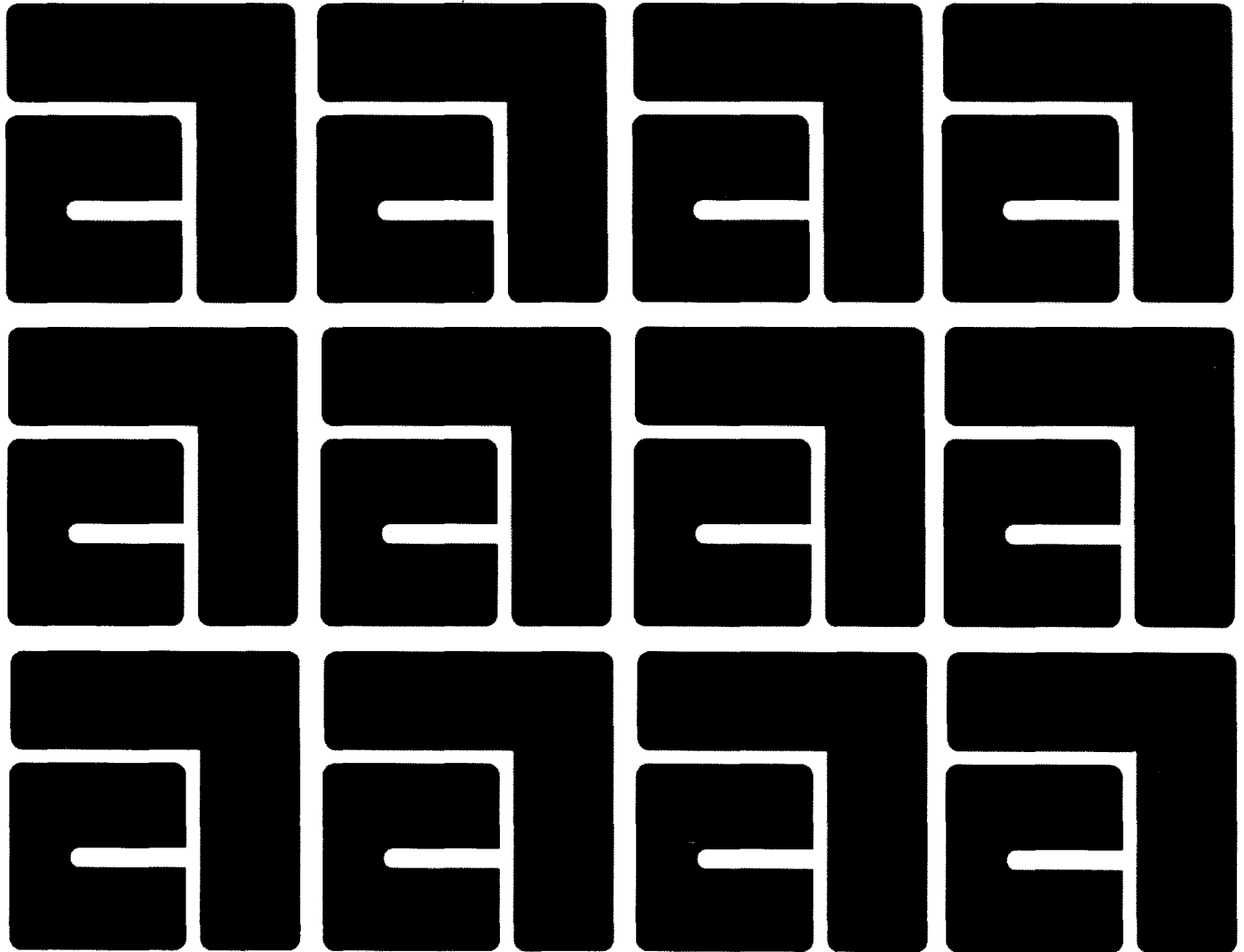




# FOUNDATIONS

a journal of evangelical theology

Spring 2005 • Price £3.00



### FOUNDATIONS

is published by Affinity in April and October. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics – and to indicate their relevance to pastoral ministry. Its policy gives particular attention to the theology of evangelical churches which are committed to biblical ecumenism.

### EDITORS

Rev. Dr Kenneth Brownell and Dr. Daniel Strange  
All MSS, Editorial Correspondence and Publications for Review should be sent to the Editor:  
6 Elrington Road, Hackney, London. E8 3BJ  
Office Tel: 020 8980 6125  
Home Tel: 020 7249 5712  
e-mail: kennethbrownell@aol.com  
(articles preferably sent as Microsoft Word 97 files by e-mail or on disk with hard copy).

### EDITORIAL BOARD

(the Affinity Theological Team)  
Paul Brown, Ken Brownell, Stephen Clark,  
David Field, Mark Johnston, Bill Nikides  
Chris Sinkinson, Jonathan Stephen, Dan Strange  
Steve Wilmshurst.

### CONTENTS

<b>Editor's Notes</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Four Questions for Evangelical Bioethics</b> <i>Leonardo de Chirico.</i> <i>Pastor of the evangelical church in Ferrara in Italy and teacher at the Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione (IFED) in Padova.</i>	<b>8</b>
<b>Preaching from Ecclesiastes</b> <i>Philip Eveson.</i> <i>Principal of the London Theological Seminary and director of studies of the John Owen Centre.</i>	<b>12</b>
<b>The Seven Blessings of the Book of Revelation</b> <i>David Field.</i> <i>Lecturer on doctrine at Oak Hill College London.</i>	<b>20</b>
<b>Has God Cast Away His People?</b> <i>David Bond.</i> <i>Works with Christian Witness to Israel.</i>	<b>27</b>
<b>The Future of Nonconformity</b> <i>Mark Johnston.</i> <i>Minister of Grove Chapel, Camberwell, London.</i>	<b>36</b>
<b>Review Article:</b> <b>Evangelicals and Roman Catholicism by Leonardo de Chirico.</b> <i>Bill Nikides.</i> <i>Missionary with Mission to the World of the Presbyterian Church of America and the current moderator of the presbytery of International Presbyterian Church.</i>	<b>44</b>

# Editor's Notes

---

First, I want to welcome Dan Strange as the new associate editor. Dan has been working with theological students for UCCF and moves in the autumn to lecture on theology and culture at Oak Hill College. We look forward to his contribution in the future. Secondly, it should have been noted in the last issue that Garry Williams's article on evangelicalism was originally given as the DM Lloyd-Jones Memorial Lecture at the John Owen Centre. The John Owen Centre was established several years ago by the board of the London Theological Seminary in order to encourage theological study by pastors, missionaries and other serious students. Currently it runs day seminars, a reading group, Hebrew and Greek refresher courses and a biennial conference. Mark Johnston's article in this issue was first delivered at the 2004 conference that explored the past and present state of evangelical Nonconformity in England and Wales. The centre has also been conducting a post-graduate degree course (ThM) in historical theology with Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. On September 3 of this year Paul Negruts of Oradea will be preaching at the first graduation service for those who have completed the course. Later on the same day Carl Trueman will deliver the 2005 Lloyd-Jones lecture. The centre also has facilities for individual study. Thirdly, a word of apology is due to you. For various reasons the survey of literature in the field of systematic theology is not included in this issue. I will try to have that put right in the next issue.

If you haven't read it yet I highly recommend **Diarmaid MacCulloch's** *Reformation*.<sup>1</sup> This is without doubt one of the best modern histories of the Reformation. First, MacCulloch's account is

both wide in scope and deep in insight. I was amazed at how much he gets in. He is a master of succinctly summarising a complex episode in clear and elegant prose. The period covered, 1490 to 1700, goes beyond that covered in many other histories of the Reformation. This allows the author to follow through the developments in both Protestantism and Catholicism where there was much more of a symbiotic relationship than is often acknowledged. But it is in his treatment of Protestantism that MacCulloch excels. One commendation on the cover calls the book 'a triumph of human sympathy' and that is surely what it is. MacCulloch enables us to enter the world of the Reformation, both through the power of his narrative as well as by his analysis. Without losing the narrative thread the author explores all sorts of incidents and byways of the Reformation that illuminate the whole story. I found the material on Eastern Europe particularly fascinating, but anecdotes about those involved in the English Reformation are just as helpful. As a student of the latter MacCulloch is dazzling. He treats the Reformed or Calvinist strand of the Reformation with much more sympathy and understanding than many others. Not least he shows that Calvinism in some places was a genuinely popular movement. The final chapters of the book deal with social aspects of the Reformation. The chapter on marriage and family is particularly good. The inclusion of a whole section on homosexuality is a mistake but not unexpected today. There are of course a number of points where one disagrees with his interpretation. However overall this is a book to make the Reformation come alive 'warts and all' as one of its sons famously said.

---

Also worth reading in the same area is *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture* by **William Dyrness**<sup>2</sup> For many the subtitle – ‘The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards’ – will bring a wry smile. For many, classical Protestantism has suffered for much of its history from a lack of imagination. Often this is associated with a lack of emphasis on the arts in public worship. However Dyrness disputes this. For sure there was a suspicion of the visual in worship which manifested itself in the iconoclasm of the Reformation period. Exploring the thinking of Calvin and others Dyrness shows how this was rooted in their critique of the role of images in the Roman church and their understanding of the nature of idolatry. In contrast to the Lutherans, the Reformed saw idolatry as not only worshipping another god than the true God, but also worshipping the true God in the wrong way. The Reformers privileged the ear over the eye which they saw as particularly susceptible to temptation. As the interior of churches were simplified, as were services which now centred on the preaching of the word, the Protestant imagination expressed itself in other ways. The sermon itself became an exercise in the imagination, particularly as biblical images were used and developed in communicating the truth. This had a profound effect in Britain in the development of literature. The interior of churches, as witnessed by those in the Netherlands and New England, exhibited an aesthetic simplicity that I for one find more beautiful than anything else on offer. What Dyrness detects among the Reformed was a new appreciation of the beauty of the whole of God’s creation, what Calvin called the ‘theatre of God’s glory’. This liberated Christians to explore the beauty of creation through painting (think of the

17th century Dutch masters), music, architecture (the French Huguenots were the best architects in France and in the case of Bernard Palissy consciously biblical ones), literature (Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Bunyan) and science. It is not surprising to find that beauty is a major theme for Jonathan Edwards. Contemporary Reformed Evangelicals need to rediscover something of this part of their heritage. Incidentally, for a short introduction to the idea of beauty in the Christian life read **Sam Storm’s** *One Thing, Developing a Passion for the Beauty of God*.<sup>3</sup> In some ways this book is John Piper simplified and condensed to 188 pages. Many of Piper’s key themes are here but with a particular stress on seeing and being transformed by the beauty of God. The relevant chapters get us to the heart of the Protestant imagination that is only satisfied in God himself as revealed in Jesus Christ.

I wish that **Alister McGrath** had taken some of this on board in *The Twilight of Atheism*.<sup>4</sup> McGrath is excellent in his account of how atheism has arisen and begun to fall. For sure-footed and accessible intellectual history he is to be highly commended. He covers all the key players and movements from the 18th century to the present. Compared to similar treatments by Blanchard and Zacharias, McGrath is more sensitive to the post-modern milieu and questioning of confused pagans. With the fall of atheism there is certainly an evangelistic and apologetic opportunity. However I think McGrath is weaker in his treatment of orthodox Protestantism and particularly on this matter of the imagination. He seems to suggest that the down-playing of the visual in devotion and public worship has put Protestants at a disadvantage. By desacralising

---

the world the Reformers unintentionally opened the way for the secularism we know today. There is some truth in that, but the answer is not to resacralise the world, but to see it again as the theatre of God's glory and to be celebrated as such. My other quibble is with the place in all this McGrath gives to Pentecostalism. He sees the Pentecostal emphasis on experience as redressing the cerebral nature of classical Protestantism and thereby countering atheistic secularism. The growth of Pentecostalism since 1900 is indeed remarkable and one of the major developments in church history. However there are some darker aspects of Pentecostalism that McGrath does not mention and that could seriously undermine orthodox faith in the future. Certainly in the west it could lead to increased unbelief as some of its more extravagant claims are proved empty. Nor is his picture of evangelical Protestantism recognisable to those who, like Jonathan Edwards, see a more experiential and affective dimension to their faith. There is a form of cerebral evangelicalism, but at best that is less than the real thing. When the tide of faith turns again the answer to secular atheism will be the historic evangelical faith that satisfies the emotions as well as the intellect just as it did for many when it countered the rationalism of the 18th century.

In the last issue I had intended to include in my survey of historical literature some books on contemporary Christianity. Let me take this opportunity to do so now. One of the most interesting sociologists of religion in Britain today is **Grace Davie** who devised the expression 'believing without belonging' to sum up the attitude of most British people to Christianity. In *Europe: The*

*Exceptional Case* <sup>5</sup> Davie examines European Christianity in the context of global Christianity. As anyone who reads the Guardian or Independent will appreciate, cultural progressives see Europe in the vanguard of secularism. Here on the western and especially north-western edge of the Eurasian land mass we have met the future where religion in general and Christianity in particular has been banished from the central cultural space. In fact the opposite is the case according to Davie. Around the world Christianity is growing and other societies, including the United States, show no signs of following the European pattern. Europe is the exceptional case (as are to a lesser extent Canada, Australia and New Zealand). Even in Europe there is evidence of strong religion, especially among immigrant groups. The exceptional nature of European religion or lack of it needs to be born in mind when thinking about the mission of our churches. While our immediate context may not be that encouraging our wider context is. Our approaches to evangelism and discipleship need to adapt to this exceptional context. A book to read along with Davie's is **Philip Jenkins's** *The Next Christendom*.<sup>6</sup> Jenkins chronicles and analyses the massive expansion of Christianity in the 20th century that shows no sign of abating in the 21st. He is particularly good at looking at how evangelicalism in the developing world may affect the shape of Christianity in the future. It will be much more doctrinally and morally conservative, but also more apocalyptic and given to excessive claims to the miraculous. While the former will hearten conservative evangelicals the latter will dismay them. The next few decades should be very interesting indeed.

---

One of the ways that churches have adapted their approaches to evangelism is that of courses for inquirers. As I argued in an articles a few years ago such courses are really a revival of the ancient practise of catechising. By far the best known and most widely used course is the Alpha Course. In *The Alpha Enterprise* Stephen Hunt<sup>7</sup> subjects Alpha to a pretty rigorous academic sociological critique. After giving an account of Alpha's origins at Holy Trinity Brompton he places it within its context in post-modernity and the charismatic movement. Each of the components of the course is examined after which he assesses its effectiveness and then takes up a number of issues such as its attitude to homosexuality and its charismatic orientation. This is not a theological critique of the course, but it does make some telling hits in its criticisms. Alpha is an attempt to market an essentially orthodox understanding of Christianity in a world of religious consumerism and to that extent it is quite successful. However it also suffers as a result, not least in the attempt to package the gospel and export it with the cultural baggage of its original context in upper middle class English Anglicanism. Hunt believes that while big claims are made for Alpha the reality on the ground is often far less impressive. Nevertheless Alpha is a remarkable development in late 20th century Christianity. In one section Hunt deals with critiques of the course from conservative evangelicals among others and mentions the FIEC in particular. To my knowledge FIEC does not have an official position on Alpha, although I suspect that most churches if not against it do have reservations about some aspects of it. Unfortunately Hunt says that no real alternatives have challenged Alpha's position and though he does not mention it, that

must include All Souls' Christianity Explored course. Those of us who are critical of Alpha need to do some more work here. My feeling is that all these courses begin at the wrong place. They start with Jesus when it would be better to start with God as the creator. Jesus makes no sense except within the context of the biblical framework of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation. In his catechising Augustine of Hippo understood this and we need to as well. Incidentally, Hunt's book is not only a helpful critique of Alpha, but also a good introduction to up-to-date sociology of religion as helpfully applied to a notable religious phenomenon.

Let me mention three books, two of them reference works, that help us understand religion today. *A Brief Guide to Beliefs*<sup>8</sup> by Linda Edwards is a very helpful survey of religion in the world today. The first chapters look at various common themes and aspects of all religions such as ethics, science, the problem of evil and so on. The rest of the book is a chapter by chapter account of all the major religions as well a vast array of religious movements, cults and new age spirituality. Christianity receives the most attention and Edwards is very balanced and fair in what she says. Without noticeable bias she details the differences between liberals and conservatives in a number of areas. Inevitably some things are left out (I could not find reference to Alevi Muslims when my newsagent said he was one) and there are some things that should have been included. *The Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World*<sup>9</sup> is a very useful addition to the IVP Reference Collection. The book falls in two parts. The first takes up a wide range of contemporary religious issues – politics, the arts, technology,

---

human rights, etc. The second section takes up the individual religions, cults and movements. Christianity is dealt with in separate articles on its evangelical, Pentecostal/charismatic, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant forms. Strangely there is not a chapter on liberal Christianity which is left for Carl Trueman to deal with in his chapter on Protestantism. While not a reference work as such, **Harold Netland's** *Encountering Religious Pluralism*<sup>10</sup> is a book to be referred to often. In the book he attempts to develop an evangelical theology of religions. Living as we do in an increasingly pluralistic religious environment we must deal with other religions in a biblical way. Netland helps us to do this, first by surveying the cultural, philosophical and theological landscape with particular reference to the thinking of John Hick. The latter part of the book develops an evangelical theology of religion that upholds the uniqueness of Christ and the exclusivity of salvation in him while recognising the reality of general revelation reflected in other religions.

Any history of Christianity in Britain in the latter part of the 20th century has to take account of the impact of the welfare state. I think it can be argued that the welfare state has effectively become the national church. In fact a few years ago Polly Toynbee said as much about the NHS in an article. The impact on the churches has not only been the way their social ministries have largely been taken over by the state, but even more how the state has nurtured a culture of dependency on itself. An interesting and thought-provoking read is *The Welfare State We're In*<sup>11</sup> by **James Bartholomew**. Bartholomew may overstate his case that the British

welfare state is a bad thing, but he makes some valid points as he surveys health care, education, housing, social benefit and so on. Interestingly Thomas Chalmers emerges as a hero who in developing social ministries for the poor in Glasgow sought not to undermine personal responsibility. On this score Chalmers has not generally been honoured by evangelicals in Britain, many of whom seem to think that some form of state collectivism is the only way to achieve social justice. Perhaps we need to recover something of the voluntary spirit of our Victorian forebears. Certainly it would improve education and civic life in general in Hackney where I live. In this regard I recommend **Tristram Hunt's** superb *Building Jerusalem*.<sup>12</sup> As a Labour supporting academic historian Hunt would not agree with Bartholomew, but he does show the remarkable achievement of the Victorians in transforming British cities. Nonconformists played a key role in this. Sadly today evangelicals, Nonconformist or Anglican, are more likely than not to be found in the suburbs and beyond rather than in the cities where they need to be.

There is no doubt that the late Pope John Paul II was one of the great figures in the 20th century and certainly one of the most remarkable popes in history. However there is something strange about the massive coverage of his death in the media not unlike that surrounding the death of Diana. Perhaps because he was a celebrity pope albeit with more gravitas than is common in the world today his death, like that of Diana, affects people personally in the way that that of other notable figures doesn't. Interestingly the Guardian on 5 April ran two articles that highlighted something of the real

---

religious significance of the pope's death for Britain. One by Mark Almond was entitled 'The strange death of Protestant England' and the other article by Martin Kettle was entitled 'It's as if the Reformation had never happened'. Kettle's concern was not religious, but cultural and political. Noting how the Prime Minister and others were intent to be at the funeral, he wrote, 'The real dynamic of this new pragmatic comes from the severe modern erosion of commitment and confidence handed down to us by history, notably by the Reformation and the Glorious Revolution'. However the consequences are not only the political and cultural ones Kettle notes, but even more the spiritual consequences of which most evangelicals today seem totally oblivious. However much we might admire the late Pope's stance on matters of human life and justice he was sadly wrong when it came to salvation though faith alone in Christ alone and by grace alone. What is desperately needed today is a revival of evangelical Protestantism that is richly doctrinal, deeply experiential, passionately evangelistic, culturally engaged, intellectually robust, socially involved and practically relevant to the lives of Christians in a very complex world. With the expansion of Protestant Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America it is especially important that the evangelical faith of the Reformers is not forgotten, but rather preached, understood and lived out in a way that is both culturally appropriate and biblically faithful.

Two books have come to hand that can help to inspire and sharpen our thinking in this area. **Terry Johnson's** *The Case for Traditional Protestantism*<sup>13</sup> is the more polemical of the two books as it makes its

case for evangelicalism in its Reformed expression. Organising his book around the classic solas of the Reformation Johnson expounds the evangelical Reformed faith in a fresh and lively way. A benefit of the book is the plethora of excellent quotes from a wide range of authors. He engages among others with Rome and recent controversies within evangelicalism on justification. In his discussion of the reformation of worship and church government he is clearly Presbyterian in ecclesiology without much acknowledgement that not all Calvinists would agree. For a book like this he seems to go on unnecessarily about the connectional nature of the church and infant baptism. Towards the end of the book Johnson briefly outlines the relevance of the Protestant faith to education, politics, economics and the arts. He ends by reminding us of Abraham Kuyper's vision of all of life under the lordship of Christ. Overall the book is very good, but I suppose my problem with it is that Johnson has not so much made the case for traditional Protestantism as for traditional Calvinistic Protestantism of the Presbyterian variety. No doubt the case needs to be made for that position, but traditional Protestantism is much broader and the case needs to be made for that as well. Surely Calvinistic Baptists and Congregationalists, classic Pentecostals, conservative Arminians and moderate dispensationalists are traditional Protestants.

In *Truth in all its glory*<sup>14</sup> **William Edgar** doesn't try to make the case for classic Protestantism in general but for the Reformed faith in particular and does so in a fresh and attractive way. Of the two books this is the one that I would give to someone wanting an introduction to the Reformed faith. The book falls



## References

---

into three sections. In the first, Edgar introduces the substance of Calvinism and gives a brief history of its development. Here he argues that knowing God involves knowing him in the fullness of what he has revealed to us in Scripture. The second and longest section is an exposition of the Reformed faith. In the third section Edgar outlines how the Reformed faith applies today in the church and the world. Like Johnson, Edgar is Presbyterian in his convictions, but does acknowledge that Reformed Baptists differ from him. Also like Johnson he rightly emphasises the central importance of the church in the Christian life and the continuing obligation of the 'cultural mandate'. Towards the end of the book Edgar outlines what he thinks needs to be done today. He mentions three theological issues that merit reflection: interpreting Scripture, relating union with Christ to other doctrines and developing the doctrine of the Trinity. The latter is particularly important in our evangelistic engagement with, on the one hand, post-modernity with its emphasis on the many and, on the other hand, Islam with its emphasis on the one. Like Johnson, Edgar reminds us how the faith has to be applied to every sphere of life and is indeed the answer to many of the issues facing humanity. Particularly urgent is the importance of discipleship in those areas of the world where Christianity is growing. As he says in his last paragraph: 'The agenda is more than full. Our God is more than able'.

1. D MacCulloch, *Reformation, Europe's House Divided*, 1490-1700 (London, Penguin Books, 2004)
2. WA Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture, The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2004).
3. S Storms, *One Thing, Developing a Passion for the Beauty of God* (Fearn: Christian Focus 2004).
4. A McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism, The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London: Rider 2004).
5. G Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd 2002)
6. P Jenkins, *The Next Christendom – The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002).
7. S Hunt, *The Alpha Course – Evangelism in a Post-Christian Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2004).
8. L. Edwards, *A Brief Guide to Beliefs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2001).
9. C Partridge, ed., *The Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World* (Leicester: IVP 2002).
10. H Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism – The Challenge of Christian Faith and Mission* (Leicester: IVP 2001).
11. J Bartholomew, *The Welfare State We're In* (London: Politico's 2004).
12. T Hunt, *Building Jerusalem – The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2004).
13. TL Johnson, *The Case for Traditional Protestantism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust 2004).
14. W Edgar, *Truth in all its glory* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed 2004).

There is no doubt that bioethics has become a burning issue for all ethical thinking. In our present situation, against the background of an increasingly complex interplay between scientific research, moral framework, and social consequences, there is no major ethical question that does not impinge on life and death issues. Traditional values are in a state of flux, threatened by powerful interests wishing to redefine the inherited moral consensus on what it means to be human and to be person.

Evangelical ethics is in the midst of this changing scenario. In the last twenty-five years, there has been a growing interest amongst Evangelicals in the challenges coming from the bioethics field. In the Evangelical world, we have now a fair number of publications and scholars as well as various study centres which have been set up. There are also lobbying initiatives which are beginning to take place around the globe. Evangelical activism has found another area of involvement and Evangelicals now share in the wider discussion. Is all well, then? No. Although it is probably too early to attempt a thorough evaluation of what Evangelical bioethics is articulating theologically, promoting culturally and achieving politically, it is important that some important questions be asked at this initial stage in order to raise awareness on critical directions that although they might appear to be winning the day, are utterly unsatisfactory. The hope is to provoke a fruitful debate on how Evangelicals should respond to bioethics issues in faithful and useful ways.

## **1. Is the recourse to natural theology the business of Christian ethics?**

Many Christian attempts to deal with bioethics tend to rely on ontological categories which are mainly shaped by natural theology. In fairness it must be said that there is no Evangelical writing on bioethics which is not concerned to let the Bible contribute to the discussion. The problem is that already assumed ontological presuppositions which are governed by Aristotelian-Thomistic interpretations of biological data strongly influence the way in which the Bible is read in this respect. One could write an entire thesis on the Evangelical (mis)readings of Psalm 139, for example, whereby the poem is understood in Roman Catholic terms of “life as substance in itself”, or “life as absolute” rather than in Biblical, relational, and covenantal ways. Another example would be the treatment that the *imago dei* motif receives in some Evangelical literature. Quite often the Christian anthropological vision which is developed is fraught with philosophical ideas shaped by classical thought.

The problem with this kind of natural theology is that it equates biological life with human life and gives a philosophical warrant to it. The biology of man is his humanity. Once you have the biology working, you have a man. Now, the simple equation between the two is a gross mistake in that it conceives humanity in a monistic way. It elevates biology to the supreme norm of humanity and it bypasses other important features of Biblical anthropology such as relationships.

---

In Christian terms, anthropological monism (i.e. man's nature is an arithmetic unity) is a mistake as erroneous as anthropological dualism (i.e. man's nature is the mingling of two elements). On the one hand, Roman Catholic bioethics (and, sadly, much Evangelical bioethics) tends towards monism whereby biology determines humanity. On the other, secular bioethics tends towards dualism whereby humanity is detached from biology and ascribed to social negotiation. Both are wrong. The Christian alternative is thinking according to the trinitarian pattern of one and many at the same time. This means that biology is important but it is not the only norm to take into consideration. Humanity is not less than biology – it is always something more.

Since bioethics heavily encroaches on anthropology, it is important to have our Biblical anthropology right. Are we going back to natural theology, either monistic or dualistic, instead of turning to the Triune God attested in the Scriptures? If it is true that scientific practices force us to stretch our anthropological categories in order to account for the ever growing power to intervene in human life, it is frustrating to see Evangelicals going back to natural theology, instead of working out a Biblical anthropology.

## **2. Is the "sanctity of life" a Christian perspective?**

In Evangelical bioethics there is much talk of "the sanctity of life", sometimes even referred to as the "sacredness of life". According to this view, life is

inherently sacred and should be recognised as an absolute value. Sacredness and absoluteness go hand in hand. These expressions are used in order to safeguard and to protect human life from any attempt to destroy, dispose and arbitrarily manipulate it. Although this protective attitude is commendable, a radical question should be asked. Is it Christian at all to ascribe sacredness to a gift (as life is a gift) which is precious but not to be deified? In other words, every gift from the Creator God is good, but the Bible strongly warns us not to elevate one element of creation to a "sacred" status. Attributing absoluteness to a created reality by way of "sanctifying" it means shifting from a Biblical worldview where God alone is sanctus, sanctus, sanctus to a pagan worldview where parts of creation are elevated to a higher position.

Much of the contemporary debate in bioethics originates from thoughts which at their root are nothing less than idolatrous. On the one hand, Roman Catholic ethics, with its strong reference to the "sanctity of life", is in danger of biolatry whereby biological life is considered as absolute and thus divinised. On the other, secular ethics, with its powerful appeal to the "quality of life", is in danger of egolatry whereby either individual choices or social conventions are considered as absolutes and thereby divinised. Both positions are idolatrous and must be rejected. The Christian alternative is to start from a Biblical account of creation, the fall and redemption with all its implications for ethics and science. With this uncritical talk of the "sanctity of life", isn't Evangelical bioethics missing the

---

devastating thrust of the Bible in its denunciation of idols and its command to build a coherent worldview in which God alone is confessed as sanctus? The good intention to protect life must not fall prey to an unholy alliance with pagan motives.

### **3. Is pro-life versus pro-choice the real alternative?**

Another prominent feature of present-day Evangelical bioethics is its adherence to the “pro-life” sector of public opinion. This position stems from deeply held convictions based on the “sanctity of life”. Again, one needs to be aware of the good motivations behind the alignment to the pro-life camp which is generally opposed to radical pro-choice supporters. Yet, the automatic alliance between Evangelical bioethics and the pro-life front needs to be questioned in the light of Biblical principles. Pro-life positions point to the existence of binding, objective norms. Pro-choice arguments stress the autonomy of individual freedom. The Bible is both for life and for responsible choice. The two do not necessarily need to be polarised and opposed as often happens.

In contemporary bioethics, Roman Catholic ethics is basically normativist in that it strongly appeals to universal and natural norms. Secular ethics is instead either situationist, as it appeals to ever changing situations, or subjectivist whereby it elevates the individual as the supreme reference point. Both positions are wrong. The Christian alternative is to view all three areas relating to norms, situations and

subjects in a triangular moral discourse. In other words, the Biblical worldview acknowledges the importance of having norms, but it also encourages personal and corporate responsibility in confronting different contexts.

Contrary to normativist, situationist and subjectivist reductionism, Christian ethics can account for valid norms, changing situations and different subjects in a way that a pro-life versus pro-choice type of approach cannot. Instead of automatically camping for pro-life concerns over against pro-choice trains of thought, Evangelical bioethics should seek to articulate better the relationship between the safeguarding of life and the responsible exercise of legitimate choice in ethics.

### **4. Is Christian Hippocratism the Evangelical proposal for present-day medical ethics?**

The final question has a wider thrust and applies to medical ethics in general. This is an area which is experiencing a transformation in terms of models of medicine practice. Many trends in modern medicine are questioning the traditional Western Hippocratic framework with more contractualist approaches. What is the Christian response?

Many in Evangelical circles would say that “Christian Hippocratism” is the suitable model to fight for. The idea behind such a proposal is to combine the classical medicine in the Hippocratic tradition and Christian concerns about personhood and the ethics of caring. The theological rationale is provided by the typically Roman Catholic idea that

---

the Christian message is the result of a synthesis between nature and grace, in this case between Hippocrates and Christ. As a matter of fact, traditional Roman Catholicism was built on the “Aristotle-Christ” synthesis whereas modern Roman Catholicism has developed other kinds of syntheses, not least the “Kant-Christ” synthesis. Now, Christian Hippocratism is perfectly compatible with this theological vision aimed at Christianising the pagan world by way of absorbing it into a wider synthesis. The question is whether the Roman Catholic genius is the Biblical manner of coming to terms with pagan culture? Is Evangelical Christianity called to make a synthesis with paganism or is it called to propound a cultural alternative based on Biblical principles and aimed at public relevance? Instead of calling for a Christian Hippocratism, shouldn't we work harder to shape a viable Christian model for medical ethics?

The overall impression is that Evangelical bioethics seems to be incapable of coming to terms with the challenge of applying consistently an Evangelical worldview to ethical issues. Instead of approaching these difficult issues from a Biblical perspective and trying to think them through in a creative Christian

way, the tendency is to depend on extra-Biblical categories which are strongly upheld by Roman Catholic moral theology in the present-day situation. The outcome is that much Evangelical bioethics works according to a type of thinking which is not Evangelical at all. Less theological laziness and more faithful creativity is needed if we don't want simply to repeat wrong arguments which Roman Catholics are saying better than us.

Until now Christian reflection has been on the defensive with respect to recent scientific developments. It has tried to resist developments rather than contributing to shape them by suggesting workable ethical frameworks. Taken by surprise and trapped in static categories, it has lost contact with the new frontiers created by irresistible advances. Whereas the Reformation had encouraged the development of science by providing a renewed cultural paradigm for it, contemporary Evangelicalism campaigns for introducing bans and moratoriums with little constructive input. The result is that science goes galloping on and positive Christian influence on it is very superficial. May these somewhat provocative questions help us to engage in bioethics in a different way.

Ecclesiastes is probably one of the most difficult of the Old Testament (OT) books to understand. Charles Bridges remarks in the preface to his commentary: *'The Book of Ecclesiastes has exercised the Church of God in no uncommon degree. Many learned men have not hesitated to number it among the most difficult Books in the Sacred Canon.'* What is the author trying to say? Popular modern translations have not made things any easier by the way they render what the older versions give as 'vanity'. *The Good News Bible*, for instance, translates it as 'useless' and the *New International Version* and *New Living Translation* as 'meaningless'.

Interestingly, the more recent English translations have reverted to the traditional reading. The aim in this short article is a modest one. It is not to consider all the introductory issues relating to Ecclesiastes, important though they all are, but to help preachers make the most of this intriguing part of God's word.

## The Purpose

Many evangelical expositors of recent times see the book as a pre-evangelistic tract, the Preacher being a kind of Francis Schaeffer before his time. Looked at in this way the book is used, like the Law, to drive people to Christ. It is claimed that the book forces the humanist and practical atheist or secularist to realise that all of life without God is completely meaningless. Eaton in his Tyndale commentary summarises the purpose of Ecclesiastes in this way: 'It is an essay in apologetics. It defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.' He suggests that the Preacher does in his own 'pre-Christian' way something similar to Paul in his sermon in Acts 17 when he preached to the pagan Greek philosophers. The

Preacher's work, Eaton argues, 'is not full-orbed evangelism; it is the opening sentences of an evangelistic message, leading to faith along a pathway of conviction of need.'

On the other hand, the traditional view, both Jewish and Christian, has been to see the work as a tract written by an old, repentant Solomon to teach against the dangers of living for this world and forgetting God. Matthew Henry follows this interpretive grid and asserts that the book is a penitential sermon like some of David's penitential psalms; 'it is a recantation-sermon, in which the preacher sadly laments his own folly and mistake'. He would also understand the sermon to be a warning to backsliders as well as to the unconverted. Henry describes it as 'a practical profitable sermon. Solomon, being brought to repentance, resolves, like his father, to teach transgressors God's way.' John Wesley likewise saw the book as proving the grand truth that 'there is no happiness out of God.'

Some modern commentators who do not consider the work either as a call by a repentant Solomon or a pre-evangelistic work will nevertheless consider that the book's pessimism does prepare us in a negative way to consider the hope that is to be found in the gospel. For Tremper Longman the Preacher is correct in depicting a world without God as meaningless. He 'has rightly described the horror of a world under the curse and apart from God.' It is Jesus Christ who 'who redeems us from the vanity, the meaninglessness' under which the Preacher suffered.

Considering the book in this way can certainly lead to many searching sermons that speak to the human conscience and situation. It is one of the implications of the book that without God all

---

worldly activity gets a person nowhere. However, this is to miss the main point that the Preacher is making.

Peter Craigie suggests that as Job grapples with the problem of human suffering so Ecclesiastes grapples with radical doubt and scepticism. There is some truth in this but it does not get to the heart of the issue. This book does not only come into its own when as Craigie puts it 'the virus of doubt or scepticism attacks the organism of faith.' Ecclesiastes does offer consolation and insight when the harsh realities of life batter our faith. It does also warn against worldliness and show the futility of living without God. But it does more. While its message is not, as some of the early Christian commentators suggested, to encourage a life of asceticism, it seeks to present wisdom for the godly to ponder every day of their lives.

Like Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is a wisdom book and like the Book of Job it prevents us from looking at Proverbs and some of the Psalms in a simplistic and literalistic way. Often it is assumed that Job and Ecclesiastes are protesting against the traditional wisdom teaching that is said to be found in Proverbs. This is not the case at all. Scripture does not contradict Scripture as liberal scholars suggest. What Job and the Preacher do is to protest against a faulty understanding of Proverbs, where general statements are absolutised. They correct a view of life that assumes that the righteous will always prosper and the wicked will always come to ruin in this life. This means that when Proverbs or Psalms depict fellowship with God in terms of health and prosperity we are not to take such pictures in a literalistic way. This would be as inappropriate as trying literally to bind God's

commands on the heart and to tie them around the neck (see Proverbs 6:21). Furthermore, it is also the purpose of both Job and Ecclesiastes to examine life as it is in the raw and not life as we would like it to be.

The message of this book is not unique in the Bible even if the method of presentation is and it will be demonstrated that the wisdom teaching of Ecclesiastes is an important element running through the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Contrary to the view of one recent evangelical writer who states that 'The New Testament gives no help towards the interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes', the New Testament (NT) certainly does give significant help in interpreting the message of Ecclesiastes. Though it is not directly quoted most scholars agree that there are obvious allusions and these will be considered later.

### **The Preacher**

We begin with the term often translated as 'Preacher'. The Hebrew is Qoheleth, a feminine participle from the verb 'to assemble' which could be translated as 'one who assembles'. The feminine form acts for the nonexistent Hebrew neuter gender. Here it is probably used to refer to an office. The closest parallels to this are in Ezra 2:55 'the sons of Hasophereth' (cf. Neh.7:57 'Sophereth') – 'the scribe'; and Ezra 2:57 and Neh.7:59 'the sons of Pochereth' – 'the binder'. From the same word group as Qoheleth comes the term for Israel as an assembly or congregation of people (qahal) which when translated into Greek (ekklesia) becomes the NT word for 'church'.

It is interesting that in the account of the dedication of the Temple, both the verb 'to assemble' and/or the noun 'assembly or congregation' occur at the

---

beginning of each key moment: when the ark was brought into the newly built temple (1 Kgs.8:1-13; see verses 1-2); when Solomon made his great speech (8:14-21; see v14); when he offered his powerful prayer (8:22-53; see v22); when he blessed the people (8:54-61; see v55); and then after he offered sacrifice in the summing up there is a reference to the 'great assembly' (8:62-66; see v65). Clearly, for the prophetic author of Kings, that was a very significant event in Solomon's reign when he gathered 'all Israel' or 'all the sons of Israel', this great 'assembly of Israel' for the dedication of the newly built temple. It is not unnatural then for the author of Ecclesiastes to make up a word (we find it nowhere else in the OT) that is associated so closely with Solomon who assembled God's people on the most solemn occasion of his reign at the central sanctuary in the capital city.

Qoheleth, 'the Assembler' of God's people, then is a term that the author uses to describe this person who is associated with the Davidic kingship - 'the son of David', and with 'Jerusalem', the capital of the Davidic kingdom and centre of Israelite religion, and who was 'king over Israel in Jerusalem' (see 1:1,12,16; 2:7,9). It draws our attention to the Solomon who assembled all Israel to the heart of the Israelite faith and practice. It is this Solomonic wisdom tradition that we are to gather round and listen to. The Preacher's listeners are in the first place the OT people of God but now as part of the canon of Scripture he is addressing God's people in every age.

I emphasise all this to show that Tremper Longman III is woefully astray in his interpretation. He suggests that Qoheleth's pessimistic theology is out of sorts with the rest of the OT and the only reason

it is part of the canon of Scripture is because of the epilogue (12:8-14). In this he follows Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart in their popular book *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*. They consider Ecclesiastes to be a cynical work pointing us to the rest of Scripture; 'it is there as a foil, i.e., as a contrast to what the rest of the Bible teaches.' The final two verses of the epilogue we are told present the contrast by issuing the reader with an 'orthodox warning'. Longman also follows Fox in suggesting that the epilogue warns the reader to beware of teachers like Qoheleth who although they can be classed as wise, their words are nevertheless harmful and wearisome to the body. Qoheleth is considered to be like the speeches in the book of Job. Only at the end are they torn down and demolished. Thus, according to Longman, the wise person responsible for putting the book together uses Qoheleth's speech 'as a foil, a teaching device' to instruct his pupils 'concerning the dangers of speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel'.

This view is far from being satisfactory. It seems incredible that a whole book is given over to stating wrong theology with only the last couple of verses to counter all that has been said. Job is not written like that. What Longman accuses others of doing, namely, straining at 'the interpretation of words and passages to make them fit a preconceived idea of the function of the book', is done on a massive scale by him, not only in his exegesis of the epilogue but also in the body of the work. Furthermore, it would be strange to find in the Old Testament an unknown wisdom author warning against Qoheleth, whom he considers to be Solomon, the great wise man of the OT.



---

## The People

To return to Qoheleth himself, it is important to emphasise that he is an Assembler of God's people. He is teaching the people of God and if the final author is different from Qoheleth they are both on the same wavelength and both express the kind of wisdom that comes from God, the 'one shepherd' (12:11). Qoheleth is speaking to an audience of Israelite men and women who have been taught from the book of the Law that God is involved in his world, that he will prosper the righteous and punish the wicked. But time and again he forces his audience to see that life in this world is far from being simplistic and to remember other items taught in the Law of Moses that tend to be forgotten especially when life is treating them well. He brings people down to earth by reminding us that we live in a topsy-turvy world. The world is not what it ought to be.

Too many assume that Qoheleth is considering the horror of life in this world *without God*. But the fact is the Assembler of God's people is struggling with the problem of understanding the world from the vantage point of one who is a person of faith. It is precisely because he is looking at life as a godly believer that he is all too well aware of the vanity of this world. It is a place of hardship, of toil, misery and death and this is true not only for the wicked but for the righteous. Life 'under the sun' is full of frustrations and troubles. The Preacher is impressing upon us that even *with God* life in this world is vanity. 'The cry of vanity in the book of Ecclesiastes is a cry which proceeds from the man of faith ... the response of the man of faith to the world in which he finds himself.'

This book therefore encourages the people of faith to

understand that life in this present world will always be full of trouble, and yet to accept whatever joys we do have as gifts from God, and to continue to be wise by fearing God and keeping his commandments remembering there is an eschatological judgement when God will put everything to rights.

## The Point

In order to appreciate the teaching of this book we shall need to look at what Qoheleth really means by the word 'vanity', a term he uses 38 times. Once we understand that 'vanity' has less to do with modern philosophical ideas of meaninglessness and more to do with the idea of what is fleeting and elusive the more we shall understand what the Preacher is teaching to the assembly of God's people. As Provan rightly states, 'Qoheleth is not Camus'. He is not presenting an unscriptural pessimism but forcing us to accept some unpleasant home truths about life in this world whether we are godly or not. In fact, we could say that Qoheleth uses what he observes to expound Scripture. Parallels have been noted, for instance, between the early chapters of Genesis and Qoheleth's message. David Clemens' article in *Themelios* is a particularly helpful treatment.

Despite the good that Qoheleth acknowledges, such as an original world created 'beautiful' (3:11) and items in this world that are gifts from God (on twelve occasions we are told of God giving) to be enjoyed, for example the marriage bond (9:9), the emphasis throughout is upon the effects of the Fall. The Assembler of God's people highlights the very same things that Genesis 3 presents as the punishment that human beings must endure because of their sin. They include toil, pain and death. The world is as it is because of God's judgement.

---

It is no accident then that the very word that Qoheleth uses time and again to express his verdict on life in this world is the name of the first person to experience physical death, the result of the madness of human sin. The name is Abel. Everything under the sun is 'Abel' (*hebbel*). It is the word for 'breath' or 'vapour' and is often used metaphorically throughout the OT to present ideas of transience and what is insubstantial, elusive and false. The term is so loaded with meaning, says Clemens, 'that it virtually defies a unitary English translation'; but he suggests that 'fallen' captures most of its connotations in Ecclesiastes. We might therefore translate the Preacher's text as: 'Subject to the Fall, subject to the Fall, everything is subject to the Fall'.

There is a phrase unique to Qoheleth that makes it clear that when he proclaims everything is vanity he means everything in this world. It is the phrase 'under the sun' which he uses 30 times. He is therefore not including God and the heavenly realm in the vanity of all things. Rather, he is referring to human existence in this present world. Life in this world for everybody is expressive of the Fall, that means for the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the unrighteous. We notice from Genesis that Abel was not an ungodly rascal but a person accepted by God, yet it is such a person who experienced a savage death, cut off in the prime of life before he married and had children. And this is the point that Qoheleth is seeking to stress to his Israelite congregation. We live in a fallen world and he feels the agony of God's people living in such a world under the curse of God. It is wisdom to see this.

The smell of death lies over the whole of creation.

That is what Genesis emphasises as a result of the Fall. The warning of Gen.2:17 - 'in the day you eat of it you shall surely die' - is fulfilled as a result of human disobedience. The judgement of toil, pain and death recorded in Genesis 3 is emphasised in Genesis 5 with the continuing refrain 'and he died' along with a further reminder of the curse in the name that Lamech gave his son Noah: 'This one will comfort us concerning our work and the toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord has cursed' (5:29).

Qoheleth drives home this point concerning toil and death. It is there in the introduction, 1:3-11, where we are told of humanity in labour and toil with generations coming and going while the earth continues. It is no different at the end with the poem on the tragedy of old age and death in 12:1-7. And throughout the intervening chapters Qoheleth continues to stress the reality of death. It is present in every chapter. The fool dies but so also does the wise (2:14-16); despite all the toil, hard labour and sorrow humans die and leave what they have struggled to achieve to others who have not worked for it (2:18-23); humans are no different to animals in this - all in whom is the breath of life die - a reminder of the flood (3:19-22); despite all the hard work and toil, just as we came naked from our mother's womb so shall we return (5:15-16); even though people were to live for over twice as long as Methuselah they still die (6:3-6); a person's life is like a shadow (6:12); the end of everyone is sorrow and death (7:1-4); no one has power in the day of death (8:8); one event happens to all - they die! (9:2-6).

Thus what Qoheleth says at the beginning he can say at the end of his message - 'Vanity of vanities,

---

all is vanity' (1:2 and 12:8). It is dust to dust for all and the echoes of Genesis 3:19 ('till you return to the ground: for out of it you were taken: for dust you are and to dust you shall return') are obvious in Ecclesiastes 3:20: 'all came from the dust and all return to the dust', and in 12:7: 'Then the dust will return to the earth as it was'. It is a depressing sermon, but it is a basic fact of life for everyone, the righteous and the unrighteous, the wise and the foolish, and it is wisdom to accept the reality of it. These are not the subjective feelings of a cynic who has lost interest in life but of a wise person who is looking at life realistically. Ecclesiastes describes an objective vanity that faces every human being, namely the fleeting nature of earthly life with all its frustrations and failures.

Comfortable Christians in the West particularly need to be reminded of this. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Ecclesiastes also challenges the health and wealth gossellers who pedal a false security in present earthly gain. The gospel does not give Christians a bed of roses in this life. The most godly of people grow old, become incapable of doing what they once did and die. Some are taken when they are young, others when they are older, but all die and during their lives whether short or long there is often great suffering, toil and pain. But the Preacher encourages us not to live like the ungodly even though some of them may have a good time in comparison to others. Wisdom is better than folly and we are to take hold of and enjoy the good things of life that God gives during this fleeting and frustrating earthly existence while always bearing in mind that there is a judgement to come. Remembering we do live in a world under the curse of God will enable us not to be too disappointed

when things go wrong, when our plans do not work out as we would like or we find that people do not follow in the way we have legislated. It will also prevent us making ourselves too comfortable in this world and will remind us that this present world order is not our home, we are strangers and pilgrims on this present old earth that is passing away.

The Preacher, the Assembler of God's people, is not alone in presenting this truth. It is part of the wisdom tradition that the wise woman of Tekoah knew as she confronted king David: 'for we will surely die and become like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again' (2 Sam.14:14). Job 7:7,9,16 describe life as a breath. Then there is David himself. In his prayer to the Lord he pleads, 'let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath...' (Psalm 39:4-6). Or again, in Psalm 144:3-4, he describes humans as 'like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow'. The prophet Isaiah speaks to the same effect, 'All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it: surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our God stands for ever' (40:6).

When we turn to the NT, we find James, like Qoheleth, concerned to correct wrong views of life. He pulls up the busy merchants and reminds them of the brevity of life. 'What is your life? For you are a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanishes' (4:14). The word he uses to describe human life, 'vapour' or 'mist' (atmis), is the same that is found in Aquila's Greek translation of Ecclesiastes for 'vanity' (*hebbhel*). James is warning

---

business people whether they are Christians or unbelievers that life is fleeting and uncertain.

Finally, on this point, there is Moses who first taught the Preacher about the Fall and its effects, who has recorded a prayer in Psalm 90 that powerfully states our short, uncertain life, consumed by God's anger and brought back to the dust. It is wisdom to recognise this judgement that applies to us all. 'So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom' (90:12).

### **The Preaching**

Preachers must not fail in their task as they preach from this book. The book directs us to Jesus Christ who freely and willingly for humanity's sake, entered this world under God's curse and experienced toil, sweat, sorrow and death.

Furthermore, he experienced the ultimate curse, the second death, God-forsakenness, with no mitigating blessing. But by suffering that awesome curse and death he has broken the curse, brought about the death of death and the end of all pain, sorrow and crying. On account of God's judgement at the cross and the vindication of Jesus in his resurrection, death has been abolished and life and immortality have been brought to light.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is the guarantee and objective evidence of the regeneration of all things and of the believer's bodily resurrection. Ecclesiastes should make Christians long for that new creation. In Christ believers are already new creations awaiting the recreation of the world at the final judgement. However, they are still living in the old age, and their present bodily existence is still part of a creation under the curse of decay and death. Ecclesiastes does not make Christians yearn

for the day of their death, for death is seen as part of the curse, even though the sting has been taken out of death for the believer. The unnatural separation of body and spirit is part of the judgement. No. This book makes the godly yearn for the resurrection of the body, for the time when our present lowly bodies will be changed to become like our Lord's glorious body.

Greidanus argues that there are many roads leading from the OT to Christ and he lists them, giving examples of each, such as the way of promise-fulfilment and the way of typology. The final way that he mentions is the way of contrast. While the other ways focus on the continuity between the OT and Christ, contrast focuses on the discontinuity Christ brings. As an example from the Wisdom Literature he uses Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8. For the Preacher, he says, death ends everything. But as NT Christians we know that Christ has overcome death, and that astonishing victory also gives us a different view of life. So he considers that the passage clearly begs to be contrasted with 1 Corinthians 15. Death has been overcome. Therefore we have a reversal, from the Preacher's summary 'all is vanity' to Paul's summary that 'in the Lord your labour is not in vain', and all because Jesus rose from death. Now that is fine as it stands but it does give rise to one misgiving. Greidanus makes it sound as if the vanity under the sun has finished for the believer.

While it is true that the Preacher did not have the fuller revelation that we have concerning Christ and the resurrection, he still lived with the knowledge of the eschatological judgement and urged his people to live in the light of it. But that did not mean for the godly in this world that the effects of the Fall did not apply to them. Likewise, the fact that Christ

---

has died and conquered death, while it should indeed make an even bigger difference to the way we view life in this world, does not remove us from the day to day effects of living in a fallen world. We Christians still experience the frustrations of a world under the curse. Christian women still suffer labour pains in bringing children into the world. Along with the rest of humanity, there are Christians who become bodily and mentally ill, who suffer Alzheimer's disease. Furthermore, we all die. It is tragic to see fine handsome intelligent Christian men and beautiful bright Christian ladies full of energy and drive, who achieve great success and bring great benefits to society, being struck down in the prime of life with some cancerous disease or reduced in old age to wizened old men and women unable to think or do anything for themselves but to lie in a nursing home until death takes them.

When Paul writes what he does in Romans 8:18-24 the Greek word he uses for 'vanity', is the very word that the Septuagint translators adopt when rendering the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes. Paul tells us very clearly that the creation was subject to vanity by God. Creation groans on account of God's curse and waits to be set free. But then he goes on to show that believers too groan with the rest of creation waiting for the consummation, the redemption of our bodies. Here surely we have the NT confirmation of the Preacher's position. The believer lives with this tension. Christians belong to the world to come, to the new creation, and yet they are still living here in this old fallen atmosphere where it is anything but a paradise.

It is part of the gospel of Jesus Christ to preach the effects of the curse on everyone's life in this world

and to encourage the believer as well as the unbeliever to understand that the form of this world is passing away. Martyn Lloyd-Jones never tired of reminding his congregation at Westminster Chapel, London, in his closing benediction, of our 'short and uncertain pilgrimage' here on earth. Ecclesiastes is part of God's revelation to us. It speaks to modern British middle class Christians as well as unbelievers who have never had it so good 'to get real'. It calls us back to view life in this world as subject to vanity, a life under God's curse. At a time when Christians, never mind non-Christians, are afraid to talk about death and to face up to the real world where there is so much unhappiness, distress and cruelty, the Preacher forces us to reckon with the brevity and uncertainty of life and all the other effects of the Fall. We are not allowed to forget that Christians groan with the rest of creation.

Nevertheless, the book also prompts us to look to the day when God will put the world to rights (12:14). With the fuller revelation of the NT and in the light of the death and resurrection of Messiah we long for the day when the Lord will appear and a new earth will become the home of righteousness, where the Lord's people will have bodies like the glorious body of Jesus. God will 'wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away... Nothing of the curse will be found there any more' (Revelation 21:4; 22:3).

There is much more that could be said about the Preacher's teaching, especially concerning the contented and joyful life that can be lived in this fallen world, but enough has been given to encourage preachers to address Christians as well as unbelievers as they seek to expound this mistranslated and misunderstood book.

## Introduction

All who believe in the divine, plenary, and verbal inspiration of Scripture are committed to the notion that nothing in Scripture is casual or accidental and that close, repeated and utterly attentive reading always pays dividends. But nothing confirms this view more thoroughly than the study of the book of Revelation. It is a “meticulous literary composition”<sup>1</sup> with an array of patterns, repetitions, structuring devices and sequences which will never cease to amaze the careful reader. For this reason, it is to be expected that the order of the seven beatitudes which are to be found in the book will have some purpose in it. The point of this exegetical note is to describe and explain the sequence of the seven beatitudes and to draw some tentative conclusions from that sequence.

## Detail is deliberate in the book of Revelation

Richard Bauckham draws attention to several of the features which make the book of Revelation the “extraordinarily complex literary composition” that it is.<sup>2</sup> The following word counts are surely beyond chance:

- seven times the word “Christ” is used<sup>3</sup>
- seven times Christ announces his coming<sup>4</sup>
- seven times the form “the Lord God Almighty” appears<sup>5</sup>
- there are seven “amens” in the book<sup>6</sup>
- “prophets” are referred to seven times<sup>7</sup>
- the form “the one who sits on the throne” is used seven times<sup>8</sup>
- the Spirit is referred to fourteen times<sup>9</sup>
- the name of Jesus occurs fourteen times<sup>10</sup>

the “Lamb” is mentioned twenty-eight times<sup>11</sup>  
there are twenty-eight products in the list of Babylon’s cargo<sup>12</sup>

Further proofs of the deliberateness of the book’s construction are to be found in the use of gematria; in the echoes of successive periods of Israel’s history in the imagery of the seven letters; in the carefully expanding formula of judgment phenomena in 4.5 and then with the seventh seal, trumpet and bowl in 8.5, 11.19, 16.18-21; in the astonishing care and creativity with which Old Testament allusions are woven into the book; in the newness of the eighth (and last) appearance of the “kings of the earth”<sup>13</sup> and – of considerable doctrinal importance – in the choice of singular pronoun for God and the Lamb in 22.3: “the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.” Examples could be further multiplied.<sup>14</sup>

## Things come in sevens in the book of Revelation

In addition to the particular words which occur seven times in the book, all readers of Revelation are aware of other uses of the number seven. There are seven churches, spirits, features of the Son of Man in 1.14-16, seven letters, seals, eyes, horns, trumpets, bowls, thunders and so on. It is widely observed that seven in the book of Revelation and elsewhere is a number which signifies completeness or perfection and this is rightly associated with the fact that three is a number associated with God and four a number associated with the created order. The two combine in God’s creative activity of the seven days in Genesis 1-2.<sup>15</sup>

## The seven blessings of the book of Revelation

It is altogether unsurprising then that when we

---

count up the beatitudes (blessings, makarisms) of the book of Revelation we find that there are seven. It will be helpful to lay them out here before proceeding any further:

1.3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

14.13 And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Write, 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!' " "Yes," says the Spirit, "so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them."

16.15 "Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame."

19.9 Then he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' " And he said to me, "These are true words of God."

20.6 Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

22.7 "And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book."

22.14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city.<sup>16</sup>

Many commentators remark upon the fact that there are seven beatitudes but make no further comment.<sup>17</sup>

Others make only general points. Osborne, for example comments on 1.3:

This is the first of seven beatitudes in Revelation. These are linked to the ethical purpose of the book, with some exhorting the saints to persevere and live exemplary lives in the light of these prophecies (1.3, 16.15, 22.7), and others promising them future rewards for doing so (14.13, 19.9, 20.6, 22.14).<sup>18</sup>

Aune tells us that the number is "hardly accidental".<sup>19</sup> Boring comments that this shows that the author regarded the "form itself [as] important".<sup>20</sup>

Witherington and Stefanovic claim that the number simply shows the fullness or perfection of promised blessing.<sup>21</sup> Charles, riding his "multiple recensions" hobby-horse, takes the occasion to observe that 22.7 should be regarded as the last beatitude "for the present text of xx.4 – xxii is in disorder".<sup>22</sup>

Two commentators make slightly more forceful claims and their remarks are brief enough to be cited in full. On 1.3 Roloff says, "This is the first of seven such pronouncements. Together they develop the message of the book in solemn, comprehensive formulations that address the situation of the readers".<sup>23</sup> And Bauckham, with characteristic acuity and thoroughness states that,

The number of beatitudes is the number symbolic of completeness, seven. Moreover, the discovery gives the beatitudes greater meaning. Together they spell out the adequate response to John's prophecy (reading/hearing and keeping: 1:3; 22:7; faithfulness as far as death: 14:13; 22:14; readiness for the Lord's coming: 16:15) and the fullness of divine blessing that attends that response (rest from labours: 14:13; invitation to the Lamb's marriage

---

supper: 19:9; participation in the first resurrection: 20:6; the tree of life and entry into the New Jerusalem: 22:14; but these are only representative of the complete blessing indicated by the number seven). The seven beatitudes comprise a kind of summary of Revelation's message.<sup>24</sup>

### The sequence of the seven blessings

One matter, however, which goes almost entirely unaddressed in comments upon the seven beatitudes is that of the sequence of the seven blessings. James Jordan is one of very few to have given attention to the matter and writes "I have attempted to discern a structure in these seven, to correlate them with other sets of seven in the book or with creation days, but have seen no particular pattern".<sup>25</sup> Yet the attempt is not to be abandoned. In Revelation, of all books, the probability that such a set of seven beatitudes has been purposefully ordered is very high indeed.<sup>26</sup>

It is straightforward enough to produce a large bunch of explanatory keys which might open this particular exegetical locked door. Each of them needs to be tested against the simple list of passages above.

Do the seven beatitudes tell the story of redemptive history?

Is there a significance (in respect of their sequence) in who speaks each beatitude and to whom?

Is there a pattern in the grammatical form of the beatitudes?

Is their position in the book important?

Do the beatitudes break into smaller groups of four and three or three and four?

Is there a noticeable progress in the content of these seven blessings?

Does each beatitude summarize the material that has preceded it?

Or the material that follows it or surrounds it?

Do the seven blessings map onto the seven churches or the seven seals or the seven trumpets or the seven bowls in the book of Revelation?

Do they relate to the seven days of creation or other significant sevens in the Bible?

Is the reverse order of any of these proposals the answer?

Attention to the beatitudes in the light of these questions yields only one conclusion: the door remains firmly locked.

### Chiasm in the book of Revelation

There is, however, one literary device which is receiving increasing attention in biblical studies and which has yet to be mentioned. It is that of chiasm. Chiasm, also known as introversion, crossing over, or concentric form, involves the statement of words or elements and then their repetition in reverse order: A-B-B-A. In Amos 5.4-6, for example, we read,

- A Seek Me that you may live.
- B But do not resort to Bethel
- C And do not come to Gilgal,
- D Nor cross over to Beersheba;
- C For Gilgal will certainly go into captivity
- B And Bethel will come to trouble.
- A Seek the Lord that you may live.

This construction is used, however, not merely at



---

the micro-level of words and phrases but also at the macro-level of whole sections of writing. This is demonstrated repeatedly in David A. Dorsey's fine work, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*.<sup>27</sup>

And chiasm is certainly on display in the book of Revelation.<sup>28</sup> For example, the key "antitheocratic figures" <sup>29</sup> appear in a particular order: first, death and hades (1.18, 6.8), then, the devil-dragon (12.3-12), thirdly, the sea and land beasts (13.1-18), and finally, harlot Babylon (14.8, 16.19). Their defeat is in the reverse order: first, harlot Babylon (17.16-19.3), then the sea and land beasts (19.19-20), thirdly, the devil-dragon (20.10), and finally, death and hades (20.14).

At a higher level, James Jordan has also shown that the broad structure of the book of Revelation can be approached chiastically.<sup>30</sup> His outline runs

The Man – Jesus – 1

The Churches: True and False –  
Letters to Seven Churches – 2-3

The Call to the Throne –  
Ascension of Christ – 4-5

The Book – Seven Seals – 6-7

The Call to Judgment –  
Seven Trumpets – 8-15

The False Church and the True –  
Seven Bowls – 16-20

The Bride – the City – 21-22

Meredith Kline and B.W. Snyder also give chiastic outlines for the book as a whole, Snyder's being in the view of Greg Beale, "the most viable chiastic outline of the book so far attempted".<sup>31</sup> It is also the case that while the likely route for the messenger explains the order of the churches as they are

addressed in chapters two and three, the spiritual health of the churches as described in the letters takes an A-B-C-C-C-B-A form. Ephesus and Laodicea are unified and compromised. Smyrna and Philadelphia are unified and faithful. Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis are spiritually mixed or divided churches with different groups within them being addressed.<sup>32</sup>

From all this it is clear that one of the possible arrangements for the seven beatitudes in Revelation which should be tested is that of chiasm. This key is the most promising so far. It fits into the lock smoothly. Yet, as even a brief look at the beatitudes will show, the key will not turn. Something still is sticking.

### **The "six plus one" pattern in the book of Revelation**

One further repeated pattern in the book of Revelation may provide the necessary lubricant. It is that of "six plus one". Not only is seven "reduced" for the 666 of chapter thirteen, it is also "broken up" in the first two major series after the Lamb has taken the scroll. After the first six seals of the scroll have been opened in chapter six there is then what is often called an "interlude" during which John hears the number of the sealed and sees the great multitude before the throne. Only then is the seventh seal opened.

Similarly, the first six trumpets are blown in chapters eight and nine but before the seventh trumpet is blown there is another "interlude". John sees the mighty angel with a scroll which he, John, then eats and then measures the temple of God and hears about the two witnesses. Only then is the

---

seventh trumpet blown. Of course, the reader is to notice the absence of such a break between the "sixth" and the "seventh" in the next major series of seven, the bowls poured out in chapter sixteen. By now, however, he knows that in the book of Revelation, though seven is often seven, sometimes seven is actually six plus one. In the light of the account of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis, this is unsurprising.

### **A chiastic arrangement of seven beatitudes involving a "six plus one" structure**

Finally, then, perhaps there is a way in which the seven beatitudes of Revelation combine these two patterns of chiasm and of "six plus one". The first would match or mirror the sixth; the second would match or mirror the fifth; the third would match or mirror the fourth. And the seventh would be in some special relationship with them all, either as a summary or as the centre or as a leap ahead and beyond them. Certainly, at first glance, such a proposal seems highly plausible. First, a look at the six arranged chiastically.

1.3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

14.13 And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Write, 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!' " "Yes," says the Spirit, "so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them."

16.15 "Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame."

19.9 Then he said to me, "Write; 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' " And he said to me, "These are true words of God."

20.6 Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

22.7 "And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book."

There seems to be a strong case for linking up beatitudes one and six and, indeed, several commentators have noticed this and gone on to discuss possible relationships with Luke 11.28. When 22.7 is read in association with 22.9-10, the connection with the first beatitude is stronger still.

Similarly, it is clear that the second and fifth beatitudes are closely related. Death and resurrection, resting and reigning: the connections lie on the surface. Beyond this, however, the immediate contexts are strongly associated too. The second beatitude is announced immediately after a call has been issued for the saints, in contrast with worshippers of the beast, to endure, to keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. Parallel to this, the fifth beatitude is announced over those who came to life and reigned with Christ: they are those who had been faithful to death for the testimony of Jesus and the word of God and who had not worshipped the beast or its image.

The relationship between the third and fourth beatitudes is equally strong as soon as it is noticed

that those invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb parallel the blessed of 16.15 in two ways. Firstly, as seen in 19.7-8, those invited to the Lamb's supper are precisely those who "keep their clothes". Secondly, they are the city-bride of Jesus in contrast to the city-harlot of Babylon and it is the latter who was stripped naked that all should see her shame (17.16, 18.16-17).

The first pair (beatitudes one and six) is about reading, hearing and keeping the words of the prophecy. The second pair (beatitudes two and five) is about the death and rest, the martyrdom and resurrection of the faithful. The third pair (beatitudes three and four) is about the naked city-harlot and the finely-robed city-bride. The invitation and the demand are obvious: listen to and obey the words of Revelation, do so even unto death and you will come to the rest-reign of the faithful and, contrasted with and separated from the naked harlot, you will sit, in the fine robes of the city-bride, at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

And what will that be like? What and where and when and who? These are the questions which the seventh beatitude will answer. The first six are arranged so as to leave the reader thirsty for more detail and further affirmation ... and then the seventh comes to quench that thirst:

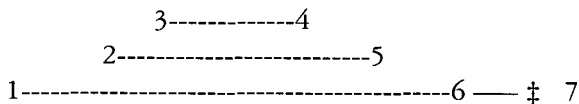
22.14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city.

In a six-plus-one arrangement, of course, the reader would, with Genesis 1-2 in mind, expect a sabbath dimension or element in the climactic "one". This is

exactly what we have in 22.14. Cleansing, sanctuary access, feasting with God by participating in Christ, dwelling in the garden-city, the authority of victory-rest are themes of completed battle, God-given renewal and eschatological security which emphatically associate with biblical teaching on the sabbath. Fullness of blessing indeed!

### Summary and Conclusions

The book of Revelation is a meticulous literary composition and it comes as no surprise that there are seven beatitudes in the book. A careful reading of the book leads us to expect some significance in the sequence of the beatitudes but, in fact, very few commentators have endeavoured to find such a sequence. All sorts of possible approaches prove fruitless. However, chiasm, an important rhetorical device in the Bible, is certainly used in Revelation and the book also has several examples of a "six plus one" pattern. When these are combined then the connections between the relevant pairs are too strong to be mere chance. The lock is cleaned and the key fits and turns. In brief, the proposal is that the seven beatitudes of Revelation follow a "six plus one" sequence in which the first six elements are arranged chiastically. The seventh beatitude goes beyond the six and constitutes a sabbath statement of what lies at the end of all things for recipients of the other six blessings. The impact on the reader of this arrangement may be diagrammed thus:



Or with the Revelation references:

16.15-----19.9  
14.13----- 20.6  
1.3 -----22.7----‡---22.14

The identification of this sequence provides proper warrant for consideration of the seven beatitudes as a set and this has three main hermeneutical and homiletical implications. First, the deliberate arrangement of the seven in this way confirms that, far from being speculation without control, to look for and comment upon this sort of detailed and careful structuring and sequencing is wholly

appropriate, certainly in the book of Revelation and possibly elsewhere in Scripture. Secondly, that these seven are purposefully organized means that it would be a legitimate treatment of Scripture to pay attention to the beatitudes of Revelation as a set either by preaching upon all seven or using them as a way in to the book as a whole. Thirdly, in stating the “message” of Revelation, whether by means of the beatitudes or in other ways, due emphasis must be given to the particular and climactic formulation of the saints’ final hope as expressed in the seventh beatitude: it is sabbath victory-rest enjoyed in the garden-city by redeemed and faithful followers of the Lamb.

1. The phrase is Richard Bauckham’s from his superb collection of essays, *The Climax of Prophecy*, (Edinburgh, 1993), p.2
2. Bauckham, *Climax*, chapter 1, “Structure and Composition”, pp.1-38
3. 1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 11.15, 12.10, 20.4, 20.6
4. 2.5, 2.16, 3.11, 16.15, 22.6, 22.12, 22.20
5. 1.8, 4.8, 11.17, 15.3, 16.7, 19.6, 21.22
6. (excepting 3.14) (1.6, 1.7, 5.14, 7.12bis, 19.4, 22.20
7. 10.7, 11.18, 16.6, 18.20, 18.24, 22.6, 22.9
8. 4.9, 5.1, 5.7, 5.13, 6.16, 7.15, 21.5
9. 1.10, 4.2, 14.13, 17.3, 19.10, 21.10, 22.17 and at the conclusion of each of the seven letters
10. 1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 1.9bis, 12.17, 14.12, 17.6, 19.10bis, 20.4, 22.16, 22.20, 22.21
11. 5.6, 5.8, 5.12, 5.13, 6.1, 6.16, 7.9, 7.10, 7.14, 7.17, 11.11, 13.8, 14.1, 14.4 bis, 14.10, 15.3, 17.14 bis, 19.7, 19.9, 21.9, 21.14, 21.22, 21.23, 21.27, 22.1, 22.3, the word ‘lamb’ is used once more in 13.11, in relation to the land-east.
12. 18.11-13
13. The kings of the earth (hoi basileis tēs gēs) appear either as the enemy or as defeated/subjected in 1.5, 6.15, 17.2, 17.18, 18.3, 18.9, and 19.19. Then their eighth appearance (21.24) is one of newness and life – a resurrection appearance. It should be noted that while EVV often translate 16.14 as “kings of the earth”, in fact the phrasing is different: hoi the word basileis, the word tēs, oikoumenēs. In a book in which the word count is so precise, this alternate word is no accident.
14. It is also worth noting that these features constitute an extremely strong argument for the unity and integrity of the book of Revelation.
15. James B Jordan makes the point that if seven stands for God and the world “side by side” then twelve (the number which dominates in chapters 21-22) stands for God and the world “united”.
16. *New American Standard Bible*, (update, 1997)
17. A quick survey of available commentaries showed that the following either made no comment at all upon the number of blessings in the book or simply remarked upon the fact that there are seven of them: Ramsey 1873; Milligan 1898; Swete 1906; Kiddle 1940; Hendriksen 1940; Lenski 1943; Farrer 1964;

- Caird 1966; Hoeksema 1969; Ladd 1972; Beasley-Murray 1974; Massyngberde Ford 1975; Sweet 1979; Wilcock 1979; Chilton 1987; Morris 1987; Barnett 1989; Hughes 1990; Mounce 1998; Thompson 1998; Beale 1999; LaHaye 1999; Keener 2000; Poythress 2000; Kistemaker 2001; Johnson 2001; Reddish 2001; Gardner 2001
18. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, 2002), p.57
19. David E. Aune, *Revelation*, WBC (Dallas, 1997), pp.22-3
20. M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, (Louisville, 1989), p.67
21. Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation*, (Berrien Springs, Michigan, 2002), p.59; Ben Witherington III, *Revelation*, (Cambridge, 2003), p.71
22. R. H. Charles, *Revelation*, ICC, (Edinburgh, 1920), p.7
23. Jürgen Roloff, *Revelation*, (Minneapolis, 1993), p.21
24. Bauckham, *Climax*, pp.29-30
25. James B Jordan, *Revelation: a Preliminary Commentary*, (Biblical Horizons, Niceville FL, 1994), p.11
26. In a delightful instance of simultaneous discovery, a friend of mine and fellow student of the book of Revelation, the Revd Jamie Murray, arrived independently at the conclusions outlined here.
27. *Grand Rapids*, 1999. See especially the discussion of chiasmus on pp.29-32 and the bibliographical leads given in fn.28 on p.19. In addition, see John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language*, (Crestwood, NY, 1994). Of course, some of Dorsey’s proposals are more convincing than others.
28. Dan Lioy’s recent work, *The Book of Revelation in Christological Focus*—(New York, 2003), summarises the work of other scholars investigating chiasm in Revelation on pp.51-59.
29. The term is Beale’s: *Revelation*, NICGNT, (Grand Rapids, 1999), p.111. His whole discussion of the structure of the book is most helpful, pp.108-51
30. *A Brief Readers Guide to Revelation*, (Niceville, FL, 1999), pp.15-17. Jordan is at pains to stress, here and elsewhere, that there are several complementary ways of viewing the structure of the book.
31. See Beale, *Revelation*, pp.131, 142-3
32. This observation is also from James Jordan, *Preliminary Commentary*, p.29

Justin Martyr (c.100-165 AD) was one of the first of many who, in effect, said, 'Yes, God has cast away His people!' This emerges in his dialogue with Trypho the Jew:

For the circumcision according to the flesh, which is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us; and that you alone may suffer that which you now justly suffer; and that your land may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence, and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

John Chrysostom (c.347-407) was more explicit in his *Adversus Judaeos*:

... when God forsakes a people, what hope of salvation is left? When God forsakes a place, that place becomes the dwelling of demons.<sup>2</sup>

But it is hard to comprehend how such men could say these things in the light of Paul's answer to his own question in Romans 11:2: 'God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew'.<sup>3</sup>

Tragically, the views of men like those quoted above have given rise to much anti-Jewish prejudice among churches, often resulting in outright persecution of the Jewish people by professed Christians. The Jewish community is only too aware of this Christian anti-Semitism. It is also well aware of the 'replacement theology' of many Christians and churches in which it is asserted that the church under the New Covenant replaces the Jewish nation in every respect as Israel. In the light of all this, we can hardly be surprised to discover that most Jewish people conclude that Christianity is not for them, and so are unwilling to listen to our message. Clearly the answer to Paul's question in Romans 11:1 ('Has God cast away His people?') is of more than merely academic interest. So we shall

look now at Paul's own answer to his question, focusing mainly on Romans 9-11 as the New Testament's locus classicus for this subject.

We should note at the outset that in Romans 9-11 Paul gives three entire chapters to the question of the Jewish people. This alone shows how important the whole matter is to him. But he highlights the importance of this issue even more strongly by the very placing of his discussion in Romans, a book which is generally regarded as first in importance among Paul's epistles. The implication is clear, that if the question of the Jewish people was of primary concern for Paul in his greatest epistle, it should also be of primary concern for us today.

We also need to note that these three chapters are not, as many imagine, a mere digression from Paul's main argument in Romans. They may appear to be so at first sight when Paul seems to be changing abruptly from his great themes of salvation, justification and sanctification to the question of the Jewish people. But on closer examination we discover that these chapters are integral to Paul's whole argument in Romans as he unfolds his underlying theme. That theme, as John Murray highlights,<sup>4</sup> is stated in 1:16-17:

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, for the Jew first, and also for the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'.

Paul shows that the Gospel is indeed 'the power of God to salvation' by first establishing human sinfulness. From this he goes on to speak of justification by faith in Christ, followed by his thrilling exposition of the blessings and benefits

that flow, by God's grace and power, from justification. But all of this leaves us with one perplexing question that apparently undermines Paul's initial assertion in 1:16-17 as to the Gospel being the power of God unto salvation. If the Gospel really is 'the power of God unto salvation . . . for the Jew first', why Israel's large-scale apostasy and unbelief? Paul must now answer this question in Romans 9-11 in order to vindicate the truth of his own assertion as to the power of God in the Gospel, even among the Jewish people in their unbelief. God allowed Israel as a whole to reject the Gospel in order that the Gentiles might hear and be saved (11:11). Nevertheless, God did not forsake ancient Israel, but simply allowed them to be hardened in part (11:25), leaving 'a remnant according to the election of grace' of those who believe the Gospel (11:5). But this is not the end of the matter in that one day the Jewish nation as a whole will turn back to its Messiah in faith (11:12, 15, 26). So Paul resolves the mystery of Israel (11:5, 25-26), and in so doing completely vindicates his initial statement that the Gospel is 'the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first, and also for the Greek'.

Space does not allow here for a verse-by-verse commentary of Paul's carefully articulated but complex arguments. For this the reader is recommended to consult the excellent expositions of John Murray's *Epistle to the Romans* and D M Lloyd-Jones' sermons on Romans 9-11. Instead, we shall deal now with some of the questions more commonly raised by Christians about the Jewish people and see how Paul answers those questions in these chapters.

### What does Paul mean by 'Israel' in Romans 9-11?

Clearly we must answer this question at the outset in order to give a clear answer to the other questions as to God's ongoing purposes for 'Israel'. 'Israel' can mean several things in Scripture. It was the name first given to Jacob when he wrestled with God (Genesis 32:28), and meant 'he strives with God - God strives'. Subsequently Jacob's Jewish descendants were called 'Israel', along with those Gentiles who became part of their nation (Genesis 47:27; Exodus 12:38; Ruth 1:16). Then the land inherited by the people of Israel was called 'the land of Israel' (1 Samuel 13:19). Later, when the kingdom was divided, the northern kingdom was known as 'Israel' (1 Kings 12:16-21). Some would also argue that the New Testament calls the church 'the Israel of God' in Galatians 6:16 - though neither context nor translation in this instance are unambiguously clear in favour of such an identification. How, then, do we determine what Paul means by 'Israel' in Romans 9-11? Louis Berkhof highlights that in the use of words in Scripture, 'the essential point is that of their particular sense in the connection in which they occur'.<sup>5</sup> Modern students of linguistics make this point more emphatically by insisting that words 'have meaning only in a context',<sup>6</sup> and that 'theological thought of the type found in the New Testament has its characteristic linguistic expression not in the word individually but in the word-combination or sentence'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, we must determine what Paul means by 'Israel' in Romans 9-11 by observing his definition and use of the word in this very context.

Paul defines his term at the outset - 'my brethren,

---

my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites'. Then, through the rest of these chapters, Paul makes a 'sustained contrast between Israel and the Gentiles'.<sup>8</sup> So when Paul speaks of 'Israel' in Romans 9-11, he is defining 'Israel' in context as ethnic Israel or the Jewish people (not the land or the church), scattered throughout the Graeco-Roman world of that generation, just as they are scattered throughout the whole world today.

Some exegetes insist, however, that at one point in these chapters Paul momentarily adopts another meaning for the word 'Israel'. When Paul says in 11:26 that 'all Israel will be saved', they insist, Paul does not mean the Jewish nation as such, but the church or whole body of God's elect, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles. But there are a number of serious objections to their viewpoint arising from the context. Firstly, Paul defines his own use of the term clearly at the outset, whilst proceeding in these chapters to make a 'sustained contrast between Israel and the Gentiles'. This makes an unannounced change of meaning in 11:26 unlikely. Secondly, in the verse immediately preceding 11:26 Paul approaches his final unravelling of the 'mystery' of Israel by referring again to Israel in contrast to the Gentiles. This makes an unannounced change of meaning for 'Israel' in the verse even more unlikely. Thirdly, in the second half of the very verse under discussion (11:26), continuing into the following verse, Paul justifies his assertion that 'all Israel will be saved' by means of God's promise of salvation for the Jewish descendants of Jacob (Isaiah 59:20-21). This now makes an unexplained change of meaning in 11:26 impossible, for Paul would hardly make an unannounced change of meaning for just one half of

one verse, only to revert straight back to his initial meaning without explanation whilst inserting an Old Testament quotation that underlines his original meaning. Finally, in 11:28-29 Paul rounds off his argument by assuring us that whilst many Jewish people are 'enemies' in relation to the Gospel, they are still 'beloved' for the sake of their forefathers, namely, those with whom God first made His covenant in choosing the Jewish people to be a special or elect nation:

Concerning the Gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Putting all of this together, to suggest that Paul, without warning or explanation, suddenly shifts for half a verse from Israel the nation to Israel the church and back again, is to forget the primary principle of interpretation in context and the fact that words 'have meaning only in a context'. As to why exegetes plead for an unexpected change of meaning in 'Israel', contrary to all that the immediate context indicates, there may be various reasons. Some do it in all good faith, for whatever reason. Some do it out of deference to revered expositors like Calvin. Some do it in the interests of a theological or eschatological agenda imported from elsewhere, as in the case of 'replacement theology' or certain brands of amillennialism. Yet others do it out of anti-Semitic prejudice, or an anti-Israel prejudice that is provoked by what they suppose to be the injustices of the modern state of Israel. But whatever their reasons, these exegetes are introducing a very arbitrary approach to interpretation which ignores the most fundamental rules. One trusts that they do not apply the same approach to other parts of Scripture.

---

## Does God still have a special love and care for the Jewish people?

All too often the answer of professed Christians has been 'No!' Their ground for saying this, more often than not, is that God supposedly rejected the Jewish nation when the Jewish nation rejected Jesus.

Jewish people are well aware of such views among Christians and churches. They are also aware of how such views have found expression in the persecution of their forbears by professedly Christian people in the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Pogroms of Eastern Europe and other times of persecution. More than this, they are aware that many who claimed to follow Christ either joined cause with the Nazis against them, or simply ignored their plight and made no genuinely meaningful protest against Hitler's 'Final Solution'. Their conclusion? That we as Christians suppose that God no longer loves and cares for them in any special way, even that God has placed them under a curse. Again, we can see why attempts to share the Gospel with Jewish people often meet with negative or hostile responses from them. This Christian lack of compassion and concern for the Jewish people is inexplicable in the light of Romans 11:28:

Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.

'Beloved for the sake of the fathers'. Paul's choice of words could hardly be clearer. Maybe many Israelites or Jewish people are 'enemies' in relation to the Gospel, but 'concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers', namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

'Beloved for the sake of the fathers'. So some of us

may surely be forgiven for feeling disturbed when our fellow believers are either indifferent to or hostile towards the Jewish people. Our point is that if God still loves them, then so must we who claim to love God.

## Are the Jewish people still a chosen nation today?

This is a natural sequel to the previous question, though taking the previous points somewhat further. It is often said that, 'The Jews are no longer God's chosen people in the sense in which they were from the call of Abraham to the coming of Christ'.<sup>9</sup> This would seem to be the plain implication of Hebrews 8:13, where we learn that the old or first covenant has been superseded by the New Covenant: In that He says, 'A new covenant', He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

From this we might be tempted to conclude that the very covenant that constituted the Jewish people a chosen nation before God is no longer in force. But again, context must determine interpretation. In context Hebrews 8:13 is dealing with the passing of the Mosaic Covenant or era in relation to the New Covenant. So in context the reference to the 'first' covenant is a reference not to any of the covenants that preceded Moses, but to the first of these two covenants in view, the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant. John Calvin has grasped this point clearly when he says of this verse in his commentary on Hebrews that the 'dispensation of Moses' has 'passed away'.<sup>10</sup> This, however, still leaves intact the Abrahamic Covenant which preceded Moses, this being the covenant by which God constituted the Jewish people as a chosen nation (Genesis 12:1-3; 22:15-18). Indeed,



in Galatians 3:16-29 Paul is explicit that the Mosaic Covenant did not annul the Abrahamic Covenant, the very covenant by which the Jewish people were constituted a chosen nation. Then in Romans 11 Paul talks about Israel as God's people, even in their unbelief, clearly implying that the covenant which constituted them God's people, the Abrahamic covenant, is still in force.

Turning to Romans 11:1-2, Paul's own answer to his question is unequivocal: 'Has God cast away His people . . . God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew'. He goes on, in 11.28-29, to speak of Israel's 'election' and to insist that its 'calling' as a nation is 'irrevocable'. What is more, Paul wrote this in c.57-58 AD when the New Covenant was already fully established. So even in this New Covenant dispensation the Jewish nation continues to be an elect, chosen nation before God, as promised in the Abrahamic covenant and subsequently re-affirmed with the patriarchs.

'God has not cast away His people whom he foreknew'. But the Greek word translated here as 'foreknew', as D M Lloyd-Jones points out, is the same as the word translated as 'foreordained' in 1 Peter 1:20.<sup>11</sup> So David Stern's Jewish New Testament is justified in the translation, 'God has not repudiated His people, whom he chose in advance'.<sup>12</sup> The context of Romans 11 confirms this when Paul later speaks of Israel's 'election' by God. 'Has God cast away His people? Certainly not!' But the 'certainly not' of the New King James Version is weak, as one commentator explains: The Greek term means, don't permit it to come into existence; don't permit it to be created; don't let it occur. In the Hebrew it is one word which means profane or profanity. In other words, the Apostle is saying that it is

profane even to think that it would ever be possible for God to be through with the Jews. The thought of God casting off His people Israel is profanation.<sup>13</sup>

Why is it profane and inconceivable to think of God casting off the Jewish nation? Because God not only made His covenant with Israel, but subsequently promised that He could never break his covenant by casting them away (Leviticus 26:44-45). Paul would have known all this, as also promises like that of Jeremiah 31:35-37:

Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for a light by day, the ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night . . . if those ordinances depart from before me, says the Lord, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before me forever . . . If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off the seed of Israel for all that they have done, says the Lord.

Have the sun and moon departed? Has man yet measured the heavens? Most certainly not (not even today)! Therefore, Paul concludes, God has not cast away His ancient people Israel. Even the thought of it is profane and inconceivable.

**If Israel is an elect nation, does this mean that all Jewish people will come to salvation, or that they will automatically be saved simply by being Jewish?**

The writer once asked a young Jewish man whether he knew if he would be saved and go to heaven when he died. He replied, 'Yes!' When pressed as to what made him so sure, he responded in the words of the Jewish prayer book that 'All Israel have a portion in the world to come'.<sup>14</sup>

In the early 20th century the German-Jewish thinker Franz Rosenweig (1886-1929) articulated a two-covenant theology:

What Christ and his church means within the world – on this point we are agreed. No one comes to the Father except through him . . . but the situation is different when one need no longer to come to the Father because he is already with him. That is the case with the nation of Israel ....<sup>15</sup>

In other words, Rosenweig believes that whilst Gentiles may come to God through Jesus in terms of the New Covenant, the Jewish people have no need of Jesus because they are already with God by virtue of their older Jewish covenant. This two-covenant theology has gained favour among various Jewish leaders and church leaders today, who use it to oppose Jewish evangelism.<sup>16</sup> E P Sanders' 'covenantal nomism' and belief in terms of Jesus that, 'His mission was to Israel in the name of the God of Israel',<sup>17</sup> has only strengthened their conviction that Jewish people have no need of a message of salvation through Jesus.

Again, the writer has often been told by Jewish friends, 'If you believe in Jesus, fine! He's your Messiah, but not mine! I can come to God without Jesus because I am Jewish and we are already with God'.

To the contrary, Paul is quite clear that the chosen status of the Jewish nation does not mean salvation for all of them or automatic salvation just by being Jewish. Rather, Paul says:

But Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law (Romans 9:31-32).

Because of unbelief they were broken off (Romans 11:20).

In the light of this, Paul cannot but pray in the most impassioned terms that his Jewish brethren would come to salvation through Christ:

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh . . . (Romans 9:1-3).

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved (Romans 10:1).

So whatever Israel's election means, it does not mean that they will all be saved, or that they will be saved as Jews by their own covenant.

### So exactly what does Israel's election mean?

The problem is that many Christians think of election as meaning simply the election of individuals to salvation. But as Louis Berkhof notes, 'the Bible speaks of election in more than one sense'.<sup>18</sup> As to the Jewish nation, Berkhof explains that, 'there is the election of Israel as a people for special privileges and for special service'.<sup>19</sup>

What are these special privileges to which Israel is elected?

Israel was elected to be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6), as also a means of blessing to other nations (Genesis 12:1-3).

Israel was elected to be a nation under God's special protection (Genesis 12:3) – as in their in their deliverance from enemies like Pharaoh, Haman, the Romans in the 1st and 2nd C AD, and Hitler in the 20th C.

Israel's national election encompassed the individual election of some Jewish people to personal salvation through the Gospel (Romans 11:5). Not only this, but it also included the promise of the salvation of the Jewish nation as a whole one day through their Messiah (Romans 11:12, 15, 26-27) –

---

not every single Jew at that point in time, but the Jewish people en-masse as opposed to a mere remnant.

Finally, Israel's election means that when they finally turn en-masse to God through Messiah, this will be a blessing to the Gentiles (Romans 11:11-12, 15) and a sign also that the coming of the Lord is very near (Luke 13:34-35).

More could be said, but again space prevents us from entering into greater detail here.

**What sort of response to the Gospel can we expect from the Jewish people today?**

Many Christians today are negative about the work of the Gospel among Jewish people. Knowing that Jewish people often react unfavourably to the Gospel message, they conclude that we cannot expect much from them today. They may even say, 'Why waste time with the Jews, we cannot really expect much from them today!' or 'Why waste time with them when God has so clearly finished with them!'

Paul's answer is more positive: 'Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace' (Romans 11:5). In fact, the earliest church was wholly Jewish (see Acts 1-9). Later, when the Gentiles began to accept the Gospel (see Acts 10), large numbers of Jewish people continued to embrace the faith (see Acts 14:1; 17:4; 21:20; 28:23-24). Certainly the proportion of Gentile believers rapidly outgrew that of Jewish believers during the first four centuries AD, but we find evidence of a continuing strong Jewish presence in the church which had a considerable influence on its doctrinal formulations and apologetics.<sup>20</sup> In recent times not only have many Jewish people continued to respond positively to the Gospel, but

some of them have risen to great eminence in Christian work and ministry. One thinks of men like Alfred Edersheim, Adolph Saphir and David Baron, along with many other lesser-known Jewish believers to this day who have been or are faithful pastors, preachers, teachers and missionaries.

When we look at the real facts of the situation today concerning the Jewish response to the Gospel, we discover that Paul's optimism was fully justified. The statistics are both enlightening and encouraging. For example, the web-site of the anti-missionary site Jews for Judaism maintains that:

According to the Christian magazine *Charisma*, "More Jews have accepted Jesus as their Messiah in the past 19 years than in the past 19 centuries". Most authorities say that there are over 275,000 Jewish converts to "Hebrew Christianity" worldwide.<sup>21</sup>

Another anti-missionary web-site says that, 'In the last 30-40 years we Jews have witnessed a large numbers of our people becoming involved in the Hebrew-Christian movement'.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the Jews for Judaism web-site says:

According to a 1990 Council of Jewish Federations population study, over 600,000 Jews in North America alone identify with some type of Christianity. Over the past 25 years, more than 275,000 Jews worldwide have been converted specifically by missionaries.<sup>23</sup>

Christian sources speak of an estimated six or seven thousand<sup>24</sup> Jewish believers in Jesus in Israel and growing, with congregations in every major town and city.<sup>25</sup>

These statistics, if accurate, are particularly encouraging when viewed in the light of other statistics. If the Jewish population of the world in 2003 was about 14,789,000 and the number of Jewish believers in Jesus (at a conservatively low estimate) about 500,000, then Jewish believers

---

constitute almost 3.5 % of the total world Jewish population. Certainly there are nations where the percentage of professed Evangelicals is higher, but there are many where the percentage is similar or less. So we have every good reason to be encouraged by the work of the Gospel among the Jewish people today and to continue to expect a positive response.

In the light of these facts, some of us can surely be forgiven for feeling perplexed and disturbed when, in this very generation when God is demonstrating that He 'has not cast away His people whom He foreknew', some Christians assert that we cannot really expect much from them. The consequence? They begin to overlook potential opportunities for sharing the Gospel with Jewish people.

In reality no other Gospel work has such definite promises of success attached to it. The fact is that 'God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew', that 'at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace', and that at a future time known only to God 'all Israel will be saved'. So we are encouraged to go on sharing the Gospel with our Jewish friends in the knowledge that God will bless our witness to them, both now and in the future.

### **What responsibility does all this place on us?**

It places on us the responsibility to have a genuine Christian concern for the welfare of the Jewish people, earthly and spiritual. And may we add that in this day of rising anti-Semitism the Jewish people need all the friends they can get, not least among those of us who are Christian and who claim to love the God of Israel.

It places on us the responsibility to remember in every generation that the Gospel is always, 'for the Jew first'.

It places on us the responsibility to share the Gospel with them, knowing that they can only be saved through faith in the one who is their own promised Messiah.

It places on us the responsibility to be like Paul when he said in Romans 10:1:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.

It places on us the responsibility to 'provoke them to jealousy' by our lives and witness in order to bring them to salvation (11:11, 14). Some of us have known Jewish people to say, 'I envy your faith and all that it means to you. I wish I could have your faith'. If we are faithful in both our Christian lives and our witness to our Jewish friends, then some of them will indeed be provoked to jealousy and come to faith. To turn this round, perhaps we in this land do not see the response we would wish from the Jewish people today because so many of us are not living our Christian lives and witnessing to them in a manner that would 'provoke them to jealousy'.

In conclusion, we started with the question, 'Has God cast away His people?' We saw how Paul demonstrates very positively that, 'God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew', and that we as Christians therefore have a responsibility towards them, both earthly and spiritual. The final challenge is that we as Christians are called by Paul to 'provoke them to jealousy' by our lives and witness, knowing that in this way God will bring Jewish people to faith. And as we see our Jewish friends come to faith we are made to realize the wonderful truth of Paul's great theme in Romans that:

The Gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, for the Jew first, and also for the Greek.

## References

---

1. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, Ch.16.
2. John Chrysostom, *Adversus Judaeos*, 1.3.1
3. All biblical quotations in this article are taken from the New King James Version.
4. J Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1965), pp.26-33.
5. L Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1950), p.74
6. G R Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Illinois, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), p.75
7. J Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 1983), p.233
8. J Murray, op.cit, vol 2, p.96.
9. J Wilmot, *Inspired Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, 1975), p148.
10. J Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of Peter* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1963), p.114.
11. D M Lloyd Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 11* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), p.12
12. David Stern, *Jewish New Testament* (Clarksville, Maryland, USA: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1989).
13. Sanford F Mills, *A Hebrew Christian looks at Romans* (Orangeburg, New York: American Board of Missions to the Jews, 1971), p.355
14. S Singer and I Brodie, *Authorised Daily Prayer Book* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode Limited, 1962), p.251
15. As quoted by H J Schoeps, *The Jewish-Christian Argument* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p.142
16. For a discussion of two-covenant theology from an Evangelical point of view, see L Goldberg, *Are there two Ways of Atonement?* (Baltimore: Lederer Publications, 1990).
17. E P Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985), p.336
18. L Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1939, 1941), p.114.
19. Ibid.
20. A point which is very ably documented and argued by Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002).
21. [http://www.jewsforjudaism.org/web/handbook/s\\_obsession.html#101/04/2004](http://www.jewsforjudaism.org/web/handbook/s_obsession.html#101/04/2004)
22. Messiahpage.com under the heading *Why are Jews so offended by the missionary?* <http://messiahpage.com/htmldocs/xtianmiss-overv.html>
23. [http://www.jewsforjudaism.org/web/handbook/s\\_response.html24/03/2004](http://www.jewsforjudaism.org/web/handbook/s_response.html24/03/2004)
24. <http://www.graceandtruthbulletin.org/MaozNews/news244.htm24/03/2004>
25. See Kai Kjaer-Hansen & Bodil F. Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel* (United Christian Council in Israel & Caspari Centre for Biblical and Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1999).

## Introduction

A number of years ago, a mobile phone advertising campaign that had flourished in England, Scotland and Wales, foundered in N. Ireland. Its slogan was, 'The Future is Bright: the Future is *Orange*!' It was hardly designed to help a Peace Process in its infancy! The future may or may not be bright for the *Orange* network, or for the Ulster Peace Process; but the question we face is just how bright is the future for the Nonconformist cause in Britain?

At face value, answer to that question might seem to be, 'Not very!' Many Chapel congregations are ageing and dwindling, Presbyterian denominations are fragmenting and losing influence and the hoped-for revival of Puritanism of the 'Sixties has not materialised. The situation is further complicated by the dramatic cultural shift experienced by this present generation. We have moved into an era dominated as never before by post-Enlightenment individualism. We seem to be left with a situation summed up by a minister bemoaning falling attendances at Nonconformist-type conferences who said, 'Let's face it, experimental Calvinism is no longer the flavour of the month!'

The current apparent decline raises questions at a number of levels: 'Do declining numbers mean that we must rethink our theology and strategy?' 'Do we simply acknowledge the sovereignty of Providence and go into pietistic bunker-mode?' Or, is it the case that we need to rethink the present situation facing churches in light of both Scripture and the past? The answer can really only be the latter option. We need to rediscover and appreciate afresh our Nonconformist heritage as it relates to a new generation. That is certainly the line we want to

pursue in the remainder of this article; but first we need to sketch in some background details.

A significant (though not sole) factor in the evangelical recovery that took place in Britain during the last century was the rediscovery of the Puritans. It began with a group of Oxford and Cambridge students, including J.I. Packer and Raymond Johnston, who began meeting to explore Puritan literature as early as 1948. The group quickly found its focus in *Westminster Chapel* under the guiding hand of Martyn Lloyd-Jones and then grew from there into what was to become the *Puritan Studies Conference*. It was not a 'Nonconformist' group in the ecclesiastical sense, but it did embrace the spirit of Nonconformity. The growing strength and influence of this little movement was reflected in the establishment in 1957 and subsequent growth of the *Banner of Truth Trust* with its different ministries. All this led to heightened expectations among a new generation of Christians.

However, the movement reached a major watershed in 1966 with the reaction to Dr. Lloyd-Jones' address at the National Assembly of Evangelicals in Westminster Central Hall. The ramifications of what was and was not said that night are in one sense immaterial; what is clear is that what happened that evening led to a significant parting of the ways over denominational alignment.

The decades that followed saw further fragmentation on both sides of the Anglican/ Nonconformist divide over Charismatic issues and the emergence of New Churches. The development of the respective groupings since that time has to a large extent been reflected in the *Banner of Truth* and *Proclamation*

---

Trusts for Nonconformist and Anglican evangelicals respectively and *Spring Harvest* and *Word Alive* for those with Charismatic leanings.

What we want to do in the remainder of this article is to reflect on the essence of Nonconformity in its Puritan past, see how it is first and foremost a spirit that transcends denominations (it was born within Anglicanism) and then go on to argue that it has a vital role in the preservation of the gospel in the fullest sense of the word for the future.

The draft title given to this paper in the early stages of planning was, 'Is there a future for Nonconformity?' I want to stick with the question in that title and answer it by saying, 'Yes! If...' – taking the line that the essence of Nonconformity lies in the Puritan movement of the 16th and 17th centuries and its spiritual legacy down to the present time. In light of what these men stood for and achieved there is good reason to believe there is a future for Nonconformity, if we grasp six important features of what the Puritans were and stood for.

## **1. If we Appreciate the Genius of Puritanism**

Scanning through much of what has been written and said about the Puritans – even by evangelicals – it is plain to see they tend to get a pretty bad press. Indeed, the name 'Puritan' was originally intended as a smear from the start and it remains so for many to the present. In one sense it is not hard to pick out the faults, failings and inconsistencies in those who bore that name in the 16th and 17th centuries and also in those who are their spiritual descendants; however, to major on that would be to overlook the incredible achievements of this movement and the

extent to which its theology and influence have long outlived these men in many ways.

J.I. Packer captures the significance and relevance of the Puritans by comparing them to the Giant Redwood trees of Northern California:

As Redwoods attract the eye, because they overtop other trees, so the mature holiness and fortitude of the great Puritans shine before us as a kind of beacon light, overtopping the stature of the majority of Christians in most eras, and certainly so in this age of crushing urban collectivism, when Western Christians sometimes feel and often look like ants on an anthill and puppets on a string ... In this situation the teaching and example of the Puritans has much to say to us.<sup>1</sup>

That leaves us wondering what, then, was the genius of Puritanism that gave it such far-reaching and enduring significance? – We can single out five of its main characteristics that are worth noting:

### **1.1 Their View of God**

Everything these men believed, were and stood for stemmed from their high view of God. (The same was true for their predecessors in the Reformation in Europe and England.) The point is well illustrated by the fact that the first derisory epithet attached to these men was 'Precisians' or, 'Precisionists.' When Richard Rogers (a minister in Wetherfield, Essex) was asked by a gentleman what made him so precise, he responded, 'Oh, Sir, I serve a precise God!' Straightaway see what is going wrong in so many churches today: they embrace a view of God that has been dumbed down in the name of popular Christianity. Even as far back as the 1950's J.B Phillips could say in the title of a book, *Your God is too Small!* The recovery of healthy, vibrant churches is bound up with the need to recover a high view of God.

---

## 1.2 Their Esteem of Scripture

The Puritan regard for Scripture is nowhere expressed more succinctly than in Question 2 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*:

Q. What rule has God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

A. The Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

In making that formulation and locating it where they did in their catechism, these men were simply reiterating the principle of *sola scriptura* that lay at the heart of the Protestant Reformation and safeguarding the heart of both gospel and church.

The problem in our day is not merely that the revelation of Holy Scripture is rivalled by many other forms of revelation; but that too often Scripture is subordinated to reason. If the spirit of Nonconformity is to survive, it must bow, neither to the temple of fresh revelation, nor to the academy, but to the Word of God alone.

## 1.3 Their Understanding of Salvation

It is commonplace in contemporary theology – at least at a popular level – to construe ‘salvation’ as ‘the point of conversion’; but that is to lose sight of its larger biblical horizons. Thomas Manton gives us a glimpse of the full-orbed understanding of salvation that was typical of his Puritan counterparts and which shaped their view of the gospel:

The sum of the gospel is this, that all who, by repentance and faith do forsake the flesh, the world and the devil, and give themselves up to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as their creator, redeemer and sanctifier, shall find God as a father taking them for his reconciled children, and for Christ’s sake pardoning their sin, and by his Spirit giving

them his grace; and if they persevere in this course, will finally glorify them, and bestow upon them everlasting happiness.<sup>2</sup>

This larger understanding of salvation explains the Puritan use of the term ‘regeneration’ and their richer understanding of evangelism to which we will come back later. It also explains the disparity between expectations regarding conversion in our day and the way they are fulfilled that stems from too narrow an understanding of salvation.

## 1.4 Their Appreciation of the Church

If there is one thing that can be identified as the main catalyst for the emergence of the Puritans it was their concern for the reformation of the church. They had a high view of the church. This first began to come to the fore in their criticisms of the *Elizabethan Settlement*. Many of these young men were Cambridge graduates who entered the ministry of the Church of England in order to press for ongoing reform at a congregational level. We will come back to this in more detail further down.

The Post-Enlightenment individualism that has become the hallmark of the 21st century church has robbed us of that biblical view that sees the church as the glorious Body and radiant Bride of Christ – the doctrine of the church is really the *Cinderella* of theology.

## 1.5 Their Concern for the World as a Whole

The fifth strand of Puritan distinctiveness worth highlighting is its view of life and community as an integrated whole – the Puritans believed that God has sanctioned the solidarity of society.<sup>3</sup> This translated into their vigorous (however imperfect) efforts in the political sphere – reaching their zenith



---

in the Glorious Revolution and the establishment of the Commonwealth. Even though Puritans differed among themselves as to the nature of the relationship between church and state, they held a generally shared conviction that the church has a God-given role in the life of the community at large that went beyond the need for evangelism. (This point is helpfully explored in relation to the influence of the so-called 'High Calvinists' of the Nineteenth Century by Ian Shaw and is illustrated also in 19th century Scotland in the ministries of Thomas Chalmers in Glasgow and Edinburgh.)<sup>4</sup>

Reaction against the aberrations of what became known as the 'Social Gospel' in the early part of the 20th century led in many cases to a neglect of wider social responsibility by its end in many Nonconformist churches. Yet a significant part of their Puritan heritage lies in a concern for God's truth to be applied to social and political concerns enabling Christians to function as salt and light in a dark and putrefying world.

The problem with much of the Puritan renaissance that swept through Britain in the last half-century is that it has embraced only a Reformed/Puritan soteriology – one that fails to grasp the grandeur and integrity of the world-life view of our spiritual forebears. (Interestingly, that stands in contrast to the corresponding renaissance that has taken place in American churches.) If there is to be a future under God for Nonconformity in Britain, we need to appreciate afresh the genius of this movement from its earliest days.

## **2. If we Cultivate the Spirituality of the Puritans**

'Spirituality' is one of the buzz-words of this present

generation – it is only a pity that it has been brought back into our vocabulary by acolytes of New Age philosophy! That surely reflects on a century and more of evangelical spirituality that was and continues to be both truncated and myopic. Through the holiness theology of the Keswick movement and its step-daughters in Pentecostal and Charismatic theology, a whole new understanding of spirituality emerged – one that struggled to find biblically persuasive answers for the problems of sin, suffering and sanctification in the Christian life. Dr. Packer probably speaks for many who have struggled with these influences – in light of their experience, as much as in their understanding of Scripture – when he says he only first began to find satisfaction in the Puritans. Again, there are a number of specific areas of their spirituality that are worth noting:

### **2.1 They took Sin Seriously**

Ralph Venning says it all in basing his book *The Plague of Plagues* on the sinfulness of sin. These men were classically styled 'physicians of soul' and as such were concerned with an accurate diagnosis of the soul's deepest complaint. Far from seeing 'sin' as some vague classification that somehow was linked to man's being under divine displeasure, they saw it in all its ugliness and seriousness. It was seen not merely as that deepest malaise of soul that cuts us off from God and that can only be dealt with by the grace of justification; but also as the running sore of the Christian life that can only be dealt with by the grace of sanctification.

The reason there is so much shallowness in much contemporary Christianity is that there is so little

---

seriousness in the way sin is viewed both from the pulpit and in the pew.

## 2.2 They lived in the Shadow of Death

Improvements in social conditions in the Western world today, combined with the quality of health care available mean that people can expect – all things considered – to enjoy a long life. The same cannot be said for those who lived in the 16th and 17th centuries. A very real sense of human mortality and the brevity of our time in this world brought the issues of death and life in the world to come into sharp focus for the Puritans and it affected their grasp of these central themes in Scripture.

As we find ourselves living increasingly in a ‘death-denying culture,’ we need to encourage people not only to reckon with the reality of death, but also to realise ‘a person is not ready to live until they are ready to die.’

## 2.3 They had a Holistic View of Life

Another feature of life in the 21st Century to which we would do well to apply some Puritan wisdom is our atomistic approach to life – an attitude that leads to a compartmentalised existence. This affects us as Christians in that we all too easily confine our understanding of spirituality to certain times in our week and certain segments of our life – that explains a great deal of spiritual dysfunction.

If Puritan spirituality can be captured in a single sentence, then it must surely be in its best-known assertion: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever!’ The controlling concern in Puritan Christianity was to know God truly and serve him rightly – in the words of Peter Lewis, ‘Puritanism was sainthood visible.’<sup>5</sup> The visibility of

our faith needs to go far beyond the number of church meetings we attend and activities in which we are involved!

## 2.4 They saw All Truth as being ‘Unto Godliness’

Perhaps the greatest factor in the strength of Puritan spirituality was the way it was rooted in theology. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to illustrate that in his ministry by pointing to the function of a building’s steel frame – without it, the entire edifice could not stand!

Theology for our 17th spiritual forebears was never a merely academic exercise, but always a means by which to cultivate communion with God and to live increasingly to his glory. Add to this the fact that the Puritans saw this not as a privatised, but shared responsibility and it is not hard to see that those who belonged to this movement stood out because of their life.

Putting all this together, Packer argues that the Puritan approach to faith and life provides the antidote for three of the most troublesome groups of Christians in our time: *restless experientialists, entrenched intellectualists and disaffected deviationists*.<sup>6</sup> The need for a spirituality that is both God-glorifying and personally satisfying is paramount for the church in every generation: it needs to be rediscovered not invented!

## 3. If we Share the Vision of the Puritans

As has been said already, the Puritan movement was born out of a concern to reform the Church of England and even as it was both forced and moved by choice out of that church, its vision for ongoing reformation was at the heart of much of Puritan

---

labour. This concern expressed itself in the pursuit of reform in three areas: worship, church order and church membership. These issues continue to be matters for discussion and debate in the church of our day and we ignore them to the church's peril. Let me offer just a few brief thoughts on each to show why they continue to be important:

### **3.1 The Worship Issue is Bigger than we Think**

Almost the entire debate over worship in recent decades has been dominated by 'Traditional' versus 'Contemporary'; but there is a much deeper issue at stake. It is the issue of what God's people are doing when they meet together as the church.

One prominent Anglican Evangelical's answer to that question is, 'We are not there to 'worship' – we are just there to meet with Jesus!' The Puritans would have had something very different to say! There is not space to develop these thoughts here; but suffice it to say, our view of worship will profoundly affect the shape of our life as the people of God and the character of our witness to world.

### **3.2 The Need for Reform must be faced by Every Generation**

It was the 17th Century theologian Gisbert Voetius – a Dutch counterpart to the English Puritans – who coined the expression, 'The Church that is reformed must always be reforming.' He was not using the term 'reformed' in its narrow sense of being Calvinistic in theology and polity, but rather to describe the ongoing nature of saving transformation in the corporate life of the people of God. It was that vision that inspired the early Puritans within the Church of England and many laboured to further that reform within that church

until the day they died. (Far from being an anti-Anglican movement, Puritanism was seen as 'a cuckoo in the Anglicans' nest – in it but not really of it – and that from the beginning!')<sup>7</sup>

The Westminster Assembly was called with the express purpose of seeking a basis of faith and a form of church government that would be more widely agreeable in Britain: its goal was ongoing ecclesiastical reform. The so-called 'Grand Debate' over church polity in the Assembly did not find that consensus; however, even their disagreements were to prove fruitful for the church polity of the major groupings who were influenced by the Confession and Catechisms that it produced.<sup>8</sup>

The task of ongoing reformation remains for every church in every age as it faces the challenge of the changing times we live in – to do so is simply to be true to spirit of Nonconformity.

### **3.3 The question of what it means to be a Christian is at the heart of what it means to be a Church**

Alongside the elimination of 'popery from the worship and prelacy in the government' of the Church of England, a major concern of Puritan reform was to remove 'pagan irreligion from its membership'.<sup>9</sup> That did not mean to say the Puritans saw no place for the unconverted in their services, or that they did not seek to evangelise them; but rather it revealed their understanding of what constituted the church. They saw it as the Covenant Community of the People of God. This is an issue that touches every church at the deepest possible level. Christ came into the world to save 'a people for himself' – a new community that would

---

stand out for him as his counter-culture in a fallen world – that must be the vision for his people in every age!

#### **4. If we Hold the Convictions of the Puritans**

Out of all the many strengths of the Puritans, the strength of their convictions was one of their most defining characteristics – it was a mark of their utter devotion to God and to the gospel. It led to their being willing to take on kings and prelates in the pursuit of reform, to the drafting and signing of the *Solemn League and Covenant* in 1643 and their readiness to face persecution and imprisonment for the sake of their cause. However, the greatest example of the strength of their resolve was seen in the *Great Ejection* of 1662. Some 2,000 Nonconformist ministers were ejected from their livings as a result.

The fact that so many men (and their families) were prepared to pay such a high price for the sake of conscience was not, as some have suggested, due to a ‘peevish humour,’ but rather because of convictions that were moulded by Scripture and a heartfelt desire for integrity. What they were required to abjure and to swear in the 1662 Act of Uniformity would have been a complete denial of what they had fought for over the past century. Expediency could never be a good reason to abandon such convictions held for so long because the underlying issue at stake was that of the authority of Scripture.

In contemporary terms, this issue raises some painful questions: a mere glance over the past 100 years will reveal a story of battles fought, divisions that followed and what appears to be the cause of Christ in perpetual disintegration – it is hard not to feel

cynical. However, there are two things that help to bring what is at stake into focus: one is the kind of issues over which we must take a stand, the other is the extent to which we are to be bound by church courts. Each in its own way is a sliding scale; but in both there is line we cannot cross over.

#### **5. If we Pursue the Catholicity of the Puritans**

In light of what have just considered about the Puritan conscience, it is easy to focus on debates about small things with which they are associated – such as rings, vestments and festivals. There is no doubt that they were capable of robust and vigorous debate! But at the same time, they were bound together by an extraordinary spirit of catholicity. The unity they enjoyed transcended the boundaries of particular views on polity or doctrine.

The fact that the Westminster Assembly was comprised of a highly diverse group of divines evidenced that: it was no hindrance to achieving the most fruitful theological consensus.

It has been all too easy to divide along denominational and party lines in our debates, when in fact the greater need is to stand together on issues that cross those lines. The spirit of Nonconformity is one that not only galvanises convictions under Scripture, but under that same Scripture tirelessly pursues the unity of the body of Christ visibly on earth.

#### **6. If we Proclaim the Gospel of the Puritans**

We have already seen that the Puritan view of salvation was much bigger than what is generally held today; that view of salvation affected their view of the gospel and how it should be proclaimed. These men preached a ‘comprehensive gospel’ –

---

preaching not merely for people to 'say the words,' but for evidence of convertedness, in the marks of grace in people's lives.

Their gospel labours were grounded in the conviction that 'salvation is of the Lord.' In the words of Thomas Watson, 'Ministers knock at the door of men's hearts, the Spirit comes with a key and opens the door.'<sup>10</sup> It is clear from reading their evangelistic sermons and literature that their views on divine sovereignty were no obstacle to their preaching both with persuasion and with passion.

Too much of today's gospel and the means by which it is communicated is reductionist, programmatic and geared towards immediate results. If there is to be a future for Nonconformity, then it has to include a place for full-orbed gospel preaching that looks to God to give the increase to our labours.

## Conclusion

It would not be hard to argue that the greatest and most enduring achievement of the Puritan era was the fruit of the Westminster Assembly. This is seen in the form of that set of documents it produced expressing a shared understanding of Scripture that transcends boundaries of church polity. The Assembly was called to create a uniformity in the church in Britain that was based on consensus. It succeeded in part – witness the value and durability of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *Savoy Declaration* and the *1689 Baptist Confession* – but it singularly failed in many other respects.

Over the past ten years there have been many indications that there is a renewed longing to find that kind of consensus – rooted in God and shaped by his word.

And there has been no shortage of gatherings and initiatives to pursue it. Out of all those gatherings that I had the privilege to attend, one comment has lingered on. We were discussing the need to work together for more meaningful theological and ecclesiastical ties between churches in Britain, when one delegate said, 'Brothers, we have it within our grasp to finish the unfinished business of 17th Century!' It may sound like something of a pipe-dream, but that is the thought I would leave with you as we draw the threads of our deliberations to a conclusion.

The great danger we face in our day on all sides is that of splintering into an independency based on minimalist theology and in which everyone does their own thing. If that proves to be the case it will be a tragic loss to the evangelical cause in this country. If there is to be a positive future for Nonconformity it cannot be achieved without humble co-operation and a shared vision to carry on with the pursuit of true reform in light of the teaching and application of 'the whole counsel of God.'

## References

1. Packer, J.I., *Among God's Giants* (Kingsway; Eastbourne) 1991 pp.11-12
2. Manton, T., *Works* (Vol. 2) p. 102f.
3. Noll, M. in *Elwell Evangelical Dictionary*
4. Shaw, I, *High Calvinists in Action*, (OUP) 2001
5. Lewis, P., *The Genius of Puritanism*, (Carey Publications; Sussex) 1975 p. 12
6. Packer, J.I., *Op. Cit.* pp. 34-39
7. Lewis, P., *Op. Cit.* p. 15
8. Noll, M. *Loc. Cit.*
9. Packer, J.I. *Op. Cit.* p.42
10. Watson, T, *A Body of Divinity* (Banner of Truth; Edinburgh) p. 154

*Evangelical Theological Perspectives on Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism.* Leonardo De Chirico. Bern: Peter Lang, 2003.

Evangelicalism is in a fair state of disarray and we had better go about addressing the situation. De Chirico in a rather technical, occasionally wooden reshaping of his doctoral thesis taken at King's College, powerfully argues that Post-Vatican II Rome has exposed evangelicalism's need for a re-formulation of itself that will regain its ability to successfully critique Roman Catholicism. Standing behind his convictions are a recognition that evangelical assessments of Catholicism have not kept up with the 'sea change' initiated by Vatican II. In other words, evangelicals are out of date. The author compares the approaches of seven evangelical leaders and several dialogic or ecumenical initiatives to prove his point. These latest endeavours, in particular, make an additional point by underscoring the evangelicals' opportunity to provide a fresh look at Rome. Rome is on the march and the evangelical community, if there is one, has the responsibility to understand and respond.

The individual critiques of Roman Catholicism by Abraham Kuyper, G.C. Berkouwer, Cornelius Van Til, David Wells, Donald Bloesch, Herbert Carson, John Stott are compared, along with the work of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) and the on-going dialogue Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT). De Chirico analyzes the approaches made by each in order to ascertain their effectiveness in critiquing Catholicism's historical trajectory, dogmatic structure, theological dynamics, institutional outlook and cultural project. The author notes these as a necessary means for

discovering the real prize in his investigation. His objective is not the accumulation of data concerning Roman Catholicism. It is rather to use the variety of perspectives obtained in order to triangulate the central core of the faith system. In other words, De Chirico wants to identify Post-Vatican II's heart. His evaluation yields two different results.

First, he discovers that no single evangelical approach yields satisfactory results. The best of these, that of Abraham Kuyper, comes closest to success because it addresses pre-Vatican II Rome as a worldview, from the vantage point of Reformed evangelicalism, an alternative world and life view. He is able to assess Catholicism as a system most effectively because he represents an alternative, competing system. Catholicism is catholic; it is expansive, plastic, at points amorphous and inclusive. The author's general critique of evangelicalism is sobering, to say the least. In comparing the seven individual analyses and the several corporate interactions, De Chirico highlights a lack of coherence. None of the critiques are sufficient, either because their scope is too restrictive to assess a broad-based belief system such as Catholicism, their assessment lacks theological rigour, they are too accommodating, or the composite picture is too self-contradictory to be useful.

Derek Tidball's *Evangelical Rubik's Cube* illustrates part of the problem. Tidball identifies three categories, world, spirituality, and denomination, each of which is subdivided 5-6 times into which evangelicalism can be placed. Evangelicalism can, according to the taxonomies noted, be transformational, radical, and denominational, or it can be conversionist, renewal, and denominational or it can

---

be any one of dozens of combinations. The author uses this as a powerful way of illustrating an overarching point. Evangelicalism is itself fragmented tremendously. What does the word mean? If the evangelicals cannot agree on who they are or if they lack significant alignment in terms of their doctrines and structure, how can they then possibly hope to evaluate Roman Catholicism? As mentioned earlier, Kuyper comes closest to giving a comprehensive appraisal of Catholicism, but it too fails. It and the theologically rigorous treatments are all out of date. This is De Chirico's dilemma. The only evaluations that come close to understanding the nature of Catholicism were all completed before Vatican II. The remaining attempts fail because they were all too restrictive in their analysis, their theological perspectives were too accommodating or the treatments were too polemical to provide sufficient objectivity for understanding. It must be added that we do not know whether other evangelical choices would have yielded better data. We only know what we have been given to understand.

We must also say on the other hand that De Chirico's use of Tidball makes it likely that a choice of any other group would have yielded similar results. As George Marsden pointed out in his *Reforming Fundamentalism*, evangelicalism's self-understanding has been undergoing radical change. Tsunamis and earthquakes have taken and continue to take place throughout the evangelical world, from the radical shifts in perspective among the faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary in the USA to the debates with Steve Chalke over penal substitution, and the growing influence of open and

feminist theologies in missiology or hermeneutics. The tectonic plates continue to shift and produce shock waves that surge through 21st century Protestantism. This shifting landscape provides a singularly deficient platform from which to evaluate other faith systems, whether they are Roman Catholicism or Islam. As the author aptly notes, the last 30 years may have evidenced a renaissance in evangelical thought, but it has come at the cost of greater marginalization. Trends are not dominated by evangelicals, even within their own camp. External theologies and disciplines impose themselves on the creation and implementation of evangelical theology. Additionally, the trend within evangelicalism is to embrace "centred" (reformist) rather than "bounded" (traditionalist) identities, making it, at once, possible to find common identity with highly disparate ideas, but sacrificing precision of thought which makes accurate analysis far more difficult. As De Chirico asserts, while confronting Roman Catholicism, evangelicals have to reflect and act upon their own identity. If you are uncertain about the latter, you will be less successful in identifying the former.

Second, he succeeds in locating the centre that he seeks. De Chirico identifies this Roman Catholic core as shaped by two factors, first, the manner in which relationship and nature and grace interact in the church and second the prolongation of the incarnation expressed as an expansive catholicity. The synergy between the two creates a cohesive institution that serves as a coherent life system. Furthermore, the resultant creation, Post-Vatican II Rome, is a success in terms of dealing with the exigencies of the postmodern world. The author,

---

in fact, sees it as being far better equipped to deal with both modernity and postmodernity than is contemporary evangelicalism.

Rome has, thanks to Post-Vatican II, rediscovered its catholicity. “The basic premise is that the whole of reality, which is already one in essence, though this protological unity is marred by sin, should be brought into a Catholic unity which would re-establish redemptively the harmonious interaction between the universal and the particular.” The author introduces the evangelical reader to a faith system which can, like Islam, incorporate a vast array of discordant, often contradictory beliefs and practices into one evolving, growing, yet stable organism.

The focus of Catholicism after Vatican II is also radically different from its focus prior to it. Roman Catholicism from Trent to Vatican II was characterized by a need to set and enforce its own doctrinal boundaries, particularly in view of the threat posed by the Protestant Reformation. Vatican II changed all that by returning the church to a pre-Tridentine model characterized by imprecision and a growing magisterium that was never fully coordinated or reconciled. Pre-Tridentine Rome served as a sponge, incorporating galaxies of different practices around a basic philosophical core of natural theology and incarnational self-identity. Interestingly, a similar interaction can be seen in the evolving ‘theology from the bottom’ of postconservative evangelicalism. This similarity may also explain why much recent evangelical criticism has been muted or absent. In other words, post-Vatican II Rome and reformist, postconservative evangelicalism may be beginning to resemble each other more than

they differ, at least at significant points. Mark Noll has, in fact, asked the question, “Is the Reformation over?” While it would clearly be going too far to say that it is, the fact that he asked the question as an evangelical writing in a conservative Roman Catholic publication, *First Things*, is certainly significant.

De Chirico’s summary of Roman Catholic theology is helpful. He directly connects the catholicity of Rome to its pervasive incarnational theology underlining the necessity of having grace embodied tangibly and materially. The church itself, the author notes, is the prolongation of the Incarnation, standing *altera persona Christi*. Once again, contemporary evangelical missiology reflects strikingly similar language. Evangelicalism typified by a pilgrim motif, often proclaiming a prophetic message of change to culture, has been replaced by incarnational theology focusing on a Christ working within cultures and, importantly, possibly within non-Christian faith systems as well. Roman Catholic soteriology continues to reflect a conviction that man can, as a corollary to the incarnational presence of Christ in nature, cooperate with grace and contribute to salvation. Once again, the tectonic plates have shifted closer together as open theology opens the door to a benevolent, democratic God, walking along with people not completely fallen. It would be excessive to describe the shift of most postconservative evangelicals as Pelagian, but growing numbers embrace Arminianism, if not Amyrauldianism. The result is that the gap lessens between evolving evangelicalism and post-Vatican II Rome. Finally, this incarnational mediation between nature and grace is the church. Like postmodern



---

evangelicals, Rome rejects a radical modernist emphasis on individualism in favour of a corporate context that fuses heaven and earth, every tongue, nation, and people, past, present, and future. As De Chirico notes, "The church is both representative of the union with God and the unity of mankind." De Chirico's judgments are intelligently asserted and troublingly plausible. Roman Catholicism is better equipped than evangelicalism to confront the challenges posed by either modernism or postmodernism. Its inclusive, non-propositional, narrative, liturgical style more closely mirrors the surrounding global cultures than does traditional evangelicalism and its confessional, propositional identity. On the other hand, Catholicism has a united core that competing traditionalist and reformist evangelicalism so evidently lack. Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism have both undergone significant change during the last 30 years, but their changes follow two different trajectories and yield two different results. Catholicism has regained its unity and focus, scandals and hemispheric crises notwithstanding. Evangelicalism, on the other hand, increasingly demonstrates what in fact it always was, not a denomination in any sense, but a loosely gathered body of believers, who define themselves with an increasingly broad catalogue of characteristics. "Together with the loss of the Evangelical cores which have theologically sharp edges (Foundations and essentials with doctrinal convictions not matching current ecumenical correctness), it is

necessary to acknowledge the subtle, yet distinct tendency to shift the centre of the Evangelical faith away from its Reformation formal and material principles and towards its revivalist heritage which has a less pronounced theological profile and a more experiential outlook." The result of this great shift is that Evangelicalism is far less capable of understanding let alone confronting different religious systems. It must be emphasized that, if this is true of Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism, it must be true for every religion as well.

Leonardo De Chirico has convincingly argued that Evangelicalism is at a crisis point. It has done a great deal to address the challenges posed by postmodernism, but the results have made it less well equipped to challenge global belief systems such as Roman Catholicism and Islam.

Furthermore, its very fragmentation and accommodation make it increasingly less influential as a formulator of theology and social change. Stylistically, the book leaves something to be desired. As a former thesis, its superstructure is too exposed, sections tend to be repetitive, and the writing lacks style. It also has to be said that it is an expensive volume. Despite these factors, it is an important work. It has accomplished two different and difficult tasks. It has accurately described the genius behind post-Vatican II Rome and it has devastatingly critiqued a drifting, perhaps dissolving, and certainly dividing Evangelicalism. It is an important book.



**[affinity.org.uk](http://affinity.org.uk)**