song, share a Scripture or a thought. This type of fellowship is

not "controlled" by a leader, but rather every believer has an equal say in how the fellowship should be led. Viola and Barna are not the first to extol this model of Church. John Nelson Darby more-or-less promoted it back in the late 1800s and more recently James Rutz in 1992 published a book called: "*The Open Church: How to Bring Back the Exciting Life of the 1st Century Church*" where he advocated similar ideas. What Darby and Rutz reacted against was a stale, authoritarian, spiritually-stifling, model of Church. Darby rejected the idea of a priestly class of believer and Rutz rejects the idea of a passive "laity". But Viola and Barna go further than both. What they argue against is any form of planned worship led by any authority within a fellowship. While the truth that these 4 authors are promoting (that God gives every believer the opportunity to approach Him and minister in some way on His behalf) is Scriptural, they each confuse God-given ministry with God-given authority. Secondly, they assume that when it comes to how a church fellowship worships, spontaneity is spiritual and planning is unspiritual. I doubt though that Viola and Barna are consistent with this method of distinguishing what constitutes "spiritual" (God pleasing) in other areas of their lives. In support of their premise that the New Testament Church of the first century encouraged every believer to participate in a worship service, they cite First Corinthians 14:26. But they amazingly seem to completely miss the real point of that verse! Paul is not commending the Corinthians for their disorganised, disorderly, worship - he is rebuking them! Note the last part of the verse they cite-

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. 1Cor. 14:26

Read on in First Corinthians 14 and you'll hear Paul talking about God not being "the God of confusion" (verse 33). This is because the "open" type of church service that the Corinthians had developed (which was vastly different to the way the other churches of the first century worshiped) had become a free-for-all and was therefore confusing to most of those attending.

Rather than this being "the model" for how a church fellowship should worship together, the New Testament prescribes exactly what Viola and Barna reject: *planned order under the authority of a leader*. By the way, the earliest form of Christian worship was not a house-church model. The house-church fellowship of the earliest believers developed as a result of the persecution of the first Christians where they simply could not meet openly in public venues.

On the day the New Testament Church was birthed, the Day of Pentecost, the believers were no longer in the Upper Room but were now in the Temple precinct seeking God. Thus, when the Holy Spirit fell upon them it was a very public event! Therefore, the early Church most naturally saw that it's worship of Jesus was a public event to be conducted in a public venue. For the ensuing weeks the believers continued this practise of worshiping Christ in the public venue of the Temple and meeting in one another's homes (Acts 2:42-44). During these public meetings in a public venue, they prayed, probably sang, and one of them would preach. Acts 2 records the main points of Peter's sermon and Acts 7 records the main points of Stephen's sermon. Viola and Barna deny that the early Church did this and then label modern churches that continue this original model of Church worship as: "pagan"! As the church spread, the default format for Christians to gather was to do so in a public setting. This most naturally

involved Synagogues, Public Squares, and riversides (which was where Jews would meet in towns where their numbers were insufficient to form a Synagogue, Acts 16:13; Psalm 137:1). Only as a fall back position did the church meet in homes. When the State sanctioned persecution of the Church ended in the fourth century, the Church immediately established public venues for worship. This was not a "paganising" of the Church, but a consistent strategy of outreach and witness established from the Day of Pentecost. If Viola and Barna are attacking the over-emphasis on church buildings where congregations focus too much of their time and resources on merely maintaining their buildings rather than their priorities being on the commission and commands of Christ, then all Christians should take note of their criticisms. But if, as it seems, that they are condemning churches from owning any buildings at all - and appealing to the first century church as the basis for their criticisms - they are sadly very wrong. There is nothing pagan with a congregation of believers owning a public building to be used as a witness, for worship, and the proclamation of the Word! It is also true that as the Church grew and developed through its history, it began and perpetuated certain traditions. As the authors point out, not all of these traditions are supported by Scripture. But while this may be true, it is a non-sequitur that therefore all Christian traditions are "pagan". Among these so-called pagan traditions the authors list such things as: pews for worshipers to sit on, a pulpit for the preacher to preach from; and eventually stain-glass windows. The authors' premise is that since these things are not prescribed in the New Testament that they are wrong or "pagan" (not Christian).

Confused About Ministry & Authority

The authors of PAGAN CHRISTIANITY commit a fundamental error: they confuse the priesthood of believers (which is about our equal access to God through the finished work and ministry of Christ) with the distinctive roles of responsibilities that Christ gifts to various members of His Church. While we are all equal in our standing before God because of Christ, we are not equal in our God-given responsibilities. Viola and Barna make emphatic statements about the New Testament's leadership structure being completely egalitarian - that is, no one is a leader over other believers. This type of leadership they call "hierarchical" and they claim that it is condemned in the New Testament. But they are very wrong. God does call certain believers into leadership roles that at times involves the God ordained establishment of hierarchy. But unlike the corporate world's version of hierarchy, God's version is based on responsibilities and the servanthood of the leader. In this way, the New Testament can use hierarchical language to describe the varying scope of responsibilities that distinguishes leaders-

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. 1 Corinthians 12:28

Viola and Barna build on their faulty premise of leadership egalitarianism and go so far as to say that the role of a pastor as a leader in a congregation is "pagan". Yet when we read First and Second Timothy it is clear that the apostle Paul was writing to his protege as the leader of that assembly in Ephesus despite there being a plurality of elders already there). He tells Timothy to set apart (ordain) additional elders (congregational leaders) and some others as deacons (assistant

leaders). He tells Timothy to continue to teach, preach, read aloud publicly, the Scriptures.

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. 1Tim.4:13

Timothy was charged to read, expound and teach the Scriptures to the Ephesians. In this way he was pastoring the church. This would have required all of Timothy's time to organise, prepare and deliver his ministry to the Ephesian church. So despite Viola and Barna claiming that paying pastors a salary is unbiblical and even "pagan" Paul actually said-

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." 1Timothy 5:17-18

Paying people for "spiritual" service is not pagan! It is thoroughly Biblical!

Viola and Barna object to the modern sermon. They attempt to show that the central place that the sermon has in most Christian worship services is a fairly recent development inspired by pagans and unnecessarily adopted by the Church Fathers. But as the instruction to Timothy in First Timothy 4:13 reinforces, preaching and teaching in a church service by a pastor dates back to the foundation of the Church. There is nothing pagan about a New Testament scholar sharing insights from God's Word in an inspirational manner- which we generally call: a sermon. But none of this negates the opportunity that every believer has to share insights from God's Word with other believers in an appropriate context. The authors condemn modern liturgies (orders of service) as having pagan roots. They claim that the early church worshiped on the basis of spontaneity. But the public assembly of believers was to be orderly and well led - not

disorderly or disorganised. This is one of the main points of correction that the apostle Paul deals with throughout First Corinthians.

The authors condemn the over-emphasis of professional ministry training for pastors. While we join with Viola and Barna and reject outright the idea of a priestly class of believers, we cannot join with them in condemning ministry training for those who have the responsibility to care and lead for other souls and their spiritual welfare. In fact, Hebrews tells us that while the Mosaic Priesthood is fulfilled in Christ, God still calls and equips certain believers to be shepherds within the flock of believers and to lead them. As such, these leaders are to be "obeyed" (Hebrews 13:7, 17). This is something the authors of PAGAN CHRISTIANITY would seemingly find repulsive.

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Hebrews 13:7

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Hebrews 13:17

These verses do not undermine the idea of the priesthood of all believers, but they do highlight that the New Testament makes a distinction between those called to live out their witness in the marketplace and those called by God to devote their lives to leading and watching over souls by ministering God's Word. I have written extensively on this issue in my eBook: *Authentic Apostolic Leadership- Structure For The Church Today.*

Is Our Worship Really Pagan?

Viola and Barna assert that song leaders, choirs, and worship directors are pagan in origin and are therefore wrong. They

base this assertion on their premise that worship services in the New Testament were only conducted in homes where everybody had the opportunity to lead a part of it. They even suggest that musical instruments were not used and therefore are out of New Testament order for today. But again they are wrong in both their premise and their conclusions. The New Testament does not condemn those who are gifted musically to be used as the worship leader of an assembly. On the contrary, the New Testament seems to encourage people to focus their ministry in the area of the spiritual gifting (1Corinthians 12). Secondly, it is likely that when Paul tells the Ephesians and Colossians to worship God by singing hymns, Psalms and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) with all their heart, that this could have and probably did include musical accompaniment. The New Testament Church honoured the Psalms. In the Psalms we read over and over that worshipful melody unto the Lord can be made with musical instruments.

Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Psalm 150:3-5

If Viola and Barna are criticising some expressions of modern church worship because it is more akin to entertainment than praise for God, then their criticisms are valid. But from anecdotal evidence and personal observation, by far the majority of worship leaders genuinely do what they do to bring glory to God and inspire believers to worship God. Setting yourself up as a judge of another believer's expression of worship is a very dangerous (and presumptuous) thing to do.

How Should We Read Our Bible?

When it comes to using the Bible, Viola and Barna advocate a similar error to that of the Emerging Church leaders. The

Bible is not meant to be used for "proof texting" they argue, but to establish and build a relationship with God. On first reading this statement seems tame if not even true. But when we consider what these authors are really advocating, there are a lot reasons to be very concerned.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. . 2Timothy 3:16-17 NKJV

Despite what Viola and Barna assert, the Bible can not only be used to establish doctrine (right belief), it should! Other Emerging Church leaders such as Rob Bell have rejected traditional, orthodox Christianity in favour of "neo-liberalism" where such foundational doctrines to Christianity such as: the virgin birth of Christ, the physical resurrection of Jesus, the exclusive nature of salvation through Christ, the authority of Scripture, have been abandoned. Christians should not be caught off guard by the crafty language used by those advocating for the "Emerging Church".

The Bible should never be used out of context in a way that an obscure verse is made to mean something that the overall tenor of Scripture does not advocate. In this sense, being "doctrinaire" is against the tenor of Scripture, but being doctrinally precise is not.

A Biblical Concept Of Church Needed

The authors argue for an organic model of Church. They claim that this is the model presented in the New Testament. This model looks like House Churches. While there is nothing wrong with House Churches, there is something seriously wrong with claiming that this is the model for every church congregation. Healthy churches know how to assemble publicly (Hebrews 10:24-25) and meet in small groups semi-

privately (Acts 2:42-44). The New Testament prescribes that congregations be led by qualified leaders - and as important as this was in the first century, it is absolutely imperative now due to the increased complexity of life. It also prescribes a God-ordained order of authority within and over congregations which in no way negates the equal access to God that every believer enjoys. It also broadly tells us to worship God together by prayer, singing, teaching, giving and sharing. A local congregation of believers is a group that meets under the headship of Christ, submitted to His appointed leaders, guided by the Holy Spirit through the teaching of God's Word, where believers are supported and equipped to glorify God with their gifts. This statement could be said like this- being part of a church is a witness together where the believer can worship together and proclaim the Word of God together. History tells us that God has a way of shutting down congregations. In the opening chapters of the Book of Revelation Christ instructs His apostle John to write to the "angels" of the 7 churches of Asia Minor. These "angels" were God's appointed messenger to each congregation. That is quite literally what the word angel means (messenger). Today we generally use the word "pastor" (based on Hebrews 13:17, 1Peter 5:1ff) to describe the person fulfilling this role. To each of the churches Christ warned them that if they abandoned Him He would remove their candle stick (shut them down). Perhaps there are church congregations that need to die because they have ceased to seek and represent Christ to a needy world. But for those churches that have culturally adapted to sincerely reach their societies for Christ as a Word-based, worshipful witness, they don't need the kind of scurrilous allegation that would seek to label them as "pagan".

Words in Scripture are equivocal

Andrew Corbett, Legana, Australia 2009.

it's not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, it's been found difficult and left untried... (G.K. Chesterton)

When it comes to understanding the Bible, *simple* interpretations often end up becoming *simplistic* instead. A simplistic understanding of Scripture overlooks important facts which (often innocently) leads to a *misunderstanding* of the text.

For example, in Galatians 5:4 we read the expression *fallen from grace*. A simplistic understanding of this expression says this as describing a *Christian who sins*. But this cannot be what the text means. The context of the Epistle to the Galatians is salvation by grace rather than by works. If a believer sins, they don't *fall from grace*, rather they *fall into grace*! To fall from grace is instead to *fall into works and legalism*.

The other thing that requires the Bible to be read with care is its usage of very precise *big* words. Unlike the general words of the Bible, which are equivocal, there are some very deliberate and selectively used words that are *unequivocal*.

The Bible's Little Big Words...

The Little Big Words: LOVE

There are some big words in Scripture that actually look deceptively small. For example - "Love" is perhaps the biggest word in the Bible. Yet there's probably not a person on the planet who understands what the Bible means by this word. We live in a world where people "make" love when what they may actually mean is that they "fornicate". When a man says to his wife that he would "love" to go shopping with her, what he actually may mean is that he doesn't want her to spend too much. We use this word in ways that are quite

foreign to the way the Bible uses this word. "Love", as used in the Bible, is more akin to *giving, caring, unconditional kindness, sacrificial serving, joyful delight in the presence of*. Biblically the word love is either of three Greek words: agape (unconditional giving regardless of the response), phileo (brotherly love), or storgos (kindness toward another, Rom. 12:10). Therefore, this "big" word is not unequivocal. The Bible reader must consider the context to understand the way in which this word is being used.

The Little Big Words: SIN

"Sin" is a big word in the Bible. "Sin" was an archery term. If an arrow missed its intended target it was *harmartia* - 'missing the mark' - or in English: *sin*. This idea is carried over into our moral condition before an infinitely holy God. We all miss the mark of His target of moral and spiritual perfection. This apparently little word can damn a person's soul for eternity if left unforgiven or un-atoned for.

The Little Big Words: HELL

"Hell" is a big word in Scripture. Some Bible teachers have sought to redefine Hell as something other than degrees of eternal torment by teaching what is called *Anihilationism* (the idea that God doesn't eternally punish anyone, rather, He simply ends their existence). This is closely associated with another idea called *Universalism* (that all people are actually saved by virtue of Christ's atonement). As Dr Tony Campolo said in his book, "*Speaking My Mind*", that he *warmed to the idea of there being no Hell, the only problem he had was that the Bible says there is!*

But the BIG Words in Scripture are unequivocal

Every good English teacher will tell his students "*Don't use a big word when a small word will do.*" Similarly, they will teach their

students to write *concisely* - don't use a lot of words when you can say the same thing with just a few. But sometimes it is a big word that is both simple and concise. This is especially so if the big word is *unequivocal* (it can only mean one thing). Scripture very carefully uses such big words. Let's look at four of these and then we'll conclude with Christianity's biggest word.

The Big Words of Christianity: PROPITIATION

"Propitiation" is used just five times in the Bible.

*"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have **mercy** on me, a sinner.' (God be **propitious** to me—the sinner! ^{YLT}) Luke 18:13 whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. Romans 3:25*

*For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make **atonement** for the sins of the people (to make **propitiation** for the sins of the people ^{NASB}). Hebrews 2:17*

*He is the **propitiation** for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 1John 2:2*

*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an **atonement sacrifice** for our sins (to be the **propitiation** for our sins ^{NASB}). 1John 4:10*

To understand what this powerful word means, we need to first understand just how strongly God feels about sin and justice. Perhaps the word that most aptly sums up how God feels about sin and what level of justice is required to appropriately deal with sin is: *wrath*. Imagine being angry. Now imagine being really really angry about something you hate. However angry you can imagine getting, you are still

only experiencing an infinitesimal amount of how angry God feels about, and how much He hates, injustice caused by sin. The closest word we have in English to describe this emotion is: *wrath*. Propitiation is God unleashing His fury and wrath upon someone so that His need for justice is satisfied and the guilty can receive mercy. This word does not occur in the Old Testament. Instead the Old Testament word is: *atonement*.

The Old Testament pre-illustrates the truth of the New Testament. It dramatically portrays propitiation and atonement in a ritual ceremony called *Yom Kippur*. Described in Leviticus 16, on this most holy day, two goats were presented to the High Priest. Lots were cast for which goat would be made the sacrificial offering for the sins of the people. The goat *not* chosen to be sacrificed (by the short straw) then witnesses the High Priest lay his hands on the head of the doomed goat and pronounce *the sins of the people be upon you*. It then witnesses its fellow caprine have its throat slit. As the bloodied and slain goat was lifted onto the Brazen Altar, the blood-splattered-yet-living goat would be released to flee through the open gate into the wilderness. This is where the expression "Scape-Goat" comes from.

It is a picture of us on Judgment Day before God. We approach God's Altar like the two goats being brought before the High Priest and have our sins read against us. Two things become immediately clear: (i) We are unjustifiably guilty; and (ii) God is furious about our guilt! But we are not standing before God alone. As God pronounces judgment against us, the One standing beside us steps in front of us to take our punishment and bear the wrath of God. The One standing beside us is Jesus Christ. He was the Yom Kippur Goat. We who have accepted Him as our propitiation are like the goat

that is allowed to escape. And this Old Testament illustration serves to illustrate another big word of the Bible...

The Big Words of Christianity: JUSTIFICATION

If you turned up to our appointment and I said to you, "Justify yourself!" I would be asking you to give a reason for your actions that could excuse your poor behaviour. To justify yourself is to give a good enough reason to be considered innocent. Returning to our Yom Kipur illustration, if we were standing before God on Judgment Day and heard Him say "Justify yourself!" we would soon realise why the Scripture says "*every mouth will be stopped*" -

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. Romans 3:19

In other words we won't be able to answer God. But for those who have received Christ, they won't have to answer because Christ will step in front of us and be our justification before God. What can we possibly say before God to justify ourselves? The only satisfactory answer is: Jesus.

And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. Romans 5:16

Not only is Christ our propitiation, but He is also our justification.

[Jesus] who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Romans 4:25

The Big Words of Christianity: REGENERATION

"Regeneration" is both a long and a big word in the Bible. It is one of the distinguishing hallmarks of Christianity. Without being spiritually regenerated you cannot be a Christian. Jesus used this term in different words when He told Nicodemus

that he must be *born-again* (John 3:3). This is why becoming a Christian is not merely an intellectual exercise. Neither is it merely *turning over a new leaf* morally. The Bible teaches that regeneration is not the result of anything we do. It is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit gracing a spiritually dead person. *he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, Titus 3:5*

In order to understand why people need regeneration, Paul the apostle explained to the Ephesians that all people are spiritually dead without Christ.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins Ephesians 2:1

"Dead" in Biblical terms doesn't mean *cease to exist*; rather it means "separated" (from a life source). To be spiritually dead is to be separated from God by sin.

But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear. Isaiah 59:2

When a person's body is separated from their spirit, they are dead.

...the body apart from the spirit is dead...James 2:26

To be spiritually regenerated by the Holy Spirit is to be reconciled to God through having our sins forgiven and a relationship of adoption established and a warmth of divine fellowship commenced through prayer. Have you been regenerated? It is what the New Testament calls our **First Resurrection**:

I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. John 5:25 (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Rev. 20:5

or as Paul puts it:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— Ephesians 2:4-5

The Big Words of Christianity: SANCTIFICATION

"Sanctification" is only used about six times in the New Testament. It means to purify. Most Christians use this word to talk about their Christian growth. In this sense, sanctification means to grow holier or spiritually purer.

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.

Romans 6:22

There is no doubt that we are to grow in this way. But this may not be the most accurate usage of this word in the New Testament. It seems that sanctification has two aspects. Firstly, there is its judicial aspect. In the eyes of God the reconciled, regenerated adopted child of God is sanctified (made holy) by virtue of Christ. This sense of sanctification is therefore a *past* event. The second sense of the word is the practical aspect. This sense of sanctification is therefore a *present* event.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 1Thess.4:3

The Biggest Word of Christianity: GRACE

But the biggest word in Christianity is not propitiation, justification, regeneration, or even sanctification. The biggest word in Christianity is **GRACE**. Why would a God who demands our happiness and complete joy and that we be at peace with Him and others, be so furious when we replace true happiness for idolatry or peace with others for selfishness? This is partly because this is mutiny in the highest order. It is like saying to God, "*You are inept at running the*

universe! You are the biggest loser in the cosmos! You do not deserve credit for anything! I know more than You. Don't You dare make any rules for me to keep! I want nothing to do with You -Your words - Your will - or Your ways!" From God's perspective, this is the stance of the morally good, decent, civil, educated, caring and even religiously devout person who has chosen to ignore God and His offer of reconciliation. Spiritual deadness ranges from denying there is even a problem (this is called lying - 1John 1:10) to blatant indifference to the consequences of such choices (1Tim. 4:2 - *speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron*). No matter where a person is on this range of spiritual mutiny and treachery, they are completely unable to rectify their situation and find peace with God. But God has chosen to rescue His enemies. What great love! What great grace! This concept of God is unique to Christianity. This is why we can say that *grace* is the biggest word in Christianity. Have you received the grace of God? You don't need to use big words in your prayerful petition to God for it.