

interact



christian growth ministries

Why I Believe in God

by Kel Willis

Can you fathom it: more Aussies believe in aliens than in God! Apparently, 80% of us believe in the existence of aliens somewhere in space whilst 74% believe in God.⁽¹⁾ It makes me wonder about the basis for people's beliefs. I guess with today's emphasis on the supernatural, visitors from outer space in movies and the many sightings reported on the TV, people want to believe in the supernatural. It's sensational and it feeds the spiritual dimension in us. Furthermore, it doesn't make demands on us like believing in God does, for belief in God is quite different: if he is there, surely we cannot easily ignore him.

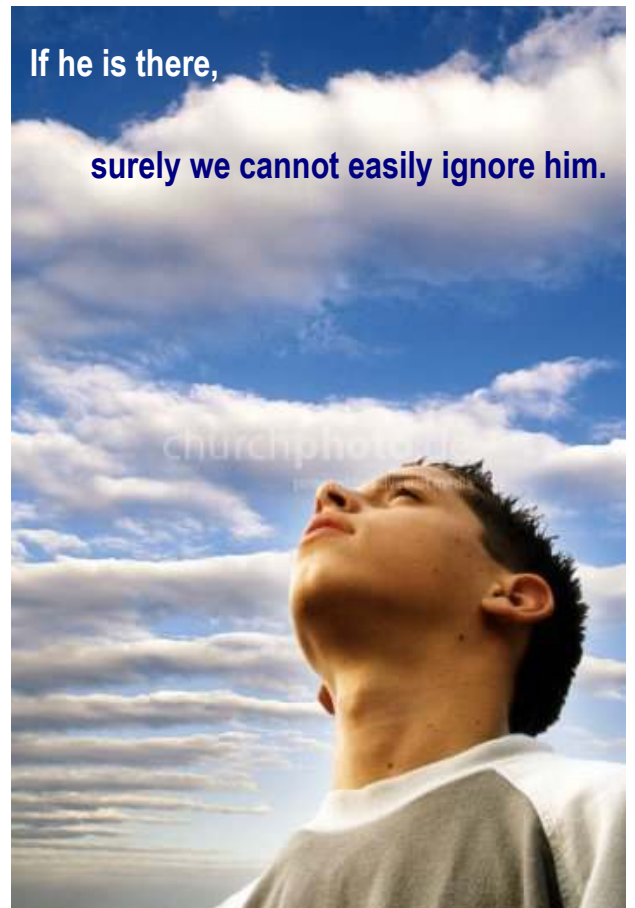
When it comes down to it, the bottom line is our response to this question: Is there a personal, transcendent and knowable being who designed and created our world? And, a not so frequently asked question, what difference does it make? Most people at some point in their lives question the existence of God and that fact in itself indicates that it is a legitimate question for us to investigate. The reality is that if God exists, what are the ramifications if we reject him? Does life make sense without God? And does he care about us or are we just part of the furniture as it were?

I often engage with people who declare themselves to be atheists or non-believers, but when I ask them why they hold this position, I find they can rarely explain their reasons in a thought through way. Instead, I hear throwaway lines about disenchantment with the church for its belief in a God who leaves the world in such a mess, or anger about people who call themselves 'Christians'. The very idea

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of being accountable to God is enough to make others refuse to accept even the possibility of his existence.

I grew up with a father who spent most of his life denouncing God because of the hypocrisy of the church and its people. When I began to question his beliefs I discovered that there was very little substance to it, and I realised that his 'atheism' was really just a convenient hideaway from God, giving him an excuse for his lifestyle and attitudes. The reality was that my father could not bear the idea of a personal god. He was rather like Thomas Nagel, Professor of Philosophy at New York University, who perhaps in an unguarded moment said, 'I want Atheism to be true, and I am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe that there is a God. I naturally hope there is no God, I just don't want there to be a God, I don't want the universe to be like that.' In the same way, my father's rejection of God was more a desire for him not to exist, rather than being based on any plausible arguments against his existence. This mindset is common and when one hears the antagonism in the writings and speeches of some of the so-called 'new Atheists', one wonders if they too don't harbour a secret fear that God may exist after all.



Richard Dawkins



In a very interesting article in *The Australian* in March this year, which was responding to some of the outlandish statements made by Richard Dawkins at the Global Atheist Convention in Australia, Melanie Phillips said of Dawkins that he 'went to war against religion on the grounds that any belief that did not follow the rules of scientific inquiry was prima facie evidence of imbecility or insanity. He became the apostle of scientism, the ideology that says everything in the universe has a materialist explanation and must answer to the rules of empirical scientific evidence; to believe anything else is irrational. A second's thought tells one this is absurd. Love, law and philosophy are not scientific yet they are not irrational. So it is scientism that seems to be irrational.'

Phillips continues, 'As for Dawkins's claim that religion is responsible for the ills of the world, this is demonstrably a wild distortion. Some of the worst horrors in human history - the French revolutionary terror, Nazism, communism - have been atheist creeds. And although terrible things indeed have been done in the name of religion, the fact remains that Christianity and the Hebrew Bible form the foundation stone of Western civilisation and its great cause of human equality and freedom...'

Interestingly, as one who is not even a professed follower of Jesus, Phillips then asks: 'Just why is Dawkins so angry, and why does he hate religion so much? After all, as many religious scientists can attest, science and religion are - contrary to his claim - not incompatible at all.'

A clue lies in his insistence that a principal reason for believing that there could be no intelligence behind the origin of life is that the alternative - God - is unthinkable. This terror of such an alternative was summed up by a similarly minded geneticist as the fear that pursuing such thinking to its logical ends might allow "the divine foot in the door".⁽²⁾ No doubt we are all aware that some people, no matter how much evidence there is, will not believe, simply because they choose not to.

The title of this article obviously identifies me as a believer, but it wasn't always like that. My journey into faith was a process: it began with honest doubt and ended with a deep conviction. I eventually became a follower of Jesus through a long process of argument, research and discussion. My own doubts about the existence of God were driven by the constant arguments expressed by my father, based on false, misleading and inadequate information. I simply had not thought through the reasons for my rejection of God.

I want to share some of the reasons why I came to belief in a God of order and design, who created us that we might know him and find our fulfilment in a relationship with him and share eternity as part of his kingdom.

For me, the alternative to the existence of God is now entirely unacceptable: if God does not exist, life has no meaning or significance, and death is the end of it all. We pass out of this world into oblivion and whilst our lives may have some positive influence, in the end we are soon forgotten. No wonder the atheist Dorothy Hewitt said, 'I've always been absolutely obsessed with the whole thing of dying because I hate the thought of it. I really hate the idea of going out into nothingness and of course being an atheist, that's what I think will happen to me.' If death is really the end, when the philosopher asks, 'What is ultimate reality?' we are compelled to reply like the Teacher in Ecclesiastes: 'Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.' (Eccl. 1:2)

The existence of God allows me to make sense of a life that has ultimate purpose only in the context of knowing him. Such a conviction also gives me confidence that, far from being meaningless, life can be lived to the full in the context of a relationship with God that allows us to tap into his purposes in the here and now and ultimately in eternity. I was asked by a Christian family to speak to their son who had announced that he no longer believed in God. They were surprised when I supported his right to doubt his parent's view of God if he really felt that way, providing his doubt was honest doubt! The difference is that dishonest doubt sets out to disprove, whereas honest doubt is searching and wanting to openly examine the possibilities. If you are not a follower of Jesus and are reading this paper, let me encourage you to at least be open to the possibility that there is a God and that he loves you and wants to have a friendship with you.

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So why do I believe in God? What are the compelling arguments that make sense of life and give ultimate meaning to the questions of who am I and why am I here? I believe that the reasons listed below are broad-ranging and taken together create a case that is difficult to ignore. Interestingly, some of the best known books on the resurrection of Jesus were written by people who set out to disprove it: Josh McDowell (*More than a Carpenter*)⁽³⁾ and Frank Morison (*Who Moved the Stone?*)⁽⁴⁾ to name just two. I am also reminded of CS Lewis who set out to discredit Christianity and would have found it much more convenient to be able to do so, but, when confronted with the evidence found he had no option but to embrace it, even though he described himself as being dragged kicking and screaming into the kingdom. One is also faced with the question of what the credible alternatives are. Life has to have started somewhere: either it evolved from dead matter, or there is some divine intelligence, a great first cause, who planned, designed and created life. Let me share with you why I believe in the latter.

The laws of nature affirm a designer

We live on a phenomenal planet. Life exists on Earth because the precise conditions are perfect for life. The Earth's size is perfect and its gravitational pull on the moon allows a thin layer of oxygen and nitrogen gas to extend above its surface. If it was smaller or larger, this atmosphere would be impossible. Earth is the only known planet equipped to sustain life. The precise laws that govern our enormously complex world affirm the necessity of a designer; it is so unique and intricate. Think of it: Our Earth is located just the right distance from the Sun and the moon; even a small variation of these distances would cause havoc, making life impossible. The rotation of the Earth around the Sun at over 107 000 km per hour allows it to warm and cool at temperatures that sustain life.⁽⁶⁾



We all know that the Sun is absolutely essential to sustaining life on our planet. It not only provides warmth but is essential to the health of our bodies. The Sun is located the perfect distance from the Earth. If we were any further away from it, we would all freeze. Any closer and we would burn up. Even a fractional variance in the Earth's position relative to the sun would make life on Earth impossible.⁽⁶⁾ Earth is in a stable orbit around the Sun because our planet's forward motion exactly counterbalances the gravitational pull of the Sun. Surely there is significant evidence of design in this.

Furthermore, consider the importance of photosynthesis: the process a plant uses to combine sunlight, water, and carbon dioxide to produce food and energy. Ultimately, nearly all living things depend on energy produced from photosynthesis for their nourishment, making it vital to life on Earth. It is also responsible for producing the oxygen that makes up a large portion of the Earth's atmosphere. Without the wonder of photosynthesis all plant life would not exist and we would all be poisoned by carbon dioxide!⁽⁷⁾



Most of us take water for granted, but with the recent drought in many parts of Australia and the debate about irrigation rights and climate change and its causes, we have all become much more aware of its importance. With two thirds of the Earth's surface covered by water, and the human body consisting of 75 % water, it is clear that it is imperative for life. Water is an amazing substance, colourless, odourless and without taste and is perfect to help sustain life. It has an unusually high boiling point and freezing point. Because we contain water in our bodies, we can cope with a huge range of temperature fluctuations and at the same time keep our body temperature at the required level. Water also sends thousands of nutrients and minerals flowing throughout our bodies, it regulates the activities of fluids and it contributes to the rejuvenation of tissues, cells, blood and other secretions. It is chemically neutral and enables food and other essentials to be absorbed into our bodies.

Furthermore, water does to the land what it does to the human body: circulating, transporting, dissolving and replenishing the many nutrients and organic matter needed to sustain life. It freezes from the top down, trapping oxygen between the water and the ice, allowing fish and other water life to survive in the coldest winters, even in the Antarctic! The huge expanses of ocean are designed to allow the sun to extract the water through evaporation, remove the salt and other impurities and then disperse it over the land masses. This allows life to be sustained and also provides an endless supply of recycled and cleansed water to maintain the health of all its recipients.⁽⁸⁾

When you think about it, it is hard to imagine all of this just somehow happening as an accident, without design!

Another reason to believe in a designer is an exceedingly complex piece of engineering -- the human body. It contains hundreds of small and intricate parts which play an important role in keeping us healthy and functional. It is sustained by kilometers of blood vessels that allow our wonderfully designed hearts to pump blood to every part of our body. It is in comparatively recent years that we have known how important the blood flow is to having a healthy body, so it is interesting to see that this is how God explained it to Moses (Lev. 17:11).

Then think of the human brain, one of the most complex and wonderful creations imaginable. It is able to operate as a giant computer and is more complex and efficient than any human creation, and yet it is small enough to fit inside our head. It weighs only about 1.4kg, but it contains a staggering 100 billion nerve cells, and its blood vessels would reach a distance of 4 rotations around the Earth if they were stretched out flat! It



receives and sorts out millions of signals from all the different parts of our bodies with amazing speed. Our brains form a million new connections for every second of our lives. The pattern and strength of the connections is constantly changing and no two brains are alike.⁽⁹⁾ The more we comprehend the human brain, the more awestruck we become. I cannot imagine it just somehow evolving from dead matter; it is too wonderful and complex. It must have had a designer with a wonderful purpose in the way he created us.

But the wonder of creation doesn't stop there. In many ways we are only just beginning to discover the beauty, vastness and incredible design of space. In a DVD called *Indescribable* Louis Giglio describes the Milky Way. It is estimated to be 100 000 light years from one end to the other, and our Sun is just one of billions of stars in it. If we were to count one star per second, 24 hours a day, it would take 2500 years to count them! Scientists believe there are at least several billion galaxies in the universe.

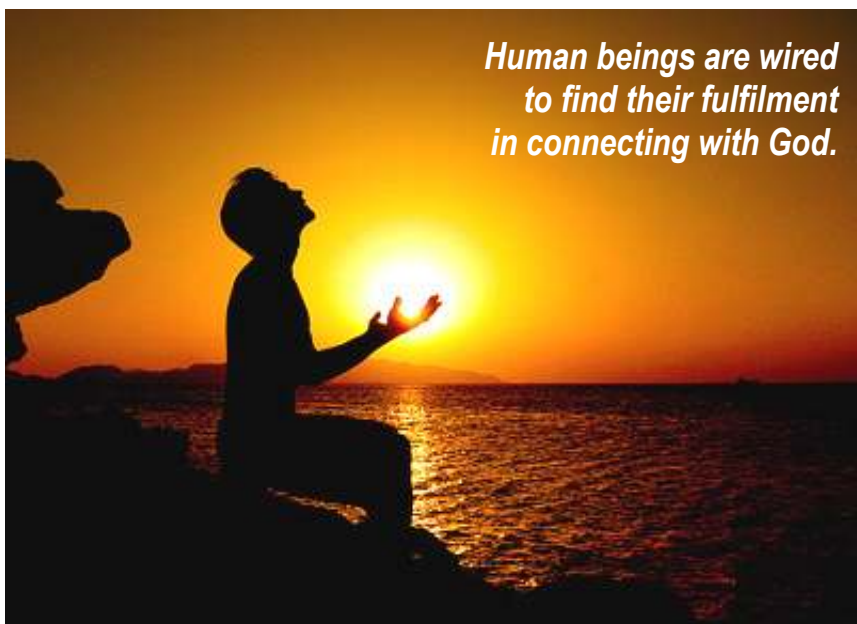


Galaxies often group together by gravitational pull in what is known as a super cluster of galaxies. The Milky Way isn't even the biggest galaxy in our "local" cluster. We don't know how big the universe is. Scientists have been able to see stars that are 14 billion light years away, so they know that the universe is at least 28 billion light years in diameter. And it is getting bigger. Scientists estimate that a new star is "being born" every second.⁽¹⁰⁾ So how big is God? We are told in Psalm 147:4 that he numbers the stars and calls them by name. We are less than a speck of dust on a planet that is less than a speck of dust, yet he knows the number of hairs on each of our heads (Matt. 10:30)!

There is a spiritual desire in all people

The reality is that humans are incurably religious. There is a spiritual dimension at the very core of our being. There isn't a tribe or nation anywhere that has not embraced some form of worship. The truth of the matter is that materialism and atheism have failed to satisfy the longings of the human heart. These longings have a spiritual base, and human beings are wired to find their fulfilment in connecting with God. In a recent *Interact* article following the Atheist World Convention (20.3), we looked at militant atheism and cited Micklethwaite and Wooldridge who say in their book *God is Back* that they are seeing a huge upsurge of interest in religion around the world. Throughout history, there have been those who have tried to do away with God. Believers have been persecuted, executed, maligned and ridiculed for being naïve enough to believe there is a God. Voltaire declared that God would be a non-entity in 50 years! Frederick Nietzsche insisted in 1882 that God was already dead and we have killed Him. Micklethwaite and Wooldridge beg to differ: some of the concepts of God may differ and may be given different names but, like it or not, God is back. They claim that through their research they have come to the conclusion 'that Man, whether the neo-atheists like it or not, is a theotropic beast'. In other words, they are saying that we have an inbuilt bias towards the spiritual; there is an innate desire in all human beings to find spiritual fulfilment. Interestingly, their statements were made in the context of their discovery that the huge upsurge in those searching after God in spite of the fact is in fact amongst those who are well educated and in good socioeconomic circumstances.

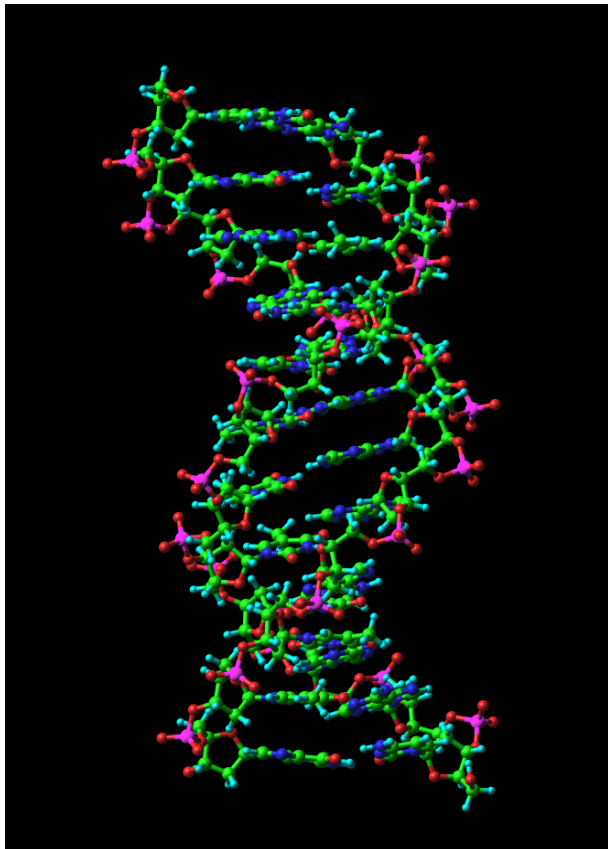
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Even religious persecution has not been able to stamp out the innate desire for God. Both the Soviet Union and China have made significant efforts to get rid of belief in God. Yet in China there is now evidence of a real hunger for a spiritual dimension. It is estimated that there are over 100 million people who profess to be Christians, as well as an upsurge in Buddhism, Islam and other religious groups.⁽¹¹⁾ In Russia, in spite of years of atheism being promoted through the education system, over 84% of people now believe in God. Micklethwaite estimates that 400 million people in Africa profess to believe in God. So in spite of the fact that philosophers and atheists have been predicting the demise of God for centuries, he is alive and well, and shows no sign of being otherwise!

Philip Vander Elst confirms the inbuilt bias towards the spiritual when he comments that



'The superficiality of atheism in relation to the problem of evil is mirrored in its equally shallow explanation of the religious impulse in human beings. What are we to make of the fact that religious belief has been common to millions of human beings down through the centuries, all types, races, and social conditions? Why, if there is no God, have kings and philosophers, artists and scientists, poets and peasants, thought otherwise? Has most of the human race from Hebrew Prophet to modern physicists, simply been mistaken in their religious conviction? Atheism's failure to do justice to the religious impulse is but a part of its more general inability to account for or make sense of human conscience in general. To be specific, it cannot offer a convincing explanation of our experience of free will, our ability to reason and obtain knowledge, or our awareness of moral values.'⁽¹²⁾

It all points to God

The alternative to the existence of God is that everything around us came about by natural causes and random chance. In other words, all the mind boggling factors that make life on earth possible just happened by accident and the human body with all of its incredible components somehow just came into being! This seems to me to be more difficult to believe than to believe that all of these wonderfully designed creations had a divine designer- a god who is far beyond our imagination, but is evident and visible through the things he has made. To those who reject a God of order and design, the answer to the question of origin still remains speculative.

Anthony Flew was one of the world's best known atheists and credited with being the father of modern atheism. He underwent a radical change in his thinking as a result of reading about fantastic new discoveries in the science of human DNA. When asked if recent work on the origin of life pointed to the activity of a creative Intelligence, Flew said, 'Yes, I now think it does ... almost entirely because of the DNA investigation. What I think the DNA material has done is that it has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce life, that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements to work together. It's the enormous complexity of the number of elements and the enormous subtlety of the ways they work together. The meeting of these two parts at the right time by chance is simply minute. It is all a matter of enormous complexity by which the results were achieved, which looked to me like the work of intelligence.'⁽¹³⁾ Flew has now come to the point where he can say, 'I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite intelligence. I believe that life and reproduction originate in a supreme mind; the origin of life cannot be explained if you start with matter alone.'

It's interesting to note atheist Richard Dawkins' statement in *The Blind Watchmaker* that 'Every single one of more than a trillion cells in the body contains about a thousand times as much precisely coded digital information as my entire computer...Each nucleus... contains a digitally coded database larger, in information content, than all 30 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica put together. And this figure is for each cell, not all the cells of a body put together.'⁽¹⁴⁾ And this from a man who believes it all happened by chance!

Can God be known?

If there is a God, and if he is responsible for all creation, what difference does it make? Imagine for a moment that you are God. You create this world with all of its wonders and set it all in motion. Imagine creating humans in your own image, in that they are persons like you with the ability to reason, to choose, to be creative and to engage together in ways that are unique to human beings. Why would you create such beings?

Christians believe that God is a God of purpose and that when he created us he did so in order to relate to us. It is possible to know him because he has revealed himself through his creation. The Psalmist said, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge... their voice goes out into all the earth' (Ps. 19:1-3).

The Bible is unique. It stands out amongst literature of antiquity for its accuracy and credibility. There are over 270 specific promises about the coming of Jesus Christ written hundreds of years before he came. These promises predicted his birth and events surrounding his early



life. They predicted his death in details that could not possibly be known at the time of writing. Noted historian FF Bruce says, 'There is no body of ancient literature in the world that enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament... if the New Testament documents were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would be beyond doubt.'⁽¹⁵⁾

Christians believe that the God who created the world is unique. He is a god of order and design who wants us to understand who he is and wants us to have an ongoing relationship with him. How do we know this? Because he has revealed himself and his purposes through his word the Bible, and through his son Jesus. Again, if you were God, how would you reveal yourself to humanity and how would you deal with the problem of their rejection and rebellion? You would not be able to justly overlook their sin or you would be guilty of condoning it, and what of your holiness and righteousness? How would you deal with broken laws with prescribed penalties? God acted to deal with the problem by

sending Jesus, who came to do two incredible things: to reveal to God to us and to make it possible to be reconciled with him.

If God can raise Jesus from the dead, he is worth investigating. If he loved us enough to send his son into the world to make it possible for us to be drawn into a relationship with him, surely he is worth knowing.

So I also believe in God because of the person of Jesus. No other made the claims he did or so influenced the world as he did. Jesus is unique because of his remarkable claims to be God clothed in human form, and to be the only way to God. He performed miracles and predicted that he would go to Jerusalem, be crucified but rise again on the third day, and that is what happened.

Jesus is unique amongst world religious leaders. Their graves are still occupied and indeed many have become shrines. But think of it, Christ

was crucified. A large Roman spear was thrust into his side, and his body was mummified with a hundred pounds of embalming ointment and placed in a tomb sealed with a large stone and guarded by a company of elite palace guards. However, on the third day after his crucifixion, the tomb of Jesus was empty and over 500 people gave eyewitness accounts of seeing him alive (1 Cor. 15). If God can raise Jesus from the dead, he is worth investigating. If he loved us enough to send his son into the world to make it possible for us to be drawn into a relationship with him, surely he is worth knowing.

I also believe in God because when people believe the message he came to make possible, they can be transformed. One person who vehemently denied the resurrection was himself confronted with the resurrected Christ and later wrote about it in 1Corinthians 15, testifying to how his life was totally transformed because of knowing Jesus. Saul later became the greatest apologist for the resurrection, and this radical change through knowing Jesus is still happening in many lives today.

The greatest constraint in this article is not that there is not enough material to support the reasonableness of belief in God. Indeed, I have barely scratched the surface. I could have written ten times as much and still not exhausted the things that constantly lock us in to the fact of his existence, and his love for the world he made. Jesus once said that fulfilment in life was really about knowing a relationship with him. Many have found this to be true. I believe that you can too.



A Preacher's Temptation – Cheap Shots!

by Richard Quadrio

Everybody who preaches knows that humour is an incredibly valuable tool. Who doesn't enjoy a laugh? A laugh lightens the mood of the gathering and seems to earn a preacher listening points from his audience. Preachers of yesteryear, like C.H. Spurgeon, were masters of many things, including the amazing use of humour. These days preachers like Mark Driscoll have studied the form of standup comics and many enjoy his sermons online, not least because of his use of humour. There is, however, a temptation we preachers face when we use humour and that is what I would call the temptation of the 'cheap shot'. Let me confess that in my day I have used the cheap shot as comically, cuttingly and convincingly as most. But fortunately, over the years some loving colleagues have painfully convinced me of its dangers especially for a local church pastor who preaches week in and week out to the same people.

Let me start by trying to define a cheap shot. One dictionary defines it as an unnecessary, aggressive and unfair remark directed at a defenseless person'. In preaching terms, it's when we send up a person or a group in a sly, subtle, or not so subtle way. For a preacher there is always a laugh if we make fun of people who are not as theologically correct as we are, those who have different liturgical styles, who are different denominations, (and sometimes the easiest cheap shot is at our own denomination!), or those who are just plain easy targets. If we find the worst in these people, it is so easy to enjoy an in-house laugh that confirms our rightness and the victim's wrongness.

There are at least five reasons why cheap shots are so dangerous. Firstly, cheap shots are tempting because they usually do get a laugh. Those of us with cynical minds, who have been around Christian circles for a while, can so easily send up people who are a little different. I can think of one American author whose attacks on charismatics are brutally humorous and incredibly readable. It's no wonder he sells books! The problem, however, is that he is not at all fair or evenhanded. The temptation to rubbish people we disagree with by essentially laughing at them is something we really do need to repent of.

Secondly, many people in church on Sunday love preachers who use cheap shots. In an Aussie context, we feel so at home when the preacher can 'bag out' people like the best of us. This, not only feeds a preacher's temptation. But just like cheap wine, cheap shots often have a residual effect that has to be dealt with the morning after.

Thirdly, People get hurt in ways we often don't expect. Sometimes the group or person we are shooting gets to hear about it and we then have to deal with their response. However what is much more likely to occur is that our own people are wounded in ways we do not expect. A cheap shot against Pentecostals wounds a member of my church whose son attends a Pentecostal church. She is just glad he is attending church at all. A cheap shot about church musicians is funny to most, unless you are a musician and feel you are being maligned.

I remember preaching through Galatians many years ago and not being able to avoid a few cheap shots at Rome. What I discovered later was that members of our congregation with Roman Catholic backgrounds were often personally offended by my jokes and cutting words. They felt that I was attacking them personally. Strangely, I react exactly the same way when I hear a clever academic theologian paying out the local church. As a local church pastor for more than 23 years, no one has collected more dirt on the local church than me, but when someone else uses these problems as a cheap shot, I too am quickly offended.



Fourthly, cheap shots really do not deal with error at all. Instead of carefully explaining why we might part company doctrinally or reject a certain liturgical practice, a cheap shot sends up the worst of a movement without adequately recognising its value and strengths. It's hard to gently, carefully and truthfully assess a group's strengths and weaknesses; it's easier to make fun of them. From a secular point of view, a cheap shot can be another name for a remark that really is racist, sexist or just plain bigoted. We preachers are guilty of worse when we use humour to build that club-like feeling, defining ourselves against others, for whatever reason, are in our eyes, wrong or misguided.

Finally, I am convinced that the greatest danger of the cheap shot is that we apply God's Word to others (whoever we are humorously sending up) and thus avoid applying it to ourselves. When I was busily sending up Rome in my Galatians sermons, and most people were happily laughing at 'those foolish Catholics', we were all missing the point that unless we are very careful, we are all susceptible to allowing a works mindset to creep back in to our theological perspective. Somehow by

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laughing at those who are different, we avoid allowing the Word to reveal the truth in our lives that should make us cry, not laugh. Sadly, we as preachers are more popular when we make people laugh at other people's sin, but my guess is that we will be more faithful when we learn to weep at our own sins. Somehow our cheap shots so often mean we miss the real point of God's Word.

I wish I could say that my preaching is now 'a cheap shot free zone', but I fear the temptation is still alive and well. We would do well to heed James' warning, as cheap shots have a nasty habit of starting bush fires.

"Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." James 3: 5-6

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