

The Presbyterian Banner

April 2020



A Mighty Fortress is our God

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FROM THE EDITOR

THE last editorial written on 26 February referred to the Coronavirus which had hardly touched Australia. I write this on 1 April and so much has happened in the intervening period that it is hard to credit. We have been warned for years that a pandemic was not only possible and now it is upon us with all the dislocation of life involved. While Dr Raina MacIntyre's estimate of potential deaths quoted last month was twice the correct figure on her assumptions, and was subsequently corrected in the *Age*, the potential of more than 240,000 deaths is certainly a calamitous figure, and has motivated urgent efforts to reduce the spread of the virus by physical distance measures.

Lord's Day services in a place of worship were not possible on and after 22 March. Our churches have responded in a variety of ways. In New South Wales most use a dial-in telephone system while Hunter also has a youtube channel. In Melbourne Knox and Carrum Downs co-operate in a live stream of two services to www.knox.pcea.org.au, All Nations has a livestream to Facebook in the Nuer language, while Narre Warren ran a Zoom (private conference) meeting as did Ulverstone. It's all a bit new for most

of us, and there will be adjustments as a pattern is established for the duration of restrictions.

The impact on church finances remains to be seen. Already some of our people have suffered employment issues, and relatives have been affected too. The government interventions will be very positive, but after this pandemic has subsided society will not be the same. Changes will be needed in our indulgent life-style, as well as diversifying our supply lines and establishing crucial industries on shore. Of course, if we have a recurrence the ability for the government to intervene financially will be somewhat limited.

But there are changes needed on the spiritual level too. The most important immediate thing is to keep in contact through text, email and service arrangements, to be sensitive to pastoral needs and maintain the preventative measures required to check the spread of the Coronavirus. Next is for the Church to focus on the call to repentance, neglected in the 17th century (hence our Confession's emphasis on its importance) and today.

What will the death toll be? No one knows. If it was in the same proportion as the Spanish flu of 1919 we're looking at 75,000, but one would like to hope it will be less than 20,000. Time will tell but the point to remember is that while we may be able to delay death from certain causes, we cannot stop it. Are you right with God? #

The Synod planned for May is postponed.

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The coronavirus: can any words help?

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The coronavirus had one huge advantage: the element of surprise. It gave no advance warning, no early danger-signs, not even a gradual evolution. One mutation, and suddenly it was there, invisible and unstoppable. Neither oceans, mountains, armed border-guards or national lockdowns could stop it. It took possession of the air we breathe and got its victims to carry it.

My first thought was that this thing was too big to say anything about it. It wasn't a time for clichés, and reassuring words were hard to come by. Despite this, however, much was already being said, some of it of a pseudo-theological kind.

Over-hyped?

Some said the crisis was being over-hyped, and nothing like as bad as politicians and the press were saying. Well, that was true. It wasn't as bad: it was worse. The world had known many epidemics in the past: plagues which affected whole cities and whole nations and, in the case of the Bubonic Plague, a whole continent; and as recently as 1918-19 a virulent form of influenza had led to the deaths of 50 million people in Europe and America (where, Mr. Trump should note, it started). But the one now upon us was a pandemic, affecting the whole world from pole to pole and from east to west. Besides, these epidemics had taken place in what we like to regard as pre-scientific ages. This one was defying science itself.

Then there were others who said, blandly, 'God will protect us, and so there's no need for all these special precautions.' Sometimes we even seemed to be coming close to the thought-world of those cults which teach that if we're true believers then we should be able to pick up venomous snakes and drink deadly poison. No need, then, for the elderly to minimise their social contacts, and even less need to consider curtailing church services or to suspend the use of the common cup in the Lord's Supper.

It is easy to mistake such sentiments as signs of great faith, but faith embraces every divine command, including the command to make 'all lawful endeavours to preserve our own life, and the life of others.' (*Shorter Catechism*, Answer 68). Prudence will keep to a minimum the number of miracles we expect God to perform on our behalf.

We are such odd creatures, willing to stay off church to avoid passing on a common cold, but balking at proposals to stem the spread of a deadly virus.

Pseudo-courage may say that we aren't interested in measures to protect our own health, but our own health isn't the issue, at least not directly. We have a duty before God to do all we can to preserve the life and health of others. Christians are as likely as anyone else to catch the 'flu, perish in a tsunami, die in an earthquake, or even drown on their way to the mission-field. By the same token they are as likely as anyone else to contract Covid-19; if they contract it they will spread it; and to minimise that risk they must take the same precautions, and share the same inconveniences, as the rest of the population.

Other voices loudly proclaim that the virus is a divine judgement and this has, of course, its grain of truth. Biblically, all death and all diseases are the wages of sin; and though God has reserved his final judgement for the Great Day, he does sometimes pass interim judgements on nations and civilisations in the ordinary course of human history, as the Apostle Paul makes plain in Romans One.

But the only reason we know that what happened to the Roman empire was a revelation of the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18) is that an apostle blessed with divine insight, and writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, tells us so. We today have no such insight. The wisest of us has nothing to offer but his own interpretation of world events (2 Pet. 1:20), and when we venture to suggest that any human calamity is a divine judgement on the victims, we should remember the Lord's rebuke to those who thought that when the tower fell on the people of Siloam it was because they were more wicked than the common run of humanity (Lk. 13:4).

The premise of those who see Covid-19 as a divine judgement is that ours is a singularly dark, irreligious and apostate age. The slightest knowledge of history should be enough to remind us that the world is no more godless today than it always was. Ever since Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, every intention of the thoughts of man's heart 'was only evil continually' (Gen. 6:5), and this applied to post-Reformation Britain as much as it did to the rest of human history. John Knox never suffered the illusion that the people of Scotland were a 'people of the Book'; George Whitefield and John Wesley were pelted by mobs when they preached the gospel in 18th century England; the commercial and industrial life of Imperial Britain, and the domestic life of 19th century Edinburgh, tolerated evils that shame us even today.

Is the 21st century godless? Yes! Do our politicians ever refer to God? No! But then neither did many Prime Ministers of an earlier age, and those who did, like Winston Churchill, did it only for rhetorical effect, not because they governed in the fear of his Name. Had God marked the iniquity of 16th or 17th or 18th or 19th

century Scotland, we would have been wiped out long since. The fact that we haven't been, owes nothing to the godliness of past generations, but to the fact that there is forgiveness with him (Ps. 130:4).

Most of the Bible's references to the anger of God speak, not of his anger against the world, but of his anger against his own people. It is his chosen nation he punishes for their iniquity (Amos 3:2), and those he loves that he reproves and chastens (Rev. 3:19).

It is not, then, the evils and sins of the world that should be troubling us, but our own shortcomings as the people of God, and if we want to continue speaking of the pandemic as a judgement we should remember that it begins at God's own household (1 Pet. 4:17); and if that is the case, then the voice of all true piety will be asking, 'Lord, is it me?'

Is there anything the church can do?

Is there anything the church can do? She can only ask that question in a spirit of real humility, knowing that care and compassion are not a monopoly of the church or of Christians. Covid-19 has not only unleashed the selfishness of panic-buying and mass migration to remote and fragile rural communities: it has also demonstrated the depths of active benevolence which, thanks to Common Grace, still dignify our common humanity. This being the case, believer and unbeliever, church and un-church, Christian and Muslim, will often find themselves working side by side.

At the same time, the very nature of the pandemic imposes severe limitations on what the church can do. The urgent need to restrict social contact means she cannot do her usual things, such as opening her doors to the vulnerable or using her pulpits to offer comfort to the anxious or going from house to house to minister to the lonely, the sick and the dying.

What, then, can we do?

First of all, we can give our full support to 'the powers that be' and to the measures that government proposes. One marked feature of the crisis has been the dignity and gravity of the response from both Westminster and Holyrood. Shorn of their usual adversarialism, and armed with the best medical and scientific advice in the world, the Prime Minister and the First Minister have focused firmly on limiting the spread of the virus, saving lives and making sure the NHS remains fit for purpose. The time may come again when we will need to raise our voices in protest against government policies. But now, more than ever before, is a time when those who fear God must honour those whom he has appointed to govern, and submit to every directive of the state for the Lord's sake (1 Pet. 2:13). Secondly, the church must pray. How glib that sometimes sounds! Nothing is easier than prayer, and nothing is more difficult.

All prayer is based on faith, which means that it starts from a position of assurance and certainty. But this

assurance, in turn, is based on knowledge. What, then, do we know?

We know, first of all, that the world isn't praying for itself. It is taking all sorts of measures, but looking up and spreading the matter before the Lord is not one of them. But the Christian community, dispersed throughout the world, is a nation of priests (Rev. 1:6), with a right to approach God's throne with confidence (Heb. 4:16), and a duty to plead not only for ourselves but for all around us. That includes those in authority, that they may be as wise as Solomon and as unsure of themselves as little children. But it also includes the whole struggling society around us. There is a great precedent for this in the letter that Jeremiah sent to the Jewish exiles held captive in Babylon. In reality, it was a letter not merely from Jeremiah, but from the Lord, and it said, 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.' (Jer. 29:7).

We know, secondly, that God, and specifically the Lord Jesus Christ, has the whole world in his hands. Everything lives, moves and has its being in him, and this means that when we pray, we are not confronting some corpus of impersonal natural laws or pleading for mercy from a biosphere trapped in an inexorable nexus of cause and effect. We are speaking to God, a living, loving, all-powerful personal intelligence in whom the universe as a whole and in each of its component parts holds together (Col. 1:17). For his own reasons (so far not made known to us) he has permitted this virus to mutate and to become what we can see only as an unguided missile of biological warfare. But God can cause it to mutate yet again; he can cause our bodies to enhance their immune-systems; and he can guide and resource (and fight with) the vast hostile army which is already gathered against the virus (medics, scientists, politicians and millions of ordinary people deploying only their common sense). Together, with divine blessing, that army will conquer.

Thirdly, we know that God cares deeply for the world and for its most distinguished inhabitant, the human race. This doesn't mean that he never permits epidemics or other natural disasters, but it does mean that even in the midst of such episodes (and they are only episodes) it still remains a world of incredible beauty, teeming with life and filled with what pleases eye and ear, touch and taste; and it remains, too, a world marked by stability and order, where even a virus has its own delicate genetic code, and where it remains possible to work out why it is so toxic and what vaccine might hold it at bay. God knows its secrets and will guide us to them. In the meantime, nothing has happened to shake our confidence that we live in a magnificent universe under a caring Deity.

Fourthly, we know that with God there is grace to help us in every time of need. (Heb. 4:16). The language here is deeply suggestive. The word translated 'help' was a specialised technical term used by sailors when their ship was caught in a severe storm and belts or ropes were slung round the hull to prevent her breaking up. We see an instance of this in Luke's account of Paul's shipwreck, where he tells us that when the ship was driven before the storm the sailors 'used supports [helps] to undergird the ship.' (Acts 27:17).

This is an apt metaphor for the danger the present crisis poses to mental health, especially in the case of those forced into complete isolation. We could easily go to pieces, but we have every right to trust God's grace to hold us together. Paul gives a similar assurance in 2 Corinthians 12:9. When we feel at our weakest and most helpless, God's grace is 'sufficient' for us; and it is sufficient, he says, because it is 'power.' God doesn't just wish us well or send us on our way with bland words of reassurance such as, 'It'll be OK' or, 'Don't worry.' He pours his power into our situation or, more precisely, into ourselves; and that power, that grace, is not something abstract, detached from God himself. It is the Almighty standing beside us as our paraclete: the God of all consolation, comforting, encouraging and empowering whatever the pressure.

This is why Paul can assure the believers in Rome that, whatever happens, they will be triumphant conquerors (Rom. 8:37). Isaiah put it even more memorably: 'those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. (Is. 40:31)

Does the crisis have a message?

But apart from testing our faith, has the crisis any other message for us? It clearly does. It tells us in no uncertain terms how limited and fragile is our control of our world. Pascal once remarked that, for all our dignity as 'thinking reeds,' such is our weakness that, 'a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill us.' We had forgotten that lesson, but it's come back with real force. A tiny organism, only a fraction the size of a drop of water, is enough to kill us.

Ancient man, expelled from Paradise, found himself in a world that terrified him: a world where, his imagination told him, the forces of nature were controlled by countless angry and unpredictable deities, each one demanding endless rituals and sacrifices, and yet never satisfied. Then with the slow and gradual rise of modern science the whole picture changed, and nature lost its terrors. With knowledge came reassurance, and power. We learned to fly, and to 'sail' under the sea; we split the atom, put man on the moon, and conversed with each other across vast oceans; and we conquered, more or less, diseases such as smallpox, tuberculosis, malaria and AIDS.

These were remarkable achievements, and enormous credit is due to those who pioneered them. But then, calamity! A bloody 20th century saw our greatest scientific insights and our greatest technological achievements put to hellish use; a prodigal use of natural resources polluted sea and sky, fields and rivers; and now, a tiny virus undetected and unforeseen by science, suddenly threatens hundreds of thousands of lives and forces whole nations into lockdown.

We are no longer steering a steady course. Instead, we are forced into a series of evasive actions, hoping only to stave off disaster.

May God grant our leaders generous measures not only of wisdom, but of humility; and may he grant all of us the grace to go on our knees and cry, 'Lord, we're way out of our depth. Have pity on us, and save us.' #



Ordained by the Free Church of Scotland in 1964, Macleod (b.1940) was Professor of Systematic Theology 1978-2011 and was Principal 1999-2010. Incisive and stimulating articles by him may be found on <https://donaldmacleod.org.uk> His recent volume, *Christ Crucified: Understanding the Atonement* (IVP 2014) is essential reading for preachers and thoughtful lay persons alike.

PSALM 43

- 3 O send thy light forth and thy truth;
let them be guides to me,
to bring me to thy holy hill,
ev'n where thy dwellings be.
- 4 Then will I to God's altar go,
to God my greatest joy;
Yes, God, my God, thy name to
praise
my harp I will employ.
- 5 Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why in me so dismayed?
O trust In God, you'll praise him yet:
my God who is my aid.

Reflections of a Minister's Wife

Anna F. Ward

Concerns have been expressed at several Synods about how few men from within the church are entering the PCEA ministry, with most new ministers coming from other denominations. No-one mentioned (if anyone thought of it) that no wife of a current serving PCEA minister was brought up in the PCEA. Some are from other Reformed/Evangelical churches, here or overseas; others grew up in non-Christian families. Adapting to a different denomination and/or culture, adds difficulty to the position. Some of my comments also apply to the often-overlooked elders' wives. I am not criticising anyone but am reflecting on my own experience.

We all have different gifts and personalities, some are outgoing and mix easily; others are reserved and inhibited. I was often daunted by those who were more gifted than me, but the Lord made us all the way we are, we are to use our gifts as we see best, and there is no set course of action for any minister's wife.

Rowland and I were greatly blessed to have a longsuffering congregation (Ulverstone) as Rowland's first parish with mature Christians who had the good sense to try to knock this young couple into shape!

Students for the ministry are assessed in a rigorous process through studies, licensing and ordination; then have ongoing interaction with church courts, which will involve giving reports and having assessments made of their ministry. But how does the minister's wife learn her role and responsibilities?

It is probably true that ministers and their wives who have the easiest transition are those who have been involved in church life from childhood – they learn to pick up the books after the service, help with refreshments, mow the lawn, help in Sunday School, perhaps going on to leading a youth group, visiting the sick, or evangelism. However, those from a non-Christian background or those coming into leadership later on can bring a fresh perspective and great life skills. It is God who calls and God who equips.

Starting off right

The minister's wife is involved in her husband's calling in way that seldom occurs in other occupations. When Rowland and I met in St Kilda PCEA in early 1971 a few months after my arrival in Australia to work as a midwife in a Melbourne hospital, I had been a Christian for many years, but was fairly new to the Reformed faith. Rowland was working as an Insurance Executive and had recently been received as a student for the ministry. Although we hit it off straight away, Rowland did not ask me out for 6 months; he waited until I was received as a communicant member of the congregation, ensuring I was both committed to the PCEA and happy to live in Australia. When marriage came in 1972, I tried to learn as

much as I could about the church, her teachings, government, high points and struggles (and marrying an historian helped!). Not everyone can do this of course; increasingly older men, already married, are entering the ministry, but the same principle applies – the need to work together in the Lord's work.

Some of my struggles

1. *Knowing my role.* The minister's wife does not fit into a neat slot - she is a member of the congregation and may need to help in a pastoral situation, but has no say in decision making and session confidentiality will preclude her knowing certain needs. This can create feelings of helplessness, especially for those who have had, and may still have, a responsible job.

2. *Sitting at home anxiously* when the men are at a meeting which may be life changing, but unable to have any effect on the outcome.

3. *The solitary evenings*, though with five boisterous children, perhaps solitary is not the word! A minister's work involves many evening meetings, visits and times away. His busyness means his wife will have to do more around the home, do things by herself eg school meetings etc and miss out on family functions. One elder's wife told me that in 20+ years of having school-aged children, her husband had never once attended a parent/teacher meeting because they always clashed with the prayer meeting. This is not a popular concept today. Ministers' wives are not alone in this of course – many men work long hours and have business trips away, but unlike ministers, are usually free at weekends and have uninterrupted holidays.

Serving the Lord is a joy and a blessing; but it can be a hard and often lonely life.

3. *Moving house:* This is the biggest bugbear for all ministers' wives. We have lived in 9 homes in 48 years of marriage, less than many others, but uprooting is always stressful and heart wrenching.

4. *Being 'on call'* 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and having to find someone to take your place before you can have even a short break.

5. *Relationships:* We all need friends, especially if we have no family nearby, but within a congregation we have to learn to relate positively to everyone and avoid creating inner and outer circles.

6. *Busyness.* No matter how hard I worked, how much self-discipline I applied, I was always behind. Distractions constantly occurred and I often struggled to cope with the pressures.

7. *Small congregations.* Many think that small congregations in a small denomination mean less work – actually it is the reverse, because there are fewer people able to take on responsibility, so more falls on the minister and elders (and therefore on their wives).

8. *Family issues.* Ministers' children (and I was also one) can feel the weight of expectation on their shoulders. Some parents overprotect their children and some the opposite, but ministers' wives need great wisdom, as much of the decision-making falls on their shoulders. Our children could probably make some perceptive comments about this (and probably will!).

9. *Opposition*

a. from Satan. Christian leaders are at the forefront of the battle and are especially subject to Satan's wiles. Destroying a church leader (or his wife) may come through temptation

to outward sin, but may also come by limiting effectiveness through depression, exhaustion, family issues, or feeling overwhelmed by the task.

- b. from Christians. Spurgeon is reputed to have said that the church is the only army to shoot its wounded and we need realism about the depth of sin in the heart, even in believers.
- c. The biggest culprit of all is the sin in my own heart.

So how have I coped?

As I wrote above, there is no training, but I grew up in a manse (not Presbyterian), so when I married Rowland, I had some idea of what was expected and followed very much my mother's pattern. My primary role was to care for Rowland and the family, freeing Rowland for the work to which he was called. Responsibility for church leadership rests on the ministers and elders, and I am not an assistant minister or even a pastoral care worker. My focus therefore has been in the home and showing care and concern for the congregation and those we meet and to be actively supportive of church events. A loving attitude will overcome many shortcomings, especially on the many occasions when I know I have bungled badly.

Keeping on going

*Involvement in church activities. This has varied depending on family responsibilities. It was less when the children were small and like most ministers' wives we had no family nearby to help. As they grew, I chose not to return to nursing but to assist where possible in the church, so my involvement was greater.

*Family. There is a temptation to assume that because the minister works from home, he is available for the school run or babysitting; and children need to learn that their father is working, though in the next room. In this regard I tried to see us as like any other working family with a husband out during the day; and actually this was our situation for Rowland's first few years of ministry due to low church funds, but I kept this pattern going afterwards.

*Hospitality was important, by caring for those who came to our home, either by invitation, or because they wished to talk to Rowland. Another minister helped me by stressing that "given to hospitality" does not mean feeding everybody, but having an open door so people know they are welcome. Moreover, having visitors from many backgrounds and nationalities staying in our home was a great blessing to us (and I hope to them).

*Activities: One we found beneficial was involvement in outside groups, mixing with both Christians and non-Christians eg. CRE teaching, school committees and community/ mission/ Christian organisations. The computer and social media have their uses, but are a hindrance not a help if they limit face-to-face contact with people. However, the Lord has given us different gifts and others will use their gifts in their own way.

*Time together is important. We tried to have time off on Mondays. When the children were small we might go for a picnic; when they were at school, maybe a drive, a walk, or to a museum, garden or art gallery (and in those days we didn't have to worry about the need to switch off the mobile phone!).

*Time management. Some find this easy and some find this hard. I have kept a diary since I left school in 1963, and over

the years found it essential in managing the day's events, otherwise my time just vanished (and at 73 I find it goes faster every year).

* Care from the congregation. I take longer to get to know people than the more outgoing; but regardless of personality, it is vital to understand needs and worries and to be helpful but never gossipy. I have often found that people to whom I sit down to talk, do more to help me than vice versa. I have been blessed beyond measure by the love and care I have received from so many (locally and in the wider church) and the knowledge that they are praying for us as individuals and as a family. We were also greatly blessed for many years by one elder who made a point of giving us an annual pastoral visit, to encourage and to counsel us.

* Maintaining a close walk with the Lord. In a busy life finding time for family worship + husband and wife reading and praying together + personal devotions, is hard, but must be done. Christian service is not a fluffy euphoria of 'being in the Lord's will', but takes a conscious effort of serious commitment and hard work. The minister and his wife must both be strong and resilient and close to the Lord to withstand the pressures.

I haven't included the importance of piety, Bible knowledge or teachability, because all believers ought to be developing these. Nor have I included financial constraints as many are worse off than the minister.

I was 29 when Rowland began his ministry in the PCEA when he was appointed to Ulverstone in 1975 as a Licentiate, and I was a believer for 23 years before that. Serving the Lord is the greatest joy any believer can have, whatever their vocation, their role in the church, their age, or their physical and mental capacities.

Some verses I have found helpful:

Ecclesiastes 9:10: Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.

Col. 3:23: Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.

Luke 18:29, 30: "Truly I tell you," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life". #



This very year you are going to die!



Extract of a sermon on Jeremiah 28:16 preached at Princeton on 1 January 1761 by the Rev. Samuel Davies (1723-61).

Davies succeeded Jonathan Edwards as President of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) and died at the age of 37 on 4 February 1861.

There are certain events which *regularly* happen to us every year, and therefore we may expect them this year.

There are others which *sometimes* occur in the compass of a year, and sometimes do not; such are many of the blessings and afflictions of life; of these we should be apprehensive, and prepare for them.

And there are events which we know are before us, and we are sure they will occur; but at what particular time they will happen, whether this year or next, whether this day or tomorrow—is to us an utter uncertainty.

Such is that most solemn event—the close of the present life, and our entrance into eternity. That we must die—is as certain as that we now live; but the hour or year when we die—is kindly and wisely concealed from us, that we may be always ready, and stand in the posture of constant vigilant expectation; that we may not be surprised. But certainly it befits us to reflect seriously upon the mere possibility of this event happening *this* year, and realize to ourselves those important consequences that result from this supposition. The mere possibility of this may justly affect us more than the certain expectation of any other futurity. And it is not only possible—but highly probable, death may meet *some* of us within the compass of this year! Yes, it is highly probable, that if some prophet, like Jeremiah, should open to us the book of the divine decrees, one or another of us would there see our *sentence*, and the time of its execution fixed! “Thus says the Lord—This very year you are going to die!”

There some of us would find it written, “This year you shall enjoy a series of prosperity—to try if the goodness of God will lead you to repentance.” Others might read this melancholy line, “This year shall be to you a series of afflictions: this year you shall lose your dearest earthly support and comfort; this year you shall pine away with sickness, or agonize with torturing pain—to try if the kind severities of a father’s rod will reduce you to your duty.” Others, I hope, would read the gracious decree, “This year, your stubborn spirit, after long resistance, shall be sweetly

constrained to bow to the despised gospel of Christ. This year shall you be born a child of God, and an heir of happiness, which the revolution of years shall never, never, terminate.” Oh happy and glorious event! May we hope this mercy is reserved among the secrets of heaven, for any thoughtless impenitent sinner among us!

Others perhaps would read this tremendous doom, “This year my Spirit so long resisted, shall cease to strive with you; this year I will give you up to your own heart’s lusts, and swear in my wrath that you shall not enter into my rest.” Oh! dismal sentence! None can equal it in terror but one, and that is, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into everlasting fire!” And the former is an infallible presage of the latter. Others (Oh! let our souls dwell upon the thought!) would probably find the doom of the false prophet Hananiah pronounced against them: “Thus says the Lord—I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die!”

This year you **may** die—for your life is the greatest uncertainty in the world. You have no assurance of another year, another day, or even another moment!

This year you may die—because thousands have died since the last new year’s day; and this year will be of the same kind with the last—a time to die for many mortals. The causes of death, both in the human constitution and in the world without, will exist and operate in this year as well as in the last.

This year you may die—for thousands of others will die: it is certain they will—and why may not you? What peculiar security have you to confide in?

This year you may die—though you are *young*; for the regions of the dead have been crowded with people of your age; and no age is the least security against the stroke of death.

This year you may die—though you are now in health and vigour, and your constitution seems to promise a long life; for thousands of such will be hurried into the eternal world this year, as they have been in years past. The principles of death may be even now working within you, notwithstanding the seeming firmness of your constitution; and you may be a pale, cold, lifeless corpse, sooner than the invalid whose life is apparently near its close!

This year you may die—though you are full of business, though you have projected many schemes, which it may be the work of years to execute, and which afford you many bright and flattering prospects. Death will not consult your leisure, nor be put off until another year—that you may accomplish your designs. Thousands have died before you, and will die this year amidst their *golden prospects*, and while spinning out their eternal schemes. And what has happened to *them*—*may* happen to *you*.

This year you may die—though you have not yet finished your education, nor fixed your place in life—but are preparing to appear in the world, and perhaps elated with the prospect of the figure you will make in it. Many such

abortive students are now in the dust. Many who had passed through a laborious course of preparation for public life, and had inspired their friends, as well as themselves, with high hopes—have been snatched away as they were just stepping upon the stage! And this may be your doom also!

This year you may die—though you are *not prepared* for it. When death shows you his warrant under the great seal of heaven, it will be no excuse to plead, “But I am not ready!” Though the consequence of your dying unprepared will be your everlasting ruin—yet that dreadful consideration will have no weight to delay the execution!

This year you may die—though you deliberately delay your preparation, and put it off to some future time. You may fix upon the next year, or the decline of life—as the season for religion; but that time may never be at your disposal. Others may live to see it—but you may be *engulfed in the boundless ocean of eternity* before it arrives, and your time for preparation may be over forever!

This year you may die—though you are unwilling to admit the thought. Death does not slacken his pace towards you, because you hate him, and are afraid of his approach. Your not realizing your latter end as near—does not remove it to a greater distance. Think of it or not—you must die! Your lack of thought can be no defence; and you know not how soon you may *feel*—what you cannot bear to *think* of!

This year you may die—though you may strongly hope the contrary, and flatter yourself with the expectation of a length of years. You will not perhaps admit the thought of a short abortive life; but notwithstanding this—you may be a lifeless corpse before this year finishes its revolution!

Thus it appears very *possible*, that one or other of us may die this year. Nay, it is very *probable*, as well as possible, if we consider that it is a very uncommon, and almost unprecedented thing, that not one should die in a whole year, out of such a large assembly as this. Several have died the year past, who made a part of our assembly last new year’s day. Therefore, let each of us (for we know not on whom the *lot* may fall,) realize this possibility, this alarming probability, “*This year I may die!*”

And what if YOU should die? Surely you may be startled at this question; for oh! the surprising change! Oh! the important consequences!

If you should die this year—then all your doubts, all the anxieties of blended hopes and fears about your state and character, will terminate forever in full conviction. If you are impenitent sinners, all the artifices of self-flattery will be able to make you hope better things no longer; but the dreadful discovery will flash upon you with resistless blaze! You will *see*, you will *feel* yourselves such. If you lie under the condemnation of the divine law, you will no longer be able to flatter yourselves with better hopes: the execution of the penalty will sadly convince you of the tremendous truth. To *dispute* it would be to dispute the deepest heart-felt sensations of the most exquisite misery.

But, on the other hand, if your fears and doubts are the honest anxieties of a sincere, self-diffident heart, ever jealous of itself, and afraid of every mistake in a matter of such vast importance, you will meet with the welcome demonstration of your sincerity, and of your being unquestionably the favourites of heaven. *Sensation* will afford you *conviction*; and you will *believe*—what you *see*. In short, the possibility that this year maybe your last, may be joyful tidings to you. If you die this year, this year you shall be in heaven, imparadised in the bosom of God! And is it possible that your salvation is so near! Transporting thought!

It would be easy to enumerate several happy consequences of death with regard to those who have spent their life in preparation for it; and the nearness of death, instead of striking them with terror, may heighten the transport of expectation. It would afford me no small pleasure to trace those blessed consequences, and it would be an act of kindness and compassion to the heirs of heaven, many of whom go on mourning and trembling even towards the regions of happiness, as though they were going to the place of execution, and anticipate but very little of those infinite pleasures which are so near at hand.

But I intend to devote the present hour chiefly to the service of a part, perhaps the greater part of my hearers, who are in a more dangerous and alarming situation, I mean such who may die this year—and yet are not prepared; such who are as near to *hell* as they are to *death*, and consequently stand in need of the most powerful and immediate applications, lest they be undone forever beyond recovery.

To you, therefore, my dear brethren, my fellow mortals, my fellow candidates for eternity, whose everlasting state hangs in a dread suspense, who have a secret conviction that you are not qualified for admission into the kingdom of heaven, and who cannot promise yourselves that you shall not sink into the infernal pit of hell this year—but upon this supposition, which is the most precarious and doubtful in the world, namely, that you shall live out another year. To you I would address myself with affectionate tenderness, and yet with plainness and pungency. And I beg your most solemn attention to an affair of infinite consequence, to which you may not have another year to attend.

This year you may die! And should you die in your sins this year—you will be forever cut off from all the *pleasures of life!* Then farewell, an everlasting farewell to all the mirth and gaiety, to all the tempting amusements and vain delights of earth! Farewell to all the pleasures you derive from the senses, and all the gratification of appetite. This year the sun may lose his luster as to you; and all the lovely prospects of nature may become a dismal blank. To you music may lose all her charms, and die away into everlasting silence; and all the gratifications of the palate may become insipid. When you lie in the cold grave, you will be as dead to all such sensations—as the clay that covers you! Then farewell to all the pompous but empty pleasures of riches and honours. The pleasures both of

enjoyment and *expectation* from this quarter will fail forever. But this is not all.

If you should die in your sins this year—then you will have no pleasures, no enjoyments to substitute for those which you will lose. Your capacity and eager thirst for happiness will continue, nay, will grow more strong in your immortal state. And yet you will have no good—real, or imaginary—to satisfy it; and consequently the capacity of *happiness* will become a capacity of *misery*; and the *privation of pleasure* will be positive pain. Can imagination think of anything more wretched than a creature formed for the enjoyment of the infinite good, pining away forever with hungry, raging desires, without the least degree of gratification! banished at once from the supreme good, and from all the created enjoyments that were accustomed to be poorly substituted in its stead! Yet this may be your case in the short compass of the following year! Oh! what a terrible change! What a prodigious fall!

If you should die in your sins this year—then all your hopes and prospects of a long life, will perish abortive. Several of you now are in a state of education, preparing to enter upon the *stage of the world*; and you are perhaps often pleasing yourselves with mirthful and magnificent dreams about the figure you will make upon it. You may be planning many schemes to be accomplished in the several periods of a long life: and are perhaps already anticipating in idea the *pleasure*, the *profit*, or the *honor* you expect to derive from their execution. In these fond hopes—your affectionate parents, friends, and teachers concur with generous pleasure.

But, alas! in the swift revolution of this beginning year, all these optimistic expectations and pleasing prospects may vanish into smoke! Youth is the season of promise, full of fair *blossoms*; but these fair blossoms may wither, and never produce the expected fruits of maturity. It may perhaps be the design of God, that after all the flattering hopes and projects, and after all the pains and expense of a fine education, that you shall never appear upon the public stage; or that you shall vanish away like a phantom, as soon as you make your appearance! Certainly then you should extend your prospects beyond the limits of *mortality*; extend them into that world, where you will live to execute them, without the risk of a disappointment. Otherwise,

If you should die in your sins this year—then you will not only be cut off from all the flattering prospects of this life—but from all hope entirely, and forever! You will be fixed in an unchangeable state of misery; a state that will admit of no expectation but that of uniform, or rather ever-growing misery; a state that excludes all hopes of making any accomplishment, except as the monuments of the vindictive justice of God, and the deadly effects of sin! How affecting is the idea of a promising youth cut off from the land of the living—useless and hopeless in both worlds! fallen from the summit of hope—into the gulf of everlasting despair! Yet this may be your doom, my dear

youth, your doom this very year—if you should die in your sins!

If you should die in your sins this year—then all the ease and pleasure you now derive from thoughtlessness, self-flattery, and suppressing the testimony of your consciences, will forever be at an end! You will then be obliged to view yourselves in a just light, and to know the very worst of your condition. The secret plaudits of self-flattery will be forever silenced, and conscience will recover itself from that state of insensibility into which you have cast it by repeated hardenings, and, as exasperated by your ill-treatment, it will become your everlasting tormentor! It will do nothing but accuse and upbraid you forever; you will never more be able to entertain so much as one favourable thought of yourselves!

And what a wretched state will this be! for a man to be self-condemned! to disapprove of his whole past conduct! to be pleased with nothing in himself—but heartily, though with horror, to concur in the condemning sentence of the Supreme Judge—to esteem himself a fool, a sinner, a base, sordid wretch; an enemy to himself, and the whole universe; a self-destroyer, an outcast from all happiness, and from the society of all happy beings; a vile, odious, useless, miserable, despairing creature forever! O miserable situation! Does it not alarm you to think you may be so near to it?

If you should die in your sins this year—then you will be deprived forever of all the *means of salvation*. All these are confined to the present life, and have no place in the world of eternal punishment. There the thunders of the divine law roar; but the *gentle voice of the gospel* never sounds. There the *LION* of the tribe of Judah tears the prey; but never exhibits himself as a *LAMB* that was slain, an atonement for sin, and the Savior of the guilty. There conscience exerts its power, not to excite the medicinal anguish of kindly repentance—but the hopeless horrors of everlasting despair! There *Jehovah* works—but not to enable the sinner to work out his own salvation—but to touch all the springs of painful sensation, and open all the sources of misery in the criminal. There *mercy* no more distributes her bounties—but *justice* reigns in her dreadful rigors! There the sanctifying Spirit no more communicates his purifying, all-healing influences—but sin, the great *Apollyon*, diffuses its deadly poison!

In a word, when you leave this earthly state of trial, all the discipline of the present state, all your advantages for salvation, all the means of grace, and all the encouragements of hope—will be forever removed out of your reach; and consequently all possibility of your salvation will cease forever; for when the necessary *means* are taken away—the *end* becomes utterly impossible. #

The full text of this sermon may be found at: https://www.biblebb.com/files/davies/this_very_year_die.htm

Hindi Holy Bible Project

The Evangelical Reformed Church India, is a conservative and confessional group of some 58 congregations embracing about 2,500 people, and holding to the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of unity. Three of their ministers attended the ICRC Conference in Melbourne last October. Their special project is described here by Rev. A. A. Hiwale.

The Bible is God's own Word which is holy, divinely inspired, beautifully written in various cultural contexts, and immensely powerful to transform numerous lives that have been already chosen by God. Therefore, the Bible has to reach to people in their own languages. In fact, in God's mysterious providences the Bible has been reaching many in their own languages.

To be specific, it has even reached to many Indians in Hindi language. But one may take serious note of St. Jerome's statement: *ignorance (incomprehension) of the Bible is ignorance of Christ.* Sadly, this is the story with Hindi Bible translation, because it does not have accuracy of translation rather it has commentary to the original. There are some verses which have been even distorted for their true meaning in terms of the original texts. At places there is paraphrasing of texts, which loses the real meaning in both the Old and New Testaments.

However, it does not mean that they in the past did not reveal the message of salvation or basics of Christian beliefs to Hindi speaking people in India. But our attempt is to take the Hindi Bible translation closer to the original texts. We are seeking all possible accuracy in translation; besides that, we will introduce each book more comprehensively which would enable its readers to begin their reading with all needful background of each book. It will also have a family worship guide, based on the material in the KJV Study Bible published by Reformation Heritage Books in the USA, for each chapter of the books which would enable families to ponder on some of the spiritual lessons and deal with some thought provoking questions about doctrines. There will be maps and cross references for study purposes.

For all these reasons, **Mission of Peace Making (MPM)** believes that this Bible Translation is essential and it will become rich blessing for many Hindi speaking people India and to its diaspora. Eventually, it will transform people and the way church worships and Christians will glorify God more meaningfully. It will edify each believer in and through its reading; preaching would become accurate and people would see Christ in their personal, family and public gatherings as they should. Even it will completely refresh and reform the Bible-Study meetings, Catechism classes, Sunday Worship services and all other special gospel meetings.

The leaders in MPM and **Evangelical Reformed Church in India (ERC)** have learned this need over the period of last 20 years. Over 500 million people in India are Hindi speaking. The way India is heading is against Churches politically, and there are open speeches of the anti-Christian politicians who are targeting to eradicate Churches in India by 2025. On the other hand, the Lord is massively changing hearts of many Hindi speakers, but unfortunately there are not sufficient Hindi Bibles available for these masses, and there is no accurate Hindi translation available elsewhere. It has been in the air that the anti-Christian movements in India are planning bans on printing of the Hindi Bibles in India. This is the time for us to work on Hindi Bible and get it printed as soon as possible. For the time is coming when we will not be able to work as freely as we are able now.

The editorial Committee is:

Chief Editor: Rev. Anupkumar Arun Hiwale
Hindi Editor in Chief: Mr Sunil Kumar Simgh
Additional Committee Members: Rev. Anup Dass, Rev. Ameet Mohan, Rev. Hiralal Solanki, Mrs Promila Anup Hiwale, Mr Ramraj D. Dhalwade and Rev. Simon Chandra.

The entire Hindi text has already been typed. The cost to get to the point of printing is about 900,000 rupees or A\$20,000. The printing cost is additional and the aim is to largely recoup it from sales. A sample of the Gospel of John is proposed for February 2021. For more information contact:

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INDIA & COVID-19

The sudden nation-wide shutdown in India went into force on 24 March. Given India has one of highest rates of respiratory illness in the world the impact of the coronavirus is likely to be extreme, hence the shutdown in an effort to contain its spread. Multitudes of day-workers in cities like Delhi found themselves without food and so have left the city to go to their home villages, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away, where their families will look after them. The fear is this may spread the virus to the countryside. In any event, the shutdown is about the only option the government has to stop the virus. If it fails the loss of life among the poor and marginalised of India will be horrific. #

SEARCH WORK APRIL 2020

SENIOR and INTERMEDIATE
Intermediate omit questions 2 and 6

MATTHEW 6:16-34

1. Why is it foolish to lay up treasure on earth? Where should our treasure be? (2 verses)
2. What lesson can we learn from the birds of the air; from the lilies of the field? (2 separate verses)
3. What should we seek first?

Chapter 7

4. What is the result of our asking, seeking, knocking?
5. How are evil men who give good gifts to their children compared with the Father in heaven?
6. What are the two different results from entering at the strait (narrow) gate or at the wide gate? (2 verses)
7. What kind of people enter the kingdom of heaven?
8. What kind of hearer is like a man who builds his house on a rock?

JUNIOR

MATTHEW 6:19-34

1. Where should we lay up for ourselves treasure?
2. What will happen if we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness?

chapter 7

3. What will happen if we ask, seek and knock?
4. Why should we enter in at the strait (narrow) gate?

Answers to be sent to: Mrs Irene Steel, PO Box 942, EPPING
NSW 2121 or Email: iesteel@gmail.com

A new principal for the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, India

Rev. Dr Dennis Muldoon, Mt Druitt PCEA

The Presbyterian Theological Seminary (PTS) is located in the foothills of the Himalayas in North India, in the picturesque city of Dehradun. I remember going up on the roof of the guest house in which I was staying to view the snow-capped mountains. A few days later the students hired a bus and we drove up to the mountain side town of Mussourie (2500m) to have some fun in the snow. India is a land of very hot summers but the mountains get cold in the winter.

Ministers of the PFCCI usually study at PTS. Rev Samit Mishra is an alumni, now on the board of the seminary. Rev Vishal is currently undertaking further studies at PTS. Men and women from numerous Presbyterian and Reformed churches in India, Nepal and Bhutan come to study at PTS. They come from other churches also, and some come as private students. They can undertake a diploma, a BTh. or MDiv. PTS is affiliated with the Asian Theological Association. There are plans to open a MTh. course soon. PTS has also started a training program for evangelists in the Hindi language, the language of Northern India.

PTS began in 1969, although its roots go back to the early days of Presbyterian Missions in Northern India. When the British rulers opened the land to non-British missionaries in 1833, Presbyterians from the USA came to the Punjab where they helped establish medical work in Ludhiana. The RPC of USA established a work in Roorkee just north of Delhi in 1835. Some of these missionaries got caught up in the Indian Mutiny of 1857; two Presbyterian families were killed in Kanpur. It would be another eighty years before British rule in India (the Raj) came to an end.

As churches were established, a place for training local pastors became necessary. A small Bible school was set up at Roorkee and this is where PTS began in 1969. This was a joint effort between the Bible Presbyterians and RPC churches. Upheavals in Presbyterian churches in America, primarily because of liberalism, were reflected on the mission field in India. In addition to the work in Punjab and United Provinces, Scottish Presbyterians worked in the Darjeeling Hills, as well as Central and South India. Welsh Presbyterians were active in the hills of NE India after 1841, the large Presbyterian Church in Mizoram being a legacy of their work.

In 1925, eleven of the sixteen different Presbyterian and Reformed groups came together to form the United Church of North India (UCNI). Some of these churches remain today; they send men and women for training at PTS. In 1914 I was privileged to visit one of these churches in the hills beyond Darjeeling; I went to visit one of the men I had taught. In 1971 many UCNI churches joined with Methodist, Baptist and Anglican churches to form the Church of North India (CNI); this followed the formation of the CSI in 1948. This was the age of ecumenism, but this came with liberalism. These are the largest churches in India today but are Episcopalian and largely liberal. The establishment of PTS in 1969 was strategic in the light of the spread of liberalism, and later Pentecostalism.

PTS began at Roorkee but when a more suitable property became available at Dehradun in 1978 it was decided to move the 50 students to this new campus, where it continues today



with around 90 students. The first principal was Rev Richard Strom from the USA- my wife, Elizabeth, went to Hebron school with his daughter. Dr Mohan Chacko became the first Indian principal in 1987; he retired in 2014. The board set about searching

for a new principal. In the interim Dr Matthew Ebenezer was acting principal.

After a long search, the board has announced that Rev.



Abhishek Barla [pictured], a graduate of PTS, will be installed, God willing, on 15 August 2020. Following his graduation in 2000, Rev. Barla was assistant pastor in the Bangalore Presbyterian church. He later worked as pastor of Ranchi Christian Fellowship before joining the staff of PTS. He is currently completing studies in the USA. We rejoice with our brothers and sisters in India, and we join them in prayer for Rev. Barla and a new era at PTS in India. #