

welcome

Welcome to engage.mail. Originally part of a pilot project in 2007-2008, we have relaunched our monthly email for June 2009. Engage.mail is a sample of EA's work to share resources and insight across the Australian Evangelical community through printed and web resources and events and seminars. EA—now 50 years young—promotes theologically reflective, culturally engaged Christianity. We hope you will join with us—share, support, contribute!

Grace and peace

Ian Packer
Director of Public Theology
EA (Australian Evangelical Alliance)



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Faith: Toxic or Life-Serving?

A visit to the website of the UK based National Secular Society is a sobering experience. Reflecting the growing 'evangelistic' atheism of our time, one of its more popular services is the issue of certificates of de-baptism. In spite of a £3 fee, apparently around 100 000 have been issued since they went on offer 5 years ago, with the issue rate increasing sharply in recent months. The promo line goes "Liberate yourself from the Original Mumbo-Jumbo that liberated you from the Original Sin you never had." Other campaigns have been to sponsor the "There's probably no God" London bus campaign, and to express outrage at the state sponsorship of chaplains, as well as at the political influence of faith in society.

It's not an isolated group. Bolstered by the writings of, amongst others, Dawkins and Hitchens, there is a groundswell of support for the mantra proclaiming that faith is both toxic and abusive, and that the sooner the world is declared a God free zone, the better.

Everything within me wants to protest at the allegations. They are undoubtedly one sided, reflecting the same narrow intolerance expressed by the religious fundamentalists they oppose. When I hear them lament that exposing children to religious instruction is a form of child abuse, my instinct is to sarcastically retort that if they consider this to be child abuse, they must have led pretty sheltered lives. But I know that this will not do. Beneath the overstated accusations lie some disturbing realities.

Before plunging into the unsettling, there is a glowing story that both can and should be told. Christians can claim credit for many of the positive social advances made in the last 2000 years. While multiple social factors are invariably at work in societal evolution, it is not fair to explore the abolition of slavery, the protection of the rights of women and children, the development of the welfare state or the shift in focus from retributive to restorative justice, without repeatedly referring to the Christian faith that motivated and inspired most of those who championed these causes. And they represent a small selection of an impressive array of humanitarian achievements.

It would, however, be simplistic to assume the argument could be closed by referring to some of the more satisfying outcomes resulting from the interface between the Christ story and human history. There is also a shadow side. There have been many times in the history of the church when it has been supportive of a right wing agenda, which on occasion has revealed itself in racism, sexism, homophobia, militarism, ecological and economic exploitation, cultural insensitivity and more beside.

Even if not actively supporting exploitation, faith can easily wear unattractive masks.

There is faith as escapism. While it is perhaps understandable that African American slaves longed for the day when the sweet chariot would swing low to carry them home, it is more difficult to understand why those whose lives are saturated with material abundance are sometimes so heavenly minded that they are of little use to those on the fringes of life, indeed those who are specially dear to the heart of God.

Then there is faith as the status quo. This mask bears no resemblance to what's required to be an authentic Christ follower, but nonetheless for many people things are good provided they've been around for more than 20 years. Nostalgia, rather than a commitment to a daring faith agenda, is the driver. Onlookers fail to find it inspiring.

There is also faith as smugness and self-righteousness. While most have renounced the wagging finger, the image of Christians as people who see themselves as morally superior to lesser mortals and who tut-tut at the folly of those who don't share their faith, persists.

This alerts us to an important truth. Faith can spark life's loftiest journeys but paradoxically, can also accompany and bolster its most misguided and tragic detours.

Because of the potentially abusive nature of faith it is important to highlight some of the warning signs that it is at risk of proving toxic. While an exhaustive list is beyond the scope of this essay, danger signals include an insistence on unquestioning faith, or faith as compulsion instead of faith as invitation, or where there is legalism without love, or any form of faith that aims for power and control and attempts to justify the unjustifiable in the name of God.

So if you're up to it, why not pay an unsettling visit to the website of the National Secular Society? Be outraged by what you read, but let the little kernel of truth at the site disturb you. And as more of us let that disquiet grow, perhaps we can birth a future where the Christian faith again accompanies life's noblest journeys.



Brian Harris is the Principal of Vose Seminary and the Senior Pastor of Carey Community Baptist Church, Perth, Western Australia.

Casseroles and Spirituality in Dialogue

The gift of a home-made casserole to someone who finds themselves in crisis is a beautiful event. When I think about a casserole given to someone in tough circumstances (and there's been a number of times in my life when that someone has been me), I can't help but appreciate the practical love that it represents. There is no escaping the fact that someone has invested their time, resources and effort to not only create the casserole but also to deliver it to the doorstep of someone in need.

As we ponder this simple act of kindness I want to ask a question to spark a conversation. How can we as Christians practically live out our spirituality (that is, our life in Christ) with at least as much impact as a 'casserole made and delivered to someone in need'?

One approach to spirituality is to imagine the perfect casserole and to worship its 'abstract' power to nourish and sustain. This way of thinking about spirituality comes down to us indirectly from the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. In elements of his worldview it was only the things in heaven that were truly good and beautiful. In contrast to this, the world was intrinsically evil and less valuable. Many of Plato's followers (though people like Aristotle were an exception) applied their energy towards reaching towards these perfect and lofty forms. This often left them with little interest, energy or motivation to help those who were less fortunate. Their spirituality was about privilege, hierarchy and abstraction and not about reaching out to the rest of society 'below' them. Yes, they certainly imagined the casserole, but that's as far as it went. They loved ideas and perfection, but caring for the less fortunate was a bridge too far.

It would be pleasing if we could announce that this particular kind of ancient Greek thinking no longer holds sway in our world today. But unfortunately many philosophers tell us that this particular kind of thinking continues to strongly influence our world. Dare I say, it also influences you and me and our churches.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is in complete contrast to this ancient Greek way of thinking. The first clue to this is in the Bible. The Bible tells the story of God's interactions with the world since creation. God our Father, in all his holiness and perfection, insists on being with his people and doing everything possible to restore his people to himself whenever they turn away. God doesn't abstract himself away from us. Rather, he comes out to find us and breaks down the barriers so we can be together with him.

The depth of God's love for the world was underlined in red by the sending of his Son into the world. God refuses to just be 'abstract' about the kind of relationships he wants with us. Instead, he acted in time and space and demonstrated once and for all that he loves the creatures of his world and that he is not above reaching out to them and helping them. In God's story,

he 'makes' much, much, much more than a casserole and 'delivers' it personally to the world he has created.

Now, here's the rub. If our world is so deeply entrenched with the Platonic thinking of the ancient Greeks, what happens if we mix the gospel of Jesus Christ, inside our minds and hearts, with this ancient Greek thinking? I believe the answer to this question is central to answering the question I posed at the beginning.

As Jesus told us "the words that come out of your mouth come from your heart. And that is what makes you unfit to worship God" (Matthew 15:18). Now the 'heart' is the wellspring of our lives and is the signature of our character and thinking. So, what kind of heart does it take to practically live out our Christian spirituality?

The answer to this question from the Bible is clear. Through God's grace in Christ we are invited to enter into God's story as our story. As we said before, God's story is all about his interactions with people and his heart to save them. "All of you are God's children because of your faith in Christ Jesus. And when you were baptized it was as though you had put on Christ in the same way you put on new clothes. Faith in Christ is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew, or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman" (Galatians 4: 26-28).

Now for an ancient Greek who followed Plato (and anyone who follows in their footsteps), that kind of teaching about the heart is just plain foolishness! And you are not going to get any casseroles from them!

What kind of thinking and heart is your spirituality based on? There's a lot more we can say about this. But I trust this is some real food for thought and action.

(Scripture quotations are from CEV)



Michael York lives in Sydney with his wife Ruth and three sons. He is a content provider and facilitator for the Australian College of Ministries' course 'Mastering Change'. Michael has a background in science, business and Christian ministry and works as a change agent with leaders and organisations.

michaeljyork@primusonline.com.au

The Challenge of Friendship

"Friendship is one of the greatest gifts of life; without friendship our lives would be impossibly impoverished." Thus says Paul Wadell, borrowing from Aristotle's famous quote that without friendship life is not worth living.

The Bible has many stories of the gift of friendship, but we may gloss over how significant friendship is by focusing on history, or the metanarrative. To examine the challenge of friendship, let's look at the friendship of Israel's champion David and King Saul's son Jonathan, using the eight characteristics of friendship identified by Paul Wadell: attraction, affection, enjoyment together, freeing, benevolence, mutuality, shared vision/interests, and trust and faithfulness.

Attraction. Friends are attracted to each other, often through a common interest. There are several things that might have attracted David and Jonathan to friendship: they were both very skilful and successful soldiers, and they both began as the favourites of the King, Saul; David as his champion and musician, Jonathan as his son and heir.

Affection. Friends like each other. 1 Samuel 18:1-5 talks about the deep affection David and Jonathan felt for each other, they exchanged gifts and promised to be loyal.

Enjoyment together. Friends enjoy spending time with each other. David and Jonathan clearly liked to be with each other. 1 Samuel 23:14-18 refers to Jonathan seeking David out, even at risk to his own standing with his father.

Freeing. Friends free each other up to reach their potential through encouragement, providing opportunities and prayer. Jonathan supported David's right to be king against his father, Saul, and his own interests as the next in line to the throne.

Benevolence. Friends are kind and generous to each other. Jonathan defended David's reputation and rescued him several times.

Mutuality. A distinctive characteristic of friendship is that it is mutual, that is in common, shared. It also has connotations of reciprocity, that both benefit from the relationship. In David and Jonathan's friendship they formalised this mutual aspect through a covenant, an agreement to look after each other and their families (1 Samuel 18:3, 23:18).

Shared vision/interests. This is often the thing that initiates the friendship, and continues to sustain the friendship. David and Jonathan shared a vision for David's God-granted right to the throne of Israel (1 Samuel 23:17).

Trust and faithfulness. The deep communication and vulnerability necessary to form a deep friendship is made possible by shared trust, and a sense of loyalty to the other. For David and Jonathan, this loyalty was tested to the extreme. Jonathan tested his father's fear and hatred of David, on behalf of his friend (1 Samuel 20), and David spared Saul's life twice, as an act of faithfulness to his king, and to his friendship with Jonathan (1 Samuel 24 and 26).

In Christian circles friendship is often seen as a weaker relationship to family or marriage. This may be because those two relationships are metaphors for our relationship with God, and within the church. God is our Father; we are his children (John 1:12-13); we speak about the church family. The church is the bride for Christ (Ephesians 5:22-32). The language of devotion in the Psalms is often the language of lovers (Psalms 42; 63). Those relationships are also the basis of sacraments: marriage and baptism; they are rituals within our church services that affirm those relationships within our lives.

Yet friendship may be a better model of relationship because it doesn't have the binds of those relationships, and is therefore more able to speak honestly and freely about what is best for the other. In a marriage my primary responsibility is to the bond of marriage, the covenant. In a family there are blood ties rather than attraction. Loyalty is to the family, to keep the family whole, to preserve the family integrity.

Friendship is a relationship where the shared values are not turned inward like the family or marriage; but turned outward, toward God and/or ministry and/or community. It also has a mutuality that continues to be based on love and enjoyment, for when that ends, the friendship ends.

That is not to minimise or dismiss the value of marriage or family relationships. Instead, the metaphor of friendship may challenge us to examine our spiritual and church relationships in a new light.

The friendship of David and Jonathan rose above the demands of family and was valued by David higher than romance (2 Samuel 1:26).

It was a friendship that enabled David to fulfil his destiny in the salvation story of God and his people, as the model king, and the family line of the Messiah, Jesus (2 Samuel 7:8-16).

It is significant that Jesus, the descendant of David, should choose "friend" as the new title, and the new model of relationship for the community that would become the early church. In some of his final words to his disciples he called them his friends (John 15:15). In using this title, Jesus would have been mindful of

the models of friendship from Scripture.

A friendship like David and Jonathan's: deep, intentional, sharing, self-sacrificing, with a vision of God's purpose for each other's lives that is prophetic and enduring... surely this is the friendship which Jesus saw as the basis of relationship in the new covenant community, and in our church communities today:

"This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've

named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father." (John 15:12-15, The Message)



Kara Martin has lectured in Spirituality and Friendship at Macquarie Christian Studies Institute and was Director of the School of Christian Studies, Robert Menzies College in Sydney.

News Comment

The 'Matthew Johns Affair'

I am hesitant to comment on the specifics of the present case in the media, as the full facts of the matter seem to be somewhat vague. However I have been interested in the public response to the concept of group sex and sportsmen.

It would be interesting to see the reaction to this situation if this had been a group of politicians or doctors gang-banging a teenager. There seems to be a higher level of public tolerance of the bad behaviour of sportsmen, as if being drunk and boorish is their entitlement for entertaining us so royally on the field.

There appears to be a deal of public sympathy for Matthew Johns. It is acknowledged that he was unfaithful to his wife, but this is seen as a private issue for him and her.

There seems to be greater ambivalence over the claim that he was involved in degrading and humiliating behaviour. Group sex seems to be seen as morally neutral as long as all parties are consenting adults. The argument in the present case seems to hinge on how consensual the relationship was, and whether the power balance between the parties was equal.

Johns claims that the woman was a consenting, willing adult, and that he was not forcing her to be involved in sex with multiple partners. However, if a person is willing to be abused, does this lift the moral responsibility off the abuser? There is surely a basic human instinct that resists degrading another person, and this instinct was ignored. In addition, it seems that if a woman is 'up for it' then men have no independent responsibility. Women alone have to take the responsibility for appropriate sexual behaviour.

The liaison may have started as consensual, but the fact that more men entered the room and began using the woman can never be construed as equally consensual. When a person is out of control of a situation, and

unable to state their own needs and wishes, she/he becomes the subject of abuse. It is clear that there was a huge power imbalance in a situation where several men were involved with one woman, and by her own admission, the woman in question found this traumatising.

There can be no avoiding the fact that these men behaved in an irresponsible fashion that showed no respect for a woman, or for themselves. Rugby players, in particular, seem to inhabit a macho culture which condones bad behaviour as 'high spirits' and is not conducive to seeing women as equals. It is sad that the general public does not speak out against this, but continues to collude with a male bias in our society which allows men in general, and sportsmen in particular, to take no or limited responsibility for their sexual behaviour.



Anne Wilkinson-Hayes is Regional Minister NW Metro, Baptist Union of Victoria

Our next issue of Faith and Community (3-4 issues via email per year as part of EA partnership) will include an analysis of the social and cultural issues raised by this 'affair' along with articles on speaking about God in disasters and a retrospective of a year (and a bit) under Rudd. Email ian@ea.org.au to subscribe.

Gospel and Culture: Miroslav Volf's Missional Ecclesiology

A central theme running through much of Miroslav Volf's writing is the relationship between gospel, church, mission and contemporary western culture, and this has some significant implications for the church in Australia it seeks to develop a missional understanding of what it means to be church (i.e., a missional ecclesiology).

For Volf, the question of how the church and the gospel relate to culture naturally emerges from the church's growing awareness of the profound influence cultures have on shaping who human beings are, the diversity of cultures colliding and communicating across a shrinking globe, and the rapid evolution of cultures. Cultures are the substance from within which churches emerge and are immersed, and these cultures have characteristics and expressions that may be adopted, adapted, transformed from the inside, discarded, and replaced.

In 'It is Like Yeast', Volf writes, 'There is no single correct way to relate to a given culture as a whole, or even to its dominant thrust. There are only numerous ways of accepting, transforming, rejecting, or replacing various aspects of a given culture from within. This is what it means for Christian difference to be internal to a given culture.'

The implications of this are that the churches, and individual Christians, make a difference from within a given culture that they and others naturally inhabit, our transformations are piecemeal this side of the new creation, and accommodation to culture should be replaced by an emphasis on difference.

Not only so, but disruption from cultural identity is normal at conversion, yet it remains internal to a given culture, and inculturation is best done by Christians themselves as they wrestle with appropriate expressions of faith in their own cultural context. 'The key issue is how to maintain the Christian difference from the culture of which we are a part and how to make that difference a leaven in the culture', since difference is essential to authentic and transforming faith and ecclesiology, and without it the church is left with nothing.

Discernment is needed in order to identify the appropriate points of difference and non-difference within a given culture, while keeping ourselves open to God's reign without extracting ourselves from our culture.

The mission of the church is innate to its essence and identity, for 'if the church is the image of the Trinity, then the church's very being is a form of mission.' The church, in Volf's ecclesiology, is intrinsically missionary and is called to the following:

* Continue the mission of Jesus, through the proclama-

tion of the truths of the new creation, forgiveness, transformation, trinitarian embrace, and rebirth;

* Place reconciliation, grace and the pursuit of justice at the heart of its social mission, allowing healing to spring forth, even in the context of remembrance;

* Care for human beings in their entirety - their bodies, spirituality, and larger social and ecological environments - and in this endeavour discover the presence and inbreaking of the Spirit of God going before them;

* Demonstrate both hiddenness and openness by rejecting the lure to become one more social institution among many, while continuing to offer an alternative vision shaped by the future and present reign of God, and to 'subvert, challenge, and transform' the culture around it and in which it is immersed. In doing so, the church pursues 'the very mission at the core of the church's identity';

* Practice 'unaggressive evangelism', by recognising that it is God's task to change a person's heart and religious or spiritual allegiances;

* Focus on the cross of Christ, through the celebration of the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper), in such a way that injustice, deceitfulness and violence in our world are resisted, and public engagement is inspired by remembrance of the Lord's death 'until he comes';

* Practice radical worship that is both adoration of God, and vigorous action in the world;

* Provide a 'robust alternative to the pervasive culture of late capitalism' in anticipation of the new creation - by being aliens and sojourners who engage in a 'soft missionary difference' of both difference to and acculturation in contemporary culture (that is, both commensurability and incommensurability), and by being both a prophetic community and a sign of hope in the context of modernity and postmodernity.

Volf's insights into the relationship between church, mission and culture certainly leave much to ponder and practice.



Rev Graham Hill is a lecturer at Morling College in Sydney, and Director of the Morling College Centre for Leadership.

Reproduced from Soundings No. 36, 13 June 2006 (Centre for Christian Ethics, Morling College, now part of the Tinsley Institute)

Hot Buttons and Cool Reason: Have We Lost the Art of Moral Argument?

Hot button - "word or issue that ignites anger, fear, enthusiasm, or other passionate response. Such an issue, frequently involving values or morals, serves to lift an audience out of its seats. (Safire's New Political Dictionary (Random House, New York, 1993)).

There are a number of controversial such issues within the Christian community today, including the role of women, the nature of hell, and the moral permissibility of same-sex relationships. At the interface between the church and society, abortion, euthanasia, anti-religious vilification law, gay marriage and access to IVF and/or adoption for singles and homosexual couples are all hot button issues. In Parliamentary democracies such as Australia, Christians have both the opportunity and the obligation to attempt to influence public opinion and public policy in relation to such issues. To bear witness to the biblical revelation of God's holiness and his plans and purposes for humanity, and to promote the biblical vision of human flourishing. But what is the best way to do this? And are there any methods which we ought not use?

When there is disagreement about an issue and people from both "sides" talk to each other or in the public space promoting their point of view, we call this an argument. But a look at the two distinct ways we use the word "argument" tells us a lot about the state of public moral discourse. An argument can mean a discussion in which reasons are advanced for and against some proposition, but it can also mean simply a quarrel or a controversy. Public policy debate on "hot button" moral issues is mostly argument in the second rather than the first sense. Big on anger, fear, enthusiasm and passion, not so big on reasonable persuasion. And this also, sadly, is sometimes true of Christians' contributions. Why might this be the case?

One explanation might be that we've picked up some bad habits from the world, specifically the adversarial practices of the law and of politics. Framing things as absolute dichotomies - guilty/not guilty, black/white - entails dismissing any argument against your own "case". One side wins and the other loses. But this method is poorly equipped to deal with complex moral issues. Many moral issues are complex, and even when the moral issue itself is clear (eg there's no support for adultery or injustice in the Bible) the question of if and how this should be reflected in legislation and public policy may be complex. Multiple competing principles and considerations must be weighed against each other, until we arrive at a conclusion "on balance". Whenever we come to such a conclusion, there will often remain powerful and valid counterarguments against it, which we ought to acknowledge and take account of. For example, a person who is generally opposed to euthanasia needs to recognise the strength of some of the arguments for legalised euthanasia and consider their implications for public policy (such as

ensuring adequate palliative care provision including pastoral care for the dying). But we find this difficult. It's much easier to think that all the right is on our side, and that there can be no doubt or legitimate disagreement about it. To concede the validity of some of our "opponents'" reasoning might be seen as weakening our "case". Such an attitude often means we don't really have to listen to arguments against our position, and are not open to being challenged, modifying or even radically changing our view.

People with whom we disagree can become opponents or even enemies. We do not seek to persuade, we simply assert as forcefully as possible that they are wrong, stupid, disgraceful, morally bankrupt and so on. We might impute wrong motives to them, and we might employ rhetorical devices such as the use of hyperbole. So, anyone who considers there might be some legitimate grounds for legalising abortion becomes a "worshipper of Molech". We might attempt to discredit a claim made by someone by attacking their character or by describing other claims/views they have (the ad hominem fallacy). For example, we might attempt to discredit everything Professor Peter Singer says about the moral argument for vegetarianism by pointing to his views on infanticide and euthanasia. We should not dismiss any argument out of hand just because it is made by someone with whom we often disagree, even if the disagreement is at a fundamental level.

There are other unfair or fallacious tactics of argumentation. One is the "straw man" tactic: misrepresenting another's position, making it appear more implausible, so it can more easily be refuted. Other examples include argumentum ad populum, which is an appeal to popular opinion to support a conclusion, and argumentum ad ignorantium, the claim that because a particular proposition has not been proved to be true (or false) one may conclude that it is false (or true). It is tragic when, in pursuit of so called godly aims, we resort to ungodly strategies. If the medium is even only a part of the message, the way we conduct our arguments speaks as loudly as their content. Might not graciousness, temperance, integrity, humility and respect for those with whom we disagree be more persuasive? "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:6).

I think the underlying explanation for the poor quality of some Christian argument in the public square, and the adoption of ungodly strategies of debate in place of reasoned argument, is a loss of confidence in the ability of Christian moral arguments to persuade a post-Christian, often militantly secular audience. We have adopted the view (most famously put by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*) that contemporary moral argument is incoherent, because we have no shared tradition to give meaningful content to a "common morality". Even in the secular world there is intractable dis-

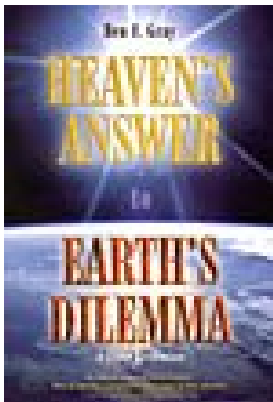
agreement about the source of moral authority (if it indeed exists), and how we decide right and wrong (normative ethical theories). If disagreement exists at such a foundational level, is all moral argument doomed to be, as MacIntyre suggests, reduced to emotivism, the attempt to win others to our views by appeal to emotion rather than rationality? Do we have any common ground, any starting point, any agreed premises on which to construct a rational argument about moral questions? Next time we'll look at how we might legitimately construct moral arguments in the public square.



Denise Cooper-Clarke is Researcher for EA Public Theology 3 days per week. She is a graduate of medicine and theology with a Ph. D in medical ethics (end of life decision making). She has a special interest in professional ethics and the ethics of virtue. She is an adjunct Lecturer in Ethics at Ridley Melbourne, and a tutor in medical ethics at the University of Melbourne. Denise and her husband David have three adult children and one grandson. Denise is based at St Hilary's Anglican Church in Kew, Melbourne.

Book Review

Heaven's Answer to Earth's Dilemma: A Grace Revolution Ben Gray



In this very timely, 160 page publication; Ben Gray lifts our sights immensely. He describes the vast scenario in which God's people are called to honor and serve Him, not only in church, but in every realm of life - indeed throughout the whole creation. He startles and encourages us with the astonishing yet biblical claim that the whole of creation is longing for God's people to come into their own; something many Christians have never realised or long-since forgotten.

gotten.

Ben Gray's portrayal of the scale and scope of our calling goes far beyond that found in most Christian writings. He expands our horizons enormously. On the other hand this book is applied theology! He "earths" the living act, as individually and churches of our exalted calling with the practical insights as to what this means. And unlike some who advise us for example; to put family first, marriage first, or one's own well being first, this author urges us to put God's Kingdom first.

Responding to this for more challenging and difficult calling, will he argues, result in a greater authenticity and credibility in our lives which honors God, demonstrates His Kingdom and enriches the lives of all those around us. And he helps us see what "Kingdom First" living will mean in our marriage, families, businesses, work places and communities.

An excellent companion study guide entitled Obtainable Wisdom is due for imminent release. It is a virtually essential tool if pastors, individual readers, and those reading Heaven's Answer in groups are to get the maximum benefit from the book. I cannot recommend it too highly.

Heaven's Answer to Earth's Dilemma is greatly needed. It will spoil you forever for mediocre, demonstrated, culturally modified church. It should leave you trembling with wonder and excitement and it gives clear direction about the way forward for twenty first century Christians.

Gil Cann was Editor of Australian Evangelical Alliance's former magazine, Working Together

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