

# REFORMATION TODAY



JULY/AUGUST 1996

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## Contributors to this issue:

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### Carey Conference for Ministers

8-10 January 1997

The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, Derbyshire

*Speakers:* Baruch Maoz (Israel), Earl Blackburn and Dr John Currid (USA), Noel Espinosa (Philippines) and Geoff Thomas (Wales).

*Theme:* Caring

*Conference secretary:* John Rubens, 22 Leith Road, Darlington, Co Durham DL3 8BQ.

## Caring for Life

Front cover: *This picture was taken on Caring for Life (CFL) Open Day in June, when 1500 visited Crag House Farm. Jonathan Parkinson in the foreground.*

Established nearly 10 years ago, CFL now provides a comprehensive support network for particularly damaged homeless young people: a residential facility for 8 young men; a resettlement project providing accommodation and ongoing support, currently assisting 50 young men and women; plus work experience projects in agriculture, horticulture, workshop skills and car mechanics providing training for 20 people daily.

As a specifically evangelical Christian Trust, CFL has unique opportunities to share the gospel with totally unreached young people, probation officers, social workers and many others. The work is difficult but the trustees and staff praise God for his provision and for the joy of seeing many come to faith in Christ.

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## Editorial

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### Are we living in the time of the great apostasy?

Personal and general apostasy are distinguished in the leading article of this issue. The Reformers and Puritans made no bones about identifying the great apostasy with the papacy. That view is part of the 1689 London Confession of Faith. John Calvin interpreted the language of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10 as apocalyptic.

The reasons for applying 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10 to the papacy are weighty. A vital issue concerns the direct link between apostolic Christianity and the general apostasy that developed. The original meek religion of Jesus apostatised into a pompous, rich, persecuting, monolithic system, absolute in power and absolutely corrupt. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* is still the principal text book documenting the universal suffering caused by the papacy.

In 1302 Boniface VIII issued his famous bull, *Unam Sanctam*, which authoritatively stated that for every human being the condition for salvation was submission and obedience to the Pope. The doctrine of salvation by grace alone and by faith alone was subverted. Direct access to Christ was cut off and replaced by the mediation of the Roman priesthood. Soul killing doctrines such as baptismal regeneration, the mass, indulgences, purgatory and dependence on Mary and prayers to the saints were added. The decrees of the post-Reformation Council of Trent anathematise all who believe in justification by faith alone. These decrees of Trent have not been revoked.

The Popes arrogated to themselves supreme power seen in the Pope's three decked tiara which symbolises universal dominion. This led in turn to blasphemy and abomination. E R Chamberlain in his book *The Bad Popes* documents the personal crimes committed by seven popes in particular.<sup>1</sup> Not even in fiction will you find felony and corruption to equal that record.

Historically and exegetically the case upholding our Confessional statement is sound. However, the RC Church is different from what it used to be. In remote places evangelicals are still martyred by the old system, but generally speaking the RC Church is becoming increasingly modernistic, ecumenical, pluralistic and from its old position of exclusiveness it is increasingly inter-faith. This is multifaceted apostasy. The RC Church is not the enormous red dragon (Rev 12:3) it used to be in the days of the Spanish Inquisition when John Calvin

wrote his commentary on 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10, or the Spanish Armada of 1588, or 1688 when the Huguenots were hounded out of France.

In recent times the RC magisterium sought to discipline RC radical modernist theologians but now the situation is out of hand. Leading RC modernists like Karl Rahner are dominant.<sup>2</sup> They submit to the supreme authority of the magisterium which is now more important than ever since it is up to them to interpret the untrustworthy (modernist) Bible. We now look back on an apostasy which reached its zenith in the 15th century, received a mortal blow in the 16th century, which is now in disarray, but still very dangerous.

## Postmodernism

Many are bewildered, confused and discouraged by what they see in disintegrating standards and moral chaos of our civilisation, a slide marked by rampant crime, family breakdown and general disintegration of society. Bill James' comprehensive review of Don Carson's tremendously significant book *The Gagging of God* not only assists us to come to terms with contemporary momentous sweeping changes, but provides us with a summary of the underlying issues and how to respond.

Dr Albert Mohler addressed this theme at the Grace/Carey Conference where he compared the collapse of Western society to the fall of the Roman Empire. David Brighton has given us a synopsis of Dr Mohler's perceptive and incisive analysis of the contemporary scene as well as the challenge this poses to Christians today.

## References

1. *The Bad Popes*, E R Chamberlain 310 pages, Dorset Press, New York, 1969 hardback ISBN 0-88029-116-8
2. For a scholarly documented exposition of the advance of modernism in the RC Church see Robert B Strimple in *Roman Catholicism – Evangelical Protestants analyse what divides and what unites us*, edited by John A Armstrong, Moody Press, 1994.

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# Backsliding and Apostasy

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*Erroll Hulse*

Sadly most of us can remember friends who once maintained a consistent Christian profession. Gradually they fell away and now oppose what they once believed and even preached. I think of two pastors in particular. One was systematically destroyed through studying modernist theology. He fell away, divorced his wife, and now is fiercely opposed to the gospel. Another, a very successful pastor, became morally compromised, is now divorced from his wife, and at this time appears to be alienated from his former Christian friends. Time speaks out the difference between those who are backsliders but come to be restored and those who backslide into apostasy.

### **Backsliding and apostasy – a biblical survey**

The word backsliding is used several times in the Old Testament (Hebrew *meshubah*, Jer 2:19;8:5;14:7, Hosea 14:4 *shobab* Jer 3:14,22;31:22 and *sarar* Hos 4:16). The word backsliding does not occur in our English translations of the New Testament. In Luke 8:13 our Lord speaks of those who in times of temptation fall away (*aphhistēmi*), Hebrews 2:1 speaks of drifting away (*pararreō*), and Peter warns against being carried away (*sunapagō*) by error and falling (*ekiptō*) from a secure position (2 Peter 3:17). John concludes his first letter by speaking about those who commit sin from which there is no recovery and those who do not, as he writes, ‘there is a sin that does not lead to death’ (1 John 5:16). James draws attention to those who wander (*planaō*) from the truth (James 5:19). In the letters to the seven churches our Lord warns against losing our first love (Rev 2:1-7) and against lukewarmness (Rev 3:14-21). These are sober warnings to local churches and show that caution is needed to safeguard against decline in each church. Paul’s warning of the Ephesian elders recorded in Acts 20 seems to foretell the Ephesian decline. Churches in whole regions can slip in decline. Hence Paul expressed sheer amazement (*Thaumazō* – I am astonished – Gal 1:6), that the Galatians should so quickly abandon the Gospel.

Generally speaking we regard a backslider as one who has run well and been consistent in Christian practice but who becomes lethargic, unenthusiastic, half-hearted, inconsistent and unfaithful in his profession, one who needs to repent spiritually and repair his life by recovering his devotional and practical Christian walk. Backsliding casts doubt on a person’s standing. Will that one turn out to be true or not? Or will he so slide away as to become an apostate?

An apostate is one who abandons Christ altogether. Even though he has professed Christianity in word and deed he backslides and then falls away becoming an

apostate for whom, according to the letter to the Hebrews, there is no hope of recovery (Heb 6:4; 10:26-31). To apostatise is to revolt against, to repudiate or renounce the faith. The word in both Latin and Greek is *apostasia* (2 Thess 2:3; 1 Tim 4:1-3).

The letter to the Hebrews implies throughout that Jewish believers were going back, that is backsliding. We dare not reduce the force of the solemn warnings in the two climactic passages just referred to namely Hebrews, 6:4-6 and 10:26-31. It is usual to concentrate on the first passage to the neglect of the second, but the two passages belong to each other. They teach that it is possible to go a long way into the Christian faith and yet not be born again. The second passage affirms that there is no judgment so severe as that which comes upon those who have abused such a privileged position. 'How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?' (Heb 10:29). That is consistent with what our Lord said about Judas and what he declared about it being more bearable for Sodom than for those who trample on Gospel privileges (Matt 10:15).

There is awful peril in backsliding. True, that those who have been truly born again will always be reclaimed as we see with Samson, David and Peter. But we are left wondering about Demas who forsook Paul, having loved this present world (2 Tim 4:10). By no means do all those who profess faith and then backslide, recover. Some, having gone back, never recover. John's words are apposite here: 'Their going showed that none of them belonged to us' (1 John 2:19). There is also the awesome truth of God's sovereignty declared in John 15:2, 'He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit.'

John intimates that there are three trends toward apostasy: doctrinal, moral and social. Going back from Christ into apostasy can manifest itself in heterodoxy (rejection of the deity of Christ), living in immorality, or hatred of fellow believers (1 John 3:14,15). The signs of declension are evidenced in carelessness about worship, irreverence, frivolity, and the lack of love and esteem for God in worship.<sup>1</sup>

### **General apostasy**

It is important to distinguish between personal apostasy and general apostasy. In the New Testament two quite distinct general apostasies are referred to.

The first concerns the period leading up to the downfall of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews. Jesus gives clear warnings about that in the Olivet discourse (Matt 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). In other places he warns of the testing conditions that would apply particularly at that time. For instance in Matthew 10:23 he says: 'All men will hate you because of me but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.'

This passage should be compared with Matthew 24:11-13. The implications are very serious. Notice that it is a majority that grow cold and also that the increase of wickedness has an adverse effect on the believers. While there is uncertainty about the dating and background of the letter to the Hebrews it is not misplaced to associate the message of that letter with the tremendous upheaval surrounding the demise of Judaism, the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews.

The sternest warning in the New Testament concerns not a local or even national apostasy but one which is world-wide. This is the warning of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, which represents the purpose and heart of this epistle, which can be seen from what leads up to it and the application that flows from it. This passage should be compared with the general warnings given by Paul to Timothy (1 Tim 4:1-5; 2 Tim 3:1-5 and 4:3).

The Reformers and Puritans interpreted 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 as the great apostasy in the Christian Church dating from about 500 to the time of the Reformation and subsequently in an unrepentant Roman Catholic Church. In his commentary, John Calvin interprets the passage as apocalyptic in style and not literal. Concerning *the man of sin*, he says 'Paul is not speaking of one individual, but of a kingdom that was to be seized by Satan for the purpose of setting up a seat of abomination in the midst of God's temple. This we see accomplished in popery,' and concerning the antichrist Calvin asserts, 'for quite certainly Paul meant that antichrist would seize the things which belong to God alone, his purpose being to exalt himself above every divine power, so that all religion and all worship of God should lie beneath his feet.' Calvin points out that the Pope claims complete authority. A threefold universal claim of authority is symbolised in his tiara.

This interpretation is also taken by John Owen and is the view stated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* chapter 25 paragraph 6 (cf. the *1689 London Baptist Confession* chapter 26 paragraph 4). No apostasy from apostolic Christianity can be compared to the papacy. For over a thousand years the Gospel became more and more subverted and covered over with error. The Church became the monolithic, sacral persecutor of the faithful, driving them to death or into the wilderness as described in Revelation chapter 12.

William Hendriksen takes a different view of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. F F Bruce's scholarly commentary in the WORD series helpfully discusses one of the most difficult expressions in the passage namely, the restraining power, 'but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed.' The Imperial power of Rome acted as a shield of protection as well as being a source of persecution. The waning of the Imperial power paved the way for the ascendancy of the papacy.

## Applications

**Application 1.** A time of apostasy brings great pressure to bear upon the faithful. We deduce from Christ's warnings that times of declension lower the temperature of love for God. He says, The love of most will grow cold. It is no small blessing when those around love the Lord passionately but it is wretched to live in a lukewarm fellowship. The prevalence of evil in itself forms a great discouragement and a major factor in many going back on the faith. The letter to the Hebrews mainly concerns the increasing pressures on Jewish believers who had stood firm and sacrificed their goods and reputations but were now coming under increasing pressure to go back on Christ.

**Application 2.** Persecution can have an adverse effect on the Church. It is sometimes thought that persecution advances the Gospel and suggested that if only we had persecution in the West the Church might grow. This is very questionable. Persecution of Christians does sometimes cause many to enquire about the truth of the Bible especially when they see Christians prepared to suffer pain and loss and yet remain joyful. When Christians maintain a consistent testimony in adversity that does commend the faith. But severe suppression and persecution of Christianity in many countries has been successful in stifling the truth. Many examples can be quoted. For instance prior to the Reformation the true Church was almost blotted out and in Spain the Inquisition extinguished the Protestant cause completely. There are some countries today (Saudi Arabia is an example) where conditions forbid any kind of Christian church. 1 Timothy 2:1-4 suggests that peaceable conditions are advantageous to the promotion of the Gospel.

**Application 3.** Christian leaders are of vital importance to withstand apostasy. The small number of outstanding Christian leaders in the history of the Church is quite amazing. Even in the New Testament so much rested on the reliability of the apostle Paul, especially when Peter was muddle-headed (Gal 2:11-21). We remember that in the fourth century there was a point when Athanasius stood alone in the defence of the Faith. In 1522 at the City of Worms, Luther stood alone against the whole panoply of religious and secular power, the Emperor Charles V and the Pope combined. At the end of the last century Spurgeon was on his own in the downgrade into modernism. What a great leader was Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones! How greatly we miss his stand for Biblical truth today. And living in the same time span was Rehwinkel the great Lutheran leader who single handed saved his great seminary and denomination (The Missouri Synod) this century. Let us pray for leaders who are excellent statesmen. In a time of declension it is easy to be separatist and isolationist and blow the trumpet from far away. It is another thing to be involved on the battlefield with those who most need help. Leadership is crucial if the Church is to be kept from decline. Let us pray for men like Albert Mohler in his courageous efforts to reform Southern Seminary and all that it stands for in the context of the Southern Baptist Convention. Men of calibre are very rare.

## Provisions against backsliding

The central question which we now consider is what provision is there in the Word of God to prevent Christians from backsliding into apostasy.

There are basic axioms or principles that underlie this subject.

Axiom 1. Perseverance is the antidote to apostasy. The reality of apostasy means that we do all we can to insure perseverance. Jesus said that those who endure to the end will be saved.

Axiom 2. Perseverance involves divine sovereignty and human responsibility as summarised in Philippians 2:12,13. Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. God's purpose to save his elect is absolute but it lies with our responsibility to make our calling and election sure.

Axiom 3. Perseverance involves the primacy of the affections. Proverbs 4:23 says, Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Our first parents fell first in their affections and then in their actions. Maintaining a daily devotional spiritual life is paramount.

## The most relevant Scriptures

While all Scripture is designed to keep the Christian strong in faith there are some parts specifically addressed to this issue. John 15 – abide in me – is an example. Ephesians 6:10-20 the whole armour of God is another.

The necessity of being kept is everywhere present as we are reminded in the doxology of Jude that there is only One 'who is able to keep you from falling' (verse 24). Two passages which stand out are 2 Peter 1:5-11 and Romans 8:28-39. Peter urges that the Christian should add to his faith a set of virtues and if he does, *he will never fall*. The word add (*epichorageo*) is most expressive as it reminds us of a conductor of an orchestra who calls into play the various instruments. They are all needed. They vary in contribution and in volume but they are all essential if the music is to fulfil the composer's specification.

From Romans 8:28 Paul tells of the work of the Father. He has loved us from eternity. He has predestinated us to be conformed to the image of his Son. He has called us and justified us and our glorification is certain. Attention is focused on the certainty of God's purpose. Even though all hell should conspire against God's elect they will be kept from falling. Paul is defiant, 'Who can separate us from the his love of Christ?' A firm permanent hold on these truths is designed to keep believers from backsliding.

## The letter to the Hebrews

The Hebrews epistle is the *locus classicus*, the central place of teaching on this theme. From first to last the style of Hebrews is admonition to avoid apostasy and to persevere. The genius of the Hebrews letter is to fortify against backsliding. The thrust of the message is to show how we are constantly in the present tense preserved through our union with an omnipotently divine intercessor who is presently active on our behalf. This active intercession is the principal theme of Hebrews. Note well Hebrews 8:1, 'The main point' (*kephalaion* means 'the sum of' or 'main point').

The principal reasons advanced in Hebrews as ways to avoid apostasy are as follows.

### 1. *Live day by day in union with our great high priest.*

A constant and consistent prayer life, drawing near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith is the essence of the Christian life.

### 2. *Live in union day by day with other members of the church.*

Beginning at chapter 10:22 we are told that prayer, meeting together and observing how we might spur each other on toward love and good deeds, are essential. The sure way to backsliding and then to apostasy is to devalue the means of grace. Hebrews 10:24,25 suggests that it is essential to meet together for mutual encouragement. In the same context of application the writer urges the importance of meeting together. We are members together in the body of Christ (Rom 12:4:5). Each member belongs to all the others (Rom 12:4,5; 1 Cor 12:13-26). The spiritual condition of a Christian is reflected by his relationship to the body (Eph 4:15,16).

### 3. *Live by faith and do not shrink back.*

The justified must live by faith (10:38). The salvation which is ours in Christ is stupendous. Nothing can compare with it. There is no other salvation (Acts 4:12). This salvation is through union with the Triune God. It is just too great to forfeit. We have everything in Christ (1 Cor 1:30). We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17 and Heb 2:10-13). 'How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?' (Heb 2:3). To shrink back will result in destruction.

### 4. *Live by viewing the examples of others who have run well.*

Hebrews 11 is the story of faith in action. Our hearts are moved by the example of others. Church history and biography occupy an important place in the teaching ministry of the Church. The history of the Reformation and the history of past revivals greatly encourage God's people. Stirring descriptions of the pioneer missionaries quicken desire to finish the missionary task.

5. *We must live with the idea that hardship is normal.*

Hebrews 12:4-13 exhorts that we endure hardship as discipline. We must not be discouraged by hardship.

6. *We must live with a diet of solid food.*

In times of declension it is misguided to water down doctrine. First century Jewish believers found it hard to cope with the taunt that Jesus of Nazareth could not possibly be God since he died a criminal's death. Note that Hebrews is utterly uncompromising on the theme of the Divine nature of Jesus. It was hard for them to accept that Judaism was now valueless. Hebrews is uncompromisingly clear about that.

## **Conclusions**

*First, concerning general apostasy.* If the Reformers and Puritans were correct in their interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 then we have seen the worst of the apostasy and should focus our attention on the open doors to fulfil the Great Commission. The future is as bright as the promises of God. Promises such as Psalm 110:1; Daniel 2:35; Micah 4:1-5 and Habakkuk 2:14 are bright indeed and await fulfilment. Surely great progress and encouragement lies ahead for many countries coming into Gospel truth for the first time. We must plead for a mighty harvest for the Prince of Peace.

*Second, concerning personal apostasy.* There is abiding responsibility to do all we can to discourage backsliding and to seek the restoration of the backslider, as Jesus suggests if a shepherd has 100 sheep and loses one, he will leave the 99 and go out and seek the one that is lost. John declares at the end of his first letter that we are to pray about this issue (1 Jn 5:16,17). James is emphatic: 'My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth, and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins' (James 5:19,20).

*Commended reading.*

John Owen is the richest resource of theology in the English language. Time and time again he comprehends central themes with unexcelled depth and power. This is true on the nature and causes of apostasy from the Gospel, being the title of the Banner of Truth 166 page paperback which is a summary of volume seven of Owen's work on apostasy. The abridged work has been skilfully prepared by R J K Law.

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# A Reformed Perspective on a Secular Age

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*A paper given at the Grace/Carey Conference, May 1996 by Dr Albert Mohler.  
Summary by David Brighton*

On the 24th August, 410 AD Rome fell. The 'eternal' city was shown to be temporal. Confusion and fear abounded. Rome had been the one fixed reality in the 1st-century mind, and that Rome fell raised fundamental questions; 'What does one do in the midst of such a cataclysm, when an empire falls?'

Augustine's response was to write a book. In *The City of God* Augustine tried to deal as honestly as possible with what the fall of Rome represented. What had happened, from the perspective of the City of God, wasn't that important. From the perspective of man it was the end of history. But, as Augustine reminds us, there are two cities: the City of God and the City of Man, one bound for heaven and one for hell. Remember that we are talking about the City of Man's collapse, and at its best it was bound for hell.

We're living in the midst of a collapsing civilisation. For the last 15 centuries, Western civilisation has been as ubiquitous and apparently eternal as the Roman Empire. Now it is collapsing. The USA has never been very honest about having an empire. The British called their empire an empire and even had an empress. But the US empire, though unproclaimed, has been just as impressive as any before it. And its fall, although it has been quieter than most, has been as inevitable as that of its predecessors.

What do we do? How shall we then live? Reading *The City of God* is a good place to start. Both Augustine and the Word of the Lord remind us to place our hope in the City of God, not the City of Man. Most of all it means we should be contending 'for the faith once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3). But it is one challenge to contend for the faith in the Victorian era where the culture of the day censures those who deny Christian truth. Contending for the faith then was largely a matter of speaking exhortation to those in the pew. Today's culture rewards and elevates heresy and immorality. Ours is a post-Christian, post-industrial and post-modern age. We are post-everything, but where are we now? The only certainty is that we are not where we have been.

The challenge of contending for the faith means that we should be aware of what is taking place around us. And, as we form our *Reformed Perspective* on this post-Christian, post-modern age, we need to begin by making certain definitions and categories clear. This age is a secular one and has been so increasingly for the past



*Contributors at the Grace/Carey Conference. From left to right: Daniel Webber, Peter Day, Albert Mohler, Bob Sheehan, Stephen Rees, Geoff Thomas. For report see page 31.*

two hundred years. *Secular* means devoid of religious referents. Thus we can talk about *secularisation* that has taken place within our society. This secularisation has left its marks throughout society, including the world of the academic. I often tell my students to remember the ideology that gave birth to certain disciplines. Sociology, for example, is not a neutral discipline. It was founded by Augustus Kant, who was also known as the father of positivism. Kant says that the more a society develops, the less it needs God. Obviously sociology is providing an alternative to the Churches view. And, alarmingly, Kant has been proved right. As the 19th century progressed, and the industrial revolution spread through the West, there was a corresponding decline in religious faith. America is seemingly the only exception to this. Why? According to Brian Wilson, of Oxford University, it is because 'Americans will take anything as a religious confession'. A man could be mowing his lawn, strike his foot against the mower, and curse the Lord's name and American sociologists would interpret this as a declaration of faith. Church attendance is higher than anywhere else in the West, and 86% of Americans do claim to be born again, but the way Americans live show that this is not Christianity in any biblical sense.

*Secularism* is another definition we should make clear. This is an ideology determined to rid the public of religious discourse. It has been successful. When you look at the media you do not expect to see the Christian faith dealt with respectfully. You see the clergy, where present at all, in roles that are clearly meant

to marginalise and ridicule. The authority of the preacher has been replaced with the hilarity of the bumbling idiot.

In order to reach a Reformed perspective we must apply the truth of God's Word comprehensively and comprehensibly to all dimensions of life, not merely to those to do with faith. All truth is God's truth. There is no truth that is not his, and there is no truth that is not ours. We are accountable to him and we had better make sure that we are biblically engaged with the world. It is our responsibility as Reformed biblical Christians to make a bold and comprehensive statement of a Christian worldview, to apply the truth of Scripture to all areas of life and to bring every thought captive to the Word of God.

Stanley Fish, of Duke University, USA, recently wrote this in a magazine. Speaking to Christians he said, 'Go home. You don't have a place in this culture any more. We held the Enlightenment, and God lost.' Such candour is rare, but what he says strikes a chord.

How is it that so many people, inside as well as outside the Church, are confused about what this biblical perspective should be? Stanley Fish points us in the right direction when he talks about the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment saw the shift of authority from the object to the subject. This may seem irrelevant to the life of an ordinary Christian, but follow my argument for a moment. Every mode of thinking has to understand a relationship between the object and the subject, that is between the object to be known, and the subject doing the thinking. Before the Enlightenment the thinker assumed that the process was of bringing his thoughts in line with the reality of the object. This is called *objectivity*. In other words, the truth is true whether the thinking subject sees, understands or acknowledges it or not. Truth is inviolable and eternal. Why? Because God made it so. The Enlightenment shifted this authority from the object to the subject. Now the subject becomes sovereign. In post-Enlightenment thinking the subject can think in ways he wishes to think. The object will have to bring itself in line with the subject. This is called *subjectivity*. This relates directly to preaching the gospel today. We preach about objective truth to a generation who thinks they are sovereign, and not God. We preach to a generation who waits to see if they like what they hear or not. Objective truth is the predication of the gospel. If there is no objective truth, we are objectively lost.

This massive shift in human consciousness was the most significant change in all history. Even in pre-Christian days there was the assumption that truth was objective. But now we are a civilisation made up of subjectivists; most think that God is not part of their picture, and they can simply leave him out. Preaching has ceased to be threatening, because it is seen as irrelevant. The Puritans used to tell preachers to 'be dangerous', but the world no longer sees the Church as dangerous

or threatening, as the Church's truth is now just another point of view. This leads us on to *relativism*. Relativism is part of the world view of everyone in Western society, not just the radical critics in seminaries. Since the truth is in the thinker and not in reality, you can have your truth, and I can have mine. All truth is therefore relative. But if that is what truth is, then truth is nothing at all. Relativism inevitably slides down into nihilism, the denial of truth altogether. That leads to despair and that is where we are today. When people hear what you say, they take what they want, and throw away what they don't want. Preaching depends on 'your interpretation'.

This has led to the rise of personal moral autonomy within society and the Church, which in turn has led to an increase in immorality. We've already mentioned that our society rewards immorality; as it does so, biblical morality is sidelined, and treated as intolerant and oppressive. This is so 'in the Church' as well, for how many churches implement church discipline today?

The extent to which biblical morality is sidelined is illustrated clearly by popular culture. We live in the first age when a culture is more powerful than the politics, the economy or the Church that it surrounds. Even if the combined governments of the G7 nations tried to bring it into line they could not. And the influence it exerts over the world and the Church is colossal. Children can no longer handle silence, or a lack of visual stimuli. Sitcoms are written around 8 minute segments to keep viewers interested, and people's attention span has shrunk accordingly. The Church has responded by producing 8 minute sermonettes, preached by preacherettes, who try to grasp their congregations' fragile attention. Contrast this with the Puritans, who preached for upwards of two hours, in an age when their visit to the village was the most exciting thing that had happened all week.

We must come back to the authority of Scripture, and rely entirely upon it. 'How can you say homosexuality is wrong?' Because God says it's wrong. We cannot and must not rely upon secular arguments to prove biblical truths, for two reasons. Firstly, on a point of principle; it is wrong as it violates the Word of God. Secondly, from pragmatism; it doesn't work. The world can use secular arguments to far greater effect than we can; they are, after all, their arguments.

The one clear sign that the Reformed view is superior to that of the relativists or liberals is that it can be applied to every discipline of life. If all truth really is relative, then will it make any difference if you think you have \$4,000 in your account but your bank manager thinks you have \$40? Can one thing be true for one person but not for another in simple economics? No. But, we can and should apply a biblical perspective to everything in life, including economics. And as we do that, we will be fulfilling the command to 'contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints'.

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# Christianity Confronts Pluralism

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## **The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism**

D A Carson, Apollos (IVP), 1996, 640pp hardback, £14.99

*Review by Bill James*

*The purpose of this review article is not just to review, but to give a brief summary and taste of the book so that the reader can see the scope and importance of the subject for himself.*

The missionary planning to move to a foreign land would undoubtedly spend time studying the culture and heritage of his chosen field. Yet do we understand the rapidly changing scene of Western culture in which the Lord has placed many of us? Have we grappled with the fresh challenges which are presented as our society has become pluralistic, not only in the sense

of being ethnically diverse but also by maintaining that one culture or belief system is as good as any other?

We are faced with no easy task. There is much hard thinking to do. The literature is broad and deep. Pluralistic thinking is pervasive in our universities and schools, the governments of our nations and the hearts and minds of millions; it even reaches into our churches and seminaries. Yet now we have an ally in Don Carson who takes us by the hand and leads us forward into the arena, warning us of the pitfalls, guiding through the terrain, and pointing out the sure path of Christian fidelity. Carson is a mighty friend in this battle. His reading is monumental (over 1,000 works in 47 pages of 'Selected Bibliography') and his interests cover not only our defence against pluralism but how to confront it, not only within the confines of the Church but also how we are to address governments and nations caught in the pluralistic embrace.

The book begins with a survey of the ethnic and religious diversity found in the Western world. This diversity is accompanied by the new philosophical outlook of postmodernism, that no one ideology, religion or culture can in any sense be claimed to be superior to any other. Each person's understanding is subjective and cannot be used to challenge the validity of alternative views. The old modernism, with its proud claims of scientific objective understanding of the world, and irrefutable 'facts' has now been left behind, and has been replaced by relativism and pluralism.

The book is then divided into four sections:

1. Hermeneutics
2. Religious Pluralism
3. Christian Living in a Pluralistic Culture
4. Pluralism within the Camp

## Hermeneutics

Readers will be familiar with the well-charted paths of grammatico-historical exegesis. In interpreting the Scriptures our aim is to discover the message and intent of the original author. However, in postmodernism it is no longer widely accepted (for any literature, let alone the Bible) that a text can convey certain 'truths' to be scientifically discovered by the reader. If that were the case, it is suggested, one interpreter would be 'better' than another as they approach the 'real' meaning. Rather in the postmodern scheme the subjectivity of interpretation is emphasised; it is right and proper to dismantle the text from its original framework (deconstruction) and rebuild it within the cultural perception and situation of the reader to gain new insights. It may be an oversimplification but, to make the point, it is to say that the text means what the text means to you. Where has this approach come from, and how can it be answered?

Carson begins by going back to the familiar ground of modernity; he traces the roots of such thinking to Descartes and his quest to ground knowledge in infallible reason. We are reminded that however comfortable we may feel with the 'certainties' of modernity, yet this system is no friend of Christianity, and has led inevitably towards a naturalistic



*Bill James*

(anti-supernatural) and rationalistic (anti-faith) approach.

Kant is identified as the precursor of postmodernism. The emphasis on the subjective element of 'meaning' is traced until we arrive at the modern proponents of deconstruction.<sup>1</sup> Deconstruction maintains that language has no capacity to refer to 'objective reality'; words only refer to other words. Any text may be interpreted in a variety of ways, and each text refers to other texts which in turn have been interpreted. How you interpret a text depends upon your expectations, your interpretive framework, etc. To maintain an 'accepted' interpretation begs the question 'Accepted by whom?' and to defend any interpretation is simply to exert the power of your own group. The consequences for Bible study are obvious. Historical certainty is lost, and theology can no longer be claimed to be a pursuit of 'truth'.

Carson then provides a superb response. He begins by highlighting the positive emphasis of postmodernism on the diversity of culture, and our need to

be sensitive to cultural presuppositions when we approach the text of Scripture. And when we teach the Scriptures, we must remember that what we mean to say is not always what someone from another culture will hear. If we are insensitive to the culture in which we work, then we may prove to be unfaithful in making the message of the Bible heard clearly. Carson uses the critique of deconstruction to make us think carefully about how we should approach our hermeneutics. There is much helpful material here.

Nevertheless, Carson also demolishes the absurdity of deconstruction that

*'One of the reasons for Francis Schaeffer's influence was his ability to present his analysis of the culture with tears in his eyes. Whether or not one agrees at every point with his analysis, and regardless of how severe his judgments were, one could not responsibly doubt his compassion, his genuine love for men and women. Too many of his would-be successors simply sound like angry people. Our times call for Christian leaders who will articulate the truth boldly, courageously, humbly, knowledgeably, in a contemporary fashion, with prophetic fire – and with profound compassion' pp439-50.*

words cannot convey meaning. If such were really believed, then it would make communication effectively impossible. And if deconstructionists really believed their own theories there would be no way for them effectively to convey them to us.

## Religious Pluralism

There is no consensus in the postmodern society on matters of religion or morality. You have your opinion and I have mine; our differences are to be celebrated not argued. Further, there are no grounds on which to criticise another's views (their understanding is just as valid as yours). Christian claims to exclusive truth are clearly offensive in this context, and even more so when we seek to 'proselytise'.

Having surveyed modern trends in pluralism (effectively a new brand of universalism: 'all will be saved'), Carson defends the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. He shows that the Bible is committed to the notion of propositional truth, and this necessarily entails the reality of both orthodoxy and heresy. The clear and exclusive 'truth claims' of Scripture must be taken seriously. The works of a range of modern scholars are considered, and there is stimulating and profitable analysis. We are shown that pluralists come to the Bible already committed to pluralism; they do not take the text seriously and pick and choose which elements suit them. This chapter 'Has God Spoken?' is a robust defence of the doctrine of Scripture.

The next two chapters (one theme divided into two parts) follow naturally and are entitled 'What God has Spoken'. They make a simple plea to let the Bible speak for itself. Yet here Carson is provocative. He maintains that our presentation of the Christian worldview must be made directly from Scripture, and within the framework of the Bible's own plot line. In other words he rejects a 'systematic' framework beginning with the

*'It is said that baby busters did not want to be lectured; they expect to be entertained. They prefer videos to books; many of them have not learned to think in a linear fashion; they put more store than they recognise in mere impressions...'* p45.

doctrines of God, man, sin, etc. None of these categories is objectionable, but let the Bible speak for itself, let us follow its own story line and ensure that God's voice is heard. This is the case for the primacy of a biblical-theological approach, and to my mind it is right. We are therefore taken first to creation (with an assault on Darwinism en route), moving next to humanity in our dignity and accountability before God and exploring the implications of being made in his image before he addresses the fall. Then we are shown how God himself is revealed in the plot of Scripture. This survey is brief, but shows how the message of the Bible has been misrepresented and misunderstood in our modern age, and we are helped to confront modern pluralism with God's own revelation of himself. Finally Carson presents Christ; we are confronted with the person of Christ in the Gospels, the coming of the kingdom and the gift of the Spirit. All is fresh and helpful in showing the relevance and importance of these themes within the pluralistic culture in which we live. We are guided through the epistles to the climax of Revelation. We are shown that pluralism not only challenges particular doctrine(s) but the whole worldview and plotline of the biblical message.

The challenge of inclusivism is then faced in its various forms. Who will be

saved? What of those of other religions? What of those who have never heard of Christ? The claims of Pinnock, Sanders and others are examined, and it is demonstrated that to maintain inclusivism one must shut one's eyes to the whole sweep of the Bible's storyline. The chapter concludes with a brief exposition of various 'problem passages'. Then follows a further chapter insisting on the finality of Jesus.

Carson makes us face up to the fact that we must confront the modern pluralism which surrounds us even when we are considered rude or offensive to do so. Truth demands it, and if we are to be faithful to the Scriptures we have no option but to confront modern culture.

### **Christian Living in a Pluralistic Culture**

Now Carson moves easily into the political arena. What are the implications of pluralism for religious freedom, government, law, education, economics, and morals when a common consensus is lost? I will leave the reader to savour Carson's analysis for himself. In this time of 'Culture Wars' his thinking is wise and incisive, and finds a safe path between the ambitions of the postmillennial to Christianise society and the Anabaptist withdrawal from all matters political.

### **Pluralism within the Camp**

We are now shown how deeply pluralism has made inroads even within the boundaries of evangelicalism. What does it mean now to be an evangelical?

Carson's first concern is that modern evangelicals have become so consumer

*'There is a battle going on for the minds of men and women; well does the apostle know that in the Spirit-empowered proclamation of the whole counsel of God, men and women escape conformity to this world and are transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom 12:2)' p508.*

oriented that even the faith movement with its claims to health and wealth has grown and increased. We have become not at all interested in truth, but only in entertainment and enjoyment of worship, self-esteem and feel-good therapies. Where now is the submission to the objective and authoritative revelation of the Scriptures. The Bible, in typical postmodern fashion, has become a book which can help me and must be judged by its relevance to me in my situation.

Then, at the other end of the spectrum, we are in danger of being so 'conservative' as to be hopelessly irrelevant. Our orthodoxy must not be confused with a bygone age and a bygone culture. While we do not believe that the social sciences are the key to saving the lost and we shun Hollywood technique, are we being creative and relevant in the ways in which we seek faithfully to present Christ to those around us? The way forward is helpfully pointed out in the chapter on 'Heralding the Gospel in a Pluralistic Culture'.

The doctrine of hell is presented as one of the main casualties of the encroaching pluralism within the evangelical camp. Carson gives a masterly overview of the arguments and exegesis. He concludes that we may be guilty of gagging God if we do

not speak of the severity of his warnings and the awfulness of his punishments.

Amidst the fog of contemporary pluralism, Carson shines a clear light of incisive thinking on our postmodern world. This is a book which has wide scope, taking in the broad range of pluralism and its implications. Yet there is also depth, as Carson is not afraid to engage in detailed argument with his opponents on issues which are important to his case. The matter considered is sometimes complex, and will be unfamiliar to many readers, yet Carson's easy and flowing style carries us through and makes for easy understanding.

We must be grateful to God for giving such gifts to Don Carson, and we must be grateful to Carson that he has so used his talents to challenge the errors of our age and encourage us in proclaiming boldly the uncompromising message of the Bible. This excellent book is vital reading for pastors and Christian leaders in the Western world. It sharpens our thinking and gives a spiritual challenge to faithfulness in an unfaithful age.

## Reference

1. Deconstruction. The dictionary definition is: 'A method of literary analysis originated in France in the mid-20th century based on a theory that, by the very nature of language and usage, no text can have a fixed, coherent meaning.' (*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1988). Hence there is no single 'right' interpretation of a text. Some who are unfamiliar with this concept may be put off. Thankfully Carson gives us illustrations to help us on pp. 72-77.

## Nigeria

Home to about 20% of sub-Saharan Africa, this troubled country is much featured in international news reports of late.

The semi-desert North is generally thought of as 'Muslim' although there are some strong churches there, while the South is said to be 'Christian' (although many are still involved in traditional religion and Islam is increasing). The churches include a mix of indigenous and Western and many have taken on board such heresies as 'Health and Wealth', 'Perfectionism' and 'Salvation by works'.

### *The Samuel Bill Theological College*

Samuel Bill was a missionary from Northern Ireland who established the Qua Iboe Church of Nigeria just over 100 years ago. There are now 1,500 congregations of varying sizes. The denomination is traditionally Reformed but is not free from the influence of some errors (happily not including liberalism) which have pervaded the Nigerian religious scene.

The college offers a 3-year *Diploma in Theology* and a 4-year *Diploma in Ministerial Studies*. There are normally between 80 and 100 students and eight lecturers (at present 3 Nigerian and 5 missionary). In August it is planned to cater for more academically gifted men to study at a higher level for a 2-year *Bachelor in Divinity Degree*.



*Martin Bussey*

The students have a full schedule of lectures as well as preparation for preaching or Sunday school teaching on Sundays. There is a sense of joy and awe at the privilege of studying the Word of God. Some of these men are truly godly. They work exceedingly hard and are earnest in prayer. After graduating they go out to the churches as preachers and are often hindered by church 'elders' who may be untaught and even ungodly. We need to pray that they will have wisdom and perseverance in preaching the truth with love and also humility.

There are constant needs at the college – spiritual lecturers (at least two more are urgently needed by August), equipment, books, more courses, finance... A major encouragement is the literature work TETST (The Equipping of the Saints Trust) which has been established for 7 years. Books are imported and subsidised so as to be

made available to local Christians. A second aim is to print books written in Nigeria. The advantage is that language and illustrations are applicable to the Nigerian idiom. As a basis some of the college course material has been printed and further biblical and expository and practical works are almost ready for the press. There is an immense need and outlet for good Christian literature in Nigeria today. Wherever you go, people seem to be reading avidly. The *problem* is that many of the seemingly 'Christian' books really are not. The *challenge* is to produce literature faithful to the Scriptures, and again subsidy is needed to print sufficient to keep the cost level down. We must pray that the Lord will bless and prosper the work to equip his people for the difficult task of living Christ-centred and God-glorifying lives in Nigeria today.

This report is a summary from information provided by Martin Bussey, missionary and lecturer at SBTC. Further information can be obtained from: The General Secretary, Qua Iboe Fellowship, 14 Glencreagh Court, Belfast BT6 0PA, N Ireland.

**The Netherlands** – *George Whitefield Foundation*

*A report by Kees van Kralingen*

The 16th century Reformation had significant influence in the Netherlands. In the next two centuries this was followed by the so-called Second Reformation (see review of Joel Beeke's *Assurance of Faith*, RT150).

The current position can be briefly



*Kees van Kralingen*

summarised as follows:

There are a number of Presbyterian denominations which span the theological spectrum from liberal to very orthodox (hyper-Calvinistic). They all carry one of the possible Dutch translations of the word 'Reformed' in their name.

Then there are also Baptist churches especially in the Northern part of the country, some belonging to the Baptist Union but others being independent. Most are orthodox and non-charismatic. So far there are no self-declared Reformed Baptist churches and the 1689 Confession is unknown. In this Presbyterian stronghold the title, 'Reformed Baptist' is seen as a contradiction in terms (especially by those who place great emphasis on the covenantal theology of Kuyper and his followers).

The alarming fact is that today 64% of the population do not regard themselves as affiliated to any church and probably never visit a place of worship. The

figure is probably much higher for young people. Dutch society is characterised by spiritual and moral crises, the examples of which are all too well known abroad!

Against this background, it is very encouraging to know that a group of believers (including several Baptists) have formed the 'George Whitefield Foundation'. Their aim is to stimulate a study of the history and writings of the Puritans and of subsequent periods of revival in order to encourage strong desire and earnest prayer for revival. This, they believe, is desperately needed by the churches and could turn the tide; a powerful work of the Holy Spirit which only the Lord can give.

The Foundation seeks to further its goals by prayer, organising study conferences, publication of a quarterly magazine and by providing Reformed literature for Bible colleges, etc. The latest project is to donate a complete set of *The Works of John Owen* to one of the colleges.

The study conference in November 1995 was attended by some 125 people from a variety of backgrounds, the theme being 'The Marks of a True Revival; lessons from the past and inspiration for the present'. Pastor M Gorsira introduced the theme from Psalm 126 under the headings, 'Remembrances' and 'Expectation'. Mr J van Valen, who has authored books on the subject, gave a historical overview, comparing the work and views of Whitefield, Wesley, Finney, Moody and others. Finally Mr A Kamsteeg, who edits a Christian newspaper, gave a lively presentation on the importance of

the Puritans and of times of revival in the churches.

Prayer is earnestly requested for true revival in the Netherlands and for the work of the 'George Whitefield Foundation'. May our Lord have mercy once more upon this country which he has been pleased to bless so much in the past.

### **Uganda – Christian Books**

In May 1995 Robin and Margaret Bird, who have many years of experience in promoting Reformed Christian literature, travelled to Uganda. Since then their involvement has continued to grow. 6,000 of the best books have been sent in and strategically placed with the advice of missionaries and other contacts. Churches are numerous and large (often numbering between 2,000 and 3,000 worshippers), but lack teachers and leaders. The aim is to provide suitable books for the training of those who are recognised by their churches. A branch of the *Evangelical Library* (London) is also being set up in the West Nile region.

A further aim is to discount some books radically for sale and so to encourage individual Christians to purchase their own books and build up a pattern of personal study. The Butts Evangelical Church, Alton, Hants, UK has set up a Ugandan Literature Fund to help defray the high cost of freight.

### **Spain**

During the first week of June, the 10th Reformed Conference (*Cipriano de Valera*), attended by sixty, took place in



*David Rivero is shown seated just outside the auditorium, translating from English into Spanish through the equipment provided by Grace Baptist Mission.*



*Demetrio Canovas and Geoff Park*

fulfilled in the history of the RC Church.

An excellent spirit of unity was enjoyed at the Conference.

#### *USA – Seaside Heights, New Jersey*

Spain. Visiting speakers were Geoff Park from Garston Bridge Chapel, Liverpool, and the editor. David Rivero, pastor at León, acts as secretary for this conference. Demetrio Canovas serviced a book table. Demetrio is full-time manager of a Reformed Publishing House.

By request, the material expounded by the editor was similar to the article on Apostasy in this issue but included an exposition of the doctrines of grace as found in Romans 8:28ff. José Grau attended. He is esteemed as the most accomplished Reformed author in Spain. His major work consists of two extensive volumes on *Roman Catholicism*, a work which should be translated into English. He takes the view that 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is

Grace Evangelical Church is hosting its 25th Annual Sovereign Grace Bible Conference from September 8-12 this year. This Conference has been a blessing to many over the years and being based from a local church has given practical advantages such as open air witness on the busy esplanade. Another encouragement over several years has been outreach abroad by means of 'Project Malawi', a fund to provide scholarships and literature for ministerial students to the Likubula Bible Institute in Blantyre.

Speakers this year will include Dr James Boice of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Thomas Smith of Charlestown, West Virginia. Details from Box 189, Seaside Heights, New Jersey 08751.

# The Importance and Nature of Church Membership

*Nigel Westhead*

Recent developments within my local church have directed my concern to this subject which I wish to address in respect of three questions.

## **1. Is the idea of church membership a biblical concept?**

To readers of this magazine this may really sound like the proverbial 'silly question'! For myself however, having spent my early years as a Christian amongst the Christian Brethren assemblies (otherwise known as Plymouth Brethren) the notion of church membership, so second nature to those of the Reformed community, was not apparent. Instead the preferred term was 'fellowship' – one was not 'in membership' with the assembly but 'in fellowship' with it. Through coming to Reformed views about churchmanship and especially after becoming a pastor and facing the issue practically, I had to ask whether membership was biblical or not. I came to the conclusion it was and for the following reasons.

*A number of Bible verses suggest it*

In Acts 2: 41,47 for instance, we read of the Lord 'adding to their [i.e. the church's] number, a phrase suggesting that the early Christians were joined to a fixed number of established believers in one place. This is confirmed in Acts 5:13 where it is said of the gathering of believers that 'no one else dared join them'. The interesting word is 'join' which is used in Luke 15:15 to describe the relationship that the prodigal son came to sustain to his employer – he was 'contracted' to him, 'hired' by him. Such a term conveys the idea of a fixed association. Jesus uses the same word in Matthew 19:5ff when he speaks of a man and woman being 'united' (AV 'cleave') in marriage – hardly a loose arrangement! The same word appears again in Acts 9:26 to describe Paul's attempt to 'join the disciples' at Jerusalem – the context showing that what was meant by this was his intention to stay with the disciples and build them up in the faith (v28). Just as individuals seek to become members of churches so we find the corresponding idea of churches receiving Christians as members. Paul says of Phoebe 'I commend to you our sister... I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints...' (Rom 16:1ff). In addition there are those

seemingly insignificant, but give-away phrases like, 'Onesimus our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you...' (Col 4:9, cp. v12), and again, 'the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty)...' (Acts 1:15).

### *New Testament ecclesiology requires it*

What I mean by this is that the metaphors for the church indicate that believers should stand in a very intimate relation to it. This we can grasp by thinking of the church as a 'flock' (John 10) or a 'family' (eg. Eph 2:19), but especially by thinking of it as the 'body' (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12), pointing up as it does the deep organic union between the members, rather than 'hanging loose'! Also, the fact of church discipline alerts us to the place of membership. In this context Paul (1 Cor 5:12) can speak of those who are 'outside' and contrast them with a clearly known and identifiable group who are 'inside'. In the same vein, the act of excommunication would be meaningless if there were no membership from which one could be excommunicated. Finally, God's provision of elders and deacons to rule over the flock and pastor them necessitates a commitment to that flock or otherwise how could the injunction be met – 'Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you' (Heb 13:17)?

### *The doctrine of the believer's union with Christ is its basis*

Paul reminds us that as Christians 'we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body' (1 Cor 12:13). This means that we cannot think of our salvation merely in individualistic terms, but we must remember that we have been saved 'into' the body of Christ and into an organic connection with all those who share that privilege. Through union with Christ we have become part of something bigger than just ourselves and we are not at liberty to be 'free-lance' Christians as though we had only ourselves to think about. Church membership is the visible expression and symbol of that union created by the Spirit and the implement used by God to bring forth the fruit of that union.

## **2. Is there a pre-determined level of commitment required before one can become a member of a local church?**

In other words, must a prospective church member attend all or most of the church's meetings on a regular basis for a prescribed period before being admitted to membership? Although in Acts there are clear indications of what sort of commitment the early believers gave to the church (eg. Acts 2:42), such descriptions fall far short of a required standard of entry. In short, and in this

connection, the requirements for membership of the church visible don't appear to be any more stringent than those for entry into the church invisible. To approach the issue of membership by linking it to hoops for candidates to jump through is, I think, a very arbitrary procedure too. By this approach how would we know how many meetings or which meetings of the church were to be attended? It may not be so onerous to demand attendance at all the meetings of a small church whose weekly diet is two Sunday services and one mid-week prayer meeting. But what of those churches that resemble a department store in the range of their activities and in the time and man-power required to operate them? Would believers in such a church be required to attend all that was on offer? Who is to decide, the individual believer or the pastor? Again, I think the doctrine of union with Christ is helpful here. In Romans 6:1-11 the fruits of a dedicated and committed life do not precede entry into Christ's body but follow it. Growth and maturity in discipleship spring from the fact that believers are first planted in the fertile soil of Christ's grace by union with him, and from that union the fruit of a devoted life is harvested. From this perspective people are received into membership not as a consequence of having come to the fullest depths of discipleship but with a view of helping them grow up into such a position from the warm 'sense of belonging' generated by membership of the church. The pattern of the gospel is of capital importance here – grace then law, the indicative then the imperative, justification and sanctification.

### **3. How is membership related to access to the Lord's table?**

Again, I have had to think about this question against the background of my own specific circumstances. In particular I have in mind the 'freelance' Christians mentioned before who, if my own personal observations are anything to go by, appear to be on the increase! What do you do with the believer who has no real relation to your church but who turns up from time to time, and does so on your communion Sunday expecting to participate, as no doubt he does when he goes to the church down the road and the one round the corner as well?

I think we need first to go back to the question, 'What is the Lord's Supper about?' If my understanding of 1 Corinthians 10:17 is correct, then it is an act whereby the unity and fellowship of the participants with Christ and with one another comes to visible expression. But isn't it a bit hypocritical to participate in such an act, or to be allowed to do so if in fact you are only a casual visitor – i.e. if you're not a member? I don't feel free to dogmatise, and I know there are so often a thousand and one extenuating circumstances, but in principle at least, and in the face of the kind of issue raised, it does seem to be logical to assert the need to be in membership with the body of Christ at local level before giving symbolic expression to it in an act of communion.

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# The Indonesian Church and the Growth of Reformed Theology

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*David Brighton*

Historically, the earliest impact Reformed theology had upon Indonesia dates from the arrival of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Established in 1602, the VOC enjoyed 200 years of prosperity, often at the expense of the indigenous population. With them they brought Dutch Reformed pastors, not with a view to evangelism (which was actively discouraged by the VOC, as they felt that evangelism would conflict with their commercial interests) but merely as ministers to the Dutch. The VOC actually sent pastors home when they showed any genuine missionary interest. As the VOC gradually took control of different areas, so it also took control of the Roman Catholic churches left behind by the Portuguese, who were the first European settlers in Indonesia. And once they had seized these Catholic churches, the way was clear for the VOC to change them all into Dutch Reformed churches.

However, despite such inauspicious beginnings, Reformed theology in Indonesia today is on a much firmer footing. Many of the state Protestant churches have a Reformed background, though not many are keenly interested in it. But with some of the more recently established churches, the story is different. Reformed theology is a central issue for Dr Stephen Tong's Evangelical Reformed Church, a Presbyterian body based in Indonesia's capital Jakarta. This church is only five years old, but is

already so well established that they need to hire a large auditorium on Sunday for their main services, the first of which is in Indonesian and attracts a congregation of 1800, and the second, in Mandarin, is usually attended by 500. God has richly blessed the ERC, and as a result it is in the process of setting up churches in Surabaya and Malang (Java), Palembang (Sumatra) and Batam. Part of the reason for the church's dramatic growth and size is that throughout Asia Dr Tong is known as a powerful speaker and a gifted mass evangelist, often finding himself compared to Dr Billy Graham. Yet, unlike Dr Graham, Dr Tong places a high emphasis upon Reformed theology, an emphasis that is very practically worked out in his church's ministry. Dr Tong's philosophy is that church members should not be left as spiritual babies constantly in need of milk, but that members of all ages should be encouraged to grow spiritually and doctrinally. With this in mind, Dr Tong has set up the Evangelical Reformed School of Jakarta. This is run as a separate organisation distinct from the church, and is housed in its own office block. Here, believers from the ERC and other churches can choose between three different types of courses run for recent converts, those who are interested in a foundation in Reformed theology (The Intensive Programme) and those who want to pursue a more detailed study (The Diploma Programme). The Intensive Programme offers courses on subjects such as 'Old Testament Poetics' and 'Calvin, Predestination and Salvation',

which run for eight weeks. The Diploma Programme, which takes two years to complete, offers courses on 'Religion and Society', 'Christian Ethics', 'Systematic Theology', 'Hermeneutics', and 'The Minor Prophets', to name but a few. These are all run in the evenings and at week-ends, making it possible for the church members to attend. Currently there are about 250 students.

Dr Tong's vision for Reformed theology goes beyond the bounds of his own church. He regularly holds doctrinal seminars for groups of up to 5,000 people, drawn from churches all over Indonesia. He has set up, in addition to the school, the Evangelical Reformed Seminary of Indonesia, which offers divinity courses for bachelors' and masters' degrees. And, under the auspices of the Evangelical Reformed Foundation of Indonesia, a publishing ministry has been set up. Texts are carefully selected, and are either written by Indonesian writers like Dr Tong, or else they are translations of Western authors. Thus Calvin and Berkhof are available to Indonesians in their own language for the first time.

One of the key problems in encouraging Baptists to embrace the Reformed position is that in Indonesia Reformed theology is considered to be Presbyterian, hence paedo-baptist and not the concern of Baptist churches. However, one group of churches to break through this sectarianism is the Synod of Baptist Churches in Jakarta, a group of Independent Baptist churches. Assistant pastor, Widiyanto Yong, has taken the translation of *The 1689 Confession of Faith* produced by Dr Charles Cole of the Southern Baptist Seminary (see RT149 News) and has made linguistic revisions before using it in the church's own extensive training

programme. Young people with responsibilities in the church, such as Sunday School leaders, are being led through the 1689 in a series of two hour sessions. This is just one church in a group of seven different churches from Sumatra and areas around Jakarta, whose pastors also meet on a regular basis to study the 1689. Such is their enthusiasm for the Confession that they have begun to photocopy their own translation for circulation.

This publishing venture offers an excellent opportunity for expressing unity as skills from a number of individuals are necessary if the work is to realise its potential not only in production but in circulation. A collaboration between Charles Cole and Blane Mays of the Southern Baptist Seminary, and the ERFI's publishing wing, headed up by Sutjipto Subeno, means that the 1689 could be published as early as July. The hope is that the editor, in his next trip to Indonesia, will be able to participate in a launch of the book, where Baptist pastors from non-Reformed churches will be invited to hear papers on the 1689's historical background.

If recognised as a most valuable historical, practical, relevant and useful resource the 1689 Confession could have a tremendous impact. It is vital that it is not tagged as a sectarian piece and that it be acceptable amongst Baptist churches generally. It has considerable potential in the SBS. It will hopefully be useful to pastors and elders throughout Indonesia.

It would be wrong to allow this article to imply that Indonesia is some kind of doctrinal haven where all the news is good. Indonesia is engaged in doctrinal struggles similar to those in other parts of

the world, though in the opinion of Eric Michael, who has been a Christian worker in Indonesia for two decades, some issues are running chronologically about twenty years behind the West. There has been a lot of talk within the Indonesian seminaries and churches of a new 'non-Western' Christianity. Christianity is presented by some as a Western religion, not a Middle Eastern one, an argument which plays upon a healthy desire not to duplicate Western culture within the Church. As Western materialism is being thrust at Indonesia through the aggressive marketing strategies of consumer goods companies, often owned by the West or Japan, this desire is laudable. But under the banner of 'New Asian Christianity', neo-orthodoxy, pluralism and universalism are being introduced to seminary students and church congregations, and so a positive spirit of anti-materialism is being used, consciously or not, to open the door to weak, watered down theology.

Not all churches here wish to be distinctly Asian, and for some the influence of the Western Church is substantial. This influence is often not for the good. Issues such as the ordination of women are being struggled with by churches who feel the pressure to 'be like the churches in the West' irrespective of good or ill. Here, biblical arguments can become of secondary importance to following the West's lead.

Whether the West is influencing an individual church or not, the tension between Reformed theology and liberal theology is the same as in the West. And, as in the West, it is often apathy that allows a church to slip from the former into the latter. About 70% of Protestant Christians in Indonesia are from mainline Reformed and Lutheran churches, but

only a fraction of these have either a grasp of or an interest in their doctrinal heritage. There is a genuine need for these Christians to rediscover the doctrines that their founding fathers considered so important.

One of the other issues about which there is much confusion amongst baptistic churches in Indonesia is the subject of baptism. These churches are confused over a range of points, from how believers should be baptised to when they should be baptised and from immersion or sprinkling to when another church's baptism is valid. One church may practise both sprinkling and immersion for believers, allowing them to choose which is preferable, whilst one Bible school will not allow students, who have completed their studies, to graduate unless they have fulfilled that establishment's total immersion baptism requirements. Whatever the view of the individual, this seems to be one issue where clear biblical teaching is often lacking. Even amongst some seminary students and pastors within the Baptist denomination there is confusion over what the clear biblical position should be. It is noteworthy that *An Introduction to the Baptists* by E Hulse has been translated into Indonesian by Dr Cole.

God is working in Indonesia, but the country still needs our urgent prayers. One local pastor recently summed up for me the experience of Indonesian church life. He had passed the age of retirement, but had declined offers of a comfortable lifestyle with friends and family in Australia or America. His reason for not wanting to leave is that 'living in Indonesia is exciting. God is using me here'.

## Strange Fire?

*Strange Fire?* Eric Wright, Evangelical Press. 368 pages, large format paperback, £8.95, USA \$14.99.

Eric Wright is an experienced missionary (Pakistan) and pastor, as well as a gifted author. His research into the Toronto Blessing is thorough. He has attended the meetings in Toronto and interviewed TB leaders. No personal hostility toward them is found in this book.

The reasons which make this a particularly valuable book are as follows:

1. The TB is placed in its historical setting of the Vineyard Movement. Even though the Vineyard Movement has now distanced itself from the TB, that is the soil out of which it has grown. The career of John Wimber is traced out and nine fundamental defects of the Vineyard Movement which are perpetuated in the TB movement are described.
2. Those who have seen the TB videos will have noticed Stacey the prophetess who with shaking utters the most dire denunciations of critics and pronounces judgments on them as quenchers of the Spirit. Eric Wright calls for the exercise of discernment. To neglect a biblical assessment of these claims is irresponsible. He deals firmly with spiritual blackmail by expounding the Scripture which requires that we test all things.
3. The author provides a full and fair examination of the TB behaviour: doing carpet time, laughter, animal noises, crying, acting as if drunk. He shows that the physical phenomena correspond almost exactly with hypnosis practice. It is interesting to see that Eric Wright has made the same kind of observations



*John Rubens at the Grace/Carey Conference*

- as those made by Dr Gaius Davies (see in *RT* 144).
4. TB claims that the phenomena are essentially the same as found in revivals in the past – a survey of history is provided which refutes this claim. Wright shows the difference between divine disorder and cultivated chaos.
  5. There is useful and very relevant exposition on the issues of signs and wonders as well as prophecy.
  6. The author is positive in reminding his readers of the urgent need today for true revival in which the fruit of the Holy Spirit will be evidenced.

The overall conclusion is that the TB movement will never provide the dynamic needed to revitalise lives but it does, in some instances, inflict long term damage.

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## Tribute to Dr John Gerstner

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*The editor*

Dr John H Gerstner, writer and theologian, died on Sunday 24th March at the age of 81. We pay tribute to the memory of this man who was one of the leading figures of the Reformed movement in the second half of the twentieth century. He loved the Reformed faith, the Puritans and in particular Jonathan Edwards, and was devoted to introducing others to these authors.

Converted in his teens, he studied at Westminster College; one of his professors, Dr John Orr, became his mentor. This was followed by training at Westminster Theological Seminary where he met his wife Edna. Doctoral studies were completed at Harvard, and work was also undertaken at universities in Pittsburgh, Boston, Zurich, Barcelona and Oxford. Following a brief period in the pastorate, Dr Gerstner became professor of church history at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary where he taught until 1980. Through this work he influenced hundreds of faithful pastors and leaders. Most notable is his 'star pupil', RC Sproul through whom the Ligonier Valley Study Centre was established, propagating the Reformed faith by means of conferences, books, tapes and videos. Gerstner was a regular speaker at the Ligonier Conferences, and also at Boice's Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology.

Dr Gerstner's literary output was prodigious and we are left with a marvellous legacy of his writings. In 1976 his bibliography filled 16 pages; that was perhaps doubled by the time of his death. His main work was a three-volume set on the theology of Jonathan Edwards. Other works cover a broad range of practical, doctrinal and contemporary issues.

Many will remember his sharp mind and spiritual wisdom. I attended a public meeting in America at which Dr Gerstner was the speaker. It was unforgettable. All he did for two hours was to receive questions handed to him by stewards from members of the congregation. He read the questions one by one and answered them with great insight. I noticed that he glanced at one and put it on one side. He came back to it later and answered it well. It was very controversial and I cannot digress, except to say that Dr Gerstner remarked that the Reformed constituency is small and we should try to maintain our unity.

We record gratitude to God for raising up such a gifted and godly man, and for using him so mightily.

Dr Gerstner is survived by his wife and three children.

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# Grace/Carey Conference, May 1996

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*Report by David Bugden*

In an age of splits and divisions it is good to note an occasion when there is a coming together and uniting! This was the third time when the annual Grace Baptist Assembly and the annual Carey Ministers' Conference combined to meet residentially at Swanwick, Derbyshire. The Assembly normally gathers messengers from the churches, the Conference gathers pastors: this Conference was wider than either and was open to all – and some 160 had gathered.

The setting was idyllic though the weather was unusually cold. But the fellowship was warm and the opportunities to spend two days together were great: the blessing of the Lord upon the proceedings was evident and many benefited from the ministry. Each session was under the able and genial chairmanship of Bob Sheehan (Welwyn) as well as the closing Conference Sermon being his responsibility.

The first session was assigned to Geoff Thomas who presented us with one of his inimitable biographies, this time on 'J Gresham Machen: Mr Valiant-for-Truth'. It is doubtful if one can really regard Machen as an outstanding success, but we were instructed in the way in which he courageously and boldly stood for the truth in the seminary where he taught (Princeton),



*David and Pamela Bugden at the Conference*

in his denomination and concerning foreign missionary work. He was, of course, instrumental in Westminster Theological Seminary coming into being, as also the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It was a strange providence that he died in the prime of life. His biography and his writings are in print and clamour for further attention. He was the first in a succession of men who have stood against the insidious inroads of liberalism this century, and his stand challenges us.

We were privileged to have as guest speaker at the Conference Dr Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, USA, one of the oldest and largest of Baptist institutions anywhere. It was refreshing to have biblical Reformed ministry from such a source: some of us remember leaner times of 40 and 50 years ago when Reformed truth



*Paul Mizzi who gave a report of the work in Malta*

was not to be heard amongst Southern Baptists! Dr Mohler's first address was on 'A Reformed Perspective on a Secular Age'. With masterly ability we were given a bird's eye view of the present world situation from the standpoint of the truth we believe – how does a Calvinist view the wicked and apostate age of which we are part? The contrast was made between the City of God of which Augustine wrote and the City of Man which is destined for hell at the last. The following evening we were challenged to be faithful in ministry in such a context: '“Preach the Word” in all situations', urged our speaker. The discussion following both sessions went on well past bedtime!

Stephen Rees (Stockport) addressed us on two mornings from Philippians 2, the first concerning our understanding of the meaning and significance of the condescension and exaltation of Jesus. With great detail and insight the background was painted in so that from the perspective of first Alexander the Great and then the Roman Emperor

who were acknowledged as lord and worshipped as divine, we should recognise the challenge that Jesus is Lord by virtue of his humiliation. In confessing him as Lord, we are thus called to face all the challenges of modern lords and in humility to walk in obedience to our Lord whatever the cost.

Daniel Webber (European Missionary Fellowship) spoke on our responsibility to take the gospel to all the world – a task unfinished – and this was well complemented by a session of reports of the Lord's work in other parts, e.g. Nigeria, Luxemburg, New Zealand, Argentina, etc. This brought a fresh sense of challenge and responsibility to fulfil the Great Commission.

The closing Conference Sermon by Bob Sheehan was preached from Exodus 32:11, with particular emphasis on one phrase – 'And Moses besought the Lord his God' which literally means 'And Moses stroked the face of God'. As a child would climb on his father's knee and stroke his face, so we are given the privilege of sitting on the knee of Omnipotence to stroke the face of God. He referred to the few other places in the Old Testament where the word is used, showing us the privilege of coming to God on behalf of others and pleading with him. We left the Conference with urgent need to seek the face of God more.

If you were not there, cassettes can be purchased from: Carey Conference Cassettes, Crag House Farm, Cookridge, Leeds LS16 7NH, UK at £3.00 each plus p&p.

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