Page 13

A selection from the writings of

Gordon Stirling

Edited by
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A selection from the writings of Gordon Stirling

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Number “13” is consistently avoided in various public contexts: aisle 13 in some aircraft; floor 13 for hotel guests (used as a storage floor); table 13; number 13 for examination papers. Why such superstition so long after the Enlightenment’s subjection of any superstition to empirical scientific methods? Gordon Stirling confronts this inconsistency by titling his regular article of the Australian Christian, Page 13.

Gordon Stirling always valued intelligence and scientific discovery as gifts of God, enabling us to invent and produce beneficial products, such as medicines, for human wellbeing. This affirmation of human dignity is endorsed by the goodness of creation within which, tangible actions can enhance human nurture and possibility, while good news is expressed in words that became flesh and a new dimension of hope for humanity in Christological generosity and veracity. Superstitions concerning 13, as symbolic of any superstition, are antithetical to good news and so genuine possibility for human flourishing.

In his Page 13 articles, Gordon Stirling presented Christian identity, life and ministry as a privilege, challenge and joy in which good news can be engaged in faithfulness and ever-new expression—a constant theme in these articles. In these writings, we encounter the immediacy and generosity of his intelligent enthusiasm—which propel us into life with fresh vigour to exhibit Christian faith, anticipation and gratitude in whatever we do.

As we encounter Gordon Stirling through these pages, he encourages to us to be interested listeners, encouraging mentors and committed disciples. Through Sarah Bacaller’s faithful curation of these articles, Page 13 continues to be a wonderful gift to Churches of Christ and beyond.

Dr. Stephen Curkpatrick

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Introduction

‘But why, Mummy?’ … the favourite question of any curious three year old! If this curiosity remains, is fostered and matures along with the child, it drives a certain sense of focus—an intelligent impetus that seeks understanding and yet is ever re-articulating crucial questions within life’s complexity: Who are we? Why are we here? Why do we do what we do, the way we do it? What does it mean?

This searching curiosity pervades Page 13. Refracted through the prism of a particular time and place, Gordon Stirling asks questions of identity—our identity—as those seeking a word of good news in our own time and place, as Churches of Christ. What is good news, today? What does it mean to be us, here, intersected by a word of grace and hope, invited into liberty and responsibility? Where have we come from? What is our heritage? What will we treasure, recast or discard as we go on? All this is wholly resonant with the Churches of Christ heritage in the Restoration Movement as it sought to pare back to essentials of Christian faith and practice. So, here, we have a new coming-to-be of the spirit of a movement seeking veracity in grace.

Gordon Stirling explores many issues on Page 13; ever the theologian, philosopher, shepherd and friend … often the satirist and so too, the prophet. Though written between 1979 and 1987, words jump off the page as though they have anticipated us, perhaps somehow delivered from tomorrow.

The Australian Christian—the Churches of Christ national journal which circulated for over a hundred years, in which these articles appeared—no longer exists. Our networks and connections, communities and conversations do. And Gordon Stirling is here again, a contemporary dialogue partner who will invoke the thinking, asking and exploration that keep life and community so interesting.

Some curation notes: There are 24 articles here, out of a total of 189. The originals are in the bound copies of the Australian Christian which are stored in the Hindmarsh Archive Centre at Stirling Theological College (so named in 2011, in honour of Gordon Stirling, who lectured in pastoral care and was the college vice-principal from 1969–1981). The cataloguing system in use here refers to articles by their year of publication, followed by their
sequential number in that year’s collection; so, the very first article of 1979 is referenced as 1979/1. (20–22 Page 13 articles were published each year, except for the first year, 1979, in which there were slightly fewer).

In the interests of time-travel, very slight editing alterations have been made. God and a small number of statements have been made gender inclusive (nuances we are sensitive to these days); however in some places, these changes have not been made because the tone of these articles and the context of usage is quite clearly affirmative of human dignity and equality; the articles chosen felt like the most contemporary to our time. A very small number of grammatical tweaks (for readability) and articulative amendments (for contemporary sensibilities) have been made. These do not diminish the spirit of Page 13.

Times have changed, but so much is relevant here ... and the challenge for us remains now to develop the conversation even further with Gordon Stirling beyond his time.

Sarah Bacaller

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Page 13: Introducing Ourselves
(an excerpt from Gordon Stirling’s first Page 13 article)

Introducing ourselves: As I write my first ‘leader’ I propose to inform readers about my own particular role as editor. I am responsible for everything that appears in the Australian Christian whether I write it or not and whether I agree with it or not. I am responsible for the leading article in each issue, if there is room for it! I will handle letters to the editor in the ‘Open Forum’ columns. With the Board of Management and the sub-editor-manager I will be responsible for the policy and the ‘shape’ of the journal. I will be consulting with the sub-editor-manager (Chris Ambrose) concerning each issue ….

Editorial policy: Our editorial policy is based on these convictions.

Ours is a strongly biblical faith.

We believe that the whole church (not just ‘the clergy’) is called by God to evangelising, caring, nurturing, serving, worshipping, and working for justice.

We believe that it is God’s will that Christians should be united in witness, worship and service. This also includes Christians who do not come under the labels of ‘Churches of Christ’ and ‘evangelical’.

We believe that Churches of Christ should always be seeking opportunities to discover together with other churches, from the scriptures, what is the mind and will of Christ for his church today.

We hold these convictions strongly but believe in the liberty of our fellow Christians to hold differing convictions as strongly. We believe that in the Australian Christian they should be given the opportunity to express their views in love just as we hope to express ours in love ….
**Let’s have some discussion:** To revert again to the first person singular, I am not a controversial person by nature. I love peace. I hate arguments. I dislike violence, both physical and verbal. But I rejoice in free unhampered discussion of controversial issues in a generous spirit, with a view to discovering with open minds what is the truth of the matter. So no doubt from time to time I will prod and stir a little and throw a cat or two amongst the pigeons with a view to encouraging the honest facing of issues and the discovery of truth. The Open Forum columns are always there for those who feel and think differently.

‘**Finally Brethren**’ Finally, we love the church. We believe that God is more than equal to the task of coping with our contemporary world. We believe that Jesus Christ is alive and well and is dramatically changing the lives of those who are continuously open to him. We believe that the Holy Spirit has not lost any power since the great ‘breakthrough’ in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. And we believe that our readers will be patient with us while we are learning, that they will stick by us, and that they will encourage others to subscribe, so that the A.C. will be able to continue to serve the kingdom of God in general and Churches of Christ in particular.
We have heard references to certain people as ‘not being spiritual’. What is usually meant is that they do not attend the prayer meeting or read their Bibles very often or become involved easily in ‘spiritual things’. Some people present themselves as loving ‘spiritual things’ as opposed to other things. What they mean by ‘spiritual things’ is hymn singing, praying, attending Christian meetings and speaking frequently about the Lord. The ‘spiritual life’ for them has to do with the ‘God-part’ of us, as opposed to our physical or social or recreational or vocational life. ‘Spirituality’ for them is being involved in ‘spiritual exercises’ rather than in eating, earning a living, socialising, engaging in sport, romping with the kids, or playing ‘Grand Old Duke of York’ at a church social.

‘The Bible says...’ All of these uses of the word ‘spiritual’ are no doubt valid, if limited. But it seems that the word and its derivatives are used so loosely that we ought to check it out with the New Testament. Once, the New Testament use is in the sense of having a good attitude or a helpful spirit (Galatians 6:1). Once it is used to refer to the ‘spirit world’ (spiritual wickedness in high places, Ephesians 6:12). Twice it is used in the metaphorical sense (e.g. drinking from the spiritual Rock in 1 Corinthians 10:4). And in 1 Corinthians 15:44, 46 it is used to describe the non-material state of the believer after death. The other 14 uses of the word ‘spiritual’ mean simply ‘of the Spirit’.

Who is spiritual? A spiritual person then is one who is open to the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. He is a Spirit-filled person. He is ‘of the Spirit’. Wherever he is and whatever he is doing he is spiritual, whether he be in church or at a football match, and in both places he will act as one who is motivated by the Spirit. Conversely one can be involved very deeply in so-called ‘spiritual things’ but not be ‘of the Spirit’ (spiritual). Spirituality does not result from doing spiritual things or from being involved in spiritual exercises.
Spirituality is not the result of what we do, except the ‘doing’ which is remaining open to the Spirit’s action in us. Spirituality (being ‘of the Spirit’), is the result of the the Holy Spirit’s activity within us, renewing and recreating us. Doing ‘spiritual things’ or being involved in ‘spiritual exercises’ may well be the result of the work of the Spirit, but they are not the method whereby we become spiritual.

**Fruits of the Spirit**: Paul neatly sums up the meaning of ‘being spiritual’ in Galatians 5:22–23. He describes what the spiritual life looks like, using the metaphor of fruit. Obviously fruit does not generate itself, but is the result of the life of the tree. Similarly we do not generate our own spirituality by doing spiritual things, but by being open to the ‘Spirit’s work’.

‘Spirituality’ or ‘being spiritual’ then is not necessarily reflected in the frequency of our attendance at meetings for prayer and praise, the number of chapters we read per day, the fact that we sing hymns rather than ‘secular songs’, or that we speak often about the Lord. It may well be reflected in these things, but not unless it is also reflected in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

**Spirituality has to do with how we get on with other people**: The fruits of the spirit can only be seen in our relationships with other people. We can only know if a person is spiritual (bearing the fruits of the Spirit) as we see how he gets on with people. The spiritual life is not withdrawal from others, especially the ‘non-spiritual’.

When the Holy Spirit fills us with love it is an all-embracing compassion for everyone. Patience is with people, as are kindness, goodness, dependability and gentleness. Self-control is what inhibits our natural tendency to destroy others. And above all, spirituality is not sitting in judgement upon the spirituality of others.

**Spiritual things**: The life in the Spirit may well express itself in ‘spiritual things’ such as prayer, conversations about the Lord and study of the Word. But the family that entertain at a meal the shy migrants from next
door is doing a spiritual thing. The church that surrounds with patience the person who has a succession of bad alcohol problems is doing a spiritual thing. The father who takes time to listen to what his teenagers are really trying to say to him is doing a spiritual thing. Spirituality results from being so open to the action of God’s Spirit within us that increasingly God is transforming us into joyous people who are finding life and peace in patient and committed understanding of and caring for all of those people whose lives we are able to touch.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Spiritual things’ Australian Christian, 1979/3
The Billy Graham organisation deserves top marks for its public relations. They had Billy on all of the top current affairs programs and he performed well. They had him hitting the press headlines. And behind the scenes they had enlisted thousands of church people on an enormous word-of-mouth selling program.

**Press hand out:** It is not surprising then that their press release material was so well done. The kit that came to the *Australian Christian* office was an attractive glossy folder with container pockets. In these were details and photos of all team members, together with program arrangements.

**A glossary:** In the P.R. kit there was even a glossary of the words that Billy Graham would be using in his sermons. The assumption seemed to be that the Australian press is spiritually illiterate, for there are one hundred and twenty-two words in it. All of the words would be familiar to regular church goers, although many of them might find it hard to put them into contemporary English.

**What does all of this mean?** It seems strange that an organisation that is so good on P.R. cannot present the gospel message in colloquial Australian. Let us look at some of the words and definitions in the glossary...

- **Assurance**—being sure
- **Atonement**—an act that brings enemies together as friends
- **Believe**—trust
- **Born again**—being given a new life by God
- **Expiation**—making a wrong relationship right
- **Heart**—the real self
- **Repent**—turn about in thinking and acting
Is there something sacred about the traditional words of preaching? Why not use the glossary meanings instead of the words themselves if they make the message plainer? (Some of the glossary definitions themselves needed further explanation!). We know of some people who listen for words such as *sin, redemption, salvation* and *propitiation* in sermons. If they are not there, they feel that the gospel is not being preached although the sermon may be all about the truths that these words represent.

**Bible words:** Is Billy Graham restricted in his preaching to using words that most Australians do not understand, in order to keep the support of church people who feel that they are being cheated if they do not hear the traditional words? Is it that church people want to hear the message in what they call *Bible words*? Almost all of the one hundred and twenty-two words in the Billy Graham glossary are from the Authorised Version, but not one of them is a Bible word. All of the Bible words were originally spoken or written in Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek. The words in the glossary are seventeenth century translations of Bible words.

**In the language of the people:** Today in New Guinea some of our young people are translating the Bible into the ordinary speech of the people. In Santo one of our young men is working with other experts translating the Bible into Bislama, the common tongue of the New Hebrides. Yet in Australia, there seems to be some hang-up about communicating the gospel in every day Australian.

**A problem:** When we speak in churchly language we may know what we mean, but that is not always how others hear us. Take for example the well-known phrase ‘accepting the Lord Jesus as your own personal saviour’. It means realising that Jesus Christ is alive and here and able to liberate any one of us from our hang ups and failures and hassles with people, if we trust him and if we really want him to. But some young people have thought of the phrase as a sort of religious formula to which you give intellectual assent in order to go to heaven when you die. Others think it means going down to the front on Sunday night so that you can be baptised and join the church.
What to do? If we ever expect to win spiritually illiterate people (and that is most Australians) to Christ we are going to have to do something about the problem of words. Either we can print glossaries to hand to people on the way into church that explain the words of hymns, prayers and sermons or we can learn Australian and settle down to translating the gospel words, so familiar to us, into the vernacular.

My friend: My friend has never bothered about God. He was self-sufficient and successful. But now life has collapsed around him. He is angry and hurt and bitter. He desperately needs power and life and meaning that God is anxious to give him. He needs the warm, accepting support of God’s loving people. Technically he is in sin, because sin is separating oneself from all that God can do in us and for us. But do I have to get him to make a formal and technical admission that he is a sinner, when for him a sinner is someone who thieves or sleeps around or fiddles his tax return? Why can I not simply let him know that Jesus has shown us that God loves him, and is with him, and that right now God can begin to set him free from his self-destructiveness and his hurts and his anxiety? If he opens up to God’s love and graciousness he will learn later that what has happened to him may also be described as being saved from sin through the finished work of Jesus Christ on Calvary!

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Billy Graham and words’ Australian Christian, 1979/4
‘Community’ seems to be the latest in-word of starry-eyed do-gooders who think that the mere utterance of the sacred word elevates their Christian life-style above that of those who content themselves with keeping the ‘institution of the church’ running smoothly.

We remember when pious people used to judge a sermon by the number of times the name of Christ was mentioned in it. Now there are those who judge preaching by the number of references to ‘community’.

**The elite of the church:** Once the elite of the Christian church were the foreign missionary enthusiasts. Now they are the crusaders for community. Some have been so keen on the church ‘getting out into the community’ that they got out themselves and never came back.

**The church is already in the community:** The fact is of course that the church is in the community already, because the church is people. At most they only spend two or three hours a week ‘propping up the institutional church’. The rest of the time they live and work and eat and sleep and play, in the community. It is nonsense to say that the church ought to get out into the community. It is already there, twenty-four hours a day. What it does there is the important thing. And often it is doing a lot more, ‘unheralded and unsung’, than the do-gooders give it credit for.

**The word for trendies:** The word ‘community’ does add sophistication to one’s conversation and gives the impression of theological and sociological enlightenment. It is the word for Christian trendies. Which of course is in order, provided that they are really being the ‘Body of Christ’ in the community.

One suspects though that ‘community’ can be the latest ‘sacred cow’ that can be worshipped and honoured and lauded in order to avoid too much
personal contact with the true and living God and God’s son Jesus Christ, and the people for whom he died.

**Jumping up and down about community:** For a long time a lot of us made noises about evangelism, but we didn’t do a lot of evangelising. We left that to the ministers and the brotherhood agencies. Similarly many of those who jumped and down and make noises about ‘community’ do not do very much about people who make up community. What they mean by ‘the church getting out into the community’ is for ministers to become involved in community agencies and for the church establishment to make solemn pronouncements on community issues.

**Not for ourselves, but for the community:** We heard of a church that discussed borrowing money for some badly needed renovations to their building. The move was rejected because of orators who persuaded the members that the church should not spend money on itself but on the community. (They did not say what community project they had in mind. The mere mention of the ‘sacred cow’ was enough to deter the faithful). So the money was not borrowed. The renovations will not be done until they become more costly. And no money has been given to the community. Of course Christians have work and witness to undertake in the community. But this is different from reverencing a sacred in-word and using it to escape from real mission in the community.

**A moratorium on ‘community’:** We are suggesting a moratorium on the use of the word ‘community’ by Christians. We are suggesting the use of the word ‘people’ because primarily the community is people. It is the people next door, on the next production line, behind the counter, at the desk over the way, blocking your shopping trolley with theirs. We can be so busy flying a flag for ‘community’ that we never get round to caring for people either one by one or in the mass.

**The community is people:** Some people of the community hurt inside and need Christians to listen to them. Some people of the community need practical help involving the time and money and goods of Christians. Some
of them are lonely and need Christian friendship. The needs of some can only be met by organised Christian action with community agencies or through local body, state and federal political channels.

Christ-filled Christians will be compassionate. Because they are Christ-filled they cannot help it. They will move in on need wherever they find it. They will be Christ’s serving, loving, sacrificing presence with people, the people for whom Christ died. They will be serving the community without feeling the need everlastingly to be mouthing the sacred word!

**Other community agencies:** Some who carry the ‘community banner’ talk as though the church is the sole community agency and has total responsibility for the good things done in the community. There are many other far better equipped and wealthier community agencies doing a far better job in many areas than the church could ever hope to do. Many of them are doing their work even better because of Christian professionals working in them. Sometimes the best thing the church can do for the community is to refrain from blundering in amateurishly and to campaign with other responsible citizens to see that the most proficient agencies to do the job are set up by government or local bodies.

**The church is unique:** We also need to remember that most things that the church can do in an organised way in the community can be done by others, and often better and more efficiently. But there are some things that the church alone can do for the well-being of people that no other agency can. We refer to communicating the good news of Jesus Christ as liberator and source of life, to dynamic worship, and to Christian pastoral care and counselling. Christians will be involved in other forms of community service where community agencies are lacking, or even alongside community agencies already on the job. But to fail in those areas where the church alone can serve the community is to let the community down … and to let the Lord of the community down!

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Community—the latest sacred cow’ *Australian Christian*, 1979/14
Many older suburban churches are dying. Once great congregations, they are now down to a handful in large suites of inadequately used buildings.

*An age gap:* The average age in the dying churches is quite high. Many of the members feel that they have done their bit and are in no mood to be motivated. Minister and congregation are often discouraged. A church of 50 on the way down has a different morale from a church of 50 on the way up. Some of these dying churches are putting their faith in the future into pathetic Sunday Schools. Sometimes there are clubs, although there is no contact with the families from which the young people come. Unless clubs and Sunday Schools are used to contact and cultivate families there is no way in which the young people will become the future church. Even if they do join the church, after marriage they will inevitably move away.

*Too much timber, too few people:* The unattractiveness of empty pews is depressing, not only to the members—who manage to scatter widely over them or to huddle in a small corner—but to any would-be members. People ‘trying churches out’ to find a church home normally do not come back to half empty buildings. Excess pews can be disposed of and excess space can be cheaply blocked off, and the whole thing can be made warm and cosy. But that would inhibit the one big day of the year, the ‘Back-to’ when past members make their annual pilgrimage ‘back to’ the ‘shrine of their ancestors’. (If half of them went back every Sunday and weekdays as well there would be some point in it!)

*Good ‘reasons’ for dying:* The success of the ‘back-to’ is of course a tribute to the fact that the dying church once gave birth to other churches. This is often one of the reasons given for the present decline. (Yet the surrounding population has increased!) Members of dying churches tend to rationalise their condition … *We have so few young people. We are too old.*
No one comes to the gospel service any more. It is the ‘falling off’ of ‘the last days’. We are waiting for a super-minister to put us back on the map.

**Faithful and hard working ... but!** Many members of dying churches are very faithful. They give sacrificially to support their minister even if they are reluctant to support his ideas and plans for growth. Some are very busy in the church … doing every commendable good work except finding new people for Christ and the church. Others again make it quite clear that attendance once a Sunday, when convenient, is the extent of their discipleship.

**Not much good at evangelism:** Members of dying churches are often unenthusiastic about evangelism. They went cold on it in the 50’s and 60’s. Some became ecumenicals and with a wrong idea of what ecumenism is all about, felt that evangelism was sheep stealing. Others believed that the way to win the world was to become involved in social causes. We should be involved of course, but such involvement does not fill churches. And if there is to be continuing involvement there has to be a continuing supply of new Christians to be involved. Those more evangelistically minded still had the non-biblical idea that souls could only be won in church on Sunday nights at five to eight by a professional evangelist. So they prayed that the Lord would bring people within the sound of the gospel, when the Lord has told them distinctly to go out and get them themselves. So the gospel service as a means of finding new people for Christ became quite ineffective, especially when we insisted on having it when the best TV programs are on. And many of the ‘faithful’ following the adage ‘if you can’t beat ‘em, join em’, also stayed home and watched TV.

**Where have all the young ones gone?** Dying churches are often resistant to other methods of evangelism to replace the gospel service, except of course ‘youth evangelism’. Youth work boomed in the 50’s and 60’s and nearly all who came into the church were young people. In the 70’s this source of new growth has tended to dwindle. Even the offspring of the faithful have often succumbed to the pressures of an affluent society and are no longer with us. ‘Putting all our eggs in the youth evangelism basket’
for the last 30 or 40 years means that we have forgotten how to win adults for Christ in spite of the fact that adults of middle life and older are the most fruitful field of evangelism. They are the disillusioned, scared, hurt and weary ones, looking for liberation (salvation).

Amalgamation? To avoid death, some dying churches have considered amalgamation. But unless there is a dramatic change of motivation and vision this only means dying in one coffin instead of in two or more. The only adequate reason for churches to come together is not for comfort or convenience or the postponement of death, but to become more effective and dynamic in mission. But dying churches need not die. If they can stay alive until the next issue of the A.C. we will discuss it on Page 13.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Dying suburban churches … that don’t have to!’
_Australian Christian, 1979/15_
Dying suburban churches do not have to die. Thousands of people are still living in their neighbourhoods. They need the good news that Jesus Christ can liberate them from their hang-ups and fears and lostness and sin. The neighbours of dying suburban churches know that they need something more than they have now. That is why they go wistfully to the occult, to the stars or to one of the many drugs. They want to ‘experience life’. But they are sure that this is not what the church is on about. They are sure that the church is on about condemning their fun and trying to get them to dress up in uncomfortable clothes to go to dreary buildings to sit on hard seats to sing songs that they do not understand and to listen to dreary discourses that belong to another age, when it is so much nicer out of doors or watching telly at home. So our immediate task is to bridge the communication gap so that we can get close enough to our neighbours for them to trust us when we tell them what we are really on about.

SENT TO TELL! So churches do not have to die. We can simply do what Jesus sent us to do. That is to go and find people (instead of expecting them to come to us) and to give them the good news that can blow their minds, lift their sights and change their lifestyles from dreary drabness to excitement. Jesus Christ committed us to two things … to go and find people; to tell them the good news! Members of dying churches find these two comparatively easy things hard to do because we are stuck in a religious culture pattern that pre-disposes us to find our only friendships in the church and to express the gospel in a gobbledygook of religious cliches that simply do not tell it like it is.

Turning acquaintances into friends: Church members tend to have friends in the church and only acquaintances outside it. The first step then is for members to spend less time in unproductive ‘in-group’ church life
and more time in turning their acquaintances into friends. This involves a lot of socialising, especially in our homes, and thus getting close enough to people in order to be able to tell them what God is doing with us, in non-threatening ways that they can understand and welcome.

**They won’t come to church:** Members of dying churches have all tried to get people to come to church, often with indifferent results. Some of course can be persuaded to come to ‘specials’ and if they are ‘grabbed’ by what they see and feel, may continue coming. But how many services of dying suburban churches are like that? Most people who have questions to ask about God and life and death, and who are open to the good news, are not willing to come to services under conditions and times that suit us, but not them. But they can be cultivated in our homes at dinner parties, or in small groups and coffee hours. In our homes, socialising with people, ‘faith conversations’ will come up again and again. But a lot of people are so far away that they are going to need to be in our homes many times (and we in theirs) before they trust us enough to hear ‘what makes us tick’. And a lot of them are going to have to come a long way towards commitment to Christ before they are ready to be risked at a church service!

**They can be found!** Some of our neighbours and friends will happily become part of an over-fifties club or a couples club or a singles club or a play group. However if such groups are merely ‘tenanting’ the church property they are unproductive. But if they provide opportunities for committed church people to socialise with others, they are productive. There are many other ways of finding people.

If there are still Sunday Schools and youth groups there is an immediate list of families to be cultivated through visitation and socialising. Good old fashioned door knocking is another way to discover people. Door knocks are best if they follow a series of letterbox drops, using positive and simple material about God and life and faith and prayer and families, rather than material that appears to condemn or ‘grind a denominational axe’ or present ideas that people are not ready for yet. About one in 10 calls turns
up someone who is lonely and in some sort of trouble and needs a lot of loving by caring people.

Too old...to care!! But members of dying suburban churches often do not want to be involved. They are too old! They have ‘had their day’! Yet half the community round them is just as old, and the older they get the more urgently they need the gospel. And they are more likely to accept it from their own age group than from anyone else, especially when they bowl together or attend the same elderly citizens’ groups.

Sent with the good news: Not only are we sent to find people. We are sent to give them the good news. This means that we will accept people as they are and we will not be shocked by their smoking and swearing and drinking and gambling and ‘rough ways’. We are not sent to change their habits, but to introduce them to Jesus Christ. He will look after their habits in his time and their’s and not ours!

The language of the good news: We will also learn to express what God is doing with us in their language. Jesus gave the good news in colloquial Aramaic. The early church translated it into colloquial Greek. The sixteenth century church translated it into impeccable educated upper class English. And there it has stayed in our services, our hymns, our prayers and in our ways of talking about the faith. This is very good, except that it is not the language of our neighbours. Perhaps the best way to learn to share the good news in contemporary language is first to share with one another what our faith means to us in non-religious language.

Is there any hope? All of what we have said so far of course will only hit the defence nerves, unless of course we are totally open to the living Christ as our motivator. Suburban churches do not have to die, unless they want to!

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Dying suburban churches don’t have to die!’

Australian Christian 1979/16
Page 13: God’s cross

The ship’s chart showed that we would pass the Mediterranean volcanic island of Stromboli at 3 a.m. So 3 a.m. found me dressing-gowned and alone on the freshly swabbed promenade deck to see the marvellous sight of exploding red hot lava, leaping into the sky and flooding down the mountain side into the sea. But all I saw was thick fog and all that I heard was the mournful sound of the ship’s foghorn. I returned to my bunk disappointed. I really wanted to keep that appointment with Stromboli because it was associated with a dramatic change in my life.

A crisis of faith: As a young man I was having a crisis of faith. I was very fond of Jesus, but I thought that God was rough, harsh, capricious and vindictive. I had every sympathy with the cynic who said, ‘God the Father fetches us a clout on the side of the head and Jesus the Son gives us balm for the wound’. Then one day I discovered that God is like Jesus. Jesus was in effect ‘God-in-a-man’. I saw new meaning in the Bible phrases, I and the Father are one and In him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. It dawned on me that Jesus was a living, walking picture of God, and that all he did and said was showing us something about God. But I still had the problem of the cross. In fact I had two problems. How could a God who is like Jesus send someone like Jesus to the cross? And did Jesus reveal the Father during his life and stop revealing him when he went to the cross?

God in Christ on the cross: Then I read of a traveller who had better luck than I did and saw Stromboli erupting by night. As he watched in awe he was aware that the cascades of glowing lava that lit sea and sky were but a small part of the great molten mass at the heart of the earth. He wrote that he thought then of the cross. It dawned on him that the cross revealed but a small part of what is going on in the great heart of God all the time. From his vivid word pictures I could see the volcanic scene. But more, I suddenly saw God in a new light: the light of the cross. For ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ … on the cross. The cross was the cross of God. My life was changed as I came to grips with a God who loves and cares that much; with a
God who suffers all the suffering of hurt people; with a God who never stops giving in love even when this love is greeted with indifference.

*The cross means many things:* After all the intervening years I know that the cross means many other things. That it is a mystery whereby a just God is able to receive, as though they had not sinned, people who richly deserve to be punished (justification). That Christ died so that I do not have to (substitution). But above all the cross shows me right into the loving, suffering, forgiving heart of God. This does not mean that he is a soft and easy sort of God. God’s love is the sort that makes enormous demands on me ... for my sake! God will not let me be satisfied with less than my potential and will not let me substitute any ersatz substitutes for life. And the fact of God’s pain in a suffering world of people will not let me remain indifferent either to God’s pain or theirs.

*What about the resurrection?* So I had solved the problem of God revealing himself in Jesus Christ, even on the cross. But I was still left with another problem ... what was the resurrection revealing about God? This one was not hard. Jesus bursting out of the grave on resurrection morning is the picture of a God who is already conquering death. Never has so much been written about death as is being written today. Ours is becoming a generation obsessed with death and dying. Yet God is conquering death by giving us deathless life. The message of the Bible is that at the End *there will be no death*. But the resurrection tells us that God makes it possible for us to ‘pass from death unto life’ now. And for those who believe ‘there is no death’ here or hereafter.

*Good Friday and Easter Day:* On Good Friday we will take a long, long look into the heart of God and come alive again with God’s love. On Easter Day our minds will be blown by the thought of the continuing triumph of God over death and pain and sorrow for those who believe, now and at the end of each life, and at the End.

GR Stirling *Page 13 ‘God’s cross’ Australian Christian*, 1980/5
We all know what S.O.S. means and most of us learned to tap it out in Morse when we were children. The letters are said to be the initials of the words save our souls. If that is true, then those who created the expression knew more about the biblical meaning of the word souls than many Christians do. When people on a ship in distress signalled S.O.S. they did not mean saving some sort of ‘heart-shaped blank’ inside them or some ‘God-part’ of them. They meant save us. Souls are people.

You don’t have a soul! You do not have a soul. Biblically the word soul and the word self are synonymous. I am a living soul; I do not have a soul. My body, my mind, my feelings, my memory, my attitudes, my habits, and all that I am go to make up the soul that is me. The body part of the soul is only temporary packaging for the self or soul on its earthly journey. It is a very useful collection of water, minerals, fats and chemicals that eventually wears out and is discarded. But the death of the body does not necessarily destroy the soul or self.

Saving souls: Saving souls is saving people, whole people, and not a little spiritual bit of people. Because we are all keen to save souls it is good for us to keep this in mind. I remember hearing a pathetic complaint from a little old man about a church where he occasionally attended with his wife. He said to me, ‘They are only interested in my soul, they are not interested in me’. Actually they were not interested in his soul because they were not interested in him as a person, only as a statistic. ‘How hardly souls are wooed and won’, says the hymn writer. Someone should have told him that it is a lot easier with people.

Define our terms: Which all goes to show that we tend to use the familiar words of our faith without stopping to define them and to find out what they really mean. When we talk about ‘saving souls’ we are really talking about liberating people. The word salvation in the biblical sense means liberation. It is used twice as often in the Old Testament as in the New. It usually referred...
to liberation of the nation from some sort of bondage, because for hundreds
of years at a time they were not free people.

**Salvation in the N.T.** : In the New Testament salvation also means
liberation—from ‘hang-ups’, limitations, meaninglessness, self-
destructiveness, death, darkness, sins, inhibitions, and indeed everything that
destroys life both here and here-after. Salvation is not the right that a spiritual
bit of us has to survive after the cemetery. It is God liberating us as whole
persons here and now, and thus making it possible for us to be people whom
even death will not be able to defeat.

**No particular virtue in particular words:** As there is no particular virtue in
using particular English translations of words that describe vibrant biblical
experiences, and as certain long-used words have come to be misunderstood,
we ought to give the old words a rest for a while and let ourselves be
challenged by other words that are more descriptive of these experiences. I
am proposing that we talk about people rather than souls and about liberation
rather than salvation. We are in business to let people know that God can
liberate them as God has liberated us. Liberation is one of the ‘in’ words today
which makes its use even more relevant.

**A word from Peter:** In the first chapter of his first letter Peter has a few words
that sum up what the liberation of people by God is all about. In verse 10 he
says that we are liberated if we really believe that God can and will set us free.
He records the three tenses of liberation. The past tense is in verse 3 where
we read that we have been renewed or liberated by a merciful God. Verse 5
talks of the present tense where God’s power is now guarding us, to keep us
liberated and filled with a fantastic joy (verse 8). Verse 5 refers to the future
and ultimate liberation when we will be freed from death, because of the
resurrection of Jesus Christ (verse 3). It is great to be liberated people in
business to help others towards their liberation.

**But that is not all:** While it is our business as liberated people to let others
know of God’s way of liberation, we also remember that a soul is a person. It
is only God, through Christ, who can liberate souls or persons from the
destructive things within them that have them all bound up. But we as their
friends can help to liberate them from a lot of other bondages.
**Our work of liberation:** Those who think of people as having impersonal souls can confine their interest to getting those souls saved and their owners onto the church roll. But people who have really been liberated by God are full of love and compassion. They are interested in whole people rather than just the ‘God-shaped blank’ inside them. So they liberate others from their loneliness by being with them. They liberate them from hunger by feeding them. They liberate them from oppression by working for justice. They liberate them from discrimination by accepting them and getting others to do the same.

**Saving souls:** So saving souls is liberating people from everything that destroys, binds, hurts, inhibits, confines and stunts growth. A great deal of this liberation only God can achieve through Christ. But some of this liberation is the job of compassionate people who themselves have been liberated by God. So saving souls is not only getting people down to the front on Sunday nights. It is also feeding the hungry, liberating the captives, caring for the sick, comforting the bereaved and lifting up the fallen. And when we are busy with our part of the liberation process, there are likely to be more people coming down to the front on Sunday nights for ‘the salvation of their souls’.

It was early in my ministry. She was brought to me by a friend who had assured her that I could help her with her problem. How little she knew! The story was poured out a harrowing, complex domestic mess. The more she revealed the more confused I became about what advice to give. Eventually the grim story ended, For once I was silent and bewildered. Groping for some words that would enable me to stall for time, I began to speak. She interrupted me. ‘I won’t take any more of your time,’ she said. ‘You’ll never know how much you’ve helped me. I know what to do now. Thank you!’ I had done nothing but listen to her. That was all that she needed.

‘I feel terribly guilty!’ It was another occasion and another person. She was weeping copiously. ‘I feel terribly guilty. I don't know how to forgive myself,’ she sobbed. So it went on with crying, professions of guilt and deep anguish. She had come to the right person. I was an expert on the theology of the forgiveness of sins. I awaited a lull in the crying to explain how God forgives everything. She accepted my word, dried her eyes and even prayed after me a little prayer accepting God’s forgiveness. It was that easy. Except that the next day she was back worse than ever. I could think of nothing more to say to her. So she sobbed out the whole story that she had needed to tell me the day before.

People need to be listened to: Our neighbourhood, our churches and our families are full of people who need to be listened to by sympathetic, caring, accepting persons. Most of them cannot talk it out with those closest to them because they are emotionally involved. They need people like us who are close enough to be trusted and concerned enough to care. Yet it is because we are so concerned and caring that we want to talk our heads off to them when they need to talk their heads off to us. It is easier for us to talk than it is to listen. Talking gets their burden off our shoulders with a bit of cheap advice. Listening gets their burden onto our shoulders where it belongs.

The shy ones: Another area where some of us are short on listening and long on talking is in committees, on church boards, in discussion groups and in
informal socialising. The talkative ones have all the say. They enjoy talking. They are confident in the expression of their opinions; often too confident. They cope better with their own ideas than they do with the ideas of others, and so avoid listening to them. Meanwhile the shy ones who lack confidence, but who often have excellent ideas, are seldom heard, and the committee or group are the poorer for it.

Many types of listening: Sometimes it is a good thing to take stock, especially we talkative listeners, to see where we are in the communication business. The following possibilities are selected from the lists of those who are expert in telling us how to listen:

Polite listening—while I think of what I am going to say when you shut up.

Negative listening—which makes me want to interrupt you to put you right.

Selective listening—when I am bored with what you are saying and looking round for someone more interesting to talk to.

Threatened listening—that makes me so mad about what I think that you are saying that I am not really listening to you.

Interruptive listening—where I am only listening for a suitable moment to take over the conversation from you.

Absent minded listening—in which I am ‘away with the birds’ but hopefully saying yes and no at the right time.

Interested listening—in which I am paying attention to you as though you are the only person in the world, at that moment.

Listening and evangelism: We inherit a tradition that evangelism is the church doing the talking to the non-Christian. It has been assumed that there is no point in listening to his point of view because it is wrong. That is why so much so-called personal evangelism has failed. Evangelism through listening is where we encourage the other person to talk about what he believes and thinks and feels. Often we find that he already believes in God and prayer and the Bible, even if church attendance and puritan ethics do not appeal to him. As he talks about God and faith and his own beliefs to a concerned and interested
listener, he is likely to think again about some of these things. And the interested listener is able to ask the sort of questions that help this re-thinking. And sooner or later the person is going to say to the listener, ‘What do you think?’ Then he is ready to listen. Listening earns us the right to be heard.

**Listening to agnostics:** Even agnostics should be listened to with a great deal of genuine interest. How else can we find out what makes them tick and what they are on about? Mostly, if we are willing to give them a genuine hearing they will give us the same courtesy. We may not be able to change their thinking. But if they have felt accepted by us and have responded by giving us the courtesy of a hearing, the Holy Spirit could well be working in their minds after we have finished the conversation. And the chances are that the more we listen in love to people, the more we will hear the voice of God!

GR Stirling *Page 13 ‘Hey! Listen!’ Australian Christian*, 1980/15
Page 13: The problem of interpretation

When we want to find out what God is saying and doing now, and what God wants of us now in the areas of faith and life and morals and worship and doctrine, we go to the Bible to find out what God said and did then and how people then understood and interpreted what God was saying and doing and what God wanted. This means of course that we have to interpret what was written then into our modern situation.

This of course opens up the way for differences of interpretation. For example, Jesus said, ‘Love your enemies’. Did he mean to love the Russians? Or was he referring to private enemies? And when the Bible says, ‘Thou shalt not kill’ did this mean not to kill fellow Jews, or does it mean that Christians can never take up arms? And what are we to make of Paul’s words about greeting each other with a holy kiss, women keeping silent in church and baptisms for the dead? There is always a problem about differences of interpretation. If Christians are to work and worship and live together it would seem desirable for them to be agreeing as much as possible, especially on major aspects of the Christian faith. And some of us get quite irritated with those people whose interpretations of Scripture differ from our own.

Four possibilities: In meeting the problem of differences of interpretation there are four possibilities. One is to have an authoritarian church that does our interpreting for us and tells us what doctrines to believe and how we should worship and what our morals should be. Some churches have done this quite successfully. Most of the sects do likewise and their members are able to quote in detail what they can eat and drink and believe and do, and what they cannot. This is one reason why they appeal to people who do not want to think, but want to be told what to believe and do.

The second possibility: The second possibility is for groups of people who interpret the Bible in the same way to get together and make up a written or unwritten creed or confession with sufficient detail for everyone to know
exactly what to believe in every last detail. Then the ‘faithful’ know exactly where they are and the rest are heretics to be disdained and cut off. All such creeds of course are human interpretations.

_The third possibility:_ The third possibility is to accept as part of the church all those who want to be called Christians and let them believe what they like and interpret the scriptures as they will. This would be generous, but rather confusing both to those in the church and those outside it.

The _fourth possibility_ we will look at later.

_**Pioneers of Churches of Christ and interpretation:**_ Our pioneers were not happy with these three possibilities. They rejected the authoritarian church idea. Being in the reformed tradition they leaned towards the right of private interpretation, with all of its risks and dangers. Neither were they happy about the division of the church into fragments each with its creed or confession.

And they were certainly not in favour of a church in which there was no consensus of interpretation in faith and worship and life and where everyone believed and thought as he liked.

_**A general consensus:**_ So they came up with the idea of trying to find a general consensus of essentials in doctrine and behaviour and worship, that is agreed upon right across the church and down through Christian history. They argued that if the church can find such agreement on these essential matters then there could be wide liberty of opinion and practice on all other matters. They used the slogan,

_In essentials unity,
In opinions liberty,
In all things love._

The third line of the slogan of course is essential to make the other two lines work.

_What is essential?_ The problem of course was to know and to agree on what was essential. They said that essentials were those things that had to do with our salvation. These of course were the authority of the scriptures in their
presentation of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the church, and the
doctrines of faith in Jesus Christ as Son of God and Saviour, of repentance
towards God, of baptism into Jesus Christ as the outward expression of God's
saving act, and of life in the Spirit.

*A valid fourth possibility:* In all of this our fathers had hit upon a valid fourth
possibility in solving the problem of differences of interpretation. That is,
finding a general consensus of belief and practice and worship that can be both
definitive and widely accepted, and at the same time allowing liberty of
interpretation in all other matters.

*A lot of people may be unhappy:* This possibility of course puts very large
areas in the realm of matters of opinion and a lot of people may not be very
happy about this. Some are not satisfied for instance with simple affirmations
of Christ’s atoning work and second coming. They want particular theories
about these doctrines affirmed as well. Others would like a written or
unwritten credal statement defining the inspiration and authority of the
scriptures in certain ways. Others would like to see us committed to certain
stances on such contemporary matters as the use of alcohol, the remarriage of
divorcees, abortion, war and peace, politics and religion, forms of worship,
ecumenical participation, ordination, the place of women in the church and
church government.

*Four choices:* These people need to remember that we have four choices as
far as biblical interpretation is concerned … an authoritarian church, getting
with those of like mind around a common creed and that excludes ‘heretics’,
the anarchy of a believe-what-you-like situation, or agreeing to live and work
happily with those Christians who affirm those basic facts that have to do with
God’s grace and human salvation, and in love, giving to all the right of liberty
of opinion in other matters.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘The problem of interpretation’ Australian Christian, 1981/1
One of the greatest problems that religious people had with Jesus was his habit of mixing with the wrong people.

**He eats with the hoipoloi:** ‘He eats with publicans’, they said. Put into modern terms that is, ‘He eats with trade unionists...or the establishment’, depending on whom one thinks is ruining the country.

‘He eats with sinners’, they said. The word ‘sinner’ was literally ‘law-breaker’. These were Jews who did not observe the five daily prayer times, and mostly did not go to synagogue, and were slack about fasting and other religious duties. The modern equivalent would be people who do not go to church and who have most of the vices that church people do not have.

**Harlots and publicans:** Jesus told them the story of the prodigal son and the Father’s love and of the brother who represented the religious people looking down their noses at the Father’s children who have strayed away. And Jesus said to these religious people, ‘Harlots and publicans go into the kingdom before you’ and they probably still would if they had someone like Jesus to mix with them and lead them into the kingdom.

They not only called him a friend of publicans and sinners, but also a glutton and a wine-bibber. He must at least have been in the company of such people to have earned such a reproach.

**Good news for ‘outsiders’:** As we read the Gospels we find that Jesus never condemned the ‘outsiders’. But he did condemn the religious for their attitude to the ‘outsiders’. To the publicans and sinners and harlots he spoke of the Father’s love and of eternal life and of the kingdom of Heaven breaking out amongst them and within them.

This the religious did not understand. They could have coped more easily with Jesus mixing in questionable company if he had used the opportunity to
roundly condemn them for their behaviour and their slackness in relation to the synagogue.

**Sent to mix with ‘outsiders’**: Jesus has shown us that God obviously loves the non-religious, the amoral, the unchurched and the ‘outsider’ and expects that we will go and find them. But this of course involves mixing with them, accepting them, and coming so close together with them that they will be open to hear the good news from us with confidence in us that what we are talking about is ‘fair dinkum’.

**Conditioned by our culture**: But we have been conditioned against all of this sort of thing. Church people mix with church people. Most of us seldom socialise with ‘outsiders’. We work with them, have them for neighbours and play sport with them, but we are careful not to let it become more intimate than that because our conditioning has made a big culture gap between us. Did we not learn in Sunday School that it is wrong to mix in bad company? Were we not grouped into church sports clubs to avoid too much contact with the ‘unsaved’? Have we not passed resolutions about these people and their ways, and written to the papers and set up societies to judge and to condemn them?

**It is not our fault**: It is hard to socialise in one another’s homes with the so-called wrong people whom we have been conditioned to despise and shun. It is not our fault, but the fault of those who took the passages out of context, so that we grew up believing that *keeping oneself unspotted from the world* and *coming out from among them and being separated* meant keeping away from these people.

The church is the body of Christ, continuing what he set out to do when he was in the flesh. So the church is the friend of ‘outsiders’ and sinners and people on the wrong side of the tracks and down-and-outs and up-and-outs. Or that is how Jesus meant it to be before somewhere along the line someone got the idea that these people could hear about the love of God and the gospel without us having to mix with them. The gospel could reach them by radio and TV and from the professional evangelists without us ever having to touch the untouchables.
We are troubled by it: We are all aware of all of this and we are troubled by it and we want to do something about it. How? Church boards and church business meetings could well put on their agendas … high up on the list: ‘MIXING WITH THE WRONG PEOPLE’. Small groups are flourishing (mostly in-groups). A night or two looking at ‘reaching the outsider’ in these groups could have positive results. As families we could discuss the possibility of opening our homes to some ‘outsiders’ we know for coffee, a meal, or a dinner party.

Marj and Roy: And thinking of Jesus and ‘the wrong people’ again, he must have had many homes open to him to meet these people and to talk with them. Many of the homes belonged to the ‘outsiders’ themselves.

Marj and Roy liked to have dinner parties. Marj was a superb cook and both of them loved people. They would have called themselves ‘outsiders’ as far as the church was concerned. Lesley and I were often their guests. We met more unchurched people in that way than in any church homes in our various ministries.

According to Jesus the wrong people are the right people to socialise with if our commitment means anything. Perhaps doing this in our homes is where the new evangelistic thrust will get most of its momentum.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Mixing with the wrong people’ Australian Christian, 1981/17
Thoughts on Social Justice Sunday: Of course we do not convert people. God does. It is our job to help them to be open for God to do God’s saving work in them. But that could be dangerous, in the sense that newly converted people could rock the boat and start getting mixed up in things that traditionally some people think the church should stay out of.

A radical change: If people are converted by God, God is changing them radically. From being ego-centred they are becoming concerned for everyone else. From being greedy grabbers of goods they are caring about people who never get enough of anything. God is filling them with compassion and concern. They cannot help being deeply compassionate and caring people because that is what happens to people when God is converting them.

We do not mind this of course, provided they keep their newly given compassion within the bounds of respectability. They can serve on the local benevolent committee. They can give to local charities and work for various overseas aid organisations.

Awkward questions: The trouble is that some of these converted and now compassionate people are quite intelligent. They start asking awkward questions such as:

Why should two out of three children born today be disadvantaged because they are born into the third world?

Why is two thirds of the wealth of the world concentrated in the hands of one third of the people in the world?

Why are nearly half a million Australians unemployed in one of the world’s most advantaged countries?

Why are one and a half million Australians living below the poverty line?
Why is it necessary in a country like Australia to run art unions and raffles and gambling wheels and beauty contests and street collections and telethons in order to maintain services for the physically and mentally handicapped?

We do not mind these compassionate converts asking these questions provided that they are satisfied with such answers as ‘We are the victims of world economic forces beyond our control’ or ‘Once we have evangelised the world all these problems will disappear’ or ‘Let us pray for them’.

**Maybe political solutions:** The one conclusion that a lot of us do not want them to arrive at is that there may be political solutions to some of these problems. We older converts do not mind God getting at our time and our money and our morals, but so far we have been able to keep God out of our political thinking and out of our loyalty to our favourite political party. After all, does not our political party represent the mind of God?

Yet our compassionate new convert is going to discover that to help a lot of people both in Australia and overseas, there are going to have to be actions by governments towards: equality of opportunity; a fairer distribution of what comes from God’s good earth; the opportunity for all who desire it to have a job; the making available of greater community resources for the poor, the disadvantaged and the handicapped and thus spreading their burden across the whole population; and for wealthier nations to make it possible through aid and trade for the poorer ones to begin to have a greater share of what God has so amply provided for everyone.

In short, our compassionate convert has discovered the Biblical concept of social justice. Our compassionate new convert will discover, if we do not hinder him, that there are two outlets for his compassion. One is to provide ‘bandaids’ to alleviate the immediate sores and hurts arising from poverty and unemployment and disadvantage. The other is to get at the causes of these sores and hurts deep down in the structure of society. Such depth surgery requires political and social action.
**Anything to be afraid of:** So our compassionate convert will learn to pray and to think and to talk social justice. He will work with other people of good will to ‘lobby’ for social justice. He may even hear God’s call to enter local body, state or federal politics. And is all that anything really to be afraid of?

GR Stirling *Page 13 ‘The danger of converting people’* *Australian Christian*, 1982 / 15
Page 13: Minister’s son off the track

We often think that being brought up in a godly family automatically results in children who will stay on the track and not cause concern to their parents or the church. That such is not always the case is seen in the true story of Jerry.

From the country: Jerry grew up in a country manse and showed every sign of following his father’s footsteps into the ministry. That was until he moved to the city. He didn’t turn against God or anything like that; rather the opposite. He became some sort of religious radical and was constantly upsetting church and political leaders and even got himself into jail, to the shame of his family.

Demonstrations: Demonstrating was his way. He managed to get an old bullock yoke from an antique dealer and used to wear it on his shoulders round the city in the cause of disarmament. He said that disarmament might lead to some nation or other putting us under its yoke, but that God would deliver us if we did the right thing and disarmed unilaterally.

Well, one of our older and respected ministers tried to counsel him and took the yoke away from him. A few weeks later Jerry had managed to get a blacksmith to make him an iron yoke which he began dragging round the streets. He said that it represented the yoke of a foreign power that we would eventually have to bear if we did not obey God and disarm. They say that idealism is next to madness!

Then one day he got a crowd together and started smashing crockery all over the place. He said that God would smash church leaders and politicians likewise if they refused to obey God. That sort of thing might be alright for a religious drama group in a church hall, but out on the street it just brings the church into disrepute!

A manifesto: We all hoped that as he got older Jerry would mature and get some sense. It was a vain hope. Jerry was in his fifties and we were at war. He was still on about disarmament and justice for the oppressed and the failure of
the heavies in church and government to do the will of the Lord. But he was so well known that if he got up in a public place to speak, he was moved on. So he prepared a manifesto and sent his close friend and follower Barry to read it on the cathedral steps. No one took much notice, except a security officer who happened to be passing. The manifesto said that our involvement in the war was contrary to the mind and will of God and that unless the nation initiated an immediate ceasefire, the judgement of God would be upon us. This of course was sedition and the security officer confiscated it. To make a long story short, it eventually came into the hands of the Prime Minister when he was eating fruit by the fireside after his evening meal. He was so mad that he shredded the manifesto with his fruit knife and threw it into the flames. Jerry was arrested and thrown into jail. Later he was helped to escape by a young black activist.

_Call of God:_ To make matters worse Jerry claimed that God was calling him to do all of these things. He even claimed that the rough things he said about political and religious leaders and preachers were from the Lord. Of politicians he said, ‘They are a horror, a reproach, a byword, a hissing and a curse’. He described a Prime Minister as ‘a despised and broken pot, a vessel no one cares for’. He advised people ‘do not hearken to the words of preachers who fill you with vain hopes saying, _It shall be well with you. No evil shall come upon you_.’ That is not a very Christian attitude, nor was his language. He used to accuse well off people of becoming ‘fat and rich and sleek by spurning justice for the needy and for single parent families’. He called them ‘well fed lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbour’s wife’. Such language from a minister’s son!

_To cap it all:_ To cap it all he announced what he called ‘A New Deal from a God’ wherein people would be no longer burdened by the traditions and rules of church and state, but that God would help them to know in their own hearts what is good and true and just. That of course is straight anarchy dressed up in religious clothes!

It just goes to show that even ministers’ sons can get off the track. And all of this actually happened because Jerry is the Jeremiah of the Old Testament and Barry his faithful servant Baruch. You can read it for yourself.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Minister’s son off the track’ Australian Christian, 1982/17
Page 13: New bottles

Of course, they were not our sort of bottles. The new translations correctly have Jesus saying that no one puts new wine into old wineskins because the new wine will burst them. They must have made quite a potent brew in those days!

Relevant now? Jesus was referring to the fact that his message and lifestyle would not be able to fit in with the traditions and thought forms of his day. But does the parable have any relevance now, especially as we are thinking of the home mission offering? We will all give sacrificially of course, to ensure that our Home Mission Departments go on doing evangelism and church growth and church planting for us. But perhaps they have some ideas about new bottles, while we have became comfortable with the old ones.

The wine has matured: We know that the message and lifestyle of Jesus was new wine in his day, but what was new wine then has matured. It should be able to fit into the wineskins of 11am and 7pm on Sundays, and professionals to do our evangelising for us, and best suits for church, and hymns full of figures of speech that no one uses any longer, and the usual auxiliaries and business meetings and church boards and dignity and propriety.

We are not knocking the old wine skins. They will no doubt hold the new wine for another generation, And we had better keep them in good order until we can find wine skins that can cope with new wine.

Old, mature and safe: The problem is that we have assumed both that the old time gospel and the New Testament Christianity that we want to restore are old and mature and safe, and that our present methods and lifestyle and worship and church patterns can cope with them. We could not make a greater mistake.

The gospel is never old wine. It is new and heady and intoxicating in each new generation. When it is imbibed (undiluted and uncontaminated) it changes
people and homes and churches and communities dramatically. Perhaps even now it is bursting the old bottles.

**Replacements needed:** That the old bottles need replacing is evident. How many outsiders can begin to understand what is said and sung in church? I have asked Christian people to explain what their faith means to them in terms that an outsider can understand. Stumblingly they work through the cliches, all representing great truths, but meaning nothing to an outsider. Put the average intelligent young women who feels some sense of responsibility for the world into some women’s meetings and see if she ‘digs’ the significance of what is going on. Encourage thinking teenagers with the ball of the future at their feet into some of the non-challenging entertainment type programs that characterise some church youth groups and see how long they will last. Ask yourself what has the church really got to say to the average blue collar worker that can get his interest, especially if he has to come to church to hear it said (maybe he doesn’t have a suit!). And how many Christians who are supposed to be on new wine appear to be so terribly sober?

**Not a lot of time:** We do not have a lot of time to find new bottles, but find them we must. Perhaps one new bottle is to free some of our people from ‘church work’ in order to enable them (perhaps with help) to use their homes for dinner parties, home seminars, and outreach groups. It could be that a lot of people who are not yet ready for ‘church’ might be encouraged to take part in friendship making and open discussion in some such sort of ‘halfway house’ environment.

Beach missions seem to attract all sorts of outsiders. When people are referred from them, what can we have in our church life that feels like a beach mission? And should we get in professionals in human relations and communication to help us find the possible shapes of new bottles?

One old wine bottle is our expectation that new people immediately should dispense with certain habits, vices and sins (that we in church do not commit) but be allowed to hang on to the sins of temperament (which we in church do
commit) for the rest of their lives. Is there a new bottle of patience and understanding that lets God deal with these matters at God’s and their grace?

*Taste for new wine:* Perhaps the slowness of some of us to discover new bottles for the new wine of the message and life style of Jesus Christ is that we have lost the taste for new wine ourselves!

GR Stirling *Page 13* ‘New bottles’ *Australian Christian*, 1982/18
President Reagan has declared this year to be The Year of the Bible in the United States. It would be straight out cynical to ask if he has read it, or to suggest that such a move will keep the Bible Belt of the usually Democrat South on his side. We simply suggest to the President that a Year of the Bible in any country could be dangerous if it encouraged people to read it and think about it and take it seriously.

It’s dangerous, Mr Reagan! If Americans really take the Bible seriously they may discover that our Lord is on the side of the peacemakers and the meek and the poor in spirit. They may discover that Paul wrote about a spiritual inner revolution that fills people with love and peace and gentleness and goodness and patience and self control. And if your people notice that the Bible talks about loving the enemy and forgiving and going the second mile, they may become disenchanted with your sabre-rattling brinkmanship.

It’s dangerous, Mr Reagan! The Bible talks about bearing one another’s burdens, feeding the hungry and ministering to the poor. And it has that uncomfortable parable of the judgement in Matthew 25. In the Year of the Bible your people may discover the incongruity of your unemployed begging in the great canyons of your skyscraper banks and your hungry standing in lines for food handouts in your pleasant parks. And they may discover that a better way of stemming the tide of communism in the Third World is to pump money into lifting their standard of living rather than into arms for their dictators.

It’s dangerous, Mr Reagan! The people of the self-styled moral majority who back you may discover that the Bible is not only about personal righteousness, but also about national and social righteousness. They may hear God speaking through Amos and Isaiah and Micah. They may even wade through the less interesting parts of the Pentateuch and discover God’s concern for the stranger and the dispossessed and the economically disadvantaged. They may even discover that the new person in Christ is so
compassion-filled that he is restless to see social and political change that gives a new deal to those who are the broken victims of an acquisitive society.

_It’s dangerous, Mr Reagan!_ But who am I to tell the President of the United States that it is dangerous to take the Bible seriously. The Bible is just as dangerous to the Australian lifestyle with its emphasis on acquisitiveness, self-sufficiency and non-involvement. Perhaps it is because the Bible is so dangerous that most Australians do not go to church any more. Perhaps it is because the Bible is dangerous that many of us who do go to church are selective and choose to concentrate on those parts of the Bible that comfort and sustain us and support our particular theologies and philosophies of life, and ignore the uncomfortable parts.

_It’s dangerous, Mr Reagan!_ But I will not try to take the mote out of the Presidential eye when I have a beam sticking out of my own. I find that the Bible is dangerous to me. I had no trouble about being baptised as a lad. It was quite an adventure in the middle of winter, before they got the idea of heating baptistries. But I do have a lot of trouble with Paul’s reminder that a baptised person is supposed to have died to a lot of things that seem to be as alive in me as a can of worms. I am supposed to have ‘put on Christ’. I gather that means that my life is now lived within the very being of the living Christ. That thrills me. But it does not stop me from trying to run my own life in my way, rather than in his. And Romans 6 on baptism is just a start. The Bible seems to have the habit of piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and of discerning the thoughts and intentions of my heart.

_It’s dangerous, Mr Reagan!_ It’s dangerous both to you and to me and to our nation and to our churches. But as long as we reverence the Bible, and enshrine it and sloganise it, and recognise it in a Year of the Bible, and do not take what it says seriously, it is not likely to do much damage!

GR Stirling _Page 13 ‘It’s dangerous, Mr. Reagan!’ Australian Christian_, 1983/13
Page 13: Come home to the party!

In the days when we had scripture exams, the story of the Prodigal often featured in the curriculum. As one who marked hundreds of papers, I remember that the younger children’s chief impression of the parable was the party, back at the father’s house. And if you read Luke 15 again, it was some party!

Not the story of the prodigal: The parable is not so much the story of a prodigal son as it is a story of a loving father and what he thinks about prodigals, both those who go away and those who stay on the farm. Jesus had been in trouble for mixing with sinners. The word means ‘law-breaker’. These were the people who had neither the time nor the wealth nor the inclination to observe the minutiae of the law as the Scribes and Pharisees did. The older brother represents the latter, and the younger brother, the sinners. Jesus wanted to bring them all home to the Father. The religious thought that they were already there. The sinners were not sure whether they were welcome.

Still the same: It is still the same. We good church people live on the Father’s farm. We work for the Father. We have never strayed morally or doctrinally. We respect the Father and try to do his will. But often we have never really come home to a warm, loving relationship with the Father. We can be there without being at home with him. We can reverence him without loving him. We can have a cerebral relationship with him that never gets near our feelings. And the Father wants us to come home to the party. The sinners and the outsiders think that they are too far gone for the Father to care about them. They have the idea that they have to be clones of the elder brother to be acceptable to the Father. Some elder brothers have been quite off-putting! And some sinners are not sure that they would like it in the Father’s home. Yet the Father has asked us to bring them to the party.

How we get on with the Father: When we come to the end of this life, the thing that will count is not so much whether we stayed on the farm or whether we went to a far country, but rather, how we get on with the Father. Ecclesiastes 12:7 reminds us that the soul returns to God who gave it. For some
that presence will be heaven, and for others it will be hell. It depends on how they get on with God.

A former W.A. Premier used to entertain the ministers of his country electorate at special events in the town. My father was his guest at an orchestral concert. At interval he asked my father how he was enjoying it. My father tried to express to him the heaven of delight that it was. The Premier confessed that it was only politeness that made him sit through it. He was tone deaf. The same music—for one it was heaven; for the other it was hell.

At home with the Father: The important thing for both saints and sinners is that they should both be at home with the Father. The Prodigal had prepared and memorised a neat speech. Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and so it went on. The Father interrupted, Son, you’ve come home!

And what does coming home mean? For those of us who stayed on the farm it means that we have to get over our squeamishness about whom the Father may welcome to the party. Self-righteous judgmentalism is not compatible with life at the party. Pride in our achievements on the farm has to go. And we are not going to be happy at the party until our relationship with the Father gets past our heads and our hands and into our hearts. For those who have slipped out of the Father’s home and have been a long way off, the message is that it is not much good in the far country and that there’s a party on for all who want to come home.

The smell! A father had told the story of the Prodigal to his small son. The lad had difficulty with the nice clean father putting his arms round the rather grubby son. He objected, ‘But Daddy, he was all dirty and smelled like pigs!’ Daddy replied, ‘His father was so pleased to see him that he didn’t notice the smell!’ The Father’s heart and home are open to all of us, no matter what sort of stinkers we are, religious or otherwise!

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Come home to the party’ Australian Christian, 1983/15
When crisis comes

There are many possible causes of crisis. There is death, marriage breakdown, sudden redundancy, sudden illness or the diagnosis of serious disease, moving to a new location or job, the results of natural disaster, or any unexpected disruption of normal circumstances.

**Some cope:** Many people will cope with such events. Most people have acquired built-in coping devices. Some find faith, prayer and Bible reading see them through. Others have learned to ‘screw up their courage’. Others believe that ‘time will heal’. Some get help by talking about it. Some remember that they got through in the past and will no doubt do so again. These people are not in crisis. They perceive themselves as being able to cope.

**Some are in crisis:** People are in crisis when they cannot see themselves as ever being able to cope again. Anxiety and despair are so great that they have no confidence in the future. They give up. They find it almost impossible to function normally or to accept responsibility for themselves or those dependent on them.

**They cannot pray:** The usual coping mechanisms that have got them through difficult times before do not seem to work. This increases their panic and anxiety. They cannot pray. They find no help from the Bible. Faith seems to have disappeared. They cannot ‘tough it out’. They are sure that time will not heal, but only make matters worse. They cannot talk it out because they are sure that, not having had exactly the same experience, no else can know what it is like.

To tell such people to trust in the Lord or to pull themselves together or that everything will be alright, is useless. If they could trust or pull themselves together or see a brighter future they would not be in crisis.

**The supportive church:** People in crisis should be encouraged to get medical help. But at the same time there is a great deal that the church can do to support them through the crisis, with love and care and understanding.
'Just being there' is one of the best forms of therapy. Sometimes 'just being there' means just that.

Often it means doing some of the chores that have been neglected, but in a way that does not imply criticism of the grieving person’s coping. It means encouraging the person in crisis to start again with some of the less heavy responsibilities of life. It means getting a shoulder under those that the person cannot cope with yet. It means patience with expressions of anger, hostility, doubt and despair, all natural parts of the crisis situation. Supportive, caring people can begin to help those in crisis to accept their non-coping feelings as a natural part of their grief. They can quietly reassure them that while they may not be able to see it now, there will eventually be ‘a light at the end of the tunnel’.

*Healing:* Time heals and God heals, even when a person has lost faith. When surrounded by a lot of unobtrusive love given by understanding and accepting people, there is slow movement away from despair. Those in crisis become ready to take a little more responsibility. Gradually they begin to pick up the broken pieces of life and with help, put them together. As they feel the total acceptance of Christian friends who do not judge them or hit them on the head with texts, they come to terms with their guilty feelings and begin to accept the forgiveness of God. Tentatively they may begin to pray again. Provided that their friends do not expect that having glimpsed ‘a light at the end of the tunnel’ they will hurtle towards it, they will move slowly through the darkness, with the light often going out again on the way. Eventually they will come out on the other side, stronger for the experience.

*Crisis prevention:* Of course, crisis prevention is better than crisis cure. I know of no better crisis prevention group than a supportive local church. Often in death, family breakdown or sudden illness I have seen Christian people (and others) move into such situations ‘just to be there’ or with practical help. Where there would have been serious crisis, it was prevented. I have seen despairing people come up again because undergirding support was given by friends who mercifully not knowing what to say, did not say it, but sat there in love, or got busy doing what needed to be done. And the
interesting thing is that most of these caring people whom I have seen quietly at work were not aware that they were involved in crisis prevention.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘When crisis comes’ Australian Christian, 1985/4
The phrase ‘the silenced minority’ was coined by Bill Guy, Adelaide journalist in an article in the *Advertiser*. He told the story of three members of this select group.

There is Dr Andrei Sakharov, nuclear physicist, formerly honoured by the Soviet leaders, but now exiled because he dared to speak up about human rights. There is Dr Beyers Naude, formerly a dyed-in-the-wool supporter of apartheid in South Africa, but who ‘saw the light’. The Government silenced him with a seven year banning order. There was even a ban on people quoting him. The third is Father Leonardo Boff of Brazil, champion of the poor, and willing to go political in their interests. Father Boff is no ‘communist in priest’s clothing’ but a deeply spiritual man who loves his Lord and has heard a call to the people. The Pope has forced him into so called penitential silence.

Here are some of the ‘silenced minority’, silenced by a left wing government, by a right wing government and by the church.

**Nothing new:** Of course there have always been those who try to silence people who have an uncomfortable truth to tell. The Apostles were ordered by the Sanhedrin Council ‘not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus’. Later the same Council ‘stopped their ears’ and stoned Stephen because they did not like his truth.

What is it that makes people want to shut up those who disagree with them? Why do people say to the Editor, ‘What did you print that for?’ And why do preachers sometimes ‘keep off’ controversial subjects upon which a word of the Lord should be pronounced? And why is it that some members of a local congregation remain silent for fear of upsetting a very noisy and outspoken minority?
Arises from insecurity: It seems to me that the desire to silence those who disagree with us arises from insecurity about our own position. To hear another viewpoint is a threat to us. But if we have really done our homework and thought our way through to the position we hold, surely we should not fear hearing another viewpoint. And if in hearing another point of view we see a truth differently, then we have lost nothing, except perhaps our pride.

The word to those of us who would silence others is to search the scriptures, to think dispassionately, to listen to other points of view and to be willing to follow truth wherever it leads, in love.

Frequently I hear prayers in church thanking God that we can live and worship freely in a free country. When we pray this way, we are reminding ourselves that Australian freedom implies freedom for all to express their honest convictions about truth as they see it, even if we do not agree with them. Any direct or indirect attempt to silence anyone in church or nation is a betrayal of that freedom.

A responsibility: However it must be said that we do have a responsibility, not only to say the truth as we believe it, but to say it in a manner that can be handled by those who may not yet be ready for it. Jesus said to his friends, ‘I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now’. The New Testament talks about ‘speaking the truth in love’.

Some earnest proponents of truth have got themselves ‘persecuted’, not because of the truth that they have presented but because of the way that they have presented it. People have switched off from their truth because they first switched off from their manner. It would be possible for someone to feel part of the suffering ‘silenced minority’ when in fact people have stopped hearing him because of his arrogance, offensiveness, intransigence and sometimes downright rudeness. Surely if my truth, and not my pride and pig-headedness, is important to me, I will want to find the best ways of reaching others with it in ways that they can handle. Truth cannot be hammered in.

Churches of Christ and freedom: Historically Churches of Christ have always stood for freedom of expression of truth as each of us understands it. Because we are human our understandings of truth often differ. But we accept one
another’s right to stand where we do because in honesty, at any given time, we can stand in no other place. We listen to one another in love, and thus help one another to bring our understanding of truth closer to the truth that God revealed in Christ. In Churches of Christ there should be no ‘silenced minority’. But in some parts of the church and the world there are ‘silenced minorities’. While praying for them, perhaps we could ask God’s forgiveness for the times when we would have gladly shut up people whose understanding of truth was different from our own.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘The silenced minority’ Australian Christian, 1985/10
Page 13: No creed, but slogans!

Churches of Christ have never had a formal written Creed. We have used the slogan, ‘No creed but Christ’. At other times we have said that ‘the New Testament is our creed’.

**Our position:** When New Zealand Churches of Christ became legally incorporated as a body they were required to lodge with the Parliament in Wellington a statement of their beliefs. So their representative took along a New Testament, confirming that all of their beliefs were contained in it. This did not satisfy the legal people and a document of beliefs (a ‘written creed’) had to be formulated and lodged. This exercise was not difficult because it simply meant writing down what was generally believed amongst New Zealand Churches of Christ (an oral creed) and every one knew what that was.

In Australia there are ‘those things which are most surely believed among us’ and they are our creed. We have frequently referred to ‘our position’.

**Creeds are divisive:** Historically we objected to creeds because they were divisive. Those who framed and held them denied the genuineness of the Christian life and witness of those who could not accept some of their articles. Yet from time to we have let ‘our position’ separate us from those have claimed to be genuine followers of Jesus Christ.

**No problem with slogans:** We have had problems with creeds, but no problem with slogans. We have cheerfully printed them in tracts and handbills and on our letterheads and church notices. Some slogans belong to the beginnings of Churches of Christ; others have been coined and gained acceptance later. They have enabled us to tell the world what we believe, without a formal creed.

Here is a list of some of the more widely used slogans:

*We plead for the unity of all Christians through the restoration of New Testament Christianity.* (This slogan gave us the name ‘Restoration Movement’ and the term ‘Our Plea’.)
No creed but Christ; no name but the divine; no book but the Bible.
Christians only, but not the only Christians.
Where the scriptures speak, we speak; where the scriptures are silent, we are silent.
The Bible—our only sufficient rule of faith and practice.
In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things love.

Quite a later cluster of slogans was:

An inspired Bible or no Bible.
A scriptural baptism or no baptism.
A religion of service or no religion.
A united church or no world conquest.

Slogans look simple: On the surface slogans look simple and straight forward. They slip easily off the tongue. But like most slogans they are not as simple as they look. Slogans are good until people ask us what we mean by them, or want some clarification about them. For example, when we say ‘We are Christians only and not the only Christians’ whom do we class as the other Christians? And when we say ‘In essentials unity’, what are the essentials? When we say ‘No creed but Christ’ do we really mean that we accept as fellow Christians all of those who claim to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour?

‘Where the scriptures are silent’: In the U.S.A. a million and a half members of what they call the church of Christ have separated from the rest of us because of the slogan Where the scriptures speak we speak and where the scriptures are silent we are silent. They believe that the scriptures are silent about church organs and therefore it is a sin to use them. They believe that the scriptures are silent about conferences and that it is a sin to be involved in them. The other interpretation of this slogan is that where the scriptures are silent on any matter we can use our own discretion about it. We are silent about it in the sense of not making an issue out of it. Perhaps the greatest lack in the slogans that we have used is that they do not represent any of the great Biblical doctrines of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, the kingdom of God, of sin and salvation and of justice and righteousness. But of course to have included these would have created a creed.
**Slogans out?** In one way it would probably be better for us to drop the slogans and to discover in the New Testament what God is revealing through Jesus Christ for today’s church, and ways of implementing that. But the slogans have worked their way into our ethos whether we like it or not. So perhaps it would be better to look again at what is relevant in them. From time to time on Page 13 we will do just that.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘No creed, but slogans!’ *Australian Christian*, 1985/12
Page 13: Joses, the encourager

His name was Joses. It was a very common name, and as was the custom, he was distinguished from all of the other Joses’ by a nickname. Nicknames in those days were descriptive. So more often than not Joses was called Barnabas, meaning Son of Encouragement. And whenever he turns up in the New Testament he is encouraging someone.

We do not know when Barnabas became a Christian. Possibly it was on the Day of Pentecost. He had no doubt come from Cyprus for the religious festivals in the 50 days between Passover and Pentecost. Probably he stayed with his sister Mary in whose upper room the Last Supper took place. He may have met Jesus there. Certainly he would have been close to the grieving disciples. His sister was one of the group of women who found the tomb empty. He would have felt the full impact of the appearances of our Lord and the ultimate experience of Pentecost.

Among the encouragers: Barnabas was not amongst the leaders of the Jerusalem church, but he was amongst the encouragers. In the first weeks the infant church was faced with the problem of poverty. Widows were cut off from Temple aid. New converts from abroad had prolonged their stay and run short of money. Barnabas disappeared for a few days to Cyprus where he sold his farm and brought the proceeds back for the very first social service work of the church. Others got the message and soon there was general sharing, from each according to ability and to each according to need.

Barnabas then disappears for five chapters of Acts. When he comes back he is still encouraging people. This time it was Saul of Tarsus. When Saul the former persecutor of the church turned up to a service in Jerusalem with a story about having been converted, he was treated with great caution. That was until Barnabas arrived and put his big arm round Saul and called him brother and encouraged the others to do the same. On that day Barnabas became the father of all of those who operate in church foyers helping newcomers through the agonies of being in a new and unfamiliar situation where they know no one.
Still encouraging people: Two more chapters and Barnabas is on the stage again, still encouraging people. The persecution in Jerusalem had scattered Christians, some as far as Antioch in Syria, were enthusiastic and ‘went everywhere preaching the word’. Soon a strong church had been established. It was a cosmopolitan city and many Greeks were won to Christ and duly baptised, without being made to become Jewish proselytes first. When news of this reached Jerusalem they decided to send a one man committee of inquiry. Fortunately it was Barnabas.

He did not come in like a royal commission, but quietly watched what was happening. ‘When he saw the grace of God working in them he was glad and encouraged them, that with purpose of heart they should cleave to the Lord’.

While he was so far north Barnabas decided to go looking for Saul of Tarsus. The Jews had tried to kill Saul both in Damascus and Jerusalem and he had gone back home to his tent making. Barnabas found him and encouraged him back into the ministry. Soon they were to undertake together the very first missionary journey. Saul, now called Paul, could never comprehend why the Jews rejected the message, and Barnabas was always there to pick up Saul’s shattered spirits.

Valuable in ministry: When the second mission was planned Barnabas was all for taking young John Mark with them. Paul was against it because Mark had dropped out of the first mission. The frontiers of the kingdom were no place for a quitter. So they went their separate ways with Barnabas taking Mark. Barnabas was right. Paul was later to write of Mark, ‘He is valuable to me in the ministry’.

After this Barnabas disappears from the record. First it was Barnabas, then Barnabas and Paul, then Paul and Barnabas, and finally just Paul, because Luke who wrote Acts was in Paul’s missionary party and not that of Barnabas.

Barnabas wrote a beautiful epistle. It never got into the New Testament. The only trace we have of it is in quotations from it in the writings of the early Church Fathers. Barnabas was outshone by Paul his brilliant protege. But had it not been for Barnabas the encourager, there would have been no Paul.
The secret: The secret of Barnabas’ great spirit of encouragement is inferred in Acts 11:24. ‘He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith’. When I come to think of it, the people who have encouraged me most in my various ministries have also been ‘full of the Holy Spirit and faith’.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Joses, the encourager’ Australian Christian, 1985/13
Page 13: The radicalness of Jesus and the worldliness of Christians

The teaching of Jesus is radically different from the generally accepted lifestyle of the world. The problem for Christians is that we can absorb so much worldliness that the radicalness of Jesus makes us uncomfortable. So we find ways of explaining away his difficult teachings.

Jesus and the needy: In the Parable of the Judgement (Matthew 25) Jesus says plainly that whether we go to heaven or to hell depends on how we behave towards the poor, the hungry, the sick, the foreigner and the disadvantaged. The world’s way is that you look after number one, that the disadvantaged are usually thriftless, that the welfare state has produced a lot of bludgers, and that if you do give for the hungry of the world, how do you know that the money is going to get there.

Christians can soon imitate the world’s cliches with religious ones. We can avoid the thrust of the Parable of Judgement by pointing out that elsewhere in the Bible we are saved by faith and not by works of kindness. We can assert that if people are having it rough God will make it up to them in the next life. (He will indeed as Jesus showed in the Dives and Lazarus story. But what happened to Dives?). We can affirm that the church’s job is to save souls and not get mixed up in politicking for the poor with the consequent danger of appearing to be ‘a bit pink’.

Jesus and money: Jesus talked about wealth and money more than any other subject including prayer, baptism, sexual morality and heaven and hell. He asserted that in no way could any one serve both God and money (Matthew 6:24). He said that it is hard for those who have riches to enter the kingdom (Mark 10:23) and that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go into the kingdom (Matthew 19:24).

The world of course will have nothing to do with such radicalism. TV commercials keep on telling us that a man’s life does consist of the abundance
of things that he possesses, and that success in life comes from putting money before morality, family, friends and the quality of life itself. It is hard for a Christian in an affluent society to avoid absorbing something of the general attitude. ‘After all’, we say, ‘Jesus talked about the rich, and we are not rich’. Yet even the poorest Australian pensioner is ‘rolling in wealth’ compared with two thirds of the world’s population.

When the disciples heard Jesus using the eye of a needle and the camel parable they exclaimed, ‘Who then can be saved?’ In verse 26 Jesus says, ‘With men this is impossible but with God all things are possible’. It is said that verse 26 is a ‘gloss’ added by the early church to make it easier for rich people to be members of the church. Whether this is so or not, in our worldliness we try to soften the radicalness of Jesus by making the camel into a cord or the eye of needle into a small gate.

In plain terms Jesus is saying that worldliness is making what we own more important than God, the church, and the way of justice, honesty and responsibility.

*Jesus and peace:* Jesus commended the peacemakers (not just peace-lovers) in Matthew 5:9. In verses 38–47 he called for love of enemies (not just tolerating them). He spoke of forgiving seventy times seven. He warned that the way of aggression would destroy the aggressor (even more true in the nuclear age!) (Matthew 26:52).

For the world Jesus’ way is too simplistic. Sabre-rattling towards the potential enemy is the way to avoid attack. To be just ahead in nuclear stockpiles is too risky. And to spend millions making friends instead of using the money to smash enemies is too Christ-like for our sort of world. Christians, of course, believe in peace, especially inner peace. But can we expect the idealism of Jesus to work in a pagan world? Not until after the second coming will there be peace, say some Christians. Until then we must join forces with the world (many of whose ways and standards we abhor) and make common cause against the potential enemy. After all, didn’t Jesus say, ‘I come not to bring peace but a sword’? And when he said, ‘love your enemies’, did he not mean private enemies and not atheistic communists?
One can understand the world finding worldly ways to ‘protect the peace’ by trusting in force. But Christians are supposed to trust in God—unless of course this modern complex world has become too much for God! The greatest follower of Jesus once wrote, ‘Be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds’.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘The radicalness of Jesus and the worldliness of Christians’

*Australian Christian*, 1985/15
Churches of Christ have used a number of slogans to represent their view of the Bible, such as ‘Where the scriptures speak we speak and where the scriptures are silent we are silent’. They are all ways of affirming our belief in the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. But there are two problems arising from our affirmation of the Bible as the Word of God.

The first problem: The first problem is that of interpretation. We all interpret the Bible, or put our meaning into it. For example, some of us are pacifists because the Bible says, ‘Love your enemies’. Others of us interpret the verse as referring to domestic and not foreign enemies.

There is the apparent difference between Acts 2:38 where baptism is related to salvation and Ephesians 2:8–10 which presents a doctrine of salvation with no reference to baptism. These passages have to be reconciled, which is interpretation. We are doing it all the time.

It is all very well to accept the authority of the Bible as God’s Word, but when we want to obey that authority, what is God’s Word really saying on any particular question?

Alexander Campbell* gave us some clues about how to find out what the Bible is saying.

1. Consider who wrote the passage and when and why.
2. Consider to whom it was written and the circumstances that caused it to be written.
3. Consider the original language in which it was written.
4. Look at the words in context to get their real meaning.
5. ‘Come within understanding distance’ of the passage. That is closeness to the living God as revealed in Christ enables us ‘to get the feel’ of the spirit of God and thus better hear what God is saying through the Word.

The second problem: The second problem is to discover what God is saying to us now in our situation.
The members of one of our country churches were perplexed. The Bible said, ‘After supper they sang a hymn’. They could manage that. But the Bible went on to say, ‘And they went out to the Mount of Olives’. There was no way in which they could imitate that on the flat Victorian plains. So they did the next best thing. Each Sunday morning they ‘went out’ and walked round the chapel and returned to the service.

But we are not meant to be involved in slavishly reproducing the first century scenario. Rather, we to apply the great truths of the New Testament to our current faith and life and witness.

Some have sought to defend certain practices and theories by finding Bible verses to back them up, frequently ignoring other verses and passages that do not fit. In Bundaberg we used to have an ‘open air ring’. Men and women all took part. That was, until an expert from Sydney came and told the women to stand on the footpath and let the men run the ‘ring’. This caused great contention, until someone said, ‘Let us see what scripture says about it’. So we all went to a nearby church and took out our Bibles. I sat there and observed these eager people searching the scriptures, not to discover truth, but to back up their different points of view. Every now and then someone would pop up with a verse, saying, ‘What about this?’ Others would reply with their interpretation of it. After two hours the meeting adjourned with nothing resolved. The man from Sydney went home and the women rejoined the ‘ring’.

God does speak through God’s Word today, but it is easy enough to hear only what it suits us to hear.

God speaks through the Word: God spoke to the fathers by the prophets (Hebrews 1:1) and in the Old Testament we have the broad outline of what they heard him saying, and how the people reacted, either positively or negatively, and the consequences of those reactions. As we read the Old Testament we find great guiding principles being constantly affirmed, principles that apply to the people of God and the world at all times.
'In the latter days God spoke through his Son’. In the Gospels we hear the voice of God in the words and deeds of Jesus. This gives us a clue about what God is doing and saying now and how we are to respond.

In the Acts and Epistles we see how the early church heard God’s Word in Jesus, and translated it into action in their sort of world, which often called for different actions, methods and forms for the different geographical settings. (This is why we cannot find a common ‘blue print’ for church life from the New Testament). Similarly, from the word in the New Testament and its practice in the first century, we discover a living faith, a lifestyle and a dynamic for the contemporary church in the contemporary situation.

* Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) and his father, Thomas Campbell, were instrumental founders within the Restoration Movement in the United States of America. It is in the Restoration Movement that Churches of Christ in Australia has its origin, with strong links to its expression in the United Kingdom.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Where the Bible speaks’ *Australian Christian*, 1985/18
Page 13: Faith, hope and love

‘Now abideth faith, hope and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.’

So Paul climaxes his great hymn to love (1 Corinthians 13). But faith and hope and love are having a hard time in our sophisticated world. While moderns easily believe in their horoscope, in their luck, and in salvation by technology, they are often cynical about the Christian faith. Question a high-school person about the meaning of faith and you are just as likely to get the reply, ‘It is believing what you know very well to be untrue’.

Hope for many people is taking a long shot on the highly improbable and keeping your fingers crossed. In lots of minds the concept of hope is conditioned by their weekly investment in Tatts or the monotonous pulling of the lever of a one-armed-bandit.

At best, love is something reserved for a well-defined circle of people who mean something to us and with whom we feel secure. At worst, love is what you ‘make’ and when you ‘use up’ someone of the other sex for your own passing and irresponsible satisfaction. So what are faith and hope and love?

**Faith:** Faith is believing what looks as though it could very well be true and trying it out to see if it is. This definition is biblical. Hebrews 11:1 says, ‘Faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things unseen’. It is not airy-fairy. There is substance and evidence on which to work.

At Pentecost, bewildered Jews suddenly discovered that the long awaited promises in Joel had been fulfilled and that the Spirit had been given, and that they had missed out. In despair they cried out, ‘What must we do?’ Peter said, in effect, ‘You have seen enough evidence to convince you that the claims we are making about the Spirit are true. Now respond to what you have seen and heard by repentance and baptism, and then if you find that you are filled with the Holy Spirit in your lives, you will know that it is true’. And that is what 3000 of them did; and that is faith.
We said that faith is believing what looks as though it could very well be true and trying it out to see if it is true. This definition is also scientific. The scientific method says, *look at all of the evidence and you will find an hypothesis or meaning emerging*. An hypothesis is a statement of faith which looks as though it might very well be true. Then you experiment and try it out to see if it is true.

So we have the evidence of scripture, the evidence of the Christ event and the evidence of the experience of millions of people who are receiving or have received life from God, all of which point to the truth of the Christian hypothesis. Our Christianity consists of trying it out hourly and daily and finding that it is true. For ultimately, the Christian faith is not only belief in a proposition, but in a person, Jesus Christ, who is our ever loving companion and friend. That is faith.

**Hope:** Hope is expecting the possible because all of the evidence points in this direction. God has not made a hole in the sky for us to see through. God has not appeared on millions of TV sets whether they are turned on or not. God has not altered the chemistry of our brains to make us hopeful. But God has revealed himself though the Son.

Those who have responded to the Son through faith have in their lives all of the evidence needed for hope. They have hope in this life for they know that there is no possibility of their ever meeting a circumstance that they cannot handle, with the power and presence of the living God within them. And for the next life they know that already Christ has conquered death, including their own.

**Love:** Love is opening ourselves up completely to all comers with eyes wide open to the risks, and knowing it will be worth it in the end. Of course this definition of love rests on the fact that God is love and God’s love is all inclusive, with terrible risks involved. No one is left out of God’s love, not even the most despicable person in the world.

God knew in advance the risks of such a love, and the cross reveals something of God’s eternal pain because of what the objects of God’s love keep doing to him. But God went ahead and created the world, in full knowledge of the pain,
but also knowing that in the eternal long run it was worth it. This encourages us as believing and hoping Christians to go on loving, in spite of the risks, because ‘now abideth faith, hope and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love’.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Faith, hope and love’ Australian Christian, 1985/19
Before the disciples were first called ‘Christians’ at Antioch, they were referred to as belonging to the Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9; 23; 22:4; 24:14). Christians have not arrived. They are pilgrims on the Way.

**The beginning:** Often baptism has been assumed to be the end of the journey, with our expectations of the newly baptised too high. Perhaps this is why some have lost the Way again soon after baptism. We have used the phrase ‘born again’ to describe people of great Christian maturity. Yet birth is a beginning, even when we are ‘born of the Spirit’. The Spirit goes on working along the way. Baptism and new birth are the beginning of the way.

As a young minister I used to get upset at the behaviour of some church members, especially the leaders. I judged them by what I believed a Christian ought to be. Thank God they did not judge me the same way! Then I began to think of them as fellow pilgrims on the Way. I discovered that length of time in the church, position of eminence or profession of religious achievement has very little to do with the distance along the Way that people have travelled.

**Fellow pilgrims:** My anger with the people who frustrated my plans and my hurt ego when some of the best people did not come to hear me on Sunday nights and my shock when some members ‘blotted their copy-books’ were all dissipated when I began to see them as pilgrims at different stages on the Way, and each of them along with me, fellow pilgrims needing to help and to encourage each other, rather than being judgmental about each other’s progress. While we all realise that we are not perfect ourselves, we can get quite uptight with fellow church members who do not turn up to our particular pet events, or do not support our particular projects, of whose spirituality is lacking or whose lives leave something to be desired. So we think, ‘What sort of a church is this?’ The answer of course is that it is a group of pilgrims scattered along the Way, some making rapid progress, others going more slowly and some just crawling
and not one of them anywhere near to the self-righteous checkpoints we have set up for them. They do not need checkpoints; they need the companionship of others who are also pilgrims and who know from experience how rough the way can sometimes be.

**Unrealistic expectations:** The Pilgrim-on-the-Way concept helps to free us from unrealistic expectations of people. Ministers may expect constant favourable response from elders to their bright ideas and get upset when there is a lack of enthusiasm for them, or the final ‘thumbs down’. Maybe these elders are not far enough along the Way to have caught the vision yet. Or they may still be picking their way out of the ruins of earlier sure-fire schemes dropped onto them by former eager ministers. Elders may have unrealistic expectations of ministers and wonder why their preaching and visiting have become slack. Could it be that their pilgrim journey has become full of frustrations on a steep lonely climb, so that the once eager runner is now dragging the feet.

It is useful sometimes to get onto a high spot above the Way and to see the pilgrims going by. Some are getting off the track, some are going the wrong way, and some are sitting on the side of the road criticising. Some are ‘running the race set before them’, others are happily walking and there are many cripples, along with some who have slowed down to help them along. There are some who are making a great show of running … on the spot!

There are some who think they have arrived, but have scarcely started. A few think that they are the only ones on the Way. And some of the old families who have ‘borne the heat and burden of the day’ think that they own the Way. And we can say, ‘These are my fellow pilgrims, and God loves and accepts them and ‘there is joy among the angels in heaven’ that at least they are on the Way. So why should I get uptight about any of them?’

**Recommended:** The discovery of the Pilgrims-on-the-Way concept changed my ministry and my life. I recommend it to all of us. If we take it seriously we will be more patient with our fellow wayfarers. We will have the delight of encouraging their pilgrimages, comforting them when hurt, sheltering them when the elements beat upon them and of enjoying them and their company along the Way. And when we ourselves are down and hurt and bleeding and
cold, fellow pilgrims will be there to help us up again. And it is on the Way, amongst fellow pilgrims, that we find Jesus Christ, for he is the Way.

GR Stirling Page 13 ‘Pilgrim’s Progress (with apologies to John Bunyan)’
_Australian Christian_, 1987/21
Gordon Stirling's contribution to Churches of Christ in the twentieth and early twenty-first century remains strikingly contemporary.

Here, for the first time, a taster of Gordon Stirling's Page 13 articles (published on the 13th page of the national Churches of Christ journal, the Australian Christian) are made newly and readily available for Churches of Christ communities and beyond, long after their initial publication in 1979–1987. Stirling's insights remain apt for our time and context.

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