

## STUDY 6

### THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL AND FIRST CONTACT

#### 1KINGS 21

*Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth." But Naboth replied, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?" He answered her, "Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, 'Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" Jezebel his wife said, "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him. In those letters she wrote: "Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death."*

*So the elders and nobles ... did as Jezebel directed .... Then they sent word to Jezebel: "Naboth has been stoned and is dead." As soon as Jezebel heard this .... she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead." 16 When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard.*

*Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: "Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. Say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' Then say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood — yes, yours!'"*

#### GOD'S REIGN GIVES HOPE IN ABORIGINAL HISTORY

In Colossians 1:9 Paul prays that God will fill us with the knowledge of his will and in 1 Corinthians 15:24 we learn that his will is that when the end comes then Christ will deliver all things to his Father and then it will be that the *"The kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever."* (Rev 11:15). So the will of the Father is the reconciliation of all things to himself.

What we see, therefore, in the history of Aboriginal Australia, is an integral part of God's plan for his creation and the redemption of his people from every tongue and nation. The Aboriginal people may rightfully claim that they are the first nations but this country no more belongs to them than it does to the colonizers who claimed it for the British crown. It is God's possession and he entrusts it to whom so ever he wills and removes it also from whom-so-ever he wills. At the very most we are never more than stewards of his gift. Douglas Pike, therefore is right in his statement; "The vanity of the true Englishman was not in belonging to this great country, but in the thought that so great a country belonged to him"<sup>1</sup>. In 1937 a friend of an Aboriginal leader, William Cooper, wrote to Rev Ernest Gribble during a particularly depressed period in Cooper's life, included in his exhortation was the words, *"Still, God is not dead"*.<sup>2</sup> It is his presence, active and involved in the affairs of the nation, that gives all people the opportunity that he will yet right the injustices in his creation. God is not dead.

#### GOSPEL AND CIVILISATION

Although the precise nature of the relationship between the gospel and civilization - that is, Europeanization - was debated, there were no missionaries in this early period and very few in

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Pike, *Paradise of Dissent*, 1967, 4

<sup>2</sup> John Harris, *One Blood*, 1990, 629.

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later periods who did not believe that there was an important connection<sup>3</sup>. This confusion of Gospel and Europeanization (as wrong as it is) is not totally without justification because the gospel had played such a large part in the development of the cultures of Europe and England. The leaders considered that their own national and religious institutions were ordained of God and sealed with the blood of martyrs over many centuries and therefore they could not be seen as separate from the Gospel which gave them birth<sup>4</sup>. For these people 'to be Christian' and 'to be civilised' was synonymous. This confusion can be seen in the following quotes;

**Jonathan Edwards.** (Theologian, philosopher and missionary. 1703-1758).

How happy will that state be, when neither divine nor human learning shall be confined and imprisoned within only two or three nations of Europe, but shall be diffused all over the world, and this lower world shall be all over-covered with light, the various parts of it mutually enlightening each other, when the most barbarous nations shall become as bright and polite as England."

**Ernst Troeltsch.** (Theologian, philosopher and sociologist. 1865-1923).

Christianity and Western Culture are so inextricably intertwined that a Christian can say little about his faith to members of other civilisations, and the latter in turn cannot encounter Christ save as a member of the Western world<sup>5</sup>.

The missionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came from cultural backgrounds steeped in self-assurance and buoyed by the advances of the cultural revolutions of the Enlightenment. Europeanism was believed to be destined to rule as the superior race by way of colonialism, and this was supported by heretical interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis.

Read ONE LAND, ONE SAVIOUR pg 60-62

The impact that the self-assurance of the colonisers had on the Aboriginal food gatherers of the new colony of South Australia cannot be underestimated. Land possessing, property orientated value systems which saw the immediate loss of tribal land and therefore identity, destroyed all that the Aboriginal people knew as security, purpose and identity. Social change that had developed within European culture over hundreds of years was suddenly imposed on a people who had no existing framework by which to interpret it. Agriculture was enforced over subsistence, compounds and fences over freedom of movement, machines over hand tools, written text over oral transmission, autocratic rule over tribal leadership. The self-sufficient people who had dignity and wore little clothing, became a charity dependent people full of shame and wearing rags, environmentally friendly wiltjas became embarrassing humpies and capable bushmen became fringe dwelling welfare recipients. People who traditionally died from natural causes became victims of genocide through imported diseases and mass murder and whose average life span was reduced to childhood. It was into this world that the European missionaries came to minister.

**CHURCH AMONG THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE.**

In 1967 and 1970 secular authorities stated :

*For all the effort and money that has been devoted to the conversion of Aborigines, whether in the city or outback, there have in fact been very few converts<sup>6</sup>.*

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<sup>3</sup> John Harris. One Blood. 1990. 77. Also Christopher Anderson. Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions. 1988, 322. The Lutheran Churches stated aim in the venture at Bloomfield was "not only...to civilise the Aborigines, but also to teach them the word of God and to make them equated with rules put down by the same".

<sup>4</sup> Consider for example the the Papacy in Rome and the Monarchy in England.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Neibuhr, 1975. Christ and Culture, 1975, 30.

<sup>6</sup> A.A. Abbie. The Original Australians. p. 242.

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*There is little evidence to show that its objects of the conversion of Aboriginal people to Christianity has been achieved<sup>7</sup>.*

It is obvious that such assessments are wrong<sup>8</sup>. The Christian Gospel has born, and is bearing, much fruit in the form of a robust church among the Aboriginal people. The body of Christ among Aboriginal people reveals the same diversity as it does among non-Aboriginal people - both inter- and intra-denominationally. The same fundamental realities which assure the one of its identity in Christ are present in the other. The same variety of secondary beliefs and practices which form the pluriformity of the church are present in both. Although such diversity is readily evident, the abundance of similarities is more so. This fact forces one to acknowledge the reality of the church among Aboriginal people which is obviously and necessarily Aboriginal.

**ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP**

The following list is by no means exhaustive. And it only refers to the more prominent leaders in certain geographical areas. However, the list does show that from the very beginning of the Gospel being proclaimed in SA God raised up Aboriginal leaders who gave ample evidence that they were equipped with all that was needed to share the Gospel with their own people. Obviously, the Gospel they received and shared was coloured by the mission that brought it to them but God showed his willingness to unite a people for himself in spite of the divisions his servants thought so important<sup>9</sup>.

**SOME EARLY INDIGENOUS CHRISTIAN LEADERS**

- 1820c Thomas & Jemmy Bennelong (NSW, Angl)
- 1851 Takan-Arro (SA, Luth/Angl).
- 1860 Nathanael Pepper, (Vic, Moravian).
- 1864 James Unaipon, James Wanganeen, William Kropinyeri (SA, Ind).
- 1880 William McDougall (Vic, Angl)<sup>10</sup>.
- 1900c Alick Bybee (Qu, Angl)<sup>11</sup>
- 1901 Willie Ambryn (Qu, Angl)<sup>12</sup>
- 1906c Alexander Russel (NSW, AIM).
- 1908 James & Angelina Noble. (Qu, Angl, Ordained 1925).
- 1909 Mickie Free, Lame Paddy and Michael Highfold (SA, Luth).
- 1910c Bert Marr (NSW, UAM)
- 1912c Ella Simon (NSW, UAM)c
- 1920 Eddy Atkinson (Vic, CofC ordained 19??).
- 1923 Tjalkabota (Blind) Moses (NT, Luth).
- 1930c King Billy, Mompie and Jack. (NT, UAM).
- 1932 Bobby Peters (Vic, AIM).
- 1946 Douglas Nichols (Vic, ordained CofC).

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<sup>7</sup> Davies. Australian Society: Sociological Introduction. 384.

<sup>8</sup> John Harris. One Blood, 1990, 658. Harris shows that such assessments were incorrect even when they were written. He states that by the 1930s the proportion of Aboriginal Christians was greater by far than that of the whites. and on page 660, by the 1950s most Banjalang of NSW were Christians.

<sup>9</sup> These divisions can even be seen in the (so called) non-denominational ministry of AIM when the mission authorities omitted Eddie Atkinson's name because he had left their ranks to join the CofC. W. Arnold Long, Treasure in an Earthen Vessel. The story of Bobbie Peters, Hunch-Back Native Pastor, 10.

<sup>10</sup> John Harris, One Blood, 1990, 214.

<sup>11</sup> Noel Loos, White Christ, Black Cross, 2007, 146.

<sup>12</sup> Noel Loos, White Christ, Black Cross, 2007, 146.

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1964 Conrad Ruberuba and Peter Bulla (NT, Luth, ordained 1964).  
1970 Patrick Brisbane (Qu, Angl, ordained 1970).  
1973 Gumbuli Waramarra (Qu, Angl).

**Takan-Arro 1851**

Takan-Arro had been very diligent in reading the NT as his preferred section of Scriptures because in it he read about Jesus. He was frequently heard praying and would often get up during the night to pray. When he was very ill he asked that a section of 1 John 3 be read to him,

*“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.*

Takan-Arro’s expressions with regards to forgiveness of sins, and his trust in Jesus Christ, were a blessing to those who knew him. He would recite the Lord’s Prayer and other petitions with great earnestness. He also believed that his sins were forgiven and that he was going to glory and would see his Saviour face to face.<sup>13</sup>

The record of Takan-Arro’s illness and death provides a picture of his redeemed state but also the lack of understanding of the Gospel in the minds of the missionary pastors. They constantly focused on the action of the hearer to secure their own salvation rather than the action of God who saved them. This resulted in a ‘cultural conversion’ as distinct from a dependence on grace and explains why baptism was often withheld at the very points when it would have been most theologically appropriate.

**Tjalkabota (Blind) Moses 1823<sup>14</sup>**

Moses was baptised in 1890. He preached regularly at Hermannsburg and later at Henbury Station. He also assisted in instructing people for baptism. Using what ever mode of transport was available, such as donkey, camel, buggy, on foot or occasionally on the back of a truck, he visited his people at Deep Well, Alice Well, Horseshoe Bend, Idracowra, Jay Creek, Alice Springs, Undoolya, Arltunga and other places. He preached that everyone should put their trust in Jesus and give up their tjurunga (sacred objects). He had memorized whole chapters of the Scriptures and he used Bible pictures, taught hymns, the Commandments, and prayers by rote. During his ministry he assisted C.F.T. Strehlow with translation of the New Testament into Western Aranda. In his final years he preached and taught children at Jay Creek, near Alice Springs, and dictated a valuable account of his own life.

**Nathanael Pepper 1860**

Nathanael Pepper was converted on seventeenth of January 1860 as a result of studying for the purpose of assisting with translating Romans eight. He said,

*I have thought how he prayed in the garden till his sweat came out as blood, and that for me. I could not sleep, I felt so happy. I have wept over my sins ...his sweat came out like blood; and that for me<sup>15</sup>.*

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<sup>13</sup> The Aborigines Of Australia Being An Account Of The Institution For Their Education At Poonindie, Hale,

<sup>14</sup> The following information is cut from Australian Dictionary of Biography, Online Edition and [Hermannsburg, a Vision and Mission](#), 36.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Kenny, [The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper & the Ruptured World](#), 2007, 211f.

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Pepper went on to evangelize his people around the mission station and out to the near-by stations. He led worship services and read the Psalms and prayers. He freely confessed “*Thou hast laid down thy life for our sins*”<sup>16</sup>. Pepper wrote to the mission headquarters in Germany and included a poem;

*Think on our brethren (Lord),  
who preach the Gospel word,  
in spirit free and bold,  
in hunger heat and cold:  
thou art their strength and shield,  
help them to win the field.  
(Signed; Nathanael Pepper).*

It is often argued that the ministry of Nathanael Pepper brought about the beginning of the Aboriginal Church in Australia<sup>17</sup>. However, despite Pepper’s obvious maturity in the faith and love for his Lord these are not the things that were used to determine his maturity. Instead, his christian maturity is denoted by the fact that he built a house with a fireplace<sup>18</sup>.

### **James Unaipon 1864**

James Unaipon (an anglicised spelling of ‘Ngunaitponi’) was born at Raukkan in the nineteenth century. As a Ngarrindjeri leader he was converted under the ministry of Rev. James Reid. After Reid’s tragic death George Taplan took James on as his assistant missionary. A position he accepted in September 1864. By the mid 1860s he was authorised to administer the sacraments<sup>19</sup>. He worked with George Taplan to develop a written grammar of his language and in 1864 Ngarrindjeri was the first Indigenous language to have a translation of Bible extracts published. By mid 1865 William MacHughes also stepped forward for missionary service to his people. Together MacHughes and Unaipon funded their own mission trips from Raukkan on Lake Alexandrina up river as far as Mannum. They purchased their own river boat and embarked on two trips before Taplan deemed their efforts unfruitful and squashed the project in May 1869. Once Unaipon recovered from the distress of Taplan’s actions he resumed his spiritual care of his people through general ministry, preaching and praying<sup>20</sup>.

### **James & Angelina Noble 1908**

James Noble was converted in 1895 at about nineteen years of age under. He married Angelina in 1904 and together they supported the missionary endeavours of Rev Ernest Gribble, the son of Yarrabah’s founding missionary, Rev John Brown Gribble. They soon assumed the full role of traditional missionaries themselves; they selected mission sites, taught school, built mission buildings, horse yards, administered the sacraments, preached and attended and addressed synods. James was the first Aboriginal Anglican clergyman. By 1939 their were fourteen identifiable Aboriginal missionary leaders from the Yarrabah community.

### **Mickie Free 1909**

Mickie Free was converted under the ministry of Pastor Wiebusch in the scrub camp north of Kooniba mission. The details of his conversion are limited but informative. They show how culture,

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming; Nathanael Pepper & the Ruptured World*, 2007, 215.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming; Nathanael Pepper & the Ruptured World*, 2007, 218.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming; Nathanael Pepper & the Ruptured World*, 2007, 82.

<sup>19</sup> Graham Jenkin, *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeteri*, 1979, 137.

<sup>20</sup> Graham Jenkin, *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeteri*, 1979, 147.

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the Gospel and the education and control of children were inter-related in the missionaries mind<sup>21</sup>. Mickie was a long standing elder in the church and he had a good name through out the community as worker for his own needs, for the welfare of others and the kingdom of God. He was a shrewd financial manager and from his early days as a Christian he took responsibilities for the congregations collection money. Pastor Eckermann writes *"It was a rare morning that did not see him in his pastor's study (meaning his own) on the business of the mission and the Master"*<sup>22</sup>.

**Bobby Peters 1932<sup>23</sup>**

Bobby Peters first heard the Gospel through the ministry of Mr and Mrs Daniel Matthews at 'Old Maloga'. However, he spent the next twenty years of his life as a drunk. It took an Aboriginal man by the name of Eddie Atkinson (the first 'southern' Aboriginal man to be ordained), to share the word of forgiveness with him before he was 'soundly' converted in 1930. The chain of conversions leading up to Bobby Peters faith is significant. An Aboriginal man by the name of Stanley Russell was converted only weeks before his death from alcohol abuse. He felt constrained by the love of God to take the word to his people. Despite severe weakness and pain he walked to the community he was concerned about. As a result of his testimony twelve people were immediately converted. After some grounding in the faith two of these, Rev Bert Marr (ministered at Purfleet, NSW) and Alick (Alexander) Russell, moved out into the surrounding country and then across large portions of rural NSW. Alick Russell then became resident minister at Cummeragunja mission for four years during which time Eddie Atkinson was converted<sup>24</sup>. This means therefore, that Bobby Peters was converted fourth generation Aboriginal ministry. He was founding Pastor of an AIM church at Darlington Point in NSW from 1932.

**THE QUIET MINISTRIES**

These are the ministries which we probably remember in our own families but which we, as white fellas, have historically given little credence to in Aboriginal families. Ministries such as that referred to in Norman Mitchell's testimony; he learnt the importance of prayer and the Word of God from his father<sup>25</sup>. Or, Rev. Bill Hollingsworth whose experience was the same as Timothy's who learnt the faith from his mother and grandmother<sup>26</sup>.

It is impossible for us to imagine the hardships these leaders suffered. They were frequently ostracized by their own people as well as subjected to the overt and covert racism of the dominant European's around them. They suffered the loss of their own ancestral lands and culture and yet were seen to have defected to join the enemy who took the land. The colonial and church authorities often gave them titles equal to their European counterparts yet when the crunch came they faced restrictions not suffered by their European peers.

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<sup>21</sup> C.V. Eckermann, *Kooniba, the Mission and the Nunga People*, 2010, 232. "Pastor Wiebusch, unwilling to risk the loss of the family to the mission,....impressed on him particularly his duty towards his children, whose training would be neglected if he left Kooniba, and, as his own account of the event ran, "That was when I became a Christian, when Pastor Wiebusch told me I shouldn't take my children away from the Word of God."

<sup>22</sup>

<sup>23</sup> These facts are drawn together from a little booklet *"Treasure in an Earthen Vessel, The story of Bobbie Peters, Hunch-Back Native Pastor"*. W. Arnold Long

<sup>24</sup> Eddie Atkinson went on to be ordained in the CofC c1928 John Harris, *One Blood*, 1990, 666.

<sup>25</sup> Max Hart, *Story of Fire: Continued*, 1997, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Max Hart, *Story of Fire: Continued*, 1997, 180.