

A Call to Reform the Church

by

Rev Dr Nick Hawkes

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Contents

	Page
Introduction	2
The Roman Catholic Church	3
The Protestant Church	10
The Pentecostal Church	18
Conclusion	30

Introduction

Jesus only really gave his disciples two characteristics to attract the attention and respect of people outside the church. It was not the grandeur of the church's buildings, not the pageantry of its services, not the professionalism of the music or the motivational nature of the talks by its speakers. No. According to Scripture, Jesus called on only two characteristics to attract the attention and respect of those not in the church.

The first was love (see Jn 13:34-35). Jesus asked his disciples to exhibit a quality of love that was similar to that which he exhibited, a love so extraordinarily beautiful that it would instantly identify a person as being a follower of Jesus.

The second quality Jesus called his disciples to exhibit was unity (Jn 17:20-23). He asked them to display a level of unity amongst themselves that reflected of the unity that existed within God who has revealed himself as a community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each is in perfect union with the other; each perfectly represents the other; yet each is distinct. That is real unity. In fact, it is the final definition of unity. Christians are called to reflect that sort of unity amongst themselves, and to do it in a way that is so extraordinary, that it compels people to admit that Jesus really must be God's Son - because nothing else can explain it.

At this point, I want to weep.

What a wretched, unfaithful, broken witness we have given to the grace and truth of Jesus Christ!

The institutional expression of church should hang its head in shame, because it has had power and influence. It, particularly, has been the public face of Christianity.

Acutely aware of my own fallibility and imperfection, let me express my grief.

Just as I need to name, confess, and reform those areas within myself that are not submitted to Christ, the institutional expression of church must do the same.

I'm going to suggest where it might begin.

Now, this might surprise you. I mean, how dare I?

This is why I dare:

I dare, because if you claim the lordship of Christ and lead these denominational institutions, you are my brother or sister. I belong to you, and you belong to me—and what you are doing is hurting Christ's mission. It is also hurting me.

The Roman Catholic Church

Oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.

How you are wounded. What on earth have you become?

In my country, Australia, the media have recently had a field day reporting on two things in particular.

The first was a television debate between Cardinal George Pell and the anti-Christian atheist and evolutionist, Richard Dawkins on 9th April 2012. It wasn't a very edifying affair. Dawkins complained about Pell's lack of understanding of the finer details of evolution and used this to avoid the real issues Pell wanted to expound. Pell scored a hit by telling Dawkins that Darwin was a theist, not an atheist. Dawkins protested that this wasn't true, but Pell was right. It is something Dawkins should have known, and it again showed up his extraordinary ignorance of things outside his field of biology.

Where Pell came unstuck was in seeking to defend some of the idiosyncratic beliefs peculiar to the Roman Catholic Church. The cardinal, caged within his denominational institution, gave an expression of the Christian faith which made my toes curl with embarrassment. I was acutely aware that some of my non-Christian friends would be watching, and whenever Pell strayed from consistent, biblical principles, what he said was not credible.

The second thing the Press reported was George Pell's comments leading up to, and following the announcement of a Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse ordered by the Australian government in November 2012. Much of the momentum for this investigation had been generated by reports of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. For years, the Catholics were in the news for all the wrong reasons. The press, eager for sensational news, pursued them remorselessly. The Catholic Church fuelled the press' interest by being seen to be doing too little too late to put its house in order.

When Pell gave a press conference after the announcement of the Royal Commission, his speech contained many of the right words. He 'welcomed' the government's investigation of this 'enormously important topic,' and said he was glad that the victims were 'pleased.'

But, oh dear, it was pretty muted.

Pell concluded the press conference by having a soft jibe at the press, asking whether their continual reporting of abuse in the Catholic Church was unhelpful for victims in that it kept the wounds open. This comment sounded a little sulky and defensive. It smacked of evasiveness, when, most Australians know that only transparency, righteousness and justice can bring healing.

The cardinal intimated that whilst the Catholic Church was 'serious' about addressing sexual abuse within its institution, he also wanted the investigation to 'clear the air' and

separate fact from fiction. The subtext was that the Catholic Church would be proved to be not as guilty as the press has reported. This, I might say, was despite reports of known abusers being moved on to new locations within the Church where they continued to prey on vulnerable people.

This self-protective stuff from the cardinal was deeply unsatisfying and provocative. If ever there was an occasion for a leader to be a statesman like John the Baptist and be uncompromising in his call for holiness, this was it. This was an occasion when people needed to be reminded of the call to holiness for all Jesus' disciples and to hear about the righteous nature of God. They wanted this from a church leader they could believe in and cheer for.

But they didn't get it.

I wonder how Australians and the press would have felt if they heard a church leader say something like this:

I am horrified, appalled and brokenhearted at the precious lives damaged by sexual predators who are seeking to camouflage their evil acts by hiding in the church. I also grieve for the families and friends of those abused who have had to watch their loved ones self-destruct as a result of their experiences.

My passion is for you to find justice. My passion is for you to know the love, truth and hope of God despite your betrayal by evil people who are pretending to be godly. My passion is for you to find a home within a community of authentic Christians, people who truly reflect the righteousness of Christ.

As someone who helps lead a church institution in which sexual predators have sought to hide, I ask your forgiveness.

I also ask that you don't confuse the evil of abuse and betrayed trust with anything Christian. What happened to you was anti-Christian, anti-good, and anti-God. Jesus came to give you hope and to give you life in all its fullness. His offer is still open. Whilst fallible people might fail you, please know that Jesus will never fail you.

Now... to you who have sought to hide your evil acts behind the righteousness of Christ, know that I am against you. Get out of the church you defile. Understand clearly that Jesus reserves the severest condemnation for those who abuse vulnerable people, particularly children.

Your evil is not something that can be expunged by a brief confession and a prayer of repentance. If you are not willing to confess also to the authorities and face the consequences of your actions, making reparation as much as you can, then your repentance is insincere, inauthentic and invalid.

Know that God's forgiveness is always there for you, but your repentance must be authentic. Know that God's ability to transform you and your addictions is always there, but you must die to self and submit to Christ. We, in the church, will help you do this. But never think you can excuse, or minimise your evil by seeking collegiality with other like-minded abusers who are masquerading as Christians in the church.

If you are an abuser, we aim to find you and hand you over to the authorities. The church is not a place for sexual addicts to find victims. We will not let you hide your evil in a place where people would least expect to find it. The church is not a place to camouflage your broken sexuality. The church is not a place to seek societal respectability and self-acceptance when you are plagued by guilt and evil urges.

We will do all we can to root you out and expel you from the church. If you thought we would do anything less, you are not biblically literate. God is holy and has a zero tolerance for evil. He has paid a huge price to rescue you from it and its consequences. He has also paid a huge price to prevent you from being enslaved by it.

The church is a community of people who have embraced Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. It is a community of people who seek to become like Jesus and share in his ministry to the world.

It is Christ's church, and it is called to be holy because God is holy.

When Christian leaders can't give a moral lead

What are we meant to think of Catholic clergy when lay people, instead of clergy, have to be appointed to lead the council that will be working with the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse? It implies that Catholic clergy have proved to be so untrustworthy and self-protective that they can't give a moral lead. Laity has to do it instead.

It is just so sad.

The excuse George Pell gave for this was that the Catholic clergy don't have the 'technical skills' to address the issue.

This is partly true. Not all clergy have the training and legal skills necessary to help abuse victims. But they do have the moral and spiritual responsibility for:

- 1) Giving the sort of speech mentioned above.
- 2) Organising for the church to carry out the promises contained in that speech.
- 3) Crafting an authentic Christian culture in the church; one that is faithful to the consistent biblical witness; one that has not been dulled, supplanted or corrupted by the less holy accretions of religious institutions throughout history. This means doing some serious reform to the Catholic theology of the confessional in order to bring it

into line with the rest of Scripture (which talks of holiness, justice, authentic repentance, transformation and accountability).

These things don't require 'technical skills.' They require you to be authentically Christian.

It is impossible for this scenario not to bring to mind the Apostle Paul's anger, scorn and bewilderment at the Corinthian church (1 Cor 6:1-8) whose members had grievances against each other and went to secular authorities for justice. This was incomprehensible to Paul. The Christian church, and particularly its leaders, should be the final definition of righteousness, wisdom and justice. The church is (or should be) comprised of people who know the righteous character of Jesus and have allowed God's Holy Spirit to build that character within them.

So, respectfully, I say to any Christian leader: Don't you dare duck your spiritual and moral responsibility by claiming technical incompetence. Please provide leadership in these areas, or leave the church.

Where do you find a mandate to maintain a culture of secrecy about sexual abuse in the church? Certainly not in the Bible.

Where do you find a culture of collegiality which turns a blind eye to sexual abuse, moving perpetrators on so they can damage lives in other places? Certainly, not in the Bible. So, cut it out.

The Bible and the Catholic Church

If you have detected a plea for the Roman Catholic Church to return to the consistent principles of Scripture when determining their belief and culture, you are right. I believe the Roman Catholic Church has been ill-served by the accretions of institutional history which have sought an authority equal to that of Scripture. Whilst its leaders may, on reading this, sigh and reach for well-worn rebuttals formed over the centuries by theologians squirreled away in the Vatican, these institutional theological accretions are wreaking havoc in the real world. Superstition is replacing faith; tradition is replacing biblical principles and immorality is flourishing. These theological accretions have given rise to barely credible theologies and practices within the Catholic institution which have caused the rest of Christendom to cringe with embarrassment. They have given poor witness to the apostolic, biblical witness of Christ, Christ's mission and Christ's church.

Some of these accretions include:

1) Transubstantiation.

This is the belief that the bread and wine of Holy Communion (or Mass) miraculously and mysteriously become the physical body and blood of Jesus. Please don't do this. It is neither necessary nor credible.

2) The transmission of the imprimatur to become bishop or Pope by the laying on of hands.

This is done to legalise and formalise a common Christian practice that was never meant to become a legalistic requirement. The claim that this has been a necessary and unbroken tradition from the time of St Peter isn't true. Historical scholars have shown that the line has been broken. So, by all means make use of the Christian practice of laying on of hands during commissioning. There is something very beautiful and sobering about a practice being as consistent as it has been through the centuries, but don't invent a fictional theology or history which requires it.

3) The worship of Mary.

Respect her greatly? Yes. But worship her? No. That is in no way biblically defensible. It is damaging to the gospel's insistence that Christ alone is worthy enough and sufficient enough to link us with God (Col 1:15-23).

4) Praying through the saints.

Please don't. This will, and has, fostered a culture that too easily collapses into superstition. The tearing of the curtain that separated ordinary people from God's presence in the temple (Mk 15:38; Heb 10:20) held a significance which the early church understood and celebrated with joy and amazement. It meant that every Christian now had access to God the Father, through Jesus Christ. In a very real way, every Christian was now a priest (1 Pet 2:9-10). Christ alone is our sufficient intermediary. Please don't mess it up.

And please don't invent intermediaries you feel you need to go to who stand between you and God. Just don't! It's bad theology and it's anti-gospel. To invent intermediaries is to fall into the trap of the third century Gnostics who felt they needed to pierce successive emanations from God (which he used to keep himself from being defiled by our ordinariness). That is heresy.

No one gets an 'engaged signal' when they talk to God. His lines are always open. No saint is more ready to listen to you than God, so you don't need a saint to represent you.

Please protect the reputation of the gospel. You are not free to change it. The pitfalls that follow from doing so impact all of Christendom to its detriment and result in a non-credible and non-biblical witness to the world.

5) The theology of purgatory.

The theology of purgatory suggests that there is an intermediate place which is not hell, in which sinful people can be purified after they die, and so eventually make it to heaven.

This doctrine doesn't command much support in Scripture, so please be restrained with it. At best, it is speculation that may help people understand God's justice better. At worst, it is just plain wrong.

The idea of purgatory began as tentative theological speculation which had the laudable aim of giving hope to sinful people. However, in the hands of an institution, it took on a life of its own and became a tool of control responsible for the sorts of excesses and abuses that brought about the Reformation.

It ought to be of some concern that the theology of purgatory can give people the impression, however unintended, that the saving work of Jesus on the cross is not necessary. Purgatory, it seems, can provide another way for people to make it to heaven. Obviously, this understanding would make a nonsense of the foundational tenet of Christianity, namely, the unique, necessary, saving work of Jesus Christ.

So, again, please let the Bible become your final authority. It has proven to be an excellent and worthy custodian of truth. God's Holy Spirit has never failed to return people to consistent biblical principles in any genuine Christian revival anywhere in the world. This is hugely significant. The sad fact is that religious institutions, because they are dogged by power, prestige, money, status and control, have sometimes not been good custodians of theological truth. As such, they should not be allowed to form any theology which muddies the truth taught in Scripture.

6) Professional hierarchy and elitism.

I suspect that the professionalization of the clergy and the Catholic love of hierarchy has done little other than to enfeeble the mission of the whole church. The reality is, every Christian is called to live and speak the gospel. It is not something that clergy or specialists can do for us.

I struggle to recognise the priests and prelates of the Catholic Church in the principles and patterns of leadership taught by Scripture. I can't help but think the Catholic institution has gone well beyond the Scriptural mandate in designing its hierarchy. This has possibly come about as a result of the legacy of Constantine adopting Christianity for the Roman Empire in 313 AD. He was responsible for institutionalising the church along civil and political lines—not always to the church's advantage. Please don't feel constrained to impose an ecclesiology from a past historical context on the church of today where it may no longer be relevant.

7) Celibacy for priests.

I'm not sure that forcing a requirement for celibacy on church leaders (instead of allowing them to choose it freely and offer it to God as an act of dedication) has served the Catholic Church well. What it has done is helped the Church become a haven for the sexually dysfunctional.

If we seriously want to carry the name of Christ, the Catholic Church (and all churches) need to reform. If we don't, then we shouldn't complain if society scorns us. This is an urgent call. It is sobering to remember that Jesus' worst enemies were the religious leaders of his day who presided over a culture that did not want to change.

I hope you don't think that this plea for reform comes from someone ignorant of the subtle nuances of Catholic theology. This is not a puerile attempt to conform you to a reformed, Protestant tradition. The fact is, if you are a Christian, you and I are brothers in Christ, we both share in the saving work of Christ. As a brother, I need to say that non-biblical things being done by the Roman Catholic Church is impinging on my credibility as a Christian. Worse, it is impinging on yours. People are struggling to see the hope of Christ because of your theology and actions.

Therefore, I grieve.

Beautiful people and a beautiful heritage

Some of my finest friends are Catholic. I have worked alongside many of them in a professional capacity and have been proud to do so. I've attended Bible studies in their sitting rooms, shared hilarious lunches with Capuchin monks, shared conducting weddings with wonderful priests, and rejoiced in the company and brilliance of my Jesuit friends, savouring their love, compassion and an occasional whisky.

I am in awe of the beautiful side of the Roman Catholic heritage. Thank you for your heart for mission. Thank you for providing schools and hospitals when no one else was doing so. Thank you for caring for the poor when most of the rest of the world did not care. The work of Mother Teresa and those like her has been, and is, beautiful. The amazing priests who worked amongst the rubbish dump dwellers in Juarez, Mexico, were heroic.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

It is all too beautiful for me not to care.

The Protestant Church¹

The lingering death of the church in the West has largely come about because of two inauthentic things which have posed as Christianity. The first is the belief that religious denominations, of themselves, are what defines Christianity. This is not so. Whilst most denominations began with a sincere attempt to recover authentic Christianity, they have too easily morphed into bureaucratic organisations riddled with politics and power.

Now, don't get me wrong; there are many lovely Christians in denominational churches, but religious institutions are not the measure of Christianity. At times, they have been severely dysfunctional.

It is interesting to note that Australians aren't generally enthusiastic about institutions. A brief look at our history will tell you why. Let me quote Noel Park's description of the early settlers of Australia:

*'Australia's settlers brought with them such characteristics as independence, toughness, anti-authoritarian attitudes and collective morality from their Irish, convict, dissenter or working class background. At the same time, the huge distance from their homeland added a sense of isolation and together these factors created a need for national heroes in the new country. These heroes were generally of a tough, irreverent, rascal type with little respect for such things as religion or status.'*²

The other thing that has masqueraded as Christianity but which is not, is liberalism. Religious liberals have sought to radically revise Christianity, removing its defining features of Christianity so that it bears little resemblance to the gospel teaching contained in the Bible. To do this, they have needed to cut free from scriptural authority. Liberal revisionists don't believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God in anything like the biblical sense. Essentially, they believe in little more than moralism and a vague sense of internal spirituality. This thinking, which has infiltrated the church under the banner of Christianity, is actually a completely new religion.

Its effect, particularly on the Protestant church, has been devastating. It has enfeebled the church and caused people to leave. A church which can't decide whether Jesus did or did not die for our sins; which can't decide whether prayer is efficacious or not; a church which lamely follows the values of secular society on issues such as sexuality has manifestly lost any right to respect or any right to consider itself to be the prophetic voice of God to the world. More particularly, it has lost its message of hope.

¹ The term 'Protestantism' is used here in the broadest sense to mean those churches protesting against Roman Catholic authority.

² Noel Park, from his address to the Uniting Church Wakefield Presbytery, South Australia, 27th March, 1998

The irony of this is extraordinary. The Protestant church was once a movement that protested against the spiritually dead excesses of a religious institution which had lost sight of its biblical foundations and the centrality of the saving work of Christ. Now it too has become spiritually dead and offers little more than theological confusion and politically correct moralism. John Wesley was terrified that this would happen. In 1786, he wrote:

‘I do not fear that the people called Methodist shall ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. I only fear that they shall exist as a dead sect having the form of religion but not the power thereof, and that undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast to the doctrine, discipline and spirit with which they first set out.’³

The movement which John Wesley was instrumental in leading began as a renewal movement. It exhibited many of the factors associated with the work of the Holy Spirit which would re-emerge with the Charismatic renewal movement 200 years later. The Methodist revival resulted in a renewed love of Scripture and a renewed zeal for mission to the poor and the unsaved.⁴ It reflected the passions of Jesus as recorded in Scripture.

And then in recent decades, the Protestant church took its eyes off the Bible and off Jesus. As a result, it has now largely lost its passion and its distinctive Christian flavour. And a main reason for this has been the influence of liberal theological thinking.

One of the best known exponents of liberal revisionism is John Spong, so let’s explore what he says.

John Spong

At the time of writing, Spong is a retired American bishop of the Episcopal Church. From 1979 to 2000 he was Bishop of Newark, New Jersey. He has been a dynamic, persuasive, well-practised speaker advocating the complete reworking of biblical belief.

His teaching is very attractive in that he offers a spirituality:

- without religious barriers
- without any need to attend church
- without any need to believe the miraculous
- without guilt
- without the troublesome demands of God-given standards of holiness

Many sincere people, weary of dysfunctional churches, are attracted to his thinking.

In common with other liberals, he seeks to divest Christianity of all its distinguishing

³ John Wesley, ‘Thoughts Upon Methodism,’ (London, 4th Aug, 1786).

⁴ Some liberal Protestant denominations would still claim to put a priority on their mission to the poor, but in reality, this can amount to little more than hiring some non-Christian people to help them administer and disseminate government grant money. Whilst this is laudable, I respectfully submit that such activity is an inadequate measure of the health of any church denomination.

features so all that is left is moralism and tolerance of things hitherto forbidden. Anything supernatural about Jesus is denied e.g. his resurrection and miracles. In order to bring this reform, Spong parodies the belief of conventional Christians to the point of absurdity. Balanced, evangelical Christians are not represented in his writings. Those believing in the consistent principles of Scripture are caricatured as barely credible people who believe in things that are patently untrue.

The reality, of course, is that most Christians understand full well that God usually chooses to work within the laws of nature that he has put in place. Most Christians understand that we don't live with miracles every day. God's presence is often subtle and shy. He chooses to stand behind a veil of mystery so that he can only be approached by faith. In this way, God does not compel faith by dramatic shows of strength but invites a faith that is freely given. Everyone, whether they are a child or a brilliant academic, must stoop through the humbling door of faith to reach God. But reach him, they can. And, because God is now incarnate within us by his Holy Spirit, he garnishes the work of his church with a miracle now and then.

Spong discards biblical authority and justifies doing so by pointing to the apparent absurdities within it. He seems unable or unwilling to differentiate between outdated cultural features that existed at the time of writing, and the consistent principles within Scripture that apply to all people at all times.

Of key significance is Spong's conviction that Jesus did not die on the cross for our sins. His belief has a distinctly New Age flavour in that he suggests we don't look to Jesus for our spirituality: rather, we should turn inwards in order to locate our own internal spirituality. He believes that different religions are simply the cultural badges we put on our own spirituality.

Spong says that he promotes his theology in order to reinvigorate the church. However, as a bishop, he presided over the fastest declining diocese in America. His teaching drove people from the church rather than bringing them to it. This is hardly surprising: all he did was give reasons why people shouldn't believe and offered them no hope beyond their own resources.

Spong could be guilty of academic arrogance when promoting his views. Sometimes, it came dangerously close to elitism. This happened notably after an Anglican Lambeth conference where he railed against bishops from the developing world accusing them of being uneducated (despite their impressive academic credentials) because they did not believe God approves of people engaging in homosexual acts. Because he centres spirituality on the individual rather than on God, Spong believes we are free to define our own morality. Everything that doesn't diminish other people must therefore be tolerated.

Because Spong's New Age style of philosophy has no concept of the fall (the sinfulness

of humankind) it fails to address the problem of evil. Evil is not judged by God and killed off on a cross, it is simply met with tolerance or as something that needs to be corrected by education. This ‘salvation by education’ belies a modernist optimism that is, in these postmodern times, now looking distinctly shaky.

The divergence of Spong's thinking from Christianity can be represented as follows:

	<u>Spong's liberal revisionism</u>	<u>Conventional Christianity</u>
God	is still distant from us and is not able to be grasped	is with us
The essence of God	remains hidden behind many religious masks	is seen as Jesus
Jesus is	primarily a brave and tolerant moral teacher	God's Son, who died for our sins
The cross	represents a moral example	is God's saving act
The resurrection	is not believed	is believed
Heaven	is possibly not true	is true
Consistent biblical principles	are revisable	are not revisable
Intercessory prayer	is not valid	is valid

Spong is scornful of intercessory prayer. He says, ‘*Prayer cannot be a request made to a theistic deity to act in human history in a particular way.*’⁵ He goes on to say that God has no identity and does not exist in any form in which a relationship can be established. God is merely the source of life, love and meaning, which he defines using Tillich's term, ‘Ground of Being.’ God does not engage with us in any way. We must ‘*turn inward to meet God*’ within us and so have ‘*an expanded transcendent consciousness.*’⁶ Spong says that God has not entered history or the realm of human experience, and so any notion of God entering our world as Jesus Christ must be dismissed. ‘*The Christology of the ages is bankrupt.*’⁷

Oh dear! There goes 2,000 years of Christian theology.

In my own country, Australia, a progressive stream within the Uniting Church has helped sponsor a number of trips to Australia by John Spong. The schizophrenia that this helped to maintain in that denomination was extreme. The national president of the Uniting Church at the time tried to hold things together using the mantra: ‘*Unity in diversity.*’ He’d

⁵ The tenth of John Spong's twelve theses (or articles), see: John Spong, ‘*A Call for a New Reformation*’

⁶ John Spong, ‘The God Beyond Theism,’ *The Voice* October 1999
See also: John Hick, ‘Jesus and the World Religions,’ in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London, SCM, 1977)

⁷ John Spong, ‘*A Call for a New Reformation,*’ see Article 2

forgotten that the Bible makes it very clear that unity is only found 'in' Jesus Christ. The fact is, it is simply impossible to put light and darkness in the same place. It is simply impossible to put two mutually exclusive philosophies together and claim any sort of credibility from a watching world. Light and darkness cannot co-exist. Matter and antimatter cannot co-exist. They cancel each other out. This is exactly what happened. The Uniting Church is now the fastest dying denomination in Australia.

One of the factors which helped accelerate this decline was the tendency for liberal clerics (with little interest in leading people to faith in Christ) to migrate either towards academic pursuits in theological college or church governance. This meant that liberalism often became over-represented in the highly influential theatres of theological education and church politics—to the denomination's great misfortune.

Both grace and truth are required (Jn 1:17)

Liberals like Spong caricature conventional Christianity as being exclusive and intolerant whilst they portray their own views as being inclusive, tolerant and loving.

This is of course a deeply flawed and deceptive approach because both love and truth are necessary for right belief. Jesus was characterized by both grace and truth (Jn 1:17). Truth without grace becomes legalism; and grace without truth becomes ungrounded sentimentality. You need both. Truth matters. Not everything should be tolerated if truth means anything.

Richard Niebuhr, one of the most significant American theologians in the twentieth century, summarised how liberal Christianity both weakens and cheapens the Gospel. He wrote, '*It proclaims a God without wrath who has brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross!*'⁸

Spong reduces the gospel to a therapeutic invitation to 'come as you are and stay as you are.' There is no need for repentance, no need for obedience to Christ. It proclaims what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace.' *Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.*⁹

Making gods after our own likeness

It is the nature of humankind to grasp at God's crown. As the eighteenth century philosopher Voltaire said, '*God made man in his own image and ever since man has been seeking to return the compliment.*'

⁸ Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, (1937).

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (Collier, 1963), p.47.

This is happening now every bit as much as in ancient times.

The book of Daniel in the Old Testament tells the story of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar who set up a ninety foot tall golden idol to be worshiped (Dan 3:1-6). By making this idol, Nebuchadnezzar was promoting himself as the one who was in charge of god. It ensured that he would be honoured and feared as the priest and mouthpiece of that god.

In the same way, liberal theologians have set up an academic god, fashioned after their own ideas, and have told people to worship it. The god they have defined exalts to the highest place the academics who created it. They become the authority of the god they have designed. As such, they define god rather than let the true God reveal himself in a way that only the humble and childlike can appropriate.

The paganising of Christianity

It is perhaps pertinent at this point to talk more generally about the process of de-Christianising Christianity that is evident in all denominations but which is particularly evident in Protestant churches.

In his book *Pagans in the Pews*, Professor Peter Jones expresses the concern that paganism (worship of nature) is infiltrating the church. He says that the driving philosophy behind paganism is 'Monism,' the conviction that everything is one. Paganism, he says, is the conviction that:

- 1) Everything shares the same substance, the same force of nature. As such, there is no creator.
- 2) Humanity and all of creation constitute God. We are all thin slices of the pie that is God. Therefore humanity and nature are one.
- 3) All religions are one. All have parts of the truth. All are valid and must be tolerated.
- 4) Humanity does not have a moral problem, it has an ignorance problem. We don't make moral mistakes, we simply make mistakes because we are asleep to the truth. One of the symptoms of being 'asleep to the truth' is that we make distinctions between people on the basis of gender, sexuality, faith and race. We must therefore get rid of all such distinctions.
- 5) Truth does not come from a God outside us, it comes from a spirituality within us, something we access by turning inwards in meditation.

Pagan teaching is far removed from the Christian teaching that God is distinct from his creation. The Bible says clearly, '*In the beginning, God created*' (Gen 1:1). It is also very

different from the Christian understanding that ‘*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*’ (Rom 3:23) which is why those embracing pagan ideals play down the central Christian claim that God gave his son Jesus to die on a cross to pay the price for our sins. They would rather believe that Jesus is just a good moral example who was particularly in touch with the elemental life-force of God.

David Gushee and Glen Stassen, professors of ethics at Fuller Seminary, write, ‘*When Jesus' way of discipleship is thinned down, marginalised or avoided, churches and Christians lose their antibodies against infection by secular ideologies.*’¹⁰ Sadly, this has proved true.

Adherents to pagan philosophy have no answer to the raw reality of evil. They either don't call it evil or they minimise it by calling it a failure of education. Christians however, whilst they don't deny the importance of education, take the existence of evil very seriously. They understand that God names evil, judges evil and will ultimately destroy evil. Until it is finally destroyed, Christians are called to work with God to address evil and injustice wherever they find it.

Similarly, those who hold to pagan principles have no answer to the vexing issue of suffering. They avoid talking about it. Christians, however, understand that suffering is a lamentable consequence of a universe that is ‘off the rails’ because it is contaminated by sin. They look forward to a time when the old, imperfect creation will be replaced by God's perfect re-creation in which those who have accepted God's love and lordship are invited to participate. Again, Christians take the existence of suffering seriously and work with God to overcome it wherever they come across it.

A hint from Jeremiah

Significantly, the Bible warns that when godly leaders are not giving a clear, inspirational lead, society tends to cast off restraint and go into a moral free-fall (Prov 29:18).

This occurred in the time of the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah.

Jeremiah, chapter 5 tells us that the Hebrew people had become stubborn and rebellious and had taught themselves to no longer ‘*fear the Lord*’ (v.24). Later, in verses 27-28 we learn that economic rationalism, designed to make the rich richer at the expense of the poor, had become rife. All of society, from top to bottom, had become corrupt, even the religious leaders. The prophets who were meant to be speaking God's word, were speaking lies instead, something which God condemned as being ‘*a horrible and shocking thing*’ (v.30). Similarly, the priests who were meant to present the authority of God to people, were presenting their own authority as if it were God's. In the next chapter, we learn that they had become greedy

¹⁰ D.P. Gushee and G.H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003).

for prestige and money, and were deceiving people by telling them that their moral failures were 'not serious' (Jer 6:13-14).

Does this sound familiar?

What was God's response?

God tells his people that they are standing at a crossroads. It's a place of choice. They need to make a decision about which way they will go. God urges them to '*ask for the ancient paths*' (Jer 6:16). In other words, he wants them to choose the time-honoured, traditional values he revealed to their ancestors.

Tears

For the once beautiful Protestant church, I weep. You used to be so fresh, powerful and committed to Christ. You had reformed yourself on scriptural principles and were on fire. Now you are dying. Whilst there are a few among you who are still giving faithful witness, your light has almost gone out and there is little left to give anyone direction.

The question is: Are you content to let this be so? Are you content to let this happen on your watch, during your particular period of history? Or will you pray, fast and network with other faithful Christians to bring about serious reform?

The Pentecostal Church

Wow! What a whirlwind. See how much you have grown since the revival in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, in 1906. You started out small and were dismissed, for the most part, by the mainstream denominations as being little more than a cult. Then the worldwide Charismatic renewal swept through every main denomination in the world.

Just as the Reformation returned the church to Christ and the Bible, the Charismatic renewal returned the church to an authentic engagement with God. It reignited a love for God and allowed the possibility of God's supernatural action within his church.

The Pentecostal church played a pivotal role in this. Whenever a mainline denominational church did not condone spiritual renewal, you opened your arms and accepted the people it displaced into your churches. The Protestant churches in particular emptied into you. People who were tired of liberalism, spiritual dryness, formalism and irrelevance, who were hungry for an experience of God, came to you in huge numbers.

Thanks for providing a home for them.

Theology of success

Paradoxically, the monster that now seeks to pollute the Pentecostal Church comes from its very success. What is threatening it now is a distorted theology of prosperity. Like all of the most dangerous of lies, this idea is nearly correct. But corruption always comes from pushing something too far so that a good principle is turned into something unbalanced and un-gospel.

In essence, the Pentecostal theological argument for success goes like this: God is active in our midst today and chooses to act in response to the prayers of his people. He does so because he loves us and wants us to thrive. As we centre ourselves on God and honour him with worship, our faith rises to a point where we can take hold of God's promises. Then we can pray God's healing on our sicknesses and blessing on our finances, family and ministry.

The theology is so nearly right but it is nonetheless a distortion of the gospel of Jesus Christ—a distortion that has resulted in a number of unfortunate symptoms.

The first is that success is seen as the result of God's blessing, which has come about as a result of faithfulness. 'Big' is therefore seen as a symptom of faithfulness. This has resulted in what some of my Pentecostal pastor friends call: 'dog sniffing.' When two dogs meet, they circle around each other, trying to sniff each other's bottoms in order to determine their identity and relevance. The same happens in a Pentecostal setting. When two Pentecostal pastors meet, they will ask, 'How big is your church?' In other words, they are both wanting to know whether the other is someone worth meeting who is bigger than them, or not?

This culture is encouraged by the practice of ushering senior pastors to front row seats, inviting them to special lounges reserved for the elite and putting them up in luxury hotels. To be spiritual is to be successful and big. To be big is to be guaranteed respect and the right to speak at conferences.

Now, please don't get me wrong. I love effective, faithful leaders, many of whom are worth listening to. They are usually inspirational and charismatic—after all, that's what makes them successful. But 'big' isn't the only definition of Christian success.

- Success is being able to sit on an ash-heap while dressed in sackcloth, refusing to curse God even though you are covered in sores and have lost everything—Job.
- Success can look like a man dying on a cross—Jesus (Jn 19:30).
- Success includes being shipwrecked, beaten, abused, maligned, deserted, and executed—The Apostle Paul (2 Cor 11:23-30; 2 Tim 1:15).
- Success can look like being fed to the lions or staying faithful even when you are raped, intimidated or in any other way persecuted for your faith (Heb 11:32-40).

Without losing its emphasis on the importance of faith, the Pentecostal church needs to find a more adequate doctrine of suffering (see chapter 6); a more adequate doctrine of healing and a more adequate doctrine of success (see chapter 8). The insidious nature of the prosperity doctrine which has taken hold amongst you is exacting a terrible toll.

It has given rise to a celebrity cult. This has forced leaders of big churches to run ever faster on the treadmill of excellence and busyness, fuelled by an addiction to expansion. Some of this expansion can be more parasitic than godly. One megachurch in Queensland sought to plant satellite campuses in other areas by taking over and developing some small churches around it. When one of these churches did not want to be taken over, the mega-church stole its name and planted another church right beside it. The megachurch then poured its considerable resources into the new church so that the original church was killed off.

I hope you find this as troubling as I do. I don't see Jesus' passion for love and unity in that sort of behaviour. I see an addiction to bigness masquerading as a desire to further the gospel. It looks dangerously like building one's own kingdom rather than God's kingdom.

Another symptom of an addiction to bigness is the faking of a spiritual 'wow' factor.

The fact is, people will turn up to church if God is seen to show up. This is usually evidenced by miracles of healing. This exerts huge pressure on churches to be seen to 'perform' spiritually. At its worst, this results in sensationalist healing meetings, some of which are aired on TV. An investigation into all the healings conducted by one TV evangelist

revealed that not one of the healings claimed on the show could actually be substantiated. Not one!

This sort of phenomenon has given rise to the term ‘evangelastics.’ Evangelastics is when someone stretches the truth for the sake of the gospel.

Please don’t do this. If you do, Christianity will be scorned and will lose credibility—and so will you.

Curiously, a doctrine of prosperity can also result in a lack of spiritual engagement with God. It works like this: When a church gets big, it quite properly becomes committed to excellence and expands its ministries and mission. Competent leaders are appointed and a huge army of volunteers is mobilised. However, this means it can be very easy for reliance on God’s supernatural provision to fall away. After all, you already have the finances and leaders necessary to do everything you want. Who needs the Holy Spirit when you have everything under your own control?

An addiction to bigness often starts a busyness treadmill that burns people out. The casualty list can be huge. Church leaders are required to motivate people to do more and more, and give more and more, so that the church can get bigger. Eventually, the church can become a monster, not a blessing.

A theology often used to motivate people to invest more and more into their local church is one that doesn’t really exist in the New Testament: it is a theology of ‘The House.’ In Pentecostal-speak, ‘The House’ is the local church or megachurch. The account of the Queen of Sheba being impressed with Solomon’s splendour is often used to justify the importance of people investing in the grandeur of ‘the house’ (1 Kings 10:1-13). This is slightly disturbing, given that this passage was not written to teach people to put a priority on financing big churches or the mission projects of their leaders.

Again, the theology is so nearly right. The New Testament does talk about the church being a community of love in which people combine their abilities to do effective mission under the direction of godly leaders who are committed to prayer and preaching (Acts 6:1-4). But that doesn’t confer a biblical mandate for pastors to ask their congregations to build and maintain extravagant mega-churches.

It is difficult, isn’t it, to find the dividing line between an unhealthy compulsion for bigness, fuelled by an addiction to significance, and the entirely laudable motive for building something attractive to which people want to come because of its culture of excellence and hospitality. Pastors who are building something like that are seeking to be culturally relevant and wanting to do what is necessary to draw people into a place where they will hear and experience the gospel. With a touch of sadness, I have to admit that today’s discerning consumerists demand such excellence. If they don’t find it, they will probably go elsewhere.

What it comes down to, I think, is the importance of ensuring that the right kingdom is being built. It's about whose glory is being sought. Sometimes this is not very clear. There is always a temptation for pastors to steal a little of God's glory and bask in the rewards of their own success. It is an insidious mindset that can easily develop in competitive cultures where bigness is seen as a badge of competence and faithfulness.

Churches that are wanting to grow in size hate losing people. As a result, Pentecostal pastors preach a lot on the importance of unity and loyalty. However, the definition of unity that most pastors hold to unconsciously is, 'Come and join me in what I'm doing.' Significantly, they don't often focus on helping people to discover and engage in ministry in their own spheres of influence outside the control of their church.

This mindset can teach churchgoers to become dependant on their senior pastor. He (usually) is the one who defines and articulates the vision that everyone should commit to and bring about.

Another consequence of this sort of thinking can be a competitive spirit between churches. Neighbouring churches are seen as a threat rather than groups of brothers and sisters whose welfare you should prefer over your own. This can make genuine unity difficult to achieve. Whilst most pastors speak of the importance of being 'kingdom minded,' i.e. growing God's universal church rather than just their own church, their idea of unity is too often one of, 'Come and join me in what I'm doing.'

Again, I want to say that we should be profoundly grateful for big churches led by skilled, dedicated and faithful pastors. They provide training and resources for the wider church, so it's important that we encourage them to stay healthy and sustainable. Their ministry is too difficult and too vital for us not to care for them.

Leadership, in the Pentecostal church, can be particularly lonely and demanding. Senior pastors have to put up with a continual background noise of criticism and envy. As high achievers, they can struggle to find people with the necessary wisdom and experience who are able to mentor them. Authentic accountability can therefore be hard to put in place. Nonetheless, it is vital for them to find people who are able to ask them the hard questions and speak into their lives. Similarly, no senior pastor must let himself be so busy that he fails to maintain his spiritual disciplines. Success, as will see in chapter 8, can be hazardous to a pastor's health, integrity and ministry.

Worship

Let's move on and talk about worship in Pentecostal church meetings. Those who are slightly unkind to the Pentecostal church might call it 'emotional manipulation.' Why do they say this?

Pentecostal churches put a high priority on encouraging an authentic expression of worship in their meetings. They do this, both because God is worthy of worship, and because they believe that worship encourages God's Spirit to turn up and do things amongst them.

I love worshipping with Pentecostals. I love it when someone provides an environment within which I can be real and express my love for God. However, I am troubled when people speak about needing to worship in order to cause 'faith to rise,' an essential prerequisite if God is to operate supernaturally amongst them.

Whilst God usually chooses to work amongst people who have faith, working to cause 'faith to rise' through music, singing and emotion can easily morph into manipulation. It can too easily become a necessary act we are required to do to 'switch' God on. In other words, it can become a means by which we seek to control God.

People have been trying to control God since the dawn of time. It's our oldest heresy.

Rather than cause 'faith to rise' in readiness for a few minutes of ministry, it is much better to grow a faith that will be present for a life-time. By all means, use music to help people celebrate their God and worship him but don't seek to use it to manipulate either God or his people. Emotional manipulation of endorphins in the brain should never be mistaken for authentic worship. Love for God, based on truth and expressed in obedience, is what makes worship real.

The idea of 'calling God down from heaven' through praise and worship also presents a theological problem. The Bible teaches that God is everywhere fully present. As such, he doesn't need to be called down from heaven—ever. Rather, encountering God is a matter of focussing on him so that we become aligned with him who is always fully present. Singing in order to manipulate God is invalid. However, worship that helps us centre on God and celebrate God is perfectly legitimate.

CEO and Apostles

A CEO (Chief Executive Officer) is not one of the five-fold ministries listed in the Bible as being essential for training people to be fully functioning disciples of Christ (Eph 4:11-13). I say this because the actions of some senior pastors of large churches can suggest that it is. Certainly, Senior Pastors can very much look like CEOs. Any pastor organising a team to help grow the church can't help but do so. However, a pastor is so much more. They pray, love, preach and model Christ's lifestyle. Sometimes, CEO behaviour has been

spiritualised by labelling those responsible for large organisations ‘apostles.’ I’ve even seen that title written on business cards! For the sake of biblical integrity, it may be helpful to remind ourselves what being an apostle actually is.

The word ‘apostle’ comes from the Greek word, *apostolos*, meaning ‘sent one.’ Apostles are those sent to speak a message about God's kingdom, to speak to people who have never heard of it. Essentially, they are missionaries. They are those who plant churches in non-Christian cultures (either overseas or in their own nation).

According to the Bible, there are only two qualifications required for being an apostle:

1. An apostle must be called by God (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1).
2. An apostle must be so familiar with Jesus' life and teaching that he or she imitates it, embodies it and reflects it in his or her words and deeds (Acts 1:21-25).

That's it.

Being an apostle has nothing to do with having political influence with governments, building a megachurch, or being a CEO with a large salary and lots of toys.

Modelling the servant heart of Jesus

Enjoy reading this beautiful passage:

Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’ (Mk 10:42-45)

I can’t help but contrast Jesus’ attitude to the following experiences:

I was once sent a free gift of a book and DVD from a pastor of a Pentecostal megachurch in America. Evidently, he’d sent the same gift to hundreds of pastors in Australia. The DVD was a long advert explaining why I should give to him financially so that he could own a one-third share in a luxury private jet.

I threw the book and DVD in the bin.

A friend who was pastor of a large Pentecostal church once told me how he’d needed to write to a well known overseas pastor who had volunteered his services and explain why he wouldn’t be needing them. He would not be supplying the prescribed make of luxury car for him to drive during his visit. Nor would he pay the umpteen thousand pounds required for his mission costs, or guarantee the visiting pastor a certain grade of luxury in a hotel.

On another occasion, I listened uneasily as a senior pastor of a Pentecostal megachurch boasted that neither he nor any of his family had ever flown economy class in their life.

Hmmm.

Whilst I fully appreciate the need for exhausted pastors on international mission to be comfortable and cared for, I can't help but think that a boundary has been crossed here. I'm forced to ask whether this culture of excess is what the widow's mite, given so faithfully and sacrificially, is meant to support? Does this sort of behaviour faithfully represent the humble, servant heart of Jesus? Is it good for the gospel?

I don't think it is. In fact, I think it is evil.

It is exactly this sort of abusive behaviour that the Apostle Paul railed against in his letters to the church in Corinth. Paul needed to expose the exploitative behaviour of supposed 'super-apostles' who were demanding extravagant payments and provisions (2 Cor 11:5-15). In contrast to them, Paul simply showed them the compassion of a father's heart (1 Cor 4:11-16). And so must we. The reward that each of us should be seeking is in heaven. If we seek rewards in this life, the Bible teaches that we shouldn't expect to see them in the next (Mt 6:19-21; Lk 16:19-25). Quite simple.

Sadly, some megachurch leaders seek to justify this wretched abuse of privilege by quoting the Bible selectively, using it in ways never intended by the original authors. Let me say, in passing, that if any theological student did this in a sermon outline and submitted it for marking, he or she would (and should) fail.

Jesus gave short shrift to leaders who set aside biblical principles for their own traditions in order to enrich their lifestyle (Mk 7:8-13). So, let me say this clearly: If you distort Scripture to justify this sort of exploitation, you will be subject to God's judgement. You will also hurt people.

So, stop doing it.

Right teaching on honouring leaders

What does the Bible say about honouring church leaders?

The Bible teaches that those who direct the affairs of the church should be respected and should receive our full support. We are to honour faithful leaders and imitate their best qualities.

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. (Heb 13:7)

Leaders carry a heavy responsibility for which they are accountable to God (Jas 3:1; Lam 4:11-13). They must grow disciples of Christ as well as guard the church against danger

(Is 62:6). It is hardly surprising, then, that the Bible asks us to help them as much as we can so that their ministry is not burdensome to them.

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb 13:17)

Another Bible passage that is often abused by those claiming a biblical mandate for a luxurious lifestyle is 1 Timothy 5:17-18.

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'

Not 'muzzling the ox while it treads the grain' means giving a leader enough to live on so that he or she doesn't have to take time off ministry to earn a salary. A full-time Christian leader has every right to be supported by the church that he or she leads. However, support is one thing—a luxury lifestyle is another. The context of the passage makes it clear that 'double honour' means giving leaders double respect and being careful to listen to them. It does not mean giving them a luxurious lifestyle.

It's worth remembering that when Jesus was incarnate 'with us,' he did not lord it over us. He was born in a place where animals feed, had no home of his own and washed his disciples' feet. I say this not to endorse a poverty mentality (no big church can engage in significant mission unless its people give) but to help pastors avoid having an abusive, elitist mentality.

To church pastors, let me I say this: Don't show me your luxury lifestyle, show me your servant heart. Show me your Christ-transformed character. Show me Jesus. Humbly show me your scars that have come from persecution and hardship. That's what the world needs to see. Throw your triumphalistic, self-aggrandising, prosperity doctrine into the pit of hell.

It might be helpful at this point to review how to use the Bible with integrity.

A right way to use Scripture

Here are some rules:

- 1) Use all of Scripture to determine the meaning and application of any one verse. Selective use of a few verses ('proof-texting') is a tool employed by all false leaders, so take care. Have a holistic understanding of what the Bible says about the subject taught by any one verse before you preach on its meaning and application.
- 2) Don't force a meaning onto a passage of Scripture the original author didn't intend. And don't force your culture or preconceptions onto the Bible. Rather, get these from the Bible.

Jesus said, famously, ‘Take up your cross and follow me.’ It was a challenge to us to be prepared to pay the cost of being faithful disciples. Amazingly, I once heard this passage used to teach people to follow the leadership of the senior pastor unquestioningly.

Such abuse of Scripture is not uncommon, even amongst senior Pentecostal leaders. So I plead with you: don’t use a passage of Scripture outside of its original context. Just don’t. Your old theological teacher would have drummed into you time and time again, ‘A text without a context is a pretext.’

- 3) Don’t be so addicted to being relevant that you end up preaching ‘how to’ sermons full of motherhood statements, instead of preaching about Jesus. The primary purpose of Scripture is to testify about Jesus (Jn 5:39; 20:31).
- 4) Clever systematising of subjects into lists is done well by some Pentecostal pastors. Too often it is not. Let me say gently that clever alliteration should not be mistaken for profundity. Faithful biblical exposition that transforms people to be like Jesus is what is truly profound.
- 5) Finally, read the Bible. Read it all. I don’t care how busy you are, read it. As a leader, you are called to be a craftsman of the Bible.

Love truth—all truth

I’ve noticed that when the media ridicule Pentecostalism, they attack two things in particular. The first is their prosperity doctrine, which we’ve already talked about. The second is its barely credible belief about science.

Pentecostalism’s antagonistic stance against conventional science can be hugely damaging to Christianity. According to a South Australian survey in 2001, eighty percent of tertiary trained people who do not attend church believe that Christianity is not scientifically credible.¹¹ In other words, they believe that in order to be a Christian, one has to commit intellectual suicide.

This makes me cross. Christians have no right to put obstacles in front of those coming to faith by requiring them to believe the ridiculous. Exaggerated claims have been publicised by some Christian organisations aimed at discrediting the evolutionary theory. Sadly, these are almost always distortions of the whole of scientific truth, as we currently know it. Such writings have helped generate a self-fuelling sub-culture amongst Christians that promotes views not held to be credible by almost all scientists.

In reality, the theory of evolution is remarkably well supported by scientific fact. It has earned so much credibility that almost all scientists operate on the basis of it.

¹¹ N J Hawkes, *An Apology for the Scientific Credibility of Faith* D Min thesis, Australian College of Theology, submitted February, 2004.

This means that if you allow scientific truth to be ridiculed in your church in the mistaken belief that you are protecting biblical authority, you will be scorned by society. Worse, you may earn God's displeasure for putting obstacles in front of thinking people who want to believe in Jesus.

I have some sympathy for pastors, because, for many of them, science is outside their field of expertise. This makes them wide open to noisy minority groups holding views on science which are not credible, which they promote in the name of protecting biblical authority. This is usually enough to intimidate Pentecostal pastors into one of two positions:

- 1) They lazily embrace an indefensible position on scientific truth which earns the scorn of educated people.
- 2) They throw up their hands and say it's all too hard. Then they say that it's not something that is of central importance. Sadly, by doing so, they allow a culture that is anti-science to take root in their church.

This can lead to some amazing dishonesty. I was once having coffee with the national head of a Pentecostal denomination. He admitted to reading my book about science and faith before saying ruefully, 'Nick, I found your book fascinating and agreed with everything you said. But my denomination would not allow it to be promoted in my church.'

Oh dear.

Here's an elemental truth: All truth, whether scientific or theological, has its origin in God. So, don't you dare set scientific truth against theological truth. Just don't. It is wrong and it is damaging. Have the courage to go for truth—all truth.

The militant creationism that came over from America about one hundred years ago is a cuckoo in the Pentecostal nest. Kick it out. The lack of integrity and credibility in the creationist camp is appalling. To name just a few examples off the top of my head:

- They have claimed that dinosaur footprints were found next to human footprints in petrified mud. No, that's been shown to be a mistake.
- They have claimed to have found Noah's ark—about forty times! All such claims have been shown to be mistakes or frauds. One 'discovery' claimed to have found the ark, together with the remains of animal pens, and metal nails. It was exposed as complete fiction on prime time TV, to the embarrassment of all Christians.
- They claim huge gaps in the fossil records. Umm... not really.
- They claim that the speed of light has changed. It has since been shown there is no evidence for this.
- They claim to have found the wagon wheels of Egyptian chariots which were overwhelmed with water while chasing the Hebrew people across the Red Sea. One

of the wheels was said to have been given to an esteemed Egyptian archaeologist for verification. No evidence of this ever happening has yet come to light.

And so it goes on and on. You've got this nonsense on your websites, in your magazines and on your bookstalls. Many of you allow it to be promulgated in your pulpits.

What makes it worse is that this abuse of scientific truth is being done in the name of preserving biblical integrity. This is truly horrible. If your biblical integrity requires people to lie about science and truth, then you need to get a better theology of Scripture (the first eleven chapters of Genesis in particular).

Don't allow even a hint of this rubbish in your churches.

God is a God of truth (Ps 31:5; 51:6).

If you are feeling ill-equipped to bring scientific truth back into your church, I've written a brief (free) online course that might help called "Evidence of God" (see: nickhawkes.net).

How will you die?

Here's a sobering question: How do you want to die? How do you want the Pentecostal movement to die?

You see, every organisation carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. Every organisation normally completes a cycle of birth, maturity, corruption and death.

The question is, How much do you want to control and manage this cycle?

I would urge caution before you protest that Pentecostalism will never die. Whilst Jesus promised that his church will never cease to exist, no such assurance is given to denominational institutions. The Pentecostal church in the third century AD had its equivalent in the Montanists. Although Montanism began as a Christian sect, it eventually spiralled away from apostolic and biblical truth until it was declared heretical. The movement petered out early in the sixth century.

All Christian movements have a lifecycle.

The church of Jesus Christ was born at Pentecost with the power of the Holy Spirit. It was new, vibrant, and soon engaging in mission and in preserving the words of Christ in Scripture. Then it became institutionalised. It took its eyes off Jesus and wandered off from biblical principles.¹²

¹² The Roman Catholic Church has continued to be a significant entity through history because it allowed reformations of its own, most notably the first: The Counter Reformation of the sixteenth century. I submit that it is time for another.

The church was protested against when Holy Spirit renewal broke out during the Reformation and the Protestant church was born.¹³ This returned the church to a love of Scripture, a love of Jesus and a love of mission. But then it too became institutionalised and lost its edge. New revivals and renewal movements (including the Methodist movement led by John Wesley) protested against the Protestant church and reignited a love of Jesus, a love of Scripture and a love of mission.

But the Methodist church has since had its edge blunted by liberalism, formalism and institutional folly. It too was subject to a protest movement when the Holy Spirit brought the charismatic renewal and gave birth to the Pentecostal church.

So, now it's your time. What will be your story?

The date of your death and the manner of your death are entirely in your hands. May I encourage you to write large on history's page. But this will only be possible if you stay faithful to Scripture and foster a love of Jesus—because that's where the Holy Spirit never fails to return the church each time he brings renewal.

¹³ The term 'Protestantism' is again used here in the broadest sense to mean those churches protesting against Roman Catholic authority.

Conclusion

Have you noticed that the ugly things which are threatening the Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal church all have the same fundamental cause? In every case, it is the departure of these institutional churches from central biblical principles.

So, with all humility, may I say that if you have any ambition to be faithful, any ambition to fulfil Jesus' desire for you to be in unity with each other, then get rid of the inglorious human accretions in your denominations and meet together at the one place to which the Holy Spirit never fails to return the church, the place where we all should be: with the Jesus, as witnessed to in Scripture.

Nothing more. Nothing less.