

Review for the Launch of *The Evangelisation Society of Australasia*

It is a great pleasure this afternoon to be able to officially launch Bob's book, and to pray the book on her way. The book recounts great spiritual battles and victories under God, introduces us to great soldiers of the Cross, and so importantly it acts like a supply line to those on the front today, providing resources, encouragement and sustenance for our own warfare. Perhaps there is so little energy for great evangelistic undertakings today because we have fallen prey to the notion that the world is a neutral zone, a no-man's land, where nothing much is at stake. But as much as the gods of this age appear attractive and benign, the book of Revelation shows us behind the curtains of history and makes clear that those who believe in Christ are part of a bigger battle and will share with Jesus 'the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance.' (Rev 1:9). Thank you Bob for your fine labours in assembling such a variety of material, organising it to make it digestible, and publishing it for the sake of the Gospel cause. This kind of chronicling is a great service to the church and to the academy.

The single greatest impression I received as I read the book was how energetically the evangelistic task was prosecuted in the early decades of the twentieth century. People travelled from Britain or America to preach not just in the city of Melbourne but also in country areas in Victoria, Tasmania, or South Australia, and over months, not just weeks. Men and women from Melbourne had contacts all over the country and world, despite not having emails! Take for instance Eric Clarkson, who preached in Warrnambool, Port Fairy, Nullawarre, Hamilton, Heyfield, Orbost, Childers, Thorpdale, Moe, Willow Grove, Narracan, Brodribb River, Waygara, Tostaree, Hospital Creek, Gormandale, Callignee, Maffra, Beaufort, Stawell, Horsham, Janiember, Cavilil, Woomelang, South Carrajung, Sea Lake, Barham, Willangie, Berriwillock, Kangaroo Ground, Ballan and Ballarat, to name just those places referred to in the book, not counting Melbourne suburbs, army camps, or places outside of Victoria. Most intriguing were the opportunities he and others had to preach in factories and workshops, at the beach, children's meetings, and women's

meetings. George Hall preached in the railway shops in North Melbourne, and wrote:

Out of the hundreds of men who work there, possibly 70 per cent of the total number came out of the meeting last week. These men are skilled mechanics, untouched by the churches, yet they are prepared to listen attentively to the old story of the Cross. (p218)

Perhaps the networks in country towns made preaching tours easier to advertise than in the city. Perhaps there was a patina of Christian faith left there to fan into flame. Whatever it was that made small isolated communities attractive to visit and to evangelise, these men nevertheless did not shirk their responsibility to address their Gospel to workers in the city who were harder fish to catch.

Encouraging too was the number of times Ridley College, or men connected to Ridley, were mentioned in the book. The Griffiths brothers, James and John, were great financial contributors to the establishment of the College out of the proceeds of their tea and coffee business. The Griffiths' Tea Carriage was used to transport Eric Clarkson, W. A. Allen and Andrew W. Smith to Bright on an evangelistic tour under the auspices of the Victorian Open Air Mission, now merged in 1925 with the Evangelisation Society. John Griffiths' property in the Dandenongs, Forest Park, was used for morning Bible studies during an early Upwey Convention. At the twentieth birthday celebrations of the Melbourne Bible Institute in 1940 (now the Melbourne School of Theology), Bishop Donald Baker, then Principal of Ridley, gave an address. Frequently I asked myself if people I know in Melbourne today are related to families in this book with the same surname, who were themselves bulwarks of the truth in their own day. Though Anglican Archbishop Head makes a conspicuous appearance in the book, preaching at a summer beach meeting on the Chelsea foreshore in 1936 (p188), the narrative concentrates on the work of Methodists and Baptists and their tradition of itinerating, coupled with the expectation of 'personal work,' the labours of personal evangelists to reap what the public evangelist had sown (pp140-141).

The ministry of Reg Stephens, Chief Stoker in the Royal Navy then in the newly formed Royal Australian Navy, was for me the most engaging of the biographies recounted. He saw active service with the Grand Fleet in the North Sea during World War I, and loved to tell the story of the foggy night off the coast of Britain in 1916 when the HMAS Australia, on which he served, collided with the HMS New Zealand (p70). Returning from war, he continued in active evangelistic service with the YMCA, though was temporarily seconded to the Victorian Evangelisation Society in 1922, and had a particularly fruitful ministry amongst men and boys. This was of course a period in which the presence of men in churches had been decimated through wartime attrition, so his own experiences and energies now made good the deficit. Here is a snapshot of *muscular Christianity*, a strategy applied regularly to churches since the industrial revolution to make space for the conversion of men to Christ. In Broken Hill, he preached under the title of 'Superb Heroism' and made an appeal for 'men to be men' and to learn both the courage and the tenderness of Christ (pp 73-74). His schedule was normally full.

If there were to be additions to the book, I would really love to see some of the background social movements further described and explained. A number are mentioned, but their impact on worldviews, ministry and church life would be an exciting expansion. For example, what difference did the Russian Revolution have on preachers and their appeal to traditional values? Were there many direct influences from the Welsh Revival on revivalism in Victoria? We learn that Norman Lumsden believed that if God could shake Wales, surely he could also convert many in the Kanaka country of Queensland (p 126)! This book deals with the period in which the Great Depression ravaged Western societies, and though we hear about it periodically, impacting the ability of voluntary societies to employ evangelists, no doubt it also affected unbelievers' expectations of the churches. I was amazed how many in our story had studied at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. The way this fundamentalist institution has impacted Melbourne is no doubt also a story worth researching and retelling. I had no idea before reading this book how embedded was the

ministry of a soloist singing as accompaniment to evangelistic preaching in Australia. The Methodist legacy strikes again.

And so our thanks again go to Bob, and his supporters, for their labours of love as represented in this book. Sometimes reading about ordinary men and women of faith is more energising than rediscovering the great heroes. And when they are both ordinary and local, our part in the ongoing story is an easy conclusion to reach. Let's pray for the readership of this book, and the gracious work of God's Spirit, that we may yet see in this land a great harvest, for the ears are ripe:

Gracious Lord, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

We thank you for the example of Christians past, whom you have honoured and blessed and used. Though we often experience your power in our weakness, we pray that we, like them, may be made competent for service, and bold to preach, and persistent in prayer.

We thank you for Bob's efforts in chronicling the lives and times of men and women who worked for the Evangelisation Society in Victoria in the early twentieth century. We thank you for the production of this book, and for the opportunity we have today to celebrate its birth. May it go out from here and find many willing readers, who themselves may be better trained as evangelists, who in turn would lead many to Christ. Prosper the work of ESA Country Ministries and also who labour under its name, for the sake of godly peace in our nation and for your glory and praise

In Christ's name. Amen.