

Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Study Supplement

1. In God We Trust

by Joseph Tkach

2. Window on the World

by Randal Dick

3. The example of Jesus (Bible Study)

by Michael Morrison

April 2002

Something worth thinking about...

By Joseph Tkach

In God We Trust

No doubt about it, God wants us to trust him. We are to trust in him, not in ourselves. We are to trust that he is good, that he loves us, that he is full of mercy. Our faith is to be in him. He is trustworthy, absolutely reliable and faithful.

Trust, or faith, is a key ingredient of our new life in Christ. We are justified by faith (Romans 3:28), sanctified by faith (Acts 26:18) and saved by faith in Jesus Christ. We live by faith (2 Corinthians 5:7), stand in faith (Romans 11:20), work in faith (1 Thessalonians 1:3) and pray in faith. We cannot please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6). It is absolutely essential!

When we put our trust in God, we are trusting him to be our very life (Colossians 3:4). That means that when we first put our trust in God, we are taking the first step toward learning to trust him for absolutely everything!

A step beyond belief

Trust, by nature, is active. We do not merely accept that God took care of our salvation from sin and death and then go on our way with no further thought about it. Trust in God cannot be a passive thing—by its very nature it has to be active. Faith generates action. It is far more than just believing a set of facts about God (see James 2:19)—it is trusting God to be and to do everything he said he will be and do for us. And when we trust God, we are committed to everything he is committed to. That is why worship is so important and meaningful to us as children of God. Worship is a means God has given us of rehearsing and remembering who he is and what he has done for us. Through worship, God helps us more deeply understand and value who he is and what he has given us. Worship helps us commemorate and celebrate his love for us and the good things he has done for us.

When we trust God, we don't want to hide any part of our lives from him. We want him to make us into the person he wants us to be, and we trust him both to know what to do and how to do it.

The Holy Spirit leads and empowers us to love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (Mark 12:30), and to adore him, desire him and delight ourselves in him (Psalm 37:4).

In worship, we praise God for his power and love. We express and act out our faith that he will always be the most important reality in our lives. Our praise helps us put life into its real perspective.

When we trust God, we realise he is our greatest priority. He is more important to us than anything else—more valuable than possessions, money, time, reputation and even this mortal life. He is our all in all.

The greatest commandment

The greatest commandment, Jesus said, is to love God with all that we are. That means we orient our lives around him, around his gracious will for us. When we trust him, we believe he knows best for us, and we want to please him. He is our point of reference, our definition of a meaningful life.

When we trust him, we do his will not out of fear, but out of love—not begrudgingly, but with joy. We trust his judgment, his word and his ways. We even trust him to give us a new heart, to make us more and more like him, to lead us to love what he loves and to value what he values.

We would never be able to do any of this on our own, of course—we must trust God to fulfill his promise to do his work in us from the inside out, by the Holy Spirit transforming us. To trust God is to let him have his good way with us. It is to believe him, to desire and to take his advice, to seek to follow him wherever he leads.

When we trust God, we trust him with all that we are—our past, our present and our future combined. Like a toddler resting fearlessly and contentedly in its mother's arms, we rest securely in the love of our heavenly Father—and that is something worth thinking about!

Joseph Tkach

Window on the World

by Randal Dick,
Superintendent of missions

Gossiping the Gospel

Over the past few months I have been asked by some congregations to consult with them about how they might be more effective instruments of Christ. I consider this a privilege and have learned as much from these members as they have learned from me.

One congregation had been devoting themselves, as a group, to asking God to transform them so that they might be able to fulfill his will. Together we discovered that we are bound to some faulty paradigms, which must change if we are going to be effective stewards of the gospel.

Toxic paradigms

Paradigms are values and assumptions we never question. They are difficult to change because they remain invisible. Everyone just "knows" that a particular way of doing or thinking is right—so paradigms are assigned a truth status that is rarely questioned. Some are incorrect from the outset. Others may have been correct initially, but as situations change a helpful paradigm can cease to be valid and become toxic.

It might be helpful to share a couple of areas where we (Western Christianity, including the WCG) tend to be paradigm bound—that is, unquestioningly accepting a faulty paradigm. I'll then try to contrast

the faulty paradigm with one that is hopefully more reflective of Christ's intent.

Static vs. dynamic

Christ intended that his disciples embark on a lifelong journey with him. The early church was dynamic—it spread like yeast spores, penetrating increasingly diverse places, crossing ethnic and cultural boundaries. The church could not be contained by any economic stratum and surmounted all class barriers. Only after several centuries did the church begin to position itself as the center of society, government and culture. It became the static church—everyone and everything in society was expected to revolve around the church.

In the United States we have no conscious awareness of this dynamic; nevertheless, this is where the prevailing Western Christian paradigm got its start. Over the last few centuries, government and society rejected the church being the center of all things. The church was forced to accept this new status, but did not shift back to its original dynamic, journeying role. Instead, the church began to compete for a place in the life of the individual, which brings us to a second flawed paradigm.

Attraction

As the increasingly disenfranchised church continued to cling to the security of its centuries-old static paradigm, it was forced to adopt an approach of trying to attract unbelievers to it. As a result nearly every evangelistic program and effort is built around the concept of either directly attracting people to join the static church, or to raise the awareness and reputation of the church. This is part of an effort to grow by attraction. The attraction paradigm is essential if the church is going to be static and still grow. This approach was effective to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the receptivity of the target audience.

Marketing paradigm

Since World War II the church in the West has been considered increasingly irrelevant. The target audience has grown more resistant to organised religion. The continued attempts to attract have increasingly resulted in sheep shuffling, or transfer growth, rather than an increase in conversion of unbelievers.

(**Note:** It would require a separate article to begin to explore how pervasive this faulty paradigm is in Christianity and in our fellowship for that matter. Perhaps we can explore this in a later column.)

Marketing the church

The static and attraction paradigms have caused us to adopt and cling to another toxic paradigm that I'll call the marketing paradigm.

To attract effectively, the church has essentially cloned the business model and seeks to market the gospel. Hence we have a huge emphasis on

"evangelism," a term that seems to defy precise definition.

We find a strong focus on learning how to witness, share our faith, advance the kingdom, lead someone to Christ, give our testimony, fulfill the Great Commission. We take out ads, we do radio and television shows, we have seeker services, we conduct crusades and revivals, we canvass neighbourhoods, we build attractive buildings with maximum amenities, such as childcare and exciting audio-visual effects.

All this is part of seeking to make our product (the static church) more attractive to unbelievers. The desired result is the same—that unbelievers are brought to Christ—hence to the (static) body of Christ. The problem is that more and more effort is being expended for less and less result. Modern unbelievers in the West tend to reject the institution of the church.

Increasingly, wise heads within Christianity are urging us to force ourselves back into a dynamic mode instead of our comfortable static/ attraction/marketing mode. I would strongly urge the WCG congregations to follow suit for two reasons. First, if we pursue a marketing paradigm, we are taking on as new something that is actually old and increasingly proven to be ineffective. Second, we are too small, too poor and too far behind to compete in that market. The good news is that there is a better way.

Dynamic church

Let's take a fresh look at the principle upon which Jesus founded the church and see if we might recapture some of Jesus' paradigm. One of the most overused slogans in the marketing paradigm is Matt. 4:19, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Reading this through marketing-paradigm eyes causes one to miss the true paradigm that Jesus was communicating. Under the marketing paradigm, we place the emphasis on learning how to be effective "fishers of men." That is backward thinking! The emphasis of Jesus is on the "follow me."

Jesus is saying that we are invited to be on a journey (dynamic paradigm) with him. It is in following Jesus in a journey that he will cause us to be effective fishers of men. This is the opposite of the static paradigm—and takes one in the opposite direction from the marketing paradigm. As Wayne Meeks, church historian, puts it, the early Christians, who were a vibrant part of their communities, "gossiped" the gospel. The joy of the journey with Christ simply overflowed, impacting those in their intimate community. They didn't have to "evangelise."

The church Jesus founded was dynamic, not static. They had no status, no grand institutions or facilities other than their homes.

They expected Jesus to return, and viewed themselves as sojourners.

They lived normal lives and did not stand out from the culture around them—except that inwardly the Holy Spirit of God was radically transforming them. The church was fully engaged with its community. Unlike our WCG history, where we awaited Christ's return in as much exclusion as possible, Jesus plunged the first Christians into the world.

Except for avoiding idolatry, the culture of the church was virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding Jewish, Greek or Roman culture. By Christ's design, his people remained tightly connected to their friends and relatives. It was Christ living out of the daily lives of Christians that made them attractive.

The focal point of the life of the church and the basis of its growth was the household—a fabric of family and business relationships.

Rodney Stark, sociologist of religion, relates research on the growth patterns of the early church in his book *The Rise of Christianity*. Stark shows that the growth of the church from its tiny 120 person beginning to a conservative estimate of from 5 to 7.5 million Christians by the early 300s need not be the result of unending signs and wonders or any other abnormal process. Stark demonstrates that a growth rate of about 40 percent per decade would account for the growth of the early church. This translates to 4 percent per year.

Even in our modern context, this is not unknown. The Mormon Church has grown about 40 percent per decade for the last century!

Importance of the household

Stark shows that the primary means of the growth of the early church was by attachments and networks of intimate relationships. Stark says that "conversions to new deviant religious groups (as early Christians were viewed by those around them) occurs when, other things being equal, people have or develop stronger attachments to members of the group than they have to non-members." (p. 15). Stark then points out that "the basis for successful conversional movements is growth through social networks, through a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments.

"Most new religious movements fail because they quickly become closed, or semi-closed networks. That is, they fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow.

"Successful movements discover techniques for remaining open networks, able to reach out and into new adjunct social networks. And herein lies the capacity of movements to sustain exponential rates of growth over a long period of time."

I would urge any and all congregations to devote significant time and prayer to trying to discover how they can create and maintain open networks.

The early church grew because close friends and relatives of new Christians saw a transformation taking place in the lives of the believers. Mr. Tkach tells us that as a fellowship we need to start living. We need to get in a frame of mind that embraces

the fact that we are spiritual pilgrims while living a normal life, with relational attachments to our unconverted friends and loved ones.

By breaking out of the marketing paradigm, we will instead become servant-priests (1 Peter 2) who offer spiritual sacrifices of love, prayers, and quality time given to our household. This includes those friends, relatives, neighbours and associates with whom we have an open networking relationship. This may mean re-ordering our use of time.

Accepting Jesus' paradigm would lead us to love and serve rather than look for the opportunity to give our gospel sales pitch. Jesus said in Acts 1:8: "You will be my witnesses."

We witness him by living in close connection with our household, or network of relationships. The growth of the church will take care of itself when we love the household that God has given each and every one of us. Growth takes care of itself because "as movements grow, their social surface expands proportionately. That is, each new member expands the size of the networks of attachments between the group and potential converts."

To summarise, we need to process out of the paradigm of marketing, which tries to attract people to the institution, and seek instead to do the following:

1. Every individual asks Jesus to transform him or her enough into his likeness to be an effective witness through ordinary living.
2. Every individual seeks to deepen the attachments with his or her existing network of relationships of unbelieving family, friends and associates. The individual purposely looks for ways to love and serve—with no strings attached.
3. When the Holy Spirit brings the unbeliever to a desire to know more, the Christian needs to have, through personal study and prayer, an effective answer for the hope that motivates them.

I'll try to develop these concepts further in future articles.

Randal Dick

Bible Study

By Michael Morrison

The example of Jesus

A study of Philippians 2

Paul, in prison, is writing to thank and encourage Christians in Philippi. They face their own trials and have their own problems. They, like many churches today, had some petty disagreements and selfishness. Paul points them to a better approach to interpersonal relationships and gives them three examples they can imitate.

Consideration

Paul begins by reminding them of blessings they have been given by Christ: "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any

comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion..."—he assumes that they have enjoyed all of these—"then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Phil. 2:1-2).

He is not just asking them to think like one another. As he will soon explain, he wants them to be like-minded with Christ—to be encouraging, comforting, sharing, tender and compassionate, as Christ is. He wants them to have the same kind of love as Christ has, being like him in attitude and goals. That is the only sure way to be united with one another. When the Philippians put this into practice, Paul's joy among them will be complete, for his gospel will have produced its fruit.

The bottom line, he says, is to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit" (v. 3). Do not be motivated by selfishness or pride, for they destroy unity and are the essence of sin. Instead, "in humility consider others better than yourselves." Paul does not say that others are better—only that we should consider them better. Objectively, everyone cannot be better, yet Christian unity must be built on considering others ahead of self.

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (v. 4). We may consider our own interests, but we must also look out for others. This is the way of Christ. He, the best of all humans, did not put himself first, but considered the needs of others.

Humility

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (vv. 5-7). Scholars call this passage "the Philippian hymn," because its style and rhythm cause some to think that Paul is adopting words that Christians were already singing—words of praise for Christ Jesus.

Paul is using these words to remind his readers of the example they are to follow: someone who was divine, having the greatest of honour, yet who did not cling to his rights and privileges. The new edition of the NIV puts it this way: Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage" (TNIV). Though the Philippians had important rights as citizens of a Roman colony, they were to focus on others, not themselves. Jesus willingly set his rights aside, in humility becoming a human, serving our needs. "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (v. 8). His humility, his desire to serve, was complete. He endured the most painful and most shameful form of death, just to serve our needs. The result? God resurrected him and "exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and

under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (vv. 9-11).

What is the name above all other names? The name of God. In Isaiah 45:23, God says, "Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear." Paul is saying that Jesus should be given the same honours as God. When we bow to Jesus, God gets the glory.

Jesus is in the highest place, worthy of worship, worthy of the name "Lord." Because he was humble, he is now exalted. Humility is the praiseworthy way.

Contentment

How should we respond to Jesus' humility and service? Paul pleads for action: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (v. 12). The Philippians have been a responsive church, eager to do what is good. Paul is asking them to take one more step, applying the humility of Christ to their interpersonal relationships.

They are to work not in order to get into salvation (salvation is a gift that they already have), but to work out its implications—to diligently apply it in their lives by imitating their Saviour. They are to work, and yet realise that they are not working alone: "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (v. 13). We cannot make ourselves more like God—only he can, and he does it by changing our desires and our actions. He does not force us, but enables us. We work, trust him to do his work, and give him all the credit (see 1:3 and 1 Cor. 15:10).

"Do everything without complaining or arguing," Paul writes, "so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life" (vv. 14-16). In other words, as you share the gospel, be aware of the example you set (see 1:27). Be content, be peaceable, and you will be seen as points of light. Society doesn't make it easy to be Christlike, but instead of viewing this as an obstacle, see it as an opportunity to make the gospel attractive.

Paul then makes his appeal personal: "in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour for nothing." This will complete his mission, he says, bringing the people toward maturity in Christ.

Paul then elevates the significance of what they are doing—he is a sacrifice for God, and so are they. Their lives are given together as an offering to God. "But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you" (v. 17). Although I am in jail, he says, I rejoice because of the way that you serve the Lord. "So you too should be glad and rejoice with me" (v. 18).

Timothy

"I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you" (v. 19). Paul hopes to send a friend to them, who will (if we read between the lines) report on whether the Philippians put Paul's exhortations into practice.

Without directly saying so, Paul writes that Timothy is a good example, already doing what Paul is exhorting. Timothy "takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (vv. 20-21). Timothy does not act from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility he looks to the interests of others, of Jesus and the gospel.

"But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (v. 22). Look to him, and hear what he says. "I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me" (v. 23). As soon as I find out whether I will get out of prison, I will send him, my son in the faith, to serve your needs. "And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon" (v. 24).

Epaphroditus

But Paul did not wait. He sent his letter with someone else: "But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs" (v. 25). Epaphroditus, apparently one of the leaders in Philippi, had come to visit Paul in prison. Now Paul is sending him back with special commendation: "For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill" (v. 26). In other words, he is looking out for your interests. He is distressed not because he was sick, but because he doesn't want you to be worried about him. "Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me,

to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety" (vv. 27-28). I care for you, too, and I will be less anxious about you when he is there.

"Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour men like him" (v. 29). He is setting a great example, and if you honour people who serve, more people will serve. Epaphroditus put his life on the line: "he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me" (v. 30). Be willing to serve, Paul says, and you will be great. Humble yourself for him, and he will exalt you with Christ!

Questions for application

- In my own experience, what role does self-interest play in squabbles?
- When others consider me better, do I tend to agree with them?
- Do I sometimes assume that other people want what I want? Do I "serve" them as a means of getting what I want?
- What rights and privileges do I have? Am I willing to give them up to help others?
- If I can't complain (2:14), what can I say about things that are wrong?
- Can I trust God to do his work within me? Does he sometimes seem to work too slowly?
- What examples of humility do I know locally? Do I honour them?

Michael Morrison

**If you would like to discuss with us any information
printed in this free booklet please contact**

The Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Tel. (03) 9726 8898