

*what  
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require  
of us*

**ECONI**

**EVANGELICALS  
ASKING  
QUESTIONS**





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*Talks given at the launch of the ECONI Action Pack series  
on the 11th of April 1992*

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*All references are to the Holy Bible New International Version unless otherwise stated.*



# *Introduction*

David Hewitt

In 1984 a number of conferences were held in the Queen's University of Belfast under the title 'The Word of God to Northern Ireland'. Organised by evangelicals, the conferences represented an attempt to address the issues of our confused and torn society. These evangelical Christians were concerned that the honour of God was at stake in Northern Ireland. They were concerned that the Christian message was, at times, portrayed in a way that implied that faithfulness to the gospel required faithfulness to a political conviction: 'For God' was too easily associated with 'For Ulster'.

Subsequently, a group of evangelical leaders came together to ask: Is there something else we should be doing? As a result they decided that the concerns expressed through the conferences should be put into print and a steering group was established to oversee publication of the booklet *For God and His Glory Alone*. Initially, 5,000 copies were published: they sold out. So a further 5,000 copies were published. The response to the booklet, both locally and from farther afield, was extremely encouraging. That some 200 people put their names to it undoubtedly gave it a credibility and a significance it might have lacked had only two or three been identified with it. Without doubt we had struck a chord.

Having published that booklet we had no intention of doing anything more. However, the response was such that we felt we should at least ask ourselves: Is there something more that we should be doing? The steering group did not want to answer that question alone. So, on 15th April 1989, a further conference was held at Stranmillis College in Belfast. The purpose of this conference was to bring together the original signatories of the booklet and others who had responded to its message. Together, we wanted to ask: What do we believe God is saying to us as an evangelical community in Northern Ireland?

The steering group identified two clear themes arising from this conference:

1. Our attempt to address the problems of our community had to be 'earthed'. The key biblical principles, identified and presented in our booklet, needed to be clearly and directly applied to the specific issues of relevance in our community.
2. We had to be wary of moving too fast. In addressing evangelical protestants in Northern Ireland we needed to be sensitive to that community's fears. Only so could we hope to bring them with us as we sought the Word of God for Northern Ireland.

So we were advised to take our time and ensure that we were taking our own people with us in this venture - a venture which was increasingly becoming, for those of us involved, a very exciting pilgrimage in our own personal lives.

A decision was then taken by the steering group to produce a series of Action Packs which would develop at greater length the biblical themes presented in the original booklet. Our desire in doing this was to produce a tool which could be of help to God's people in putting into effect the yearnings of their hearts for more Christlikeness in our community. Having made that decision the steering group began discussing the production of the packs - very soon we got into very deep water! Clearly, we were going to need assistance. At that point we called in the expertise of the City of Belfast Y.M.C.A. whose staff had both the expertise and ability to get things done.

Their assistance was invaluable in two key areas:

1. Funding. The YMCA assisted us in obtaining funding through the Joseph Rowntree Trust and the Government's Central Community Relations Unit. Both bodies carefully assessed the work we were doing and each decided that it was of significance in relation to our community.
2. Project Co-ordinator. Sarah Young was appointed as Project Co-ordinator. Under the guidance of Gary Mason at the YMCA and in consultation with ECONI she effectively and efficiently ran the Action Pack project.

The Action Pack series was launched at a further conference held at Stranmillis College on 11th April 1992. At this conference a



number of talks were given each of which raised a question of relevance to our community from a biblical perspective.

It is these talks which we now offer to the wider evangelical community. Our aim with this booklet, as with all that we do, is not only to promote reflection and debate within the evangelical community but also to enable change to take place in values and attitudes so that an increasing number of evangelical Christians may take up the challenge of active involvement in our community.

# *Evangelicals Asking Questions*

**David Porter**

Published in September 1988, the booklet *For God and His Glory Alone* identified and discussed TEN biblical principles. This booklet was, as stated in its introduction, an attempt in the context of community conflict in Northern Ireland, to clarify 'certain issues which tend to become blurred in Christian attitudes and practice'.

By nature and tone the booklet was a STATEMENT targeted specifically at our own Evangelical community. It sought a re-examination of values and actions in the light of Scripture. In so far as any of the thousands who have read it have consciously and seriously reassessed before God their Christian responsibility - irrespective of whether they have reached similar conclusions - its publication has not been in vain.

However, the STATEMENT also contained a COMMITMENT and a commitment requires ACTION. 'Actions speak louder than words', we say, and this is both a truism and a biblical principle. The predictable few may be listening to the words of our statements but both church and community have still to feel any impact from the deafening volume of our ACTIONS.

God's greatest STATEMENT - his final WORD - was an ACTION, the INCARNATION of Jesus. Yet in complete contrast to the smugness of our hymnology that claims, 'Christ is the answer for the world today', he remains, as he always has been, the ultimate question.

In him the Kingdom of God had come. God's Kingdom was a present reality in his words, his actions, his attitudes, his values, his relationships with the poor, the outcast, and the marginalised. His was an 'upside down' Kingdom marked by an inversion of values: the powerful served the weak, love of enemies was the norm, forgiveness was on offer to all irrespective of their level of righteous attainment. His presence was a call to repent and believe, to become the children of God, to become peacemakers.

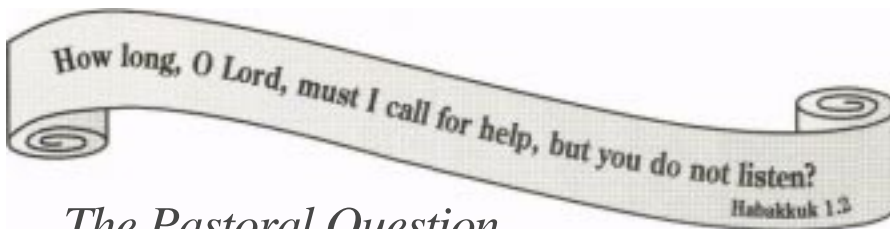
Total allegiance is required of all those who submit to his kingly rule. His reign is marked by justice and righteousness; by the breaking down of barriers; by the refusal to draw boundaries; by the reconciliation of the whole created order; by the bringing of hope to all - this is the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

This is the REAL Jesus. Then, as now, he posed a question which must be addressed. Now, as then, it is not only wider society or the political establishment that refuses to face up to this question, that remains uncomfortable with the real Jesus and seeks to domesticate and contain him, but also the religious community to which you and I belong. Jesus asks not only *Who do people say I am?* but, more importantly, *Who do you say I am?* (Mark 8.27-29).

Jesus in his ministry preferred questions and parables to statements and sermons as his means of getting people to face the new reality of the Kingdom. Jesus' questions and parables demanded more of his hearers and they demand more of us. Yet this demand leads to the joy of discovery as the Spirit of God nurtures the seed of the word of God, and this discovery in turn motivates us to act for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

At the launch of the ECONI Action Pack series we come together for a time of REFLECTION. We do this by asking questions - questions that go to the heart of the reality of the Kingdom of God that is within us. We do not want simply to accept the neatest answers our tradition provides. We want instead to stay with the questions, wrestling with God until we discover afresh his answer and then, having done so, to ACT.

Our five questions are deliberately structured to model a Good Friday meditation. It is significant that we come to address these issues at the beginning of holy week, for in this season we reflect on the ultimate question and choice that was presented to the people concerning the real Jesus - "What shall I do with the one you call King of the Jews?" (Mark 15.12). We know their answer. We also reflect on God's commitment to the values of his Kingdom as they are revealed in his ultimate ACTION - the cross. It stands triumphant but not triumphalistic, bearing the crowned king and suffering servant. With that before us do we dare face the questions?



## *The Pastoral Question*

David Cupples

*How long, O Lord, must I call for help,  
but you do not listen?  
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"  
but you do not save?*

The two most common pastoral questions are, Why is this happening to me? and, Why is God not answering my prayers? Many ask them about our troubles - why are they happening? Why are all the prayers for peace apparently not being answered?

Our immediate difficulty is that, while this is a very real and pressing question, the complete answer lies in a book we cannot read - the book of divine providence. The full answer lies in the secret counsels of the Most High, whose judgements are unsearchable and whose paths are beyond tracing out. Nonetheless, we can read the book of scripture and apply it to our times. If we do this with caution, humility, integrity and in dialogue with one other we shall surely find a light for our path and a word to sustain the weary. Yet of this one thing we can be sure: we shall find that the Lord's thoughts are not our thoughts.

Such was the experience of Habakkuk. He asked his question of God (1.2-4) but the Lord's response (1.5-11) seemed so incredible that, far from reassuring Habakkuk, it left him just as perplexed and raised new questions (1.12-2.1). Job, too, questioned God (e.g. 7.10-21). He, too, received no 'answer'. Instead, he was swept away in a torrent of divine questioning that brought him to see how little he knew and called his perception of his experiences into question. The fall of the tower of Siloam killed eighteen people. Jesus rejected the comfortable assumption that the victims must have been great sinners, warning instead that the same fate awaits all who will not repent (Luke 13.1-5). In all of these instances human perceptions were challenged by divine revelation. The truth of God may have been unpalatable but, ultimately, only the truth could satisfy. When we ask our questions of

God are we prepared for our perceptions to be challenged, are we prepared to hear the truth of God no matter how unpalatable?

### **WHY VIOLENCE?**

In the first place, though violence may grieve us it should not surprise us. Biblical writers may have been perplexed by the suffering of the righteous but all were utterly realistic about the violent world in which they lived. Jesus himself expressly told his disciples not to be alarmed at wars and rumours of wars for these would characterize the last days. There is no promise in Scripture of a peaceful world, of Utopia. However, none of this implies that God has lost control.

The conflict in Northern Ireland is far from unique. Around the world communal and other conflicts are multiplying. Indeed, given human sinfulness perhaps the surprising thing is that there is ever peace (see James 4.1-2), for all conflicts, whether personal, communal or international, have the same root - sin.

Secondly, is it not true that we in Northern Ireland are undergoing both divine judgement and a satanic attack? The Bible records the story of David's census of Israel twice. In 2 Samuel the cause of David's action is the anger of the Lord (24.1). In 1 Chronicles the cause is the malice of Satan (21.1). Both are causes but at different levels.

It is not hard to recognise that because of our godly heritage we were a likely target for the evil one and, equally, that because of our great spiritual privileges yet glaring failures we would be likely to merit God's severe displeasure.

War is permitted so that people may bear the consequences of their sin: there are temporal as well as eternal judgements. War is also permitted in order to reveal the true nature of sin. War shatters optimistic views of human nature. Human pride, our confidence in our ability to build our world, is humbled. What we would not learn in peace we may be forced to learn in war that we might seek and find God.

Are we in Northern Ireland seeking God yet? Do we even recognise the real problem? How patient and merciful is the Lord! How much longer will he have to wait before we learn his lesson?

But have not many people sought God in prayer? Why is there no answer? Here again our whole approach is wrong. Of course people pray in a crisis. However, those prayers are often merely a panic reaction based on the mistaken idea that God's main concern is to keep us happy; that His main function is to grant our requests. Our concern is with what God ought to do for us: this is paganism, not prayer. What then are the marks of true prayer? Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 2.8: *I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.*

Have our hands, our lives, been holy? Do we come in sorrow for our sin, humbling ourselves before God? Are we people without anger? Perhaps we are more like those of God's people described in Isaiah 58.2-5:

*For day after day they seek me out;  
they seem eager to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that does what is right  
and has not forsaken the commands of its God ...  
'Why have we fasted', they say,  
'and you have not seen it?  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?'  
Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please  
and exploit all your workers.  
Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.  
You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.*

With so much anger in Northern Ireland can we expect our voice to be heard on high? Such anger is bound to be hindering effective prayer. We must also examine what we actually pray for. We ask for peace but this is not enough. It is merely asking God to intervene to limit the consequences of sin, or prohibit one sin, simply because we find it upsetting. Yet if we want peace so that we can continue living without God how can God grant it? Imagine you are a doctor. A heavy smoker asks you to treat his chest complaint so he can resume smoking. How would you respond? Once again we must recognise that this approach is wrong. Trying prayer simply as a method of securing peace is wrong. Real prayer is about seeking God. Martin Lloyd-

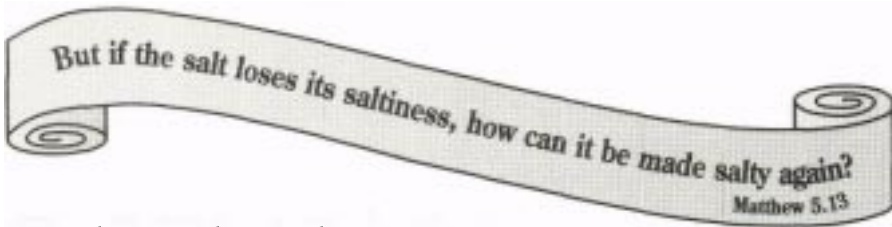
Jones asked, “Were we justified in asking God to preserve peace and grant peace? What if war has come because we were not fit, because we did not deserve peace; because we, by our disobedience and sinfulness, had so utterly abused the blessings of peace? Have we a right to expect God to preserve a state of peace merely to allow men and women to continue a life that is an insult to his holy name?”

As we face this how should we respond? What must we do?

- i. We must not lose hope. Rather, we must put our hope in the Lord, waiting patiently for him and for his coming.
- ii. We must pray more directly against Satan, putting to the test the exhortation of James: *Resist the devil and he will flee from you.* (4.7)
- iii. As we pray we must yield to the will of God, praying in the spirit of the Lord’s prayer. We must keep silence before the majesty of God.
- iv. As the church we must make our unique contribution to society - embodying and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.
- v. Finally, in dark days, we must refuse to be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

Perhaps we have been asking the wrong question. Perhaps we should be asking not, Why is God letting this go on so long? but rather, Have I learned the lesson of my sinfulness? Have we come to the place where our sole desire is to worship God, to see his will done? Are we resisting evil and in humble obedience patiently doing good?

Perhaps these are the questions God would ask us.



## *The Political Question*

Paul Reid

*You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.*

God has always had his representatives. The Old Testament tells us that God chose a people, Israel. This people was to be a light to the nations, a witness to the one true God and a model of how a God-ordered society should live. The year of Jubilee, described in Leviticus 25.8-55, makes known the radical nature of this society. Every fiftieth year prisoners were to be freed, land was to be redistributed and slaves were to be released. Yet, as far as is known, Israel never observed the year of Jubilee. Though God's representative, the nation was flawed.

In the New Testament God himself came among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus' understanding of his mission is recorded for us in Luke 4.16-21:

*The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:*

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ...*

*Then he rolled up the scroll... and sat down ... saying to them, ' Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'*

In effect Jesus was saying 'You are looking at the embodiment of the Kingdom of God'. Through his ministry he manifested the values and standards of God's reign and carried through the agenda outlined



in Luke 4.

Jesus is no longer with us in person yet he remains present as head of his church. Today, it is the church that is God's representative; it is the church that proclaims the Kingdom of God; it is the church that goes into the world with the message of Christ; it is the church that is to live in the world as salt. The church, to be true to its head, must live, work and minister in society constantly praying: 'Lord, here we are - what do you want us to do?'

Furthermore, the church's ministry encompasses not only evangelism, not only social witness, but all of life. And that means that the church must be salt in the political life of society. But, as God's people in Northern Ireland, have we been?

How can the church be salt in the political process? One way might be to think about the whole purpose of politics. Another, more practical, way might be to offer a critique of the political parties and their programmes in the light of God's word. We should also remember that questions of peace, justice, unemployment, poverty, righteousness and the environment are also political questions.

However, there is a more fundamental problem, for it seems to me that the church in Northern Ireland is in no position to address any of these questions.

If the church is salt in society then it can freely and fearlessly challenge the politicians, the parties, the political agendas. But, what if the salt has lost its saltiness? What then?

Some years ago I became friendly with a young man from a catholic background. He came to our church and eventually said he would like to join us. One evening he asked me, 'Paul, do I have to become a Unionist to join your church?' I asked, 'Is that a serious question?' 'Yes it is', he replied.

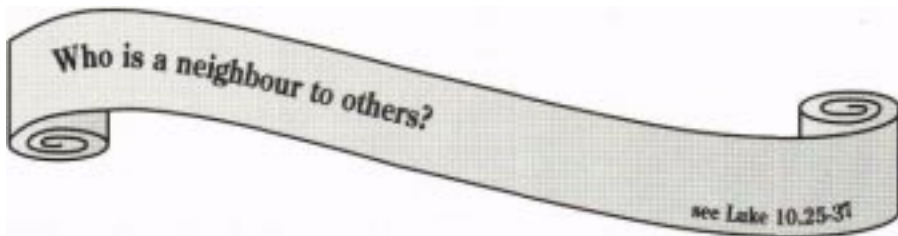
That started me thinking about the many identities and convictions and attitudes that we so often bring with us into the community of God's people: the Orange, the Masonic, the Black; Unionism, Nationalism; personal ambitions and preferences, personal political goals and identities.

How can we challenge the politicians, how can we be salt in society when our saltiness has been so seriously compromised? Have we

lost our saltiness? Some time ago John Hume, leader of the SDLP, provoked controversy when he publicly challenged the churches over their role in Northern Ireland. Of course many people were offended. Yet perhaps John Hume, identifying what the churches claim to be, challenged them to live up to their own claims. Perhaps his challenge provoked a strong reaction because it touched a raw nerve.

Have we lost our saltiness? Have our compromises undermined our ability to contribute to the political life of our society? Can we no longer give answers to the political questions the world is asking because the salt has been tainted through association with the political ideologies of unionism or nationalism? If the church has nothing to say about the most important issues confronting us as a community is that not a tragedy?

Before we can address the political question we have to return to Jesus' question: how can the salt be made salty again? I believe we can only do this if we are prepared to break some of the ties that bind us; to go into our society and say to whomever we meet: The only thing we bring to you is the gospel of peace - no additives, no organisations, no ideologies - we bring you simply the gospel of Jesus Christ.'



## *The Social Question*

Carol McRoberts

*'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?'*

*The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'*

Who is a neighbour to others? Who was a neighbour to the robbers' victim? - the Priest? the Levite? the Samaritan?

*What of Jesus? Who were his neighbours?*

His demanding friends? His religious critics?

The sick? The public sinners? The demon possessed?

The temple police? The army officer? The Roman Governor?

The disciple who betrayed him?

The crowds who mocked him?

The soldiers who stripped and crucified him?

The thieves crucified on either side of him?

Joseph of Arimathea who buried him?

The sinful woman who anointed him?

Martha and others who fed him?

Mary and others who listened to him?

The disciples and others who obeyed him?

*What of us?*

What is our attitude if demands are made of us when we have come to celebrate?

How do we respond when disturbed in our private devotions or public worship?

How do we feel when we are faced with the sick in hospital or when we visit a psychiatric unit?

How do we react to the drunk or to those involved in public sexual acts?

How do we react when confronted by blatant evil pouring out of people as they speak and act?

When stopped by soldiers demanding evidence of our identity, wanting to know our destination, how neighbourly is our reply?

If a friend speaks lies about us or openly displays hostility, how do we cope?

Security guards, traffic wardens, politicians, the crowd that cheers us, the crowd that taunts us - are these our neighbours?

What is our attitude to those who violate us or our property - rapists, muggers, burglars, car thieves?

How do we treat those who suffer deservedly?

Are we embarrassed by a deep appreciation of ourselves or an extravagant public show of affection?

Do we secretly or openly despise those who seek to learn from us or who imitate us?

Who is a neighbour to others?

*Consider the following people. As you do, think of the people you know. How many of them need you to be a neighbour?*

Patricia, a young mother, her husband shot dead as he cleared up after a party for their six year old child.

Stephen and William, teenage boys left without their father.

Liam and Peter and their mother Marie, bereaved through the St. Albans bombing. Hearing of her daughter's death, killed by the bomb she was carrying, Marie said, Thank God she didn't take anyone else with her'.

The unemployed husband and father who works the system.

The husband, drinking every penny gained, who comes home and beats his wife.

Three little sisters from one family, each sexually abused; the one who abuses them.

The woman at the end of her tether who beats and verbally abuses her children.

The politicians who break their promises; the paramilitaries who believe violence is the only way to pursue or defend their cause.

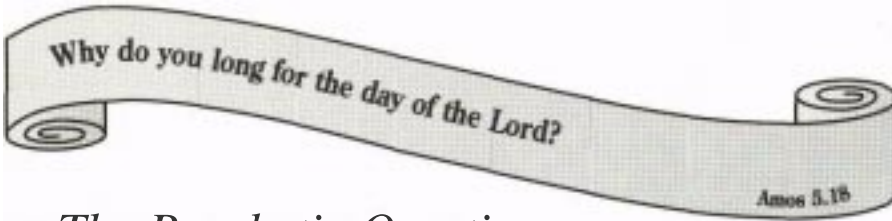
The fundamentalist attacking people with the truth; the liberal appearing to lack all conviction.

The nurse prepared to strike; the police officer prepared to turn a blind eye.

*Who is a neighbour to others?*

*Am I?*

*Are you?*



## *The Prophetic Question*

Ken Clarke

*Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord!  
Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That  
day will be darkness, not light.*

Won't it be great when the Lord comes back? Will it? I can't wait for the Lord to come', say some. 'I wish he would come soon', say others.

But do we really long for the day of the Lord? We usually assume that the 'day of the Lord' refers to that momentous time when Jesus returns. But in scripture there are many 'days of the Lord'.

In the time of the farmer-prophet Amos, God's people looked forward to a day of the Lord. Yet their expectation of it and Amos' description of it were radically different. Expectations can be not only misguided but false. Wishful thinking and charitable wishing can be far removed from naked reality and genuine prophetic insight.

Amos was a genuine prophet and a realist! He contradicts popular and public opinion and surprisingly declares -

*Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! (v18):*

What is he doing? Three things:

First, he is probing entrenched positions - most believed the day of the Lord was the answer to their problems.

Secondly, he is asking questions and sowing doubts - why do you long for the day of the Lord?

Thirdly, he is laying the Divine cards on the national table - that day will be darkness, not light.

It will be as though a man fled from a frightening lion only to meet a terrifying bear; as though he entered his own home anticipating safety and security only to have a snake bite him as he rests his hand on a wall (v19). The latter state is worse than the former. What he thought would be a hospital turned out to be an asylum.

And Amos continues to probe and disturb:

*Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light-pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness? (v20)*

The prophetic voice today will stand in the tradition of Amos:

The prophet will probe entrenched positions.

The prophet will ask questions and sow doubts.

The prophet will lay God's cards on the contemporary table.

In the time of Amos the attitude of the people was a happy complacent optimism; the message of Amos was profound penetrating realism. It was not merely their behaviour and attitudes which needed to change - it was their perception of God himself. They had been made in God's image but they had made God in their image.

Have we not done the same? Unbiblical perceptions of God abound both inside and outside the church. The sin of idolatry is a modern as much as an ancient sin. We too can make God in our image. Human imagination replaces biblical revelation. Broad minds become empty minds when the arena of biblical truth becomes a playground for rational or irrational speculation. The authority of God's word is denied. We want a Christ without a cross and a God who will love us but will not judge us. Amos in contrast dealt in truth and reality - a genuine prophetic voice will do the same.

The people of Israel were looking forward to the day of the Lord when the Messiah would come. They expected that they would be world leaders but their hopes were false and their expectations erroneous. They were looking forward to a coronation day; Amos made it sound like a funeral. The situation was clear: if God visited them in their present state the result would be judgement, not blessing. Yet outwardly the local press would have reported life and vitality in the religious community. The people celebrated feasts and festivals; they participated in processions and assemblies; they made offerings of money and praise. Singing voices accompanied by stringed instruments could often be heard.

But God says (v21-24):

*I hate, I despise your religious feasts;  
I cannot stand your assemblies.  
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them...  
Away with the noise of your songs!  
I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
But let justice roll on like a river,  
righteousness like a never failing stream!*

God still looks for justice and righteousness. His manifesto does not change. Without justice and righteousness in public and private We the day of the Lord will be terror not triumph, darkness not light.

Let Jesus have the final word now as he will then.

*Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Matthew 7.21*





## *The Religious Question*

David McMillan

*He has showed you, O man, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you? To  
act justly and to love mercy and to walk  
humbly with your God.*

The Board of Assessment and the Personal Assessment Interview have become settled features of modern business life. However, self-assessment has always been something God demands of his people. Micah asks a question, *What does the Lord require of you?*, and gives an answer, *To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* In Micah's words we hear God's challenge to us, demanding that we assess our lives in the light of his clear requirements.

Of course assessment has always been part of the life of the church - the old fellow sitting at the back of every church meeting, gurning and complaining that there is not enough gospel preaching; the young people harassing the minister about the severe boredom they are subjected to; the treasurer despairing that the money will ever come in; the minister tearing his hair out (what he has left) trying to drag his church kicking and screaming into the next century. There is always some kind of ongoing assessment in the church!

It seems that Christians in Northern Ireland are enthusiastic assessors - assessing their church, assessing their minister, assessing their involvement (or lack of it) in social action, assessing their denomination. They may not be very skilled but they appear to be very committed!

However, the critical question in any assessment is always, By what standard do we measure? The answer for the Christian is very clear: God's standard - he is the only one who can set the standard for our

assessment. Yet how slow we are, how slow the church is, to ask the question, What does the Lord require of us?

It is clear from Micah 5:10-15 that God's people considered themselves largely self sufficient. God's response is marked by hostility. God is opposed to their self-confidence, their horses, their chariots, their cities and their strongholds, their witchcraft and their carved images. Of course we do not see ourselves in that light, but perhaps we have our own contemporary horses and chariots, our own contemporary forms of witchcraft, even within the church. We have our traditions, our protestantism, our administrative abilities, our technological sophistication, our denominations, our committees. Are these our horses and chariots? We can plan our programmes, we can set our goals without reference to God, we compromise with humanistic modes of thinking. Is this our witchcraft? We have our buildings, our projects, our theological fads. Are these are images? No, we would never put our trust in princes as those foolish people of old; instead, we put it in our evangelistic activity, our denominational structures and programmes. What would mark God's response to us?

To these people, who had rejected reliance on God for self-reliance, the Lord addressed the plaintive question, *What have I done to you? How have I burdened you* (6.3)? That burden was their deliverance and redemption. It is in the light of this that God demands self-assessment (6.6-8):

*With what shall I come before the Lord  
and bow down before the exalted God?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousand rivers of oil?  
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
He has showed you, O man, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.*

What is the burden God has laid on us? Might he not say to us: 'I have delivered you; I have redeemed you; I have given you my Son; I have faithfully led you; I have provided for you'? So, given this, what does

the Lord require of us? No more or no less than he has always required of his people - that they should act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with their God. Is this the standard by which we assess our own lives? Is this the standard by which we assess all aspects of our lives?

Perhaps two further passages from the New Testament can help us understand the implications of Micah's words.

In his letter to the Romans Paul wrote (11.17-21):

*If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.' Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare natural branches, he will not spare you either.*

There is no place for spiritual pride, arrogance or complacency among God's people. Instead, our lives should reflect this godly fear and humility as we wonder at God's grace to us.

In his gospel Luke records Jesus' summing up of God's requirements (10.25-28):

*On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher', he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'What is written in the law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?' He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbour as yourself.'"*  
*'You have answered correctly', Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.'*

This is what the Lord requires of us.

This is what it means to act justly.

This is what it means to love mercy.

This is what it means to walk humbly before God.



## *The Pertinent Question*

David Porter

*... your kingdom come,  
your will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*

Questions - addressed by God to us, his people. In this final paper I want to ask you one further question. This question is personal and, you may consider, impudent. It is addressed by the younger generation to the older; it reflects my particular background and experience in evangelical East Belfast; it arises from a very instructive five years working with the likes of David Hewitt, Brian Moore and Ken Wilson in ECONI; it comes with an understanding and appreciation of all that has already been done by evangelicals in raising these questions.

However, it is also a question that comes with much anger: anger that can act as a barrier in relating to the leadership in our evangelical churches. I believe that I am not alone in this but that many of my generation feel the same way.

This question may be considered idealistic or naive by some but it is a question that needs, demands, honest answers.

It is simply the question: Why?

Why, when I was growing into maturity in faith, attempting to respond to the vital concerns facing our society, were my only models fundamentalist fuming on the one hand and evangelical silence on the other?

Why, when I tried to express my concern for cross community matters through movements like the peace people, was I made to feel that in some way I was betraying my faith?

Why has it taken so long to find a public evangelical lead on these kinds of issues?

Why is it when I seek to follow the real Jesus I am marginalised most by those who claim to know him best?

Why, when our evangelical faith and foundations are so secure, are we the most insecure, failing to respond creatively to challenge and change for the sake of the Kingdom of God?

Only honest reflection on these questions will enable us to face the pertinent question: What on earth are we doing?

In our worship we pray, *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*, as the Lord taught us. Yet I fear that much of the evangelicalism we know in Northern Ireland reflects an attitude that can be summarised as, 'emptying hell to populate heaven, but nothing will change on earth'. We listen to many sermons, being great hearers of the word, yet I fear there are too many sermons. While personal piety is prized few are doers of the word where it matters most- in the midst of this community and its conflicts.

Honesty will compel us to acknowledge that fear has paralysed us: fear of the fundamentalist shadow that hangs over us; fear of alienating our own people; fear of rejection and hostility.

Jesus was no stranger to fear: Gethsemane is ample demonstration of that. But his commitment to the Kingdom of God, shown not only in his words but his deeds, compelled him to the cross despite his fear.

A greater fear needs to compel us: a fear that in seeking to gain the Kingdom we lose it by a betrayal of its priorities and values.

Our booklet, *For God and His Glory Alone*, was an attempt to provoke reflection and debate. With the Action Pack series our goal is to encourage commitment to action and change. Such a commitment is demanding: it demands that we take risks; that we act in our community with faith and integrity; that we do something. This is our ultimate goal for the Action Packs and in so far as their use does not lead to action we will consider them to have failed.

**So, what on earth are you DOING?**

## **NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS**

David Hewitt is a solicitor in Belfast and is chairman of ECONI. Together with a number of others, he was responsible for founding ECONI. He is an elder in the Presbyterian church.

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## **WHAT IS ECONI?**

Evangelical Contribution On Northern Ireland (ECONI) represents a broad coalition of evangelical Christians concerned about our community. It emerged out of a number of conferences held in the mid 1980's. Organised by evangelicals, these conferences represented an attempt to address the issues of our confused and torn society. These evangelical Christians were concerned that the glory of God was at stake in Northern Ireland and believed that the time had come to speak out.

The practice of ECONI has always been to operate on an informal basis thus enabling a diverse group of evangelicals to come together around a common concern for the community, with no one section of the evangelical community 'fronting' the initiative.

## **WHAT IS ECONI'S ROLE?**

ECONI exists specifically to address evangelical Christians within Northern Ireland on the basis of a shared commitment to the authority of the bible.

Evangelical Christians are found throughout the denominations and it is estimated that 33% of the active Protestant community consider themselves to be evangelical. This would indicate a community of some 185,000 people representing 12% of the population.

ECONI speaks to this community from a biblical perspective addressing questions of faith and practice which arise from the situation in our community.

## **WHAT DOES ECONI DO?**

In 1988 the booklet *For God And His Glory Alone* was published by ECONI. This booklet highlighted ten biblical principles pertinent to our community. Commended by 200 evangelical leaders, over 9,000 copies have so far been distributed. In 1992 a series of Action Packs was launched. Each Pack developed at greater length one of the biblical principles highlighted in the booklet and also provided resource material for use by church groups.

The first ECONI Sunday was held on November 7th 1993. Some 55 churches representing more than 10,000 people were involved. The goal of ECONI Sunday is to communicate to the community that God has something to say to our community and that God's people are

engaging with his word and with the hurts facing our community. Further ECONI initiatives are also planned.

### **WHAT IS ECONI'S GOAL?**

ECONI's aim is not only to promote reflection and debate within the evangelical community, but also to enable change to take place in values and attitudes so that an increasing number of evangelicals may take up the challenge of being peacemakers in our community.





