

LISTENING TO FOOTSTEPS

On 27th December, 2004 I began to learn a great deal about tsunamis, including how to spell the word. I learnt about the awesome power of water, I learnt about the creation of the tsunami, and I learnt a bit more about Banda Aceh.

But one thing sticks in my mind in particular – I don't know why. It's this, that before the tsunami arrives the tide goes out. The water lapping the shore just disappears. In fact, it goes so quickly that fish can be left flapping about on the sand. But then, of course, the water returns with a vengeance, and that's when the destruction occurs.

When I first heard about that phenomenon, I tried to imagine what it would have been like for a poor fisherman, one not educated in the ways of the tsunami. On the 26th December, he may have been on the beach, getting ready to go out fishing, hoping to catch enough for a feed. "Perhaps on this day," he may have thought, "I'll get enough so that I can even sell a few. A few hours in the boat, a sore back from rowing, but it will be worth it if I get ahead a little."

And then he may have turned and looked, may have seen the water disappearing. That's strange. But then a smile creeps up from the corners of his mouth. He suddenly notices fish flapping about on the sand. He quickly grabs his basket and hurries over. There'll be no sore back for him today...

It would have been almost as close to his ideas of paradise as it could get...

Until the water returned and washed him all away.

The point is, if he had known that a receding tide like this one was a warning of a tsunami's approach, he would have known to run. But he didn't know, so he didn't run, so he didn't live to tell the tale. His paradise-like experience was short-lived, and it was followed by doom because he didn't read the signs.

It made me think of those scripture passages which tell us of the footsteps of the Lord. There will be wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes... look around and you'll see them all. Avalanches, catastrophes, deaths of untold thousands. The prophesies tell us that men will be lovers of money, of themselves. There will be fornication, adultery. The truth will be called a lie, and the lie will be held up as the truth.

You can hear the footsteps loud and clear...

But what are you doing as you listen? Are you enjoying the moment too much to contemplate the end? Are you like the fisherman, running around on the sand collecting your favorite fish, oblivious to the fact that the tide *will* come back in?

Are you aware that what you may consider a paradise-like experience is in fact going to be short-lived?

Because if you're so busy enjoying this earth that you forget to serve God properly, if you're asleep to the true meaning of life, now is a real good time to wake up.

Otherwise you may well drown.

E Dekker

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Are We Persecuted?

2 Timothy 3:12 reads as follows:

“Yes, and all who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”

The verse quoted above was read at the dinner table recently and led me to wonder: If all who live godly lives suffer persecution does that mean that those who don't suffer persecution are not leading godly lives?

I know there have been many godly people who have suffered persecution. Some of the accounts are horrific: Stephen who was stoned for criticising the Jews, Christian martyrs who were torched or thrown to the lions, people who were slowly roasted at the stake above little fires for breaking with the Roman church at the time of the Reformation, some of our ministers who were sent to Dachau for daring to speak out against the Nazis during World War 2, and there are more recent stories of terrible things happening to Christians in China and to one of our own missionaries, Brother Jacob in India.

But nothing remotely like that has really happened to me. I'm not dragged off to prison when I pray or read the Bible in public; none of my friends or family have been burnt at the stake or stoned to death for being a Christian. In fact, I can even speak to work colleagues about my faith and they listen (if only for a while) without openly ridiculing me and throwing stones at me for what I've said. So am I not really living a godly life? Is Paul perhaps just speaking about the times he lived in? But if that's the case, what's the message for us today?

I wondered about this, so consulted Calvin. He says:
 “... Must all men be martyrs? For it is evident that there have been many godly persons who have never suffered banishment, or imprisonment, or flight, or any kind of persecution. I reply, it is not always in one way that Satan persecutes the servants of Christ. But yet it is absolutely unavoidable that all of them shall have the world for their enemy in some form or other, that their faith may be tried and their steadfastness proved; for Satan, who is the continual enemy of Christ, will never suffer any one to be at peace during his whole life; and there will always be wicked men that are thorns in our sides. Moreover, as soon as zeal for God is manifested by a believer, it kindles the rage of all ungodly men; and, although they have not a drawn sword, yet they vomit out their venom, either by murmuring, or by slander, or by raising a disturbance, or by other methods. Accordingly, although they are not exposed to the

same assaults, and do not engage in the same battles, yet they have a warfare in common, and shall never be wholly at peace and exempt from persecutions.”

Clearly Calvin shows that if we display zeal for God—of course, not with the aim of seeking persecution, but in order to promote the truth—we will find enemies opposing us. Honouring God wherever we are must mean not only living a holy life but also speaking openly and pointedly to people when they say or do things which are not right in God's eyes. And although we must do it in love, seeking God's honour and our neighbour's salvation, it stands to reason that it won't be appreciated. People who want a license to do evil, and ignore God and His Word, won't thank you for redirecting them. The truth will cause the enmity to come to the surface. You may be shunned, labelled as a Bible-basher, scorned. It might not be physical persecution, but it will be persecution nonetheless.

When I was thinking about this, and casting my mind back through church history—from the time of the prophets through to more recent church history—it struck me that people of the world are not the only ones who are capable of persecution. Much if not most persecution seems to have come from 'believers', though what they believed was at variance with the truth. Old Testament prophets were persecuted by those they warned; the Jews persecuted the early Christians; Roman Catholics persecuted reformed people at the time of the Reformation; the people of the first and second secessions were persecuted, as were the people of the Liberation. So it seems that if you take a stand for the truth you can expect persecution anywhere.

These days if you show zeal for the truth and speak out against wrongs, you won't be physically beaten, stoned, burned at the stake, or what have you. But you can expect to be slandered, mocked, ostracised, accused of being old-fashioned, of being “too black and white”, of sticking to creeds and confessions which are outdated. Try speaking out, for example, against those who want to take the sharp edges off the commandments; people who are so confident of their spiritual strength that they flirt with what is worldly; people who so trust their ability to withstand the allurements of the world that they feel free to go to places our parents and grandparents warned us against. Then there are the people who want to smother the differences between believers and the world, or between the true church and the false church. Yet the Lord calls us to speak up, just as He did, calling a

spade a spade. But, says Calvin echoing God's Word, expect persecution.

Paul is clear: no persecution means no godliness. Evidently godly people can't be fence-sitters. To sit back and be smiley and pleasant in order to remain pally with everyone may appear to be godly but, when you think about it, it's actually a sort of idolatry. Because we would then be serving ourselves. Paul and Calvin are saying there is a war going on—a spiritual war. It's been going on since the Lord put enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. It's often known as 'the antithesis'. And, the Bible says, it will continue to go on till the Lord Jesus returns.

Before He left earth to ascend into heaven the Lord Jesus said—if they persecuted Me they will persecute you. He didn't promise us a bed of roses, but warfare, a warfare in which He has already given us the victory. So, says Paul, "be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be

able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places..." (Eph. 6).

Is all bleak then? No, because Paul also says, "Rejoice always". For we have wonderful promises: salvation in Jesus Christ, a Father who sees our every move and cares for us, the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. And the rewards? Priceless! Out of this world! Rewards, not of merit, but of grace. Rewards, "such as eye has not seen nor has entered into the heart of man..." As Paul says having "fought the good fight", having "finished the race", having "kept the faith": "there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4: 8).

Rosanne Numan

On the Other Hand Response

Dear Editor,

Upon reading your thought provoking question, I was taking an imaginary journey with my eyes closed, relaxing on a easy chair and trying to picture your sign on the roadside 'If God seems distant, who has moved?'

It was then that I remembered a trip that we made from Armadale to Denmark a while ago. The car we were driving was an old one and it broke down with a faulty alternator, which caused the battery to run down and the car stopped! It was a public holiday and no garages were open, so we bought a new battery and tried to conserve power in order to get to Denmark. However we encountered rain and it also became dark so we had to use lights and wipers. This left us with a near flat battery and the car just sputtering along on the dark and deserted road between Mt Barker and Denmark! "Will we get there?" was the question. Looking back, the distance, though small seemed so great!

Throughout this eventful journey, Denmark stayed in the same location, but with each problem that we encountered it actually seemed further away. Had we used a more reliable vehicle the distance would not have been that far! I can then relate this experience with that question on the signpost. God has always been the same distance from us and we from God, however, heartfelt prayer that is pleasing to Him closes the distance that physically is impossible to bridge. If we start to wander from God and His Word, it is our prayer that begins to break down first, than the distance between God and us suddenly begins to become so vast. Prayer is the reliable vehicle that you need to stay close to God, but keep it serviced by studying God's word diligently and meditating on it always.

Another signpost made the statement 'Know God, know love. No God, no love.'

Owen Slobe

Sonja Lubomirsky is in the business of happiness. A Psychologist at the University of California, she researches what makes people happy and how people are able to improve their satisfaction with life. Sound bizarre? Ivory Tower stuff? Read the following list that she compiled in *Eight Steps Toward a More Satisfying Life*.¹

STEPS: 1. Count your blessings 2. Practise acts of kindness 3. Savour life's joys 4. Write a letter thanking those who have been a positive influence in your life. 5. Forgive Others 6. Invest time and energy in friends and family. 7. Take care of your body: sleep, exercise and eat healthy. 8. Develop a strategy for coping with difficult situations and sadness.

As Christians we might think this sounds fine. Actually, it's really common sense. Apart from the bit about writing a letter and developing a strategy, I try to do those things as well. But is a list like Sonja's really all there is to it? If you do these things will you be happy?

The short answer is, no. In this article I would like to look at what the book of Proverbs says about happiness, in particular Proverbs 3:13-18. This section states quite plainly that happiness can be found with Wisdom; Godly wisdom.

This segment of Proverbs (chapter 3:13-18) begins with a sentence about happiness. "Happy is the man who finds wisdom" (vs. 13). The happiness that is being spoken of here is more than an emotion. It is different than the pleasant feeling enjoyed when meeting a good friend or receiving a nice gift; a subjective happiness. This word happy could also be translated as blessed or fortunate. It is a concrete, objective term. Unlike emotions that go up and down, the happiness spoken of here is stable, more of a condition, like being tall or short, than a feeling.

This wisdom, which results in happiness, is also not something that happens automatically. You are not born wise. Chapter 3:13-18 talks about: finding, gaining, taking hold of and retaining wisdom. These are verbs. There must be activity, action.

Where do we start looking? Much of the book of Proverbs teaches us what this wisdom is. Proverbs gives instruction for many spheres of life, our finances, relationships, obedience to authority and more. This wisdom is summed up with one well known phrase "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

With such a call to activity one might ask the question why? Why does wisdom result in happiness? What's the connection? Verse 14, 15 answers: "For her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies." Reason number one is that wisdom results in material prosperity. Verse 16: "length of days are in her right hand, In her left hand riches and honour." Not only

does wisdom result in prosperity but you will also receive respect and a long life.

At this stage we might be a bit perplexed. As Christians we are not to covet riches (aren't we the first to tell unbelievers that money can't make you happy?). Nor should we go about trying heap up honours for ourselves. Also what about all the sincere believers who aren't rich, are disrespected and die before their time?

In answer to these questions we have to remember what the proverbs are: practical advice for everyday living. To make an analogy: many a parent has ordered their children to eat their vegetables on the incentive that it will make them healthy. At the same time a number of these same children kids who did eat their vegies are afflicted with serious illnesses and grow up quite unhealthy. Does that mean that the principle of the parents was wrong? Obviously not, vegetables are healthy. In the same way wise management of one's finances, health, and personal relationships has as its by-product prosperity, long life and honour.

We understand. This proverb is a generalisation. It does contradict the obvious fact that God in His sovereign providence often withholds these earthly blessings from His children. Jesus was to echo the words of this proverb in Mathew 6:33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

There are more benefits of having wisdom. Verse 17 says "all her paths are peace." With godly wisdom God's children are able to pursue right relationships with other people and thus have peace. In addition those who walk on the path of wisdom have peace with God.

For after the fall into sin our life ended in a spiritual sense. We were at war with God and we were spiritually dead. Yet God did not leave us in our misery but promised to send His Son to pay for our sins. We must believe in the saving work of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. That is wisdom!

Because of this, in verse 18 wisdom is called "a tree of life to those who take hold of her". By the term tree of life we must not firstly think of the "tree of life" from Genesis. This tree of life is a symbol in other places in Hebrew poetry of renewal of life and of growth. What it means is that our life can flourish once again because we have a right relationship with God.

In Proverbs and indeed throughout the whole Bible we learn skills for living life in a wise manner. The 8 steps of Sonja Lubomirsky are also by and large commanded in the Bible. We must show kindness to others, forgive, and look after our body etc... Yet Proverbs 3 shows us that the true happiness of the Bible has deeper roots. It has roots in faith in the redemption from sin through Jesus Christ. Then renewal of life and happiness will begin. We can agree with verse 18 that "happy are all who retain" wisdom.

Arend Witten

¹ Adapted from Sonja Lubomirsky in Elizabeth Coady "The Science of Happiness," *Time* No. 2 Jan 17 2005.

Dare To Be A Daniel

– Do We Really Know What That Means?

I very nearly didn't write this article.

The sermon by Rev Eikelboom on Daniel chapter One had given me much to think about, and I had instantly seen that it was great Contender material. Yet hot on the heels of that observation came the spine-chilling, heart-stopping thought – won't I, by writing about how to live, open myself up to criticism? It's all very well thinking that 'other people ought to hear this', but then you start to wonder if it would be better coming from somebody else.

But that's what the Contender is about. In this fight for the faith we need all the help we can get, and that includes from each other. So I stilled my knocking knees, sharpened my quill, and dared to be a Daniel ...

Daniel is a book about war – or, more specifically, the antithesis. And at first glance, it seems that Babylon is winning. After all, the people of Israel are in exile under Nebuchadnezzar.

Chapter One, however, shows already that the book of Daniel is about more than God's chosen people being away from their homeland. It is obvious in so many things – the food issue, the dreams, the lion's den, the furnace, the king's madness – that while Babylon is a great earthly power, God is still in control over everything. In the battle that counts, God is winning.

Daniel is also a book about faithfulness. It is a book about the faithfulness of God, and also about His response to the faithfulness of His people. And it's this faithfulness, on both sides, that Rev Eikelboom brought out so clearly in his sermon.

The story of Daniel is familiar - certain young men, princes of Israel, are taught the Babylonian way of life. These young men were eventually supposed to go back to Israel and be an influence there, so that the whole nation would give up their old ways and look, think and act like Babylonians. On closer inspection, several things stand out. First, the wisest and most respected of all the young men were the ones chosen for this special project. Second, the king made sure that nothing was forgotten in the process of turning Israelites into Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar was being devilishly wise!

King Nebuchadnezzar had realised something that we often forget: humanly speaking, the future of the Church lies with the young people. Someday, they will be the leaders. And if they can be made to believe that faithfulness to God's Word is not important, in a few generations the Church will die out altogether.

Fortunately, Nebuchadnezzar's plan failed in the long run. The reason? Despite the best efforts of man, God is still in control.

However, it is not enough to say, "God is in control. We don't need to look out for Satan's attacks because in the end God's plan has to come to pass anyway." We are still responsible for our actions and as such, should always be on our guard. Satan's methods don't change much – they don't need to, because people always make the same mistakes. Let us examine, therefore, the dangerous and Satanic plan of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar was very thorough indeed. Daniel and his three friends, Mishael, Hananiah and Azariah, all had names that offended the king. The suffixes 'el' and 'ah' referred to the God of Israel. Lest this be too much of a reminder for them of the life they had left behind and the God that they were supposed to forget, they were given Babylonian names. They were required to learn the Babylonian language, eat Babylonian food, wear Babylonian clothes, and study the Babylonian religion(s)! From the outside, one could hardly tell that these young men were not Babylonian by birth.

Think about it. We are quick to say that one shouldn't judge by appearances, but the story of Daniel demonstrates that Satan knows how important these 'little' things are! If we look like the rest of the world, we will eventually feel like them, too. Do appearances matter? Yes, they do! We are not to judge other people by their appearance, but we are responsible not to let others assume the wrong thing by our own appearance.

What are the 'little' things in our lives? We don't have a King Nebuchadnezzar forcing us to dress the same, listen to the same music, go to the same sort of parties as people in the world. We have the freedom to show ourselves different. So do we? How do we talk to strangers – in a friendly manner or rudely? (How many of us have experienced road rage – on our own part?) For that matter, how do we talk to each other within the Church? Think of your freedom as a gift. It is the

opportunity to show the world how Christians are different.

It's so easy to gloss over the story of Daniel and the food. Daniel and the lion's den – now that was brave! – but the food issue can't have been a really big deal, even to Daniel and his three friends. Right?

Wrong. It's time to look at this story through new eyes.

Daniel is in Babylon with a new name and learning new things. He can't change that, and he is not disobeying God by learning at a 'secular institution'. However, some of the food that he is required to eat is unclean. He cannot eat it without disobeying God's law. The tempting thing is to just cooperate. After all, the training was only for three years, and then Daniel could get some great job where he could eat whatever he wanted. If he kicked up a fuss, he might lose this privileged position altogether! We might think, in that situation, with a good position in government I could do a lot for God's kingdom! Isn't that a noble enough end to justify the means?

In addition to this, there were other Israelite princes who seemed to have no problem eating the king's food. At any rate, we don't hear of them protesting. It's always tempting to say, "Every other Christian I know has no problem with this! It must be alright!" Yet secretly we know that we are hiding behind other people. We know that the only measure of right and wrong is God's Word. And so did Daniel.

Career opportunities and the actions of fellow believers did not sway him. Do they sway us?

Daniel proposed a test. We hear it so often and rarely think about the possible consequences. In fact, this was a potentially dangerous thing for Daniel to do: imagine that at the end of the ten days on vegetables and water, Daniel and his three friends looked thin and unhealthy. They would have been forced to eat the king's food! Daniel was a man of his word, and he would have done whatever was required of him. How then did he dare to propose this test?

The answer is simple, and yet a matter of faith: firstly, God would never command us to do something that was bad for us. The young men could be assured that the vegetables and water would not be insufficient for their needs. Secondly, Daniel realised something important: strength comes from God, not just food!

We know this, and yet we don't. We pray, please bless this food, and then we look at the nutritional information

to see if we are getting our Recommended Daily Intake of thiamin, niacin and riboflavin.

God rewards faithfulness!

Why did our parents send us to the John Calvin school? Because it had the most brilliant teachers who were sure to send their children on the road to academic success? Or because it is a school where God is acknowledged? Our parents knew that we depend completely on the blessing of God for our success. God rewards faithfulness!

Do we fully understand this? If only we could remember when we have to make decisions, that ten days on vegies and water gave Daniel and his friends more health and strength than their peers!

What is the conclusion of the whole matter? Read for yourself. Daniel and his three friends were blessed beyond belief. They were ten times as wise as any other person who went through the same training. They had honour and royal power. Daniel remained in a position of power for over sixty years, all the way until the first year of King Cyrus - the Persian king! Belshazzar had come and gone, Babylon had fallen, and still Daniel was there.

Our lesson is about more than being brave in the face of lions. It's about doing God's will when our friends and fellow Christians have decided, God will understand that it's impossible. It's about doing God's will when we are thinking, Just two more years of this and then I'll be in a position to do so much good for His kingdom! It's about trusting that, despite what science and sociologists say, God is the one who blesses our efforts.

And He rewards faithfulness.

Belinda Schoof

On the Other Hand

Are "cute" religious bumper stickers appropriate for our cars, or is it a catchy but irreverent way of witnessing?

Send responses to eric.dekker@frsa.asn.au. Any length is ok.

BEWARE!!

Remember the 10 commandments by heart? Chances are you don't, despite the fact that you hear them every Sunday morning. It means that you're one of that number who needs to read Deuteronomy 5 whenever you want to know what the 8th, 9th (or any) commandment is. The commandments: God's rules for life in His service.

So, you know what's in Deuteronomy 5. Excellent. Now, though, is as good a time as any to read Deuteronomy 6. Why? Because it holds a warning, one which you and I had better not take too lightly. It holds a message from your God to you. A powerful message, one which says BEWARE!!

Look at verse 1. "Now this is the commandment...which the Lord your God has commanded to teach you...that you may fear the Lord your God, to keep all His...commandments...all the days of your life." This was told to Israel (to ALL Israel, including the youth!!) as they crossed over into the land of promise. At the very moment that they could start looking forward to a life more stable than most of them had ever known, as they looked forward at last to a time when they could put their feet up in their own house, these words came thundering down to them through the mouth of Moses.

Fear God, and keep His commandments...a message we know well. Nothing new or fearsome about that. So why a special mention of these words?

The answer to that question can be found when you read verses 10 – 12. In a nutshell they say this: Once you are living in the large and beautiful cities you did not build, when your houses are full of good things, when your pantry is filled and you have plenty of toys, when your business is running well, then (vs 12) BEWARE! Because, Israelites, it is in that situation that it is hardest to remember your God, to feel passionate about serving Him, to be convinced that you really need Him. When everything is fine, that's when you feel most apathetic; that's when you can't be bothered.

So, beware of what? This: beware lest you forget the Lord, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

And it was with this instruction ringing in their ears that Israel crossed into and inhabited their new land.

It isn't hard to see that my situation, and yours too, has an uncanny resemblance to this situation. In a spiritual

sense we've been brought out of the house of bondage. Christ has come, has paid for sin, has released me, you, from the power of darkness.

But in a material sense too there is likeness. We live in cities we did not build (you can thank mum, dad, opa and oma for them). Our houses are full of good things, our pantries overflow, our toys are bigger and better than ever and working conditions are excellent. Our church is established, our school is looking great. And so, it's a good time to reflect on God's words to His people.

So must I live in fear? No for I belong
to Christ.

The word to reflect on is, then, beware. The danger of apathy, tolerance, can't be bothered-ness, is real. History shows that it is in times of trouble that God is sought. In the good times you'll see slipping. So what are you doing right now? Playing "Hide", or "Seek?".

You and I are standing at the beginning of the tunnel called 2005. I can't see ahead, but I know that there is One who can and does light the way. I can gaze with confidence to the future, because I know that whatever may happen, He will be beside me. It's a lovely thought.

But I also know that I can't take it easy, must not take Him for granted. Because verses 13 – 15 warn me that "You shall fear the Lord your God and serve Him...you shall not go after the gods of the people who are all around you (for the Lord your God is a jealous God), lest the anger of the Lord your God be aroused against you and destroy you from the face of the earth."

So, must I live in fear? No. I belong to Christ, so I don't need to do that. But, I will try to do what is right and live faithfully in this year of our Lord 2005, because what He is offering me is too good to refuse.

E Dekker

A MIXED MESSAGE IS A CONFUSED MESSAGE

“Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27a)

In the last contender issue of the year 2004, in the ‘food for thought’ section, Bert Veldman wrote about playing volleyball under a banner ‘defend the faith’ while listening to a song ‘Losing my religion’. While pondering this thought, it struck me that our present message to the world can be dangerously mixed (or blurred) and therefore confusing those who observe us, leading them away from learning more about God and the church.

It is our mandate to walk a godly walk of life, and that our conduct is to be worthy of the gospel of Christ, as Paul spoke in Philippians One. The problem is there are too many times that we as youth cling onto the things of this world. This could be in the movies or TV that we watch, in the activities we get up to on the weekend, to the music we listen to in the car, in the way we talk, in the way we act at school, uni or work and the list could go on. Here is where it gets difficult, because we like to tell the world that we are Christians and that we love God, but it is hard to not do the things that the world is doing, we are producing a mixed message. Therefore when people observe us they get confused because we say one thing and do another.

“¹⁴Do all things without complaining and disputing, ¹⁵that you may be blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.” (Philippians 2:14&15)

The point should be made that we have to have consistency in our walk of life in order not to confuse the observers. In order to remove inconsistency we have to evaluate ourselves and find out where we are lacking. Have a good listen to the music in the car, listen to the words of the movie, is it pleasing to God? If not throw the music away, don’t go to the movies, lest you prevent someone from joining the church because they got confused by your mixed message. A well clichéd guideline is ‘would Christ join in with your activities?’ We have to get pedantic about this point, for we have to shine in the world, as Paul says in Philippians 2:14&15

“¹⁴Do all things without complaining and disputing, ¹⁵that you may be blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”

“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off” (Mark 9:43)

We must strive to win others for Christ and this must be done initially by our conduct of life. Peter says in 1 Peter 2:11-12 “Beloved, I beg you as sojourner and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honourable among the gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.” When we associate with those not of the church we should not allow them to doubt our faith in Christ. Whether on the work force or at uni or tafe, people are watching us and therefore we should not give them a reason to attack us but that we live a life in the reflection of Christ. If we say something we must also do it, or else we start sending a mixed message which confuses those who are receiving the message and the message could soon be wasted.

Of course we are not perfect and we are tainted in sin, but this should be all the more reason to pray to God for strength so that in our daily walk of life we may win others for him. I know that it is hard to give up what we enjoy such as movies, music etc, but if we are really serious on which path we are going to take we have to get rid of our earthly goods. As Christ said to His disciples in Mark 9:43, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell.” We should get rid of the milestone around our neck, so we can without hindrance serve God and win others to Him with a clear and concise message. Remember this: A mixed message will always be a confused message so please endeavour to do some soul searching, get rid of the jargon that is mixing the message so that in your walk, talk and act you may win others by allowing Christ to use you as His servant.

Frank Janssen

SPYSC AGM 2004

Review – Christians in Government

On the 15th of November 2004, the Social and Political Youth Study Club (SPYSC) celebrated and concluded an eventful and successful 2004. Indeed, there was much to celebrate. In 2004 we saw increased awareness and involvement in the political scene throughout our community, and particularly among the youth. Of particular note was the positive response we witnessed in the lead up to the Federal election. Looking beyond our direct circles, we could rejoice in an election result that reflected a significant increase in the Conservative and Christian vote.

To recap briefly, the following topics were covered in 2004:

- Rebuilding Iraq
- Mission Work in PNG
- Study Evening - The Purpose and Creation of Mankind
- Priority-One - A stimulating assessment of our priorities in life
- Election review with the CDP
- Election review with the Senate candidate, Dr Lachlan Dunjey
- Church History – Islam
- Christians in Government

It is our sincere prayer that we may continue to witness increased growth. And there is so much room for growth. Growth in knowledge and understanding, so that we conduct ourselves according to God's will within the realm of politics. And growth such that we become a significant voice in the ears of our community and politicians. As we commence 2005, we issue the challenge - the challenge for further involvement, support, boldness and passion.

CHRISTIANS IN GOVERNMENT

And challenged, is what the attendees of this AGM were, by our guest speaker, Mr Spike Fokkema. Mr Fokkema had been invited to speak on the topic of 'Christians in Government'.

How is a Christian to govern? How is a Christian to practice real-life politics?

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Mr Fokkema promised to challenge our often idealistic arm-chair view of this question, to challenge some of the commonly held perceptions and beliefs, to make us think! That's why he also promised that he would not be providing all of the answers to these questions. Likewise this review gives a taste of the issues raised, but does not provide the answers. Rather, you are encouraged to consider and test these things yourself. You may not agree with some views, but at least consider them carefully and practically.

Mr Fokkema has been blessed with the experience of being a Christian in government, with many years service in the Armadale Council, both as a Councillor and Mayor. He described this as a difficult experience, as he encountered the constant focus of those who left no stone unturned in their bid to undermine Christians and Christianity, as well as opposition from within our churches regarding the manner in which he should fulfil his role.

After briefly outlining the history of Reformed politics in our circles, Mr Fokkema argued that the current poor level of political involvement can largely be attributed to an incorrect approach to politics within our churches, an approach that does not stand up to the Bible and our confessions. He said that there is incorrect support for an approach which includes a call to stand up as a councillor or member of Parliament and declare prophetically: 'Thus saith the Lord'. Mr Fokkema claimed that throughout Church History, where the Church has attempted to rule the state, or vice-versa, this has inevitably led to disastrous consequences for Church and State. Just think of the problems in the time of the Reformation and its aftermath.

Having defined politics as 'the governing and regulation of society by certain laws in order that the individual and the common good is advanced to the honour and glory of God', Mr Fokkema went on to flesh out our understanding of this using Article 36 of the Belgic Confession.

Article 36 states that the sword has been placed in the hand of the government to 'punish wrongdoers and protect those who do what is good (Rom 13:4)'.

Note that the article refers to punishing wrongdoers, as distinct from sinners. The distinction is deliberate in Art 36. It distinguishes the different authorities or jurisdictions and consequent roles of Church and State. It is for the elders (Church) to deal with sinners, and the government to deal with wrongdoers. The key difference: Wrongdoing, (disobedience to civil laws) is clearly always sin, but sin is not necessarily wrongdoing as per the way the term is used in Art 36. The distinction is not always obvious, and there may be many grey areas (as our lively discussion brought out!) yet Mr Fokkema argued that this is a valid and scriptural basis for approaching one's role in government.

Article 36 goes on to state that the government's 'task of restraining and sustaining is not limited to the public order but includes the protection of the church and its ministry in order that (emphasis mine) the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere, and God may be honoured and served by everyone, as He requires in his Word'.

The words 'in order that', are critical here. It is not the role of the government to ensure that the Kingdom of Christ comes, that the Word of the gospel is preached everywhere, and that God may be honoured and served by everyone. BUT, it is the government's role to protect the church in order that these things may happen! Note again, the distinction between the authority, and hence role of Church and State.

That the Kingdom of Christ may come! This is where, in Mr Fokkema's view, so many well-meaning, misguided (also Reformed) people go wrong. They see it as part of the government's role to commission the Kingdom of God on earth, and so drift towards a style of government known as Theonomy.

Theonomists seek to have the Law of God (the 10 Commandments and the OT Civil laws and punishments) incorporated fully into the civil laws of the country. They argue that as the State is "God's servant" the State must legislate against and punish all transgression of God's Laws, including lying, gambling, idol worship, false religions, adultery, homosexuality, divorce, blasphemy, and desecration of the Sunday, to name a few.

Theonomy is often (with exception of Reformed people) coupled to a pre millennial theological position with a view on the Bible that focuses on the "Kingdom of Christ" and is deeply ingrained in many evangelical and some

Reformed groups. Theonomists seek to establish a Christian society, as "the Kingdom of Christ" through preaching, but also very much through political processes and the literal application of Biblical laws on civil laws, opposing all un-Christian behaviour in and by society (eg Sunday trading, gambling, adultery etc). Mr Fokkema also claimed that Theonomistic views can be found among members of the Christian Democratic Party.

More extreme Theonomists, referred to as Reconstructionists, go a step further, and would attempt to 'force' Christendom. Thus, if they had the political power and authority, they would make God's law, the whole Bible in fact, the law of the land. They would also invoke the Biblical punishments for breaking God's law such a stoning to death for blasphemy, breaking the Sabbath or for adultery.

Perhaps we would not adopt as extreme a position, but are we perhaps 'closet' Theonomists?

Mr Fokkema referred to contributions to Clarion from the likes of Rev Aasman, and Rev Van Oene, (see www.spindleworks.com/library search on "Theonomy" for articles from Clarion). Quoting from these references, Mr Fokkema argued that the moral law (the 10 commandments) is not valid for the whole human race, and that it should not be enforced by civil government. God addresses his covenant people in the 10 commandments (I am the Lord your God, etc.), not the entire human race. It is not the government's role to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus said: "My Kingdom is not of this world". The Kingdom of God is not a Christian society ruled by a Christian civil authority. A Christian society is one where the people are born again by the power of the Holy Spirit, working and waiting for the Kingdom to come! However desirable good laws are, laws that uphold God's name, and however beneficial to the progress of the Gospel, a politically Christian society is not the Kingdom of God!

Naturally, we can and must support laws which reflect the 10 commandments. However, Mr Fokkema argued that the basis for this support should be an appeal to the government's role to 'protect the Church' (as per BC Art. 36), and NOT an appeal to the government to uphold the 10 commandments as the laws of God' intended for all mankind to be observed by weight of Civil laws. All of God's creatures, all people everywhere, are bound to live in obedience to their Creator. However it is not the role of Civil Government to see to it that they do so. Sin will be punished, but it is not the Civil Government's role to do so. Civil Government lacks the authority to determine Biblical truth and therefore has no task to enter into the

private lives of citizens, no matter how grossly sinful their deeds may be. If it did it would be usurping an authority God has given solely to the Church and the office bearers. The Church's task may not be devolved to, nor confused with the work of the Civil Authority, so we must be careful that we with our best Reformed intentions do not to promote, let alone practice, that view.

And so for example we Reformed people rightly oppose widespread Sunday trading. Why? Because it impacts negatively on the task of the Church to fulfil its role, rather than opposing it because we believe it contravenes the 4th commandment. The Civil authority is required to protect the ministry of the Church (Art 36). By deregulating Sunday trading the civil authority is doing exactly the opposite, it is making it harder for people to serve the Lord God as He requires of them. So if we promote eg Sunday trading restrictions let us be careful that we do so from the perspective of Art 36 and not on any Theonomist leanings that the Civil Authority is required by God to implement and apply the 10 commandments (with all the theological interpretations thereof) to all of society.

Understandably, much of the discussion that evening focussed on the governments role with respect to the 10 commandments, the distinction between 'wrongdoers' and 'sinners', the distinction between 'civil/public' and 'private' sins, and the role of the Church and the State. Included in this were many difficult examples and scenarios.

Mr Fokkema promised to challenge us, and indeed it turned out that way, with a lively discussion that would have continued for a long time were it not for time restraints. More than enough material for a follow-up meeting ... and more than enough to think and act upon.

Owen Mulder

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Difference

I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day,
I had so much to accomplish that I didn't have time to
pray.

Problems just tumbled about me, and heavier came
each task.
"Why doesn't God help me?" I wondered. He answered,
"You didn't ask."

I wanted to see joy and beauty, but the day toiled on,
grey and bleak;
I wondered why God didn't show me. He said, "But you
didn't seek."

I tried to come into God's presence; I used all my keys at
the lock.
God gently and lovingly chided, "My child, you didn't
knock."

I woke up early this morning, and paused before starting
the day;
I had so much to accomplish that I had to take time to
pray.

- by Grace L. Naessens

"YOUTH WAVES"

Albany's YOUTH WAVES congress is drawing near! This fun-packed weekend of Christian fellowship will be held, the Lord willing, from Friday 25th – Monday 28th March, 2005. Details and registration forms have been sent to all youth clubs – please see your club secretary if you have not received one. Please also note the deadlines for registration and payment... we appreciate your assistance in our organisation.

Looking forward to seeing you there!
The Committee

Aim:

Romans 12:2 teaches all of God's people:

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

This magazine will encourage its readers to earnestly contend for the faith, and to think and act biblically, in the good traditions of the Church of all ages. Its basis is God's word, as the Church confesses in the Three Forms of Unity. It is intended for the younger members of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, and is produced in co-operation with the Una Sancta. Subscription to the Contender is automatic with subscription to the Una Sancta.

It is not meant to be exclusively for unmarried members who still attend the Youth Bible Study Clubs, but for all those who fit within the loose parameters of 16 to 30 years of age.

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