

2 Peacemakers in a World not at Peace
Susan An

3 One Man and One Woman
Kanishka Raffel

5 From the Editor: A Public Faith ... but how to engage in public debate

7 Christians, Justification and the Final Judgment
Andrew Leslie

9 Church-Planting and Gospel Confidence
Simon Flinders

'The marriage relationship, as the basic unit of human community, draws the man and the woman out from themselves to the love of one who is both like and unlike themselves.'

From One Man and One Woman

THE BIG PRIZE ... BUT WITHOUT MERIT

Steve Carlisle



SEPTEMBER IS THE MONTH of the footy finals. It's the time when the best play the best in order to win the grand final. However, for some teams they are just happy to have made the top 8 finals series. Making the finals is, for some teams, an 'above expectations' season. In all honesty, playing in September is a win in itself. (Though they won't admit that publicly!)

Many people believe that Christianity is a bit like the footy finals. In the footy, if you win more games than you lose, then you get into the finals and play for the 'big prize'. Now, not many people think that they are perfect, or that they are awesome and without fault. We all know that in life 'we win some and we lose some'. We do some things right and some things wrong. However for many, they believe that provided they 'win more than they lose', they will make the cut off line, and enter the spiritual equivalent of September footy finals (aka heaven).

However getting into heaven is not a case of making your wins outweigh your losses, about making your good deeds outweigh your sins. Getting into heaven is impossible for all, no matter where you feel you might finish on the 'points table of life'. No, instead heaven, eternal life, is attained by faith in the perfect one, the one who never sinned, the Lord Jesus. Having faith in him is the one and only way that we can be made right

with God and attain eternal life.

As the Scriptures say: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith (Rom 3:23-25).

It doesn't quite sit right with us though, does it? After all, in just about everything we do in life, our efforts are evaluated by our achievements and successes. (Or by our failures!) And yet, with the most important question, that of where we will spend eternity, it does not depend on our efforts, but the efforts of another. The perfect Son of God, the Lord Jesus, died on the cross, paying the penalty for our sin

so that we might receive his perfection credited to our spiritual account. All we need to do is trust that his death is sufficient for our salvation. And to prove to us that it is, he rose back to life powerfully again after three days and is alive today with his Father in heaven.

Your team might not have made the finals this year. As they say 'there is always next year'. But when it comes to Jesus, we mustn't delay until next season. The time is now to put our trust in him, and find the gracious gift of salvation he offers. ☺

Getting into heaven is impossible for all, no matter where you feel you might finish on the 'points table of life'.

PEACEMAKERS IN A WORLD NOT AT PEACE

Susan An



EVERY YEAR, PROTESTANT SCRIPTURE in our parish is invited to participate in the Inter Faith Assembly, organised by Baha'i Scripture. Each of the participating faiths (Protestant, Catholic, Baha'i, Buddhism and Jewish) present a brief talk to the children on the theme of

Baha'i Scripture's choosing. This year, they have selected 'Peacemaker,' as they are saddened by the violence in our contemporary society. Baha'i plans to teach the children to bring peace in the world, for them to be peacemakers.

Baha'i have been very astute in observing that this, indeed, is a violent and unsettled world. The evidence is all around us. It is only in the last 12 months we have seen mass deaths in Orland, Paris and Belgium, countries that are usually not vulnerable to such attacks. (Only naming these three, of course, is woefully inadequate to capture the full scale horror of other countries at war, as well as crimes committed every day, everywhere). The theme of 'peacemakers', and teaching children to bring peace, is a noble idea. It is an idea that is most certainly supported by the Bible. In Romans 12:18, Paul calls on Christians to do just that: 'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.'

However, the Bible is also clear that the cause of violence and division within humanity finds its roots, not our own failures to be peacemakers, but from its separation from God. Genesis 3 recounts how distrust of God and rejection of his authority produced not only enmity with God, but also frustration between humanity and creation, and discord within human relationships, even our very closest ones. In other words, the cause of the violence and evil in the world can be traced back ultimately to our rejection of God. Without having peace with God, therefore, peace with each other will

ultimately be elusive (Romans 1:28-32).

It is no coincidence, then, that in the New Testament Epistles, writers repeatedly urge the readers to remember the peace that they have with God first. It is only after this is reiterated that they urge for peace with each other (Ephesians 4:1-6; Colossians 3:13-15; James 3:17-18; 1 John 3:7-10). In Colossians 3, for example, Paul reminds Christians to forgive each other and live in peace (v15) as they remember that they have been forgiven much (v13). It is only by remembering the forgiveness through Christ that Christians have any chance of making peace with each other work.

The New Testament writers draw on the grace of God when teaching about peace because living in peace is a costly exercise in this fallen and sinful world. It took the radical forgiveness, unimaginable grace and sacrifice of his precious Son for us to have even a chance for peace with God. To expect us to be able to achieve that with each other through our own efforts is naïve at best.

So in our neck of the woods, Protestant Scripture will be teaching the children from Ephesians 2:14-18 this year—that there has been a dividing wall of hostility between God and us, due to our rejection of him. This prevents us from having peace with God, and consequently, with each other. This wall of hostility can only be, and has been, removed by Jesus' death on the cross.

It is our hope and prayer that all present will be challenged and moved by the sacrifice of Jesus and grace of God. ☺

The theme of 'peacemakers', and teaching children to bring peace, is a noble idea. It is an idea that is most certainly supported by the Bible.



The Australian Church Record has served Australian Christianity since 1880, seeking to promote independent and evangelical thinking amongst Australian Anglicans. Since 2004 the publication has been online. Back issues are on the website, which also enables notification emails to be requested. www.australianchurchrecord.net

The Australian Church Record is an evangelical newspaper in the Reformed Anglican tradition of the historic creeds and the 39 Articles of Faith, and the standard of teaching and practice in the Book of Common Prayer. We accept the Scriptures as God's word written, and as containing all things necessary for salvation and the final authority in all matters of faith and behaviour.

Publisher: Australian Church Record
Interim Editor: Nathan Walter

The Australian Church Record is designed and typeset by Lankshear Design

Australian Church Record. ACN 000 071 438

All enquiries:
PO Box 218, Camperdown NSW 1450

ONE MAN AND ONE WOMAN

Kanishka Raffel



Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. Genesis 2:23-25 (ESV)



ONE OF THE GREAT privileges of local church ministry is the opportunity to prepare couples for marriage and to conduct their weddings. Scripture’s teaching on the subject is beautiful, encouraging and challenging! As they consider God’s vision for marriage in Scripture, couples

come to appreciate the importance of seeking God’s help and provision as they make their covenant promises to one another.

We generally start with the above verses from Genesis. Jesus quotes these verses when he is asked a question about marriage, indicating that they are foundational for understanding God’s plan for marriage. Fittingly, the subject is raised at the very beginning of the bible. The marriage relationship will be foundational for God’s purposes that the world be filled and ruled by his image bearers.

This year’s Synod will be asked to affirm that marriage is the union of a man and woman, voluntarily entered into for life. Genesis gives us at least four markers of the nature of marriage as intended by God—publicity, exclusivity, permanency, and complementarity.

That marriage involves a man ‘leaving’ his father and mother and being united to his wife, does not mean that he ceases to be the son of his father and mother, or a member of the family of his birth. But marriage creates a new family with its own integrity that is to be acknowledged by the birth families of both parties to the marriage, and by the community at large. In this sense, marriage is a ‘public’ institution. It is not a merely private arrangement; it has social and legal consequences beyond the parties to it.

The man is to ‘hold fast’ (ESV) or is ‘united’ (NIV) to his wife, and they ‘become one flesh’. It is a picture of an intimate and exclusive union. The idea of one flesh includes but is not limited to physical intimacy and union. The physical union of the man and woman will be a token of the comprehensive intimacy and exclusivity that they share personally, emotionally and spiritually. Christian *homes* are to be places of hospitality

This year’s Synod will be asked to affirm that marriage is the union of a man and woman, voluntarily entered into for life.

ONE MAN AND ONE WOMAN

(CONTINUED)

and welcome—to family, neighbours, strangers and those in need. But Christian *marriages* have a God-intended exclusivity. God gifts to married couples an intimacy of shared conversation, understanding and prayer that is exclusive of all others—it is the realm of their one flesh union, not only physical, but psychological, emotional and spiritual.

Another dimension of the ‘one flesh’ union of a husband and wife is its indissolubility. It is a permanent union. Jesus makes this plain when answering a question in Matthew 19: ‘So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.’ (v6) The marriage bond is to endure until death.

Until recently, the fourth ‘marker’ seemed unremarkable. Today, it is highly contested. Marriage is a complementary union—the union of a man and a woman. Why is this essential to the biblical understanding of marriage?

First, the ‘one flesh’ union of marriage is more than physical but it is not less than physical. The man and the woman in the garden were ‘naked and not ashamed’ because their physical complementarity is a gift from God to be enjoyed and experienced in the marriage relationship. Emotional and personal intimacy is expressed in joyful

physical intimacy that is exclusive of all others. They are ‘made’ for one flesh union.

Second, the complementarity of the man and the woman is essential to their ability

to fulfill the Lord’s command to ‘fill the earth’. Children are to be born into a context of the preexisting public, permanent and exclusive one flesh, covenant relationship of one man and one woman. The complementarity of the sexes is designed to serve the divine commission.

Third, the complementarity of the marriage relationship requires that the man and the woman practice love for an ‘other’.¹ The woman is the ‘fit helper’ for the man because she is neither like the animals nor the same as the man. She is both ‘like’ and ‘unlike’ the man; she is ‘bone of my bone’ but also *ishah* (woman) taken out of *ish* (man). In the unfolding revelation of Scripture, love for one’s own family is extended by the call to love one’s neighbour. The call to love a neighbour is extended by the call to love a



stranger. The call to love the stranger is extended by the call to love an enemy. The marriage relationship, as the basic unit of human community, draws the man and the woman out from themselves to the love of one who is both like and unlike themselves.

Last, the complementarity of the marriage union prefigures the ‘mystery’ of Christ’s union with his bride, the church (Ephesians 5:31-32). Human marriage cannot serve as a picture the union of Christ and the church unless the parties to the marriage are complementary. They must belong to each other but cannot be interchangeable.²

The Bible illustrates a vast array of deep, enriching and godly relationships. We can think of the deep friendships of Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, Paul and Barnabas. The Scriptures delight in human friendship and community. Our hyper-sexualised culture has almost forgotten about intimate non-sexual friendships. Relationships are essential for human flourishing, but marriage is not. But God’s plan and purpose in marriage—public, exclusive, permanent and complementary—reflects his plan to bless individuals, families and society, and to display his faithfulness and love for his people in Christ. ©

1 Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning—The Opening Chapters of Genesis* tr. David G. Preston (IVP, 1984) p102.

2 Kevin DeYoung, *What does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?*, (Crossway, 2015) p32.

FROM THE
EDITOR

A PUBLIC FAITH ... BUT HOW TO ENGAGE IN PUBLIC DEBATE

Nathan Walter



TO THOSE WHOSE BELIEFS instruct you that only God can decide how a human being should die, I urge you, step aside. May your beliefs sustain you and those you love, but do not impose them on the rest of us.'

So said media personality Andrew Denton at a recent address to the Australian Press Club. He was speaking about laws for assisted dying. The basic sentiment, however, is expressed regularly on a whole range of issues going on in public debate at the moment, most of which will have a significant impact on what kind of society we are going to be together. In many ways, Denton voices the secularist agenda—not that religion be abolished altogether; simply that it be marginalized, squeezed out to the edges where it can have no real impact on anything, for entirely private moments only.

The most prominent of these issues being debated at the moment, of course, is same-sex marriage. It's still not clear whether there is going to be a plebiscite or just a parliamentary vote. Christians know that God's Word has much to say about marriage. Yet we face enormous pressure to keep silent, to step aside and not impose our views on everyone else. This new situation requires us to do some careful thinking about what it means for Christianity to be a public faith.

Here are five suggestions for how we, as Christians, might contribute to the public debate ...

First, we should be confident that God's Word has important and good things to say to all people.

This confidence stems from the doctrine of creation,

that God created all things, and in particular, that he created all people, both male and female, in his own image (Gen 1:26-27). With respect to himself, he created us to delight in him, to love, serve, trust and obey him. With respect to the creation, he created us to exercise dominion as his image-bearers, part of which involves the command to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28).

Central to humanity as God has made us, therefore, is that we are made both male and female. It is not good for the man to be alone (Gen 2:18), not in the sense of personal loneliness, but in the sense that humanity as male only has no future. The sexual distinction and complementarity that is bound up in being made male and female is essential to God's purposes for mankind. It is bound up also in public marriage, which forms the basis of family life (Gen 2:24), and therefore also of whole communities. It is a one-flesh union in which a husband and his wife can be completely safe with each other and for each other (Gen 2:25), both sexually and in every way. This is so much more than the casual commitment of our modern over-sexualized hook-up culture, which is so damaging for people.

And so God has brought together, for our good, and for the sake of human flourishing—that we might live under God's blessing and be fruitful and multiply—a whole lot of things: marriage and the fact that we are made both male and female; marriage and family; marriage and sex; marriage and children; marriage and whole human communities. The Bible's vision of marriage, and of what it means to be human, is a glorious vision, because it is our Creator's vision. How good, then, that this year's Synod has an opportunity to affirm this vision: that marriage is the union of a man and a woman, voluntarily entered into for life.

We should be confident that God's Word has important and good things to say to all people.

But, **second, we should be careful about if and when and how we say them.** For the doctrine of sin reminds us that by nature, all people are rebellious towards

Denton voices the secularist agenda—not that religion be abolished altogether; simply that it be marginalized, squeezed out to the edges...



A PUBLIC FAITH ... BUT HOW TO ENGAGE IN PUBLIC DEBATE (CONTINUED)

God in their hearts. They have no interest in God's ways; they have no commitment to living according to his good design; they do not want to hear his voice. (And, of course, nor would we, if not for the finished work of Christ and God's Spirit living within us.)

The realization of these things, however, should temper our expectations about how the people around us will hear the important and very good things that God's Word has to say to all people. In fact, in our particular time and place, the same-sex marriage debate may have become such a touchstone for people, one that determines whether they will listen to anything else that Christians have to say about any topic, there may even be some situations where we refrain from proactively contending for a Christian position on this issue.

Certainly, to participate in the public debate is (in theory) a right afforded to us by virtue of living in a democracy. After

After all, the doctrine of sin teaches us that what sinners need most is not government legislation but the good news of the gospel.

all, are we not also members of the society in which we live? However, this should be a source of blessing for all

members of our society, Christian and not. And when Jesus taught that we must give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's, he introduced an important distinction between God's people and what we might call the secular state. Christians don't look for the state to be Christian.

After all, the doctrine of sin teaches us that what sinners need most is not government legislation but the good news of the gospel. And so **third, we remain committed to the priority of prayerfully proclaiming Christ.** We continue, with God's help, to declare the good news of the gospel that is good news for sinners—news of God's love and mercy and grace and kindness, to those who don't deserve it and can never pay it back. For God demonstrates his own love for us in this—that at just the right time, while we were still sinners, that was when Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). He alone is the one mediator between God and all people, who gave his life as a ransom for all people (1 Tim 2:5-6).


Ultimately, too, it is this gospel about Jesus that sees people come back under God's good and loving rule. For in the light of all that Christ has done and achieved by his death and resurrection, the call of the gospel to sinners is always, 'repent and believe the good news.'



Fourth, we strive always to be compassionate, as we ourselves have received God's compassion. One of the things the gospel is meant to produce in us is a deep and abiding humility. After all, if we have come to know and to trust the Lord Jesus, if we have come to know the goodness of God's Word as the supreme authority in all matters of life and doctrine, it is certainly not by our own merit or cleverness, but because in his great mercy and grace, God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (Col 1:13-14).

Consider Jesus' interactions with unworthy sinners: the woman at the well in John 4; little Zacchaeus; the sinful woman from Luke 7. Not once does Jesus hesitate to tell the sinner, 'Go, and sin no more.' Yet, he has a remarkable capacity to keep drawing them into himself, that they might taste the goodness of God's compassion and mercy. Such should be our goal also.

Finally, our lives should contrast the fruit of knowing the Lord. That is, as our society continues to go through a massive period of upheaval in its attitudes to things like marriage and gender and sexuality, together with all of the mess and confusion that will doubtless follow, those of us who have come to know Jesus as Lord are now in an ongoing process of having all our relationships and all of our thoughts transformed by his good and loving rule.

This is surely the point of the New Testament house-tables (e.g., Eph 5:22-6:4; Col 3:18-4:1). It is also the point in those passages that instruct the church family how to conduct itself. For in both the home family, and in the church family, the Lordship of Christ should be showing itself in the fruit of relationships bearing godly peace and order. As we continue to come into contact with those around us, it should increasingly be both a point of contrast, and a source of blessing—a pleasant taste to show that the Lord is good. 

CHRISTIANS, JUSTIFICATION, AND THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Andrew Leslie



ONE OF THE MORE perplexing dilemmas for many evangelicals is the spectre of a final judgment or evaluation of our Christian faithfulness and obedience on the last day. Our present assurance of complete forgiveness, the unmerited adoption into God's family, along with

every other glorious blessing encircled by the doctrine of justification by faith alone, can make a final judgment of works seem redundant at best and baffling at worst. How can it not corrode that precious confidence the Gospel entitles us to enjoy? Why is it even necessary if we are fully acquitted in Christ? What could possibly be at stake? The very suggestion appears to jar with the full sufficiency of Christ's saving work.

The fact is, in several places the New Testament anticipates the genuine reality of judgment for believers. Famously, Jesus pictures a final separation of the righteous from the wicked, as a shepherd distinguishes his sheep from the goats. One way or another, the Son of Man will judge people according to the way they have treated him and the 'least' of his 'brothers' (Matt 25:31-46). Elsewhere Jesus refers to an ultimate assessment of every 'careless word' (Matt 12:36-7). Likewise, the Apostle Paul indicates that a person's ministry will be exposed and tested by fire on judgment day (1 Cor 3:12-15). And in the most unambiguous terms of all, he declares, 'we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil' (2 Cor 5:10). Beyond these direct references to judgment, we might add Christ's warnings about fruitless branches (Matt 7:19; John 15:2), alongside his expectation that only those who 'do the will' of his Father will enter the kingdom (Matt 7:21, 24-27). Not to be forgotten either is James's insistence that faith without works is 'dead', together with his notoriously challenging conclusion, 'a person is justified by works and not by faith alone' (Jas 2:24. Cf., 14-26).

Since the Reformation at least, passages like these have generated a great deal of controversy concerning the nature of salvation, and particularly the doctrine of justification. For instance, what does Paul mean when he says, 'it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified'

(Rom 2:13)? Protestants have classically taken him to be pointing to the perfect standard of divine judgment no sinner can attain. Christians are those who have been justified, or put right with God, not by 'doing' the law, but by faith in a perfect Saviour who has stood in their place. However, some wonder if Paul here really means to say that Christians who are now justified by faith alone, will somehow finally be justified on judgment day by faith *together* with the fruit of obedience the Holy Spirit has produced. Certainly, Roman Catholicism traditionally teaches a two-stage justification, where a person's justification begins in the present through the gift of faith, but ultimately depends on a final assessment of faith and a Christian's Spirit-produced works of charity.

There are obviously various considerations relevant to each of these passages which we cannot resolve here. Nonetheless, given these ongoing debates about a believer's judgment and justification, it is worth briefly reacquainting ourselves with the classic approach to this question forged at the Reformation. In a short piece like this, alas we have to content ourselves with all the inadequacies of a mere outline. But an outline might at the very least help us get our bearings.

The first thing to notice is that against the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of a two-stage justification, the Reformation consistently emphasised a single, unified justification where a sinner is completely pardoned by God, and granted the legal right to every blessing of salvation through faith in Christ. Put simply, justification is a privilege enjoyed by faith alone (*'sola fide'*), through Christ alone and his perfect sacrificial substitution for sinners (*'solo Christo'*). Because faith trusts Christ to be a sufficient and exclusive saviour, it inherently renounces all confidence in itself or in any 'work' of righteousness.¹

... the Reformation consistently emphasised a single, unified justification where a sinner is completely pardoned by God...

¹ This is what John Calvin meant when he referred to faith as something 'merely passive' as regards justification: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.xiii.5.

CHRISTIANS, JUSTIFICATION, AND THE FINAL JUDGMENT (CONTINUED)



In other words, the sole foundation of our justification is Christ's *objective* work on our behalf. This is why the language of Christ's 'imputed righteousness' needs to be reaffirmed as something unnegotiably fundamental to the Reformational doctrine of justification. It simply means the only reason a sinner may be forgiven and saved by God is because all Christ's perfections and sufficient saving work are legally counted as theirs by faith.²

Needless to say, this formulation of justification emerged from sustained theological engagement with the New Testament, and particularly with the writings of Paul. But flowing out of this formulation there are two basic theological reasons early Protestants strongly resisted any talk of a two-stage justification.

First, such a prospect unavoidably questions the objective sufficiency of Christ's substitution for sinners. If we presently enjoy the legal right to every blessing of salvation by faith alone, why might God require works to justify us on judgment day? Someone may fairly point out that these works Christians produce are really the 'fruit' of Christ's Spirit. It is not as if we will crassly earn our future justification through our *own* efforts. God will simply recognise the evidence of his own work within us, and justify us accordingly. The Reformation still saw a problem with this, however. No matter how much we stress that our works of love obedience are really effects of Christ powerfully present within us, we cannot extract ourselves

from these acts. They are still in an important sense *ours*. And therefore, if our justification ultimately depends on these works, we can no longer say that Christ's work is solely sufficient to grant us the right to salvation.

There is a second problem with a two-stage justification. If, by faith in Christ, *apart from works*, and on account of his righteousness alone, we are justified and freed from any charge of God's law in the present, why would we need to answer a further case before God to be justified on judgment day? Is it that God's law, or the Gospel for that matter, somehow brings a new charge for us to answer before we are finally justified—that we prove the genuineness of our faith *through the evidence of works*? If so, it means God's present declaration of justification is provisional at best. There may be no condemnation *now* for those who are in Christ Jesus, but

who can be absolutely sure if there won't be *then*? The early Protestants realised this prospect casts a shadow over God's Gospel promises. Two-stage justification inevitably undermines confidence in Christ's finished work and replaces it with anxiety, or worse still, complacency over his unfinished work within us. This is why the Reformation considered it to be a 'Gospel issue', serious enough to cause a heart breaking rupture in fellowship.

Early Protestants were acutely conscious of the charge that justification by faith alone leads to license or lawlessness ('antinomianism'). They were equally concerned to uphold the New Testament teaching about the final judgment. There is no question that on judgment day Christian works of love and obedience will be summoned and evaluated as necessary signs of genuine faith, inasmuch as the Spirit unfailingly produces these fruit in all those truly ingrafted into Christ. It is not so much that God himself will somehow need the evidence of works to confirm those whom he has *already* united to Christ by faith, justified, and pardoned once for all. But it may be that these fruit are brought forth to silence any objection—from Satan, or even from a believer's own frail conscience—to vindicate God's glorious work in his elect. To use Augustine's oft-quoted expression, God will 'crown' his own works in us.

...if our justification ultimately depends on these works, we can no longer say that Christ's work is solely sufficient to grant us the right to salvation.

2 The *Belgic Confession* (1561) states the truth simply enough: '[T]o speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our Righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all his merits, and so many holy works, which he hath done for us and in our stead, is our Righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with him in all his benefits, which when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins' (Art. XXII).

IN DEPTH CHURCH-PLANTING AND GOSPEL CONFIDENCE

Simon Flinders



Evangelistic zeal has long been a feature of the life of the Sydney Diocese. It's one of the things I love about our fellowship of churches. We want to see lost people found. We want to see people in our parishes and in our city coming to know the salvation that's in Jesus.

To that end, over the years we've employed lots of different evangelistic strategies. But in recent years, in many ways, church-planting has become a strategy of choice. The way we speak about our shared mission and priorities suggests we are deeply committed to planting new churches as a primary way of reaching the lost in the Diocese. Indeed, it's a strategy that has been embraced by many others across the world too, so much so that we can now speak of a "church planting movement" with serious momentum. Moreover, it's a strategy that has borne real fruit for which we ought to praise God.

However, one of the dangers in embracing a strategy such as this is that people might begin to theologise the strategic choice to the point where a pragmatic decision starts to sound like it's Biblically mandated. One of the ways I have noticed this "theologising" in relation to church planting is the assertion that the Apostle Paul was the original church planter. But was he?

Many of course would say "yes". In fact, many would say that Paul was the father of the whole church planting movement. They might even suggest that the New Testament is a record of his prolific church planting career. After all, does not Acts tell the story of Paul's movement from city to city establishing churches as he went? And

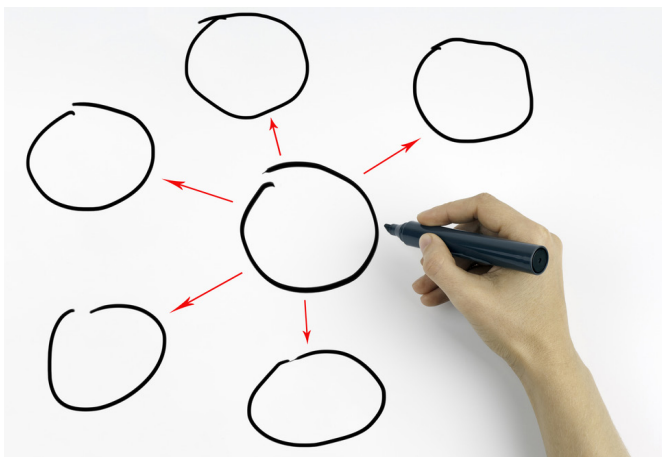
do not the letters of the New Testament reveal that Paul had indeed established many churches that continued to see him as their founding father in one sense or another? In the present time when the church planting movement has become such a juggernaut it is not uncommon to hear people refer to Paul as the great model in this endeavour. Some would go so far as to say that 'Paul is the greatest church planter in the history of the world'.¹

But is this description of Paul's ministry one that would sit comfortably with him if he knew how we used the language of church planting today? Is this assessment of Paul borne out by the narrative of Acts when we look closely? For

example, what do we see when we examine Paul's first ministry journey (in Acts 13-14)?

In Cyprus (Acts 13) Paul preached the gospel in the Jewish synagogues, travelled around the island meeting people, and the proconsul Sergius Paulus came to believe. In Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13) Paul again went first to the synagogue where he brought his message (at the invitation from the synagogue rulers) over two Sabbath days and, as a result of subsequent discussions, many Jews were urged to continue in grace, and many Gentiles believed too. At Iconium (Acts 14) Paul went 'as usual' to the Jewish synagogue with his gospel and a 'great number' of both Jews and Gentiles believed. But in the face of Jewish opposition Paul decided to stay for some 'considerable time' to speak the message of grace and perform signs and wonders. In Lystra (Acts 14) we're not told where Paul was speaking when he healed a crippled man. But when the locals confused Paul and Barnabas for Hermes and Zeus, and some imported Jews stirred up more trouble for them, they left there after only a short stay. In Derbe (Acts 14) they preached the good news and won a large number of disciples before returning to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch to strengthen and encourage new believers (Acts 14:22).

... people might begin to theologise the strategic choice to the point where a pragmatic decision starts to sound like it's Biblically mandated.



¹ Adam Sinnett, 'Life in the Story' Blog, February 5, 2013: <http://lifeinthestory.com/lifeinthestory/2013/2/5/the-apostle-paul-and-the-heart-church-planting-and-pastoring>; accessed July 25, 2016

CHURCH-PLANTING AND GOSPEL CONFIDENCE (CONTINUED)



Significantly, they also appointed elders in each 'church' and committed them to the Lord (Acts 14:23). Paul then went through Pisidia and preached the word in Perga before returning to Antioch where he had begun. Arguably, a similar pattern can be seen in Paul's subsequent journeys as well.

Certainly Paul has an ongoing concern for the disciples in the cities he has visited, and a serious desire to see churches in those places established and strengthened (eg. Acts 14:22-23, cf. 15:36, 16:4-5, 18:22-23, 20:2, 20:7, 20:17-38). Nevertheless, a striking feature of the Acts narrative is Paul's desire not to stay too long in any one place (eg. 18:20), so much so that it seems exceptional that he ended up staying in Ephesus for two whole years (19:10). Paul's default strategy seems to be short-stay ministry in places where the gospel was not previously known (cf. Romans 15:20). However, at no time do we get any suggestion from Acts that Paul saw himself or was seen by others as the pastor of these churches. He certainly didn't assemble a launch-team, spend a year praying about it, and then mark his arrival in any of these cities by holding the first public service of the city's new church. Rather, Paul simply sought out opportunities to proclaim the gospel. In a few cases he stayed long enough in a town or city to see people beginning to be established in the faith as well. But what flowed from that seemed, in his mind, to be up to the Lord to work out and him to follow-up later.

When we think of church planters today and how most begin their ministry or their churches, could we say that the pattern resembles that of the Apostle Paul? Would Paul call himself a church planter (in the sense that we use the word)? I would say "no". Clearly, Paul's preferred description of himself is as an "apostle", and it seems that from his perspective that title adequately described his ministry. But beyond that, if we wanted to ask for a contemporary paradigm that resembles Paul's first-century ministry, we'd be more likely, I suggest, to use a description like "itinerant evangelist".

So what implications might this have for church planting? In the first place, I would say "none at all". Whether Paul is, in fact, the father of the church

planting movement has very little to do with whether church planting is a good idea. Patently, in many, many circumstances and places church planting is a wonderful idea that's entirely consistent with Biblical principles. All I've argued for to this point is that those who claim Paul as a "church planter" should look more carefully at the Biblical evidence. I'm simply suggesting that we need to avoid theologising a good idea in order to lend it a weight that Biblically it may not be able to carry.

However, I do think answering this question about the nature of Paul's ministry does help us to see something that Acts is trying to show us which the church planting movement could be in danger of forgetting. That is, Paul's primary strategy in seeking to make disciples was to proclaim the gospel, rather than to establish a church. That's not to say he had no interest in the establishment of churches. Clearly he did. But it does tell us that establishing a church was not his first order of business. Rather, his first order of business was to preach the grace of Christ, and to persuade people, in the Spirit's power, to become Jesus' disciples. This was his mission. The establishment of churches was *not* his mission as much as the *fruit* of his mission. The establishment of churches was typically the stunning work of God in the wake of Paul's departure.

Therefore, I think we can confidently say

that one of the things Luke is eager to impress upon the readers of Acts is that what the world primarily needs is the gospel. The way some in the church planting movement speak, and the way sometimes even we in the Sydney Diocese speak, you could be forgiven for thinking that what we believe the world first needs is the church (ie. "there are lost people out there so we must go and plant a church"). But a careful reading of Acts cautions us against sloppy thinking in this regard. What the world first needs is the gospel. What the new suburbs of Sydney need first is the message of the grace of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the establishment of a Bible-believing church may or may not be the best first strategy for ensuring they hear the gospel².

Paul simply sought out opportunities to proclaim the gospel.

2 Indeed I even wonder if the language of "Bible-believing churches" betrays exactly the sort of thinking I'm questioning here. If we believe that establishing churches is primary, then of course we'll want to make sure they're the very best churches they can be. But if we believe the gospel is primary, then I wonder if, to some extent, we won't care so much about how it arrives or who delivers it (cf. Philippians 1:18).


CHURCH-PLANTING AND GOSPEL CONFIDENCE (CONTINUED)

We should give ourselves heart and soul to the work of evangelism in our Diocese, and in the world. And we should give ourselves to it in whatever form it should take. Perhaps evangelistic church planting is the best way to go in some places? Perhaps itinerant evangelism (like Paul's) is the way to go in some places? Perhaps an annual mission team sent from an existing church? Perhaps the establishment of a caring ministry for the community? Perhaps a school plant? Perhaps an aged-care-facility plant? Perhaps more than one of the above? Whatever it is, we must not think that church planting is *equivalent* to evangelism, or the *only* way to do evangelism, or even the *best* way to do evangelism.

What I'm saying is that when a new greenfields suburb opens up our most earnest desire should not so much be the arrival of a church as the arrival of the gospel. Even if in some places the gospel *might* profitably arrive through the arrival of a new church, it's not the *only* way this can happen. Remaining clear about that will help us remember what the new residents of that suburb most need. They need to meet Jesus.

Practically speaking, if we get this right, there will also


be some important consequences. If we think the only way or the best way of proclaiming the gospel is the planting of a church there will be times when we respond to opportunities more slowly than we otherwise might. New opportunities require nimble responses and a flexibility of approach will equip us to be swift where we need to be. Furthermore, clarity of thinking here will ensure we don't become strategically one-dimensional. Moreover, remaining clear about this will help us to dignify the work of evangelists who aren't church planters, and will help us in our encouragement of all Christian leaders to 'do the work of an evangelist' (2 Timothy 4:5). Most importantly, a godly refusal to *equate* evangelism with church-planting will ensure that our chief confidence will be in the gospel rather than the church, in the message that forms the community rather than in the community itself.

The Apostle Paul may not be a model church planter (as we think of church planting today). But he is a model to us in gospel confidence, and gospel zeal. Wherever he had opportunity, he proclaimed the message Christ had entrusted to him. He did so, because he believed that what the lost world most needs is the gospel of life-altering grace. 

CHRISTIANS, JUSTIFICATION, AND THE FINAL JUDGMENT (CONTINUED)

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8 On this basis, Calvin and others had no difficulty saying that we ordinarily come to 'possess' eternal life through the path of good works—not at all because we earn the right to it by works, or even that we are justified before God by them—but purely in recognition that they are the necessary, Spirit-produced fruit of true faith.³ I say 'ordinarily' because there is always the case of a genuine believer who dies before there is much real opportunity for these fruit to emerge, like the thief on the cross (Lk 23.40-3). But on judgment day, false faith will undoubtedly be exposed by its enduring lack of real fruit (cf., Matt 7.19, 21-7). Some early Protestants were even happy to refer to a judgment-day 'justification' of our faith and works—both in the sense that works evidence or vindicate genuine faith (as James speaks), and in the sense that even our best Spirit-produced works are tainted by sin and need to be pardoned by Christ. But this was never

understood to be a final 'stage' or even 'aspect' of that justification by faith alone, through Christ alone, which grants us the blessing of salvation and eternal life both now *and* in the future.

To be sure, then, on the last day our actions will be judged, rewarded, and even justified in a narrow and distinct sense. That should spur us on to love and good deeds, not in fear, but as adopted children of God who have been re-wired to seek our Father's pleasure and approval. Indeed, there is truly no place for fear because God's final sentence of eternal life rests on an entirely separate foundation—Christ—and he will merely recognise what is true of us by faith alone, now and then. In fact, this is precisely the truth that liberates us for a life of love. Genuine Christian faith recognises God's free mercies in Christ for what they are. And faith's very awareness of divine grace sows the seed of delight that cannot but germinate into a life of Christian love and obedience that will glorify God on the last day (cf., Tit 2.12). 

3 Calvin, *Institutes* (1559), III.xiv.21; III.xviii.1, 2.