

“SAFETY LAST”

1. *Crisis of confidence*
2. *What are we scared of? Church / Fear - Individual / fear*
3. *The remedy: Individual / Safety-last models Church / Mission priority*
4. *The role of the mission society*

[1. Crisis of confidence]

In January 1961 the USA put Ham, a four-year-old **chimpanzee** into space for **17 minutes**. Back-slapping scientists on the Mercury programme were pretty damn confident they would put the **first** man in space. Eleven weeks later, the Russians launched **Yuri Gagarin**, not just into space, but into a complete **orbit** of the Earth. It was a coup for Moscow.

I was visiting the zoo at the time and overheard two **chimps** talking. One told the other “We’re a little **behind** the Russians [bares teeth] but a little **ahead** of the Americans.”

Stung, President Kennedy told Congress in May that the USA should, **would**, aim to put a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth before the decade was out.

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Buzz Aldrin, the **second** man to step onto the Moon, said recently: “The achievements of Apollo were so **bold** and our subsequent efforts so **timid** that the energy of those years seems like a **youthful** dream.”

A glorious **adventure**, a farce, folly, or fraud? You choose.

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In 1908 CMS Victoria sent a **stockman**, a **teacher** and a **farmer**-turned-cleric to Roper River.

Together with three Queensland Aborigines they were to **proclaim** the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and **provide** a sanctuary for a race being systematically dispossessed and exterminated by pastoralists; to succeed where the police, government and ‘**civilised**’ Australians had failed.

This adventure was so **bold** and our subsequent efforts so timid that the energy of those years seems like a youthful dream.

[2. What are we scared of?]

What **imperatives** motivated these ventures? What **sustained** their protagonists?

In a pluralist society there is always a temptation to judge the importance of any statement of truth by the **number** of people who believe it. Truth, for practical purposes, is what **most** people believe. Christians have fallen into this trap.

While churches grow rapidly in other parts of the world, in Australia we continue to be a small, **shrinking** minority. If this is so, it is an example of that pruning which is **promised** to the church in order that it may bear fruit (John 15). It is **painful**. But Jesus assures us that ‘**My Father** is the gardener’. **He** knows what he is doing. And we can **trust** him. This is **not** a time for anxiety. This is the time for self-searching, repentance and **boldness**. God is faithful and he **will** complete what he has begun.

Kumar Abraham tells us that: The biggest enemy of evangelism is the western church which has retreated in **fear**.

What **are** we scared of?

I remember arriving in Buenos Aires for the **first** time on 1 April, 1992. **You** had given me a one-way ticket to Argentina. The freeway from the airport carves a swathe through **70** city blocks at the height of a third storey apartment. **Everything** had gone according to plan. But, **where** was God? I had previously travelled on **three** continents and encountered Christian fellowship where I **least** expected to find it. But **nothing** had prepared me for the doubt I now confronted. I was engulfed in a wave of **panic**. I felt **God-forsaken**.

What **might** have seemed exotic when I had a return flight booked now felt alien. **Where** was God? I **looked** around. High rise buildings flashed by on **either** side, among them churches and synagogues. The numerous church steeples and crosses did **nothing** to alleviate my anxiety. He was **not** to be found.

My curse was **broken**, fellowship **restored**, when Carlos Yabraian gave **thanks** for the wine, empanadas and the safe arrival of the Collies in a language I had yet to learn. Gracias Señor por la llegada de los Collie y estos alimentos. He **was** there after all.

We **KNOW** that there are no God-forsaken places. 'Behold, I am **with** you always.' We **know** that there are no God-forsaken places. But sometimes that is **not** how it feels. It **feels** unsafe.

"Is **Aslan** safe? Is he **safe**?"

"**Safe**?" replies Mr Beaver, "**Who** said anything about safe? '**Course** he isn't safe. But he's **good**. He's the **king** I tell you."

God wants to be our **only** comfort. But, going about God's business **feels** dodgy.

It takes **courage** to forgive. It takes **courage** to ask for forgiveness. It takes **courage** to do justice. It takes **courage** to love. It takes **courage** to grow. Talking about '**god**' is easy; it takes courage to talk about '**Jesus**'.

It takes courage to **ask** for courage. Asking for courage is **asking** for trouble. Or worse, it seems, **embarrassment!**

Yet, we can choose to be fearful **and** obedient at the same time.

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We are an **all-style-no-content** generation. We are a **risk-averse** generation. **Comfort** is king. Passion is **out** of fashion. But there is **worse** to come. We are raising a generation that is not only risk-averse but risk-**illiterate**.

Children are **no longer** allowed to fall out of trees. Teenagers, **denied** responsibilities and **shielded** from the consequences of their actions find themselves bewildered victims of their own negligence. I am haunted by the recent death of a young man in a car accident. His **teenage** girlfriend was at the wheel, naked and inebriated.

End of **game**.

But, wait, This is **not** a game.

My family attended a conference at the CMS centre at Katoomba where health and safety regulations **prohibit** children under the age of eleven from serving themselves at the buffet.

My daughter Katherine, then 10, was **incensed**. I **suggested** that she discreetly serve herself. But she would have **none** of it. She looked me in the eye and replied: **Serve** me!

The **interrogation** began as we drove home.

Dad?

Yes, dear.

Is it against the **law** to preach the gospel in Laos?

Yes, dear. It **is** against the law to preach the gospel in Laos.

Yet CMS is **sending** missionaries to preach the gospel in Laos?

Yes, dear. CMS **is** sending missionaries to preach the gospel in Laos.

But **I** cannot serve myself food at the CMS buffet.

No, dear. You **cannot** serve yourself food at the CMS buffet.

Our Argentine friends **assumed** that we were returning to Australia for the sake of our daughters' education. **Nothing** could be further from the truth. Australia is a **terrifying** place to raise children. Our God is **smaller** than ever.

Our universe used to be the size of our **living** room. If TV ratings are any indication, our world has now shrunk to the size of our **kitchen**. Don't tell me you haven't watched **MasterChef**.

[3. The remedy]

Former CMS missionaries, Michael and Petra Palmer, live with their three teenagers in the rectory at St Michael's **Vaucluse**. Their view of **Rose Bay**, the **Sydney Opera House** and **Harbour Bridge** is priceless.

Think **seven-digit** real estate.

Where do they spend New Year's Eve? Partying in their **privileged eyrie** as the harbour bridge and the western sky is lit by fireworks? **No**. At **10 pm** they carry a pair of canoes down to the harbour. They **paddle** the length of Sydney Harbour to experience the spectacle at close quarters. Two hours' dodging pleasure craft of all shapes and sizes in **darkness**. Navigating **six** kilometres by the light of torches and glow-sticks.

As the Palmer family launch their kayaks they are **heckled** by students from their daughter, Stephanie's school. **Some** are already drunk, but the night is **young**. When the mariners return at 2 am on New Year's Day the revellers that are able rise to their feet, give them a standing **ovation**. **Their** parents aren't into adventure. **Their** parents don't even know where they are.

Two risky behaviours. **One** is calculated and life-enhancing. The **other** is self-destructive and demeaning.

I was lucky. Before I was born, **my** Father turned his back on a family fortune to study for ordination. My **mother** married the heir to an industrial empire and ended up with an Anglican clergyman. In 1993 Mum and Dad retired from their last parish, **Wilcannia**, outback New South Wales.

If **parents** don't live adventurous lives, neither will their **children**.

Am I saying that mission is only for **adrenaline** junkies? **No**, of course not ... **Yes! Yes**, I am!

Safely **last!** Jesus of Nazareth did not come to establish a **church**. The Nazz came to start a **missionary** society. A **Go-Go** club. **Go!** And make disciples!

[4. The role of the mission society]

The Nazarene did not come to establish a **Sunday-centric**, sheltered workshop. The Nazz came to start a **missionary** society. A society that exists for the benefit of those **yet** to become members. A society that exists for **nothing** else but to draw men and women into Christ; so that they might become little Christs.

Church is the outcome of **mission**. Mission is **seldom** the outcome of church.

Go! Make disciples. Then, **feed** my flock.

The church is supposed to be God's instrument to grow the kingdom. Yet as long as mission remains an **option**, church remains an **end** in itself rather than a means to an end. As long as the church is an end in itself, it is a barrier, an obstacle, to growing the kingdom.

Friends, if **parents** don't live adventurous lives, neither will their **children**. If a **missionary** society isn't obedient to the safety-last Jesus and his mission, neither will the **church**.

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At Gethsemane, I see the **missionary** Jesus. **Knowing** fear. Preparing to go to a **God-forsaken** place. **Choosing** to go to a God-forsaken place.

Jesus **experienced** fear. He **feared** being misunderstood. He **feared** for his disciples; traitors and cowards to the **last man**. (The gender specific reference is **intentionally** exclusive!) He **knew** fear but was not conditioned by it. Just as he **knew** temptation but was not tempted, so also he **knew** fear yet was fearless.

Here on the Mount of Olives we see a member of the Trinity, God incarnate choosing to **go** to a God-forsaken place. For this purpose God, became man.

Our Heavenly Father must be **fed up** with our timidity. Yet, by grace, from where we fail to **go**, seekers **come**. This year Elspeth and I have been **privileged** to welcome to our church fellowship families from Shanghai and Teheran. Curious, incredulous even, I asked them what they find **attractive** about our church. They told me that they find Christian **peace** and **joy** irresistible.

Not through **our** missionary endeavour have they come. Am *I* any different to the average aussie? I **don't** think so. Christian peace and joy are **remnant** gospel fruits still tangible in our culture that we take for granted and even deride. Yet in a Christian church these seekers instinctively recognise their **source**. By the **grace** of God.

Hamid says "Islamic prayer is always **crying**, crying. If there **is** a God would he not want us to be joyful?"

There I **was** in our morning service with my hands in my pockets. **Hamid** to my right clapping in time to the music. His wife, **Monireh** to my left clapping in time to the music. I pulled my hands **out** of my pockets. I felt like a young girl nervously confronting a **whirring** skipping rope. [Bobbing head ... saying to herself] You **can** do it ... you **can** do it ... you **can** do it ...

The Nazz came to start a **missionary** society. All you have to do is say, **Yes Lord!**

He will **not** be thwarted. God is **faithful** and he will complete what he has begun.