

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 23

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission

Volume 23 • Number 3 • July 1999

beings. We cannot claim to love God in our hearts and at the same time to turn a blind eye to human greed, hatred, sexism, police brutality, racism, adultery, bigotry, child abuse, and all kinds of perversions which are part of human existence. It was to identify with these issues, that in [Matthew 25](#) Christ assumed the role of a prisoner, one of the little ones, a hungry and thirsty person. John N. Jonsson has pointed out that there is no dichotomy between humanization and the glorification of Christ in the gospel. In the New Testament glorification of Christ is not posed as a counter to humanization. The conflict is not between God and humanity but between God and the enemy of humanity, for human liberation. The conflict is between God and ego-centrism.²⁵ African Christian humanization for this reason means

an ongoing commitment to advance from the less human conditions of disease, hatred, crime, war, racism, poverty, oppression, faithlessness, hopelessness, etc., to human conditions of health, love, peaceful coexistence, equity, justice, community fellow feeling, faith, and hope.²⁶

These are not peripheral to the gospel, they are inextricable ingredients kernel to the gospel. It is a progressive humanization of society based on 'being more' rather than having more, thus restoring meaning and wholeness to society and to the entire universe. The best compliment you can give to an African is saying to her or him, *uri munhu* you are human. We are human only because others are human. Salvation makes people more and more human while human sinfulness makes them less and less so. It is as humanized persons that Africans like Abraham look forward to the city which has no foundations, whose builder and maker is God ([Heb. 11:10](#)). A new Pretoria, Harare, Nairobi, Lusaka Abuja Accra coming down out of heaven.

Professor Mugabe Ph.D. is Principal of Baptist Theological Seminary of Zimbabwe, where he previously served as Academic Dean. He has served on the Shona Bible Translation Committee. This paper was presented at the Baptist International Conference on Theological Education, Johannesburg, South Africa in August 1993, and is reprinted by permission of the Baptist World Alliance and the author.

Thinking Theologically About Evangelism

J. Keir Howard

*Reprinted with permission from Stimulus Vol. 3 No 4. November 1995
(with later editing by author)*

²⁵ 25. John N. Jonsson, 'An Elliptical Understanding of Mission and Its Roles' *Missionalia*, 11 (1983), pp. 3–10.

²⁶ 26. George Omake Ehusani, *An Afro-Christian Vision 'OZOVEHE' Toward a More Humanized World*. (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1991), p. 243.

Keywords: Evangelism, Kingdom of God, communication, proclamation, righteousness, culture, pluralism

INTRODUCTION

An examination of the New Testament documents would suggest that the process of passing on the good news of Jesus Christ to others was seen as a central function of the life of the early Christian community. It has to be said, however, that this can hardly be held to be true for most church communities in the western world today. In fact, evangelism has tended to become divorced both from theology and from the main stream of church life, in spite of efforts such as the 'Decade of Evangelism' to refocus attention on the issue and bring it back into the centre of church activity.

Modern writers on evangelism have been almost exclusively concerned with techniques and methodologies, apparently assuming that the nature and content of the message to be proclaimed is self-evident and needs no elucidation. Modern evangelists generally seem to display little interest in theological reflection on their work and have been more concerned with practice than theory. It is equally true, on the other hand, that few theologians in recent years have been greatly concerned with considering the fundamental issues of the content of the Christian message¹. In consequence the theological issues that relate to evangelism have been largely ignored. Furthermore, the fact that many of those who have primary concerns for evangelism also tend to hold to what might be called 'fundamentalist' forms of Christianity, together with the high proportion of evangelistic effort that has come from 'parachurch' organizations, may be seen as additional factors in the process of alienating many churches from the whole area of evangelism.

As a result, the task of evangelism has become largely divorced from the life of the local church community and has come to be seen as the province of certain individuals or groups of individuals, rather than the whole community of faith. Furthermore, there is often the additional element of confusion over definitions so that words such as evangelism or the gospel come to mean different things in different circles.

There is a need to address this imbalance and restore evangelism to its proper place in the life of the church and develop a critical examination of the many complex issues which relate to it, such as the essence of the gospel, the nature of Christian commitment, the meaning and need for repentance and faith and the function and place of baptism. Issues such as the nature of the kingdom of God, as well as a consideration of the place of evangelism in a modern pluralist society and the problems of cross-cultural communication also require thought and attention. A consideration of evangelism will also redirect attention to the neglected area of Christian apologetics as well as the relationship between evangelism, teaching, nurture and other areas of pastoral activity which have tended to become fragmented, but which should probably be seen as facets of the church's single task of making disciples for Christ.

The fundamental locus of the New Testament is the conviction that God has acted decisively in Christ to inaugurate his 'kingdom', that is, his rule and sovereign authority in human lives and human affairs. This was construed as being 'good news' for all people. Initially, in the ministry of Jesus, following on from John the Baptist, and also in the early

¹ 1. To say that no theological writers have discussed the theology of evangelism would be less than fair (e.g., R.B. Kuiper, *God Centred Evangelism*. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966) (= 1961) and W. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), but the great majority of works are about the 'doing' rather than the theology.

stages of the apostolic mission, it was 'good news' specifically for the Jewish community, seen as the people of God now being called back to him in repentance and commitment. The work of Jesus was primarily a mission to Israel, completing the preliminary call to repentance of John the Baptist. It was thus firmly rooted in the history of Israel and the prophetic tradition. The message of Jesus was set firmly in the context of the earlier prophetic ministries, pointing to the crisis which his coming had inaugurated and the stark choice between national repentance and national ruin.

The early disciples saw themselves as the true and faithful remnant of Israel who had responded to this call to renewal, a reality symbolised in the call of the Twelve. The initial work of passing on the 'good news' was thus directed to Jerusalem and to Jewish listeners. Even at a much later stage, some thirty or more years after the Easter event, Paul could still remark that the message of the gospel was to 'the Jew first' ([Rom. 1:16](#), [2:9](#), [10](#)) and the content of the message continued to be rooted in Israel's history as the people of promise. The inauguration of God's rule thus centred in the restitution and renewal of Israel and was seen in terms of the fulfilment of the prophetic promises, a matter which continues to be affirmed in the Acts of the Apostles, written another ten or fifteen years on from Paul's writings. The prophetic promises, however, also pointed to the fact that God's purposes were for universal blessing and that the nations would flock to Israel to witness and experience the salvation of God, particularly explicit in Deutero-Isaiah, but reflected elsewhere in the later prophetic writings. The Acts bears witness to the initial, very tentative attempts to include gentiles, but the Pauline mission saw its main thrust as being to the wider gentile communities in order to incorporate them into the people of God and bring them under the rule of God in Christ. In Paul's metaphor, they were the wild olive branches grafted into the original stock of the true olive tree of Israel ([Rom. 11:17-24](#)).

It is this task of bringing people to commitment and obedience to the will and rule of God in Jesus Christ that essentially constitutes evangelism. It is thus that activity of the church which calls people to repentance and the obedience of faith that they may become disciples of Christ, experience the forgiveness of sins, the new life in the Spirit of God and be incorporated by baptism into the community of faith. The boundaries between what is termed evangelism, nurture, teaching and related activities are thus somewhat artificial as they are all activities which merge into the single task of bringing people into lives of discipleship, obedience and service. Certainly these areas of ministry overlap in the New Testament documents which provide the starting point as well as the standard for any thinking about evangelism. At the same time, it also has to be recognised that while the New Testament can provide standards and principles, there are remarkably few close parallels between the biblical situation and the modern mission of the church. Nonetheless, the New Testament provides an indispensable guide for the understanding of those key words and concepts that lie behind all forms of evangelistic activity.

THE NEW TESTAMENT VOCABULARY OF EVANGELISM

The primary word relating to the Christian message is 'good news' or 'gospel' (*euangelion*), a word that occurs on almost eighty occasions in the New Testament, predominantly in the Pauline correspondence. Paul also uses the cognate verb, 'to proclaim good news' (*euangelizō*, *euangelizomai*) quite extensively. In the gospels, it is Mark that favours the noun, whereas Luke/Acts favours the verb. What is particularly striking is the total absence of this group of words from the Johannine writings—was this perhaps a reflection of the inward looking nature of this community?

The secular use of this word group related to the good news of victory and especially the good news of the accession of the emperor. This concept seems to lie behind the New Testament usage and the good news of Jesus Christ is the announcement of his victory over sin and death and his rights to universal lordship. The original picture probably derives from those passages such as [Isa. 40:9, 10](#) and [52:7](#) which, particularly in the LXX, are exact parallels of the New Testament message—the proclamation of God’s victory and his sovereignty exerted for the vindication and salvation of his people. The challenge of this announcement was thus the challenge to a choice of commitment and allegiance. Such a commitment required a redirection of life and hence there is a constant emphasis on repentance and the obedience of faith as the essential, indeed, only proper, response to the message. It is not possible to live under the lordship of Christ while continuing to claim human autonomy—an emphasis which seems sadly lacking in the church’s message today.

A variety of other words is used to express the essentially proclamatory nature of the evangelistic task, but two words are of major importance. Firstly there is the verb ‘to proclaim’ or ‘announce’ and its related nouns (*kruss* and its cognates). Originally this word group related to the formal activities of an official herald and his public announcements, especially in making known the arrival of a king. It always carries the sense of public proclamation and it came to be the favoured word group to describe Christian preaching. It was the verb used of John the Baptist and Jesus and it was therefore a relatively natural transition from this situation to its use to describe the Christian activity of proclaiming the kingly authority of God revealed in Jesus.

The second verb to note is ‘to bear witness’ (*martyre*). The whole concept of witnessing is central to New Testament thinking about the communication of the good news as it centres on the testimony of the community to the truth it has heard and seen and come to know in experience, particularly in relation to the historical events of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the ongoing activity of the risen Christ in the community through his abiding Spirit.

Numerous other words are also widely used in relation to the early communication of the gospel, such as ‘persuade’, ‘argue’, ‘prove’ and ‘explain’. These words provide some evidence for the broad scope of the early proclamation and tend to suggest that preaching was not conducted ‘six feet above contradiction’, to use John Robinson’s famous expression, but was frequently in a setting of open discussion and argument. At the heart of all these words, however, lies the single basic concept of communication which, virtually by definition, lies at the heart of any genuine evangelism. No message can be passed on without understanding and this necessitates an agreed conceptual framework with common ideas. The early proclaimers of the gospel, in general, were able to communicate because they were speaking to people who shared a largely unified culture and a set of common presuppositions and beliefs. This was especially the case with the Jewish community and the gentile proselytes and ‘God-fearers’ who had close associations with the synagogue and who together made up the majority of those who accepted the Christian message in the period up to the mid-60s and even later.

The Acts, however, provides an example of an almost total lack of communication when Paul was at Athens. He proclaimed a message which seemed to be but another example of the strange eastern religions which were flooding the empire and Paul himself was probably viewed as just another pedlar of religious wares, this time of the god Jesus and his consort ‘Anastasis’ ([Acts 17:18](#)). The result was that his proclamation was almost completely misunderstood by those who did not share the religious heritage on which the essential concepts of the gospel were based. In spite of the attempts to find common ground, as Luke records the event, the episode at the Areopagus has very little effect and

it was probably because of this that Paul was in a depressed and anxious condition on his arrival at Corinth ([1 Cor 2:1-5](#)). His first real attempt to pass the message to educated pagans had met with incredulity, ridicule and indifference². The simple fact was that, unlike his successful mission in Corinth, a very pagan city indeed, Paul had failed to take the time to prepare the ground. He stayed at least eighteen months in Corinth according to Acts, and may well have been there longer in view of the way that Acts consistently compresses events and time scales. The result was a thriving and active church community, which, it should be noted, still seemed consistently to misunderstand much of the content of the gospel by attempting to 'contextualise' it into accordance with pagan norms of behaviour.

There seems to be an underlying lesson in this experience. It cannot be assumed in the neo-paganism of the modern western world that people will necessarily understand the underlying concepts of the gospel and some form of teaching is required to ensure that there is some commonality of language and ideas. The Christian message has its own technical language without which it cannot be passed on—the problem is that the modern world no longer understands that form of technical language and is rarely prepared to make the effort to learn it. Teaching is thus an essential and integral component of the evangelistic task and cannot be divorced from it. The other side of the coin, however, is the recognition that the primary focus of the early mission was to those who already saw themselves in some way as the people of God, that is the Jewish community and the gentiles who had come to be associated with it. As noted earlier, more than thirty years following the events of the first Easter, Paul could still emphasise that the gospel was to the Jew first.

The question thus arises as to what extent the primary emphasis of evangelism should be directed to those who have some association with the life of the church and who have a passing acquaintance with its forms and language—those, for example, who see the local parish church as 'theirs', who wish to use it for baptisms, weddings and funerals, but who lack any genuine commitment and are perhaps not even seen at Easter or Christmas. It is suggested that the primary work of evangelism might be better directed towards gaining commitment from such 'fringe members', rather than an initial concentration on the unchurched, 'pagan' outsider. The issue is where best to use the limited resource that the church has available and it is a matter which deserves careful thought.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CONTENT OF EVANGELISM

It was suggested earlier that evangelism is that set of activities which is concerned to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to people in order to obtain a response of faith and commitment. In a very real sense this embraces every activity of the church, for the life of the church should be a presentation of the realities of the gospel. The heart of the church's worship in the Eucharist is evangelistic by definition as it 'proclaims the Lord's death' ([1 Cor. 11:26](#)) and Sunday by Sunday as the words of institution are recited, so the reality of the cross is brought into the present experience of the people of God in all its saving power. Further, the community is to live by the values of the gospel and every proclamation of the word of God cannot help but be evangelistic since it will always point to Christ through whom and in whom God is reconciling the world to himself. Nonetheless, certain activities may be considered to be more specifically related to the church's mission

² 2. Not all would share this rather pessimistic view of the results of Paul's visit to Athens. However, even Luke with his hero-worship of Paul cannot do very much with his sources—the fact of the matter was that only a handful became 'believers' and Luke does not even suggest that an active church was left behind.

to the world and it is thus of particular importance to determine what actually constitutes the core essentials of the gospel which are non-negotiable, and what things are peripheral to it. It is in this area that there has been frequent difference of opinion.

The preaching of Jesus himself was centred in the kingdom of God, his kingly rule and authority. It was, as has been noted already, a proclamation to the Jewish people, firmly in the prophetic tradition, demanding repentance and offering God's forgiveness as the basis of a new relationship with him as his people. The proclamation of both John the Baptist and Jesus was to the people of God, calling them into a proper relationship with him. The post-Easter community proclaimed essentially the same message, but with a significant difference in that it was proclaimed in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus which it saw as the climactic event which had ushered in the 'last days'. Thus, alongside the forgiveness of sins, it also proclaimed the gift of the Holy Spirit as the ongoing presence of the risen Christ with his people and the evidence that the Messianic age had dawned.

The gentile mission introduced a change of emphasis, but did not change the essential nature of the message. Concepts such as the 'kingdom of God', which were part of Jewish eschatological thinking, were not part of the common coinage of the Graeco-Roman world and tended to be dropped in favour of other concepts which expressed similar ideas. Paul, in particular, used the idea of God's righteousness (*dikaïosyn*) in the sense of what God requires. This was an essential element of Jewish prophetic religion, but he shifted the boundaries to make it an all embracing concept and underlined the basic principle that the necessity of fulfilling God's requirements was an essential human need. The human predicament lay in the fact that people failed to meet God's requirements in conduct and relationships and were alienated from God and from each other. The shift in terminology, however, does not mark a shift in the essence of the message, for righteousness lies at the heart of any understanding of the rule and sovereignty of God. The primary characteristic of God's activity is to establish righteousness, that is to set things right. This emphasis is reflected in Luke's account of the beginning of the ministry of Jesus as set out in [Luke 4:17-22](#), using the quotation from [Isa. 61:1-3](#). The programme for the ministry was to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, deliverance for the oppressed and the announcement of the eschatological day of judgment which had arrived in his own person. The response that people made to Jesus was the effecting of the verdict of the final judgment, but a verdict made in the here and now. The coming of Jesus was seen as the beginning of the Messianic age when things were to be set right and what God required would be accomplished.

What had been essentially a limited and 'political' agenda for the people of God, was transformed by Paul who built on this foundation but extended it into a universal message of good news for all people. All nations might become part of the 'chosen race' as they were 'set right' by the work of Christ through whom people were given a new status and restored to a right relation with God, being reconciled and forgiven. On the basis of an obedient response, life was transformed and righteousness became the attribute of the Christian life, lived under the sovereignty of God and in accordance with his law. Paul's emphasis on 'justification' or 'setting right' may be seen as closely parallel to the original Palestinian gospel which had been centred in the rule of God.

The rule of God, however, is revealed in Jesus and the message of the rule of God, the message of the gospel, is centred in Christ—indeed, it is Christ. It is worth quoting T.F. Torrance at length in this regard. He wrote,

Jesus Christ is himself the content of God's unique self-revelation to mankind. It is on the ground of what God has actually revealed of his own nature in him as his only begotten Son that everything else to be known of God and of his relation to the world and human

beings is to be understood. It is only when we know God the Father in and through his Son who belongs to his own being as God that we may know him in any true and accurate way ... In order to know him in that way, however, we must enter into an intimate and saving relationship with him in Jesus Christ his incarnate Son, for it is only through reconciliation to God by the blood of Christ that we may draw near to him and have access to him. The Lord Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Son of God, is the Way, the Truth and the Life, apart from whom no one has access to the Father.³

The gospel is thus set out in the form of propositional truth about Jesus as the mediator of the divine forgiveness through his life, death and resurrection. But it is also about personal truth and existential encounter for, being centred in Christ, it reveals God as himself and underlines the nature of the proper human response to this personal revelation in Jesus Christ and allows the establishment of genuine relationships. Such relationships are not built from the ground up, but are brought about only through the operation of the Holy Spirit who actualises in human experience the historic reality of the atoning life, death and resurrection of Christ. The subjective appropriation of the gospel thus rests solely on the continuing objective action of God and is not merely experience.

The essential parameters of the gospel are unchanging for they rest in God. Any attempt to 'contextualise' the good news must always bear this in mind and not abandon the bits that do not seem to fit. The New Testament provides evidence of shifts in emphasis and reinterpretation of the original gospel proclamation so that it might meet the needs, in particular, of the non-Jewish communities whose minds were not conditioned by Jewish apocalyptic, eschatological thought forms. Undoubtedly the same task has to be performed today so that the good news is reinterpreted in a way which continues to meet universal human need. This requires to be without losing the core essentials of the gospel on the one hand, yet, on the other, using terms which allow for a genuine communication of the truth. There are real dangers here which are not always appreciated. Bruce Nicholls has remarked, 'Throughout the history of the church accommodation to cultural accretions and provincialism have destroyed the life of many churches. The local or national church must never become captive to its own culture'⁴. It might be added that this is exactly what seems to be happening in New Zealand where 'cultural credibility' for the gospel is little more than conformity to the trends of the moment. Any statement of the gospel must be true to the gospel's first intentions. Furthermore, it also has to be recognised that there is no single sociological situation to which any one communication may be 'relevant'—what may be relevant in one situation may be totally irrelevant in another⁵.

THE COMMUNICATION OF THE GOOD NEWS

The consistent New Testament emphasis is on verbal communication. The vocabulary that was noted earlier centres on words that describe intent, for the function of verbal communication is not merely to pass on information, but to initiate a response. Language is not neutral, its purpose is both to affect and to change. In relation to the gospel, the

³ 3. T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p. 3.

⁴ 4. B.J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979), p. 66.

⁵ 5. The percipient comments of Alistair McGrath on 'liberalism' are worth noting in this context (*The Renewal of Anglicanism* London: SPCK, 1993, pp. 111–125). It would be this writer's conviction that to some extent they are equally applicable to some forms of 'evangelicalism'.

purpose of communication is to affect the hearer in such a way as to determine the response. Communicating the gospel is about persuasion and attempting to induce a positive response to its claims. Paul could say that, 'knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others' ([2 Cor. 5:11](#) and note the consistent use of 'persuade' in Acts). Hence there must be understanding on the part of the hearer if it is to be effective in influencing behaviour and if responses are not to be totally subjective and meaningless. The gospel cannot be proclaimed in a vacuum. At the same time there needs to be consistency in the message being communicated, otherwise there will be confusion. This is undoubtedly a major issue to be addressed, although the likelihood of universal consensus seems rather remote. This inevitably undermines the mission of the church. The communication of the gospel should be undertaken with authority, but this is difficult to achieve when there is a lack of consistency or even fundamental disagreements on the nature of the message that is to be communicated.

Where there is a lack of understanding of the nature of the propositions on which the gospel is based, there will always be a tendency for the message to degenerate into nothing more than a subjective experience based on what the hearer chooses to consider 'is true for me'. The problem with such a subjective approach is that it produces 'believers' who have no foundation or content to their faith. It is ultimately little different from believing in fairies. This tendency may be seen at both the 'evangelical' and 'liberal' extremes of the Christian spectrum. On the other hand an over-emphasis on propositional truth at the expense of a genuine 'existential encounter' with the living God tends to lead to people becoming no more than 'assenters', rather than 'believers' having a life commitment. It could be argued that the production of 'assenters' is one of the primary problems in the Church today.

Communication of the gospel, however, is not complete unless the message is reinforced behaviourally. If the good news is about righteousness, then axiomatically, those who proclaim the message should demonstrate this righteousness in their lives, in relationships and in behaviour, both in terms of the community as well as individuals. It is for this reason that ethical principles are given such a high profile, both in the gospels and epistles. The lives of the 'righteous', living under the sovereignty of God, are to display a radical dissonance in respect to the standards of behaviour and relationships in the society about them. The ethical norms of the kingdom of God are not those of the world, yet all too often the church seems to take its agenda from the world rather than pronouncing its inherent difference. It may be argued with some reason that part of the weakness of the church's evangelistic proclamation derives from its too great conformity to the patterns of life around it, rather than maintaining patterns of life that radically (and unpopularly) differ from those of secular society. To live under the rule of God requires conformity to the will of God which is summed up in the two great commandments, 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... You shall love your neighbour as yourself' ([Mt. 22:37-39](#)).

EVANGELISM AND A PLURALIST SOCIETY

Pluralist societies are essentially syncretistic. The essential philosophy is that no one religion has a monopoly of the truth and that all are fundamentally of equal value in gaining insights into reality and as ways to God. Some would argue that as there are many ways to God and all formulations of religious concepts are no more than approximations to the truth, there is in consequence a need to harmonise all religious experience and create a single human religion. Radical feminist theologians have been very much to the

fore in pursuing this road in recent years⁶. Such concepts, however, are not new and are no different in essence from the syncretistic ideas which flourished in Graeco-Roman society as well as the Roman strategy to unite all religions (and hence all peoples) under the unified worship of the emperor.

The Christian church, however, is founded upon the conviction that in Jesus of Nazareth it has received the ultimate and final revelation of God, the proclamation of which is a matter of life and death for all humanity. The gospel is not a proclamation about religious conviction or spiritual experience, it is the proclamation of the news that in the particular and historic man Jesus, the rule of God has come and people must respond in one way or another to its critical and absolute demands. The credal affirmations of the church are of necessity exclusive in nature and they bear witness to the central biblical conviction summed up in the *Shema* that faith in the one true God rules out the possibility of acknowledging any other gods. Furthermore, by definition the Christian faith and the Christian confession rule out any alternative approach to God or any alternative statement of truth other than that which is rooted and grounded in Christ. 'No one can know God except God, and so no one can know God except through God—that is, only through sharing in some way in the knowledge which God has of himself. This is what has been made possible for us through the incarnation of God's Son and his mediation to us of the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, through whom we may enter into communion with God and learn to know him through himself in accordance with his own eternal nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit'⁷.

Nothing, therefore, can displace the concrete historical figure of Jesus Christ from the central place. The ideology of pluralism is to be rejected outright. As Lesslie Newbigin has put it, 'we must reject the invitation to live in a society where everything is subjective and relative, a society which has abandoned the belief that truth can be known and has settled for a purely subjective view of truth —“truth for you” but not truth for all'⁸. There can be no excuse for arrogance or discourtesy, but at the same time the church does not apologise for its claims about the uniqueness of Jesus and the fullness of God's revelation in him. In the syncretistic and pluralist world of the Roman empire, the apostles declared that there is one God and one Lord, Jesus Christ, who is the sole mediator and saviour. In doing so they used the thought forms of the cultures in which they operated, but they did not change the nature of the truth they proclaimed. The church needs to recapture that confidence and reflect on its implications, for it is the basis of a theology of evangelism. Without it, the church will become lost in a maze of socio-cultural secularisation and relativism in which there are no signposts to guide the lost for the meaning of biblical truth will have been changed in its substance and the revelation of God in the gospel will have been transmuted into something other than it is.

The Rev Dr J. Keir Howard is both an Anglican priest and specialist consultant physician. He undertook his initial studies in Edinburgh and London and later completed doctorates

⁶ 6. See further on this subject, Elizabeth Achtemeier, 'Exchanging God for "no Gods": discussion of female language for God' in A.F. Kimel (ed), *Speaking the Christian God*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 1–16.

⁷ 7. T.F. Torrance, 'The Christian apprehension of God the Father' in A.F. Kimel (ed), *Speaking the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 120.

⁸ 8. L. Newbigin *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids/Geneva: Eerdmans/ World Council of Churches, 1989), p. 240.

in both medicine and theology. He lives with his family in Lower Hutt, New Zealand where he is assistant priest at St Alban's Church, Eastbourne.

The Lord's Firestorms: God the Holy Trinity and the Experience of Religious Revival in Australia

Stuart Piggin

Reprinted with permission

Keywords: Holy Trinity, revival, prayerfulness, church, doctrine, experience, Bible

I. WHY FOCUS ON THE HOLY TRINITY?

Let me explain why I want to focus on the Holy Trinity in this address on Australia's revival experience. In 1995 I gave a course on revival at Regent College, Vancouver. It was at the height of excitement caused by the Toronto Blessing and the completely independent American college revivals. At the end of the course I asked the students to discern the times. Tell me, I said, what will be the characteristics of the next great awakening which the Lord will send to bless his church? It would be characterized, some thought, by a revived confidence in God's Word; an interesting view—and timely—given the undermining of that confidence due to postmodernism. Others suggested that the next great awakening would see Christians more involved with the needy in their communities, while the underprivileged themselves, the poor and the hungry, the underclass and the underdogs, the marginalized and the relegated, the unnoticed, the unseen, and the ignored, would be empowered to help themselves. That, too, is interesting considering the current moves towards reconciliation in South Africa and in Australia which I am sure have much to do with the Spirit of God. Others thought that the next great awakening would be characterized by a revived concentration by the church on the centrality of Christ and his gospel. Revival will be seen again, as it was in the days of Wesley, Whitefield and Edwards, as the fullest flowering of the gospel plant, as the most abundant harvest of the doctrines of grace, as the most gracious manifestation of biblical Christianity. This revival would restore to the church vital orthodoxy, healing the current division between rational orthodoxy and irrational vitality. This too is interesting given the tragic stand-off between the Reformed and the Charismatic branches of Christianity.

But the most persistent feeling among my Regent students was that the next great revival would awaken Christians to the glory of the Holy Trinity. While Christ and salvation would be seen as central, the place of the work of Christ within the Father's cosmic purpose for the recreation of the universe and the Spirit's ministry to broken-hearted individuals would become luminous. This I found the most intriguing of the four suggestions about the characteristics of the next great awakening. I believe that it is an awakening which will not pass Australia by. I say this for two reasons. Some of the most