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THE MAGAZINE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

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editorial

One of the most important issues to have faced the Presbyterian Church of Australia since Church Union in 1977 has been the role of women in the church. Despite the intensity of feeling about this issue, those of differing persuasions have, for the sake of the gospel, worked alongside one another and maintained a sense of genuine unity within the denomination. All Presbyterians have been the richer for this goodwill and forbearance.

The debate surrounding this subject has been significant for several reasons. The first relates to how we understand the Bible. This is really the eye of the storm. While Presbyterians agree that God's word speaks with fresh power to each new generation, we have been divided over the extent to which we should be sensitive to modern cultural trends in trying to understand the role/relationships of men and women in the light of the Scriptures.

Enter the General Assembly of Australia, which more than 20 years ago ruled that the Scriptures, and not changing cultural trends, determine who holds ministerial office. Despite considerable pressure to admit women as pastors-teachers, the church declined because it believed that its decisions were bound by Scripture alone and not modern culture.

In the wake of this decision, many women within the Presbyterian Church have longed for some clear direction from Scripture and the church courts that will validate their service within the denomination and affirm the significance of their contributions to the spread of the gospel. This is indeed a legitimate concern because the Bible is quite specific in identifying a deliberate and intentional ministry by women and for women in the New Testament. Further, this is not a peripheral issue but one which lies at the very heart of the church's impact upon society.

In this issue of *Australian Presbyterian* we invite readers to progress this matter by rediscovering what the apostles had in mind when they encouraged the deliberate strategy of mature Christian women teaching, mentoring and discipling other women in the church. In Paul's eyes this is a matter of vital importance because as he reminds Titus (2: 4, 5), this ministry is essential to the evangelistic impact and effectiveness of the church within our culture.

Peter Hastie 

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Women's work

The Bible, not feminism, gives women a rich role.



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Dr Duncan's preaching ministry is followed on television and radio, and on the internet at www.fpcjackson.org.

Ligon, the rise of the feminist movement over the past 40 years has brought about lots of changes in the



**J. Ligon Duncan III
talks to
Peter Hastie**

church. How do you assess the impact of feminism on the church?

Actually, the impact of feminism stretches back into the 19th century, although its effects have been most dramatic since the 1970s. Of course, the most obvious place where we see the effects of the feminist movement is in the area of women in mainline Protestant churches who now hold positions of ordained leadership.

However, I think the deepest effects of feminism have been felt in unexpected ways in Christian families. Men have slowly abandoned their responsibilities for spiritual leadership and it's usually the women who bring that to my attention. Today I am increasingly finding women who long for men to take some spiritual leadership in both the home and the church. Tragically, a male leadership vacuum has developed in those areas. I think

that's a direct result of the effects of feminism. The rise of feminism has led men to step back from their God-given responsibilities and it has left women more frustrated instead of fulfilled.

What impact has this had on the church's witness?

Well, one very obvious impact of feminism has been the effect that it has left on Christian children. As fathers have become less involved in the spiritual leadership of their homes, this has had a knock-on effect in the next generation. In the past, at least in my part of the world, children could look back and see fathers and grandfathers who treated their wives tenderly as well as providing strong direction in the home. Men could lead in prayer and take all sorts of spiritual initiatives.

However, few children today can remember fathers like that. Instead, they are more likely to say, "You know, I've never seen my dad pray. It was always mum who got us to church. Dad never took any initiative in spiritual things." The problem is that without strong male role

models in the home, the rising generation of men have been unable to provide the strong and secure leadership that men are supposed to give. So that's the first effect that feminism has had on the church's witness.

The other effect of feminism is that wherever it has had a pronounced doctrinal and practical impact on the church, the Christian community has tended to follow the culture rather than counter the culture. Feminism tends to undermine a distinctive and biblically-based witness and message.

Do you find it strange that many Christians still support the feminist agenda in the church despite the fact that increasing numbers of non-Christians are saying that the feminist agenda in society has failed?

Yes, I do, especially when many of these Christians come from the ranks of evangelical Protestantism. It's rather sad that Protestants have had a cultural history over the last 100 years of jumping on the bandwagon some 20 years after everybody else has jumped off it. We do this repeatedly, and so it doesn't surprise me that many evangelicals are jumping on the bandwagon at the precise moment when everybody else is seeing the problems.

I find it interesting that the feminist social experiment is now under challenge from secularists who are both inside and outside the feminist movement. They are asking the feminists some hard questions about whether the promises they made at the beginning of the movement have been realised or not. The extraordinary thing is that despite the fact that the feminist movement has failed to deliver on those promises, we now find many Christians claiming that the key for being relevant in the world is to embrace those ideals. They say we ought to package feminism in Christian clothing and offer it to the church and to the culture so that we can be more relevant in the world.

I think that's a misguided strategy. I believe the proper approach is to say that we have a radically different message from feminism. Christians are not meant to accommodate themselves to the world; we are meant to be distinctive. Further, we need to make it clear that our opposition to feminism has absolutely nothing to do with a desire for power, control and male dominance in male-female relationships. Instead, our difference in approach is governed by our concern for the spiritual welfare of men and women. We believe that the fruits of feminism are harmful to peo-

ple's lives. Feminist ideology has ruinous effects on relationships and imposes a tremendous burden on families.

Is there anything really wrong with feminism? Are its fundamental assumptions about the sexes flawed?

Yes, feminism has some major problems. Naturally, the average person thinks it's relatively harmless when it's dressed up as equal pay for equal work. But if you look at the roots of feminism, you'll discover that the ideology behind its popular face is either radically pagan or Marxist/humanist. So when you look at the roots of feminist thinking (whether pagan or Marxist/humanist) the problem is that it's a deeply flawed ideology in the way that it evaluates human life, sexuality, gender issues, and success and worth in the culture.

Now the interesting thing is that it is the pagan roots of feminism that have extended their tentacles into the modern church. In a recent feminist conference

This feminist myth – that orthodox Christianity promotes sexual abuse – has been shown to be false. It is an old canard.

sponsored by the more mainline churches in the USA the pagan goddess Sophia was worshiped and offered as an alternative to orthodox, traditional Christian religion. The pagan roots of feminism have been very apparent in these sorts of conferences, indeed much more so than any Marxist or Enlightenment influences.

The problem is that feminist ideals are flawed regardless of which particular ideology informs them. You may have heard about a recent development in Holland where a new law has been proposed that penalises women who graduate from university and do not enter the workforce on the grounds that they have failed to make a satisfactory contribution to society. It seems as though the Dutch government has come to the perverse conclusion that women who stay home and have children are not doing anything worthwhile. I mean, as if rearing the next generation is somehow an unworthy and unprofitable cause? Are they seriously suggesting that producing profits in a capitalist economy is somehow the chief end of man?

The unfortunate consequence of this is that we now have a completely warped view of what's valuable. Have you ever

heard someone say to a woman "Well, do you work or are you a stay-at-home mum?" In fact, the question is nonsense. It presupposes that an activity does not qualify as work unless it is paid. But what stay-at-home mums have you met that don't work – and work really hard? If the truth be known, there are some women in the workplace who choose to be there because the work of raising children is a very demanding calling. So, I think there are some fundamental feminist assumptions about the sexes, about women, and about the value of human beings that are highly dubious.

One other feminist myth which I think we need to expose is the claim that feminism is a response to systemic male abuse of position, particularly in conservative evangelical churches. You may be aware of a new sociological survey that's been done by W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia. It's been published in a book called *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*. Essentially, what he does is to study the incidents of reported abuse in different categories of homes – conservative evangelicals, mainline liberal nominal Protestants, secular etc. He has about four or five different categories. Which category of household do you think has the lowest incident rate of abuse? Interestingly, it's the conservative evangelical complementarian Christians.

In this case, couples share the view that men are supposed to be the spiritual leaders in the home. The role of women in this context is to support their husbands and to nurture their families. In this particular group we find the lowest rate of incidents and my guess is that those statistics could be repeated wherever that kind of survey is done. The simple fact is that this feminist myth – that orthodox Christianity promotes sexual abuse – has been shown to be false. It is an old canard.

Your readers may be interested to know that I serve on the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood which tries to foster a complementarian view of male/female role relationships, that is, where men and women's differences are recognised while their equality before God is affirmed. On numerous occasions we have tried to produce a joint statement condemning the physical and sexual abuse of women with our egalitarian counterparts – the Council of Christians for Biblical Equality – but surprisingly they have refused to produce a joint statement with us because they want to perpetuate the myth that a comple-

mentarian position promotes sexual abuse, even when the facts prove the exact opposite. So this myth is being promoted not only by secular feminists but also by so-called evangelical ones, despite studies providing conclusive evidence that they are wrong.

Lots of Presbyterians say that we ought to avoid the issue of gender within the church because it's not part of our confessional position. Is that realistic?

No, I think it's fraught with problems. We need to face the reality that there is no room for accommodation on this issue. Some people think that we can deal with the problem by ignoring it, but it's not an issue that can be safely left alone. It's one of those issues where you are forced to take a position whether you like it or not. For instance, you are either going to ordain women as ministers or you are not. There is no neutral position on this issue. Similarly, you are either going to urge men to serve their families as spiritual leaders or you are not. There is no ground in between. You have to take a position one way or the other.

Personally, I think that instead of trying to avoid these gender issues because they are not dealt with in the Westminster Confession, what we need to say is, "we embrace this teaching with joy because it's not only biblical but it's also good for you". I think the most helpful approach is to speak about the biblical position on

masculinity and femininity as positively as we can.

Christian feminism is often portrayed as a move to establish equality between the sexes, which is based on the fact that women and men are made in the image of God. Is that a fair description of the origins of Christian feminism? Or are its roots in paganism?

The underlying ideology of feminism and its offshoot, Christian feminism, is fundamentally non-Christian.

This is a very important question because so many people think that feminism, or Christian feminism, is simply about equality. Many Christians, of course, would protest vehemently about any claim that suggested that

Christian feminism was in some way related to paganism. They see Christian feminism solely in terms of women being equally valued and having the same opportunities as men.

Nevertheless, this should not blind us to the fact that the underlying ideology of feminism and its offshoot, Christian feminism, is fundamentally non-Christian. I think church history shows that whenever issues of gender have become controver-

sial in the church it has always been due to the influence of non-Christian thought. Whenever feminists within the church make appeals for equality between the sexes, it is always at the expense of the distinctives which the Scriptures say exist between men and women.

While the Bible certainly emphasises the equal worth of men and women as created in the image of God, it also maintains that we have distinctive roles to play within the family and the church. So when feminism, under the guise of pressing for equality, denies or minimises what the Bible has to say about those distinctions, in my opinion it betrays the non-biblical origins of its ideology. In other words, I am not convinced that so-called Christian feminists are being driven by exegetical considerations when they make their case for equality of function between the sexes; I have a feeling that there's something else driving them and that they are simply going to the Bible to look for an excuse for their program.

I have just reviewed an article by a respected Christian theologian who holds an egalitarian view of Genesis 1 and 2. He says that there is no evidence in Genesis to support the complementary understanding of the sexes; instead, he argues, Genesis upholds the ideas of equality and egalitarianism. As I was reflecting on his claims I asked myself the question: how many times does the word "equality" appear in Genesis 1 and 2? It's not there! The very assumption he is bringing to the text is imported from somewhere else. It doesn't really appear in Genesis 1 and 2, and it certainly doesn't come from any of Paul's expositions of that passage where he always emphasises the distinctions between men and women. So, if there is not exegetical support driving these conclusions, they must be coming from somewhere else. If it's not coming from exegesis, theology, or from the history of the church, where is it coming from? I believe it's coming from a non-Christian ideology.

Is the idea of male leadership in the family something that's grounded in the creation itself, or is it, as it is sometimes alleged by Christian feminists, derived as a result of the fall?

Male leadership is clearly something that arises out of creation. That is affirmed both by Moses in Genesis 1 and 2, and it's acknowledged by Paul in 1 Timothy 2 and 3. As far as Paul is concerned, male leadership is based upon two important factors. One is the priority of creation of the male.



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Many feminist scholars mock Paul's exegesis of Genesis 1 and 2 in which he says that the creation of Adam prior to Eve establishes a specific order in the relationship between a man and woman. Now if we believe that Paul's words are Scripture, then what he is saying is important.

Interestingly, one of the ways that this plays out in Paul's theology is where he emphasises Adam's responsibility as a representative head. Isn't it interesting that although Eve begins the cycle of sin in Genesis 3, Paul says it was Adam's sin that led to our condemnation. Think about this: we see sin in the angelic world with Satan tempting Eve; then, we see Eve herself engaging in sin and rebellion; and finally, Adam joins in that sin as well. But whose sin undoes us all? Paul says that it was Adam's sin.

The way that Paul explains this is by the principle of representation. Adam had a responsibility with respect to others that was not shared by Eve. In Adam we all fell. Paul emphasises it a number of times. For instance, he points out in 1 Timothy 2 that "the woman was deceived". Incidentally, Paul is not arguing here that men ought to be in leadership because women are inherently gullible. Instead, he argues that what happened in Genesis 3 was that role reversal occurred. His point is that while Eve was genuinely deceived by the serpent into doing what she did, Adam knew exactly what he was doing. He had been present the whole time. He allowed the conversation with the serpent to continue and never once intervened. The simple fact is that he knew exactly what he was doing when he took the fruit.

I think Paul is telling us in 1 Timothy 2 that it was the role reversal between Adam and Eve that was a decisive factor in the fall. God had appointed Adam as His special covenantal representative and he disobeyed Him. Despite what the feminists may say, I think it's clear that male/female role relationships are not based upon the curse that God pronounced on the woman in Genesis 3. The truth is that the role/relationship distinction goes all the way back to Genesis 1. It's rooted in the order of creation (man first, then woman); but it's also based upon the representative responsibilities that Adam had.

What does it mean that the woman was originally created to be a helper suitable for the man?

The word *helper* is a rich and powerful word in the Old Testament. Incidentally, it doesn't mean what a lot of feminists

think it means. They caricature the term as though it means a "junior flunky". The problem with that interpretation is that God is referred to in the Bible as the "helper" of Israel. The same idea is present in Isaac Watt's rendition of the Psalm *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*. So it's a strong word; it's not demeaning in any way. Essentially, what it means is that the woman comes to complete and assist man in an area of his need. Moses tells us that Adam had no other creature which corresponded to him; there was no one like him. And so, in order to help Adam, to complement him, Eve was sent to assist



Bob Dylan is right. The ideas of authority and service are inherent in the creation order.

him in his God-given task. It was a task he could not fulfil alone. In Genesis 1 and 2 the only thing that is said to be "not good" is that Adam was alone. Everything else was said to be either "good" or "very good".

Now how is Eve his helper? The Bible says that she completes or complements him in the area of his aloneness. So that which was "not good" – his aloneness – is answered by Eve. And the beautiful thing about that, which our Protestant forbears have stressed since the days of the Reformation, is that it reminds us that the essential function of marriage is to be found in the deep partnership between man and woman. Of course, while sexual union and procreation are important elements of marriage, they weren't the fundamental reason for marriage before the fall. Adam's basic need was for companionship.

Augustine, who believed marriage was essentially for procreation, claimed that if it had been intended solely for companionship, God would not have needed to make someone like Eve; another man would have been just as good. But Luther and Calvin believed that the basic purpose of marriage is companionship. Certainly, procreation is a part of the creation order and children are a blessing from the Lord. But if a woman is unable to have children,

she can still fulfil the basic purpose of companionship within the marriage. And that's what's being spoken of when it says that she was a "helper suitable for" the man.

To what extent are the notions of authority, submission and service built into the created order?

Bob Dylan once said, "you may serve the devil or you may serve the Lord, but you all gotta serve somebody!" And he's right. The ideas of authority and service are inherent in the creation order. As long as there is a creator God who is over all and as long as there are creatures who owe Him their all, there are going to be structures of authority and service in the created order. And so the question is not will you serve? It's who are you going to serve? And Paul reminds us that the essence of sin is that we have decided to serve and worship ourselves as opposed to the creator God.

Now the apostle tells us that in marriage we find a beautiful picture of the lordship and service that exists between Christ and His church. Why should husbands love their wives as Christ loved the church? Why should wives respect their husbands? Because Christian marriage is meant to be a living picture of the structures of authority and service in the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. And the beautiful thing about this picture is that Christ's authority is used in a self-denying and self-giving way towards the church. This means that the church's respect for and submission to Christ is not one which leads to impoverishment for the church; rather, the church submits to Christ because it has been enriched and blessed by Him in a way that is ultimately indescribable. When the church yields itself to Christ it does so as an expression of gratitude for His blessing. So clearly, the notions of authority and service are inescapable in this created order and they will find perfect expression in the new heavens and the new earth.

In *Mega Trends For Women*, it's claimed that men are the main breadwinners and women the home-makers in only 10 per cent of homes. If that's true, how realistic is it to impose a biblical prescription for male/female relations upon people in the church and insist upon them in wider society as well?

Well, first, I agree that a range of economic, social and ideological forces have conspired to create a situation in which

it's not easy to give expression to the biblical teaching on the role/relationships of men and women. The industrial revolution has played a major role in this process. Before that time our ancestors for the most part would have worked along side one another in homes or in small shops. But when the industrial revolution arrived some significant changes took place. Men often had to leave their homes to work. This has meant that most husbands and wives rarely work together.

However, it's interesting that many women in Jackson say that they long to see biblical manhood and womanhood working in their own homes. For instance, I have a number of women doctors in our church who have deliberately chosen to practise only part-time because they really want to be able to make a contribution to their families as wives and mothers. Some of them are prepared to sacrifice salary and advancement in their careers because they want to be good wives to their husbands and good mothers to their children. This is not something that has been forced on them; it's something that they have desired themselves. So, yes, it is hard for biblical manhood and womanhood to be expressed in our homes. There is often a financial cost involved. I don't think anyone pretends that it's easy. But is it worth it? Absolutely.

The same book says that with the rising trend of female clergy and the surging numbers of women graduates from theological seminaries, there are going to be some revolutionary changes in church policy. Do you agree?

Well, first of all we have already seen this happening in mainline Protestantism. The changes started in the 1960s. But interestingly, wherever those changes have come about the churches that adopted them are in deep decline. So to say the changes are on the way is a little late in the day – the cows are already out of the barnyard gate on that score.

Nevertheless, it's still true that evangelicals in the USA are faced with a major challenge. I expect it's the same in Australia. Here in America we are seeing young Bible-believing evangelical women attending seminaries in larger numbers than ever. But these women are not by and large seeking ordination. They simply want to be able to serve in a variety of helpful ways in the churches. The vast majority do not want to be ordained as

pastors and they are not trying to overturn church structures.

So what is the church meant to do with all these intelligent, energetic and godly women? If the Presbyterian Church of America does not have women pastors or elders, how are they meant to employ these talented women who are graduating from seminary? How are we going to use their gifts and abilities in the church? This is an important issue but I don't think it should be the driver for changing the government of the church. After all, the government of the church is not based upon our changing cultural circumstances; it's grounded upon eternal, abiding, biblical principles that never change, no matter what culture we are in.

That's why I am very positive towards women's ministry – I've seen the benefit of it.



I find it interesting that when the apostle Paul gives his instructions on male spiritual leadership in 1 Timothy, he is speaking in the context of a predominately Gentile culture. If ever there was an opportunity, this is it for him to say "OK, we're going to throw off the shackles of old Jewish ways. We are going to get rid of this all-male Jewish elder business. We are in the Gentile world now; we've got to be cutting edge, and we've got to get out there and reach the culture where it is. We're going to throw off all these Jewish restraints and adopt male and female eldership in the church". But he doesn't say it.

He takes an entirely different approach. He says: "In every place I want holy men lifting their hands in prayer and I want men as the pastors and elders." He had every opportunity in that cultural setting to argue for significant change based on sensitivity to Gentile culture, but he doesn't. He says: "No, we are going to stick with the Bible and we are going to ground our relationships in the creation story in Genesis 1 & 2. Further," he says, "we are going to do it this way because God created Adam first and then Eve, and because Eve was deceived." He establishes the government of the church on solid biblical, theological foundations. So I

don't believe that cultural changes necessitate changes in church policy. Nevertheless, I think we have to re-examine the way we use the spiritual gifts and learning of so many talented and godly women.

You are known to be a supporter of women's ministries in the Presbyterian Church of America. Why do you take such a positive approach to women's ministry?

Well, first of all, I have been blessed at each stage of my life by the example of many godly, well-educated, Bible-believing women. My grandmother and my mother, and many of the women in the church where I grew up, were women of learning. They were Bible students who played a constructive role in the life and ministry of our church.

Further, I saw a number of pastors who encouraged these women in appropriate ministries within the congregation. And I realised how important that was, especially in a culture like ours, where everyone is saying "if they are not ordaining you as pastors and elders then they don't really respect you. You've got to fight for your rights; you've got to put your foot down and be heard etc". Here were these pastors teaching and equipping these women for a variety of valuable ministries within the church. I know the women felt deeply appreciated and I know that their ministries were vital for the mission of the kingdom of God. So in my own ministry I have tried to value all the spiritual gifts that God has given us in the church because all are necessary for our growth in love.

For instance, when our women Bible study leaders are preparing to teach different books of the Bible to their groups, I take the leaders' study sessions. I do that, not because I am the only person in the church who can do that, but because I want to send a message to them that I think that what they are doing is very important. That's one of the reasons why I am very positive towards women's ministry – I've seen the benefit of it. My wife, Anne, served in Christian education in two large Presbyterian churches for 10 years, and she too has been a huge influence on me. I can see how her pastors invested heavily in her. Consequently, she became a tremendous asset and support for the pastoral staff, the elders and the women and young people of those churches. And I want to be able to encourage other women to be able to help in similar ways.

How do women continue to partner with you in spreading the gospel and fulfilling God's mission in the church?

Well, women in our congregation partner with us in a lot of significant ways. One vital way is in the diaconal care in the church. Our women in the church work along side our deacons in an extraordinary way. Let me share one story with you. A few years ago there was a man in this church whose father died, and this man had not been a regular attendee of the congregation. And the women in the church, along with the deacons, tried to reach out to him in his time of need. Our deacons try to do a range of things for people who have lost a loved one such as cleaning their homes before the relatives come around, or making meals for them and so on. The women in our church went into that man's home in the days before and after the funeral and provided meals and prepared the house for visitors and family. They really served the family during their time of bereavement. And shortly afterwards, I began to notice him in church every Sunday.

I went to visit him not too long after the funeral and had a long conversation with him. He volunteered to me (not at my prompting) this statement. "Dr Duncan, do you know why I am back in church?" I said "No, but I've noticed that you are in church every Sunday." And he said "I'll tell you why; it was because of those women from the church who came into my home. While my father was dying they took care of my wife, my children and my extended relatives, and quietly served us all. I only realised then how much I needed the church."

Now I am sure that those women would have realised that they were being a practical help to that family, but I am not sure how many of them would have seen what sort of spiritual impact their tangible care was in the case of that man. Here was a man who acknowledged that these women played a vital part in his conversion to Christ. Seeing those women care for him brought home to him God's love for us in the gospel. Now women can have that kind of effect everywhere and that's why many of them are a great help to me in terms of my gospel ministry.

Our women are, of course, also very much involved in teaching one another. And we have two very significant outreach Bible studies for women, not just for our congregation, but for the whole community. Anybody can come, Christian or non-Christian, church or

unchurched. And our women teach those Bible studies to other women. And over the years it's been one of the several things that has led to more people becoming Christians than just about anything else that we have seen. It is truly wonderful when women grasp a vision of how they can reach out to other women by teaching and evangelism. This ministry started under Dr Don Patterson who was the pastor here in the late 1960s through the early 1980s. His wife was an excellent Bible teacher and she started teaching women's Bible studies. And it's grown to where we now have 400 women a week from around the city gathering for Bible studies, and many of them are being exposed to the Gospel for the first time. And the women are having a tremendous impact in that area.

Another area of importance for us where women play a key role is in the area of discipling other women. Our older women come alongside our younger wives and mothers and help them flesh out what it means to be Christian wives and mothers to their families. Naturally, women also play a significant part in supporting missions here at First Presbyterian church. The women play a strategic role in helping us to pull together the logistics of our annual mission's conference, and in our ongoing correspondence with missionaries. So we use women in gospel ministry in many different ways in the life of the local congregation, and all of them are significant for spreading the gospel.

What are the legitimate areas of ministry for women in the church?

I think the apostle Paul sketches out a number of them for us in 1 Timothy 5. In that chapter he seems very interested in showing the significant role that women can have in a range of mercy ministries in a local congregation. In Jesus' own ministry He has a variety of women patrons from the very beginning. Women were there from the start in helping to spread the gospel. The first thing we need to say about the areas for women's ministry in the church is that both Jesus and Paul make it very clear that women are to be

maturing disciples. Of course, that's true for men as well.

The problem is that we don't realise how revolutionary an idea that was in the ancient world. When we hear Paul say "I do not allow a woman to teach or hold authority over men, but to learn in quietness", the thing we latch on to is the prohibition relating to women as teachers or elders in the church. But one of the things that would have struck Jews in the first century on reading Paul's words was his positive assertion that women were to learn. Women, like men, were to be disciples of Christ. This is where we start. I think we need to say, "we want women to be disciples, and to be disciples means that they are going to learn, read, and think as they meditate upon the Scriptures". No church leader should be afraid of educated, thinking, learning, female disciples.

Have any of the approaches tried by Presbyterian churches to cope with the rise of feminism been successful?

Well, one of the approaches, of course, has been the ordination of women elders and pastors. This has been a proposal that has been followed in Scotland, America, Australia and elsewhere. And it's had unfortunate consequences. Let's look at the Church of Scotland. In the 1960s women elders were introduced and part of the thought was, "we don't have enough men to fill these positions so we need to deploy this vast army of women that have been overlooked in the past". Well, look at what's happened. It's now 40 years later and we have fewer male elders than ever before. There has been no church growth; in fact, the church is less than half its size from the 1960s. There is a complete dearth of men in the church in Scotland. And this story can be repeated everywhere it's happened. So, as a strategy for coping with the rise of feminism, I think it was misguided. It ignored the fact that where women lead, men tend to leave. This happened everywhere in Protestantism where the female leadership experiment was tried.

The problem is that if you can justify the appointment of women elders in the light of Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 2, "I do not permit a woman to teach or hold authority", then you can make Paul's statements mean anything you like. If you can get around that for women elders, then you can get around it for women ministers, women bishops, women archbishops, women cardinals, women in any position you want. That's the simple fact of the matter.

ap

Beyond gender

From the battle of the sexes to gender redefinition.

The battle of the sexes is over, or at least is reduced to a skirmish. When feminism burst on to the cultural stage in the 1960s the battle of the sexes was waged with ferocity. But recently the heat seems to have gone out of the discussion. Older feminists complain that younger women take all the advances of a previous generation for granted and aren't committed to defending these hard-won achievements. Younger women are enthusiastic about all sorts of things their mothers resisted in the name of female freedom, from make-up to motherhood.

The debate has moved on to new territory. The burning questions are no longer how the sexes are going to relate, but what anyone means by gender. We are moving into a cultural period in which people are reinventing themselves and wondering if "male" or "female" is a polarity that has to define how they see themselves.

The new game is "redefinition". The most radical version of this is the argument that gender is a social construct and rests on power relations. This claim implies that the whole idea of gender must be restructured so that all can find freedom to define themselves. A less radical version is the view that each person has to



**John
McClean**

work out for him or herself what it means to be "a man" or "a woman". The discussion about "SNAGs" (sensitive new age guys) and "metrosexuals" and "women who run with the wolves" are all about

Esau seems far more "masculine" than Jacob, but the problem with both of them is sinfulness.

how people define themselves. One of the reasons why our culture is intrigued by homosexuality is that we are unsure about what gender means or how it "works".

This seems to be one important reason why the

battle of the sexes is winding up. When you know what it means to be a man or a woman then you have some idea of what you want to fight for, or against, but when it is all up for grabs there is not much

point fighting about it.

What do Christians say and do in the new gender landscape? Are we committed to what people call "gender stereotyping"? Can Christians be part of the "redefinition"? If we are going to help people through confusion we need to have an idea of how we think and act. To think about this we need to ask about creation and sin and God himself.

Christians have always known that it is important to say that the God we worship, the Father of the Lord Jesus and our Father, is the Creator. In the last few years we have rediscovered how important this is in ethics. That rediscovery has stimulated a renewed interest in the first great struggle in Christian theology. This was the debate with the Gnostics, a pseudo-Christian movement which was very suspicious of creation and the Creator.

From that debate Christian theology learnt some great truths. One was that the whole sweep of the Bible shows that God's creation is important. Not only is creation important, but God is committed to saving His creation along with His people and He is doing that through the Son taking on flesh and rising again with a real body. The debate with Gnosticism also showed Christians that if you deny the value of creation and physical bodies you distort the Christian life.

What does ancient Gnosticism have to do with our debates about gender? It all hangs on the affirmation of creation. Since God has made the world and made humans as men and women then being "gendered" is a good thing, part of God's good plan. Gnostics claimed that having a body (and a gender) was a curse and that the best thing we could hope for was to get free from the messiness of being men and women. But the biblical Christian turns to Genesis 1 and 2 and finds out that God made us this way and saw it was very good, and that Adam rejoiced when he met Eve.

All the way through the Bible we find affirmations that men and women are both valuable, both have a role, both relate to God. Sometimes Christians are seduced by the Gnostic vision and start to think that life in eternity will be a bodiless



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and genderless existence. Nothing in the Bible suggests this. When Jesus ascended He had a glorified human male body and when He returns He will transform us to be like Him, glorified humans, male and female.

This means that we don't have to spend our lives trying to define ourselves as male and female, or some other gender. Our gender, or our sexual identity, is already given to us by God. We don't achieve anything by desperately trying to redefine ourselves.

When we recognise that God has made us male or female, we still have to do some serious thinking about that means. It certainly doesn't mean that the only way to be a "real man" is to conform to a standard cultural picture of masculinity. God has made people with a wonderful variety. In Genesis 25:27 Esau may seem to conform to a far more "masculine" stereotype than does Jacob, but the problem with both of them is sinfulness. Jacob is deceptive and greedy, Esau is thoughtless and violent. The fact that Esau loved the fields and Jacob the tents is not the problem.

Christians should feel quite free to discover how God has made them, as men and women. Our goal should be to help people feel comfortable in their own skin and with the kind of personality that God has given them, and help them to work out how to serve God as the person God has made them.

So what is the difference between men and women? The obvious difference is physical, and particularly sexual. Men and women are created differently, and this enables them to enjoy a sexual relationship and to reproduce. The key to gender differences is the marriage relationship and the way in which a man and a woman can live and work together in that special partnership. God has given an order of loving headship and submission within that relationship (Eph. 5:21-25). Gender differences flow out of God's pattern for marriage. In all cultures men will relate differently to men than they do to women. What those differences are will vary greatly between cultures. But we should not be surprised by these differences or embarrassed by them.

On the other hand we should not stress the differences too much. Men and women are all humans! Remember that Adam's first reaction to Eve was not "Hey, she is different from me", but "this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh". We have far more in common with each other. *Men are from Mars, women are from*

Venus is only half right. Much about us is shared.

One of the important things that the Bible says about gender is that men and women are meant for partnership. In Genesis 2, God makes Eve to be for Adam a "helper as his partner" (NRSV). In 1 Corinthians 11, in which Paul is discussing the way men and women should conduct themselves differently, he reminds us that "in the Lord woman is not



Sexuality is one area in which sin is expressed. Men and women wound each other rather than serving each other.

independent of man or man independent of woman" (1 Cor. 11:11). Christians have not always recognised the interdependence of men and women. Aquinas conceded that woman was created as a helper for Adam, but added that "she was not fitted to be a help to man except in generation, because another man would

prove more effective help in anything else". John Calvin said the woman was created as an "inferior aid". They were, of course, men of their age, but they fell short of the Biblical message of the equal value and mutual need of men and women.

So we have a great deal of freedom to explore how we live as men and women. The principles are that we should not try to pretend that gender differences are unimportant and that we should expect men and women to make good partners, especially in marriage.

Like all aspects of God's good creation, sin has taken its toll on our gender identity. There are some rare individuals whose physical gender is not clear. Medical science has recognised that this is a disorder which should be corrected as well as possible. Like other physical disorders it is part of the effect of sin on the physical world. More commonly there are people who are confused about their psychological gender or are unhappy with their physical gender. These people need to be helped. It is no real help to them to suggest that gender is up for grabs and can be redefined however they want. It seems far more helpful for skilled professionals to help them sort it out.

Sexuality is one area in which sin is expressed. Men will try to use women

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and dominate them, rather than treat them as partners (see 1 Peter 3:7). Women will use their sexuality in a way that deceives men (see Proverbs 7:6-23). Men and women wound each other rather than serving each other. Homosexuality is a perversion of sexuality which the Bible condemns (1 Cor. 6:9, Rom. 1:26-27). Christians are often outraged by these sexual sins, and we should be. We need to also remember that they are symptoms of a deep confusion about gender and sexuality. People need to rediscover who they are through the work of the Spirit in the love of brothers and sisters in Christ before they can really leave these sins behind. The church's first responsibility is to be the community in which broken people find a proper reordering of their sexuality.

Christian discussions about gender often lead back to God. Feminist theologians have claimed that speaking of God as "He" and "the Father" makes it difficult for women to relate to God and justifies men controlling and abusing women. They say that "if God is male, then male is God". Instead they want Christians to use inclusive language for God, talk about "Godself" not "He" and to call God "Mother". We should admit that Christians and the church have been guilty of the subjugation and exploitation of women and others and that those who have suffered from abusive fathers or totalitarian pastors might find the description of God as Father or King difficult

and disturbing. But that can not be a reason for giving up the biblical pattern of speech.

We need to remember that whenever we talk about God it is by way of analogy; we don't imagine that our words comprehend God in all His transcendent glory. The church has understood that although God is referred to by masculine terms, He is not male, any more than the human

If we stop using "Him" or "Lord" we abandon God's self-revelation and leave the impression that God is impersonal.

terms used to describe God imply that He is human. However, that makes it even more important that we use God-given analogies which interpret in harmony with each other and the gospel. The Bible consistently uses masculine terms for God.

Elizaebth Achtemeir writes that: "Contrary to those modern theologies ... which claim that God is the great unknown and that therefore human beings must invent language for God that can then be changed at will, the God of the Bible has revealed Himself in five principal metaphors as King, Father, Husband, and Master, and finally and decisively, as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

If we stop using personal pronouns

and gendered titles we abandon God's own revelation of Himself and leave the impression that God is impersonal.

It is also important to notice that God does not conform to "gender stereotypes". He is a husband, but He chases his unfaithful wife to win her back from prostitution. He is the "Lord" who came to serve, not to be served. There are scriptural feminine similes for God used in the Bible (e.g. Num. 11:12; Dt. 32:18; Isa. 42:14; 45:10; 49:15; 66:13; Job 38:29).

What does all this mean for us as gendered persons? Again it means that we shouldn't be embarrassed about being who we are – in some way we reflect God's character. Women certainly should not be made to feel that they are less in God's image than men. We can recognise that as we live in partnership as men and women we reflect something of the wonderful richness of who God is.

We live in a world that is confused about gender and often tries to fight against it. Christians do not need to be like that. We can receive our masculinity and femininity as good gifts from God. We can recognise that each of us is made in God's image and in different ways we reflect God's character. We don't need to be constrained by stereotypes, neither do we need to fight against who we are and pretend gender doesn't matter. We can learn about working together as partners.

John McClean is lecturer in theology at the Presbyterian Theological Centre, Sydney.

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What women want

Australian women find a voice.

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Philippians 1:3-6

God has placed us in a partnership with our fellow Christians in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians walking together in our church communities are members of this partnership. The New Testament uses the word partnership in the context of fellowship and sharing the Gospel with others (1 Cor. 1:9; 1 John 1:1-7). God has made men and women different yet complementary to each other (read Genesis 1 and 2). This article discusses the partnership role of everyday women in the PCA.

Partnership is the relationship between people who have mutual cooperation and responsibility to achieve a goal. We are partners in the gospel regardless of gender, age, ethnic background or career. When Christians work together in partnership, the body of Christ functions in the way that God has designed and He is glorified.

Over the past two years a group from the Women's Ministries Presbyterian Church of Queensland held consultations with people throughout the Presbyterian Church of Australia. The main goal was to collect information about the roles of everyday women in the church in 2007 and beyond.

People were consulted from churches in NSW, ACT, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland. A discussion paper was written and used as the basis for collecting information. People responded to the paper individually, as a group, or took part in one of the 13 focus groups held around Australia. In total, about 600 people were consulted across Australia. The committee ensured that the participants were a representative sample of the church membership through rigorous research design.

The responses were very encouraging and challenging. Around 90 per cent of the responses were from women who



Cecelia Orford

poured out their hearts, passions, hurts and desires. While there was a great range of responses, three major themes emerged. Women wanted a voice in the church and wanted to be heard, they wanted to be encouraged and valued by church leadership to develop their gifts and they wanted to use their gifts for God's service.

Many respondents felt that they had no voice in the church at the local or wider church level. Women reported that when they were asked to contribute by the decision makers before decisions were made they felt valued in their church community. Women do not necessarily want to make the decisions – they just want to make contributions.

Some women expressed that the lack of access to the decision-making process has caused hurt, dissatisfaction, loss of enthusiasm, feeling devalued and resulted in a lack of commitment to working within the church. Some churches are already trying new approaches to overcome these issues. Here is an example of a church strategy for involvement:

- The session sets the general direction and goals of the church.
- Committees are then established to address these goals.
- Members of the congregation are invited to belong to a committee of their choice.
- These committees plan ahead (preferably 12 months) and submit a program for the approval of the session, along with a budget to the committee of management.

Lack of access to decision-making has caused hurt, dissatisfaction, loss of enthusiasm and feeling devalued.

- Once approved, the committee is free to get on with the job.

In this way the session maintains its ruling role and sets the direction of the church while the committee of management maintains fiscal responsibility. Vital tasks of the church are delegated out to a much wider group of people. These people then have a voice in decision-making and can use their skills, experience and initiative.

Women want to be encouraged to nurture, develop and use their gifts. In some churches women reported that their leaders mobilised them through encouragement and equipping. This is a great example of pastors and teachers preparing God's people for works of service (Eph. 4:12).

Encouragement is translated into action with the support of equipping women with resources. The definition of equipping is "to furnish or prepare for service or action by appropriate provisioning". Women are personally responsible to equip themselves and take up opportunities as God leads them. However, it is the church's role to encourage, recognise and affirm individuals and this will enable women to step out confidently in faith and use their gifts.

Some people mentioned that they desired formal theological training. Some felt that there was no suitable course that was flexible for everyday people with busy lives (that is, those not aspiring to be ministers or elders). Some acknowledged that there might be some courses available, but just didn't know. Existing courses need to be promoted by churches and course delivery needs to be flexible for accessibility.

So why do women fail to volunteer for opportunities available to them (even when they possess the gifts to do so)? Many women find it difficult to escape the sense that their contribution is not seen as valuable within the organisation – thus they fail to volunteer. Some women lack confidence to volunteer for service within the church because they have been discouraged, disappointed or hurt in the past and have come to believe they have little to contribute.

Why don't women equip themselves for service? The PCA has very few formal roles or positions for women within the church (paid or unpaid), and many women mentioned that they see little purpose investing time to develop skills they cannot use in the church. While this may be true, each individual has the responsibility to develop and use her skills regardless of the church she attends.

Women reported that where church leaders valued the gifts of the people in their congregation there was more involvement of people in church activities and sharing Christ with others. The majority of respondents believed that gifts were personally bestowed by God regardless of gender, and people should be placed in roles based on their gifts rather than gender. Generally people reported that the church's ministry agenda did not take into account the gifts of people within their congregations.

When women are not considered for non-ordained roles within the church because of their gender they feel overlooked. Apart from the passages that mention authority positions within the church (see 1 Tim. 3:1-11; Titus 1:5-9), the Bible does not distinguish between male and female as far as gifts are concerned (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-16).

The church is a body made up of many parts, each having its own gifts for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7, 12-31). God made men and women different and to be complementary to each other (Gen. 2:18-25). Therefore, the leaders of the church are faced with the challenge of utilising

Many women mentioned that they see little purpose investing time to develop skills they cannot use in the church.



these differences as they seek to develop and implement ministries.

Commitment of the church to model partnership for God's glory requires organisational change driven by the leadership of the church. Encouragement, recognition and affirmation are the keys to unlock hidden gifts. A church that teaches people how to equip themselves and encourages them will find people vol-

unteer to take up more positions of service within the church.

In summary, this consultation has informed the church that women feel respected, valued, confident, and enthusiastic about serving the Lord in the church, when they are being:

1. Taught about spiritual gifts and using them for God's service,
2. Affirmed as partners in roles by the leaders in their church,
3. Recognised for their gifts, abilities and strengths,
4. Provided with opportunities and given encouragement to use their gifts,
5. Provided with resources to equip themselves for service to the Lord and
6. Given a voice in decision making in the church.

Many of the issues raised here apply as much to men who are not elders, as they do to women. Men and women of the PCA are partners in Christ's work. As a church we need to equip and encourage one another to share the gospel of Christ with others.

God's call to the church is clear: to identify, encourage and develop the spiritual gifts of the whole body. The church must give ordinary men and women the opportunity to serve in roles in Christ's church as they are able. When Christians work in partnership, the body of Christ functions in the way that God has designed and God is glorified.

Cecelia Orford chaired the Presbyterian Church of Queensland committee investigating women's roles. The other members were the Rev. John Langbridge, Jan Langbridge, Andrea Pryde, Wendy Henry, Cath Thallon, Lorraine Eastwell and Lyn Nicol. We would like to thank all of the co-ordinators of focus groups in each state and area and all those who provided responses.

ap



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One of the noticeable aspects of this teaching is His concern for women and children. Women played an important part in Jesus’ life and ministry, and His concern for children was an expression of God’s concern for the weak and the vulnerable so clearly set down in the Law of Moses and the exhortations of the Prophets. His high regard for the sanctity of marriage and His abhorrence of divorce are part of this package. His emphasis on servant leadership, modelled so clearly in His own life (and death), was to prepare His disciples for what lay ahead – in the short term, and the long term.

Then as He moves to Jerusalem for the final confrontation with the wicked “shepherds” of God’s people (cf Ezekiel 34), men in bondage to a humanistic mindset, we see the impact of the clash of two opposing world views working itself out in His words and actions.

May God challenge His Church today to reject the ways of the world and to walk in the ways of the Saviour.

Bruce Christian ▶

DAY 1

Be very careful how you live

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 18:1-9

THE POINT The “rules” that govern the way citizens of God’s Kingdom are to think cut right across our natural way of looking at things; the church today ignores Jesus’ strong teaching here at its peril!

THE PARTICULARS

- By nature, unregenerate man has the wrong understanding of what true greatness is; his thinking must change radically (1-3).
- The defining characteristics of true greatness are portrayed by children: not given independent status or recognised as having authority by the world; naive; ignored in weighty matters (2-3).
- Childlikeness is not only a requirement for greatness in God’s

kingdom, it is even a requirement for being allowed in (3)!

- A defining characteristic of the God who reveals Himself in the Scriptures and in His Son, is His particular concern for, and protection of, the vulnerable; He requires the same of us. This is especially so regarding the nurturing of young Christians (5-6)!
- The forgiving Saviour never treats sin lightly; He requires us to be ruthless in dealing with it, even to the point of avoiding anything which, though acceptable in itself, could lead us or others into sin – and hell (7-9, cf Romans 14:13ff, 1 Corinth. 10:23ff)!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What “lawful” “hands/feet/eyes” in your life need amputation?

DAY 2

Little ones to Him belong

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 18:10-14

THE POINT That God has a special “soft spot” for the vulnerable, especially for little children, is clear from many parts of Scripture. Our own society might have moved a long way from God in much of its thinking, but it still is fairly united in its abhorrence of child abuse. As Jesus equates entry into the kingdom of heaven with becoming like a little child, He is able to speak tenderly and passionately about God’s ongoing concern for all who belong to Him, all who have humbled themselves and recognised their absolute dependence on His redeeming grace for their eternal salvation.

THE PARTICULARS

- Christians today don’t talk much about “guardian angels”,

possibly because of the sentimental “froth” attached to the idea; but Jesus and Scripture assure us that we are cared for constantly by invisible ‘ministering spirits’ in heaven (10; cf Hebrews 1:14).

- The more reliable Greek manuscripts don’t have verse 11 (KJV).
- The parable of the lost sheep reminds us of the natural tendency we have to wander from God’s path (cf Isaiah 53:6), as well as reassuring us that we have a gracious Saviour who will do all that is necessary to rescue us and bring us back to Himself (12-14).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What point was Jesus making in particular to the Pharisees?

DAY 3

Disciplined discipline

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 18:15-20

THE POINT Today’s six verses form a unit: major problems arise if we try to understand the points Jesus is making in vv 18, 19 and 20 without seeing them in the context of the point He is making in vv 15-17. Jesus is concerned for the health and purity of His Church (cf Eph. 5:25-27): He is concerned that we are serious about disciplining offending members, and that we do it in a specific way (15-17); He assures us that we have our heavenly Father’s authority to exercise such discipline (18); and He reminds us of the Father’s commitment to truth, so that if the witnesses of v 16 are united and truthful in their testimony, He will vindicate them by both His action on their behalf and His presence among them (19-20).

THE PARTICULARS

- The very first step in dealing with an offending Church member must be a private, confidential confrontation – not gossip! – ever in the hope it will lead to repentance and full restoration (15).
- The subsequent steps, only if necessary, must be: (i) involving as few other witnesses as possible; (ii) involving the full Church leadership; and (iii) as a last resort, excommunication (16-17).
- The promises of vv 18-20 are reassurances, not blank cheques!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- When someone wrongs you, do you talk about them or to them?

DAY 4

Why we must forgive

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 18:21-35

THE POINT Jesus had just spoken about the need for His Church to exercise firm discipline for the spiritual well-being of the offender. This sparked off a different, albeit complementary, train of thought in Peter: What about forgiveness? Like all of us, Peter had a real struggle with forgiveness – not just continuing to forgive people who kept on treating him badly, but even accepting that to do so was necessary. Jesus helped him see his “little” problem in context! The parable He told is a forceful, practical, easy-to-grasp commentary on that very scary phrase He had included in the model prayer He had already taught His disciples: “Forgive us our trespasses/debts/sins, but only to the extent that we are willing

to forgive others for whatever trespasses/debts/sins they might commit against us” (6:12). And we recite it so easily!

THE PARTICULARS

- The Rabbis taught that 3 times was a reasonable effort in the forgiveness department; Peter, sensing that Jesus might want him to be a bit more generous than this, tries for 7! Jesus’ response alludes to Lamech’s unrestrained vindictiveness (Genesis 4:24 could either mean “77” or “490” but He clearly means “unlimited”) and requires of His followers equally “unlimited” forgiveness.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- The parable is self-explanatory. How do you respond to v. 35?

DAY 5

Divorce: never a good option

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 19:1-9

THE POINT As Jesus approaches “enemy” territory in the south for the last time, His opponents again try the “Have-you-stopped-beating-your-wife?” method of tripping Him up. Divorce is a very tricky subject and every way of dealing with it is open to criticism in one way or another. In His Word God deals with such issues by setting before us both the ideal, and how to minimise the damage caused by our fallen nature. How to balance these is not simple.

THE PARTICULARS

- Feeling threatened, the Pharisees challenged Jesus with how to reconcile the teaching of Genesis 2:24 with that of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, hoping that whatever line He took He

could be shown to be at variance with at least one part of God’s Word (1-3).

- Jesus shows clearly that (i) God always intends marriage to be a permanent union between one man and one woman, and (ii) in our sinful world, if God’s non-negotiable plan is departed from, there are guidelines in place to protect us from ourselves (4-9).
- While not seeing divorce as an acceptable option, Jesus allows it – but only to someone whose spouse has committed adultery. (The absence of this concession from Mark 10:10-12 does not require its removal from this part of God’s inspired Word.) (9).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What further light does 1 Cor. 7:1-16 throw on this question?

DAY 6

Marriage: a serious business

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 19:10-15

THE POINT Like ours, Jewish society of Jesus’ day had low expectations of the survival rate of marriages. Men especially took advantage of the concessions of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 to treat marriage as a disposable commodity, a matter of convenience. So the teaching of Jesus in 4-9 really unsettled His disciples. Jesus responded to their protest in two ways: (i) by affirming that marriage is a gift from God and should only be contemplated by those prepared to look to Him to enable them to make it work (11); and (ii) by re-enforcing what He had demonstrated earlier (7-9) concerning His attitude to the care and protection of little children (13-15).

THE PARTICULARS

- Although marriage is God’s plan for humanity, demonstrated in the way He designed us (4-6), Jesus allowed for the single state being a valid option because of circumstances in a fallen world, or simply for the sake of God’s kingdom (12) (Jesus uses the term eunuch, both literally for the genitally impaired – naturally or surgically, and metaphorically, simply to describe singleness.)
- Jesus Himself had clearly declined marriage for the kingdom’s sake, thus giving this as a viable option for those so gifted (11).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- The best thing a man can do for his children is love their mother.

DAY 7

The deceitfulness of riches

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 19:16-30

THE POINT This well known and challenging episode is also recorded by Mark (10:17-30) and Luke (18:18-30). Drawing from all three accounts we see that the man who came to Jesus was rich, young and a ruler. He came with the presupposition that God’s favour is gained by impressing Him with good deeds. In a very incisive, convincing way Jesus demonstrated that this whole approach is impossible: God is so “good” that His Commandments are beyond man’s reach as a qualifying standard. Salvation, “eternal life”, is about what God has done for us, not what we can do for Him!

THE PARTICULARS

- The man probably addressed Jesus as “Good teacher” (cf

Mark and Luke). Jesus’ answer isn’t a denial of His divinity, but a correction to the man’s wrong perspective on true goodness (17).

- Jesus’ approach is worth noting: with regard to Commandments 5-9 where the man has done reasonably well (at least superficially – cf 5:21-48) the test is straightforward; but with regard to 1-4 and 10, which impacted on his wallet, His approach was more subtle – his attitude to his wealth was clear proof that God, His Name and His Day, did not have first place in his life; and there was probably a fair bit of covetousness there as well (18-24).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Why does Jesus respond to the disciples quite differently (25ff)?

DAY 8

Sovereign grace

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 20:1-16

THE POINT This parable is linked to what goes before by the word “for” or “because”. It is a reminder that everything we have is the result of God’s grace, not because we have earned it, or even deserve it. The disciples needed to know that the “reward” for their sacrifices (19:28-29) was still an act of grace, and that, in the end, God’s reckoning is the exact opposite of the world’s (19:30). Any difficulty we have with the apparent gross injustices displayed in this parable, reflecting only the constant struggle we have with the seeming injustice of God’s providence in our own experience of life and history, is a sobering demonstration of the reality that, this side of heaven, we don’t have the whole story. Our God, who always acts with

both justice and grace without letting either diminish the other, is allowed to put the last first and the first last without being accountable to us. This is the story of Job, and at the heart of the doctrine of divine election.

THE PARTICULARS

- We have here a reference point for the value of a denarius (1-2).
- The working parties started at 6am, 9am, 12noon, 3pm and 5pm – all finishing at 6pm. The late starters not only did much less work, they were spared the adverse effects of the hot sun (12).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What part does sovereign grace play in your own testimony?

DAY 9

Discipleship and leadership

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 20:17-28

THE POINT Our old nature does not adapt readily to “Kingdom” thinking.

THE PARTICULARS

- In the compilation of the Gospel records, the disciples could recall several occasions when Jesus had made accurate predictions of the details of His death: that it would be in Jerusalem; that He would be betrayed; that it would be instigated by the Jewish leaders, but would involve the Gentiles; that it would involve cruel treatment leading to crucifixion; and that on the third day He would rise again (17-19; cf eg 16:21, 17:22-23).
- Scripture warns against the harmful effects of selfish ambition (cf Galatians 5:19-21, James 3:16); it is worse when parents

are over-zealous for the advancement of their children (20-21, 24)!

- Like Peter (26:33-35), John and James had confidence in their own courage to face whatever “cup” of suffering their Master seemed to be facing; as with Peter their courage failed, but Jesus’ words were fulfilled in their later suffering and martyrdom (22-23a).
- In Jesus’ kingdom, greatness and leadership are about submissive, selfless service, as He demonstrated in His own life. It is His Father who is in charge – our job is simply to follow (23-28).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is your desire to serve God influenced too much by ambition?

DAY 10

The blind see – others don’t

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 20:29-34

THE POINT Jesus is now into the last leg of His final journey to Jerusalem. He has just talked about humble, sacrificial servant-leadership in His kingdom, and is given an opportunity to show what this means in practice by ministering to 2 blind beggars – against the protest of the crowd who probably considered it “below” Him (31). It also allowed the “outcasts” of society to proclaim Him as their long-awaited Messiah (“Lord, Son of David” – 30, 31) in preparation for others to pick this up as He enters Jerusalem.

THE PARTICULARS

- Matthew reports the healing of 2 men, whereas Mark and Luke mention only 1 man. (The same thing happens with the

incident in 8:28ff.) In saying a man was healed on these occasions the other 2 evangelists don’t say there weren’t more (cf John 21:25), and it suits Matthew’s purpose in addressing a Jewish readership to point out that there were the required “2 witnesses” to the fact of Jesus’ Messiahship (cf 26:60; Deuteronomy 19:15).

- The blind men’s use of the titles, “Lord”, and, “Son of David”, is significant: “Lord” was used to translate God’s covenant name, “Yahweh”, when the OT was translated into Greek ca 180BC; and “Son of David” was a distinct and specific Messianic title.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Are you easily discouraged from seeking the Lord’s blessing?

DAY 11

“Who is this?”...?

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 21:1-11

THE POINT The Triune God, who at this stage was the only one who knew the eternal significance of this visit of Jesus to Jerusalem, choreographed the whole event in fine detail, as became abundantly clear to Matthew and the other disciples after the resurrection. But as it happened, the humble common people on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the annual Passover, who had witnessed Jesus’ Messiah-like qualities throughout Judea and Galilee over three years, were not completely unaware of what was going on.

THE PARTICULARS

- A feature of this “Jewish” gospel is Matthew’s desire to show the detailed fulfilment of OT prophecy in Jesus. He would

have been aware that the poetic parallelism in Zechariah 9:9 would not have required there to be more than one animal, although that there were in fact two is worth mentioning. It would seem that the donkeys’ minder knew the identity of “the Lord” (1-5).

- Jesus entered Jerusalem for His last triumphant battle against the forces of darkness: Man in his wickedness persisting in his refusal to acknowledge the clear rule of God in His world. The crowd’s spontaneous response, using words from Psalm 118, was further proof of who He was – but still they could not see!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What does this event teach us about spiritual blindness?

DAY 12

Money changed – minds fixed

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 21:12-17

THE POINT Jesus knew His death was imminent; He was now in Jerusalem and His final confrontation with the old ways of Judaism was inevitable. The religion of God’s chosen people had become no more than empty worship and rules taught by men (cf 15:8f). Jesus had come to bring new life; the common people recognised readily who He was, but their religious leaders remained blind.

THE PARTICULARS

- The purpose of the money-changers was to help poor travellers fulfil the Law to meet with God when they would otherwise not have been in a position to do so. What was intended to be a spiritual blessing had become a lucrative business, com-

pletely overshadowing the original intention – let the Church take note!

- In casting out the money-changers, Jesus was giving notice that the whole sacrificial system was about to be replaced/fulfilled by His own death as the ultimate and only sacrifice for man’s sin.
- All the evidence was there: the healing of the blind and lame (cf 11:4-6, Isaiah 35:4-6); the praises of the children (cf Psalms 8:2 and 118:6). The indignation of the Jewish leaders who knew the Scriptures was inexcusable – no more could be done for them!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How can the Church avoid the “money-changing” mindset?

DAY 13

They didn't give a fig

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 21:18-27

THE POINT Jesus has just been hailed by the crowd as their Messiah (1-11), and He has challenged the credibility of their religious leaders on their home turf, the temple (12-17). He is about to tell 3 very pointed parables directed against these same leaders (21:28-22:14). So, by using His powerful word to wither a fig tree that failed to fulfil its proper purpose, and by aligning Himself with John the Baptist, whose authority the common people saw as intrinsic and self-evident rather than “formal” and “empty” like that of the leaders, He made it quite clear that the old regime was finished; it had been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

THE PARTICULARS

- Fig trees exist to bear fruit; Israel was God’s “fig tree”, expected always to bear the fruit of righteousness for Him in the world (cf Micah 7:1, Jeremiah 8:13). The fact that Passover was not the fig season (cf Mark 11:13) does not stop Jesus from acting out His parable, and His point would not have been lost (18-20).
- God can do anything; all that He requires of us is faith (21-22).
- The authority invested in Jesus (as it was in John) is so obvious that there is no excuse for those who refuse to see it (23-27).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What warnings are here for the Church today (cf John 15:1-8)?

DAY 14

Hypocrisy

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 21:28-32

THE POINT The fig tree in the passage we read yesterday was all outward show with no substance. John the Baptist had been entrusted by God with authority to proclaim a solid message calling for genuine repentance that would result in life-changing action. Jesus now tells the first of three parables that drive home the significance of His cursing of the fig tree and of His implied claim that His real authority, like John’s, was in the fact that God’s kingdom had now come and it was time for all men to repent!

THE PARTICULARS

- Jesus now mentions a vineyard (28) in case the Jewish leaders had missed the fig tree pointing to Micah 7:1 and Jeremiah

8:13!

- The Jewish leaders gave the outward appearance of lives lived in obedience to God’s Law; it was of first importance to them to be seen as those who said “Yes” to God. In contrast, the lives of “sinners”, the tax-collectors and prostitutes, were a resounding “No” to God’s way of holiness. But when the call to repentance came from John the latter responded with enthusiasm and were granted forgiveness and life, while the former refused to do the one thing required of them: to repent and believe (cf 9:10-12).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is the Church today so concerned with outward appearance that it is failing in its duty to call people to repent and believe?

DAY 15

Envy

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 21:33-46

THE POINT There were many factors involved in the Jews’ rejection of Jesus as their promised Messiah, but they all had their source in the sinfulness of Man’s heart. Yesterday’s parable exposed their hypocrisy; today’s will expose their envy; and tomorrow’s will expose their complacency. The common element in all these sins is pride, the one thing that will keep us from admitting our need of a Saviour, and therefore from true repentance and saving faith.

THE PARTICULARS

- The description of the vineyard here (33a) is so close to Isaiah 5:1-2 that the Jewish leaders could not have failed to see the connection; the point Jesus was making in the parable therefore was obvious, confirmed by the other details through-

out (45).

- That God was the vineyard owner in the parable, the Jewish people the tenant farmers, and the various OT prophets the long line of servants sent throughout the history of God’s dealings with His chosen people, is inescapable in the setting in which it is told (cf 23:27-39). This parable does not pull any punches!
- Jesus again clearly declares His self-conscious identity, and predicts His death at the hands of the Jews, using Psalm 118:22f to show that this is all part of God’s intended Plan of Salvation.
- We either turn to Jesus in repentance and “fall” on Him for mercy or we remain under God’s judgement and are destroyed (43-44).

DAY 16

Complacency

THE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 22:1-14

THE POINT The setting of this parable with a king, his son, a wedding feast and (chosen) guests with a long-standing invitation makes it impossible to miss Jesus’ point: the Jews are God’s chosen race; God has sent His Son among them to celebrate the taking of His Church as His Bride; but His chosen people are so pre-occupied with their own affairs, and so complacent about their status as the elect, they don’t even realise they’re under God’s judgement.

THE PARTICULARS

- Jesus speaks of both passive indifference and active hostility on the part of the Jews towards God’s gracious offer of salvation to them through His Son; both are punishable offences (3-7).

- Jesus hints that God’s time of special covenant dealing with the Jews as a race is coming to an end, with even a veiled reference to the complete destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD (7). Instead, the gracious invitation is extended to “outsiders”, the Gentiles, in all their unworthiness, and then it will be obvious to all that God Himself must supply the necessary righteous “cover” (8-12).

- Salvation is by grace alone; it includes both the “good” and the “bad”, but is never for those who think they deserve it (11-13).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How does 2 Peter 1:3-11 help us avoid the sin of complacency?

DAY 17

*God and Caesar***THE PASSAGE****MATTHEW 22:15-22**

THE POINT The purpose of the question about paying taxes was to put Jesus in an impossible situation: the really zealous Jews saw it as a God-given duty to resist Roman oppression with determination, and the passive paying of taxes therefore as a compromise with evil; but if they could get Jesus to endorse a non-payment policy it would strengthen any case they might be able to bring against Him before the Roman governor (cf Luke 23:2). Jesus' answer not only silenced them but gave Him the opportunity to teach us how to live as faithful citizens of heaven while at the same time fulfilling our obligations as responsible pilgrims in the world.

THE PARTICULARS

- The good things the emissaries said about Jesus in addressing Him were all in fact true; but flattery should always ring alarm bells, warning us of a possible trap (15-17, cf Proverbs 26:28).
- Ultimately, everything belongs to God, and He is to be the focus of every part of our lives (cf 6:33); but He has called His people to play an important role as His ambassadors in the world, and to do this we will need to fulfil our obligations of living in a society with others – to be in the world, but not of the world.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How do you set about resolving difficult issues of conscience?

DAY 18

*Love and marriage***THE PASSAGE****MATTHEW 22:23-33**

THE POINT Again, Jesus not only answers a trick question wisely but uses the occasion for some important teaching. If we look at Genesis 2 in the light of what Jesus says here, and in the light of what God knew was going to happen in Genesis 3, we see that some aspects of marriage were set in place only for the “earth phase” of our existence. In particular, procreation, and the exclusive one-man-one-woman relationship within which it would occur, are only for life on earth. There will be discontinuity as well as continuity between our existence on earth and in heaven (cf 1 Corinthians 15:35-50): our loving relationships on earth will continue (and be even better!) but there will obviously be no need or place for the

procreation/exclusive aspect of marriage.

THE PARTICULARS

- The law used by the Sadducees to concoct their conundrum was the levirate law in Deuteronomy 25:5-6; but their whole case disintegrated when Jesus pointed out the error of transferring how life on earth works to the heavenly realm without change.
- The Sadducees' wrong view about the resurrection came from an inadequate view of God and of His propositional revelation in Scripture. The actual (infallible) words of Scripture matter!

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- Is your picture of heaven too limited by earthly perspectives?

DAY 19

*Love at the centre***THE PASSAGE****MATTHEW 22:34-40**

THE POINT There is nothing worse than a multiple choice exam question (or even a question on a form) when you are only allowed to tick one box and leave yourself open to the accusation that all the other possibilities are wrong! This is what the Pharisees hoped to achieve by getting Jesus to single out just one commandment above the others. Again Jesus not only silenced His critics but taught a concise summary of the whole law, in fact of the whole of Scripture: Love God, and love your neighbour; if we get this right, everything else will automatically fall into place.

THE PARTICULARS

- The fact that genuine, self-sacrificing love (agapé) is at the

very heart of who God is and how He designed us to operate, is the basic theme of Scripture (cf 1 John 4:7-21, Rom. 13:8-10).

- Jesus deliberately puts the commandment to love God with all of everything that constitutes our being (Deuteronomy 6:5) as first, and the commandment to love our neighbour on a par with self (Leviticus 19:18) as second. Both are equally important but, as is often the case, it is not always easy to balance them in life.

- Jesus subsumes, not abolishes, all the other commandments (40).

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How did Jesus test the rich young man on these commandments (19:21)? How do you go? Why do we need a Saviour?

DAY 20

*God became man***THE PASSAGE****MATTHEW 22:41-46**

THE POINT Now it is Jesus' turn to ask a question. The basic cause of their spiritual blindness, the fact that they did not, or rather could not, recognise Him as their promised Messiah (Christ), was that they could not accommodate the idea of God becoming Man. Such a possibility was not on their radar. In this respect they were no different from every other human being who rejects the evidence concerning Jesus – evidence that proves His divinity.

THE PARTICULARS

- Nothing could be clearer in the Jewish mind than that Messiah would come from the line of David; this meant that He would be a man. For 1,000 years (and for 2,000 years

since!) they had been waiting for this descendant to appear among them, and in spite of Isaiah's prophecies about a virgin birth (7:14) and His being called “Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father” (9:6) they were not prepared for a man who actually claimed to be God and to have come from heaven; in fact, these claims offended them, blinding their eyes to His divine powers.

- Jesus was able to point to one of their acknowledged Messianic psalms (110) to show that Messiah was also David's “Lord”.

TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How important is Jesus' divinity to your understanding of Him?



Across Australia

Harman's new role

Professor Allan Harman, former principal of the **Presbyterian Theological College** has been appointed the new chairman of the **Religious and Advisory Committee to the Services**. Professor Harman, a long-time air force chaplain, recently spoke to a conference of senior chaplains in Bowral, NSW, having just returned from Sao Paulo for the **World Reformed Conference**. "Being retired is proving to be extremely busy for us both," commented his wife, **Mairi**.

Fellowship appeal

A special meeting of the **General Assembly of Australia** will be held to give consideration to the numerous appeals from members of the **Trinity Presbyterian Church, Camberwell (Vic.)** and others against decisions of the **General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Victoria** made with reference to the dismissal of the Session of Trinity in 2006. The assembly will be made up of the commissioners elected by the presbyteries and State Assemblies to the 2004 GAA. The date has yet to be announced.

Korean minister welcomed

On 25 February, the **Presbytery of WA** conducted a service of welcome and commissioning for the **Rev. Sung Tae Kim** into the **Perth Korean Presbyterian Church**. The congregation has grown so much in recent times that a new and larger venue needs to be found. There are about 150 people in church worship every Sunday. The presbytery has re-appointed the **Rev. D.B. Thatcher** to part-time ministry (0.5 or three days a week) with **Living Hope Presbyterian Community Church** for two years from 1 March 2007.

The **Rev. Keith Morris** recently presented the presbytery with plans and a report concerning a fully integrated redevelopment of the **Peppermint Grove** church site including major renovations and alterations to the historic church hall costing about \$825 000. The completion of this project will mark another significant step forward in the work in this spiritually very needy part of Perth.

New nursing director

Tracey Szanto has taken up the role of executive director of nursing at **Allowah Presbyterian Children's Hospital** in Dundas, Sydney. Allowah is the only hospital in New South Wales caring for children with severe/multiple disabilities. It was bought by **Presbyterian Social Services** in February 2004. On February 8 a special service was held at the **Beecroft Presbyterian Church** to commission Mrs Szanto. Beecroft minister **Paul Cooper** spoke of the huge responsibility and privilege involved in caring for so many children suffering from multiple disabilities.

Colin Llewellyn, the chief executive officer, said many hearts had been touched since the Presbyterian Church bought the hospital, and that many people had been challenged to financially support the work, but even so only half the building costs had been raised.

PIM patrols reorganised

The **Presbytery of Western Australia** has agreed to reorganising **Presbyterian Inland Mission** work in the state into three new patrols. These are the **Kimberly (Fraser-McAuliffe)** patrol which, it is hoped, will be worked out of the re-established PIM Church in Darwin; the **Mid-West (Shearer)** patrol, now worked by Mr and Mrs **Bert Pierce** of the **Henderson** congregation in **Leederville**; and the **South-East** patrol.

Capill heads RTC

The **Rev. Dr Murray Capill** has been appointed as the new principal of the **Reformed Theological College** in Geelong from 1 January 2008. Dr Capill, a noted preacher, writer and speaker, will take over from the **Rev. Dr Henk De Waard** who has served as principal since 1997 and retires at the end of the year.

Missionaries return

David and **Lalit Clarke, mission partners** APWM associate missionaries, are heading home from their ministry in Cambodia in early until late July of this year for a brief home assignment. The Clarkes are very keen to visit churches/mission groups/PWMUs who are interested in their ministry – whether or not they have visited previously. Mr Clarke has asked that the **Rev. Phillip Burns** of the APWM-mission partners handle any requests for this home assign-

ment. He can be contacted on philipburns@gmail.com.

Scotch principal retires

Dr **Gordon Donaldson** has announced that he will retire at the end of the year as principal of **Scotch College** in Melbourne. Dr Donaldson is in his 25th year as principal. All areas of the school have developed tremendously under his administration. The Presbyterian Church has expressed gratitude for Dr Donaldson's dedication to the Christian goals of the school as expressed in our Articles of Association; especially the pursuit of the "ideals of Christian citizenship" and "a spirit of reverence in the life and work of the college". The college council has now to find the school's ninth principal.

African appeal

Congregations around Australia have given more than \$60,000 in Christmas Day offerings to the **Moderator-General's Mercy Appeal for Africa**. This will have long-lasting and far-reaching effects in the work of sister Presbyterian churches in **Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe** and **Sudan**.

Culture and gospel

Fire on the Mountain's 2007 teaching program will focus on illuminating aspects of Australian culture in the light of Scripture. Questions asked will include how should Christians understand and relate to our political system, how can we be in the world, but not of it, can there be a truly biblical spirituality offering genuine hope in a pluralistic culture, and what should be our concern when dealing with our children's education?

Speakers include **Dr Peter Lillback**, senior pastor of **Proclamation Presbyterian** in Pennsylvania and president of **Westminster Theological Seminary**; **Dr Nicholas Aroney**, senior lecturer of law at the **University of Queensland**, **Dr Noel Weeks** and bioethics specialist **Dr David van Gend**. The conference will be at **Mount Tamborine** from 10 to 12 August. For more details, visit www.fireonthemountain.org.au

Vale Robert Curran

Elder **Robert Curran**, an elder of **Ringwood-Heathmont (Vic.) Presby-**

terian Church since 1994, passed away on 5 February. He had served as elder and session clerk at his previous parish in Shepparton. The Ringwood-Heathmont session write that Mr Curran was a well-loved, respected and dedicated elder of this congregation, whom he served as treasurer, as representative elder to the **General Assembly of Victoria** and as a parity elder to Presbytery.

He was appreciated as a lay preacher; and to his brother elders and those placed in his care, he was a caring and thoughtful friend who was willing to go "the second mile" whenever asked. A well-attended thanksgiving service was held at Heathmont on February 9.

Vale Ron Trail

Ronald William Trail, a long-standing servant of the Presbyterian church and moderator of Victoria in 1989, passed away in December, aged 84. He and his wife **Emma** had three children, **Jen**, **Geoff** and **Ro**. Rejected by the Army, Ron developed a deep hunger for prayer, preaching, teaching and evangelism. In fact Saturday nights once spent at dances were now spent at evangelistic rallies. God had set an open door before him, and even his obstacle of speech impairment was overcome.

During 11 years of theological study, he served as home missionary at **Kongwak (South Gippsland)**, **Manifold Heights (Geelong)** and **South Oakleigh**. His exit appointment was to **Daylesford** where he served for three years. He was ordained by the **Presbytery of Macedon** on 6 May 1955, and celebrated 50 years on 6 May 2005. Ron and Emma served 10 years at **Bunyip** from 1958 and another 10 at **Narracoorte, South Australia**. They then moved to **Epping-Lalor** where he was able to exercise his pastoral skills as Presbyterian chaplain to the **Royal Children's** and **Royal Melbourne Hospitals**. He served his last three years before retirement at **Sunshine**.

He also served as moderator of the **Presbytery of Latrobe Valley** (1963-1964); clerk of the **Presbytery of Penola** (1972-1978); clerk of the General Assembly of the **Presbyterian Church of South Australia** (1974-1978); and clerk of the **Presbytery of Melbourne West**.



Around the World

Persecution network

Fifteen organisations working for the persecuted church have met in Amsterdam and formed a network called **The Religious Liberty Partnership**. This network, set up on 8 March, will meet annually, while a working group, consisting of five members, will handle cooperative action during the year. The chairman is **Merwyn Thomas** of **Christian Solidarity Worldwide, UK**.

The aim of the network is to coordinate efforts, inform about the needs of the persecuted church and the work of the organisations, and to pray together. Through this unique network the religious liberty bodies believe that the suffering church can receive more relevant help than ever before.

Among the members are leading organisations such as **Open Doors**, **Voice of the Martyrs**, **Christian Solidarity International**, **Christian Solidarity Worldwide**, and **World Evangelical Alliance**, together with around 10 similar organisations. New members can be included in the future.

Scots reject gay unions

The Church of Scotland has voted overwhelmingly against a proposed church law to allow ministers and deacons to conduct services of blessing in conjunction with civil partnership ceremonies. The **General Assembly** in May 2006 decided to consult the church presbyteries on whether to give permission to conduct such services. The proposal would have needed a majority of the Kirk's 45 voting presbyteries to be accepted. The final results of this vote are that 9 presbyteries voted for the proposal while 36 voted against.

Gordon Kennedy, chairman of evangelical group **Forward Together**, said: "It is sometimes said that the church is

divided down the middle on this issue, but this clear vote suggests otherwise. Had the proposal been adopted, it would have been a significant departure from the Bible's teaching and historical Christian practice. We believe that such a move would have caused dismay to the great majority of church members, and also to many of our ecumenical partner churches."

Anglicans accept schism

Liberal American Anglicans seem willing to accept the break-up of the worldwide Anglican communion over gay clergy and same-sex blessings. "I would accept schism," **Bishop Steven Charleston**, president of the Episcopal Divinity School, told *The Washington Post*. "I would be willing to accept being told I'm not in communion with places like Nigeria if it meant I could continue to be in a position of justice and morality. If the price I pay is that I'm not considered to be part of a flawed communion, then so be it."

New York Bishop Mark Sisk told the *New York Times*: "Being part of the Anglican Communion is very important to me. But if the price of that is I have to turn my back on the gay and lesbian people who are part of this church and part of me, I won't do that."

Notably, the gay and lesbian people who are part of Sisk's church say the choice is stark. Both the current and former heads of Integrity, the denomination's main gay organisation, say there's no middle ground between approving homosexual behavior and staying in the Anglican Communion.

Bones found at hospital

In India, where gender-based abortion and infanticide are problems even in the Christian community, hundreds of bones and other human remains have been discovered on the grounds of **Ratlam Christian Hospital**, a mission hospital in **Madhya Pradesh**. The **Church of North India's Bhopal diocese** runs the hospital, and Catholic officials say there's a conspiracy at work. Diocesan spokesman **Suresh Carleton** says the hospital "was framed" and that the remains belong to stillborn babies.

"It seems to be conspiracy by some quarters like the (Hindu extremist group) **Bajrang Dal** to damage the reputation of the hospital and the Christians in the state," Bhopal Bishop **Laxman Maida**

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told the *Indian Catholic* newspaper. "It is a ploy to defame us. I was inside the hospital when the Bajrang Dal activists were on a rampage, shouting slogans against Christians, that we convert and alleging feticide. We don't do abortions, and we don't even have the machine."

Haggard findings released

Overseers at **New Life Church** in the US have disclosed some of their findings from their investigation of **Ted Haggard** and the congregation's current leadership. "Numerous individuals ... reported to us firsthand knowledge of everything from sordid conversation to overt suggestions to improper activities to improper relationships," **Larry Stockstill**, who pastors a church in Baton Rouge, told **New Life** during Sunday morning services. "These findings established a pattern of behavior that culminated in the final relationship in which Ted was, as a matter of grace, caught."

The overseers also corrected widespread reports that Haggard had been "cured". "There should be no confusion that deliverance from habitual, life-controlling problems is a journey and not an event," Stockstill said. "Ted will need years of accountability to demonstrate his victory over both actions and tendencies."

As for the current church leadership, the overseers said, "We have found a few staff members struggling with unrelated sin issues. Each such person has been confronted and has submitted to discipline. To our relief, we are finding no culture of immorality among the staff here as we might have initially expected."

Indian pastor stabbed

The body of a 29-year-old pastor was found with stab wounds on February 20 in a canal in Krishna district of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. **Pastor Goda**

Israel was found dead in a canal near his house in **Pedapallparuru** village. The slain pastor, who is survived by his wife and small children, was overseeing 15 churches that he established in the region. "Pastor Israel had earlier been threatened by Hindu extremists due to his involvement in the preaching of the gospel in the area, and he had no enmity with anyone," a leader with **Emmanuel Mission International** who requested anonymity told *Compass*.

Pastor jailed

An Uzbek criminal court has sentenced Christian pastor **Dmitry Shestakov** to four years in a prison colony for alleged "illegal" religious activities. **Judge M. Tulanov** of the **Andijan Criminal Court** handed down the harsh verdict against Shestakov on March 9. One of the nation's leading evangelical pastors said Shestakov's unexpected conviction could have "grave consequences" for Protestant Christians in Uzbekistan. "Perhaps it already has," the pastor told *Compass*, saying that over the past weekend, many more incidents had been initiated against Christians in a number of places across the country.

Muslims renew arson

Muslim students twice have set fire to a high school chapel in Zaria, Nigeria, here since it was rebuilt last August, after Islamists burned it down three years ago. In January, Islamic students at **Government Science Secondary School** in Kufena, in the Wusasa area of Zaria in the northern state of Kaduna, set fire to the **Chapel of Adonai**, which was rebuilt last year with services restored in September. The most recent arson attempt, as well as one in December 2006, failed when Christian staff members and students at the high school put out the fires. **Pastor Samuel Nuhu**, a teacher at the school, told *Compass* that in 2004 Muslim students burned down the chapel and attacked Christian students, many of whom needed hospital treatment.

Burma hunts Christians

The military government in Burma has again asked for lists of all the names of Christian children's homes, assemblies, church pastors, leaders, members and families. The military government has also fixed the time for worship which forbids

Christians to meet outside these "official" times. Christian leaders in Burma do not know what the government is going to do with the lists.

Christian homes burnt

Police detained Christian families in Upper Egypt and forced them to deny arson attacks on their homes during an outburst of anti-Christian violence last month. Two Coptic Orthodox families have said police detained them for 36 hours when they attempted to report a February 13 assault on their homes in **Armand**, 600 kilometres south of Cairo. The fires came five days after Muslim groups set four Christian-owned shops alight on February 9. It is believed hostilities began over accusations that Christians were blackmailing Muslim women to convert. Authorities detained Christians when they tried to report the February 13 arson attack on their homes.

Christian kills uncle

A Christian child has been sentenced to five years in juvenile detention in Northern Iraq for fatally stabbing her Muslim uncle while he beat her for converting to Christianity, her lawyer said. **Judge Satar Sofe** convicted 14-year-old **Asya Ahmad Muhammad** of murder at the trial's first hearing on February 7 in Dohuk's juvenile court. Muhammad's defence lawyer appealed the ruling on February 17, questioning Sofe's conclusion that the killing had been intentional. "The court should consider Maria's [Muhammad's Christian name] case unintentional killing because she didn't intend to kill her uncle," **Akram Mikhael Al-Najar** told *Compass*.

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On the Agenda

Kidnapped for conversion

Victor Udo Usen, a member of the **Christ Apostolic Church** in the northern Nigeria city of **Sokoto**, went missing in November. On 20 February, news that young Victor was spotted in a Muslim neighbor's house jolted his family. A young Christian girl had raced to the Usens' home with the news.

Victor's mother, Esther Udo Usen, told *Compass* that she ran to the house where her son had been seen. She met him, however, even as he was making frantic efforts to escape from the house where he has been held incommunicado for six months.

"I quickly held his hands and dragged him along with me towards our house," she said. "But within a twinkle of an eye, I heard shouts of 'Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar [God is great]!' I was shocked as I saw a large number of Muslims rushing towards us."

The mob surrounded them and snatched her son away from her, she told *Compass* with tears in her eyes. Before she could send for her husband, members of the mob told her that her son was now a Muslim and that she and her husband were no longer his parents.

"They abducted him in November last year, and I only saw him today," she told *Compass*. "How can someone force my son into his religion?"

Victor's father, **Udo Usen**, said: "I thought, 'If I force myself into the house of that Muslim to get my son, I will not only be placing the lives of my family at risk but also creating room for them to attack other Christians in Sokoto.'"

They complained, but "the police told

us that they cannot do anything at the moment until the **Sultan of Sokoto**, the leader of Muslims in Nigeria, returns from his trip," he said. "They have held this boy for six months without our consent. They have forced him into Islam. How can they do this to a 13-year-old child?"

Esther Thomas Tambari, a Christian neighbor of the Usens, corroborated the facts of the abduction to *Compass*. "The Muslims, we learned, have changed Victor's name to Abdulkarim," she said. Tambari said the Muslims had also threatened her son several times.

Tambari said: "I took Victor's mother to my pastor, who in turn asked her to report the matter to the police. Now the Muslims are after my son, Simon, and me. My landlady, who happens to be a Muslim, has threatened me with ejection from her house, and my son's life is at stake."

Christian leaders in Sokoto there say abduction of teenage Christian boys and girls has become a common phenomenon in majority-Muslim Sokoto state. They are worried that the kidnapping trend is on the increase, creating tensions between Muslims and Christians.

The Nigerian government, they concur, knows of the abductions but has done nothing to protect Christian children from religious predators.

Compass

PCUSA in strife

By Leslie Scanlon

Fed up with what they see as a liberal slide in the **Presbyterian Church (USA)**, the **New Wineskins Association of Churches** voted on 9 February to initiate a significant shift in the Reformed world.

Meeting in Orlando, New Wineskins voted unanimously to ask the **Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC)** to create a transitional, non-geographic presbytery for congregations leaving the PCUSA. The arrangement would run for five years. The EPC's General Assembly will vote on the proposal in June.

"I have a high level of confidence we're going to approve that," said EPC clerk **Jeffrey Jeremiah**.

For the EPC, a small denomination with 185 churches and about 70,000 members, this could be a significant alliance. Jeremiah said New Wineskins leaders have told him at least 40 of the association's 153 congregations will join the EPC.

Some high-profile PCUSA churches have already begun the process of depart-

ing, with plans to join the EPC. **Signal Mountain Presbyterian**, a 2000-member congregation near Chattanooga, Tennessee, voted 1172-10 to leave the PCUSA. North Carolina flagship congregation **Montreat Presbyterian Church**, where **Ruth Graham** has long been a member, voted 311-27 on January 21 to ask for release.

"Our church has been vigilant in its effort to call our denomination to repentance," said **Adam Boyd**, a Montreat elder. Vigilant but unsuccessful, he admitted.

Christianity Today

Clamp-down on divorce

Pope Benedict XVI has warned Vatican judges to get tough on couples who ask the Catholic Church to annul their marriages.

The Pope ordered the clamp-down after new figures showed that the church's appeals court allowed 69 annulments in 2005 for reasons which included husbands being too attached to their mothers.

The court, known as the **Sacra Rota**, considers petitions from couples claiming their marriages were never truly valid. Apart from the get-out clause for women married to "mummy's boys", an "inability to assume conjugal obligations", usually due to a childhood trauma, appears among the successful reasons for annulment in 2005, as do alcoholism, use of cannabis, infidelity and a serious lack of "moderation in judgment" by a partner, meaning jealousy or a propensity to lie.

The Vatican does not permit divorcees to remarry in church and a growing number of annulment requests are winding their way from lower ecclesiastical courts to the appeals court in Rome.

Princess Caroline of Monaco was able to annul her 1978 marriage to **Philippe Junot** on the grounds that they had produced no children.

But the Pope appeared to take a hard line recently when he told the court's 20 judges to "respond with courage and faith" to "a distorted interpretation of the canonical norms in force".

He has criticised the Italian Government's plans for a law defining rights for unmarried couples. Marriage, he said, was in danger of becoming no more than a legal agreement, "manipulated at will", and "denied of its heterosexual character". **Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi** has said that a bill on civil (same-sex) unions is close.

The Guardian

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The slippery slope

Why we struggle to gain our moral footing in bioethics.

The Abraham Centre of Life bills itself as “the world’s first embryo bank.” Clients of the San Antonio, Texas, centre will be able to place their orders for ready-made embryos after perusing a detailed profile of sperm and egg donors.

“We’re just trying to help people have babies,” Jennalee Ryan, the centre’s founder, told *The Washington Post*. Bioethicist John A. Robertson told *the Post* that embryo banking is not much different from what fertility clinics already do. “People are already choosing sperm and egg donors in separate transactions. Combining them doesn’t pose any new major ethical problems.”

But embryo banking is not morally neutral. It is another step down the slippery slope toward the clear evil of eugenics. According to global projections, 200,000 people are born annually using in vitro fertilization (IVF). The US is the world’s largest user of IVF with 112,000 treatments a year.

For many years, IVF proponents dismissed fears about IVF abuses as irrational slippery-slope arguments. But now the Abraham Centre for Life, through embryo selection, is moving society farther down the slope. This abuse of biotechnology opens the floodgates for commercialising human life. When will the embryo drive-through service start?

The slippery slope is real, and it involves a broad cross-section of the bioethics industry. W. Jay Wood, associate professor of philosophy at Wheaton College, notes that the Christian view of sinful human nature makes slippery-slope arguments credible. “Humans naturally test limits. Any cop will tell you that if you post a 35-mph speed limit, drivers will

go 38, 40, 42, until the law cracks down.”

Slippery-slope reasoning is not fool-proof. Wood says: “The illegitimate versions can’t tell a plausible story about how logically or causally taking step A will inevitably or very probably lead to step Z.” But common sense suggests that new choices, provided by new technologies, will motivate many people to test the moral limits of these choices.



You don't need religion to tremble at the thought of unrestricted embryo research.

In 1973, the supposedly moral case for legalised abortion was bolstered when advocates said the “procedure” would be used only rarely. But once the personhood of the not-yet-born was violated by judicial fiat, abortions multiplied beyond imagining. Some 48 million lives have now been lost through abortion in the US.

In 1978, Louise Brown became the world’s first test-tube baby via IVF, a procedure in which more human embryos are produced than are actually implanted. These “leftover” embryos are either frozen for future use — an estimated 500,000 are on ice in fertility clinics across the country — or “discarded”. (A relative few are adopted.)

Next, in 1999, President Clinton’s bioethics commission said destroying these “spare embryos” to obtain their stem cells was justified because society had already approved of IVF. (President Bush’s 2001 decision to veto funding for further embryo destruction may not outlast his presidency.)

Now certain scientists are asking why they have to wait to use frozen embryos, when the technology to clone them is on the horizon. It doesn’t take much imagination to foresee scientists moving seam-

lessly from “therapeutic” (research) cloning of humans to reproductive cloning to satisfy the desires of an increasingly demanding public.

Columnist Charles Krauthammer, though a proponent of legal abortion, joins many pro-life Christians in fearing the slippery slope in this realm of bioethics: “You don’t need religion to tremble at the thought of unrestricted embryo research. You simply have to have a healthy respect for the human capacity for doing evil in pursuit of the good.”

In San Antonio, you can take that to the bank.

This Christianity Today editorial was published in January. In Australia, Victoria is considering legislation that will make it the first state to allow therapeutic cloning of embryos for research. The Federal Government has already passed a similar law.

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Civil list

How letting homosexuals register relationships protects marriage.

In 2004 the Christian community in Australia secured Government and Opposition support for the passage through Parliament of the Marriage Amendment Act 2004 defining marriage as “the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life”.

This was a notable victory not just for Christians but the broader Australian community, given the progress that the homosexual lobby has made in recent years in undermining marriage, specifically in the passage of legislation securing marriage for same sex couples in Holland, Belgium, Spain, Canada, South Africa and Massachusetts (USA).

However, the move to legalise same-sex marriage may well stall. Thus most American states, including California, now have constitutional amendments in place barring gay marriage.

The lesser alternative to marriage for same-sex couples is legislation establishing so called civil unions/partnerships or a relationship register. However, there is a real difference between civil unions and relationship registers, with the former often a mere whisker away from same-sex marriage.

In Australia we have an example of a relationship register operating in Tasmania since 2003. However the ACT Government’s attempts to enact civil unions legislation in 2006 and in 2007 were frustrated by the decision of the Federal Government that the proposed legislation was “likely to undermine the institution of marriage”.

Either civil unions legislation or legislation establishing a relationship register remain very much alive, with the Victorian Government examining the issue and the Prime Minister considering changes in federal laws to give same-sex couples the same rights as heterosexuals in areas such as welfare, superannuation and tax.

Christians of orthodox conviction generally oppose civil unions, though there has been some disagreement over the issue of a relationship register.

Before considering what might be an appropriate response to these matters, it is worthwhile to consider some background issues.



David Palmer

First and foremost as Christians we need to maintain a clear distinction between church and state – in this we are not Muslims. The state has been given its own sphere of sovereignty, distinct from the church’s, that we must respect. The state must provide justice, including equity, for all. The distinction is clearly evident in the gospels and epistles – consider

Christians understand the origins of homosexuality as one particular manifestation of man’s rebellion and idolatry.

Matthew 22 : 17 - 22 , Romans 13:1-7, 1 Corinthians 5:1f. In the latter passage, having called for the expulsion of “the immoral brother”, there is no suggestion that Paul calls for punitive action by the state against the man.

To talk of Australia as currently or formerly a Christian nation is unhelpful in approaching these issues. There is no place for Christian triumphalism. The most that we can say is that Australia’s culture, including its institutions, having been predominantly shaped by the Anglo-Saxon-Celtic heritage of its early settlers in the modern era, has been deeply impacted for good by Christianity. But we must be honest enough to admit that at the same time there was always a strong secular/anti-Christian element in our nation. Of course, to the extent that Australian culture does embrace Christian ethics, Christians as members of Australian society must seek to uphold and defend such aspects of the culture.

In doing this though, we remind ourselves that we always remain “aliens and strangers” in this world (Hebrews 11:13, 1 Peter 1:1,17, 2:11), having been called out of darkness into God’s wonderful light in order that we might declare God’s praises

(1 Pet. 2:9,10). We declare God’s praises into Australian society with the gospel, the *only* measure we possess to change human hearts and so bring salvation and a life pleasing to God.

The Christian, and more particularly the Christian church as a community of believers, is to live the Christian ethic and so demonstrate the excellence of Christ’s way of life before a watching world. Homosexuality is not the only or biggest sin impacting on the health of a nation, or the church for that matter. Far greater undermining of marriage results from the widespread prevalence of divorce and de facto arrangements.

When thinking of homosexuals, we take particular note of how Jesus dealt with the woman caught in adultery found in John 8:1-11 and the prostitute in Luke 7:36-50.

As Christians we understand homosexual activity is not God’s purpose for we are told that God created our first parents, male and female *together*, as His image bearers (Gen. 1:27). Furthermore, the scriptural pattern of marriage is established in the text “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).

There are a number of clear texts indicating God’s judgment upon homosexual activity, which is described as unnatural and detestable: Genesis 19, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:18f and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

Christians understand the origins of homosexuality as one particular manifestation of man’s rebellion and idolatry. Adulterers, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers and homosexuals are all equally condemned in the 1 Corinthians text.

Further, without debating the existence of a gene for homosexuality or denying the shaping of upbringing or conscious decisions to embrace homosexual behaviour, our doctrine of original sin helps us to understand that human nature has been corrupted through and through. Some people can have the same indwelling tendency to homosexuality as others have to rage, jealousy, or promiscuity, every bit

as real as another person having congenital heart disease. So even as we hate the constant pushing and promotion of homosexuality, we feel compassion toward homosexuals, particularly for those who want to break the habit of homosexual activity and find it so hard to do so.

So with this background what are we to make of possible legislation recognising same-sex relationships in some way or other?

Given the Bible's teaching on marriage, the bottom line is that as citizens of the state and with God's enabling, we will defend marriage as already enshrined in legislation and seek with a clear, single minded focus, to deny every attempt to "undermine, confuse and mimic" marriage – on this let us be clear.

The ACT Civil Unions Act 2006 was a straight forward, indeed arguably wilful, attempt to circumvent the Marriage Amendment Act 2004. Thus it declared its civil unions were to be treated under territory law in the same way as marriage, providing for ceremonies that mimic the marriage ceremony. In the same way it paralleled the Marriage Act 1961 on who may or may not enter a civil union, including a requirement for consent, the creation of a legal framework for termination of civil unions, etc.

Much the same can be said for the UK Civil Partnership Act 2004 with its eerie undertones of a Marriage Act. Thus the civil partnership registrar "officiates" at the signing of the civil partnership schedule; the two people seeking registration must give notice and the notice must be publicised throughout a proscribed waiting period; the civil partnership document must be signed in the presence of witnesses who are also called upon to sign the document.

On this assessment, hopefully we can all agree to oppose civil unions or partnerships. Where a difference of opinion lies is whether a relationship register is acceptable.

The Tasmanian legislation allows for the registration of a relationship between two adult persons whether homosexual or heterosexual or indeed a so-called caring, non-remunerative relationship. The act covers the registration of such personal relationships with agreements covering financial and other matters. It does not include features normally associated with marriage, such as a waiting period, ceremony or promises before witnesses.

Those not in favour of the Tasmanian

type of legislation basically argue from the premise that the church must strongly resist all attempts to give any legal rights to same-sex relationships. Driving this position is the biblical teaching on homosexuality, the homosexual lobby's support for a relationship register (though they see it as less desirable than civil unions, or same-sex marriage), and the not unreasonable observation that a relationship register is but one step on the way to full legalisation of same sex marriage – so in 2001 Holland added additional rights to its 1997 registered partnerships legislation to make these relationships fully equiva-



Perceived unreasonable discrimination is a powerful tool for the homosexual lobby in its drive for civil unions and marriage.

lent to marriage.

The opposing view is based on two considerations; one of fairness in a secular society and the other on what approach best protects marriage in the longer term.

Despite claims to the contrary, it is a fact that people living in "personal relationships" do not have the same degree of certainty in financial and property matters as married people. Not only are homosexuals affected by this, but also others, often in later life, living together in a non-sexual relationship.

A registration law resolves the uncertainty here. In such cases, we are talking about the ability of people who have made a financial contribution to the relationship to safely transfer their property to one another on death or to divide it fairly if the relationship breaks down. Signing a relationship register simply means that these benefits are available immediately, or in the case of death the ability exists to leave their money to the person of choice, without risk of a challenge to their will.

The second consideration concerns the approach that best protects marriage in the longer term. Laws are constantly being challenged in the courts and particularly the degree to which they result in discrimination. State laws that prevented access to IVF for single women are currently suspended around the country after such a case; and it was a similar challenge to the

definition of gender in a test case run before the High Court that challenged the Christian community to demand the amendment of the Marriage Act.

The existence of perceived unreasonable discrimination is a powerful tool for the homosexual lobby in its drive for civil unions and through that, marriage. Without the leverage that this provides in the electorate, there would be much less likelihood of their achieving the support necessary to threaten marriage.

In this regard it is important to remember that parliamentarians will often easily be influenced by notions of a "fair go", without spending the time to study the real agenda of those putting the argument. Last year Jim Wallace from the Australian Christian Lobby and I visited the leader of the Opposition in Victoria who casually claimed to support *both* marriage for heterosexuals *and* civil unions for homosexuals, and he wouldn't be the only politician, let alone Australian, to do so.

For my part, I support such a relationship register. As citizens who are Christians we must focus on the main game. The main game is protecting the institution of marriage. Army generals understand that to secure their positions it often becomes necessary to give up lesser indefensible positions. Signing a relationship register is nothing like a marriage. You don't hear the heterosexual couples having signed the Tasmanian relationship register celebrating their "marriage". The fact that these registers attract very small numbers is significant. In Tasmania fewer 80 couples have signed and in Sydney fewer 50 have signed a similar local council register.

It is possible to be overly fearful of the homosexual lobby and the gains it has and may yet still make. Christian marriage as the God-given, God-glorifying union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life has a tremendous attraction to it even for secular people. As Andrew Cameron, Moore College ethics lecturer has written: "The way to answer (the homosexual lobby) is over the long-haul, by living out God's revealed alternative, by gently asking them to repent and rethink their view of sex and relationships — and by literally defending to the death our freedom to keep speaking about these things."

David Palmer is a minister in the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. These are his personal views. Next month AP will present an alternative view.

ap

Growing in grace

Crises of faith are yardsticks for growth.

How does one measure spiritual growth? The question assumes that we do grow spiritually, that there is something to be measured. But can I take that for granted? Scripture tells us to grow — “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ,” says Peter. But I suspect that, with all our passion for bodybuilding and personal development, very few of us are seeking to grow in the way that Peter tells us to. So very few of us are actually doing so.

Human parents would be very upset if five or 10 or 20 or 40 years after birth their babies were still babies; it must also grieve our heavenly Father when his born-again children are content to mark time in immaturity rather than aim at spiritual advance.

May God joggle our consciences, and joggle them hard, about this! Meantime, however, back to my original question: how may growth in grace be discerned? How may we know that we grow?

To get a handle on this question, we must start by asking: what are the changes in a person's life that show sanctification in progress? This is a bigger question than can be properly answered here, but we can point to at least three areas of necessary change. Each is double-barreled.

First, growth in grace means increase in humility, and in the passion for praise. A pair-of-scales effect operates here. The closer one walks with God, the more sen-



J. I. Packer

sitive one becomes to sin. One's estimate of oneself sinks lower because of the depths of sinfulness that one now sees within oneself. As one's view of oneself goes down, so one's gratitude for God's love in salvation raises up in greater adoration.

Those who are growing spiritually tread in their inner life the path of punctured pride and passionate praise, and become ever more ardent in effacing themselves in order to exalt their Saviour-God.

Physical growth is discerned by measuring height and weight; how is spiritual growth measured?

Second, growth in grace means increase in faith that will forfeit worldly security. Fifteen years ago a man in an electronics shop said to me, “what you have faith in is what you'd bet your life on”. He was right! Growing in faith in the God of all grace produces willingness at His call to enter situations of material insecurity and, by human thinking, of risk. Once it is clear that the call really is from God and is not just a foolhardy fancy of one's own, those who are growing in grace will obey the summons and, as Oswald Chambers put it, “smilingly wash their hands of the consequences”. That is not irresponsibility; it is, rather, faith in action, the kind of faith by which, we are told in Hebrews, “Abraham obeyed when he was called ... and went out, not knowing where he was to go”.

Such faith sees obedience as top priority, and trusts God's care. It embraces the path of obedience as the place of real and ultimate safety, however hazardous and indeed ruinous it may look from outside. In this sense all who grow in grace bet their lives on God constantly.

Third, growth in grace means an increase in love that gives. Folk wisdom divides humanity into two classes, the givers and the takers, and many born-again Christians seem to remain takers rather than becoming givers. But those who are advancing into Christ-likeness renounce self-absorbed self-seeking. They actively love God and others, giving up to the limit of their time, talents, and treasure to honor God and help humans. Cheerful self-denying generosity, that gives and goes on giving even then, marks all who are growing in grace.


On now to the crunch point. Physical growth is discerned by measuring height and weight; how is spiritual growth measured?

The true answer is that it cannot be measured. Growth in grace is a mystery of grace, which it is beyond us to monitor in either ourselves or others. Observables, like zeal, knowledge, self-image, and behavior patterns, are ambiguous: they may be carnal at bottom, though spiritual-looking on the surface. The heart of growth is growth in the heart, which only God can search and know.

However, something of our spiritual stature may be discerned by our responses to what we call crises of decisions and Scripture calls temptations. Those who deal with crises, or temptations, better than they once did show that they have grown in grace in the interim.

Example: Abraham. Twice, early on in his life of faith, to save his skin he passed off his wife as his sister, free flesh ripe for the royal harem. Neither humility nor adoration nor obedience nor faith nor love was expressed in that action. But some decades later Abraham was ready at God's call to sacrifice Isaac. The difference between that first response and the later response to crises of decision showed that over the years Abraham had grown in grace.

Do you and I really grow in grace? I wonder.

This article was previously published in Eternity Magazine, January 1989. 

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Letters

Prison pen pals

As a result of having corresponded with inmates in an African prison over recent years, I have been asked by three of those unfortunates to try to locate other Christians who may be interested in writing to prisoners on a regular basis. These guys exist in the most squalid situations – no clothes, no bed, no bedding, no chance to appeal, not enough food, not even any money with which to buy a postage stamp, no medical assistance, yet all have come to Christ since being sentenced.

If some of your readers would like to make the life of these Christian brothers a little easier please write me at Len Clark, Curries Road MS6, Dubbo NSW 2830. Please include a couple of international reply paid coupons from the Post Office. I will forward your letters to Zambia, and the prisoners at Kabwe will reply to you by air mail. To help ease the boredom of their existence at night they also seek others who may like to donate small battery radio cassette/recorders with headphones (or walkmans) with Christian tapes – especially Christian teaching tapes.

Quoting from their letters, Geoffrey C. says “will you help me by circulating my humble request in your magazine ... my situation here is very terrible ... no one brings me food or toilet items ... I draw your attention on the miserable life through which we are passing. Please come to our aid before we die from star-

vation and ... by faith I say as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me”.

Davies M. says: “Here in prison malaria has claimed a lot of lives.... Our prayer group are always praying for you ... please help with supportive scriptures on how we can draw on (Jesus) for His healing payment as Christians here get no medical help.”

Tanasias Y. says: “Our conditions in prison are poor, not sleeping well on concrete floors without bedding, no bathing buckets, bare feet, no means on how to lodge an appeal ... Without your help nothing good can come of us ... the morning prayer group pray for the drought to end. Proverbs 25:25 says as cold water is to a weary soul, so is good news from a far country.”

Len Clark,
Dubbo, NSW

A word in season

I am writing to express my gratitude to Bruce Christian for the Bible Study notes in AP every month.

The selection of topics is timely, but I particularly like the insightful comments and pithy observations followed by the questions which really hit at the heart of the matter.

Personal application is particularly apt in an age of moral relativism, again something we must be alerted to where it seems it is all too easy to read something and then forget about it.

For my personal study I use the New Living Translation, which has a way of

putting things in a readable way, yet to the point.

I became a member of the Presbyterian Church, or rather I became a Christian in my early 50s a few years ago after leaving one of the more aggressive sects.

Bruce Christian has a peculiar and gifted knack of training (is he or was he a teacher?) and for making a point without getting dogmatic. It is refreshing and helpful. He also holds to the truth of Scripture in a balanced manner.

So keep it up, dear brother in Christ. I am sure that for every one who tells you and encourages you there'll be a lot more who are just as grateful to our great God and His Saviour Son for your efforts, though not expressed.

André Dahmen,
Healesville, Vic

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APRIL 2007

- 21 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in West Tamar special (home mission) charge northern Tasmania comprising the Auld Kirk Sidmouth and Mole Creek with about 60 c&a (communicants and adherents), 20 yf (younger folk – Sunday School and youth) and 10 e (elders).
- 22 Praise God today for the centenary of Lockhart congregation, and pray for all the work of the Henty parish southern NSW including also Yerong Creek with about 160 c&a, 40 yf and 9 e; Michael and Corinne O'Connor.
- 23 Presbytery of the Hawkesbury western Sydney – 16 parishes and 5 home mission stations totaling 27 congregations with about 2435 c&a and 895 yf, 2 deaconesses, 3 missionary workers, 2 hospital chaplains, 1 theological teacher, 3 theological candidates, 9 retired ministers and 5 under jurisdiction. Mick Quirk clerk.
- 24 Pray for Mark Powell (and Angie) who recently began work in the Cornerstone parish Sydney including congregations at Concord and Ryde with about 165 c&a, 70 yf and 5 e; as Associate with Choog Seong Tang.
- 25 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in the Maranoa home mission station western Qld including Roma and Surat with about 40 c&a and 11 e.
- 26 Pupils, staff and council of Scotch College, Hawthorn, Melbourne – Gordon Donaldson principal; Graham Bradbeer chaplain.
- 27 Pray for Philip Burns (and Sandra) recently inducted to Bendigo parish with about 70 c&a, 20 yf and 3 e; and for the Warrnambool vacancy.
- 28 Campbelltown parish NSW with about 115 c&a, 40 yf and 5 e; Jim and Bev Elliott.

- 29 Daland and Corinne *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Woonona NSW in South East Asia with Overseas Missionary Fellowship.
- 30 The impact of the Reformers' Bookshop, a joint venture of the Presbyterian Theological Centre Sydney and Stanmore Baptist Church putting Biblical literature into many hands.

MAY 2007

- 1 North Adelaide parish with about 50 c&a, 5 yf and 7 e; Chris ten Broeke resident supply.
- 2 Presbytery of Ballarat 5 parishes and 4 home mission stations totaling 19 congregations with about 465 c&a and 120 yf, 2 retired ministers and 1 under jurisdiction. Norm Sharp clerk.
- 3 Matthew *mission partners* (APWM) worker from Seacliff, Adelaide in the Middle East in educational ministry with Red Sea Team.
- 4 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in The Entrance parish north of Sydney with about 105 c&a, 20 yf and 7 e.
- 5 Bundaberg parish Qld with about 105 c&a, 20 yf and 6 e; Wal and Elinor Brown.
- 6 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in the Condobolin parish including Ootha western NSW with about 30 c&a and 6 e.
- 7 Roslyn Gill *mission partners* (APWM) worker from Somerville, Vic. in Cambodia as an educator.
- 8 David Schulz (and Isabel) recently inducted to Hamilton parish western Victoria with about 125 c&a, 10 yf and 6 e; and for the vacancy at Tatura.
- 9 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in the Whittlesea-Mernda home mission station northern Melbourne with about 40 c&a and 10 yf.
- 10 Argyle parish NSW including Goulburn, Taralga, Crookwell and Tuena with about 110 c&a, 10 yf and 8

- e; Christie Balzer.
- 11 Phil and Glenda Carter *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Tocumwal-Finley NSW in Papua New Guinea with Pioneers.
- 12 Presbytery of Hastings NSW North coast – 7 parishes and 2 home mission stations totaling 18 congregations with about 1155 c&a and 280 yf, and 4 retired ministers; John Roomans clerk.
- 13 Central Sydney parish (Darlington near Sydney University) with about 50 c&a, 15 yf and 4 e; David and Kathy Thurston.
- 14 The South Australian and Tasmanian General Assemblies meeting this week in Mt Gambier and Hobart – the fellowship debates and decisions; the Moderators (Gary Ware and Ed Batchelor), clerks (Brian Johnson and David Turner) all officers and members.
- 15 Andrew and Michelle Blumer *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Parramatta City church NSW in Vienna, Austria with Pioneers and European Christian Mission assisting local churches.
- 16 Robert (and Wendy) Boase recently inducted to St Ives-Pymble parish northern Sydney with about 115 c&a, 1 yf and 8 e.
- 17 Ian and Dorcas *mission partners* (APWM) workers from Albury area in South Asia with Red Sea Team in medical and educational ministry.
- 18 Nambucca River parish NSW North coast including Macksville Nambucca Heads with about 105 c&a, 35 yf and 3 e; Todd and Karen Galvin, and the Valley Christian Community School, Vicky Bennett principal.
- 19 Christine Platt *mission partners* (APWM) worker from Orange NSW in Ecuador with SIM International in radio engineering and administration.
- 20 Pray for the Interim moderator, preachers and filling of the vacancy in Mackay parish North Qld including Sarina with about 170 c&a, 60 yf and 7 e.

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Books

Evangelical Feminism

A New Path to Liberalism?

Wayne Grudem

Crossway Books 2006.

Reviewed by Stuart Parry.

Wayne Grudem asks, “Can a movement that espouses so many ways of undermining the authority of Scripture possibly be right?”

Refuting 16 popular evangelical feminist arguments which he believes undermine or deny the authority of Scripture, and 10 views based on “untruthful or unsubstantiated claims”, Grudem urges egalitarians to re-consider their position, and complementarians to show some courage, because the stakes are too high for appeasement.

A prolific complementarian advocate through his books and via the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (www.cbmw.org), Grudem believes that the views used to support evangelical feminism lead to liberalism; a denial that the Bible is the truthful, written Word of God.

Rejecting the notion that the secular world should set the pace for the church in demanding equality without distinction for women, Grudem appeals to the Reformation principle of sola Scriptura, the Bible alone, as our authority.

He applauds the move to see women’s gifts and ministries developed and encouraged in churches, but rejects the claim of evangelical feminism that there are no unique leadership roles for men, in marriage or in the church.

Grudem suggests that the decline of many once healthy churches reveals a pattern marked by abandonment of biblical inerrancy, ordination of women, denying the Bible’s teaching on male headship in marriage, approval of homosexual conduct and homosexual ordination. At the foundation of egalitarianism is “a dislike and a rejection of anything uniquely masculine”.

This book will challenge readers to decide whether evangelical feminism is a necessary alignment with contemporary social realities, or an example of the interpretive anarchy for which the evangelical movement is notorious, and a new chapter in the age-old attempt to evade the authority of the Word of God.

Stuart Parry attends South Toowoomba Presbyterian Church.

Sermons on Hebrews

Robert Murray M’Cheyne

ed. Michael D. McMullen

Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, reprinted 2004.

Reviewed by Peter Barnes.

Born in 1813, the godly Scottish pastor of Dundee, Robert Murray M’Cheyne, was dead by the time he was 29 – not matching the longevity of his great friend and biographer, Andrew Bonar. Two years after M’Cheyne’s death in 1843, his sermons on Hebrews were published under the title *The Glory of the Christian Dispensation*. They have now been reprinted for the first time. It is by no means a complete treatment of Hebrews – there is nothing, for example, on chapters 1, 3, 7, 10, 11 and 12, and there are gaps in many of the chapters that are dealt with.

However, two things strike this reviewer. First, M’Cheyne had a gift for structuring a sermon – his sermon headings were derived from the text and helped to drive home its message. Secondly, he was unafraid to apply the text to his hearers. The last sermon, on Hebrews 13:8, is a particularly potent example of this. In fewer than 200 pages, M’Cheyne has given us a wonderful pastoral insight into some of the life-giving truths of the epistle to the Hebrews.

Peter Barnes is books editor of AP.

**Where 20 or 30
Are Gathered
Leading Worship in the
Small Church**

Peter Bush and Christine O’Reilly

The Alban Institute, Herndon, USA, 2006

Reviewed by Peter Davidson

The “small church” is here to stay, assert Bush and O’Reilly. The “small church” in their North American terms is that of 20 or 30, which describes so many Australian Presbyterian congregations - in city or country, in every one of our presbyteries.

The authors write from within the Canadian Presbyterian context. They see the small congregation having many marks of the family, with patriarchs and matriarchs, and where people know and lovingly care for each other. That family gathers weekly “to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever” – the central theme they frequently revisit.

The point of the book is that our Sunday gathering is the heart of a congrega-

tion’s life. But what resources have we to sustain that meeting, even for it to survive – let alone grow?

The authors are quite perceptive in showing us what treasures and abilities we really do have. Counter-intuitively, small size has much going for it! Most of what they have to say is readily translatable into the Australian setting.

The publisher – the Alban Institute – is a body whose sole purpose is to understand and support congregational life. This truly encouraging book describes so many congregations so well: many struggling to make ends meet, many without a resident minister at all, some as part of a multi-centred rural charge, others struggling in older city suburbs, almost all depending entirely on their own resources as they meet and worship Sunday by Sunday. And they have unique ways to meet their leadership and resource needs – ways with which we can encourage each other.

In a culture where big numbers equals “success”, this study encourages those of us in settings where big numbers and spectacular growth are unrealistic imaginings and no substitute for simple loving faithfulness.

Reading this book, the images of a dozen congregations I know thrust themselves into my consciousness – with great encouragement. As if to reinforce their point, they have limited the book to only 113 pages!



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A sensational story

You won't see it in the media, but believe it just the same.

One can easily tell when Easter is upon us in the West – it is that time of the year when the stores are trying to sell millions of chocolate eggs and when the media will sensationalise some quasi-intellectual attack on the Christian faith.

Some years back the BBC expected us to take Barbara Thiering seriously. After this came Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and then in 2006 all sorts of claims made about the Gospel of Judas. Now, in 2007, we are being treated to a documentary produced by James Cameron, the mastermind behind the *Titanic* and *The Terminator*.

In this we are solemnly assured that a crypt unearthed in 1980 contains some remains and the names of six people – Jesus, Mary, Mary Magdalene, Judah, Matthew, and Joseph. Not surprisingly, Cameron identifies Jesus as the founder of the Christian religion and Mary Magdalene as his wife. Judah is supposed to be their son. James Cameron has not been modest in proclaiming the importance of this find: "I think this is the biggest archaeological story of the century," he says.

Christians are then reported to be outraged. Finally, Phillip Adams proclaims that sermons are delivered in church along the lines of "believe, despite all the evidence to the contrary". In fact, the apostle Paul preached the death and resurrection of Jesus as something of first importance (1 Cor. 15:3). He passed on what he himself had received, that 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3b-4). The Christian message is thus about history and doctrine.

First, there is history – Christ did actu-



Peter Barnes

ally die, and did actually rise from the dead. Indeed, Paul says that more than 500 brethren saw the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:6). These men were not perpetrating a hoax. They had become convinced that Jesus is Lord, in large part because He rose from the dead. They were persecuted for this belief.

Man asserts himself and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices Himself and puts Himself where only man deserves to be.

The world of the Roman Empire, like the world of today, will tolerate Christians saying that Jesus is a lord, but not that He is the Lord. The historicity of the death and resurrection of Christ is thus foundational. If Christ did not rise from the

dead, Christianity is shot to pieces (1 Cor. 15:12-19). Paul was beheaded in Nero's day, but the hard fact of Jesus' resurrection from the dead meant that he looked forward to receiving the crown of righteousness (see 2 Tim. 4:6-8). Death had lost its sting.


Second, there is doctrine attached to the history – Christ died (an historical fact) for our sins (a doctrinal explanation of Jesus' death). Why, in about AD 30, did a man go willingly to die a horrific death on a cross? Why, especially because this man knew no sin? He is both divine and human. Why should He, of all men, suffer in such a way? The answer is that it was our sins that sent Him there. We deserved to die because the wages of sin is death (Gen. 2:16-17; Rom. 6:23), but Christ took the place of sinners. It is all about substitution. In the words of John Stott: "Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices Himself and puts

Himself where only man deserves to be."

What does this mean for you and me? It means that the Easter message tells us what God has done about human sin. He has sent his eternal Son to die and to rise from the dead to overcome sin and death. It also means that we must respond to this. The media are hardly likely to report the facts, but that does not mean that we can adopt such a cavalier attitude to this matter of life and death. The likes of James Cameron and Phillip Adams are not facing facts; they are taking refuge in fantasy. Reality is found in the words of Horatius Bonar:

*Upon a life, I did not live,
Upon a death I did not die;
Another's life, another's death,
I stake my whole eternity.*

This is indeed good news to sinners!

Peter Barnes is minister of Revesby Presbyterian Church, Sydney. 

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