

CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE PRAISE JUNKIE • THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE • THE GOD I DON'T BELIEVE IN • A DIVINE MADNESS • **CLEAR** • FREAK SHOW • HOW WE WENT GAY • THIS IS NOT A REAL CHURCH • THE SECRET OF TRAINING • THINKING ABOUT EMOTIONS • **COMPELLING** • GETTING THE POINT: A CROSS • THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT • SOCIAL ACTION AND THE LAST DAY • CAN SOMEONE TELL ME WHO THE REAL MEN ARE? • FOUR WAYS TO GOD • GOD'S AGENDA • THE TSUNAMI AND THE URGE TO EXPLAIN • THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT: SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS • THE VERY PRACTICAL DOCTRINE OF PREDESTINATION • WHY DO WE WORSHIP AS WE DO? • HOW TO BE A SMALL GROUP MEMBER • A MINISTRY MANIFESTO • BEING BIBLICAL OR DOING WHAT WORKS: DO WE HAVE TO CHOOSE? • PERSONAL MINISTRY THAT COUNTS: HOW TO LOVE AND SERVE EACH OTHER • THE TRUTH THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME • THE RAGS OF TIME • TIME TO BE HATED? • HEROES • RELATIONSHIPS MAN • THE TRUTH THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME • REGULATIVE OR NORMATIVE • HAS THE PERSONAL EVANGELISM SHIP SAILED? • CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE PRAISE JUNKIE • **PROVOCATIVE** • THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE • THE GOD I DON'T BELIEVE IN • A DIVINE MADNESS • FREAK SHOW • HOW WE WENT GAY • THIS IS NOT A REAL CHURCH • THE SECRET OF TRAINING • THINKING ABOUT EMOTIONS • GETTING THE POINT: A CROSS • THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT • SOCIAL ACTION AND THE LAST DAY • CAN SOMEONE TELL ME WHO THE REAL MEN ARE? • FOUR WAYS TO GOD • GOD'S AGENDA •

# THE TONY PAYNE COLLECTION

**THE BEST ARTICLES  
FROM THREE DECADES OF  
CHRISTIAN WRITING**

Tony Payne is a thoughtful, passionate and relentlessly clear writer who, for many years, has stimulated me and forced me to think. Occasionally outrageous, often provocative, but always unshakeably concerned to think through what the Bible actually teaches, his writing has always focused on how to keep the gospel front and centre in the life of the church. Whether I have agreed with Tony or not, both in print and face to face, he has been a great encouragement to live wholeheartedly for the Lord Jesus Christ in a world that desperately needs to know him.

— Gary Millar, Principal, Queensland Theological College



Tony is an evangelical in the truest sense. He has ‘lost’ his life for Jesus and his gospel. And what will be evident in his panoply of insightful articles is a courageous submission to the supreme authority of Scripture that is gospel saturated and God glorifying. Read these articles with your Bible open and see.

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— Phillip Jensen, Two Ways Ministries, Sydney



The evangelical world owes much to Tony Payne for his writing. Everything he writes is thoroughly biblical and also fresh, radical and thought-provoking.

— Vaughan Roberts, St Ebbe’s Church, Oxford

*The Tony Payne Collection*

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# Foreword

## If Payne persists...

In late 1987 I had a phone call out of the blue from Phillip Jensen. My first thought was that someone had died and for some odd reason Phillip had been given the job of breaking the bad news to me. Thankfully, that wasn't the explanation for the call. The actual reason was more life-changing than that: he offered me a job.

Phillip asked me to take over from Tony Payne in the role of Church Administrator for St Matthias Church. He explained that Tony was going to be moving into a new role—as editor of a new church publishing venture.

So in early 1988, I joined Tony in the church office as he kicked off 'St Matthias Press and Tapes' and its flagship journal, *The Briefing*. And for the next 27 years—until the difficult decision was made to close down *The Briefing* at the end of 2014—Tony and I conspired and laboured together to regularly send out *The Briefing* to thousands of people in Australia and the UK.

In that nearly three decades of work, Tony authored a prodigious number of articles, and improved the quality of countless more written by others. More than that, he shaped the editorial direction and purpose of *The Briefing*, initially under the supervision of Phillip Jensen, but within a year or two, largely on his own.

Under God, *The Briefing* had a major influence on the shape of Australian and British evangelicalism during this period. In no small part, this was due to Tony's theological acuity, his giftedness as a communicator with the written word, and his faithful persistence in the ministry God had given him.

However, it has slowly dawned on me that some of the current Matthias Media staff team *weren't even born* in 1988. And although

many of their Christian peers might be vaguely aware that a magazine called *The Briefing* once existed, the proportion of people who have read and benefited from that content is diminishing. (And those of us who *have* read it in the past are now getting to the age where we are struggling to recall it!)

That's why we've decided to give a lot of that three decades' worth of material a bit of a resurrection—new life in a new format: a book that gathers together some of the best 'Payneful' thoughts and offers them up for the benefit of a new generation.

At the beginning of each chapter we show the publication date of the article reproduced. Occasionally that date provides important context for the substance of the article (such as chapter 15, which was published soon after the terrible events of 9/11). But the date also helps explain a few somewhat dated cultural references, which we haven't tried to expunge from the book, because it seems to us to add an interesting extra dimension to it. For a handful of articles, we need a little more than the date to provide context, so we have added a short introduction.

It has been a privilege to work with Tony for the last three decades. He has taught me a great deal through his writing, as well as through the wisdom he has shared with me personally in thousands of meetings and casual conversations together as friends and colleagues. But even more importantly, over many years he has taught me by his godly example of a Christian life well-lived in service of his Lord and Saviour. I, for one, am glad that the Payne persisted.

*Ian Carmichael*

Publications Director, Matthias Media

August 2017

## Author's note

When the idea of this collection was first raised, my emotions were decidedly mixed. I felt a fair dollop of surprise as I looked over the long list of articles to choose from—it seems that all those years working on *The Briefing* weren't nearly as unproductive as they felt at the time. There was also a pleasant spoonful of nostalgia at greeting some old friends, many of which I could hardly even remember writing. But anxiety, running through the mix was a disturbing strand of anxiety.

I found myself feeling worried about what a collection like this would reveal. Would the uninhibited writings of my 25-year-old self embarrass me now with their theological naivety and youthful confidence? Would I still even agree with myself, and would anyone else? Wouldn't the whole thing just look a bit pretentious? And when taken all together, what would these articles say about my interests and priorities in life? Writing is always an act of self-exposure, but this felt uncomfortably like baring all.

With these thoughts and emotions burbling away, it so happened that I was asked to speak at a writing seminar about what I had learned from a life in writing and editing. And at that seminar, as I rambled on about finding your voice, and avoiding clichés, and using active verbs, and having a compelling opening paragraph, I strayed from my notes and blurted out, without at all meaning to, a perfect summary of what it means to write as a Christian.

I was talking about the importance of clarity and transparency; about how showy or amateur writers put themselves in the way of the reader all the time, and draw attention to themselves by overly complex sentences, or obscure expressions, or dazzling metaphors. Good writers do just the opposite. They generate prose

that is clear and transparent. They manage to get out of the way, and let whatever truth they have to convey reach their readers unhindered.

There's something profoundly Christian about this—that there is a truth about reality to be told, that it can be told in language, and that the highest and best way to do this is to crucify yourself and your pretensions for the sake of your reader. We don't want people to finish reading and comment on what a fine piece of writing it was, but to be gripped and moved by the profoundly true thing that by God's grace we have managed to say. In this sense, a good writer is very like Charles Simeon's vision of a good preacher: someone who humbles the sinner, exalts the Saviour, and promotes holiness.

And so it was that I saw my anxieties for what they were—the fleshly feelings of a secretly proud middle-aged man—and decided that I should get out of the way and allow whatever truth God is kind enough to reveal to speak for itself.

And after thanking Ian Carmichael and the team at Matthias Media for their patience and skill, and the many *Briefing* readers who made these pieces possible by their support and encouragement, that is what I will now do.

TP

August 2017

**PART 1:  
THE TRUTH AND WHY  
IT MATTERS**

# 1

## The truth is out there

7 November 1995

**T**here's nothing I enjoy more than receiving *Briefing* subscription renewal forms. After I have phoned my wife to tell her that we can now afford a bacon bone to add to our staple diet of cabbage broth, and shared the good news with the rest of the staff that their jobs are safe for another week, I turn the form over to see if there are any interesting comments on the back, which very often there are.

Recently, there was a rather disturbing comment from someone who, it pains me to say, was not renewing. The comment was: "The trouble with you guys is that you only ever publish one viewpoint".

My initial reaction was to consign the offending form to the circular filing cabinet and mutter, "Well that's one viewpoint we certainly won't be publishing", but after I'd retrieved it and smoothed the wrinkles out, I began to think more carefully. Was this a fair criticism? Do we owe it to our readers to be more balanced and diverse in the range of opinions that we publish?

At one level, *The Briefing* is in the enviable position of being a private publication with very few debts to pay. We aren't an official denominational paper, so we aren't obliged to try to keep everyone happy by at least appearing to represent a range of views. Nor are we a public organization with a charter specifying a certain degree of diversity. There are no vested interests we have to protect. In one sense, we can publish pretty much what we like.

This raises the question: if we are under no legal or official obligation to publish a diverse range of views, are we under a *Christian* obligation to do so? Is balance and diversity a characteristic of

godly Christian publishing?

This is a more serious question, and the way we answer it depends to a large extent on our view of ‘truth’. One approach that has been very influential in recent Western thought is the idea that truth is always to be found in the collision of ideas. A thesis is put forward, then an opposing one, and in the interaction between the two a new synthesized, balanced truth emerges—which in turn is opposed by a different opposing thesis, and on it goes, in a process of steadily evolving, progressing truth. This process is called ‘dialectic’, and over the past 150 years it has exercised a considerable influence on the intellectual life of our society.

More recently, many people have lost confidence in the possibility of ever arriving at the truth, by dialectic or any method. In the postmodern world, where ‘truth’ no longer even exists, the most we can hope to do is simply present all the options and leave people to make up their own minds, realizing that one person’s conclusion will be just as valid as anyone else’s. In much modern journalism and writing, dealing with a particular issue means simply presenting all the options. As Marvin Olasky has pointed out, the old journalistic dictum of ‘just state the facts’ has given way to the presentation of “multiple subjectivities”.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, none of this strikes us as very Christian. For the Christian, truth is defined by God and revealed by God. We believe that truth exists, and that it is accessible to us because of revelation. Our task must always be to listen to God’s truth, to depend upon it and to bring it to bear on our lives.

While for Christians this almost goes without saying, we need to think through its implications. If God is the source of all truth, then there is no inherent virtue in ‘balance’, nor in imbalance for that matter. A ‘balanced’ approach is not a Christian approach, for sometimes God’s truth will be found residing comfortably between two poles, and at other times it will be right out there at one of the extremes. For example, in the debate between those

1 Marvin Olasky, *The Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 1988, chapter 4.

who say that Christ rose bodily from the grave and those who say categorically that he did not, we should not assume that the truth is most likely to be found in a balanced proposal somewhere in the middle (i.e. in a spiritual or poetic resurrection). Nor should we conclude that it is okay for everyone to pick the view that suits them best, since there are so many scholars who disagree.

For this same reason, we should not think that a rich diversity of opinion and practice amongst Christians is a thing to be celebrated. Of course Christians will differ, and this side of heaven we cannot hope to be united on everything, but disagreement should be no more welcome in this present age than sin.

In an important sense, then, to publish ‘only one viewpoint’ ought precisely to be our goal. We should strive towards that oneness in mind, love, spirit and purpose that Paul talks about in Philippians 2. This is easier in some areas than others, and we have noticed this in the feedback we have received about different issues. When *The Briefing* offered a critique of Bishop Spong’s view of the resurrection, for example, we received no complaints that we should have allowed Bishop Spong equal space to put his case. Nor when we warned of the dangers of the New Age movement did we have any suggestions that we only presented one side of the debate. Our readers clearly agreed with us that we were speaking the truth on these matters.

The question remains: What about those more difficult and controversial matters on which evangelicals differ?

Certainly, as we pursue the truth together, there is a need for godly, clear-headed discussion. None of us is perfect, and what we know now, we still know only in part. We do need each other—to straighten out wobbly thinking, to point out blind spots, and to offer biblical insights or emphases that the other has missed. This has always been our practice at *The Briefing*. We do our best under God to publish the truth. Having done so, we are always keen to receive and publish well-argued, well-written material that brings God’s truth to bear on the subject at hand—whether that is in correcting mistakes or pulling apart some poor argumentation or

adding new information to the debate or pushing further to think through the implications.

But in all of this, we must keep in sight the goal of arriving with a common mind at the truth. We must not for a minute adopt the postmodern (I am rather tempted to say 'Anglican') attitude of revelling in diversity, as if the way to resolve difficult issues is simply to present two or three alternatives and leave every tribe to do what is right in its own eyes.

We should also be aware that historically this has been the strategy for redefining and emasculating evangelical belief. When the charismatic movement, for example, sought to establish itself as a valid expression of evangelical Christianity, it did not do so by attempting to show that all other evangelicals were wrong. It simply presented itself as a valid alternative, a legitimate form of biblical Christianity for which some defence could be made. Whenever the charismatic movement receives equal space and is considered an equally valid option, then this objective is reached. Evangelicalism is enlarged and redefined. Its distinctives are diluted.

We have to resist this. In the current climate, where the very idea of 'truth' is so distasteful, and our nerve so easily fails us, we must not abandon ourselves to a sort of Christian relativism. Fairness and justice are certainly Christian values, but balance is not.

## 2

# Four ways to God

10 November 2014

I suppose it's like looking at old baby photos, but over the past month or so I've been browsing through some of the classic early articles in *The Briefing*. I chuckled over some of the 'Lead Balloons' we ran in those early days, like the article that proposed we should build deliberately crummy church buildings from now on, so that when the next generation needs to rebuild them or tear them down in 50 years' time, there won't be any loud objections from the heritage lobby about the destruction of our beautiful architecture.

I was surprised and challenged to see how clearly the article on 'contextualization' in *Briefing* #102 spoke to our current debates on the topic.<sup>2</sup>

And there were many others.

But like that one favourite baby photo your eye keeps straying back to, I couldn't help returning to an article that I also highlighted in the special edition that marked our 21st birthday back in 2009—'Four ways to live', which appeared in *Briefing* #3, in May 1988. This foundational article discussed four competing sources of religious authority (the 'authority quadrilateral'), and how the Christian is to view each one.

As I reflected on this essay, it struck me again how relevant the basic insight of 'Four ways to live' is to the issues that face us today as evangelical Christians. It is not only the issue of authority

2 Phillip Jensen, 'The Good Drover or the Good Shepherd?: The question of context for preaching the gospel', 12 January 2001: [www.matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2001/01/the-good-drover-or-the-good-shepherd-the-question-of-context-for-preaching-the-gospel/](http://www.matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2001/01/the-good-drover-or-the-good-shepherd-the-question-of-context-for-preaching-the-gospel/)

that can be mapped in a quadrilateral, but also the issue of how we come to know God, to enter a saving relationship with him and be acceptable before him.

Before I explain what I mean, as a refresher for those who also remember this classic article and as an introduction for those new to it, here's an extended extract from the original 'Four ways to live' article.



## **Four ways to live [extract]**

Most of the issues facing evangelicals today resolve into a debate about authority, and in particular the authority of the Bible. In each area of controversy, the issue is 'Where do we go for the answer on this question? What is the truth by which we must live?' We all believe in the authority of the Bible, or say we do—why then do we disagree?

While nearly all Christians uphold the authority of the Scriptures, in reality there are other authorities that compete with the Bible for supremacy, other sources of truth about God and our world. Most commonly, there are four claimants to religious authority:

- Bible
- Institution
- Experience
- Reason

Put simply, these four competing authorities represent four 'Christianities'.

There are those who seek to understand their lives in terms of the Bible, and treat the Bible as the final and comprehensive authority in all matters of faith and life.

Others wish to be led more by their experience of God. They see their Christian lives in terms of following the movings and promptings of the Spirit.

A third group regards the teachings of the institution or tradition

to which they belong as authoritative for their life. If their church or priest or bishop or pastor offers direction for their behaviour or understanding, they will adopt it readily and fall into line.

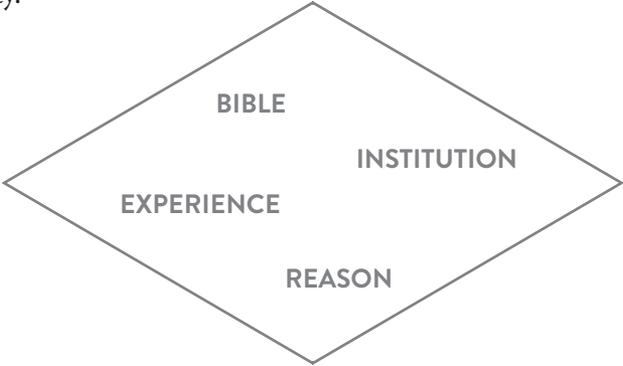
The fourth group bases their understanding of God and what he requires of us on human reason. They will accept and practise whatever can be demonstrated as sensible, rational and intelligent, and discard the primitive or irrational.

Each of these views springs from an understanding of what God is like. The first view is based on a God who speaks. God reveals himself to mankind through speech, through his word, and can only be known through his word. The second view assumes that God moves and acts in our lives and can be experienced directly today. The third is built on a God of order, who has called out a people to be his own—a people who are to live in unity. The fourth group has as its God one who is reasonable, rational and true.

We should find ourselves giving some assent to each of these understandings of God. Our God is all of these things. Nobody adopts any of these views to the extreme. Everybody's theological position has a measure of Bible, Experience, Institution and Reason mixed in.

**Areas not points**

If we were to draw a diagram of these authorities or sources of truth, we would need to draw an area, not simply four unrelated points. There is a continuum between these different areas of authority.



Those, for example, who wish to rely chiefly on reason may also use the revelation of Scripture, as well as their experience and the teachings of their denomination. In fact, this process is inevitable.

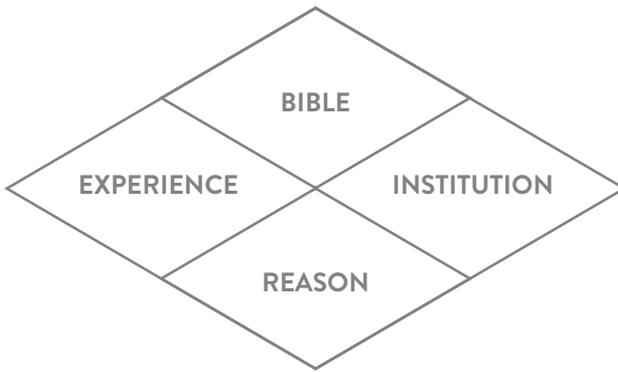
We can hardly read the Bible without using our reason to help interpret it, and our experience to apply it to our lives.

Unfortunately, the fact that we have areas of authority rather than points leads to confusion amongst Christians. Those of us who want to have the Bible as our final authority keep finding ourselves using reason or experience to back up our argument, and even appealing to the traditions of our institution and its leaders. Furthermore, those who ultimately do not accept the authority of the Bible keep appealing to it to support their points of view, claiming all the while that the Bible really is their basis. Add to this the theological grasshoppers who flit about without a qualm, and the scene is one of chaos.

## **Drawing the line**

Should there be lines drawn between these different viewpoints? Some say no. They argue that the Church (the institution) has given us the Bible; or that the Spirit we experience today is the same Spirit who wrote the Bible; or that the Bible will always be rational (being the product of a rational God). However, we must not be fooled. The end result of these arguments is that the Bible's sphere of influence is radically diminished. When it is subordinated to or diluted among the other areas, the Bible ceases to speak with its own voice. It becomes a rubber stamp for our own views and prejudices.

There comes a point where one has to choose between these four competing authorities. What will we do when our experience doesn't tally with the Scriptures? Or when our reason disagrees with our church's teaching? Or when the Bible seems irrational or unreasonable? It is at this point that we reveal our true colours. We draw a line and take our stand. Within our authority diagram, the four areas of authority and truth need to have boundaries



## **Sola Scriptura**

The authority of the Bible will never be maintained unless it is maintained alone. While recognizing the subsidiary roles of experience, institution and reason in our understanding and application of the Scriptures, it is still crucial that we establish again the supreme authority of the Bible for our lives. There can be no alternative or additional authority. It is the only reliable source of truth, the only reliable guide to knowing God. The other claimants are better regarded as lampposts—helpful for illumination, but not for leaning on.

The Bible is sufficient for making God’s mind known to us, for telling us all that we need to know to live in godly obedience to him—in all ages, in all cultures, until the Lord returns. God has not left anything out that is of any significance for us as Christians. We don’t have to search elsewhere for the answer to our dilemmas. If the Bible doesn’t give an answer, then there is no dilemma—we can do as we see fit, for the issue is unimportant. If we are taught things by spiritual experiences, church traditions or rational reflections (beyond the realm of Scripture), they are unimportant for Christian living. These things must not be laid on the consciences of other Christians. If the Bible doesn’t teach it, it is not normative or significant for the Christian.

We must be on our guard against groups and individuals who follow additional authorities to the Bible. It is an oft-repeated pattern. Some additional authority teaches them some ‘truth’. They then find this truth in the Bible, reading their new idea back into the text. Before long, this ‘new truth’ has become an

‘old truth’ that Christians supposedly need to rediscover if they are to live a life pleasing to God.

Subtly, but inexorably, the Bible’s emphasis on godly living and ministry is placed to one side. The area of the Bible’s authority has been left far behind.

The Bible is not simply authoritative. The Bible alone is authoritative.



The insight of this classic article is simple enough: in the end, there will be one authority that shapes and determines all others, that provides our starting place and our end point, and that trumps the other authorities when they compete, as they inevitably do.

In fact, as Adrian Russell once pointed out to me, it’s not really four different authorities, but two. It’s God’s authority in the Bible against human authority in three forms (human experience, human institution and human reason). We are fighting one battle, on three fronts. It’s the assertion of God’s final and complete authority, against the desire of humanity to shrug off his rule and determine our own path.

In this sense, the authority quadrilateral reflects the oldest of truths about humanity—our unquenchable impulse to usurp God’s authority by misusing the good gifts he has given us. All three of the alternative authorities are in themselves good gifts from God—our feelings and experiences, our churches or institutions, and our minds or reason—and yet we cannot resist the urge to inflate them to a grotesque size and install them on a throne they were never meant to occupy.

## The quadrilateral of salvation

Scriptural truth is a unified and indivisible whole (as we suggested in another early classic, ‘The indivisibility of truth’ in *Briefing #8*).<sup>3</sup>

3 [www.matthiasmedia.com/briefing/1988/08/the-indivisibility-of-truth/](http://www.matthiasmedia.com/briefing/1988/08/the-indivisibility-of-truth/)

The strong connections that exist between different facets or parts of God's revelation are such that a misunderstanding or misplaced emphasis or departure from it in one area will almost always lead to problems somewhere else. Likewise, patterns, connections and structures in one area of God's word will often be reflected in others.

It occurs to me that just as we might map four different authorities, so we might also map four different approaches to salvation. (I am using 'salvation' here as a broad category word to describe how we come to know God and enter a right relationship with him as saviour and Lord.)

According to the Bible, the cross of Christ is the 'home base' of salvation—and by 'the cross' I mean the empty cross, with its former occupant now vindicated and risen from the dead, sitting as King at the right hand of God. This cross, and the blood that was shed upon it, is the ground of our salvation. On the basis of the cross—and the cross alone—we come to know God, are declared righteous by God, are reconciled to God, are redeemed from our slavery, and are delivered by God into his eternal kingdom. Through Christ's cross we now have free access to the very presence of God. As the author of Hebrews puts it, "we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh" (Heb 10:19-20).

None of this is new or controversial, nor is it any less thrilling or important for being so.

It is interesting, though, to consider how our salvation in Christ relates to the three areas of human activity we noted above: our Experience, our Institutions and our Reason.

In doing so, I will reflect on some trends within evangelical Christianity that I have observed over my time as *Briefing* editor. I offer them as observations for reflection, not as indictments of particular churches or individuals. (And if these observations turn out to be only of passing significance, or to be less disturbing than I suggest, no-one will be more pleased than me!)

## Experience

It hardly needs saying that we cannot grasp hold of the salvation that God offers outside of our 'experience'. The experience in question may be the stricken conscience or godly sorrow that leads to repentance (2 Cor 7:10), or the inexpressible joy that accompanies receiving by faith the salvation of our souls (1 Pet 1:8-9), or the heartfelt thankfulness that comes from the word of God dwelling amongst us (Col 3:16), or the agony of suffering with Christ as we find ourselves mistreated and afflicted in his name (2 Cor 1:5-7). But a non-experiential salvation is hard to imagine. The Bible certainly knows nothing of it.

And yet it is very possible to confuse the experiential conditions or effects of salvation with what brings us salvation. We can begin to think that certain experiences are the path to knowledge of God or to entering his presence or growing closer to him. When we make this connection, it is not long before we find ourselves seeking to replicate those experiences and to master the techniques that lead to them, and depending more and more upon them in coming to know God and experiencing the joy and peace (so we think) of his presence.

Historically, this is the path of Christian mysticism, with its various spiritual exercises for subduing the flesh and allowing the soul to ascend to the revelatory and saving presence of God. Looking back over the past 25 years, this sort of mysticism has occasionally poked its head up in evangelical circles in the form of such books as Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. But during the time in which *The Briefing* has been in circulation, by far the most far-reaching and influential form of experiential religion has been the charismatic movement (or neo-Pentecostalism).

Charismatic practice depends for its immediacy and dynamism on a set of practices through which the worshipper experiences the 'touch of God'. These practices or 'manifestations of the Spirit's presence and power' have changed in emphasis over time. In my youth, most prominent was the practice of speaking in tongues as a sign of being baptized in the Holy Spirit. In the 80s, the

emphasis was more on healing, and on the presence of prophecy or ‘words of knowledge’. By the early 90s, under the influence of the Vineyard movement, ‘power encounters’ of different kinds (especially healings and exorcisms) were the means by which ‘power evangelism’ could take place, and the saving presence of God could be experienced and accessed.

Over the past 15 years or so, ecstatic ‘praise and worship’ has become the most common means within broadly charismatic churches by which God is thought to ‘show up’ or be ‘in the house’, or by which the worshipper is said to come into God’s presence and bask in his glory. The experience is powerful. The ‘praise and worship’ time might typically last for 30 minutes, with soaring melodies, strong underlying rhythms on drum and bass, repeated phrases and verses, and postures conducive to a heightened state of feeling (standing, swaying, eyes closed, arms aloft). The emotions thus stirred are interpreted as contact with God himself, as spiritual access to his presence and sustenance for the Christian life.

We must remember that all of these things are good gifts—corporate singing, emotion, even drums and bass! Nor would any charismatic Christian I know dream of denying the efficacy of Christ’s death on the cross, or claim that somehow he or she had been ‘saved from sin by music’. But in practice there comes a point where emotionally intense or miraculous experiences assume a place in our relationship with God that should only be occupied by the cross. They become instrumental (if you’ll excuse the pun). You can tell that this has happened when the cross doesn’t get talked about so much; when it ceases to be the constant theme of our preaching, our discussion, our prayers and our singing; when we regard suffering and difficulty as ungodly aberrations pointing to our lack of faith rather than as the norm and character of faithful Christian living; when the cross, in other words, is no longer our starting point and our end point, our home base, our humbling badge of honour.

Our Christian experience—especially our experience of exalted

or intense emotion—must not become the ground of our relationship with God. In fact, the Bible warns us that the cross cuts across our experience. The cross is a powerless encounter. There is nothing exalted, uplifting or emotionally gratifying about a crucifixion. Some will desire a miraculous sign to demonstrate or mediate God’s presence, but Paul preaches the brutish weakness of the cross (1 Cor 1:22-23). Some will seek after asceticism or angelic worship or visions that appeal to the sensuous mind, but these have no value for the person who has been crucified with Christ (Col 2:18-23).

## **Institution**

We can see a similar pattern with ‘institutions’; that is, with the communal or organizational nature of Christianity. Institutions are good. Our salvation is not individualistic, but communal and churchly, and this inevitably and rightly leads to structure and organization. I’m with Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck and their book *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion*.

In this sense the Bible can’t conceive of a salvation without ‘church’, any more than it conceives of a salvation without ‘experience’.

And yet, such is our human perversity that we have managed—on a vast scale, if we think about it historically—to turn this good gift of organized community and fellowship into an instrumentality that is deemed essential for salvation, and that mediates salvation by dispensing the means of grace (classically in Roman Catholicism). The church and its ministry colonizes the space that should be occupied by the cross of Christ.

Looking back over the past quarter of a century, I don’t see evangelical Christians rushing to embrace this sort of Roman Catholic view of the church as the mediator of salvation. However, it has been interesting (and slightly disturbing) to observe an increasing primacy being given to community, and to ‘belonging’, as a key methodology for seeing people come to knowledge of God and salvation.

The thought is that if we can persuade people to join us, to become part of our community, to experience the love and web of relationships that make up our church, then through this experience they will become Christians. We will ‘love them into the kingdom’. The church is ‘an apologetic for the gospel’, as the saying goes.

There is an obvious truth here. The loving gospel community of a Christian church is a testimony to the power and goodness of God—as indeed are all the good works that flow from the changed heart of a regenerate Christian (cf. Matt 5:16; Titus 2:9-10).

And yet the church must not become our gospel and our salvation. We must not confuse the God-glorifying fruit of the gospel with the stark message of the cross. The cross constantly teaches us that no human activity renders us acceptable in God’s sight, and that all our good works are but filthy rags. Belonging—to God and to the fellowship of his people—comes only through believing in the crucified Christ.

## **Reason**

In much the same way, the good gift of reason or understanding is both essential to knowing God and dangerous in knowing God. On the one hand, the gospel comes to us as a word—as a message to be grasped and understood with the mind. It comes with evidence about real events in space and time—for example, that Jesus really did die and that witnesses saw his resurrected body. The gospel also comes to us as propositions that interpret those real events—for example, that the crucifixion of Christ was “for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3), and that he “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:13).

When we preach the gospel, we are addressing the mind. We are imparting words that must be comprehended.

However, once again, Christian history demonstrates repeatedly the human impulse to invade the ground that only the cross should occupy, and to construct our own more reasonable, rational and attractive paths to salvation. Liberalism in all its forms

proceeds from the assumption that if only we could make the Christian message more attractive and appealing to the minds of those we are seeking to reach, more in keeping with the beliefs and mores of the contemporary culture, then more people would see the goodness, rightness and glory of Christianity, and so join us.

In classic liberalism, this was through jettisoning certain beliefs that were seen as objectionable to the contemporary mind—in particular, the idea of miracles (such as the resurrection), or the unattractive concept of judgement, or the supposedly immoral idea of penal substitutionary atonement.

Looking back over the past 25 years, we have seen some challenges to penal substitutionary atonement from within rather than outside the evangelical camp. As evangelicals have done in the past, we have had to explain and defend this truth. And various Anglican bishops seem to keep popping up to deny the resurrection (Spong and Carnley come to mind).

Yet this is not the biggest danger for us in this area, in my view. Where we need to exercise great care is with contextualization and apologetics.

When we seek to contextualize the gospel—that is, to express it in terms that make sense to the people we're speaking to—it is very easy to move the cross away from centre stage, precisely because it doesn't really make sense to anyone.

This is Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 1. In the face of those who demand a decent argument or evidence—either one that is rationally satisfying (the Greeks) or one that is miraculously impressive (the Jews)—what we preach is a cross, a message that is palpably foolish and weak. And Paul did this quite deliberately, according to God's plan, so that the surpassing power of salvation might belong to God rather than to us.

The equivalently shocking message today would be to say something like: Americans seek freedom but we preach slavery; Australians seek prosperity but we preach poverty; Brits seek security but we preach danger. There is something unavoidably counter-cultural or counter-intuitive about the message of the

cross. It defies the wisdom of our age, and shames the wise and the strong.

If we find ourselves presenting Christianity in a way that is eminently reasonable, rational and appealing according to the categories of our culture, and yet which does not feature the constant proclamation of the offensive scandal of the cross, it's time for some re-evaluation.

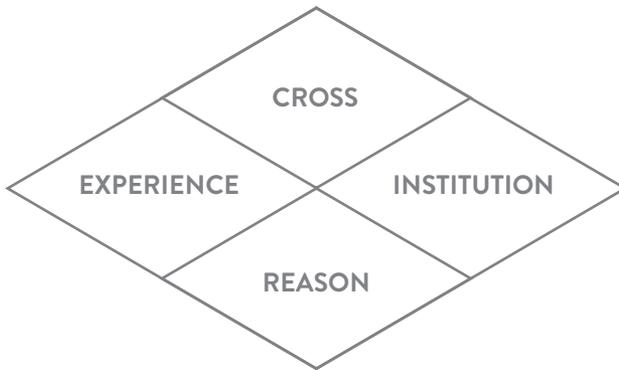
The same is true with the good gift of apologetics. Apologetics is extremely valuable in defending the truths of the gospel; in defusing the bombs that opponents of Christianity hurl at the truth; in breaking down misconceptions and 'defeater beliefs' that get in the way of people actually understanding the message of the cross.

All the same, it is very possible to find ourselves thinking that if we could only present a warm, positive version of Christianity that emphasized its beauty and nobility, and its social and personal advantages, then people would be drawn to walk across the bridge and find out what's on the other side.

But the gospel bridge is in the shape of a cross. In most respects it is a confronting and appalling bridge. There's no beautifying it. It looks foolish and weak. In fact, it says to us: "There is no way across from your side, no matter how hard you try. The only way across is if God comes over from the other side and takes you there." The cross is offensive, because it tells us the ugly truth about ourselves.

## **One battle on three fronts**

Each of these three areas (Experience, Institution and Reason) represents something good, necessary, godly and worthwhile. And yet each of them, through human sinfulness, can also become a false alternative path to knowing God and experiencing a saving relationship with him. Each of them can crowd out the cross, and push it to one side.



As with the issue of authority, the three alternatives are really all manifestations of the one impulse: to find a path that might lead from human experience, activity or reason to a saving knowledge of God. They are modern versions of what Martin Luther described as the ‘theology of glory’.

In his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, Luther drew a sharp contrast between theologians of glory and theologians of the cross. In typically paradoxical and challenging terms, Luther argued that:

- 20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.
- 21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

By “a theologian of glory” Luther meant someone who saw a direct line of continuity from us and our world to God; who thought that God could be known through human reflection on this-worldly phenomena or experiences; or that the path to knowledge of God and salvation was in building upon the good that we perceive in ourselves and the world—for example, by doing good works dictated by the church (for Luther, the Roman Catholic Church).

In other words, the theologian of glory takes what is evil—the human attempt to please God, to justify ourselves before God, to contribute to our salvation, to find our own way to God through

our reason or experience, to bring God's blessing on ourselves by our works—and calls it good. And conversely, he takes what is truly good—the cross of Christ—and declares it to be an evil (since it cuts across and destroys all human ways of knowing God).

The theologian of the cross, on the other hand, sees things as they really are and calls them so. He realizes that through the cross God has chosen to reveal the full extent of his wisdom, power and love, and the full extent of human sin and incapacity. The cross declares that the path to knowing God and being acceptable to him is not via the noble, the glorious or the humanly impressive; it is not through the magnificent, the uplifting or the triumphant; it is not through taking something good in this world and building upon it. It is through something quite unexpected and shocking. It is through an act and a message that destroys all human pretension and contribution. Gerhard Forde puts it like this:

God brings life out of death. He calls into being that which is, from that which is not. In order that there be a resurrection, the sinner must die. All presumption must be ended. The truth must be seen. Only the “friends of the cross” who have been reduced to nothing are properly prepared to receive the justifying grace poured out by the creative love of God. All other roads are closed. The theologian of the cross is thus one who finally is turned about to see “the way things are”.<sup>4</sup>

The cross is our home base for knowing God and being saved by him. It must remain our constant message, our sustenance, our frame of reference. Whether in our homes and families, in our churches and fellowships, or in our public face to the world, we must ‘call the thing what it actually is’. We must tell the truth, not only about God but also about ourselves.

“The thirst for glory is not ended by satisfying it but rather by extinguishing it”, said Luther. Only the cross can do that.

4 Gerhard O Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1997, pp. 114-15.