

# Theological Musings

- of a community activist

by

**John Barber**

*“God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”* **Reinhold Niebuhr**

*“He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.”* **Proverbs 19:7**

*“He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”* **Micah 6:8**

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While the author will not commit to entering into correspondence, he would be happy to receive and respond to useful feedback concerning this paper and hopes it will stimulate helpful discussion and action.

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*“Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy reward. Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon day: And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.”* **Isaiah 58:6-11**

*“Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”* **Matthew 10:16**

**Note:** it was my intention that this paper (book) would eventually be incorporated in a later edition of a book I wrote earlier: “Outside the Camp”, as it complements what I had already written, but now it is part of a sequel. The first edition of that book touched on many of the themes contained in this paper, which is specifically aimed at Christians who wish to come to terms with the challenge of community activism and do so based upon sound theological ideas and understanding.

## **Theological Musings**

### **Spirituality and community activism**

When I wrote the first edition of “Outside the Camp”, I did so aware that matters of faith or religion or, to use a popular modern term that is meant to be all embracing and designed to give minimal offence - spirituality, played an important part in what I came across when venturing “outside the camp” and how to approach what I found there. Not only did it provide the basis of my own involvement in the community, but in all sorts of guises it cropped up during the course of my various activities, despite operating within a paradigm that tends to be resistant to anything too dogmatic when it came to spiritual matters. Importantly, it played a major part in shaping my own values and, as I was to become aware, the values of others.

One of the challenges writing that book was to tell my story and share my insights, not just to those who believed as I did, but to those who believed differently, yet saw the importance of community activism and working together to achieve common goals. I did not want to overplay the spirituality aspect, out of deference to those who did not share my faith. I wanted to find common ground and a way to go forward based on our shared humanity and out of mutual respect. Yet I increasingly came to realize this was something I could not ignore. Moreover, many of those who have read my book would have done so out of Christian conviction and might want to find a theological rationale for doing those things encouraged in that book. Furthermore, some who are non-Christians might also want to find a rationale for being community activists. For these reasons, I have written what follows. While wanting to be truthful, I also wish to be kind; especially to fellow Christians who may feel when they read this that I am getting at them (and if that is the case, I know I need to include myself). I realise too we are all on a journey and we all may stumble and we need to encourage each other along the way and to keep humble.

My own flavour of spirituality aligns more to evangelical Christianity than any other form, although over the years I have come to welcome insights from traditions that have been antipathetic to evangelical Christianity. While less hostile than I once was, I am still somewhat ambivalent to many of these other forms, yet I realize I need to cover these other beliefs for the sake of balance and to understand how other people tick. Whatever that happens to be, it will be an important part in determining what it is people end up doing and what their motives are. If we are to keep our eyes on the prize of a better, more cohesive community, things like tolerance and understanding are important. My focus will be on Christian

theological perspectives, specifically those touching on the themes of community activism. I want to encourage such folk to have an informed and uncompromising faith, while wisely and winsomely engaging with whatever it is they encounter when they go “outside the camp”. Part of that wisdom is recognising there is a time to speak and a time not to speak, and part of that winsomeness is doing what we do and saying what we say in a Christ like manner.

I have also decided to cover other religions as peoples’ religious beliefs often determine how they act toward the community. In particular, I have decided to focus on Judaism and Islam, being the religions I have had most to do with and know most about and are the religions outside Christianity that hold greatest sway over the prevailing culture. Of the world religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam have more in common with each other than with most other religions; for example regarding what they believe about God arising out of their monotheism, although these other religions are far less prevalent when it comes to what is believed and practiced in the area where I live. To complete the picture, while being far less numerically than the others, there are a few Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists close by me, with whom I have had mainly very positive exchanges. Most of what has been termed the non-Abrahamic religions knows little of a personal God having distinct characteristics and moral attributes, expectations for their creation with commensurate rewards or otherwise depending if these are met – and often things like the demarcation between good and evil are blurred.

While I am adverse to notions of syncretism, I am of the view that there is truth, albeit mixed with varying amounts of untruth, in the non-Christian belief systems. I would use the analogy of trying to solve a complex mathematics problem, which involves getting several steps right before arriving at the one and only right answer. While, of all the religions, Christianity is alone at getting to that right answer in the end, other religions may get close and may have some or most of the right steps in place. Even so, my analogy is imperfect as not having the right answer can have enormous consequences, for consider regarding the importance of Jesus: *“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved”* Acts 4:12. There will be some, particularly those with fundamentalist beliefs, who might question ideas suggested here, and certainly those that are to do with inter-faith dialogue, yet I have found this to be one of the more rewarding activities of my community involvement and, besides, if we believe we have the truth, what is there to fear?

Increasingly, I find there are those who adopt a more folksy, mix and match approach to religion, some believing what they want to believe and what suits

them, including some of those who put down Christian when asked when filling in forms. Also there are those with no religion at all and who may even be disdainful of religion. In order to complete the survey of belief systems other than my own, I do need to consider those with no faith, who either do not believe in God or gods (atheists) or that there is insufficient evidence to do so (agnostics). In a nutshell, there is a plethora of different religions, formal and organized as well as not at all, and non- and anti-religions that I have come across. All these I want to address, for many of the followers have been allies when it comes to serving the community and some might become allies once they realize people like me are not threats and that despite differences there is also much we have in common. I do so based upon my own interaction with these various belief and non-belief systems and the protagonists of such beliefs, many of who have shared part of my journey.

## **Inside the Veil**

I have an interest in contrasting life inside the Veil (the curtain which separated the Holy of Holies, where God was said to have dwelt in Old Testament times), from the rest of the Tabernacle / Temple, which was the central place of Jewish worship, and at the other extreme, life outside the Camp. This is often tantamount to leaving our comfort zones and the company of like minded people and going into an often hostile world. I confess to having a preoccupation (based on my understanding of scripture) with the paradoxical notion that the two can and should co-exist. After first publishing my earlier book, I found myself in a fascinating conversation with an atheist chess playing friend. He told me that the picture of the Scapegoat on the cover of that book happened to be one of his favourites and a print of which happened to be in his study. What he couldn't quite figure out was why it should be included in my book and if the Scapegoat was to be compared to Christ, as the painter Holman Hunt intended, was it not presumptuous for me to identify myself with this image? My response was that, without wanting to detract from the prominence of Christ, that as His follower I need to identify with Him and "*go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach*" (Hebrews 13:13).

When choosing the title for that book, I was tempted to call it "Inside the Veil and Outside the Camp" but decided not to because of the many community activists who would find such a concept alien and excluding. For those not acquainted with this part of holy scripture, it should be noted that access to the Holy of Holies, where God dwelt, was restricted to one person, the High Priest, one day a year – the Day of Atonement, when the blood of a sacrificed bull and goat would be presented before the Almighty inside the Veil. Significantly, one of the events that took place when Jesus died was the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

This signified that through Jesus, and specifically his atoning sacrifice, the way had been made open for those, whose sins have been atoned for as a consequence may freely enter into God's holy presence at any time and forever thereafter. I remain fascinated by the Leviticus 16 account of what took place on this most solemn of days, the Day of Atonement, because we see graphically illustrated what happened when the High Priest entered inside the veil (e.g. the blood of the sacrificed goat being sprinkled over the holy artefacts) and, in contrast, what happened outside the camp (e.g. when another goat (the scapegoat) was released into the wilderness).

Some, especially those without a faith, might feel spending time inside the Veil is a waste of time given how much needs to be done outside the camp, and that those that do so engage in a useless activity that detracts from the main object of serving others. I beg to differ. Looking at people, past and present, which had faith and might, using the terminology of this book, be deemed to have been prolific and effective community activists, I see that for many, religious observance, particularly in the matter of prayer, was of paramount importance. It is this that enabled them to function outside the camp. I vividly remember reading accounts of those who today might be regarded as saints, who had busy schedules yet realized the busier they were the more they must pray. One modern example of going inside the Veil and also outside the camp was Mother Teresa of Calcutta. By spending time with God, we get to see things God's way, not just the immediate here and now, important as this may be, but the far bigger picture and one that spans the ages and that will be fully revealed in the life that is to come.

The event, immediately following the death of Jesus on the cross: "*the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom*" (Matthew 27:51) is significant because through his death, Jesus did away with the sacrificial system once and for all. A prerequisite to our being allowed to approach a holy God is we need to be holy, for God cannot allow sinners into His presence. Somehow that righteousness, that is Christ's alone, needs to be imputed to us, and that is precisely the point of Christ dying for our sins. I have seen one of the main applications is that we are invited to spend time directly in God's presence, in this most holy of places (albeit metaphorical in our case) because of what Jesus had accomplished by atoning for our sins when his blood was shed – "*having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh*" Hebrews 10:19,20.

I don't pretend to have consistently maintained that lofty position (for if I had, I reckon, my community activism would have counted for a lot more in terms of achieving good) but this is something I know I need to aspire to. The world is full

of challenges, contradictions and conundrums, where there are all sorts of obstacles that will be placed in the way of getting things done, and when things do get done there is feeling it may be just a drop in the ocean. The world (outside the camp) can be a lonely and desolate place, where dreams can be dashed in a moment, suffering is often just around the corner and one can easily find oneself as that scapegoat. It therefore makes sense to call upon the infinite resources of the Almighty (assuming he exists and is interested) to make things happen and, as many have discovered, such help is forthcoming. Practically, it can help us toward a frame of mind that can face life's challenges in a calm and measured way. While recognising the need to be proactive in getting things done, there is also the need to be reactive to what God is doing and wants to do. Knowing I can speak with God at any time about any issue, and that he responds in the best way imaginable and we might ever think possible, is what gives me strength and confidence spending time outside the camp.

*“During the Pilgrims' first winter at Plymouth, starvation, exposure and disease took a tremendous toll. Just 44 of the original 102 settlers survived to see spring. This small band desperately tried to stay warm while confined to the cold, damp Mayflower or in crude wooden structures erected in the mud. Few families were spared the death of a beloved father, mother, son or daughter”.* Those who survived gave thanks to God and thus were born the Thanksgiving Day celebrations. As I write, the above text came to me in an e-message sent by a US brother regarding the need to be truly thankful as folk in the USA celebrate Thanksgiving. While we may not experience the sort of deprivations that the Pilgrim Fathers did, we will come across pain and suffering, rejection and rebuff, injustice and wickedness, misunderstanding and misrepresentation, as we journey outside the camp. For some it becomes too much and they abandon their faith. Different people deal with these things in different ways and with varying degrees of effectiveness. But I believe God's way is that we bring these things to Him - Inside the Veil. We may not receive all the answers we expect but will see God and a glimpse of his glory. When we enter, we should do so with thankfulness and with praise and worship and then bring our supplications and make our intercessions.

Since being told as a young man that we can be “too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good”, I have long since come to realise that most are too earthly minded to be of much heavenly good! Spending time inside the veil can make us suitably heavenly minded such that we can do significant earthly good. I often use the four things mentioned in Acts 2:42 as my benchmark: *“they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayer”*. What goes on within (heart, soul etc.) has a profound affect on what happens without (words spoken, physical manifestation etc.). The Bible is full of exhortation for us

to be and become spiritual and to practice holiness (being God like in all our daily dealings) and it is easy to overlook such matters as we seek attend to the many “nitty gritty” jobs such as dealing with awkward situations, which otherwise untowardly affect the lives of the more vulnerable – which are the very things, it is sometimes said, that many so called spiritual and holy people seem to miss.

Holiness is not primarily about being goody two shoe Christians who go along to the Christian meetings (suitably attired naturally), who appear nice and upright when others are watching - and don't do many of the fun activities that hedonistic worldly types favour! Neither is it just about avoiding bad language, paying our bills on time, not getting speeding tickets (unlike the author), having nothing to do with hedonistic worldly types (or at least looking down on and judging their God ignoring lifestyles), following the letter of the law and being suitably boring by not straying from the narrow confines of one's own belief system – although some of these elements may be part of it. Holiness is about loving God and our neighbour and that means encouraging each other (word and deed), respecting all persons, unostentatiously helping those in need, putting other people's interests and needs before our own and actually having a passion for life and doing outrageous, unpredictable things, simply because God gets all the glory.

Going back to the picture of the Scapegoat on the cover of my earlier book, I see a forlorn, abandoned creature in a desolate and hostile wilderness. Christians of my ilk have often been inclined to liken such a wilderness to the world in which we live, a place where we can expect rejection, persecution, suffering and wickedness. They might talk disparaging about the world because of its opposition to God and His will, quoting texts like *“for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world”* 1John 2:16. I see the world as a mixture: in it there is much to enjoy and much that is good and wholesome and of merit, but there are also temptations and distractions as well those unholy things my spiritual forefathers identified, especially when one is faced with the prospect of living for Christ alone. Yet we can take comfort *“the Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me ...”* Psalm 23: 1,4.

We can go into the world (outside the camp) in confidence but first we must go inside the veil, for all of this is our privilege and our calling! Also, in a strange way, despite the image of the Scapegoat, the life of Jesus was characterized by abundant joy and we are called to be *“looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God”* Hebrews 12:2. And

in the words of one of the modern choruses ... *“Within the veil, I now would come, Into The Holy Place, To look upon Thy face. I see such beauty there, None other can compare. I worship thee, my Lord Within the veil.”*

## **The Good Samaritan revisited**

In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), Jesus told the story of a man who happened to stumble across someone that had earlier been beaten and robbed, and helped him in an altogether significant way. One might reflect that there would have been many other opportunities in that time and geographic area, despite the constraints of the type of government and socio-economic conditions then in place, to help many other needy people if he had gone looking for them. But this was parable (story with a moral) after all and Jesus was responding to the question: “who is my neighbour”? We face the temptation to rationalise having a position of non-involvement when we are confronted with a comparable situation, *e.g.* to excuse ourselves by saying that it is for the emergency services to deal with and therefore we should let them sort the problems out, we have pressing engagements or commitments elsewhere and we shouldn’t get involved (which was of course the position adopted by the priest and Levite), added to the fact that in this case the victim was from another community, where there was a history of animosity. Alternatively, we may decide not to put ourselves in a position in the first place - where we might be forced to choose whether or not we are going to assist.

We can also easily become insensitive to what is going on: although it is no excuse in this world of fast communications when news of yet another disaster reaches us within minutes and we stand often astounded and challenged as to what we can do to help. While we need wisdom to do the right thing, ignorance cannot be an excuse for inaction. Our own situation is different to that faced in Jesus’ day but we are still called to love our neighbour, and that neighbour now could be anyone from anywhere on the planet and, such being the vagaries of life, the need that needs to be met may be complex and out of our comfort zone and field of expertise, with many obstacles in the way of providing exactly the right sort of help.

If we look at the bigger picture we might see many things we could do if we were to be faced with a situation comparable with that of the Good Samaritan, *e.g.*:

- Be informed as to where we can go for help
- Support those services that do provide help
- Start or support a neighbourhood watch or similar scheme

- Campaign for and do things leading to safer neighbourhoods
- Get involved in restorative justice and victim support programmes
- Become a Street Pastor or similar
- Learn First Aid
- Deliberately decide to help - *i.e.* don't pass by on the other side
- Be a good neighbour - giving help that is unconditional and inclusive
- Begin to understand and relate to those from other cultural backgrounds

Back to the wisdom point, at one meeting I chaired on homelessness, I was handed a flyer by a policeman that was urging the public NOT to help beggars (purporting to be homeless) on the street but rather support those agencies that might be able to help and point such persons to them for help. While not unsympathetic to the police dilemma when confronted with destitution on the streets and recognising giving money to those who are likely to spend it on drugs and alcohol is often not the wisest of responses, I am conscious such people are our neighbours and while we may feel there are other more worthy causes we cannot ignore their plight even though that is something even the best of us might be inclined to do. In my experience of working in the community and from personal observation, I have come across many modern day Good Samaritans. While far from perfect, they do what they do out of a heart of compassion and because they see it as right to do so and often do it at a significant personal cost. They don't do what they do for reward or recognition, and often take on difficult cases that others don't touch and which have fallen through the net when it comes to what public services provide. These are the true unsung heroes and as a result of getting to know such people I am spurred on to do things that may help them operate at maximum effectiveness.

My view of community activism is: since we know these things to be true, we must try to work in our own personal capacity to do what we can, but also with and in our communities to provide the most beneficial help where it is most needed. The frustration is we still might only help a few, the world being as it is, yet as the victim the Good Samaritan helped would no doubt testify, that help was timely and appropriate and, in his case, life changing. When God's Kingdom comes in its fullness, which is what Jesus tells us to pray for and expect, all the needs of all the people will be fully met, and the will of God will be entirely done. Meanwhile we work in an imperfect world and have to deal with wicked situations, where often there are no clear-cut answers, even though by getting involved our lives will be interrupted as will cosy escapes like regular church attendance.

I refer to John Stott in my books as he was a source of inspiration because he understood many of the issues around community activism. Mission is about saving souls but it is also about serving others. Importantly, Dr. Stott also understood the right motive behind all that we do, and it is one that I would commend to all Christians: *“that Christ should be given the honour that is due to His Name”*.

## **Evangelism and social action**

For a minority of the readership of my “Outside the Camp” book, finding a theological rationale for doing the things suggested is reckoned as important. I count myself among that number but recognise this is a huge subject that warrants its own book. I believe others have written well on the subject, as well as about their own and others experiences of social action, and these merit study. My own Christian upbringing, and something I have come to learn is shared by others from a similar background, stressed that, while we should do good as Christians, there is no particular imperative to get involved with the wider community other than through programs originated by the church, often with an overtly evangelistic agenda. My eyes were opened to some of the possibilities around getting involved in the community and social action, that my early influence had clouded my eyes towards, many years back when reading some of John Stott’s writings. What struck me was that this profound evangelical expositor had deep insights into these matters that strike me now as being ahead of his time. I am presently reading a book called “Transforming the World?”, which is full of theological rationale pertaining to many of the issues raised in my book, and this has further enthused me to want to encourage readers to examine the issues further, mindful that the object should not be so much to justify a position or course of action but rather to establish a framework that will help determine what is the right course of action. An important related subject is that of evangelism and whether this should take higher or lower priority than social action, as well as how the two ought to relate.

I have come to a view that it should not be a matter of either / or but rather both, and that the biblical approach is for evangelism and social action to go hand in hand. My reading of church history, particularly regarding mission, is that Christians have been most useful and effective when the two have been intrinsically linked. It is a sobering thought but the welfare state is a modern phenomenon and prior to that many of the social needs were met by the church. How well this was achieved is undoubtedly a debatable subject, as is the desirability of these roles being taken on by the state. My instinct is that while there have been changes it is difficult to see being reversed in a secular multi-cultural

society as we have now, but there remains a role for the church to tackle the enormous gaps, the evidence of which is all around us. One of the recent changes I have seen has come as a result of the financial crisis and subsequent austerity cuts. Irrespective of the cuts, the needs remain and if the government aren't going to meet these through services funded by tax and other income, then how are the needs going to be met? The answer has to include: through the churches.

This doesn't mean the church has to preach to the people they help, for whatever it does should be done out of respect for those of all faiths and none and, if providing a funded service, those who commission that service. However, I suggest the church should hold its nerve regarding its faith ethos, be transparently clear in its belief that preaching the gospel is all important, and do what is in its power, with wisdom and sensitivity to do so. The current climate may well be to embrace faith communities in tackling welfare issues (given they are often seen as effective in doing so) but providing the faith element is contained. However, we are answerable firstly to God and that should define how we act, yet my experience has been that the right balance between over-zealousness and inactivity is too often not achieved.

For me, and I have no doubt others will share my experience, it has been a journey of discovery to find where the balance truly lies. In different eras, Christians have had different pre-occupations, often linked to those of the prevailing culture and specific doctrinal emphases, so attitudes and approaches have continually changed and this includes toward social action. I recall the excitement I felt reading about the nineteenth century, influential, Scottish theologian, Thomas Chalmers and his idea of a godly commonwealth, with the church taking a lead role in making social welfare available to those who needed it. While it may be difficult to see how this may be applied in today's society, it seems to me that churches do have an opportunity to help in these practical ways, with or without the support of the State.

As a young Christian, I came into a church that put considerable emphasis on evangelism (at least in theory), specifically that sinners need to be saved, but, other than doing good when personally or as a church confronted with individual need, social action was given little priority and sometimes looked upon with suspicion. Political action was frowned upon even more, although as a young Christian it struck me that many of the older stalwarts were conservative and that not just in their theological outlook. My reading of recent church history is that such a view was widely shared by churches of a similar ilk. While there have been many eminent socialists who were inspired by their Christian faith, the sort of Christian I had most to do with in my early days often saw socialism and Christianity as incompatible as the former put rather more faith in man than was deemed biblical.

Community activism was often seen by my former leaders as the domain of liberal Christians (who were often disregarded on theological grounds), who saw this to be a distraction from higher, more pressing matters, i.e. we should be focussing on the eternal realm and be uncompromisingly preaching the pure gospel, and not get bogged down with the affairs of the world. For other Christians, typically those in churches that were labelled as “liberal”, the emphasis may have been on what used to be termed the “social gospel”, i.e. we are to devote our energies sorting out social needs, and the question that was asked was how this ties in with the evangelism imperative? When I reflect on social problems, I am conscious these may well be a result of society going wrong, with political solutions needed and people prepared to get their hands dirty sorting out the problems - but also it is as a consequence of men’s sin and that the only remedy for this is the Christian gospel.

The Bible is clear about the importance of what is sometimes referred to as “the Great Commission” (e.g. Matthew 28:19,20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:46,47, John 20:21, Acts 1:8), that we are to make disciple of Jesus, which by necessity involves evangelistic activity. The Bible also makes clear the importance of being spiritual and becoming holy. The Bible is equally adamant, although in my early spiritual upbringing this was not always pointed out, that our concerns should also include helping the poor in practical ways and helping to bring about social justice rather than ignoring it. Interestingly, my evangelism quotes are from the New Testament and many concerning social action would be from the Old. But the two Testaments do complement each other and while Christians are not bound to keep the ritualistic part of the Old Testament law, they are bound by its principles (some of which, e.g. the law on gleaning and Jubilee have enormous application in today’s world).

The great command that can be seen as the law’s strap line, “Love thy Neighbour”, will be for many with strong religious convictions the main reason for social action. The challenge is to apply this to whatever situation we find ourselves placed. Even if the New Testament may seem to be more preoccupied with sharing the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, it also makes it clear we have responsibilities toward the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, prisoner (Matthew 25) and that our own eternal destiny is dependent on how we treat those in these groups. There was plenty of evidence from the beginning until now of the church caring for the poor and being at the forefront of providing the help needed. In the Old Testament, we read of the reluctant gospel preacher, Jonah, who by following God’s command successfully called and caused a nation, ripe for judgement, to repent. His message was simply the city will be destroyed and it was this that changed people’s minds. In both testaments, it is clear that God yearns for all people to know His nature and requirements and turn to Him.

But all this begs questions like: how do we go about social action, how do we get the right balance between this and evangelism, what sort of social action should concern us, do we just concentrate on responding to needs presented on our door step or should we be looking further afield and at the bigger picture, what are the wider implications e.g. political and economic, and how should we associate with other groups: both Christian and non Christian? The amount of disagreement and divergence of views that has existed and does exist among Christians concerning these questions might suggest the Bible does not give definitive answers, yet it does offer wisdom, which is both desirable and gettable, and having this should go a long way in shaping our response. While wisdom may not answer all our questions or help us reach the wider long term perspective (I feel many answers can only be answered in the light of eternity), it can help us decide what we should do in response to the huge and complex issues that confront us now. For me personally, as I have frequently rubbed shoulders with non-Christians when it comes to socially motivated projects and programs, I have felt I could do this as long as I did not compromise on matters of theological principle and recognise what are the limitations and the need to encourage spiritual life in the church and in evangelism.

Earlier in my first book, I included attempts to answer some of these questions. Given that the circumstances of individual readers, especially if not resident in the UK, differ massively, it is unsurprising that there could often be several correct answers to the same questions. While we might wish to model our answer on what the Bible says, it should be realised the situation in Bible times was very different to that of our own, although there are many common elements. The Old Testament is primarily addressed and relates to God's covenant people (the Jews) who in the early part at least came under theocratic government, although in later parts were subject to foreign rule as a result of God's judgement. The New Testament is addressed and relates to Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity, often facing persecution and living under regimes antipathetic to notions of community service or engaging with Christians in order to improve the lot of the wider populace, although that didn't stop Christians doing so. One of the things that has touched me is that often in the early centuries of the church, when persecution and state opposition were at their height, it was Christians who tackled issues around poverty and social injustice. I continue to be humbled that this remains the case, and am inspired to stand with those who do this. The principles that we might wish to apply to our own social action and evangelism are there in scripture if we care to look.

My own experience of involvement with social action is likely to differ from that of many Christians insofar much of it has not been part of my involvement with a

church or Christian group. Some of it does of course, such as helping to start the Growing Together project, discussed in my first book, and recently managing one of the churches' winter night shelters set up to help rough sleepers in our town. I don't believe there is a single right model, and the approach adopted is often a pragmatic one linked to how things are, how we are - a paradigm (church wise and other) that is far from perfect etc. As for Christians as a group doing social action, there have been countless, wide-ranging examples including right now in my own town. Without having to think too hard, examples that come to mind include work in/among educational and health areas (historically key areas, especially in the days these services were not being provided by the State), homelessness including hostel accommodation, food banks, debt/money management, counselling, mentoring addicts, unplanned pregnancy, single parent families, children's and youth work, vulnerable adults e.g. the elderly, lonely or with disabilities, to name but some.

As far as I can make out, these services usually come without strings attached and while many of those involved share my passion for evangelism, in the great majority of cases they do not impose this on those they seek to help - to coin a well used phrase unconditionally offer their services to those of all faiths and none. Of course there are limits to what is done due to a lack of resources, and there is scope to do more, and is why there is a need for wisdom and preparedness to work with those from other church manifestations and those that are outside the church. As I reflect on the relationship between evangelism and social action, I suggest:

1. Evangelism and social action are both important.
2. There is so much more still to be done in both of these areas.
3. To have a proper biblical perspective on evangelism and social action, and particularly when working with non Christians, is important and essential.
4. While (often for practical reasons) evangelism and social action may be treated as separate entities, the two are strongly bound.
5. God is not only interested in spiritual aspects but in all other aspects of life.
6. It is not possible to help everyone with a need. Jesus didn't.
7. Doing small, random acts of kindness is a good thing all of us can do...
8. but a more fundamental, sustained, joined-up and far reaching approach is needed to lift people from the gutter to a higher place that is safe and secure.
9. We should seek a close walk with God, in faith and obedience, and attend to the many things we have to do, *e.g.* supporting our families and being good neighbours in our community and good employees at our places of work.

10. Social action undertaken by individual churches and groups of Christians from different churches is just one of the things we can and should be doing as Christians and effective evangelism can often be one of the outcomes.
11. Social action undertaken by individual Christians, not under the specific umbrella of a church, can also be a worthy undertaking provided done wisely, as this book has sought to demonstrate.
12. Mindful of many instances of human burn-out for those with a heart or vision for these matters, we should look out for one another's needs and provide support whenever we can, and make it a primary consideration.
13. Christians from different churches and traditions need to work together and within clearly defined boundaries with those not of the faith or representing other interests in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.
14. The needs are huge and the opportunities are many, and the workers are few, but wisdom is needed as to which needs and which opportunities we are to address: how, for what purpose, with whom, and to whom etc.
15. Often, when churches are flourishing and going about the Lord's work, it will become apparent what needs to be done, but we can expect surprises.
16. While doing good in most cases does not necessitate evangelism or any overtly spiritual intervention, if we believe (as we should) that a person's biggest need is to have a right relationship with God, we cannot ignore this.
17. There is no greater challenge than addressing the needs, spiritual and other, of people, and no greater privilege than having the opportunity to do so.
18. There is little that is more important than being able to share the gospel - doing good is a good thing and saving souls is the best thing to do.
19. A no-strings approach to helping people and partnering with others should be adopted as far as possible and, while discretion, tact and wisdom is always needed, and we need to listen and seek to accommodate the concerns of non faith partners, we mustn't deny our Christian rationale for what we do.
20. While things like having boundaries, policies and procedures etc. are important to help deal with messy situations when they arise (as they will), there is sometimes a need to respond in unusual and unexpected ways.

## **Where the Church fits in**

Those who read what I have written may sense my disappointment when my own community activism is not entirely endorsed or owned or taken to the next logical

level by the churches that are near me, and that opportunities to do good in the community have been missed, although I recognise any blame should also be directed at me. However, my best supporters and encouragers have often been Christians and, while there are notable exceptions, I have found that it is often the Christians who help those whose needs are greatest and do so freely. In the story of Legion in the Bible, we find a man completely out of control, who no one could handle, who was a drain on the community, yet Jesus made him whole and that is what we as Christians should aspire to be doing when looking at this world with so many broken people in it who need Jesus' touch on their lives. While social action is necessary, there is also a spiritual dimension if we accept, at least in Legion's case, he was demon possessed and these needed driving out by God's power.

Getting the right balance is rarely easy. Some churches are socially inactive, and some that do work at the sharp end, miss opportunities to bring the gospel message to the people they are trying to help. Sometimes this is because doing good in the non-spiritual areas has become the overriding preoccupation, perhaps out of fear of upsetting peoples' sensibilities. There are other things wrong too (disunity, coldness of heart, pride etc.) – matters outside the subject of this book. Again, I realise that I am responsible too and I need to live rightly concerning these matters, and that it is impossible to generalise. I haven't felt a particular calling up to now to tell the church where it is going wrong whereas I have felt called to do those things I am advocating in this book. Even so, there is much being done we can be thankful for. For example, in my own town, seven churches of different denominations have formed a partnership, working with the local homeless charity and the local council, to provide a night shelter to otherwise rough sleepers during the winter months. We have been faced with an enormous challenge and need yet what is being done is significant, and there is scope to do so much more and in other areas.

When I refer to the Church (as opposed to churches), I usually do not have in mind bricks and mortar or individual or the sum total of denominations or local congregations, but rather those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ with sincere hearts. The prayer Jesus prayed just before he was arrested and put to death - "*I pray for them ... that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me*" (John 17v9, 21) - has yet to be fully answered. My hope is to see entirely different people become as one. I've seen glimpses but the actuality will be awesome and the breakthroughs that will follow will be astounding. While in a special way I see a role for Israel, I believe the Church is God's chosen instrument to bless the world, with much more blessing still to be seen. I believe on a day sometime in the future that has yet to be revealed there will be the culmination of the marriage between

Christ and the Church and the full manifestation of the Kingdom of God. While I will continue to work in the community, and do so gladly with those who wish to work with me in the spirit of serving others, my heart is that the Church fulfil her God given potential and destiny and take a lead in community activism. As I have discussed elsewhere, this should be intrinsically linked with spreading the Christian message throughout the whole world and making disciples who wholeheartedly follow the Lord Jesus Christ. This should always remain the priority of the Church.

I should say something here about the local church. Throughout my Christian life I have heard well-meaning Christians exhort other Christians to throw their lot in with the local church and usually they had in mind one or other Christian fellowship. Those from my own ecclesiological corner might have emphasised the need for doctrinal soundness and those of a more charismatic persuasion might have stressed the need for life, yet there are elements of truth in both. We might pontificate on the whys and wherefores, advantages and disadvantages of one fellowship over another, although these days there is a good degree of tolerance concerning such matters. I have reflected long and hard about the subject but I have not reached firm conclusions. I see good and bad in most fellowships and one has to take into consideration the wide differences among individual congregations within the denominations they represent. My advice is simple: try to go where God is honoured and seems to be working, and where you are welcome and can contribute, including encouraging others, but don't expect too much personally, although you should expect to find a spiritual home. Let your approach to others be a winsome one, with denominational labels being of secondary importance. For many, the church they end up in will be as a result of an accident, circumstance, where one happens to be at the time or where one feels most comfortable with.

One of my profound discoveries later in life, which also has enormous implications, is that rather than equating a particular congregation with the local church, "church" should be seen as the sum total of Christians in the locality we find ourselves; and that therefore somehow we need to relate to all these Christians as far as it is practicable. That is not to say that I don't get involved with a particular group. Right now, I join with a Strict Baptist congregation (having prior to that been a member of a Plymouth Brethren one), work with a charismatic fellowship and a low Anglican church on homeless issues, and with my local high Anglican and Baptist churches on local community issues, because these are the areas I feel particularly called to serve. One of the things I enjoy and value is breaking bread with other believers, remembering the Lord Jesus Christ in his death and life (some call it Lords Supper, Communion etc.), and this is irrespective of the denomination represented, and doing so regularly, because that more than anything

illustrates what the church is about. When I attended a service at All Souls, Langham Place, London, in my student days, I recall the presiding vicar getting it right (I felt) – *“if you love the Lord, come and break bread with us,”* he said!

While I have a sense of trepidation as to what might happen in the near future, given some of the unsavoury happenings going on in all sorts of situations and in the light of pressure on and persecution of Christian people the world over, I am hopeful too that it will turn out glorious in the end, and that God’s perfect plan will be enacted. Right now, I feel the opposition toward Christians, especially the more earnest types, and that should cause us to turn even more so to God in trust and dependence. For those in the UK, while we might not be physically attacked there can be insidious pressure to conform to anti-Christian ideology and pay the price if we don’t. While I can look at the church in my own country with a tinge of sadness, e.g. dwindling congregations and lack of spiritual life and effectiveness in mission (although I sense change), we see the reverse in many countries, especially the less well off, where churches are experiencing real growth. My sadness is that my own country has rejected God and is paying the price in terms of calamities that have befallen us, including natural disasters. Many years ago I was struck by the Bible text, which referred to Israel but has been applied to the Church: *“If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”* (2Chronicles 7:14). This is the need of the hour! One of the things I feel is particularly needed is brokenness by the people of God and it starts with me! When we are emptied of vain desire and selfish ambition and desirous for God and His glory, it is the time when He works, as history shows. In the words of a Charles Wesley hymn: *“Oh, that in me the sacred fire might now begin to glow, burn up the dross of base desire ... and sanctify the whole!”*

While my own theological pre-occupations have tended not to put this high on my list of priorities, the issue of revival (the need for, the actuality of or otherwise, the expectation etc.) has been one that has never been far from the fore. Around me in the West, I see apostasy in the church, falling church congregations, indifference and half heartedness among believers, Christianity marginalised and overtaken by antichristian ideologies that are gaining increasing acceptance. Although I thank God for when that is not the case, the desirability and necessity of revival becomes even more poignant. I see signs of revival, albeit often mixed with error. My own background puts much emphasis on doctrinal soundness, although I would like to have seen more heart searching in dealing with the implications. Later, I came to realise that what we might see as sound may be spiritually dead, for what was even more needed was life. Yet spiritual life exists all around us and in unlikely places

and there are things going on that delight God on my doorstep that I am not even aware of. I may feel a like the prophet Elijah, who was about God's business, yet felt alone, but he found that God has his people everywhere. We just need to be serious about God, His glory, and doing His business, leaving the rest with Him.

I often try to check out definitions in order for all parties to come to a common understanding. In the case of "revival", there are many ideas about what revival is and what needs to happen. My understanding is that somehow the power of God can be visibly seen and felt and that it has results that include spiritual conversion and changed lives, healing and wholeness, and the will of God being done in the culture. Essentially it is about God, putting Him first and giving Him the glory that is rightfully His. One symbol that encapsulates what revival entails is that of a pure, fresh, constant flowing stream of water that wherever it flows there is life where once there was death (Ezekiel 47). May I and others be prepared to pay the price, as indeed there is. As for "do we need revival", my answer is an unequivocal "yes we do" for without it many of our efforts will be in vain, but with it, some of the transformations in lives and communities that are yearned for will come to pass: some people will still resist, perhaps even more so, but they will see authenticity. The history of churches down the ages often involves a pattern of start, grow, decline and stop. The reasons why this happens repeatedly with new expressions of church taking their place, may be many, but if we consider the message of the letter to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, one significant reason why churches ceases to function is that somehow they left Christ out of what they do and their subsequent demise is linked to the withdrawal of divine favour. Knowing these things ought to cause us to take stock and spur us on to seek revival and count the cost, realising too there is a reward for those that overcome. As for identifying revival, I believe that while the principles are as already stated, the manifestations and instruments will be as God dictates and will yet surprise us all. It is therefore right to look and long for revival, but to remember that revival starts with me!

To individual Christians, I would say that you are a member of the Church if you are a follower of Christ. This includes being a unique and essential part of His Body, which is joined to other body parts. You are part of the Bride of Christ which has been betrothed to the Bridegroom, who is Christ. You are also part of a great building that is inhabited by the Spirit of God and founded on Christ the cornerstone. I would add that in order to follow these ideas through you need to relate to other Christians, typically through one or other local church, but not to exclude the other local churches. There is always room for individuals with a good heart, who don't just adopt the status quo, but we are most effectively employed when we relate to other Christians. I would urge church leaders: encourage such

folk; accept your congregation is not the local church, but rather part of it. There are likely Christians in our locality who God is blessing, with which we may have little or nothing to do, or of whom we are not even aware. This is regrettable and may not be something we alone can change. The history of the church includes a recurring narrative of schism and even in the current local situation it is evident there are widely divergent views. While I have thought deeply about those differences that divide and have views where the right lies on such matters, this isn't the time to elaborate on the relative importance of light, life and love as being the essential ingredients for Christian unity – all are necessary and the mind boggles at the prospect of these being present in full measure and perfect harmony.

Besides the issue of personality and perspective often leading to division among Christians, there is the matter of doctrine, and as anyone who has been around a bit and given this much thought endless numbers of books have been written detailing where it is Christians disagree doctrinally, on a wide range of subjects. I am reminded of the old adage: *“unity in necessary things; liberty in doubtful things; charity in all things”*, which goes back I believe to the early days of the church and has been often been quoted ever since, and try to follow this advice. The challenge sometimes is deciding what is necessary and what is doubtful. For me, the necessary things start from recognizing the person of Christ (perfect humanity and divinity combined), the need to preach faith and repentance and the historical truth that *“Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures”* 2Corinthians 15:3,4. But even then I will try to find common ground with those who don't hold these things to be true and, if I can, work with them if it may prove beneficial.

Throughout the history of the church, controversy has arisen over matters of doctrine, often resulting in schism. In my younger days, one contentious issue was the teachings of the charismatic movement concerning the Holy Spirit, and it sometimes split fellowships. I suspect there is a hot controversy in every age. Right now, I am having a discussion with a friend from my youth, who was instrumental in leading me to faith, who holds young earth creation ideas as opposed to something I have not dismissed (or embraced either) - theistic evolution. I can understand the argument that if you demote the first eleven chapter of Genesis, which is usually cited to support the creationist position, to being mere allegory then you shake the very foundations of faith. I am sympathetic, having argued a traditional position on two issues where there have been major shifts in Christian opinion and controversy during my lifetime: the role of women and homosexuality, and do so based on the teaching found in these chapters. But my point is, we can often agree to disagree, and we must if we are to deal with the great issues of the

day, especially those where bringing in the light of the gospel has so much bearing. The call of God on the lives of men and women is for them to be saved and the Church has been commissioned to go and preach the gospel to all the world.

One big issue I suggest is recognising the true followers of Christ and identifying with and supporting them wherever it is possible. Being inundated most days with correspondence relating to Christians all over the world and in many different situations, with their plethora of needs, hopes and aspirations, I recognise they are all part of God's great purpose and I need to support them, although realistically there are limits. Which group of believers to throw ones lot in with may be a pertinent question, for to be roaming from one to another Christian group is usually not a satisfactory solution. In my youth I was told I needed to join a Bible believing church but having had my fair share of scrapes and seeing people who have been damaged by sanctimonious bigotry alongside glaring omissions when it comes to authentic discipleship found in some of these places, I'm now not so sure. Also, churches tend to emphasise different things e.g. worship, word, witness, fellowship. As it happens, churches subscribing to the community activist agenda (if that is what it is), which might be discerned when reading this book, would not be necessarily be the main quality I would look for. Despite this emphasis for me personally, I am mindful of and agree with my early entree into church life of the importance given to preaching the gospel and getting people saved and later promoting spiritual life. Right now I am throwing my lot in with a church fellowship that is loving, faithful toward the scriptures and in prayer but may not quite get it regarding some of the community matters raised in this book, as well as being involved elsewhere when it does come to practically addressing such matters.

Telling folk to be in the place God wants them to be may sound smug, but finding a spiritual home where we can grow spiritually and can contribute is a realistic aim. While doctrinal disputes may be a reason for people leaving a church, usually it is down to personality conflicts (as well as things like backsliding – for it is easy for hearts to stray and become cold). I would say to folk who do not settle in a fellowship of believers: you may have been hurt in the past; you may not agree with everything that goes on in the churches; you may not feel you want to get involved, especially if you discern hypocrisy or other wrong attitudes or when those who are in authority misuse their power – but you need to relate to other believers and use your gifts because that is the way God has intended it to be. For those in positions of influence and authority, be mindful of the power imbalance and the teaching *the first shall be last* and go out of your way to welcome those on the outside, just as did the father of the Prodigal Son. We are all unworthy sinners and all that we have that is of any merit is as a result of God's grace.

Looking at experiences of the aspect of church to do with local congregation participation, my own one has been mixed. I recall in the mid 1980's, when I returned to my home town and looked for a church to join, how disappointed I was that when I tried a number of what might have been seen at the time as the more vibrant manifestations of church life. Despite giving what I thought was my best shot, I felt unwelcomed and unsettled. I experienced difficulty dealing with the real world (my early days of going "outside the camp"), in particular relating to my earlier experiences as a school teacher, due in part because being in a church didn't prepare me. Somehow I had a false idea about how I ought to engage, and church folk seemed not to understand or empathise with what happened on the outside and I didn't possess the character needed to negotiate some of these difficult situations. I can look back now at this time of testing and see it as part of God's preparation. I have also learned that I mustn't blame others and I must take responsibility and part of my service to God and others is serving the Church and in a church.

I suppose, looking back over the years, while I have often been disappointed when my expectations were not realised, I have seen much that is good and glimpses of the glory of God here on earth and around some of the church folk I have had dealings with. Some of the reasons for things not working out as I might had hoped was down to me and as with most things in life I have come to see I need to take personal responsibility. I can also see the hand of God working in and in spite of those experiences and using them to prepare me for what was to come, including empathizing with the many disgruntled misfits out there. Yet it was through the church I became a Christian, encouraged to revere God's word and learnt how I should live as a Christian, and for that I will always be grateful. Just as significantly and despite lost opportunities, I have been able to encourage others to experience the abundant life Jesus offers and play their full part as members of His Church.

Sadly, Christians are not always good at honouring one another, for we are urged to "*be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another*" (Romans 12:10), which means putting the needs and hopes of others before our own. Again to use St. Paul's words "*in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves*" (Philippians 2:3), adopting the mindset of the unprofitable servant (Luke 17:9-11), for "*blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing*" (Matthew 24:46). While there may be many things we could and should do better, attending to the area of serving our fellow man, especially the poor and lowly, is among the most important. In my observation, it is a lack of a serving heart as much as anything that causes Christians not to relate to each other, yet it is Jesus' prayer "*that they all may be one*" (John 17:21a). Jesus also spoke of the "*a new commandment I give unto you,*

*that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another*" (John 13:34). I have heard many an exhortation delivered by a well meaning preacher that we do just that, for "*by this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*" (John 13:35) and "*the world may believe that thou hast sent me*" (John 17:21c) will be the result. Sometimes I have been sceptical that there is often a mismatch between what is preached and how people respond, yet it is this love that Jesus was referring to that needs to be manifested by his followers.

Regarding honouring others, the scriptures are clear that we should honour all men and especially those who are in authority. The "*first shall be last and the last shall be first*" principle also applies, and we need to honour those who society often forgets or dismisses, such as the poor, the lowly, the old, the feeble, those who are disempowered, those who suffer for righteousness sake. One of the reasons I saw my position for nearly 25 years as church missionary secretary as important was that on a daily basis I read about and dealt with situations where the very people society tended to overlook, those who serve the poor and needy in difficult circumstances, played important parts, often out on a limb. While what I did was not much, serving those very people who deserved most honour, was a privilege. I heard recently someone saying that we can judge a person's character by the people they honour. When "*a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment... the vile person shall be no more called liberal, nor the churl said to be bountiful*" Isaiah 32 1,5. Clearly society has got it wrong – but God's chosen instrument must get it right, and when the King comes to reign it will be right.

I write this section at the time of the funeral of the remarkable African politician, Nelson Mandela, that has just taken place. When it comes to viewing politicians I veer toward scepticism. Many mean well to an extent (evidenced by my own local experience), but their power and effectiveness in delivering beneficial change is limited. Often egos and ambition take over and the approach becomes blinkered. The remarkable thing about Mandela (an adulterer who neglected his family and beat his wife), was that against a backdrop of being incarcerated for many years by his oppressors: he understood the need for and power of forgiveness. To forgive and ask for forgiveness, to seek reconciliation, and unite in order to address issues like poverty and social justice, is an important part of his legacy. In much the same way, these are lessons that could and should be learned by the church. While I have been hurt by a number of Christians, often in positions of power, I have also learned that in order to move on and do what really matters i.e. build the Kingdom of God, I need to take on board those very principles Mandela stood for. In much the same way, looking at splits in the church and differences among believers, this principle needs to be applied and yet not at the cost of compromising on truth.

Referring to the Body picture, you may only be a little finger but we all know it's significance, yet it can only function when linked to the hand, which in turn is directed by the head via the body and arm. The church may be a far cry from the glorious, radiant Bride that we are told will be in place in the end times - for what the Church will be and even now is, in God's eyes is something mighty precious. While part of my community activist interest is dealing with the needy in our society, and I am happy to do this alongside non-Christians, it is only the Christians who have the most important answers to peoples' needs. It is why I would urge my brothers (and sisters) to take seriously the call to address the needs of the vulnerable. Finally, while I sense that Christians may be under great pressure the world over and may feel discouraged, the future of the Church is a glorious one! As for the Church fitting in, rather than being the irrelevance those who wish to marginalise it may argue, it holds the key for community activism and a lot more.

## **The end times**

I have already touched on the subject of eschatology (the study of the end of the world or end times) and have wavered about whether or not to say more. In a bygone era these considerations were important to Christians in traditions similar to my own, but I felt that too often this had become an unhelpful distraction and obsession such that some failed to do what really mattered in terms of serving others, with Christians coming to hold unbalanced and erroneous beliefs and disassociating themselves from those who saw things differently. Yet the subject is still an important one, especially if one believes as mainstream Christians are beholden to do, that Jesus will be personally returning to this earth - not as a helpless babe in the manger this time, but as the all conquering king that will reign supreme in righteousness. Moreover we are exhorted to be prepared for and look forward to His coming, and to be doing His will so there will be no shame when He returns. Many from my own tradition became preoccupied with the expectation of the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ whilst ignoring issues like community activism, and argued the inevitability of the world becoming worse. Our emphasis has to be on preaching the gospel - the church must be a "rescue shop" and a lot more, yet I also feel I need to argue a case for community activism based on a correct understanding of Christian doctrine, including that of the end times.

I reflected in my previous book that there are differing views, even among thinking Christians with orthodox beliefs, as to what is going to happen and how the world as we know it is going to end. The Reformers and their natural successors, the Puritans, held mostly post-millennial beliefs, seeing the gradual triumph of

Christianity bringing in the millennium. This provided some of their theological rationale for getting involved in all aspects of their communities, including politics and institutions, often taking the lead and opening up an area that has since then often been neglected. My own upbringing has tended to favour pre-millennialism with its more pessimistic view of how the world will develop such that the millennium can only happen when Christ personally returns to the earth to sort out the mess that has been left and that it can take place at any time, and no-one knows when. All these groups however, were agreed on the personal return of Christ, that we need to be eagerly waiting and be prepared for his coming again.

As a youngster joining the church, I recall those who studied these matters deeply, often linking them to world events, feeling these to be significant. I would like to think my euro-scepticism is based on reason and conviction, yet I am mindful of the sages in my youth saying the Common Market (the precursor to the European Union) was the alliance that will come to endorse the rule of the Antichrist and to be viewed with deep suspicion. One consequence of this obsession with events and how it related to biblical prophecy is that many influential advocates of the pre-millennial view, especially when coupled with a dispensationalist belief that includes the Rapture (a belief Christians will be secretly taken from the earth prior to the Antichrist rule and the Great Tribulation and the Jews coming in their own as God's servants), have been somewhat ambivalent to some of the wider community activism my books would seek to encourage. This has been a perplexing matter for me, even though I favour a pre-millennial view, while having come to reject a lot of the dispensational indoctrination of my youth. Still I love much of what the Puritans wrote and did, including insights into some of the areas I have discussed elsewhere, although in this case my scepticism is regarding the notion that we can significantly christianise the world before Christ personally returns to it. However, I value also the insights of the pre-millennialists trying to reconcile scripture and world events and eagerly anticipating Christ's imminent return.

While I would love to discuss the fine points of beliefs about the end times, delving into some of the more difficult areas of the Bible, especially those that give rise to controversy, like the books of Daniel and Revelation, parts of some of the other prophetic books of the Old Testament and a few sections of the New, I will focus on only that which relates to our involvement as Christians in community activism:

1. Jesus will personally return to this earth, and while no-one knows the time it will be soon and when people are not expecting it.
2. We should prepare ourselves for his coming, in particular by a life befitting a Christian and by seeking every opportunity to extend the Kingdom.

3. While it has been 2000 years since Jesus said he will be coming soon and Christians ever since have lived with that expectation, the signs, foretold in the Bible, to precede and accompany his coming, are being seen now.
4. These signs, consistent with Bible prophecy, a number of which are specified in Matthew 24 (yet especially pertinent to this current generation) include:
  - natural disasters and wars on a wider scale than ever there has been
  - communications between all corners of the earth – are nowadays rapid and easily accessible, both in terms of transport and through media such as the world wide web and digital electronics
  - an explosion of knowledge in all sorts of areas
  - incredible and unimagined technological advances that make end time prophecy possible (consider for example how the mark of the beast “666” such that people can buy and sell could readily be implemented)
  - globalisation now a reality – what happens in one part of the world really does have a bearing on what happens in the other
  - the phenomenon of the state of Israel (established in 1948)
  - events taking place in the Middle East: while not always involving Israel, Israel usually plays a significant part
  - global economic meltdown has happened and will likely happen again
  - the phenomenon of pan-national alliances such as the European Union
  - the ideal of a one world government gaining increasing acceptability, especially among the world’s “movers and shakers”
  - the rise and fall of great powers and new alliances in such a way that it will herald in the great end times battle of Armageddon (one senses there will be a further shaking of the nations such that when the end comes the great alliances foretold by the prophets will be in place)
  - the escalation in the numbers of false prophets and messiahs
  - the gospel message going out to all corners of the earth in an unprecedented manner, aided by advances in technology
  - signs of and actual revival, especially outside the West
  - persecution of Christian believers intensifies
  - the endorsement of belief systems by government more in line with the rule of the Anti-Christ than with that of Christ

- those once interested in Christian things falling away
5. Whatever, the prophetic calendar is and whatever the Bible says about prophecies yet to be fulfilled, and however much we wish to pontificate on these matters, we are called to live in the real world and do good.
  6. When Jesus returns, wrongs will be righted and peace, justice and righteousness will prevail under his firm yet benevolent reign.
  7. There will be a day of judgement and we will have to give an account of our deeds before Almighty God.
  8. Heaven (to be gained) and Hell (to be shunned) are realities.
  9. The spiritual battle between the forces of light under God and the forces of darkness under Satan, are also real and even now can be discerned.
  10. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16).

## **The Jewish enigma**

During the course of my community activism, I have on a number of occasions been involved with Jewish people and to my recollection this has been in the main positive. I can think of three Jewish ladies, none of whom profess faith, who I have had extensive dealings with doing things in the community. Often it has been around issues relating to social justice and it occurs to me that the Jewish experience of persecution and pogroms have influenced their position. I have sat and worked with a number of Jewish folk on the various committees I have belonged to, or events I have attended or been part of such as Community-in-Harmony, inter-faith and Holocaust memorial. I recall an intense conversation I had with the Orthodox rabbi about organic gardening and its biblical rationale and later sharing his successor’s delight when his team of lads won the football competition I was arranging. I am in regular email correspondence with a Jewish lady who frequently brings to my attention some or other news of some world event, often involving persecution of Christians. Another older Jewish man, who is one of the leaders of the local orthodox synagogue, works out at my gym and we often have chats. Recently I attended an event he invited me to at his synagogue remembering some of the atrocities inflicted on Jews during the Nazi era, which was positive.

In our town there has long been an active Christian and Jews Council, and while not an active member I have attended and derived benefit from some of its events, including some excellent speakers. I have worked with the Reform rabbi on, among

other things, developing a project that provided resources to schools to learn about the various faiths operating in the town, starting a dialogue locally about how to resolve the Palestinian issue and being invited onto a Question Time panel at an event being held at his synagogue. In my nation's history, and to its shame, there have been serious instances of anti-Semitism and some of my Jewish friends have been on the receiving end of this. It does seem though that today incidents of anti-Semitic behaviour are low, at least in my own town, but it is not non-existent and may well be growing. Security concerns in the light of pro-Arab terrorist threats are nevertheless real, evidenced by security guards on duty at the main synagogue. Most of the Jewish people I know in my town live at peace with their Gentile neighbours and are themselves good neighbours. In terms of types of Jews and their views, such as on religion, the range is every bit as extensive as with non-Jewish folk. Many Jews I meet value highly their ethnic and cultural heritage, although to a lesser extent do they strike me as being particularly religious and as for the minority who regularly attend one of the two synagogues in my town (one Orthodox, the other Reform) there would appear to be more emphasis put on matters of form than of the heart, although I wonder if that is changing – I hope so!

I have only visited Israel once, in 1980. I spent one month backpacking round the country, particularly with the aim of visiting those sites that are mentioned in the Bible. I particularly appreciated visiting the natural sites, imagining how these might have appeared in Bible times, and those of archaeological significance, but was less impressed with those shrouded by religious paraphernalia. I met Jews, Arabs and Christians and learnt more about their perspectives. My regret is that I do not know more about and have not returned to this wonderful country since. If nothing else, an understanding of Jewish history, language and culture will help in understanding the Bible (Old Testament and New). Regarding Israel and my reflections on its place in the world and God's purposes, I would like to share something, with some minor modifications, I wrote a number of years ago, written as an appendix to my commentary on the Song of Solomon (referred to elsewhere): Israel (both the people and the land many now occupy) is one of the subjects that just will not go away. It is an important one for us to consider for several reasons:

1. An honest examination of the Bible will reveal that God still wishes to maintain a special relationship with his chosen people, the Jews, and will always keep his promises, including those where he has said that his intention is to bless Israel and make Israel a blessing.
2. The conflicting understandings concerning this important subject among Christians, which have important theological and practical implications, should make us even more determined to find out where the truth lies.

3. The media has been guilty of dealing misinformation on many subjects, but this is one where the error is particularly grave, particularly the anti-Jewish bias. The fact that Israel is prominent as end time events unravel makes it especially important that we know what is happening and the reasons why.
4. The preservation of the nation of Israel and the existence of a national homeland that occupies some of the area that God had promised to Abraham is a marvel and begs the question what is the purpose behind it all?
5. While biblical prophecy and future events are these days a less in-vogue subject considering the importance that was attached to it by previous generations, it is nevertheless an important one, especially in these last days, and one in which Israel will certainly play a major part.
6. While injustices of one people against another have constantly featured throughout human history, those which have been propagated against the
7. Jews have been and still are among the worst and there remains a need and an opportunity to redress past wrongs.

While I have a tendency to want to systematically explain everything, I also have an aversion to most systems of theology; whether Catholic or Liberal, because they respectively add to or take from the gospel; or closer to home, Calvinism or Dispensationalism, because they restrict the gospel. All of these, regardless as to what extent they are right or not, help provide us with the framework (as well as a personal comfort zone) for understanding most subjects from a theological point of view, including that of Israel. Yet none can fully account for how big the God who transcends all man-made systems is, our limited capacity to discern God's purposes and our inability to give due prominence to all the subjects that are significant. All systems need to come to terms with God's purposes for Israel. Some would smartly explain away the Israel phenomenon by stating that Israel has been replaced by the Church and any future promise that might have been applied to Israel now applies to the Church. I see no biblical warrant for such a view.

Others would seek to establish a duality such that all scripture needs to be carefully weighed and either applied to the Church or Israel, so that the focus of divine attention switches between the Church and Israel according to which is the current age - and that God deals with the Church more along the lines of faith and grace but with Israel more along the lines of works and the law. This duality, inherent in some of the dispensational systems adopted by members from my own church tradition, for example maintaining a distinction between the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God, I find mostly unconvincing and stifling. There

is a middle way that recognises that when we pray “Thy Kingdom come”, which millions of Christians do daily when they say the Lord’s prayer, we should be looking for the restoration of Israel under the reign of its Messiah, as well as a more spiritual one that God’s will reigns supreme. This recognizes God has a purpose both for Israel and the Church that is both distinct and related, and that the establishment upon this earth of principles of righteousness and justice are those of the Kingdom of God (or heaven), and bind us all. We should regard the gospel of the Kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God as one and the same thing.

God promised to Abraham, around four thousand years ago, that he would make his descendants a great nation who he intended to bless and to be a blessing to other nations. This nation and where it later settled (later to be known as Israel) would be his special chosen people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. There is nothing to indicate that the promise was ever revoked. God was, however, quite emphatic that his blessing was dependant on Israel’s obedience to his commands and if they were to be disobedient he would then curse them. The land God had promised was conquered under Joshua around 1200BC, although it was Moses who led them out of captivity from Egypt, through forty years of travelling in the desert to the verge of the Promised Land. This was ruled first by judges and then kings. It was at its strongest under Kings David and Solomon some three thousand years ago.

In 926BC Israel divided into two kingdoms. In 721BC the Northern Kingdom were conquered by the Assyrians. Of the inhabitants who were spared, most were forced out of the land and replaced by foreigners. In 587BC the Southern Kingdom (Judah) was taken into captivity by the Babylonians. This was declared by the Hebrew prophets as God’s judgement on the nation for their apostasy. In 538BC some of the exiles were allowed to return to their ancestral home. Thereafter, a succession of foreign powers was to rule over the land (Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Crusader, Mamluk, Ottoman, British). It was not until 1948, when the modern state of Israel was declared, that the Jewish people again were able to govern some of that land. The time since then has seen many wars and conflicts over the land and, while Israel’s intent to maintain sovereignty remains resolute, it would seem there are many formidable powers at work that would seek otherwise.

The return of Jews in any great number to Israel is a modern occurrence although most still remain scattered around the world. Still, few Jews believe in Jesus as their Messiah and a widespread repentance toward God seems largely absent. The history of the Jewish people since the exile has seen them, in the main, seeking to live peacefully with neighbouring hosts while maintaining their distinctiveness. It has also seen many atrocities being perpetrated by those among whom the Jews

have been placed, not least under Nazi occupation (1933 - 1944) when some six million of eighteen million Jews perished under a program of systematic genocide. Tragic as these events were, it no doubt provided a great deal of the impetus to set up a Jewish homeland, which is what the British government said it intended in its Balfour declaration in 1917, when governing what was then known as Palestine. This mandate came to be widely accepted by the international community and the British were tasked with bringing the mandate about.

While the mandate and certain other actions by the British, such as taking in Jewish refugees, shows them acting favourably toward Jews, they were also obstructive in many other ways, especially when the need of Jews to settle peacefully in their homeland was of greatest urgency prior to the start of World War 2 when the Jewish predicament was becoming clear. Some say that this was in order to appease the Arabs in order to achieve economic gain. Abraham had two sons: Isaac (the founder of the Jewish nation) and Ishmael (the founder of the Arab nations) and their descendents have been in conflict up to now. Although the promised blessing was primarily aimed at Abraham's descendents through Isaac and Jacob, we should also bear in mind that God had declared that Ishmael would found a great nation.

Some respected commentators have seen the British demise as a world power as, in part at least, God's judgement for its lack of support for Israel and perhaps the USA ascendancy has been partly due to God honouring their standing by Israel. Certainly the British were not alone as many nations have also failed Israel, not just in recent times but throughout history when many instances of anti-Semitism have occurred. While we cannot undo what has been done in the past by those who are now long dead, it does beg the question of whether there are wrongs still to be redressed, especially in the present age when a solution for peace in the Middle East still seems so far away. While there is widespread misinformation regarding social injustices supposedly perpetrated by Jews and toward Arabs, there are legitimate Arab grievances as well as the Jewish ones, that remain to be dealt with.

The preceding paragraphs contain the briefest (but hopefully balanced) of accounts of the current situation regarding Israel and how it came about. Much has been written on the subject which is outside the scope of this present account. However, we need to try to understand why things are as they because the will of God in these matters is what matters most. While it is imperative for us to love Israel and its peoples, we must not apologise for affirming the need for Jews to repent and believe in Yeshua of Nazareth their promised Messiah, as well as the need to act justly toward the non-Jew living in their land, as of utmost importance. God's word on blessing and curses must be taken seriously. The hope for the restoration of

Israel, living in peace and security and under the rule of its Messiah, looms ever stronger. The need for social justice for Jews, Arabs and all other peoples caught up in the conflicts must also remain an important concern.

In concluding this section on Israel, I hope from the context the reader will be able to distinguish when it is the land, and when it is the people being referred to and would point out that in the Bible when the word Israel appeared it was usually referring to the people. I would summarise the important points as:

1. Israel and the Church are distinct, although one can be an Jew and a member of the Church. The Church has not replaced Israel. An expectation of faith and obedience and principles of saving grace apply to all.
2. The promise made to Abraham that through his descendant Jacob (Israel), he would found a great nation, God's special possession, has not been revoked.
3. The preservation of the nation of Israel and the existence of a homeland, Israel, might be regarded as miraculous and also its divine destiny.
4. There are many biblical prophecies yet to be fulfilled relating to Israel, both regarding the land and its people.
5. There will be a future turning to the Messiah by a large section of Israel.
6. There will be days of great blessing for Jews, yet preceded by suffering.
7. God will hold all men accountable for their mistreatment of Jews, of which there have been many instances. He will also bless those who bless the Jews.
8. The fact that one third (six million) of the Jewish people were exterminated during the Nazi era (1933-1945) must never be forgotten.
9. Some of Israel's woes are as a result of its disobedience and rebellion and this may also be a means used by God to bring Israel to repentance.
10. Looking at history, while some Christians have acted sympathetically toward Jews, others haven't and this must be a cause of deep regret.
11. There will be a millennial age under the rule of Israel's Messiah, which will also be Israel's golden age. The babe of Bethlehem will reign in Jerusalem.
12. Proclaiming the gospel to the Jews (first) and then to the Gentiles, is of primary importance for those who are Christians and should not be ignored.
13. While the Church should seek ways to effectively proclaim the gospel of repentance and of the grace of God toward the Jews, it should at the same time be offering friendship and providing support wherever it can.

14. We should uphold the need for social justice toward the Arab.
15. While some Christians are as much Zionist as any Jew, others see no place for the Jews in God's plans today, yet as far as the scriptures are concerned restoring the land is dependent on a national repentance yet to take place.
16. Some Christians see Israel and Jewish people as doing no wrong and others see them as doing no right. The truth as it often does lies somewhere in the middle and despite skewed reporting we should ask where that point is.
17. The development of Israel to become an advanced technological state with incredibly talented people, from such humble beginnings, is truly amazing.
18. With a few exceptions, Israel's closest neighbours are not particularly well disposed and sometimes hostile to the existence of the State of Israel.
19. The "Palestinian question" has long occupied great and noble minds but is an important one that must not be ignored or dealt with prejudicially.
20. The Jewish people retain a special place in God's heart and purposes.

I look at the unravelling of world events, especially what is taking place in my life time in the Middle East, with some consternation and foreboding, yet also with optimism because of my belief in God who has all things under his control, and therefore will work out for the best. It is The Lord God of Israel who "*hath not cast away his people which he foreknew*" (Romans 11:2). One thing I do, and should do more, is "*pray for the peace of Jerusalem*" (Psalm 122v6) and look forward to when "*all Israel shall be saved*" (Romans 10:26). As for the gospel, which St. Paul was unashamed, it is to the Jew first and then to the Gentile (Romans 1:16).

## **Salaam Alaikum**

*Salaam Alaikum* (the peace of God be upon you) to which one may reply *Wa Alaikum Assalaam* (and upon you be peace) are greetings I have used a number of times when meeting with Muslim friends. Yet growing up as a child in Southend and up to when I left home in order to go to university, I do not recall meeting many Muslims (which is unsurprising, as there were not many around at that time). Therefore my understanding of Islam was tainted by an upbringing that was antipathetic toward and ignorant of Islam, and a religious environment that firmly saw Islam as the Devil's deception and a vehicle of oppression. I went up to university, having just prior to then been on an Operation Mobilisation mission. Among other things, we were told about Christian outreach taking place in Muslim countries that went on despite many difficulties, with Christians often experiencing

deprivations and sometimes outright persecution. We were especially urged to pray for the Muslim world, and that Muslims would become Christians.

As a zealous young student, I was motivated by a desire to convert Muslims and came to realise there were opportunities to make friends. I came across students from all over the world, some happening to be Muslim, as a matter of course. I befriended many overseas students, including Muslims, and some even came to stay at my home. While I was motivated by evangelistic zeal, there was also a sense of human compassion, cultural curiosity and a genuine desire to foster friendship, which was often achieved. I found my Muslim friends were a mixed bag in terms of religious practice. Some were fervent practitioners who understood their own faith well and some were fairly nominal, tokenistic and even ignorant in matters of faith. I also came to see that many prejudices directed at Muslims were misplaced.

Upon leaving university, I did not have much contact with Muslims, again because they were not many around in the environment in which I operated, other than in my world travels when I visited a number of Muslim countries. I maintained my interest in Islam and in trying to understand the Muslim perspective, even learning some Arabic. Over the years I came to support several Christian missions to Muslim countries. It was not until later in life, when I got involved with my third career as a community worker, that I found myself in regular contact with Muslims. By that time the Muslim population in my town had grown significantly. It was evident that some Muslims were keen to get involved with the wider community and had even started a project (Share-IT) similar to my own: Growing Together.

Census results for Southend, with a population of around 170,000, had around 2000 Muslims living in it in 2001. This was mainly as a result of immigration, particularly from South Asia but many other parts of the world also, those immigrants having large families, and increasingly due to converts from the indigenous British population. By 2011 that figure had risen to 3000, and it had become the second largest religion in Southend in terms of adherents, overtaking the Jewish contingent during that period. The rise of and attraction to Islam can be seen against a backdrop of the decline of Christianity - the simplicity, certainty, clarity, solidarity, respect for the elderly, masculinity (significant as churches tend to be female dominated) and the relative newness of Islam can be contrasted with how Christianity is often perceived. Ironically, the majority of Muslim converts have been women, often through marriage, despite the perceived suppression of women in Islam, probably attracted by the importance Islam gives to family life.

I found when engaging with the three main mosques, all situated close to each other in the Westcliff area, where many of Southend's Muslims live and work, there were differences in terms of religious mood, *e.g.* in having establishment or more radical feels about them, socio-economic status, *e.g.* professional, business or more working class dominated and ethnic mix, *e.g.* one mosque is Pakistani dominated and another Bangladeshi. Some of my Muslim friends suggested I do not read too much into this for although there are many sects there is one universal brotherhood. I also found that many Muslims wanted to give the impression of being loyal, law abiding British citizens, and I saw little that would contradict this. As I write, I am aware of a fourth mosque but have yet to make contact with them.

Around the time I helped to start the Growing Together project, a similar SRB community project also began based at one of the local mosques. We found ourselves comparing notes and one of the Muslim leads, Dr. Pasha, a retired and respected hospital consultant, became my informal mentor. One of the struggles I faced at that time was convincing our statutory partners that faith should not be a barrier to what we did, and here my Muslim friend was supportive. I recall with amusement being given a guided tour of his mosque, a former Methodist chapel, and Dr. Pasha's evident pride in the fact that in converting the building's use the original late Victorian architectural features had been retained. It was Dr. Pasha who came to my aid when a gay, HIV+ man objected to a Muslim leaflet claiming AIDS is God's judgement on homosexuals and a Jewish lady took exception to one Muslim's anti-Israel comments, at an event I was running. I found myself invited on to the mosque social committee for a period and during that time I got to know several of the leading lights, including Ahmad Khwaja, Yusef Goolamali and Ali Pankeeda, who were all members of that mosque. I found them all to be articulate, friendly and sympathetic. In their respective ways they were all deeply involved with the wider community and could be fairly described as Muslim gentlemen.

Since those early meetings some twelve years ago, I have sought to maintain links with the Muslim community, including with the Imams of the three main mosques and a number of the members. One important link has been around events I or the mosques have arranged and where we have been mutually supportive. The last mosque open day I attended was also an excuse to eat a delicious lunch laid on by our hosts, meet with some of my Muslim friends, continue to converse with each other and encourage my then 14 year old son to find out more about Islam. I have appreciated the Muslim contribution to the various events I have organised and with pleasure being able to encourage some of the boys from one of the mosques who took part in our football competitions. One nice thing I (or rather my then 10 year old son) was able to benefit from, was the 11-plus preparation classes one of

the mosques arranged – all of us sharing common concerns and recognising the importance of this practical way to help our children in their educational journey.

As I write, another Community-in-Harmony event has just taken place, although this time I was not involved in the organisation of it. It was a good opportunity to meet old Muslim friends and share concerns, news and views. One sad observation was that, while the Muslims offered a bookstall explaining Muslim beliefs, there was no Christian group doing a similar thing, something I encouraged when I was co-ordinator. When town-wide issues have arisen affecting the Muslim community, I have been able to render some assistance, for example helping to address issues around peace and security, working alongside the Police and Council, and in my capacity as a member of the Southend Interfaith Working Group helping to find a resolution to the Muslim requirement to speedily bury the dead after a person dies.

Regarding Christian witness, opportunities to share the Christian message with Muslims have been few, mainly because the emphasis has usually been on building friendships, although in hindsight I feel I should have been bolder despite not wishing to antagonise my friends. I have felt it has been good for real Christians to be seen by and engage with Muslims and to use the opportunity to dispel myths about the true nature of Christianity. While I have received literature from the Muslims, often well written, on a whole range of subjects, sometimes with a Muslim evangelistic emphasis, I have also been able to return the favour. I have found the booklets produced by the Counties Evangelist, John Martin, which sympathetically takes verses in the Koran and the Bible about the person of Jesus as a starting point, particularly helpful. I like John's approach based on befriending and seeking common ground, realising it has partly come about through painful experience. His son tragically died, while he was in India serving as a missionary, and Muslims were among the first to support him. Given the anti-Islam feeling and innuendo stirred up by the likes of the BNP and EDL, the need for dialogue is important (and my Muslim friends agree) and we have an open invitation.

Besides issues of common concern that relate to the good of the community and those we represent, Muslims and Christians have much in common, including being "people of the Book" as identified in the Koran. Along with Judaism we all relate to a common ancestor, Abraham, although for Christians this is seen in spiritual terms. Unlike most Britons, Muslims respect God. They see Him as the one who creates, reveals, controls and judges. About Jesus, Muslims recognise his messiahship, virgin birth, sinless life, that he went about healing the sick and raising the dead, was raised into heaven and will return to the earth. Yet there are fundamental differences in belief, for example that salvation is a gift that can only be received

when a person believes in Christ. Because of the contradictions between the Koran and the Bible, one only (or neither) can be the word of God. As I have argued elsewhere, truth should be the prime concern and, notwithstanding the attraction of Islam, the person, claims and power of Christ, who is not a mere prophet but the Son of God, Saviour of the world and Lord of all, are more attractive. If meaningful dialogue is to take place, such differences must be acknowledged.

Regarding the nature of Islam and its potential or perceived threats, I recognise this is a big question and one that the powers that be might prefer to avoid facing. Some would say that in the interests of political correctness they go out of their way not to upset Muslims, especially those who are seen to be of a more belligerent ilk, whereas with Christians there are no such reservations. Yet it is still important. These days Christianity is often viewed primarily in terms of personal faith while Islam is more about bringing all aspects of society under the control of Islam. This remains a goal of a good number of Muslims and, given the present trends, one that could be realised. In the light of Islam inspired terrorism, the persecution of Christians in many Muslim countries, especially those who convert from Islam and who are then seen as having committed treason and apostasy, a lack of freedom to meet as Christians and certainly not to evangelise in many Muslim lands, the wealth and therefore power and influence of certain fervently Islamic nations, the possible islamification of British culture, including the prospect of adopting Sharia law and current trends showing Islam set to overtake Christianity in terms of influence, consideration of these matters ought to happen, in the best interests of UK national life, although I am not hopeful, but is anyway outside the scope of this book. I have found the writings of people like David Pawson, Patrick Sookhdeo and Michael Nazir-Ali particularly helpful in considering such matters.

As for me and the future, I will continue to watch and pray and use whatever opportunities that come my way to show love and share the authentic Christian message with Muslims, and encourage my Christian friends to do likewise. I would want to help strengthen ties with Muslims and the wider community, uniting on the many issues we do have in common, and seek to understand Islam and Muslims better. Most of my Muslim friends are decent, peace loving, God fearing people who have a genuine desire to do good in the community and thus deserve respect.

## **The opiate of the people**

*“Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the*

*opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions”-*  
Karl Marx.

Readers might have noticed my fascination with what people believe and how it affects their lives, in particular their involvement with the community in all its many guises. While my Christian faith has enormous ramifications on my own community activism, I am all too aware that if I were to fully practise what I believe then that involvement would become even more significant. As an aside, there are many instances when those who have non-Christian beliefs have at least acted consistently with these, often putting Christians to shame. I have often reflected on what it is that makes them tick concerning the various shades of Christians I have encountered, as well as the followers of other religions and those who see religion as important, some being governed by dogma and others having succumbed to the relativist mindset that has come to the fore in recent years.

Many of these I have engaged with in my community work and some I have come to see as valued partners. Knowingly or not, their beliefs often affect what they do and for me, it is one of those fascinating imponderables to work out how. Yet it is to the atheist and his/her close relative, the agnostic, I wish to turn my attention. If the 2011 Census results and decline in public worship are anything to go by, the number of people without religious beliefs and are becoming emboldened to say so publically is increasing. Unsurprisingly, the influence of secularism in recent years on every strand of our society, including in the churches, has increased while that of religion has declined. We stand at a crossroads - for while the influence of Christianity for more than a thousand years has touched all aspects of society, this is eroding, especially in the last hundred years, and increasingly so, and one can imagine that if ardent secularists have their way it will be eradicated altogether.

I suspect there is an element of atheist in even the most fervent Christian believer. I find myself asking myself the question regularly: to what extent does my belief in God have substance? After all, the Bible makes some fantastic claims about how God can and will work in our lives and in difficult situations, yet too often we are overtaken by unbelief. Moreover, my holy book, the Bible, does seem riddled with inconsistencies. But when looking at the definition of atheism (the theory or belief that God does not exist) I would say that, in my case, not only does this notion NOT apply but it never has. Yet to understand why an atheist believes as he does, I should ideally put myself into shoes that I have never worn, having never seriously doubted God's existence. Trying to imagine eternal nothingness, the thought that

we live in a moral universe and the notion that there is a meaning to life, only makes sense as far as I am concerned if God is brought into the picture.

However much one may want to make the point about the reasonableness of belief in God, especially comparing this with the notion that something has come out of nothing, which is arguably a more incredible proposition than that “something” is the work of a superior being we call God (or a god) and life has moral meaning, I am acutely aware that many of those who do not believe in God will dismiss any idea that the existence of God is probable or even possible and maintain, using ideas around evolution and the Big Bang theory that the universe did indeed arise out of nothing and yet life still has moral meaning. To believe does require an act of faith insofar we cannot scientifically prove God other than declare God cannot be ruled out and is at least a possibility and arguably there being a God is consistent with the world as we know it. Arguably, to believe God does not exist also requires an act of faith, for how can one be sure? And if, as many atheists do, one operates under the axiom that scientific is the only evidence that may be deemed as acceptable it is no wonder impasses can soon be reached in atheist - theist debates.

Throughout my Christian life, I have been interested in apologetics (the discipline of defending a position, often religious, through the systematic use of information). While I do not particularly rate my knowledge and skill in this area (and recognise there are those who are far more qualified and effective than I am, whose endeavours I applaud), I have sought to read up on the subject and have been prepared to debate the salient points with atheists, spending countless hours doing so despite trying to avoid the red herrings and God baiting that often goes on. It must be said that usually at the end there has been little shift in position from either side. I recall, for example, a number of occasions when I have cited powerful evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, only for this to be dismissed out of hand. While it can be argued that time could have been better spent, I feel by searching out truth, helping atheists to see Christian belief can be reasonable, and increasing my understanding of my own faith and the atheist's non-faith - this has been a worthwhile activity. I can also reflect that while I have encountered many a formidable adversary in the atheist-deist debate and sometimes I have responded poorly to quite valid points that have sometimes been made, I remain confident in the God who is there and who has revealed himself to humankind.

Just prior to writing this, I was at a prayer meeting when a brother expressed his concern that it is now generally taken for granted, in television presentations for example, that science proves that the earth is a lot older than the 10000 years once generally accepted. He saw this as yet another attack on Christians and the Bible. I

didn't think it was the time and place to challenge that view, although for different reasons, as I have explained, I do feel Christians and the Bible are coming under attack. The first eleven chapters of Genesis, which some Christians cite to back up the idea of a "young earth", is every bit God's word and true as is the four gospels. But I do not believe it has to be read in the way my friend implied and I am open to such notions as a 14 billion year old universe and some evolution taking place. I do not see religious truth and scientific truth as incompatible or one trumping the other. Rather all truth is to be received and sought out gladly. I agree with those atheists who believe there will come a time when the truth on matters like the origins of the universe and (to refer to Darwin's theory) "the origins of the species" will be fully understood - yet I do not feel threatened by that prospect.

Some atheists would humour the religionists by saying, providing they don't block societal progress with their superstitions, it is ok to continue if it makes them feel better. There are others that feel religion needs to be done away with altogether because of the net harm it does. I would argue that the right religion is both true and relevant and am between ambivalent and antagonistic when it comes to the wrong religion. While I could feel some sympathy with the agnostic position that doesn't dismiss God out of hand, simply because it can't be proved, I would say that given the claims of the Bible, including those of Jesus, these are too important to cast aside merely because you aren't sure. You owe it to yourself to know which side of the fence to sit, because the issues are too important to ignore altogether. Of those I have worked with in the course of my community activities, many have been atheists, although often I was unaware this was the case - not that for the most part it mattered much. While conflicts have arisen, as there often will be when two or more parties hold different world views, and this has sometimes been particularly poignant with those who fall into the non-atheist category, including Christians of a more liberal persuasion, many of these interactions have been positive. From my perspective, the need to share and apply faith in the course of my work is important but it does give rise to conflicts. These can arise if one believes as I do that in addressing the material needs of people at the bottom of society's heap, they can only fully be set free if there is a change of heart that can only come from Christian conversion. There is much that can be achieved that I and my atheist friend would want to achieve, that can be done whatever one's views on faith are. It makes sense to foster trust and understanding in order to do so.

How this work can be or is accomplished depends much upon the personalities involved. It can be disheartening when the desire to suppress religious sentiment in the interests of being seen to be faith-neutral and politically correct can take precedence over doing something useful for those who need help. I have found that

much can be achieved working in this hotchpotch of belief and unbelief. While there have been hostile reactions to my community activism, I look back with gratitude at the support given to me by several atheists: there are those who come to mind who have greatly contributed to improving society and as useful community activists, and who I admire. Understandably, from their perspective, to bring a non-existent entity into any activity does not make sense, may be an unnecessary distraction and could be harmful. So it should not surprise us if those who think like that may react negatively to anything relating to the vaunting of faith rather than as a matter one keeps to oneself. It is for that reason I try to be sensitive (even over sensitive) regarding these matters when working with atheists and, while never wanting to leave God out of anything and realising I need to put Him before everything, I find a lot can be achieved by appealing to our common humanity.

I would reiterate the need to find common ground if we are to best help those who need help, realising in the world we live in there will be much that will conspire to consign the poor and vulnerable in our society to the scrap-heap. It is for that reason I believe it can yield dividends when we work with atheists to try and resolve misunderstandings and remove unnecessary barriers. This is just as true with any group that may be seen as antipathetic to Christians. I also find being scrutinised by sceptics and scorners is a good way of dealing with the dross that often accumulates that has little to do with the pure faith that God intended us to have. I realise that the extent Christians will work with and become reliant on those outside the faith can be a controversial question that will depend on circumstances, personalities and individual consciences. An important factor for me is the desire to win atheists for Christ – for it is he who is “*the way, the truth and the life*” and as a Christian I should be prepared to make sacrifices in order to achieve that goal.

## **Spirituality without religion**

In the course of my community activism, I have come across and worked with all sorts of religious types as well as those who do not believe in anything that can't be deduced through reason or via the five senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch). Some have recalled bad experiences of a religious upbringing and others bring up the question of suffering or the bad things done in the name of religion. Besides addressing at length what I expect to be my main audience (i.e. Christians), I have touched upon other religions also, in particular Judaism and Islam, as well as those who disbelieve, i.e. atheists and agnostics. I have tried to do so respectfully and with sensitivity. That still leaves a sizable group of those who don't come under any of these categories. In the past, most British people would have regarded themselves as being Christian. In the view of some of the people who particularly

influenced me in my early days, most of these would have been Christian in culture only. These were often referred to disparagingly as nominal (i.e. not real) Christians. It was argued that in order to be a real Christian you need to be “born again”, giving your heart to and being a follower of Jesus, “take up your cross and follow Him”, and not to select beliefs according to whim or personal preference.

I tend to be less judgmental these days, leaving it to the Almighty to adjudicate on such matters. Moreover, when it comes to loving one’s neighbour, I find some of my nominal Christian friends do more than some so-called real Christians. I sense there is a sizeable number of nominal Christians still, who typically attend church infrequently, recognize but don’t regularly practice the religious stuff, like praying, and adopt a set of beliefs different to those sound Christians are expected to hold, and at the same time try to live a decent life. The picture has become muddied as the country has become more multi-cultural, along with the introduction of other religions, typically through immigration. Increasingly people have been emboldened to say they have no religion. This has been shown in the 2011 census that revealed a sharp rise in the numbers of such people since the 2001 census.

In recent years, I have come across those who don’t follow a particular religion but believe in the spiritual world and the importance of spirituality, yet stop short of notions of a personal God, with who we could relate. While there will be those sympathetic to a particular religion but not religion in general, the term “New Age movement” may not cover the whole shebang but it will do for the purpose of this discussion. I will use it to cover a group I define along the lines: *“that which relates to a complex of spiritual and consciousness-raising movements originating in the 1980s and covering a range of themes from a belief in spiritualism and reincarnation to advocacy of holistic approaches to health and ecology”*. Whilst the specific beliefs of people who believe in this way differ considerably, there are a number of common themes. These include adopting a mix-and-match approach to religious choices, in particular favouring eastern religions; subscribing to the opinion all religions lead to God, although usually ill-defined; a rejection of organized religion, especially those that are dogma based, like mainstream Christianity; favouring notions of relative rather than absolute truth, and a recognising the importance of the spiritual dimension in all areas of life.

In my experience as a community activist, there are many folk fitting these criteria who are also community activists that I have had on several occasions been able to work with, often with positive outcomes. Given the priorities of some of these folk, such as our shared interest in holistic mental health, therapeutic gardening, conservation and diversity events, for example, this is not surprising. I learnt early

on of the need for wisdom and grace and not belittling their beliefs, despite being tempted to do so given the flaws and for reasons that should be apparent from preceding sections. My mantra remains: irrespective of peoples' beliefs, we should seek to find common ground, including firstly welcoming some of the spiritual insights they bring in the area of community activism. Secondly, we do well to work together in order to achieve the most benefit for the people we try to help. At the same time, I feel compelled to stand up for what is true and right and not to compromise when it matters. This is something that is not always easy to do and, regrettably, there may come a parting of the ways, but it is at least worth trying.

### **Should women become priests?**

I entered the equality and diversity field soon upon becoming fully embroiled in community work, for it dawned on me that questions around equality and diversity were deemed important by the authorities in our society: the need for equal opportunities for disempowered groups had become the basis for a new orthodoxy, some might say religion, although ironically two groups often not included were the poor and carers. I realized I needed to understand what the issues were and how to respond. I was aware of the "six strands" where equal opportunities and discrimination were particularly seen as matters that could affect those concerned: race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability and age. While some would say I am not altogether sold on equality ideals, I did organize diversity events, was a member of our local diversity board, did get involved when issues arose and I would say, importantly, addressed issues around social justice toward the poor. I have reflected upon all of these except for gender, which is generally seen to be about ensuring women have the same opportunities as men, something that up to relatively recently had been a real issue, and some say still is. Trying to redress the balance has been the significant pre-occupation of many during my lifetime. The patriarchal society that once existed, and with it the disempowerment of women, seems much less to be the case these days. Some would say, it is because of the valiant efforts of a few, particularly over the past two hundred years, that challenged the status quo, that gender equality has now become a reality.

As I reflect on how this issue has played out in our culture, I can look back to when I was young, when it was normal for women to stay at home when they had children, often not go to work at all once married, be paid less than men even when doing the same job. I recall there being lesser expectation or opportunity when physical activities were involved such as in sports participation or jobs that involved physical exertion, of which there were many. Women used to take on less responsible and prestigious jobs, and only a few, usually more determined, ladies

taking on managerial and other leadership roles partly but not entirely because of societal expectations as to their role as mothers and wives. Men in contrast were often being seen more as heads of households more than is currently the case. The changes since my childhood have been major. Due to flexible working patterns and changes in attitude on matters of equality, women play far more prominent roles. I suspect, just as with my peers, I have been affected. I like to think I have accepted the changes without whimper, although I suspect initially there have been some resistance and some justified criticism of my own male chauvinism. On coming to revisit the humanities, when in middle age, I undertook study for an Open University degree. I was rather surprised that for all of the courses I took there was a significant women's studies element. What began as amused surprise later turned to irritation that political correctness had even taken hold of academia. On reflection, I can see that since there has been a major shift in the balance of power shift between the sexes, it is reasonable to see this as sufficient rationale for wanting to study these matters and understand the reasons for such changes.

Whereas most of my work colleagues have been men and those I have associated with outside work have also been men, in the area of community work the proportion of those involved have been women have been significantly higher. (I've sometimes wondered why?) Working with women and for women has rarely been an issue, at least as far as their gender is concerned, despite I suspect some latent sexism within me. While no doubt discrimination and prejudice has taken place (not I hope by me) I have, more often than not, been not fully aware of it. I have tried to try to treat all people fairly and with respect and, if I am to judge any, it has to be by the content of peoples' character and the quality of output of their work and their contribution to the common good. For that reason, until the subject of whether women should be priests arose, it hadn't even occurred to me to discuss gender equality, whereas, with reference to the other five equality strands, I have done so and for the good reason these were things I have had to deal with.

"Should women become priests?" was the title of one of my son's religious studies homework questions that I was recently discussing with him. I was intrigued to see how he would approach answering the question and rather hoped the way he would and ought to go about doing so would also match the examiners mark scheme. I pointed out to my son that the issue of women's role in the church has been a contentious one, particularly over the last fifty years. Before that, campaigning for women equality e.g. the right to vote, equal employment, education and marriage rights, had taken place. In recent years there had been significant changes made as far as churches were concerned, often mirroring the changes taking place in society, with women taking on increasing responsibilities, in particular that of

church leadership. As for the question about the role of priest, this only applies to some churches, specifically Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican. Other churches have pastors or ministers or such like, with women increasingly taking on these roles despite resistance in some quarters. Churches like my own, without paid ministers, have traditionally been anti-priest, male or female, but for the “priesthood of all believers” and might answer women shouldn’t be priests and neither should men.

It was quite clear when I came into my own church as a teenager that women did keep silence in the church as, arguably, the “Good Book” teaches and despite, as I was later to discover, frequently ruling the roost behind the scenes. My church also felt the need for women to cover their heads in services, as a sign of submission, and the need to maintain silence in services other than joining in with the hymns, and this was strongly urged. They and churches of their type were often more opposed to women taking active, lead roles in the church than most, although in many significant ways it has supported women ministry, not least that of pioneer missionaries. But back to the question and what the examiners might want to see - those supporting women priests argue that the church is merely reflecting changes in society, that the notion of equality is a biblical one, the church needs more priests and women have proved their capabilities when put into this position. Those against women priests argue on the basis of apostolic succession, and start with Christ choosing only men as his apostles, and that as Christ is the head of the church this points to men’s headship over women. Women are also specifically prohibited in the Bible from teaching and exercising authority, e.g. 1Timothy 2:12.

During the course of my life and particularly latterly, I have met many women priests and ministers and, without wanting to sound patronising, many have struck me as being capable and with good qualities. Sometimes the traditional womanly virtues, such as empathy, have come to the fore in pastoral roles. Right now in my work among the homeless and asylum seekers, I can think of some lady ministers I associate with who do sterling work in these areas, whose contributions I value. But how do I personally answer this question? I take a pragmatic approach of working with everyone of good will to achieve common goals, and want to encourage and empower women to bring their gifts to church life. However, my belief, based on scripture, is that leadership in the church, particularly where when exercising authority over men, should be mainly undertaken by men. It is true that churches need to be sensitive to changes in the culture, recognize the part women can and should play, and not act according to prejudice or tradition. It is however, important to be true to what is the word and will of God, starting from the creation order. Man was created first and woman was then created from and complemented man. When humankind “fell” the woman was told that her husband will rule over her.

This may be an unpopular position but the challenge is discerning and doing the will of God. When I got engaged, as was the Indian custom, we had an engagement service. I recall with some amusement one of the Indian brothers, who preached on that occasion, bemoaning the fact that Lady Diana opted not to include the vow to obey her husband among her wedding vows to Prince Charles. The vows my wife and I later exchanged did include the vow for her to obey although it wouldn't be appropriate to comment on the extent this has been carried this out, but I can say that for my part I have been a long way from loving my wife as I ought. In the Bible, as for all covenantal arrangements, there are roles and responsibilities for each side, often different. That principle particularly applies to marriage. What may have been overlooked in the discussions that have taken place regarding the role of women in the church, the home and society is that while women are indeed equal to and as important as men in terms of worth, significance, ability, contribution etc., they are also different and have different, albeit complementary, roles.

It is a sad reflection on our culture that men often do not fulfil their role as head of the home (although in some quarters the notion is now looked upon with scorn) or leaders and role models in their communities, including the church. Men often no longer show traditional manly virtues like that of a protector or gallant gentleman by, for example, opening doors and giving up seats in buses. There is an emphasis on women pursuing careers rather than the all important role of home maker and in raising and nurturing children. Churches too, unlike mosques, have often come to be dominated by women, often evidenced by more women attending services, and who increasingly fill key and leadership roles in church congregations.

## **The end of an era**

Toward the beginning of 2013, a decision was made to close the work of Coleman Street Chapel, following 113 years of gospel witness and service to the surrounding community. By the end of July, following a spate of activity, the work had closed. It was a painful yet, given the circumstances, inevitable outcome, and one that some had seen coming for some time, despite hoping that somehow the number of active members would increase. A key factor in the decision was that the person who took most of the responsibility for looking after the building and church administration felt unable to continue doing this. In particular, it had become apparent that there was a lot of work that needed to be done to the building to meet safety regulations and the church was insufficiently resourced to carry on. Despite a lack of resources in terms of active members, especially in recent years, we had achieved much, *e.g.* supporting community and missionary activities, being a place

of refuge where the elderly and strangers could come and providing regular sound teaching. The effectiveness or otherwise of that witness is another story and it is for others to judge. I reflected on these matters in a book I wrote in 1999, titled “Coleman Street’s Children”, to coincide with its centenary. The years between writing the book and the work closing might be viewed as the church plodding on in a similar vein as before, doing what it could with its limited resources, but for me and others involved it was important to maintain a viable witness and ministry. Possibly the work could have closed long before but people acted in good faith and what took place did result in positive outcomes, and has lasting significance.

The period between making the decision to close and closing the work went relatively smoothly. We could have continued longer but once deciding we would close there seemed little point. We were able to shut down the various ministries, tie up loose ends, dispose of assets and transfer the building to new occupants, who we were able to practically assist (the building is owned by a charitable trust, with us effectively being the tenants), and disburse the money left in our accounts to the various missionary causes we had supported over the years, and do all this in an orderly and appropriate manner. In the end, the building went to a Pentecostal group and our prize asset, a Johannus Opus 10 organ, went to the Catholics. I recall telling the priest involved that if he knew anything about our type of church he would know that God has a sense of humour! It was good to support the pastor leading the new work. While his perspectives and priorities may have been somewhat different to ours, my hope and prayer is that he will lead people to Christ and serve the surrounding community with its multitudinous needs, which I believe was what those who started the work all those years ago had always intended.

The Chapel had played a massive part in my life and closing the work was part of a double bereavement (my mother died around the same time). Besides being actively involved most of my life: it was where I found faith, was taught the basics, was baptised and married. I have strong memories of many, some fond and some not quite so, most of who are now dead. I wonder sometimes what they might have made out of today’s situation? Characters who stick out, who had a particular influence on me, include: Leonard Ladd, who encouraged me when I was a young tearaway; Bryn Jones, my youth leader, who kept faith with me and led by example; Paul Bullivant, who showed me the importance of having life as well as the word; Barry Owen, who kept it simple and showed practical kindness; Peter Marret, my old school chum, who introduced me to the Chapel as an awkward thirteen year old; Winston Chilcraft, an independent spirit, who loved the word, who encouraged me to delve deep into it; Geoff Hayman, who faithfully led the work for many years; David Iles, who was generous in spirit, whose family began

the work; Malcolm Heddle, a true Christian gentleman; Ron Coker, who was unassuming, faithful and helpful; and many more, including several women.

The dust has begun to be settled after some time and those in the church have found new spiritual homes. From what I can make out, the new group using the church premises have sensitively done the necessary renovations and begun operating a full program of activities, and are successfully engaging with the community. It was a joy and privilege to be invited to the official opening and share a little of the history of the Chapel. I was able to point to the text at the back of the church, “*When I see the blood I will Passover*”, and relate it to what the church sought to do ever since those early days. I mentioned one of the reasons for the text and its position was to remind preachers that whatever they preached on they need to give due prominence to the blood of Jesus. It was evident that a number of the new folk, as well as non-believing visitors, including civic dignitaries, appreciated the gospel message. One even offered to help fund some building work. I recognise trying to work out what had gone wrong that led to our closing, especially concerning my own involvement, may not be particularly helpful. It is evident that many a church that once thrived numerically and in multiple activities, as ours had, has gone down a similar path with people far more worthy than I at the helm. Such decline is the way things are in modern British life regarding peoples’ church involvement.

While for many, my Plymouth Brethren roots (Coleman Street Chapel was part of that movement) may not mean much, but it does to me. While my own theological and ecclesiological views are fairly broad having had the privilege of mingling with Christians of all shades of belief, I can incorporate the best from different church traditions. Notwithstanding my personal prejudices and tendency to gravitate to what I am comfortable with, there are many things about PBism I value, remains relevant and will be missed (although the spiritual pride I have seen and experienced, I would not). Coming to grips with my PB heritage was at one time an important pre-occupation of mine and it led me to write papers titled “Who are the Brethren” (partly due to a lack of available balanced accounts of PB history at the time) and “The Hearts and Minds of J.N.Darby and E.B.Pusey” (two men I admire, who continue to fascinate me, who were at opposite ends of the ecclesiological spectrum) and maintain a keen interest in PB history. Not being involved at the Chapel has created an inevitable void that needs to be filled. As a family we have looked at the possibilities of which church to join, while recognising our own first allegiance is to the Church, i.e. that which includes all true believers in Christ.

Given my earlier involvement around the town, I already know many of the local churches and have good relations with people in them, along with an awareness of

my own foibles and preferences. I felt I had a good idea of what I would be facing, yet this also contributed to a degree of foreboding. That knowledge and the impressions gleaned from visiting a few nearby churches in the light of our church closing might have lent itself to doing some sort of SWOT analysis on the strengths, weaknesses of, and opportunities and threats to each to decide which church comes out best. Tongue in cheek, it occurred that some churches are strong on worship and weak on the word, others weak on worship and strong on the word, and still others maybe with strengths in both those areas yet there are significant doctrinal flaws. I would dearly have loved, for example, to have become more involved with my local, community minded and God focused, Anglo-Catholic parish church, but any notion of praying for the dead and some of the other distinctly Catholic practices remains an anathema. Realistically, there is good and not so good in nearly all of the churches and we need to work with what there is.

Trying to be spiritual on this matter, it ultimately comes down to where the Lord wants us to be and the needs of my family – a place I can best serve for me, a spiritual home for my wife and that which can accommodate the needs of my sceptical teenage son, who given the choice would opt not to attend any church. As I write, we are going along to a nearby church (Providence Baptist), firmly rooted in the Strict Baptist tradition yet fairly open to other traditions. We particularly value its welcoming character, prayerful outlook and solid Bible teaching, although there are minor differences when it comes to issues of doctrine. While I can never subscribe to any statement of belief that my conscience would not give assent to, for example, there are subtle but real differences as to what constitute the local church and around the practise of the Lord's Supper, I will tread carefully not to disturb the peace. I suppose, for me, I have been particularly struck by the self-effacing character of its pastor and the gentleness and kindness I have witnessed among the congregation. This was something we had noticed a few years previously when our son went along to its midweek children's Bible club. It was the one outside school activity he looked forward to and this was a major reason.

To date my involvement has been confined mainly to attending Sunday morning services and mid-week prayer meetings and occasional special meetings plus helping in some practical tasks, including showing hospitality to the lonely and elderly. While practical tasks aren't my particular forte, I have enjoyed doing jobs around the church like sweeping the fallen leaves in the car park and helping my wife to use one of her gifts and prepare meals for the church folk, including a number who are elderly and alone. Right now, I am tempted to write its history, given its rich heritage! While many of our other activities and involvements continue as before, as far as this church goes it is good to be on the receiving end,

having given out for so many years, and as I write we look to God to guide our next steps. A recent development is helping the folk at St. Andrews, a nearby Anglican church, with its ministry to the homeless, by managing its night shelter, something I would not have been able to do when I was so involved at the Chapel.

## **Solomon's Song of Songs**

One thing I have good cause to be grateful for is that I was influenced by those who loved the Bible from a very young age. Starting with my Sunday School teachers as a boy and then those in the church I attended as a teen, having come under that influence I have cherished this as God's own Word and sought to understand its contents. I have now read it several times and continue to study it on a daily basis. Of course, the all important thing is applying it to one's own situation. The only version commonly available in those early days was the King James (KJV) whereas these days many different versions are readily available and these are often preferred. While I am well aware of arguments favouring one or other version, and this has often got me into deep water with the different sides to the debate over what is the best version to use, the KJV still remains my favourite (and all my Bible quotes are KJV). However, I refer to others too, along with concordances, dictionaries and commentaries, in the interest of gaining better understanding.

My biggest regret is that I don't know the Bible better and I have failed to apply the teaching contained in its pages as consistently and fervently as I should. I am unapologetic when it comes to my involvement with others, *e.g.* with my own son, in urging them to study the scriptures and seek to apply them. It is also why I get cross when so much preaching is sloppy and fails to rigorously apply scripture. It is the study of scripture that has informed and inspired my community activism. Of the sixty six books contained in the Bible, I try not to fall into the trap of preferring some books over others, especially those that might reinforce personal prejudices and pre-occupations). There is amazing and relevant teaching contained throughout the Bible and my goal has to be to understand the truth and find the right balance. If pressed what is my favourite book or which is the one that stands out for me, I would be tempted to respond: it is "the Song of Solomon", suspecting there will be few others who would answer in a similar fashion and some, likely most, who are ignorant of the gems contained in this marvellous love poem.

The reason for this fascination goes back to my early days as a Christian. For those unfamiliar with traditional Plymouth Brethren, they have a tradition of allowing its men-folk to select and talk about some verse(s) from the Bible. This happens particularly when sharing deep and precious thoughts pertaining to Christ and his

sufferings at the Sunday morning Breaking of Bread meetings. On a number of occasions I recall some brother reading verse(s) from the Song of Solomon and with solemn enthusiasm apply it to the wonderful person, Jesus Christ, and how we might best relate to him. The way I saw it, having that deep relationship with Christ was and is all-important and nowhere is this better exemplified than in this Song. As a keen church historian, I am intrigued at the way the Song has been viewed down the ages and also humbled upon discovering that often when Christians have been oppressed that many have found comfort in the words of the Song.

I was later to discover that in the three thousand years since King Solomon wrote his Song, many expositors of scripture, both Jew and Christian, have seen the Song in allegorical terms, relating it to the love affair between Yahweh and Israel or Christ and the Church or individual Christians. For me, a powerful incentive for going “outside the camp” and engaging fully with what I find there is that I do so with my own heavenly lover, the Lord Jesus Christ, by my side and with his blessing. Concerning this aspect, I would suggest that the Song of Solomon has much to say, to which many before me can affirm, especially when things aren’t quite as they could and should be and when we do encounter difficulties and sometimes outright opposition. The modern consensus, including among those with a similar conservative view to scripture as me, leans toward the notion the Song is about a real love affair between two humans, and there are sexual connotations. I reflect with some amusement as well as discovering a new insight when I read and see in the Song for the first time what a vicar friend of mine wrote concerning how the lover and the beloved described each other in the Song. He pointed out that the woman started from the head and worked downwards and the man started from the feet and works upwards when describing their love. He went on to relate this to the differences between men’s and women’s sexual responses!

There have been many theories about who are the characters that are mentioned in the Song, particularly the main ones – the lover and the beloved, but no-one can be sure and no one suggested fit is ideal. One that seems to work is the lover is Solomon himself, who initially appears as a shepherd and later as the king. In this interpretation, the beloved (the girl) is a shepherdess perhaps who is of humble origin, who had been exploited by being given arduous tasks to do by her brothers. In her eyes at least, she was of modest and uncomely appearance. But that was not how the lover saw her, who was the one true love of his life. However, bearing in mind he had many wives and concubines and wrote many songs, one suggestion was he wrote songs for his other wives (the Bible records he had 700 wives, 300 concubines and wrote 1005 songs), and this Song was one of a series of letters (songs) between the bridegroom and the bride (the lover and his beloved).

As with so much of scriptural interpretation, I have tried to understand differing points of view and make allowances for my own early indoctrination, as well as to consider the language and historical and cultural context, before coming to a view of what was intended. Because the Song is full of metaphors and rich imagery, differences of understanding even among those with similar theological outlook can be vast. I have come to recognize the Song is about how lovers could and should relate, contrary to those who feel the Bible doesn't touch upon such themes in a way that celebrates sexual intimacy or refer to physical contact in an approving manner, as the Song does; feeling these to be inappropriate themes for a holy book. It is also about how God relates or want to relate to His people, in particular those who respond to his call upon their lives and seek personal intimacy with God. The Song touches upon obstacles and opportunities and ups and downs that occur in this, as with most relationships. Importantly, it is a developing relationship, which is how it should be between us and God as well as with our spouse.

It is these things I have tended to emphasize when discussing the Song, particularly with respect to our own walks with God. Some years ago, having often preached upon verses from the Song myself, I decided to write a small commentary about it. I offered reflections on its imagery, meaning and application, realizing that there have been thousands of great and worthy Bible scholars who have done so before me, with their widely differing understandings pertaining to the rich imagery presented throughout the Song. I have always wanted to return to look at these things in more depth, mindful of Christians down the ages of many dispositions, experiences and backgrounds who have been influenced by this Song and have found it to be of great comfort, often amidst suffering. However, I never have and maybe I never will. But I can take the message to know, love and serve God better.

Let the following texts, randomly selected but all with deep meaning, one from each of the eight chapters, illustrate why I am enthused by the Song and let them whet your own appetite. Without wanting to dismiss those whose ideas are principally along the lines of a man wooing, winning and retaining the love of a woman and how that woman then responds to her lover's overtures, my own thoughts focus mainly on one having a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ that is precious and profound. It is open to any who truly seek and desire him, and even in the darkest hour a child of God can experience with Yahweh/Jesus that same pure intimacy and deep love that the beloved experienced with her lover:

1. *“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.”* 1v2 – let us desire pure intimacy with our heavenly lover and that the achieving of such is more wonderful and more necessary than anything else.

2. *“My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.”* 2v10 – we are called out of our comfort zones and to embark confidently on a journey into the unknown together with the one we love.
3. *“By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not.”* 3v1 – Jesus promised his disciples he would not leave or forsake them. The beloved is feeling anguish thinking that she has lost her lover and embarks on a frantic search to find him only to find he is nearby all the time. It is worth stating that our one and only first love should be Jesus.
4. *“Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out.”* 4v16 – experiencing and dealing with the conflicts and sufferings of this life (north wind) and petty irritations (south wind) is what brings out the best in us and helps to develop true character.
5. *“My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand.”* 5v10 – of all those who have ever have walked upon this earth, Christ stands head and shoulders above them all - perfect humanity and perfect divinity combined.
6. *“I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine:”* 6v3 – that amazing relationship I have with my heavenly lover is secure and is forever, and no person or circumstance or anything at all can break or get in-between it.
7. *“I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me.”* 7v10 – the thought that me with all my imperfections and unworthiness can be an object of heavenly desire is awesome. The darling of heaven WANTS ME.
8. *”Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it:”* 8v7 – our love for Christ will be severely tested but it will not be dissipated or broken. As the popular song goes – “love changes everything” and being loved by my own heavenly lover means that I can do anything.

## **The chief end of man**

Among the statements of beliefs adopted by some Christians of similar theological outlook to myself is one that sets out a series of questions and answers, one being: *“What is the chief end of man?”* to which the answer is *“Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”* Almost all will agree, regardless of belief, that this is a very important question and one that has been asked from time immemorial and with a wide range of responses. If you are a Christian, you might agree with the answer, even if feeling inclined to put it a little differently. Personally speaking, I would agree that the glorifying God bit is of supreme importance but I may not have come up with the enjoying him forever idea, without being prompted first. But it is as well to be reminded that while there is a solemn

obligation placed on all humankind, it has always been God's intention for us to enjoy him forever. Sadly, those who subscribe to these ideas are in a small minority and it is beholden on that minority to point out and importantly to live these truths to the large majority. This is a big job for us to do but God has promised to help.

That minority has no restriction when it comes to the enormous range of people types it includes. The good news of the gospel, which tells us how God can be glorified, is for all. When it comes to reading what I have written, I suspect that my readership may not represent that broad spectrum and many will be of a similar age and theological and cultural outlook as me. While what I have written is aimed at all, I particularly wish to address the young who I hope will carry on the good work. The scripture is clear: "*rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes,*" yet has a salutary warning: "*but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment,*" Ecclesiastes 11:9, and a call to "*remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them,*" 12:1. What has become clear to me in my dotage is that while there is much us oldies can do, the future is with the young, for the youth have the energy and opportunity and even the permission to do almost anything, but youth won't last for long and the message is: make the most of it while you can and remember your creator.

One of the disputed wise says of St. Francis of Assisi, pertinent to this discussion, is that we are to "*preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary use words*". Clearly, St. Francis lived in a different age to that which we find ourselves in, and no doubt did things a lot differently, but he was a community activist in the best sense, in that he served his community, especially the poor. What St. Francis advocated is what I have promoted in this paper, notwithstanding the need to be active in our communities, and that is it is imperative for us who are believers to preach the gospel. Few of us would purport to match the saintliness of St. Francis who, by his example alone, may have been able to convey the gospel message and convince others, but it doesn't let us off the hook. We need to let people know what is the good news and we need to bring the Good News to them through our actions.

Those who have read thus far will know how important I believe the gospel to be, as is the need to preach it to all and understand the underlying message. The New Testament is full of references to the proclamation of the gospel and we know from our study of church history how contentious an issue defining the gospel has been, leading to many a schism, particularly when it comes to person and message of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel is simple (such that the simplest among us could

grasp its essence) yet also incredibly profound. While it is all part of God's eternal plan, practically the story begins in the Garden of Eden, when God created Adam and Eve with the view to enjoying a loving relationship with them and their descendants, but which was broken due to sin. Until Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came and died on the cross to atone for sin and rise again, that relationship could not be fully restored, although God has always been reaching out to humankind.

The good news is we can receive the gift of eternal life upon repenting of sin and believing in Christ as Saviour and Lord. The church I attended most of my life was, when I came to it as a teenager, designated as the "Gospel Hall", meaning simply that the building, without any frills or fancies, was a place where the gospel was preached. The folk who were responsible were suspicious of many churches around them where the gospel was not preached faithfully, and some not at all. I suspect though that St. Francis might have taken issue, sensing that there may have been too much talking and not enough doing, and that the elders at the time might not have looked entirely favourably on the community activist agenda espoused in this book, which I see as fully supporting and complementing the gospel message.

Going back to the "chief end of man" question, surely being a community activist could and should be an intrinsic part of the need to glorify God response? About the gospel, whole books could be written about its wonder and all sorts of practical implications, but not here, where the central theme is community activism. But I would like to leave one further nugget, which are the words of a popular hymn written by John Newton, and resonates with the author and many others besides, concerning the gospel of the grace of God: *"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see... When we've been there a thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun."* The great marvel is that everything I am or have or can do that is of worth is down to the grace of God. It is that grace that helps me to accept people as they are and do what I do for God. It is by grace I can stand before God and men; I have no merit of myself to do so.

I have already reflected on how I see the culture around us, as it stands at this time. Instead of a culture of life, love, light and liberty that I would hope to see, often it is one of death, decay, darkness and despair. My hope is that when it comes down to the battle between the forces of light and those of darkness, we will be on God's side, insofar we find ourselves helping to bring about the former rather than the latter, and the way this can be achieved is by practically recognising we are put here to glorify God and enjoy him forever. May God grant us the grace to do what we are destined to do and also may we cry *"come, Lord Jesus"* Revelation 22:20.