

THE LEVER

THE BI-ANNUAL JOURNAL OF BAPTIST EVANGELICALS TODAY



HOLY CHURCH

THE LEVER

lever (lee-ver) n. 1. a bar or other device pivoted on a fixed point (the fulcrum) in order to lift something or force something open. 2. a flat projecting handle used in the same way to operate or control machinery etc. – v. to use a lever, to lift or move by this. leverage. n. the action or power of a lever. (Oxford Paperback Dictionary)

The Lever aims to open up healthy and respectful reflection in our denomination on the Bible's role in our identity and decision making. We want us all to be moved by the fulcrum of the Biblical Gospel – the unmoving centre of the Apostolic witness to Jesus – and to revolve around that centre, and derive our power from that centre. The journal aims to be a biblical, loving, robust lever for such aims.

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to Lever 7. In this issue we want to think about holiness. I've noticed that we sing a lot about it these days, which is a good thing. Or perhaps more to the point, the word 'holy' appears a lot in contemporary songs of praise, but we may not be saying a great deal about it. Is the modern evangelical church singing more about holiness and all the while living a less distinct ethical life? In our desperation to present the Christian life as beneficial, have we become reticent about presenting it as holy? Do we hear many evangelistic messages in which the holiness of God is the major theme?

There is an understandable coolness toward the topic of holiness in the seeker sensitive church, where the biblical demands for holy living will be viewed as an issue that's just a bit, well, sensitive. But Reformed evangelicals have their own nervous twitches too. The main game, they rightly insist, is the holiness of Christ imputed to us – unearned, and securing our salvation. Plus, there was a whole evangelical movement named 'the Holiness Movement' that had more than a whiff of Pelagianism about it. And even the Puritans seemed to get a bit too tied up in knots about the whole affair – all that questioning of one's own salvation couldn't have made for a good night's sleep.

In the rush to jump off the good ship pietism, have Reformed evangelicals landed in a sea of moral compromise? I think these are great questions, most of which aren't answered in this issue! What we do have is a great interview with John Buckle, an outstanding Baptist pastor, whose reflections on the difficulties of real-world church discipline will resonate with many readers. We have the always erudite and clear thinking of David Starling on some very current issues in church life, and a sermon from me. We also have an anonymous cry from the trenches. Enjoy.

Matthew Arkapaw



GOOD FENCES, GOOD NEIGHBOURS? HOLINESS, BOUNDARIES AND MISSION

MENDING WALL

‘Something there is that doesn’t love a wall...’ begins Robert Frost’s poem, ‘Mending Wall’, in which he voices the ruminations of a New England orchardist about the elemental forces (weather? gravity? elves?) that make new gaps in the orchard’s dry-stone wall each year. Year by year, fresh gaps appear across the season of the winter ground-swell, and year by year, when spring comes, the speaker and his neighbour walk the length of the wall, one on each side, rebuilding it.

Re-building a wall like that is hard work:

We have to use a spell to make
them balance:
‘Stay where you are until our backs
are turned!’
We wear our fingers rough with
handling them.

But the owner of the neighbouring property is still stubbornly insistent on the importance of the annual ritual – even though in this part of the boundary line, with an apple orchard on one side and a pine forest on the other, a wall hardly seems necessary. To him it is an unquestionable, almost sacred duty:

...I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by
the top
In each hand, like an old-stone
savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems
to me~
Not of woods only and the shade
of trees.
He will not go behind his father’s
saying,

And he likes having thought of it
so well

He says again, “Good fences make
good neighbors.”

The ‘something’ in nature that resists a wall has its parallel in human social interactions. In human nature, too – or at least in the way that human nature functions in a modern pluralist society – there is something that doesn’t like walls. The ancient impulses of tradition and tribalism that build boundaries around and between us are pitted against other impulses less friendly to such divisions. And in the context of a socially fluid, multi-faith culture, these other impulses can be particularly powerful.

One recent study of this dynamic is Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s massive, meticulously-documented book, *American Grace*. In it, the authors paint a vast and detailed picture of the ways in which the forces of neighbourliness and interfaith relationship (the “My Pal Al Effect” and the “Aunt Susan Effect”) work together to erode the boundary walls of doctrine and lifestyle that pastors, priests and rabbis keep attempting to build and maintain around modern America’s various religious communities.¹

Religious leaders may talk about the eternal division between believer and unbeliever and about lifestyles and behaviours that are under divine judgement, but if (as most Americans do) you have an Aunt Susan who belongs to one of the categories that is on the wrong side of the wall, it is hard to keep believing that those kind of boundary lines are real, or that they matter:

“You know that your faith says ...
she’s not going to go to heaven,
but I mean, come on ... it’s Aunt

Susan, you know, and if anybody’s
going to heaven it’s Aunt Susan. So
every American is sort of caught in
this dilemma, that their theology
tells them one thing, but their
personal life experience tells them
to be more tolerant.”²

BOUNDARYLESS COMMUNITY?

In a context like that, Christian talk about ‘holiness’ and ‘church discipline’ can sound (at best) quaint and (at worst) oppressive, legalistic and obscurantist. Walking the boundary-walls of the church week by week, putting back the stones that have fallen off the top, can feel like the futile endeavour of an ‘old-stone savage’, locked into a losing battle against nature and gravity, too stubborn or too stupid to go behind the sayings and traditions handed down from the past.

Perhaps, one might argue, the time has come for a sort of boundaryless Christianity, in which there is a sense of belonging and a chance to explore, without the need to draw lines of belief and behaviour that divide people into the categories of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. What if tearing down the boundaries created exactly the kind of proximity and interaction in which the mission of the gospel could flourish? What if an approach of that sort turned out to be not a brand new idea, a way of accommodating to postmodern times, but a closer approximation to the way things were done by Jesus himself and among his first followers?

BOUNDARIES AND CENTRES

One of the more nuanced and imaginative proposals for how we should address these questions can be found in missiologist Paul Hiebert's distinction between 'centred sets' and 'bounded sets',³ popularised more recently in books including Darrell Guder and Lois Barrett's *Missional Church*,⁴ Jim Peterson's *Church without Walls*,⁵ and Mike Frost and Alan Hirsch's *The Shaping of Things to Come*.⁶ Mike and Alan's book offers a memorable and frequently quoted explanation of the distinction:

"The attractional church is a bounded set. That is, it is a set of people clearly marked off from those who do not belong to it. Churches thus mark themselves in a variety of ways. Having a church membership roll is an obvious one. This mechanism determines who's in and who's out. The missional-incarnational church, though, is a centered set. This means that rather than drawing a border to determine who belongs and who doesn't, a centered set is defined by its core values, and people are not seen as in or out, but as closer or further away from the center. In that sense, everyone is in and no one is out. Though some people are close to the center and others far from it, everyone is potentially part of the community in its broadest sense.

A useful illustration is to think of the difference between wells and fences. In some farming communities, the farmer might build fences around their properties to keep their livestock in and the livestock of neighboring farms out.

This is a bounded set. But in rural communities where farms or ranches cover an enormous geographic area, fencing the property is out of the question. In our home of Australia, ranches (called stations) are so vast that fences are superfluous. Under these conditions a farmer has to sink a bore and create a well, a precious water supply in the Outback. It is assumed that livestock, though they will stray, will never roam too far from the well, lest they die. This is a centered set. As long as there is a supply of clean water, the livestock will remain close by."⁷

Pulled out of their context, quoted and requoted in books and blog-posts, those paragraphs from *The Shaping of Things to Come* can be read as an argument for abandoning the concepts of 'insider' and 'outsider' altogether, dissolving any sense of membership or belonging into something implicit, undefined and relative. On this reading, 'centred set' and 'bounded set' are mutually exclusive categories, and churches and church-planters need to make a choice between the defunct 'bounded set' way of operating and the new-model 'centred set'.

Within the larger context of the book (and read alongside other books by the same authors)⁸ an absolute dichotomy of that sort seems less likely – the intention of the contrast is not so much to argue for abolishing boundaries altogether as to question their usefulness as the *defining* element of a church, to redirect attention from the boundaries to the centre, and to suggest the possibility of a variety of ways in which people might be said to 'belong' to a particular church community.⁹

Whichever interpretation is adopted, however, the contrast between 'centered'

and 'bounded' set churches raises questions that are worth addressing. Does the church need to have visible, explicit boundaries that distinguish between insiders and outsiders? If not, what does belonging mean, and how is it expressed? And if there is a need for boundaries around belonging, what shape and what attributes should those boundaries have if they are to serve the calling of the church to be a display in the world of the wisdom and the glory of God?

GOOD FENCES: HOLINESS-IN-MISSION IN 1 CORINTHIANS

One obvious place to which we might turn with questions of this sort is Paul's letters to the first-century church in Corinth, with their explicit focus on what it means for the church to be 'the church of God that is in Corinth ... sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints', their detailed attention to what the outworkings of that identity might look like in practice, and their emphatic insistence that Christians be committed together to the mission of God in the world, actively seeking the good and the salvation of others beyond the circle of their own fellow-believers.

When we read Paul's Corinthian letters with those questions in mind, at least four assertions can be made about the boundaries of the church and its calling to holiness-in-mission.

HOLINESS-IN-MISSION REQUIRES BOUNDARIES

First, and perhaps most obviously, Paul's Corinthian letters reinforce the necessity that there be boundaries of some sort that delineate the membership of the church. The very notion of the church as 'the body of Christ' and believers as 'members'

of that body (1 Cor. 12:27) implies a bounded community within which the members own a particular responsibility for one another and relate to one another with a deliberate solidarity. Entry into the community involves the crossing of a line, symbolised in the dramatic action of baptism. Certainly, there is a process of 'learning Christ' that precedes baptism and continues after it (cf. Eph. 4:17-5:2), but the drama of baptism still makes the stark visual assertion that if someone is in Christ then somewhere in that process of learning Christ a line was crossed, and by the mysterious action of God a person was 'baptised in the one Spirit ... into the one body' (1 Cor. 12:13).

The ritual boundary-crossing of Christian baptism does not, of course, guarantee the certainty that everyone within the visible church is a believing, hoping, loving, persevering follower of Jesus. 'Our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,' yet 'God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness' (1 Cor. 10:1-2, 5). Community boundaries are no infallible indicator of who is 'in' and who is 'out', as far as God is concerned.

But if it is possible for a person to be 'removed from among you' (1 Cor. 5:2); if there is a meaningful distinction between 'those outside' and 'those inside' (1 Cor. 5:12), or between 'the unrighteous' and 'the saints' (1 Cor. 6:1); if a widow is free to remarry whomever she chooses, but 'only in the Lord' (1 Cor. 7:39), then a totally boundaryless community in which no-one can ever have any idea who is to be considered as inside and who is to be considered as outside is not an option.

Thomas Oden's words are apt:

"There is a fantasy abroad that the Christian community can have a center without a circumference. Since we gather around Jesus, it is argued, it is our center, not our boundaries, that matter. But this is the persistent illusion of compulsive hypertolerance. A community with no boundaries can neither have a center nor be a community."¹⁰

HOLINESS-IN-MISSION IS ABOUT THE CENTRE BEFORE IT IS ABOUT THE BOUNDARIES

Holiness-in-mission requires boundaries. But the boundaries are not what comes first, or what matters most: holiness is about what is at the centre before it is about the lines around the circumference. The status of Israel as the 'holy nation' in the Old Testament was protected and demarcated by the various laws (circumcision, food laws, Sabbaths, purity codes) that circumscribed the nation's life, but the symbolic heart of Israel's holiness was not the law around the nation but the presence of God in the 'holy of holies' in the nation's midst.

Similarly, when Paul calls in 2 Cor. 6:17 for the Corinthians to 'come out from them, and be separate from them,' the rationale for the summons to holiness is the prior promise of God, that 'I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (2 Cor. 6:16). It is because 'we have these promises' (2 Cor. 7:1) that we are to 'cleanse ourselves from every defilement ... making holiness perfect in the fear of God.'

A concept of holiness that is principally or solely about the distinctions and dividing lines between the church and

the world is a whitewashed tomb. The first question for a church is not, 'how separated are you from the world?', but '[is] Jesus Christ in you?' (2 Cor. 13:5). If the answer to that question is not yes, then no amount of separatedness can compensate.

HOLINESS-IN-MISSION REQUIRES THE RIGHT BOUNDARIES

If the visible church's boundaries are to serve the mission of God and promote his glory in the world, then it is important not only that they exist, and that they can be seen, but also that they are drawn in the right places. The very existence of the church in Corinth, after all, was the result of the redrawing of the boundary-lines that had defined the people of God under the old covenant, and Paul's willingness (in explicit imitation of Jesus) to keep crossing the old boundary-lines in the cause of mission (1 Cor. 9:19-23; 11:1).

Boundaries drawn too narrowly (e.g. the elitist Corinthian boundaries drawn around the 'spiritual' people with their special gifts and the wealthy people with their special meals) dishonour Christ by dividing his body, and humiliating and excluding people who ought to have been welcomed and cherished (1 Cor. 11:23-34; 12:12-31). Boundaries drawn too loosely dishonour Christ by implying that there is no difference between those who know him and those who don't, and that his saving rule over the church is an empty ceremonial rule that can be disregarded with impunity (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 6:9-20; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1).

Boundaries that are all about doctrinal subscription and nothing to do with lifestyle imply that the claims of Christ extend no further than the brain and the

lips; boundaries that are all about lifestyle and nothing to do with doctrine imply that the church's unity is merely a matter of behavioural conformity, and has no basis in shared truth and common confession.

Boundaries that are drawn in the right place do not in themselves create or guarantee the church's holiness, but they do present a reminder to the church and a representation to the world of the ways of the God who dwells in the church as his temple, and the shape of the repenting-and-believing response to the gospel to which the church is called.

HOLINESS-IN-MISSION REQUIRES PERMEABLE BOUNDARIES

Finally, fourthly, if the church's holiness is to be a genuine, visible, holiness-in-mission, then it matters not only that the boundaries are there, and that they are drawn in the right places, but also that they are permeable boundaries – not ten-foot walls topped with razor-wire to keep the church out of the world and the world out of the church, but the kind of low, gated fences that allow for visibility and access in both directions.¹¹

Across the letter of 1 Corinthians, Paul repeatedly insists on the importance of Christians maintaining contact and relationship with their pagan neighbours (1 Cor. 5:9-13; 7:12-16; 9:19-27; 10:23–11:1), and his prescriptions for the shape and conduct of their church gatherings presuppose that they will be a hospitable community among whom 'outsiders and unbelievers'¹² will be present with the opportunity to observe things that would cause them to exclaim, 'God is really among you' (1 Cor. 14:25).

The original seventeenth-century baptists had good New Testament reasons to insist against the state-church structures of their day that the local church is 'a company of

visible Saints, called and separated from the world, by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement,'¹³ and to picture the church as both 'a walled sheepfold' and 'a watered garden', in which God has established 'the fountains and springs of his heavenly grace continually flowing forth'. They were correct to say that 'thither ought all men to come, of all estates, that acknowledge [Christ] to be their Prophet, Priest, and King, to be enrolled amongst his household servants, to be under his heavenly conduct and government, to lead their lives in his walled sheepfold, and watered garden, to have communion here with the Saints, that they may be made to be partakers of their inheritance in the Kingdom of God.'¹⁴

But if that vision is to be fulfilled, it requires a church that understands itself as having some responsibilities to those outside its walls who have not yet come, or have not yet acknowledged Christ,¹⁵ and enough traffic across the walls for them to know themselves invited, and to have a chance to see something of the goodness of life within. A happy, holy, hidden gathering, oblivious to the world beyond their walls, is hardly a faithful expression of the fellowship created by the gospel.

GOOD FENCES, GOOD NEIGHBOURS

The social dynamics of a pluralist, multi-faith culture are certainly a test for the holiness and confessional integrity of the church; for us, no less than for the first-century Corinthians, it can prove true that 'bad company ruins good morals' (1 Cor. 15:33). But the very dynamics of neighbourliness and interfaith relationship that can make it hard to maintain the distinctive

beliefs and behaviours of the Christian community are the same dynamics that enable those beliefs and behaviours to be communicated and made visible to others. 'My Pal Al' and 'Aunt Susan' are both a threat to the distinctiveness of the church and (part of) the reason why that distinctiveness matters and must be neither eroded nor concealed.

The conditions of our time are not a reason for the church to tear down all the fences of membership, doctrinal definition and communal discipline; nor are they a reason to wall ourselves in and hide from all contact with the surrounding world. What the church's holiness-in-mission requires is neither a fortress nor a boundaryless blur, but the kind of 'good fences' that genuinely assist the followers of Jesus to be 'good neighbours' to the people around them who do not know Christ.

What kind of fences are they? Good fences are fences that are drawn as a circumference around the indispensable centre of the saving, ruling presence of Christ; fences that do not divide believer from believer but accurately represent the distinctions and disciplines of confession and conduct that mark out those who follow Jesus from those who do not know him; fences that make explicit the common, covenantal commitment of a community of believers to live under those disciplines together; and fences that allow for the missional involvement of God's people in the world and the hospitable welcome within the activities of the church of not-yet-Christians who are in the process of learning Christ.

In twenty-first century Australia, just as much as in first-century Corinth, those are the kind of fences that the church's holiness requires.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Robert D. Putnam et al., *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 134-160, 443-550.
- 2 Robert Putnam, quoted at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130264527>, accessed 21 Nov 2011.
- 3 Paul Hiebert, "Sets and Structures: A Study in Church Patterns" in *New Horizons in World Mission*, ed. D. J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 217-227.
- 4 Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
- 5 Jim Peterson, *Church without Walls* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1991).
- 6 Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003).
- 7 Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 47.
- 8 See for example the discussions of the 'covenantal' dimension that is listed as one of the bare minimum requirements for the existence of a church in Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 147-154.
- 9 Cf. the discussion in Guder and Barrett, *Missional Church*, 207-210, which argues that the mission community should be viewed as 'a bounded set [the 'covenant community'] within a centered-set organisation'.
- 10 Thomas C. Oden, "Why We Believe in Heresy", *Christianity Today* 40 (1996): 12-13.
- 11 On 'permeable boundaries', see David Arthur Desilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 300.
- 12 NRSV. Literally, 'uninitiated [*idiōtai*] or unbelievers'.
- 13 *First London Confession* (1644) Art. XXXIII.
- 14 *First London Confession*, Art. XXXIV.
- 15 This was of course, in essence, the point that William Carey argued for in the following century, in his *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. ❀

P.T. FORSYTH, GOD THE HOLY FATHER, NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS,
COROMANDEL EAST, SOUTH AUSTRALIA, 1987 (FIRST PUBLISHED, 1897), PAGES 7-9.

“7, THE MIRACLE OF THE WORLD IS NOT THAT GOD SHOULD LOVE HIS CHILDREN OR EVEN HIS PRODIGALS. DO NOT EVEN THE PAGANS DO LIKEWISE? BUT THAT IT IS HE SHOULD LOVE, FORGIVE, AND REDEEM HIS ENEMIES; THAT HIS HEART SHOULD ATONE FOR THEM TO HIS OWN HOLY NATURE; THAT HE SHOULD CONSECRATE, A SUFFERING GREATER EVEN THAN THEY DEvised, ALL THE SUFFERING THEY MIGHT HAVE TO ENDURE; AND BY THEIR CENTRAL SIN AND ITS JUDGEMENT DESTROY SIN AT ITS CENTRE...THAT IS FATHERHOOD WHEN WE SPEAK OF GOD. THAT IS THE FATHERHOOD WHOSE LIFE, MOTIVE, AND SECURITY IS HOLINESS.

9, WE PUT TOO LITTLE INTO FATHERHOOD THEN IF WE TREAT IT SIMPLY AS BOUNDLESS, PATIENT, WAITING, WILLING LOVE. IT IS MORE THAN THE LOVE WHICH ACCEPTS EITHER BENEFICENCE AS REPENTANCE, OR REPENTANCE AS ATONEMENT, AND EAGERLY CUTS CONFESSION SHORT THUS – “LET US SAY NO MORE ABOUT IT. PRAY DO NOT MENTION IT. LET BYGONES BE BYGONES.” FORGIVENESS, FATHERHOOD, FOR THE RACE, DOES NOT MEAN, WITH ALL ITS SIMPLICITY, JUST A CLEAN PAGE AND A FRESH START AND A SYMPATHETIC ALLOWANCE FOR THINGS. GOD DOES NOT FORGIVE “EVERYTHING CONSIDERED”...IT IS NOT THE FATHER’S SENSITIVE LOVE ONLY THAT WE HAVE WOUNDED, BUT HIS HOLY LAW. MAN IS NOT A MERE RUNAWAY, BUT A REBEL; NOT A PITIFUL COWARD, BUT A BOLD AND BITTER MUTINEER...FORGIVING IS NOT JUST FORGETTING. IT IS NOT CANCELLING THE PAST. IT IS NOT MERE AMNESTY AND RESTORATION. THERE IS SOMETHING BROKEN IN WHICH A SOUL’S SIN SHATTERS A WORLD. SUCH IS A SOUL’S GRANDEUR, AND SO GREAT THE FALL THEREOF; SO SEAMLESS THE ROBE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, SO UBIQUITOUS AND INDEFECTIBLE THE MORAL ORDER WHICH MAKES MAN MAN. ACCOUNT MUST BE HAD, SOMEWHERE AND BY SOMEBODY, OF THAT HOLINESS OF GOD WHICH IS THE DIGNITY OF FATHERHOOD AND THE SOUL OF MANHOOD. THERE ARE DEBTS THAT CANNOT SIMPLY BE WRITTEN OFF AND LEFT UNRECOVERED. THERE IS A SPIRITUAL ORDER WHOSE JUDGMENTS ARE THE ONE GUARANTEE FOR MANKIND AND ITS FUTURE. THAT LAW OF HOLINESS CAN BY NO MEANS WHATEVER BE EITHER WARNED OFF OR BOUGHT OFF IN ITS CLAIM. GOD CANNOT SIMPLY WAIVE IT AS TO THE PAST, NOR IS IT ENOUGH IF HE SIMPLY DECLARES IT FOR ALL TIME. IN HIS OWN ETERNAL NATURE IT HAS AN UNDYING CLAIM TO WHICH HE MUST GIVE EFFECT IN DUE JUDGEMENT SOMEWHERE, IF HE IS TO REDEEM A WORLD. THE ENFORCEMENT OF GOD’S HOLINESS BY JUDGMENT IS AS ESSENTIAL TO A UNIVERSAL AND ETERNAL FATHERHOOD AS IS THE OUTFLOW OF HIS LOVE. IT WAS NOT CURSED SUFFERING ONLY THAT FELL ON THE SAVIOUR, IT WAS HOLY JUDGMENT...GOD IN CHRIST JUDGED SIN AS A HOLY FATHER SEEKING PENALTY ONLY FOR HOLINESS’ SAKE. HE GATHERED IT IN ONE THERE, AND BROUGHT IT TO ISSUE, FOCUSED THUS, WITH HIS UNITY OF HOLY LAW. THE MISERY AND DEATH WHICH THE SINNER BEARS BLINDLY, SULLENLY, RESENTFULLY, WAS THERE UNDERSTOOD WITH THE UNDERSTANDING OF HOLY GOD; THE GUILT WAS SEEN AS GOD SEES IT; THE JUDGMENT WAS ACCEPTED AS GOD’S JUDGMENT, BORNE, OWNED AND GLORIFIED BEFORE THE WORLD AS HOLY, FATHERLY, JUST, AND GOOD. THAT FINAL WITNESS OF HOLINESS TO HOLINESS AMID SIN’S LAST WRECK, PENALTY, AND AGONY – THAT IS EXPIATION AS THE FATHER MADE IT IN THE SON, NOT CHANGING HIS FEELINGS, BUT BY CRISIS, BY JUDGMENT, ETERNALLY CHANGING HIS RELATIONS WITH THE WORLD.”

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BUCKLE

For over forty years John Buckle led Baptist churches in NSW and QLD through periods of growth and strengthening. Expository preaching has been at the heart of his ministry, as has a commitment to longer than average pastorates. Officially 'retired', John still preaches all over the place. The Lever interviewed John on October 10, 2011, at his home in Wentworth Falls.

The Lever (TL): *What does it mean for a church to be holy? Is it just that it has individuals seeking holiness or is it more than that?*

John Buckle (JB): I suppose you've got to start in the Old Testament where God says to Israel, 'You must be holy because I am holy,' which carries over into the New Testament. So there must be some relevance to the community which is the body of Christ and in which God's work in the world is manifest. So in theory there must be some significance for the church as a whole beyond the holiness of the individuals comprising it. But when I try to put my finger on what that might mean in practise or how you would recognise it I struggle. You recognise an individual Christian growing in maturity but how does the church show maturity? How does the church show holiness? When you try and probe it you inevitably come back to the individual members.

Holiness plainly reflects the character of God, which reflects the person of Christ. So we're thinking of Christ-likeness, the divine nature, the fruit of the Spirit. All of those become relevant and you can then ask yourself, 'Can we expect the church to show love, joy, peace, patience, perseverance, self-control?' Well, yes you can, actually.

Think of that picture of the outsider coming in; do they recognise something? They may not be able to describe it in those terms but they say, 'Here is a community that is different to the RSL club or the Freemasons or the P & C. There's something here.'

I've always thought of it as the inter-relationships between the people: 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you have love one for another'. So, there would be a genuine interest and concern for people. I suppose there *have* been churches where I've thought that has occurred at an encouraging level.

TL: *If there was individual holiness you would hope it would flower into an 'atmosphere' that's a little intangible but nonetheless noticeable to the outsider; one of relationships of love and welcome?*

JB: I think when you read Acts 2 you see the spontaneous growth of the church and God adding to their number daily those who were being saved. Interestingly the factors mentioned there are social rather than moral because, I guess, the God-fearers and the Jews were living fairly moral lives. It was this interaction and care that was part of holiness as well. And you don't get to the disciplinary matters until later in church life – you get Ananias and Sapphira but then you jump to Corinth and the issues there and you think "Ah, it wasn't long before they were grappling with serious issues within the community. The holiness of the body had to be preserved by dealing with those."

TL: *What is the role of church discipline? Is it to maintain the holiness of the church? How have you thought about it?*

JB: I think I've thought about it when an

issue arises, and we've dealt with an issue as an issue; the assumption being that everyone is going fine, growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus, then suddenly a boil appears on the body corporate and it needs to be lanced.

When the moral issue arises it's a personal one initially and I've always thought if it can be dealt with privately, that's the best solution. It only becomes public at the second or third level, in line with Matthew 18, where if you have an issue you go individually and try and settle it, take a brother or elder at stage two and only then do you go to the church.

I've endeavoured to try and keep that broad practice in view when dealing with issues when they've arisen. With hindsight I think that appears to work reasonably well; as it should if that's the biblical principle.

TL: *When during your ministry have churches exercised some form of discipline? What are some of your reflections on those instances?*

JB: I hasten to say that in 40 years of pastoring I don't think life has been a string of disciplinary issues, they have been aberrations. I'm not suggesting there haven't been plenty of things beneath the surface that I never became aware of, but in terms of issues that presented themselves, one or two in every pastorate would be about the frequency. In fact, I can think of a pastorate where I don't think there were any.

I've always thought that in the current social scenario in which our churches exist, one of the underlying issues when thinking about discipline is that people's links with the local church are often so ephemeral that if you speak to them

about an issue the likely outcome is that they'll pack their bags and go to the church down the road. So I think you almost go into a disciplinary situation with that thought in mind and I think that's intimidatory – you're inclined to be very careful, very kid gloves, because your aim is not to drive the person away but that will, you fear, often be the outcome. This, if I can just digress for a moment, also gives rise to the situation where someone arrives as a newcomer to your congregation. You don't normally grill them and say, 'Did you leave with any problems? Is there any baggage that you bring with you?' In one congregation we welcomed a lady of mature years who was deeply distressed because her husband had left her for a younger woman. He was quite active in Christian circles, had divorced her, married this other woman and gone off into a church of another denomination where he was warmly welcomed and given an active role. It was that very fact that was eating away at her. We as churches don't explore these things and don't support another church's discipline. So that's a background problem.

But in the local scene, in a couple of significant instances, I became aware of the problem when the offender came and confessed to me what they were doing.

In one instance it was a church where I didn't have elders. I had a diaconate of mixed experience and wisdom, and I was fairly young at the time, when someone came and told me of their sin, and was deeply distressed by it.

I dealt with that entirely personally, on the spot, in effect. I sent the person home to confess to their spouse. And I said, 'As an encouragement to you I will ring in half an hour to make sure that you

have done so.' When I rang the spouse answered the phone and said, 'John, it's alright, I have forgiven him and we will go on.' Which reduced me to tears at the time, I thought it was an extraordinary outcome and extraordinarily generous and gracious of her! No one in the church knew, and I think that while it's not quite the Matthew 18 situation, it was resolved at that first level, as it were, and that would plainly be the ideal situation.

Another time a person came to me and spilled the beans on what they had been doing. Again, they were distraught, tearful; believing that they'd put their own marriage in peril because they'd confessed to their spouse before coming and telling me, and the spouse's reaction had been cold. So this fellow didn't know what lay ahead of him. I did have a very strong eldership at that time. I responded initially to the person with a couple of suggestions as to what he might do and where he might go, but I told him I'd take it to the eldership, which I did, and together we decided what we thought was appropriate in terms of discipline.

Now that was not straightforward, because forbidding attendance at the Lord's table is one of those disciplinary measures that's in the back of everybody's mind, I think, as is removing from public ministry.

Our dilemma was: are not those strictures designed to bring a person to repentance? Putting them outside the fellowship, as it were, to bring them to repentance. But here is someone who is repentant! So what's the point of the exercise? What are you doing it for? As an eldership we laboured over that, and were not all of one mind. But there was a feeling that some discipline had to be exercised. So we agreed that a public role in the life of

the fellowship should be removed. We didn't forbid him to come to the Lord's table; that seemed to be an inappropriate gesture at that point. It seemed to resolve fairly well.

When you've got to make up your mind on the run you won't get everything right. I don't think we did anything appallingly wrong, but we could have done it differently and we'd have made other mistakes, because we're human.

One other thing that I learned from that. One of the elders took the toughest line in the discussion and was demanding a much stricter discipline. A few years down the track a member of his own family was caught up in a not dissimilar situation and at that point he was genuinely offended that the discipline was too strict. That tells us something about how as humans we react in those situations.

What it highlighted was the value of dealing with it collectively as an eldership. It wasn't just me out on a limb; my enthusiasm was countered by other people's caution and we tempered one another. I would think that's further evidence of the value of eldership, and that sort of corporate leadership in a church rather than just the pastor making these decisions.

In another instance I dealt with it initially but then it snowballed, and then it actually came to the whole church. We dealt with it at an impromptu church meeting. That was exceedingly emotional. I saw it all through and then I remember retreating to the vestry and just collapsing in a heap, not realising what stress and tension I'd been in. But I thought the church handled it with remarkable maturity at the time.

In sum, the aim is, plainly, to deal with

a brother or a sister, bring them to repentance and express loving forgiveness and a willingness to not hold it against them but to go on. I think normal godly people have always got the perspective of a beam in their own eye and a speck in their brother's eye, that 'there but for the grace of God go I', that we're sinners dealing with sinners, we're not holy sinless people dealing with sinners, and I think you try and put it in that context even at the eldership level.

TL: *The benefits of these experiences?*

JB: My reflection would be that a church and eldership come out of these experiences with a deep sense of humility, maybe a greater awareness of God's grace. It leaves you better, I think, than you were beforehand, if you've endeavoured to deal with it in a godly way and move forward.

TL: *Something you said earlier about trying to recognise the discipline that may have occurred at another church down the road reminds me of a quote that said Christian discipline in local churches has never really come to grips with the invention of the motor car; this whole capacity for us to drive distances. It's unlikely that ancient people or medieval people would move to a church in another village! That's a fascinating complication. How do you wrestle with tough issues when there is the option for people to just leave?*

JB: Yes, and it mustn't prevent us from addressing it; we must address it. I did say earlier I'm sure it means we go in with kid gloves because you don't want the person to simply up and go, because that won't be in their best interest spiritually. So you walk a fine line, and all those thoughts go through your mind when you're confronted with the issue.

There are other issues of course, where the

other person's perfidy becomes known and they simply disappear off the scene. So no discipline is possible because the person has cut and run. I suppose being human you sometimes breathe a sigh of relief at that point and think, 'Well, we can't do anything and I'm glad we're not cast in the role of accuser.'

I suppose the other fear is that there will be a proportion of the congregation that will feel you are being judgemental, you're not being loving, we should just forgive, and any discipline at all is inappropriate or un-Christlike.

TL: *People in the church might assume a pastor just has a personality conflict with the person in question, and is seeking to use the blunt instrument of discipline or censure to hush up legitimate questions about their ministry. Aside from not actually doing that (elevating personality conflicts into some form of discipline), what can we do to avoid the appearance of such a thing?*

JB: I think what I said before about the virtue of working with an eldership, where they take on the issue. Plainly, over the years, there are folk in the congregation whom you find difficult or they don't like some aspect of your ministry and let you know that. I always encouraged folk to write responses every Sunday on care cards, which gave them a ready route to throw brickbats if they wished. That wasn't over exploited. Occasionally you got critical notes.

I remember I once said something that unwittingly touched a raw nerve in a deacon. He wrote in a care card that I'd put an arrow through his heart. I was stunned. I immediately went to see him and apologised. It was a level of hurt that surprised me. Nevertheless, it was intensely real. So I apologised profusely, assured him that it was unwitting, and

prayed with him. I went away but felt I hadn't done enough. So I then went home and wrote to him and said again how much I regretted the hurt I'd caused. Within a week or two he had thanked me for addressing the issue and taking his complaint so seriously. I think he might have felt that when he wrote it I'd ignore it and it would go away. But I'd responded positively. I think that was one instance where I had won my brother from potential alienation.

So be quick to apologise even when it's unwitting and unintentional. If it's real to the person then it's real. That's very different of course to a theological falling out where you declare what you believe is the truth and they've taken offense. You don't have the option of revoking it or changing your theology to suit them!

I think there have been pastors who have a certain abrasiveness and that's just them – they might think it was theological but it's more likely to be personality. I wouldn't know how I would handle serious disciplinary issues if I was a lone pastor, and saw myself as THE pastor who had to act off my own bat. I think that would be quite intimidating for my personality. I can imagine there are some who, whilst not enjoying it, would see it as a not unwelcome part of their work. But I always took refuge in the eldership.

TL: *To take on that sort of a burden without recourse to a collective wisdom is almost unthinkable.*

JB: Yes. But here's another incident different from the others I've spoken of. I took a stand, always I think, that I would not marry a Christian to a non-Christian. I thought that's what the New Testament laid upon me. In one church I had an associate pastor who was asked by someone in the youth fellowship to

conduct their wedding, and it turned out it was going to be a Christian and non-Christian. And he just came to tell me, courteously, and see if I had any problem with that. I said not with you conducting marriages, but Christian and non-Christian? Yes. I've got a problem there. I didn't think it good for the church if the senior pastor had that position and folk could just go to the associate pastor and say, 'well, he'll marry me.' He was uncomfortable with that so I said let's talk to the elders about it. I presented my case to the elders and they disagreed with me (laughs)! They thought that if the associate pastor was willing to marry the couple then that should be OK. I obviously thought they were wrong but I deferred to them – I think if you've got an eldership you've got to defer to them even if you do think they are wrong. I suppose that's a disciplinary matter in some sense

TL: *Most people will encounter that particular issue and have to decide what they feel about it.*

JB: I adopted the position in vacuo, ahead of pastoring. The first time I was confronted with it, it sort of blew up my position because of the couple who came to me. The girl had professed faith, was then baptised and became a member of the church but had then drifted away. So I assumed when she and the fiancé came to see me that she was a Christian, though lapsed. The fellow had vague connections to another church, so my anticipation was that he would not be a Christian and that I might well have a problem here.

I took the opportunity to explain the gospel to them, and what a Christian really was. And I said to the young lady, who I thought was a Christian, 'Are you a Christian?' And she said, 'No, I'm not.'

And I then said to the fellow who I was fairly sure wasn't a Christian, 'Are you a Christian?' And he said, 'Yes I am.' I was confronted with a totally different situation to what I imagined! My mind was spinning as to the way forward.

Here is where the rubber hits the road. You can adopt a position in your study, and it's biblical and all, but because we don't know the heart it can be quite difficult in practise. I married them eventually, saying to the Lord, 'Well you know whether they are or they are not. It's plainly not a situation where a keen believer is in danger of being undermined in their faith by an unbeliever, they are just two people I really suspect don't understand the gospel at this stage and both need grace.' I think from then on I was a little less doctrinaire when it came to couples where it wasn't always clear cut. They didn't come wearing labels. I suppose there would be instances where it would be obvious it was contrary to Scripture, but it didn't happen often over the years.

But to return to what I said earlier; I let the elders make the decision, which I thought was appropriate, and to my surprise they didn't share my judgment on the matter.

You've got to take the elders bad decisions with the good, but on balance it's a great plus to have godly men there, and make clear to the congregation that it's not just the pastor who is being difficult in this instance, but that 6 or 7 people prayerfully and carefully considered this and they believe this is the right way to proceed and the right way to handle it.

TL: *Do you have final comments or advice, especially for younger guys starting out in pastoral ministry, who are going to have to confront these complex situations? If*

they want their churches to take godliness and Christian behaviour seriously, what thoughts do you have for them?

JB: There's an advantage in covering some of these issues in your early preaching, and to remind the church of its call to holiness; to holiness of life as individuals and holiness in dealing with moral issues that come up, and spelling out what that would mean. How you deal with a brother having something against you, or what happens if you become aware of a particular sin. How you deal with it by going to the brother, taking an elder, and so on; trying to deal with things before it comes to the church. People can be taught and encouraged in that way.

If I haven't had an eldership when I've gone to a church I've always immediately worked toward getting one, or transforming one. You may have to educate the congregation to accept elders in the life of the church. Sometimes you go to a church where the eldership has been the aged ex-deacons or something, and I've set about teaching them Timothy and Titus, what the qualifications are, and the role the elders might play. Discipline would be one of those elements. You're preparing the people to know this is how the issue will be dealt with; that the pastor won't deal with these things on his own. He will deal with them with the collective wisdom of godly men the church has recognised as elders, so that if, sadly, such issues arise, then the mechanisms are in place. And, with new elders, preparing them by going through how we will deal with issues when they occur. There's room for education of the congregation as a whole, and of your elders.

TL: *Thanks, John.*

JB: A pleasure.



DEAR ABBY/THE LEVER. SLACK BAPTISTS?

Dear Abby/The Lever,

I'm worried that I may be a slack Baptist. The early English Baptists, and many other congregational separatists, greatly valued the ability of a local church to discipline and excommunicate its members. They saw this pattern in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 5, 1 Timothy 1: 20, 5: 20, Matthew 18: 15-20). They felt that a believing church had to not only have confession as the point of entry (rather than birth) but that it also needed to have a point of exit other than death – voluntarily leaving, or expulsion. They were outraged by the inability of a local church to do this in the Established Church, where you were basically considered 'in' for life, no matter how you lived, unless some faraway bishop made a judgement on you. Thus, they publicly rebuked communicant members for all sorts of indiscretions, sins, and just generally being slack Christians. Public rebuke at church by the elders might result in a person repenting, or some sort of consequence such as being barred from communion or a suspension of membership.

21st century Christians will probably cringe to read accounts of many early Baptists because lots of them really did seem to get addicted to disciplining the hell out of each other, and of course the result was often the splitting of congregations – which was good for church planting but probably not so good in other ways. Still, I find myself wondering why a commitment to the principle and practice of church discipline has waned in the modern Baptist church. Many have noted the baptistification of many established denominations, but in this area Baptists have taken on the *laissez faire* attitudes of the older established churches, both in the rigour we demand from those seeking membership (which was very considerable in a 17th century Baptist church, and can be very flimsy

in our churches) and in our willingness to keep people accountable to their membership covenants and obligations.

Here's a story I was told: A young man was baptised and came into membership in his late teens. He then went interstate and began living with his girlfriend. They continued this arrangement when they came back. This issue was not ignored in conversations with pastors, and his request to rejoin the Men's Ministry leadership team was denied, but nothing was ever done in terms of his membership. He acknowledged it wasn't right for him to live this way as a professing Christian but said circumstances made it hard to do otherwise. They eventually married, having lived together right up to the wedding, and he continued in membership. The church leadership was conflicted about what kind of 'discipline' should apply in this situation. No such conflict would have occurred in the brain of a 17th century Baptist: 'You're outta here!'

I don't think the issue is really about open and closed membership. You could be open or closed, and still have a relatively lightweight process for coming into membership, and be reticent to address covenant slackness in members. Then again, perhaps closed membership did aim to have a rigorous entry requirement (that is, the process of baptism itself) and aim to have the event of baptism as a touchstone for future disciplinary action. On the other hand, John Bunyan's open membership church still had hardcore membership and discipline.

So the questions I find myself asking are as follows. Are we, compared to our forebears, slack Baptists because we do not approach membership with the rigour we should? If this is so, why has it happened? Are we so desperate for members that we 'lower the bar'? Is practising 'belonging before believing'

something that seeps into the way we think about membership? Do we betray biblical principles of a believing and gathered church by lowering the bar for entry, and lowering the bar for continued membership? If one was serious about being a less slack Baptist church, what possible mechanisms could work today? How do you bar someone from communion? Is that even a biblical form of discipline? Do you tell them and the membership they should be temporarily removed from the member's roll? What happens if they just leave your church? Do you 'trace' them to their next church and tell the pastor they have an unrepentant Christian on their hands? Have we actually been right to become slacker in this area, and did the early Baptists go way overboard in trying to legalistically enforce a strict code of conduct through fear and intimidation? Should I be wary of missional church thinking that proposes a 'centred set' view of belonging instead of a 'bounded set' (let the reader understand)? Should I follow the advice of American Baptist Mark Dever and 'toughen up' on this issue? I lean toward his advice in theory but admit that the thought of toughening up on this sends a cold shiver down my paid-to-keep-the-troops-happy-pastor's-spine (or not so spine); I don't want to upset people any more than the next person. What to do?

Yours truly,

Confused Baptist.



DAVID WELLS, NO PLACE FOR TRUTH, EERDMANS, GRAND RAPIDS, 1993, PAGES 299-300.

“CHRIST BROUGHT EVERYTHING INTO HARMONY WITH THE HOLINESS OF GOD. TO BE SURE, THIS HARMONY HAS TWO ENTIRELY DIFFERENT EXPRESSIONS: JUSTIFICATION AND JUDGMENT. IN BOTH, THE HOLINESS OF GOD COMES INTO ITS FULL AND AWFUL EXPRESSION. IN THE ONE CASE, IT DOES SO IN HIM WHO BEARS THE CONSEQUENCES OF THAT WRATH ON BEHALF AND IN PLACE OF THOSE WHOM HE REPRESENTED; IN THE OTHER CASE, IT IS EXPRESSED IN THE FINAL AND AWESOME ALIENATION OF THOSE IN WHOM GOD’S JUDGEMENT VINDICATES FOR ALL ETERNITY HIS HOLINESS.

THE LOSS OF THE TRADITIONAL VISION OF GOD AS HOLY IS NOW MANIFESTED EVERYWHERE IN THE EVANGELICAL WORLD. IT IS THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING WHY SIN AND GRACE HAVE BECOME SUCH EMPTY TERMS...DIVORCED FROM THE HOLINESS OF GOD, SIN IS MERELY SELF-DEFEATING BEHAVIOUR OR A BREACH OF ETIQUETTE. DIVORCED FROM THE HOLINESS OF GOD, GRACE IS MERE EMPTY RHETORIC, PIOUS WINDOW DRESSING FOR THE MODERN TECHNIQUE BY WHICH SINNERS WORK OUT THEIR OWN SALVATION. DIVORCED FROM THE HOLINESS OF GOD, OUR GOSPEL BECOMES INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM ANY OF A HOST OF ALTERNATIVE SELF-HELP DOCTRINES. DIVORCED FROM THE HOLINESS OF GOD, OUR PUBLIC MORALITY IS REDUCED TO LITTLE MORE THAN AN ACCUMULATION OF TRADE-OFFS BETWEEN COMPETING PRIVATE INTERESTS. DIVORCED FROM THE HOLINESS OF GOD, OUR WORSHIP BECOMES MERE ENTERTAINMENT. THE HOLINESS OF GOD IS THE VERY CORNERSTONE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH, FOR IT IS THE FOUNDATION OF REALITY. SIN IS DEFIANCE OF GOD’S HOLINESS, THE CROSS IS THE OUTWORKING AND VICTORY OF GOD’S HOLINESS, AND FAITH IS THE RECOGNITION OF GOD’S HOLINESS. KNOWING THAT GOD IS HOLY IS THEREFORE THE KEY TO KNOWING LIFE AS IT TRULY IS, KNOWING CHRIST AS HE TRULY IS, KNOWING WHY HE CAME, AND KNOWING HOW LIFE WILL END.

IT IS THIS GOD, MAJESTIC AND HOLY IN HIS BEING, WHO HAS DISAPPEARED FROM THE MODERN EVANGELICAL WORLD, WHOSE CHURCH IS A MALL IN WHICH THE RELIGIOUS, THEIR POCKETS FILLED WITH THE COIN OF NEED, DO THEIR BUSINESS. WE SEEK HAPPINESS, NOT RIGHTEOUSNESS. WE WANT TO BE FULFILLED, NOT FILLED. WE ARE INTERESTED IN SATISFACTION, NOT A HOLY DISSATISFACTION WITH ALL THAT IS WRONG.”

THE PRICE OF LOVE (A SUNDAY SERMON) HOSEA 3

THE PRICE OF LOVE

Today is Valentine's day. When I was a younger man I pursued a lovely lady named Deborah. I soon discovered the cost of winning her heart; the price of love. It's *expensive*; it hits the wallet. I had to buy all these dinners. I had to buy gifts. And it hits the male ego; I was even reduced to writing poetry. All that effort - what a frustration! I thought, 'Why can't she just see the truth: "he's so unbelievably good looking, he's so smart, he's got a heart of gold, he's so unbelievably good looking.'" But no, the proof of love is sometimes in the price we are prepared to pay, and the lengths we will go. And for me, it worked out great in the end.

GOD'S PAIN IN LOVING US

As we saw in the first two chapters of Hosea it did not work out so well for him. We learn in these first two verses of chapter three, that *God's saving love involves terribly costly action*; painful action. We learn that God's love for his people is so great he will pay for their restoration. When they have done shameful things he is still prepared to shame himself in order to win them back. The acted parable of Hosea's retrieval of his prostituting wife, Gomer, displays all the pain of this love, and perhaps does so uniquely in the Bible. Verses 1-2 again:

The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes." So I bought her for 15 shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley.

He gives so little detail it's not easy to know what is happening, but our best guess is this: Gomer pursued her infidelities, mentioned in chapters 1-2, to such an addictive extent that she found herself working as a temple prostitute at

a pagan shrine, or employed in some sort sexual enslavement. Her uncontrolled immorality led her to the lowest rung of society. How galling for Hosea that she is *'loved by another'*. And yet even to a spouse like this the prophet is to give love. Notice what that means, however. Verse 1 says *'Show your love to your wife.'* And verse 2 doesn't say, 'so I loved her', it describes what it meant to love: *'So I bought her for 15 shekels.'* His love was action; costly action.

This self-giving, costly, even embarrassing, act of rescue, is the sort of love with which God loves Israel. It was a pathetic irony that Hosea was to love a wife who was 'loved' by another. But Israel! They know the love of God, but what is it they love in return? Raisin cakes! God found them, made them a people, cared for them, but they turned to Canaan's gods, to Baal, and thanked *him*; because his raisin cakes were nice. Is it not a shocking way to describe the idiotic banality of sin?

We think of sin as making mistakes. Perhaps at best we think of it as breaking rules. God says sin is adultery. Sin treats God as a jilted husband. Sin is betrayal. Sin is a dirty little secret shamelessly paraded before a loving God. It's personal, it's such sad stupidity; it's ugly.

And though Israel, the wife of the King of Kings, goes whoring after other gods, after leering men, as it were, still the King will seek her, will pay for her, will say, 'I love you. I love you.' I'll bet there was no husband in the neighbourhood like Hosea - to love like that. And there was no God in the neighbourhood like Yahweh - no god in Assyria, or Babylon, or Egypt, or Persia or Greece, or Canaan, who said such things their people.

Mark Twain's book *A Yankee at King Arthur's Court* has a moment where the 19th century Yankee wants the ancient King to understand his people so he gets him to disguise himself and travel among the commoners. The King doesn't know

how to behave at that level and addresses one of his people as "Varlet", as slave. The Yankee tells him he can't address them that way as he is a brother to them all. Then the King exclaims, "Brother? To dirt like that?!" Go, says God, love a woman who has ruined you, a failure. Dirt like that. For no matter how high I am, and how truly low you are, I will walk among you, and love you.

Doesn't this give us a better appreciation of Jesus' death? We have turned from a loving God, sold ourselves as slaves to sin and Jesus came as a ransom, a payment; not with shekels of silver but his own life. That's cost, that's action, that is love. Gomer's shame gave a vivid picture of the nature of sin. The cross shows how truly horrible sin is. I've often wondered why the Son of God had to be crucified. Why *that* method of death? Part of the answer is here, I think. It's only the nakedness, vile humiliation, dehumanising horror and unmatched shameful, utter shameful of the cross that can express the loathsome shameful of sin, and the personal cost to God of paying our penalty. It's hard to imagine something more appropriate than crucifixion to prove that a cataclysm must follow sin. G Campbell Morgan put it wonderfully, 'Grace agrees with law that severity must follow sin, but grace catches it, bears it, banishes it and opens the door for the sinning soul to come back to God.'

OUR PAIN IN LEARNING TO LOVE GOD

God's saving love includes strong chastisements to change the beloved. Verses 3-5 describe a full reconciliation (both in Hosea's marriage and of God with Israel) but they also show that God's love involves doing whatever is necessary to transform his people, even if that means depriving them, and constraining them, in order to cure them of idolatry. This was reflected in Hosea's experience. Most people have found verse 3 difficult to

understand and are unclear about what the Hebrew means, but when the parallel with verses 4-5 is kept in mind, I think it becomes clear. Verses 3-5:

Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you." For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol. Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to his blessings in the last days.

People who have family members that have succumbed to severe and destructive addictions, such as drug addictions, and sex addictions, know that helping such people often involves tough love. There are restrictions on behaviour and movement that would normally seem harsh, but in these cases are necessary in order to break the power of addictive behaviours. Cold turkey must be enforced in order to bring self-control, sobriety, and sanity back to the person. Something like this is happening in Hosea's house in verse 3.

The most likely sense of the middle phrase *'you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man'* is that 'any man' also includes Hosea. They will live together, but, as the NIV footnote has it, and rightly I think, the reunion will not be consummated – they will 'wait for each other'. A self imposed celibacy, for a time, will reinforce their exclusive loyalty to one another, prove and cement Gomer's return to monogamy, and break the power of her immoral addiction in her life. Now, whether or not that is precisely what verse 3 is describing between Hosea and Gomer, it is certainly what verses 4-5 are describing between God and Israel.

Through conquest and exile God dissolved the nation because of its sin, but it was more than mere punishment. It was discipline that transformed them.

It deprived Israel of Canaanite idolatry, and the arrogance that God would never punish them, and so it broke the back of idolatry in Israel's life. After the Jews return from Babylon there are many problems with their faith (as John the Baptist and Jesus make clear) but pagan idolatry was never again the great problem in the life of Judah. The exile deprived God's people of their king, the temple and its sacrifices, and so much that was from God, and so much that was good. By doing this God aimed to grow in them an appreciation for God, whom they had taken for granted. This deprivation was a severe mercy, but it was an act of mercy.

A couple I know experienced an enormous threat to their marriage when the husband committed adultery and left his wife for several weeks. Deborah and I spent time with the wife and saw her heartache first hand. Both professed Christian faith, and her faith was remarkably evident in her willingness to take her husband back and work at restoring their marriage. He came to his senses and repented and wanted to return. She accepted him. Her love was evident in this action. But her love and wisdom were also evident in her subsequent action. She had the toughness of mind to say that if he was truly repentant he would accept that he had to prove his desire to change, and be helped to guard his faithfulness. There would be, for a time, measures to assist this: 'You must get home by certain hours. You must call me at certain times of the day. You must agree to attend counselling together and meet with a Christian friend for accountability.' Is this draconian? Is this conditional love? No – trust must be rebuilt. Loving habits, not secretive habits, must be rebuilt. She had remarkable grace, yet also the spine to give shape to repentance. And their marriage survives today, praise God.

The restoration of Israel, following their period of chastisement, took place in stages. Nehemiah rebuilt the temple, but they did not have David their king until Jesus was born. I believe verse 5

began to be fulfilled in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost when 3000 Israelites came trembling in repentance to God and their King, Jesus, the son of David.

We have to be very careful how we explain the application of this idea to Christians, but the fact is *God still chastises his people* for their good. God is prepared to expose our sin, deprive us of access to it, and to deprive us even of good things in life, in order to keep us from falling away from him, or turning to other gods. In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul says God left him with the thorn in his flesh to stop him depending on himself and to keep him depending on God. 1 Corinthians 11 tells us that the Corinthian church lost some of its people to illness and death because of the flagrant sin of that church, but Paul explained to them, verse 32 *'When we are judged by the Lord we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.'* As John Piper says, 'God cares more about our holiness than our momentary happiness.'

When it comes to our loyalty to Jesus we must be zealous, sober, chaste and self-controlled. You don't fling yourself onto any object of worship that happens to pass by, that's just *yuck*. You are not your own, you were bought at a price (1 Corinthians 6:19), just like Gomer. You belong to God, body and soul. We must be ready to have our fidelity tested by other offers in life. The only reason some people have never committed marital adultery is because they've never been propositioned. The only reason some Christians haven't wandered from the truth is that they've never been spiritually propositioned – but what will happen when something comes into your life that may threaten your commitment to Christ; that offer of marriage, that dream promotion, that inheritance windfall? Will God still be first in your heart?

Israel refused to believe that their two way bet with God and Baal made them unlovely, and ugly. They thought it made them sophisticated. So much like today's sophisticated adultery. So much

like today's relaxed Christianity. Are you living with Christ, or some other spiritual lover? It's one or the other – there are no spiritual singles.

So we must guard our first love, but also, and this is vital, not from mere duty to God. The reconciliation envisaged in Hosea 3 is full, and full of feeling. We must

delight in God's love. John Piper put it this way in a little poem about his wife Noël:

*I know that if I kissed my wife simply
because it's right
and not because it's my delight
it would not honour her so well.
With pleasure I will praise Noël,
and I will magnify my wife
by making her my joy in life.*

God's love is so great he pays for our restoration in the cross, and insists on our transformation into faithfulness. His pain in buying us back, and our pain in learning to be faithful, produces a marriage of miraculous joy between a person and God; one in which deeply felt love, and true holiness, meet without contradiction. 

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