

CROSS
Purposes

Coming up...

Wes Campbell

*responds to Mark Zirnsak's
"Human Rights versus Christian Values?"*

through a glass darkly

Robyn French

in service

Paul Blacker

on Areopagus hill

**Robert Gribben
& Sharon Hollis**

on the Eucharist

letters...responses...editorial

Issue 4 of *Cross Purposes* will be published February 2006

CROSS
Purposes

Issue 3
November 2005

A forum for theological dialogue

**On Christian
Existence**

Cross Purposes, Issue 3, at your service! In this issue we're again pleased to offer a wide range of thinking about Christian existence in our times.

Margaret Blair reflects for us on the work of a presbytery minister, offering that there's a fluidity and slipperiness to ministry and to life as God's people which makes it impossible to hold on to God, church or self without closing ourselves off from God's freedom to call us into new directions.

Bruce Barber's sermon presents a challenge to our incessant desire to have and to hold God, and ourselves. Contradicting trends towards "spirituality" and self-discovery, he reminds us that the gospel is not about discovering God, but discovering our-

selves as dis-covered by God. Our calling is to live in the good news that

(Continued on page 2)

In this Issue

Letters 3

In service..... 4
by Margaret Blair

op. cit. 6
John Bottomley responds to Alistair Macrae

Through a glass darkly..... 9
"Pathos on Mt. Nebo" by Bruce Barber

Double take..... 12
by Hilary Howes

On Areopagus hill..... 15
"Human Rights versus Christian Values?"
by Mark Zirnsak

Cross Purposes is published by the Committee on Doctrine and Liturgy, Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. © 2005

(Continued from page 1)

we are borne into the promised land not by our efforts but by One who has gone before us.

John Bottomley responds to Al McRae's article in *CP* 2, reminding us of the pastoral task involved in thinking about the past and future of the church. The people called "church" are afflicted by loss and grief, through which we may be brought into some solidarity with the wider world. Confronting the realities of loss and death together may create the possibility of relearning the full significance of the gospel.

And, in this issue's major article, Mark Zirnsak considers the relationship between Christian values and human rights, an important issue for the church to understand as it contrib-

utes to the wider community discussion about the need for a Bill of Rights, or similar, within our legal system. This question brings us into the realm of public theology, interfacing directly with the social, political and economic questions of the day. Getting right the relationship between the particularity of the church's confession and the more "universal" social and philosophical paradigms of society is paramount, and we hope Mark's article will generate some vigorous dialogue to this end.

We also feature our first real "letter to the editor", which we hope will encourage more feedback and engagement on these important issues from others. May you enjoy this issue, and be looking forward to the next by the time you get through it!

self-interested argument can be advanced that we should treat others well in the hope that they will treat us well in return.

Belief in the Christian faith provides a spiritual imperative as to why we should treat other people well. As German theologian Helmut Thielicke warned, "Human rights as abstract qualities, cut off from the soil of faith in which they had their origin, are in danger of withering away".¹⁰

Conclusion

Both "human rights" and "Christian values" are terms that are debated and whose content is open to some interpretation. At the same time it is possible for there to be agreement between what these two terms mean, especially when Christians draw their concepts of human rights from the teaching and principles contained within the gospels. In fact, for Christians it is essential that human rights have their foundations in the gospels and New Testament for human rights to have meaning.

Human rights is a concept that assist in dialogue with other faiths in a multifaith society. It also allows for meaningful dialogue with secular governments about the mission of the church to liberate people from poverty and oppression, when such governments may

be unsympathetic or even hostile to Christianity. Thus human rights is a useful tool to all of us.

MARK ZIRNSAK is Director of Justice and International Mission for the Synod.

Notes

¹United Church of Christ in the Philippines, *Constitution and By-Laws* (1996) 10.

²Baptist World Alliance, *Celebrating Christ's Presence Through the Spirit: Official Report of the Fourteenth Congress, Toronto, Canada, July 8-13, 1980* (Nashville: Broadman, 1981) 77.

³Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Protestant Theology* (London: SCM, 1967) 49-50.

⁴Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution 1787-1799* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 72.

⁵William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 54-56.


⁶Richard Falk, *Human Rights Horizons. The Pursuit of Justice in a Globalizing World* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 38-43.

⁷Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 4.

⁸Hall, 79-80.

⁹Quoted in Hall, 199.

¹⁰Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Politics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 2:69.



CROSS Purposes

Published by the Committee on Doctrine and Liturgy, Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. Three issues published per year.

Editors: Garry Deverell, Craig Thompson

Letters to the Editor are invited at editor@theologyproject.net, or

Cross Purposes, 80 Camms Road, The Patch, 3792

Deadline for Issue 4 is 15 January 2006.

Advertising: \$50 whole A5 page

\$25 half A5 page

\$15 quarter A5 page

Cross Purposes is available in electronic form at www.theologyproject.net, and may be freely reproduced.

embodying that responsibility, although certainly not the only way that this could be done.

In consideration of the social justice mission of the church, human rights standards (with international treaties on human rights being something that governments negotiate and sign up to) are a way of being able to appeal to governments about the standards that they have pledged to live up to. Human rights standards are often taken seriously by both State and Federal Governments in Australia, although they can often be violated as well. In Australia, if we look at the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, torture and slavery are outlawed, people generally cannot be arbitrarily arrested, people have the right to a fair trial if charged with a criminal offence, people are presumed innocent until proved guilty, people are protected by law against attacks on their honour and reputation, people are free to marry who they choose and to start a family, people have the right to own property, primary school education is largely free, people have the right to vote for their elected representatives and so on.

As an example of where I have seen human rights standards taken into account by governments, I was recently part of a working group that assisted the Victorian

Government in developing a Code for the Employment of children under the age of 15 in the advertising and entertainment industries. In the Code is the requirement, as stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, that the employment does not interfere with the child's education or be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental or social development.

The limitations of Human Rights from a Christian Perspective

Despite the usefulness of human rights as a tool, I would be the first to argue for the superiority of gospel teaching and that human rights cannot replace such teaching. Jesus' call for us to love other people should cause us to go well beyond what is required in a legalistic human rights framework. The gospel requires us to seek the holistic well-being of all people, not just in those areas of well-being that governments around the world have agreed to be codified through international human rights instruments.

Also, human rights standards lack a clear reason why we should treat other people well. It is possible to make the humanistic argument that we should treat others well because that is how we would expect to be treated. Or a more



Reflections on CP 1

Sue Gormann's article was a collage of ideas about ministry which were typical of insights that I have been hearing over the last 15 years, but what it highlighted in this context was the Uniting Church's lack of theological foundation for the ordained Ministry. She established the basis of all ministries in the church beautifully when she said, "the ministry of the church is to take part in Christ's ministry, not in singular pursuits". But the next obvious question is "how does ordained ministry fit within Christ's ministry?" and "What is the relation between ordained ministry and all the other ministries of the lay people that make up Christ's ministry?"

Without theological answers to these questions we will continue to have Ministers and laity alike clashing over ministry style, tradition, culture, and expectations. And these clashes will look more like local "spats" instead of what it truly is; a major upheaval in the church's understanding of itself with the collapse of Christendom. With this collapse

has come the elevating of the ministry of the laity, first within the church community and more recently as the church scattered in the world. But must the raising of one mean the demise of the other or is ordination part of the gospel itself?

Craig Thompson's sermon struck at the heart of the matter even though I personally don't mind having particular symbols in a service that help to give thanks to God for the life of this particular person. But I do understand that this particular symbol (the flag) may be given a meaning opposite to what the gospel is saying about our future in Christ.

Garry Deverell's article was really two articles in one. The first one was about a renewed basis for ecumenism and I felt accurately depicted the shift and why it is happening (unbeknownst to most in the hierarchies of the denominations!). The second one on "A Taxonomy" was of immediate interest and I think would do well as an introduction to further reflection on the theological basis for actual content. Our beloved Uniting Church is trying to renew its worship but I fear we are not addressing the issue of what the worship service is. Until we do our changes will be merely ones of style and taste, or worse—accidental removal of something essential to a gospel encounter of God and his people!

Graeme Harrison

The Practice of Ministry

Margaret Blair

I have been asked to write a short article reflecting on the practice of ministry. I thought that sounded easy enough but my thinking seems hard to grasp.

Years ago when my children were little they enjoyed playing with a substance called "Slime". This was brightly coloured and very difficult to get hold of as it oozed into different shapes as you tried to hold it. Try as you might you couldn't quite hold it together but as it changed and moved it still remained in one piece. I think this is a good image for my thoughts, for ministry or indeed the Uniting Church.

The other day I got up in the morning aware that I only had one appointment in my diary for the day. I was looking forward to a quiet day as I had a mountain of "desk work" heaped up around me and a service to prepare for the coming Sunday. It must have been about 8.00am when the phone first rang. There was an acute pastoral need in a congregation, which was between ministers, and the supply minister was not available. What could be done to provide appropriate care to those involved? About an hour later and many phone calls round in a circle, and the generous

act of a retired minister, the best possible outcome was identified.

Another call, a presbytery person was unable to get to a meeting that day with a developer interested in purchasing a strategic piece of land linked to a new presbytery building project. Yes I could make the meeting as it was important the congregation have the presbytery present in the conversation. That way we all heard the same things.

Off to my fixed appointment working with a small congregation. What might be ways ahead? Ideas from Kennon Callahan's "Small Strong Congregations" helped here. What are the best things you do now? What is something you could do to build on this? It's good to plan a "one-off", don't think it has to be on-going. As we talked they went from despondency to excitement. "We can do this". I came away feeling quite encouraged.



that this can generate, such as the fact that 30,000 children die each day from starvation or easily preventable diseases.

Human rights as a concept has offered a useful challenge to an imperialistic Christendom view of Christianity that turned its back on much of the teaching in the gospels. So long as Christian faith is unable to distinguish itself at the level of foundational belief from the West-

“Human rights have offered a useful challenge to an imperialistic view of Christianity that turned its back on much of the teaching in the gospels.”

ern imperial peoples with which it has been and is inextricably linked, its actions and ethical claims will be ambiguous, even when they are inspired by apparently Christian motives.⁷

When Christianity was brought into the centre of political power and served as the spiritual guarantor and cultic legitimator of the powers-that-are, God became an eternal sovereign reflected in and radiating from the throne of earthly might and authority. Christian monarchies as well as ecclesiastical hierarchies have had vested interests in sustaining an image of God informed by power and a concomitant hesitancy

about theologies that draw upon love, justice, compassion and other attributes that limit the power motif.⁸

The emergence of human rights as a concept has helped to challenge the ways in which Christianity has been abused as justification for all kinds of atrocities, exploitation and mistreatment of people. In the words of Henri Nouwen:⁹

The temptation to consider power an apt instrument for the proclamation of the gospel is the greatest temptation of all. We rationalise and justify the use of power as something good. With this line of thinking crusades took place, inquisitions were organised, native Americans were enslaved, positions of great influence were desired, episcopal palaces, splendid cathedrals, and opulent seminaries were built.

Those critical of human rights, such as the Saltshaker quote at the start of this article, often seek to paint community responsibilities as being at odds with the concept that each person has universal and inalienable human rights. From a Christian framework, the fact that Jesus called on his followers to "love your neighbour as you love yourself", means that others can expect love from us. It means we have a responsibility towards others and "human rights" is one conceptual way of

ticle 25(1) of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control”. Article 14 states that “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution”.

Such comparisons are hardly surprising, as human rights standards codify in a legalist manner many of the values and ideals that are common to many societies.

Do Christians Need Human Rights Standards?

However the argument can be made, with the gospels, the Bible and Christian tradition and teaching, what need is there for human rights standards? The answer I would give is that that would be fine if everyone was Christian and everyone understood Christianity in the same way. Human rights standards allow us in a multifaith and multicultural world to agree to some common standards of what it means to treat each other with respect and dignity. They can even assist us in the

Christian community to hopefully have a better chance of reaching such common understanding.

The content of what constitutes “human rights” is open to debate and there are groups that are constantly seeking to broaden what are considered basic human rights. While this can be healthy in getting the global community to reflect on what each and every human being should be entitled to for the preservation of their well-being and dignity, it does carry the risk of watering down the upholding of the most essential human rights. It also carries the risk of generating opposition to human rights, where it is seen as a concept by which each individual claims whatever privileges they want for themselves as basic human rights.

However, criticism can also be mounted against those who claim the mantra of “Christian values”. Too often this term is used to strip away much of Jesus’ teaching and mission, his condemnation of the wealthy and powerful who ignore and oppress others, his proclaiming that the good news is for those in poverty, and the liberating nature of his mission. “Christian values” bears the risk of becoming obsessed with issues of sexual morality and obedience to the law, while ignoring the economic and political oppression that exists in much of the world and the very real material suffering

A couple of pastoral phone calls to ministers. How are you going? How is the placement discernment coming along? Yes, I’ll call in for a conversation with you and your spouse.

Yes, the day to day practice of ordained ministry is a slippery

“I need to remind myself that God’s love, grace and forgiveness is for me too. I need times of reflection to consciously sit in the presence of God.”

thing. One of the joys and challenges for me has always been the unexpected nature of almost every day, and my present role as Presbytery Minister of Western Port Presbytery is no different. I enjoy this variety, this changing “slime” factor, most of the time. However I don’t enjoy the piles of unfinished business, things still in process so they cannot be concluded, or things waiting for the report or the file note to be written. The sheer number of things on the go can be quite overwhelming at times. Another tension in my present role is not having a congregation who I know well, and who knows me well. I miss those clear thinkers who offer the words of challenge and correction, as well as encouragement, that

I valued so much in congregational ministry.

This might all sound rather mundane, and in one way it is, but it is also where I live out my call to ministry. Indeed all of us are in ministry through our baptism and we live out our call in every one of our day to day encounters. It is here that we make our response to God. So when I “stuff up”, which I do to greater or lesser extent on a regular basis, I feel a deep sense of shame at the magnitude of this. I need to remind myself that God’s love, grace and forgiveness is not just for others. It is for me too. I need times to move back from the busyness, times of reflection to consciously sit in the presence of God.

The living presence of Christ, and my understanding of the historical Jesus, constantly challenge me to be an agent advocating justice and hope in our world. The challenging thing in this is that as I claim this for myself and for the people in the church I must also claim it for all people. In Western Port Presbytery the challenge of being God’s people in the community takes on sharp focus as we struggle to find ways of being present among the tens of thousands of people in the new houses being built from Endeavour Hills to Pakenham. There are many questions and few answers. Sometimes I sit and listen to people bemoaning excess prop-

erty in other presbyteries and think we could do with a bit of that.

At our recent Synod I had the sense that there was a recognition of God's love taking us well beyond our frustrations, disagreements and even our hopes and dreams. As we struggle with where God may be taking us as a people of God we sometimes fall into putting each other down. Those working hard to find new ways of being church can show an intolerance for the older congregations struggling with minimum change. Faithful groups of older people in their bewilderment and desire to preserve what they value can reject those doing a new thing.

When you grabbed the slime it moved in strange ways but hung together even if by a strand. To do a new thing or to preserve the old is not a case of one being right and the other wrong. Together we make the whole, which is so much greater than the parts. God can be, and is, at work in different ways in our midst. God is leading us to new destinations in this time when change has swept the community understandings and perceptions of faith, Christianity, the church and ordained ministry.

So I thank God for the opportunities and challenges of slimy times.

MARGARET BLAIR is Presbytery Minister in Western Port Presbytery.

Grieving for a Previous Paradigm

John Bottomley

I grew up in Highett Methodist Church. When I was about ten, the congregation celebrated the opening of its new church building. It was a huge event, and part of my pride was knowing my father's company had done the plumbing for the new buildings. My brothers and I attended the Highett Methodist Order of Knights (MOK). It was as a Page that I won a Bible-reading competition, which then gave me the nod for that task at every subsequent church parade! Later, it was a youth service at Highett where I first heard God's call to ordained ministry.

Today, the Bluff Road building of my youth is gone. There is no sign that a church building ever graced the site. All my father's hard work and dedication is gone, as is my dad! And I still feel sadness about his death, even though it was 18 years ago. So I agree with Alistair Macrae's observation "that the church remains in steadfast denial of the collapse of the old frameworks", but through my experience of dad's death, I read this denial

op. cit.

Lebanese Christian who went on to become President of the UN General Assembly.

However, it is quite clear that when governments at the UN voted in favour of the adoption of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights many would have done so in the belief that it would not have any impact in the world. In 1948, governments that voted in favour of the Declaration included brutal Latin American dictatorships and Western powers involved in armed conflicts in their colonies where they sought to maintain their exploitative power. However, the cynicism of these governments proved to be wrong, due to the unanticipated, voluntary activism of citizens' associations and the role the global media has played. Human rights have become a potent tool in our world to push governments towards standards that uphold basic human dignity.⁶

The Link between Human Rights and the Gospels

Part of the Christian basis for the concept of human rights is that the image of God is stamped upon every person and should be affirmed by the Christian community as the basis of the sanctity and worth of every person.

I would argue that there are clearly similarities between Jesus'

teaching in the gospel and basic human rights standards. If we take seriously Jesus' call that we love our neighbour as ourselves, then clearly we do not want to see our neighbour, or anyone, tortured, placed in slavery, imprisoned arbitrarily, go without food, housing, basic healthcare, education or be exploited by an unscrupulous employer. Human rights standards may help set a minimum standard by which we measure the "love" of our neighbour. In Matthew 5 and Luke 6, Jesus talks of loving our enemies and he says that if you only love those that love you, how are you special, as even pagans do that. Thus, Jesus is saying when it comes to loving others, his followers should be doing at least as well as the community around them. Human rights standards might be taken as the measure of love for others that the secular community is willing to commit to, so I would argue that Christians should aim to do at least that well.

In addition to the general appeal to Jesus' call for us to love our neighbours as ourselves, other things Jesus said can be seen to connect to basic human rights standards. For example, in Matthew 25 when Jesus speaks about the sorting of the righteous, the measure used is if they feed those who were hungry, clothed the naked, looked after the sick and invited the stranger in. Ar-

noted reputation for religious tolerance and respect for basic human rights. It was later in the Revolution, 1792-1794, that the Catholic clergy and members of the Catholic orders were severely persecuted and thousands were executed. The context for the persecution was both a war with foreign monarchies and civil war in different parts of France in which Catholic clergy often sided with royalist forces or conservative factions within the republican camp. The full-scale dechristianisation movement of the French Revolution was relatively short-lived, starting in October 1793 and with the French Government working to seriously end it by April 1794. However, even from its beginnings there were many leading figures in the revolutionary government that opposed dechristianisation and supported religious freedom, even if they painted Christianity in unflattering terms. For example, on 21 November 1793 Robespierre spoke in favour of religious freedom and argued, "The man who is determined to prevent religious worship is just as fanatical as the man who says mass...The Convention will not allow persecution of peaceful ministers of religion, but it will punish them severely every time they dare to take advantage of their position to deceive the citizens or to arm bigotry or royalism against the Republic". On 6 December 1793 the

revolutionary government issued a decree formally prohibiting all violence and threats against religious freedom.

The human rights concepts that came out of the French Revolution appear to have been very influential on modern human rights standards. The modified French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1793 is very similar to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights

" Human rights standards may help set a minimum standard by which we measure the 'love' of our neighbour."

of 1948. The UN Declaration of 1948 is largely the foundation of most of the modern human rights treaties, outlining human rights in the areas of civil and political rights (such as the freedom of religion) and economic, social and cultural rights (such as the rights to health-care, education and housing) and spelling out these rights more specifically for groups like women and children.

The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights itself was drafted by a committee of people that included committed Christians such as Eleanor Roosevelt, who was elected as the Chairperson of the drafting Committee, and Dr Charles Malik, a

differently. Denial is a stage of grief. And since its inception the Uniting Church has refused our members permission to grieve all the losses associated with church union, as well as those caused by the impact of societal changes.

So I can't agree with Alistair when he says "the current situation demands a radical examination of archaic assumptions, structures and priorities of the church". That is not the ministry I would offer to a grieving person in denial of their loved one's death. Nor is it the ministry for a church in denial of its loss. I want to thank God for the gifts and graces of my past, and yes, even for being a Page and an Esquire in the MOKs, where I learned the privilege of reading scripture, was inspired by young men of faith, and later gained leadership skills. I yearn for a church-space to lament the loss of all my dad poured himself into at Highett, and I want God to know I am angry that our church today seems to care so little for its inheritance.

I am also sad that the faith I grew up with at Highett was inadequate for adult life. After High School I went to university and studied sociology, which made far more sense of the world than the Sunday School faith of my youth. The painful irony was that by the time I arrived at Theological College the faith of my youth and my call to ministry had disintegrated, and been replaced by faith in sociology!

The matter was not resolved for me at Hall, and it would be fair to say I began ordained ministry as a sociologist at heart!

However, the framework of sociology did not equip me for ministry, and when a group of church members walked out of worship one Sunday morning, my vocation seemed ended also. During a pastoral visit to one of

" The 'whole new culture' seems equally determined to deny the dark and painful truth of death, loss and grief."

the women who was angry about my ministry, I broke down in tears. She reached across the table, took my hand, and prayed for me—this representative of Alistair's "previous paradigm". And as she prayed, I knew I was loved of God, and my ministry renewed!

The social sciences construct a platform for the scientific observation of the world. From this stance, I was convinced I could see the needs of the society around me, and see what needed to be done. But I could not see what needed to be done for me! It was not until my blindness was painfully broken open that I began to learn the gift of my human limits was in knowing my dependence upon God's grace for my identity and purpose in ministry.

So I am very uncomfortable with Alistair's assumption that the church

“must” revise its sociological assumptions about the world, and in particular, embrace the two “tectonic cultural shifts” from modernism to post-modernism, and from Christendom to post-Christendom. I agree with Alistair about the “fact” that these shifts have occurred, but we will not escape from the church’s captivity to modernism or Christendom by further conforming the church to the new sociological assumptions about the world. In discussing a draft of my response to Alistair’s article with him, I understand the thought the church would conform itself to the new sociological assumptions about the world is anathema to him. If the sociological framework of “post-modern, post-Christian” reality is not a sound foundation for responding to the question about directions for the church’s ministry, then what is?

I would prefer to ask what is God saying to the world through “this period of dismantling and turmoil”. The church of my youth disappeared almost without lament. It is the same with the dismantling of our nation’s manufacturing sector, the turmoil in the farm sector, the collapse of traditional masculinity, and the demise of other once-prized institutions. Death, loss and grief abound around us, and yet as with the former paradigms of modernism and Christendom, the “whole new culture” seems equally determined to deny the dark and painful truth of death, loss and grief. Both

“old” and “new” ways of viewing the world each believe the illusion that we need the power of their insight to save the world, even as they deny that the world they wish to put right is descending deeper into “dismantling and turmoil”.

The denial within the church about our disintegration and decline is God’s gift of solidarity with this dying and grief-filled world. When we attend to denial as an aspect of our grief, it draws our attention to how both the church’s dying and our unexpressed grief may be a window into the death, loss and grief so massively feared in the world. Attentiveness to how the church seeks to avoid the pain of our dying and loss provides a window into understanding how cultures both old and new seek to peddle the lie they have overcome pain and death by burying the evidence revealed in the human experience of grief.

If we who believe in an incarnated Lord attend more faithfully to the particularity of the grief-laden denial we experience in our church, then we may hear afresh Christ’s call to trust God to lead us from the darkness of death and grief to life in its wholeness. Then Christ may open our eyes to the path of discipleship we are to follow in the world, and we may begin to live as church for the sake of the world.

JOHN BOTTOMLEY is Director of UnitingCare’s Creative Ministries Network.

Historical Emergence of Human Rights

The concept of human rights in the modern form we have them emerged in the seventeenth century. Human rights as a concept emerged at the time of the Enlightenment movement. They emerged as a legalistic-type framework to outline what each member of a society might expect from their society and what responsibility they bear to ensure that all other members of society may enjoy. This is a key point to realise, that each human right actually carries with it a responsibility to ensure that every other person enjoys that basic right. Critics of the “human rights” concept often attack human rights by erroneously arguing that human rights are only about the demands an individual makes for their own “rights” with no regard for community responsibility.

Now because human rights did emerge at the time of the Enlightenment and some of the Enlightenment thinkers were hostile to the church and in some cases to Christianity, we in the Christian community have inherited a suspicion that the concept of human rights is somehow in opposition to Christianity. However, the historical reality was that Christians, and in many cases Christians that were not followers of the Enlightenment movement, supported the development of

human rights declarations in the late 1700s.

English puritans in the seventeenth century developed the Rights of Parliament and the Bill of Rights, which affirmed the right of religious liberty and the right of protection from illegal imprisonment.

Religious tolerance was one of the principles of the Enlightenment.³ French Enlightenment thinkers championed the cause religious

“Each human right carries with it a responsibility to ensure that every other person enjoys that basic right.”

toleration and freedom of worship, especially for Protestants in France.⁴ For example, in 1766 Voltaire took up the case of La Barre who was convicted of various petty adolescent acts of blasphemy and sacrilege, and as a result was tortured and burnt at the stake.⁵ Voltaire argued that such laws were monstrous, irrational and absurd.

The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789 was voted in by a National Assembly made up mainly of Christians and many clergy, although some clergy spoke out strongly against the concept of freedom of opinion, thought and worship. However, the French Revolution hardly has a

or punishment, and those that relate specifically to refugees, women, youth, children, minority groups and other persons who cannot safeguard their own rights.

Some evangelical churches have also embraced human rights. For example the Fourteenth Baptist World Congress declared in Toronto in 1980 that “Human rights are derived from God—from his nature, his creation, and his commands. Concern for human rights is at the heart of the Christian faith. Every main doctrine is related to human rights, beginning with the biblical revelation of God”.²

The Uniting Church in Australia has not been as willing to embrace human rights standards. The Statement to the Nation by the Inaugural Assembly of the Uniting Church in June 1977 speaks of rights, but without any explicit reference to international human rights standards. Instead human rights are affirmed as being linked with Christian values:

We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and

personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.

We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur. We will work for the eradication of poverty and racism within our society and beyond. We affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available. We will oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms.

On the 50th Anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights the Synod of Victoria encouraged members to sign a pledge to support the rights contained within the document and urged the Australian Government to adhere to the rights within the Declaration. However, the Synod itself did not endorse the Declaration nor make any link between the Christian faith and the Declaration, perhaps indicating the ongoing ambivalence that the Synod as a whole has towards to concept of human rights.

It seems fruitful to explore where the concept of human rights emerged from and how they connect with or stand apart from “Christian values”.

Pathos on Mt. Nebo

a sermon on
Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Bruce Barber

The word of God to Moses: “I have let you see the land with your eyes, but you shall not go over there”.

Deut. 34:4

There are many mountains in the Bible: Mt. Sinai, Mt. Hermon, Mt. Zion, Mt. Calvary to name but some. Invariably, they are places of crucial theological significance.

Today in the person of Moses, Israel – and indeed we ourselves – find that we are standing on another much lesser known peak, Mt. Nebo. But with no less significance. For what is about to happen on this mountain is an event of considerable pathos: the poignant end of the Moses saga. Unfolded for us over the past ten weeks, it began with his birth, his call, his leadership of the people of Israel in the wilderness wanderings, until its climax today where we encounter him on Mt. Nebo on the threshold of the people’s entry into the promised land.

And what does Moses hear? We can hardly conceive of a word that could lead to greater anguish than

this: “I have let you see the land with your eyes, but you shall not go over there”. Here is one who has been faithful to his call all his life; who for 40 years had endured the responsibility and loneliness of leading what must surely rank as the longest if not the most grueling pilgrimage of all time when – just at the point of its culmination – he is robbed of its triumph.

Recall what you know about Moses. He is undoubtedly a strong man, unequalled – as we are told this morning – for all the mighty deeds and displays of power that he performed in the sight of all Israel. We have heard over these weeks how he steadfastly pointed his people to the will and promises of God, and of how he kept their ears open, refusing to let them drag their feet when their spirits failed, even when he himself did not understand how it would all end. And now, just as that end is in sight, he is prevented from entering into what he saw.

It is all so unfair. One might have thought – quite reasonably – that having endured everything he



*through
a glass
darkly*

might have been allowed to finish what he had started. After all, he is reputed to be 120 years old, and we are told, as if to corroborate our sense of injustice, “with sight unimpaired and vigour unabated”. It surely wouldn’t have hurt for him to be given whatever time might be needed for a celebratory conclusion.

“No one, not even a Moses, is indispensable to the larger endeavour.”

It would be all too easy to psychologise this. Who of us could not identify with such an experience? How many could testify to being unable to finish what has been started, despite every prospect of a happy conclusion? Who, having worked unceasingly, or endured so stoically, has not known the all too human frailty of observing the spoils go to another? Crippling illness, early retrenchment, peer jealousy, CEO vindictiveness, the sheer devilry of the system, premature death—all such are calculated to rob us at some time or another of our expectations. We well know how Moses might be feeling: the tragic sense of life.

All of this is entirely understandable. The only problem is: it is nowhere in the text. Rather, all

that we are told as a consequence of God’s decision is that Moses dies “at the Lord’s command”, content to pass the baton to another. That, at the very least, is a recipe for humility. Presumably we are to learn from this that Moses’ gift to us today on Mt. Nebo is no less than his gift to us from Egypt, from the wilderness, and from Mt. Sinai. Indeed, this may prove to be the greatest gift of all. Especially perhaps for those of us who are now almost as old as Moses, but who in younger days had caught something of a vision for the vitality of the church, only to have to face the reality that we have not been able to bring it about. Well, we might accuse God, but Moses certainly didn’t: no trace of resentment at his replaceability, no anger at premature removal, no petulance in the face of disappointment. Every such all too human response we know about is absent.

The point is that no-one, not even a Moses, is indispensable to the larger endeavour. Here on Mt. Nebo, Moses confesses and serves a faith whose promises are not given to us in the measure we might desire. Here is revealed to us one from whom many must see the pathos of our own situation: Moses saw clearly, but he could not enter into what he saw. The poorest child of that people who entered into the land of promise had what Moses,

Human Rights versus Christian Values?

Mark Zirnsak

CONVERSATIONS I have had with a number of Uniting Church people indicate that some harbour unease with the concept of human rights, with some being outright hostile to the “godless humanism” that they believe is contained within the concept of human rights. Ambivalence towards human rights extends to Uniting Church members that are active advocates of the social justice mission of the Christian community. However, the most extreme form of such opposition can be found in the parts of the Australian Christian community opposed to the social justice mission of the gospels. For example, the group Saltshakers has stated, “The Bible talks a GREAT DEAL about human ‘RESPONSIBILITY’—but NOT ‘human rights’. ‘Humanist’ governments think ‘they’ have the power to ‘give’ freedom—THEY DO NOT. All citizens of this nation already have freedom through God’s natural law”.

I have also had conversations with a Uniting Church member who

argued the superiority of human rights over the gospels.

There are a growing number of churches that are taking human rights very seriously. The partner church of the Uniting Church in Australia in the Philippines, the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, has international human rights standards written into its constitution. Their constitution states:¹

In accordance with the biblical understanding that all persons are created in the image of God, the Church affirms and upholds the inviolability of the rights of persons as reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other agreements on human rights, the international covenants on economic, social and cultural rights and on civil and political rights, the 1948 Convention against Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment

On Areopagus Hill



(Continued from page 11)

renewed creation – and he not only inherited it, but we inherit it in and with him. To those who think that they have to do absolutely everything themselves, the good news is that we are there in that promised land because he is there. In this he is not only our view; he is, we might say, our visa. None of us is over there because of who we are—because of our faith or our obedience or our good works, just as none of us is deprived of our visa because we assume that we lack these things. There is no gospel in seeing the matter this way, for that would be

“To those who think that they have to do everything themselves, the good news is that we are there in that promised land because Jesus is there.”

merely conventional religiosity after the manner of the Pharisees in today’s gospel. Rather, he is there – in our place – and we are there because he is there.

In the final analysis, Christian faith is blindingly simple. We live in a society which with ever seducing offers called “spirituality”, invites us on the forever mercurial quest of “discovering ourselves”. Our churches – apparently losing

interest in the gospel – frequently seem intent on the same project. What Christian faith invites us to, on the contrary, is a much larger discovery—to discover that we have been discovered: that One has borne our humanity from birth to death – its anxieties, its tragedies, its misplaced ideals, its despair, its ultimate nothingness – has lived, endured and transformed these realities into life, love, hope and fulfilment.

Those who stand on Mt. Nebo with Moses are indeed blessed as those who long to participate in this vision, but for whatever reason do not feel that they are able to enter fully into their inheritance. As such, they know, even as they know that they do not know fully. But the real point is to know that we have already been known, and always are known utterly. And only the gospel can offer us this.

If the word to Moses was: “I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there”, the word to us is rather: “I have let you see it with your eyes, and I have taken you there”.

Therefore to the One who made this word into such a deed, be all praise and thanksgiving, now and forever.

BRUCE BARBER is a retired minister and former Dean of the United Faculty of Theology.

who led them to that land, could never have. The fact is that Moses knew more than anyone what was intended for Israel—but he died outside the land. The same fate was to befall an equally prophetic figure – John the Baptist – who testified to the imminent coming of the reign of God, but who did not live to see its flowering.

The poignancy of the end of Moses is surely good news for us all, especially, certainly, for those who like him find themselves on the outside of that reality which Sunday by Sunday the liturgy is rehearsing for us in what used to be called “the public worship of God”. In an age which imagines that it has to experience everything to live an authentic life, there is a blessing in being like Moses—able to view but not to experience the object of sight. That is to say, there is ample room for the many who do not know if they ought to call themselves Christian at all, but who have caught a glimpse of the view from Mt. Nebo, and, wistfully perhaps, would like to be part of it all if they could. Today they – and we – are being reminded that in the providence of God, and despite the predictable strictures of somewhat desperate would-be evangelists, there is a blessing in just viewing the distant scene, even if we can’t get across to the other side.

Reassuring though this might be in an age suspicious of commitment, there is yet more for those who look hard enough. For between the pathos of Moses and, let’s say, the confidence of the apostle Paul, stands One who not only saw the promised land, but indeed did go over into it. And he went on the same terms as Moses did, precisely by his willingness to die. Jesus himself secured the promise of that land, and indeed of all lands, not as did Moses by means of a peaceable death, but by a violent one. Is Jesus then merely another, albeit greater, Moses? He is frequently so understood, and therefore misunderstood. If he were simply another but a greater Moses, there would be no grounds for the solid joy which Paul, to name but one, extols. Is it merely the case that the first Moses sees, but does not enter, whereas the second both sees and enters and makes the earth secure? Well perhaps, but that is not sufficient to account for the confidence that Christians down through the ages have grasped, have celebrated, and have made their own.

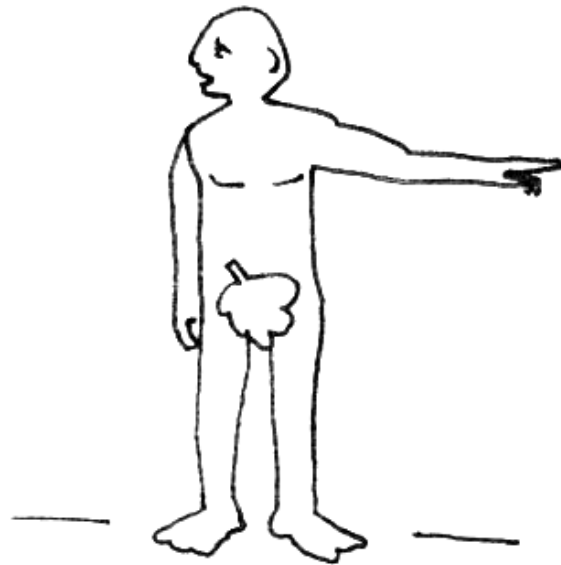
For the gospel is not merely that the new Joshua saw and did go over. It is rather that he saw—yes; that he did go over—yes. But *that he took us with him*. Jesus not only saw the promised earth – the

(Continued on page 14)

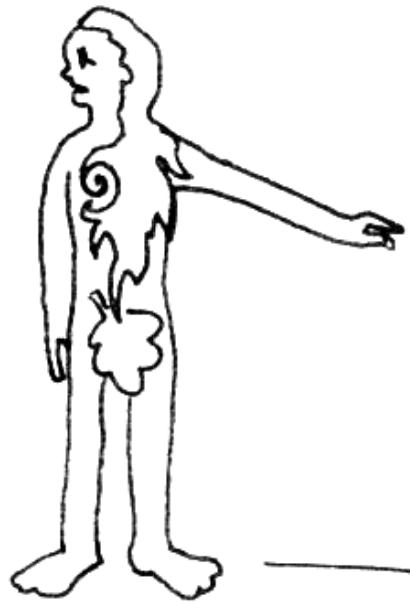
Double Take

by Hilary Howes

The dangers of "passing the buck":



Adam blamed Eve...



... Eve blamed the Serpent...



... & the serpent didn't have
a leg to stand on!

H. HOWES 2005