

The Second Annual John Saunders Lecture

Australia –whose land?

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The John Saunders Lecture is an initiative of the Baptist Union of NSW Social Issues Committee and seeks to address contemporary social and ethical issues in Australia from a scholarly evangelical perspective.

The Revd John Saunders (1806-1859) was an evangelical Christian with a missionary heart, a keen intellect, a gift for public speaking, and a passion for Christian social responsibility. He is best known for his temperance work and his advocacy for justice for the Aborigines.

Introduction

I am grateful for this opportunity to speak on this important issue, one of the great issues facing Australia. I am not an expert, and to not speak from first-hand experience of the human suffering that lies within the question. I am in danger of speaking glibly in the face of an immense tragedy which has engulfed Australia since 1788, and in the face of the ongoing effects of that tragedy still present all around us.

However, what I am saying needs to be said, and I want to encourage Christians to take leadership in these matters.

I ask forgiveness from those indigenous people present here tonight for whom these matters are immeasurably and constantly painful. I assure you of my deep respect for you and for your full human dignity as men and women made in the image of God. I want to honour you and your people tonight. I hope that nothing I say will offend you or hurt you. I want this lecture to express the duty and debt of love that I owe you.

Our question is, ‘Australia – whose land?’

1. Australia is God’s land, given to the indigenous peoples of this land.

In his book *The Discarded Image*,¹ C. S. Lewis points to the immense contrast between the ways in which a person in Medieval Europe thought about the universe, and the ways modern people of the West think about the universe. He pictures a Medieval person going out to look at the stars on a cloudless night. Though that person would have thought that the earth was the geographical centre of the universe, looking at the stars he or she would have felt as if they were looking into the centre of reality, to God’s heaven, looking from the outside into the centre. A modern Western person knows that the earth is not the centre of the universe, yet, when looking ‘up’ at the stars, feels that the earth is the centre, and that the stars are ‘out there.’

Similarly, modern Western people assume that what they use belongs to them, that they own the land. They dislike a God who intrudes into their space, and makes claims on their possessions. For modern Westerners have lost the idea that land and universe belongs, not to ourselves, but to another, to God.

Yet God created all lands, all peoples, all that is; and God sustains all lands, all peoples, and all that is. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the bodies and minds and hearts that we are, all these are God’s constant gifts. If God did not sustain the universe, it would not exist. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without God our Father knowing and caring,² and, as all animals receive their daily food from God,³ so do we all, whether we know it or not. God created this land, its rugged natural beauty, its diverse and unusual flora and fauna, its mountains, deserts, its rivers and seas.

¹ C. S. Lewis, [1964], *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 119.

² Matthew 10:29.

³ Psalm 104:27.

And God, who created all lands, distributed lands to the peoples of the world. For, as Paul preached at Athens, ‘God...made from one ancestor all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and allotted the times of their existence, and boundaries of the places where they would live.’⁴

So all lands belongs to God, and he distributed them to many nations, setting the time and places where they would live. The land is God’s land. To respect and honour God is to know that he made Australia, and to treat the existing indigenous peoples who were here in 1788 with respect. The appalling theory of *terra nullius* treated people as if they had no significance. This was an insult to them, and an offence against God their maker.

Sometimes God re-allocates land, as recounted in Deuteronomy 2 when he dispossessed the Rephaim or Zamzummin to make room for the Ammonites, and dispossessed the Horim, to make room for the Edomites.⁵ More famously, God dispossessed the nations of the land of Caanan, to make room for his people, the Israelites. But this does not mean that every dispossession of land is the will of God. The normal situation is expressed in Amos 1 and 2, where Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab are condemned because of their attacks on their neighbouring peoples. So there we read that the Ammonites ripped open pregnant women in Gilead in the process of enlarging their territory,⁶ and for those sins, God sent them into exile. Even nations used by God to judge his own people, were condemned for unnecessary violence in that judgement.⁷ And great Babylon is condemned in Revelation 18, because ‘in her was found the blood...of all who have been slain on earth.’⁸

In many situations we do if God’s will’s includes the re-allocation of land. However our best moral rule for individuals and nations is to assume that theft is wrong. Even if we suspected that someone did not have full legal rights to the land on which they lived, we would not think it right to dispossess them: why would our rights be any more legitimate?

God in his mercy may have worked some things for good when the Europeans arrived in Australia, despite much that was evil. But that does not make that act of conquest and act of will of God. Europeans assume that theft is wrong, and our legal codes support that view. We do not assume that every theft reflects the will of God. Why should we think that the theft of land is any different?

While some European invaders of North America may have thought that they were God’s chosen people, as they dispossessed the indigenous people as the people of Israel dispossessed the Canaanites. It was a bold and unsustainable claim, and resulted in a mortal sin. Our actions in Australia may not have been based on that false Biblical claim, but were in effect sins as serious as those Americans. Pitched battles by Government troops at Richmond in 1795, at Parramatta in 1797, at Bathurst in 1824 or Pinjarra in 1834⁹ were as appalling as local murders by thugs and

⁴ Acts 17:26.

⁵ Deuteronomy 2:20-22.

⁶ Amos 2:13-15

⁷ Zechariah 1:15.

⁸ Revelation 18:24.

⁹ John Harris, [1998], *We wish we'd done more*, Adelaide: Openbook, p. 432.

thieves. It was, as Laurence Threkeld of the London Missionary Society wrote in 1837, ‘a war of extermination.’¹⁰

Of course there is a danger of overstating ownership of land and reverence for it. We European Australians are not free of the guilt of a kind of secular idolatry of the land. Even the people of Israel learnt that they could serve God in exile, and that in long term Salvation History, the land pointed beyond itself to a great and more substantial reality, a ‘better country’, ‘the city whose builder and maker is God.’¹¹ But loving our neighbours’ includes respecting what we call their property. Here is a reasonable question: ‘How could this white man come onto our land and start pushing us around?’¹²

But, are there not many examples of invasion and the taking over ownership of land?’ Yes, there have been many examples in human history of invasion and the taking over of the ownership of land. Similarly, there have been many examples of private theft over the history of the human race. We would not therefore defend or justify theft. It is one of the weaknesses of evangelical Christians that we are very aware of the rights of individuals, but less aware of the rights of groups of people or of nations. If someone stole our property, we would try to recover it. Similarly if the Japanese had successfully invaded Australia, and taken possession of it, we would have fought to regain possession of it.

Surely the principle of original gift is now unworkable? In some cases, it is impossible to know the nation to whom God first gave some land, and they may not exist at the present time. That is not the case in Australia. We know those to whom God gave the land, and we know when it was stolen from them. It is time for sorrow, repentance, and reparation. For the European invasion and capture of Australia similar to when the Council of Berlin in 1884 carved up Africa between Germany, France, England, Belgium, Italy, and Portugal. Australia is a particularly clear example of the continuity of indigenous ownership and possession of the land. The curious and painful fact is that while England and the other European nations have returned the African land to indigenous ownership, that has not happened in Australia, New Zealand the United States of America, or Canada. The British left India, and the British, Germans, French Belgians and Portuguese left Africa, and the Dutch left Indonesia, why has it not happened here? Perhaps we still need more winds of change. The practical answer is that the indigenous Indians, Africans and Indonesians were clearly in the majority, whereas in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America they are not. However, that is to say that genocide is to be rewarded. It would in fact be possible, even if very difficult and complicated for Europeans and others to leave Australia. I am not sure where we would go, but that would be our problem.

Ahab was an ungodly king of Samaria.¹³ He wanted the vineyard of Naboth, which was Naboth’s ancestral inheritance, given to his family by God. Jezebel, Ahab’s wife, caused Naboth’s murder, so that Ahab could take the vineyard. God sent the prophet Elijah with these two accusations:

¹⁰ As cited in Harris, 1998, p. 432.

¹¹ Hebrews 11:10,16.

¹² As cited in Murray Seiffert, [2008], *Refuge on the Roper: The Origins of Roper River Mission Ngkurr*, Brunswick East, Acorn Press, p. 29.

¹³ 1 Kings 21.

‘Have you killed, and also taken possession?’¹⁴ How would those European settlers have answered those questions?

We have already thought about Paul’s words in Acts 17. ‘God, who made from one ancestor all nations of to inhabit the whole earth, and allotted the times of their existence, and boundaries of the places where they would live.’¹⁵ We have committed a great crime. We have not only failed to acknowledge that God allotted nations times and boundaries in this land. In order to commit these sins, we have committed the even greater sin of failing to acknowledge that we all come from one ancestor, that we are ‘one blood’, that we are brothers and sisters of the indigenous peoples of this land. The doctrine of *terra nullius* treated people as if their existence had no meaning. But we must not treat people that way. For, as Calvin preached, the duty to love our neighbour extends to all.

Since [God] has stamped his image upon us, and since we share a common nature, this ought to inspire us to provide for one another. The one who seeks to be exempt from the care of his neighbour is disfiguring himself and declaring that he now longer wishes to be a man. For whilst we are human beings, we must see our own faces reflected, as by a mirror, in the faces of the poor and despised, who can go no further and who are trembling under their burdens, even if they are people who are most alien to us. If a Moor or a barbarian comes to us, because he is a man, he is a mirror in which we see reflected the fact that he is our brother and our neighbour; for we cannot change the rule of nature that God has established as immutable.¹⁶

God’s commandments are clear: ‘You shall not murder...you shall not steal...you shall not covet’.¹⁷ But we Europeans coveted space for a penal colony, new land, new opportunities, and great wealth. We coveted, and so we stole, and we stole, and so we murdered. We read in the Law: ‘Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbour’s boundary marker.’¹⁸ We not only moved the boundary markers, we removed them, and stole the land.

As one Christian commented in 1923, in language of the time:

The white men...took the best of the land for their sheep and cattle, killing the black men’s food... The blacks tried to drive these settlers out of their country...but the white men were not to be driven back. They armed themselves and made open war upon these poor blacks...As we look back over these years there is much that we have to be ashamed of.¹⁹

We can see the simple error of the Christians of Connecticut who expressed their views in these words in 1640:

¹⁴ 1 Kings 21:19.

¹⁵ Acts 17:26.

¹⁶ John Calvin, [1997], *Sermons on Galatians*, tr. Kathy Childress, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, on Galatians 6:9-11, pp. 624,625.

¹⁷ Exodus 20:13-17.

¹⁸ Leviticus 27:17.

¹⁹ No author named, [1923], *Neighbours of the Never-Never*, Sydney: Church Missionary Society, p. 16, as cited in Harris, 1998, p. 449.

Voted, that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; voted, that the earth is given to the Saints; voted, that we are the Saints.²⁰

However we have condoned the same action without any theological justification.

A pioneer worker with indigenous people, John Gribble, said:

If I am to work as a missionary, it must be on the lines of justice and right to the Aborigines of this land, in opposition to the injustice and wrong-doing of unprincipled white men. This is my decision and by it I stand or fall.²¹

2. It is right to apologise

It is right to say, 'Sorry'. For they were serious crimes and sins. They included the theft of land, which was not only the theft of livelihood, but also the theft of home, identity, and religion. They included murder and manslaughter, the destruction of social structures and culture, the breaking up of families, the desecration of the dead, and genocide, with no legitimate justification.

But are we responsible for the sins of others? My ancestors arrived from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales in the 1850s. As far as I know, none of them killed any indigenous people. But we have benefited from death and dispossession, and have grown wealthy from the poverty of others. If I discovered that my grand-father had killed a man, impoverished his family, and plundered his property to enrich himself, I think that I would try to find any descendants of the murdered man, and at least say sorry. For I would have benefited from that crime.

But what of the defence that many Europeans did not intend to do evil? No doubt there were some who did not intend to do evil, who did not realize the evil that they did, who intended to do good but who did evil, or who intended to keep at a distance, and so were complicit in the evil deeds of others. We have to face the fact that unintended evil still have grave consequences. If, by accident, I killed a person while driving my car, I still have to face the reality of what has happened. In that situation, whatever the legal judgement, I would still think it right to go to the family of the person whom I had killed to say sorry.

Do churches have any responsibilities in these matters? Why yes, because the land and wealth of churches came from land that had been stolen from the indigenous people of Australia. I was Vicar of St Jude's Anglican Church in Carlton, Victoria. The land on which the church was built was a 'Crown Grant.' That meant that the government stole the land and gave it to the church. We received stolen goods. However even if we had bought the land from another owner or from the government, it would still have originally been stolen land. The prosperity of our churches has come from the proceeds of crime. Saying sorry is the least we should do. So our houses, our churches, our colleges, our shops, our sports grounds, our parks, our courts, our parliaments, our prisons our hospitals, our roads, our reservoirs are stolen property. Churches that know the Scriptures and so know the will of God should be the first to say sorry.

²⁰ George F. Willison, [1964], *Saints and Strangers*, New York: Time Life Books, p. 421.

²¹ As quoted in John Harris, 'John Gribble', in Brian Dickey, [1994], *The Australian Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, pp. 137,138, Sydney: Evangelical History Association.

3. It is time to repent

However saying sorry is not enough. We need to repent.

- Saying sorry may just mean remorse, feeling sorry for ourselves, more self-pity.
- Saying sorry may mean no more than regretting that others feel they have been badly treated, without acknowledging that anything wrong has happened.
- Saying sorry might just mean that we recognize that bad things have happened, without acknowledging that we have committed sin for which we are objectively guilty.
- Saying sorry for the harm we have done to others, does not necessarily mean that we also acknowledge that any sin against another person is also a sin against God and before God, and for which we face God's judgement.
- Saying sorry does not necessarily entail a decision that we will not continue in the sin, or continue to benefit from it, or that we intend to remedy the wrong we have done.

It is time to repent, to turn from our sin, to acknowledge our sin before God. Repentance must lead to action, that of making recompense, as we will see.

Christian believers around Australia would be horrified at the thought of murdering their neighbours in order to steal their property, and would be highly offended if we suggested that they might do such things. But we have benefited because others have done these actions for us, and we continue to live off the proceeds of those crimes and sins.

Our guilt is great. If we tempted to excuse ourselves by thinking that perhaps God was punishing the indigenous people of the land by sending the Europeans, then we must acknowledge that we have greater committed greater sins. We prided ourselves on our civilization, and our Christianity. We have greater responsibility, and greater guilt, and should prepare ourselves to be invaded and cast out of the land when the time is right.

For nations sin, as John Saunders reminds us:

It is not for us to state in what degree this principle shall be applied to any particular people, nor to predict the precise moment of its application, but we may be sure that the unchanging word of God has been fulfilled, and is still accomplished toward every one of the tribes of Adam. The measure of forbearance, the weight of visitation, and the time of indignation are in the hands of the Eternal, but the certainty of a righteous retribution towards all is clearly established.

An additional point is also obvious, that if there be anything which falls for a swifter and a more severe punishment than another, it is the shedding of human blood. For this the nations receive a prompt and condign visitation. Oppression, cruelty and blood, gather the clouds of vengeance, and provoke the threatening thunder of the

Omnipotent, and attract the bolt of wrath. "Whoso sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed," was the decree of the Eternal when the life of the brutes was placed in human power, and the reason for this solemn distinction is "for in the image of God made he man." And this is a distinction which God has maintained, does maintain, and will maintain till the end of time.

It is a fearful thing to shed human blood, it is an act which has the deepest malefaction of heaven upon it - a curse from the dread power above...Pilate might wash his hands but he could not make himself guiltless of innocent blood.²²

We may feel that God is only concerned with the sins of individuals, that there are no shared sins.

However the Bible is deeply concerned with the sins of communities, from the sins of the people of God in the Old Testament to the sins of the church at Corinth, as when Paul calls on the church to be reconciled to God.

We may think that we are not the ones to repent, because we did not commit the sins.

However although the Bible teaches that we may not blame the sins of our ancestors for our suffering in order to claim that we are innocent,²³ it also give examples of repentance for the sins of ancestors, as in Daniel's prayer, when he confessed 'my sin and the sin of my people Israel,'²⁴ corporate and ancestral sin:

I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, 'Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances... All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice... O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbours... Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!'²⁵

Daniel confessed the sins of his community and of his ancestors.

Hear again the words of John Saunders:

²² Revd John Saunders, 'Claims of the Aborigines,' a sermon preached at Bathurst Street Baptist Church, Sydney, 14 October 1838.

²³ Ezekiel

²⁴ Daniel 9:20

²⁵ Daniel 9: 4 -19.

Our influence has been deeply fatal to the black. It might have been supposed, that a Christian nation colonizing the Australian wilderness would have sought to bless the original possessor of the wild; but so far from this, we have inflicted a series of wrongs, which I will now enumerate.

First, we have robbed him without any sanction, that I can find either in natural or revealed law; we descended as invaders upon his territory and took possession of the soil. It is not just to say that the natives had no notion of property, and therefore we could not rob them of that which they did not possess; for accurate information shews that each tribe had its distinct locality, and each superior person in the tribe a portion of this district. From these their hunting grounds, they have been individually and collectively dispossessed.

We have also destroyed their game, and the fine-spun arguments about wild animals are adduced to show that the kangaroo and the opossum are the property of him who first obtains them. But apply this argument to the aristocratic privilege of Britain, and it ceases to hold good; the lord of the manor could transport a man, exile him from his country, his family, and friends, for shooting a pheasant or snaring a hare; and the ground and the game, the sustenance and life of the New Hollander could be taken without compunction, or the offer of an equivalent. Surely we are guilty here.

Secondly, we have brutalised them. We brought the art of intoxication to them - we taught them new lessons in fraud, dishonesty, and theft...

Thirdly, we have shed their blood. I speak not of the broils and murders which might find a parallel in the conduct of the white toward the white, but out of those extra murders in which so many have fallen. We have not been fighting with a natural enemy, but have been eradicating the possessors of the soil, and why, forsooth? because they were troublesome, because some few had resented the injuries they had received, and then how were they destroyed? by wholesale, in cold blood; let the Hawkesbury and Emu Plains tell their history, let Bathurst give in her account, and the Hunter render her tale, not to mention the South, and we shall find that while rum, and licentiousness, and famine, and disease, have done their part to exterminate the blacks, the musket, and the bayonet and the sword, and the poisoned damper, have also had their influence and that Britain hath avenged the death of her sons, not by law, but by retaliation at the atrocious disproportion of a hundred to one. The spot of blood is upon us, the blood of the poor and the defenceless, the blood of the men we wronged before we slew, and too, too often, a hundred times too often, innocent blood.²⁶

We may still feel that as we did not commit the great sins of breaking several of the Ten Commandments: 'You shall not kill,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' that we should

²⁶ Saunders, 'Claims of the Aborigines'.

not have to repent. But the Bible warns us that the sign of God's wrath is not only that people commit gross sins, but also approve of those who commit gross sins:

Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.²⁷

Others coveted, stole and killed, and we still benefit from their actions. Even if we did not do the original actions, many of us complied with the policy of Assimilation, which, even if well-intentioned, was so destructive to the social structures of indigenous communities, as well as causing immense personal suffering. We still today benefit from those original sins. If we do not acknowledge that these were indeed sins, then we approve of what they did, and are complicit in their actions. A seared moral conscience, that does not acknowledge the presence of gross sin, is a sign of spiritual hardness of heart. And repentance must lead to recompense.

4. It is time to make recompense

If I have hurt someone, it is not enough to be sorry, not even enough to repent. I must also recompense the person, or else my repentance is shown to be a sham. The idea of recompense is not popular today, but it is essential. If I steal someone's car, then repent, I must return the car. If I steal someone's car, and smash it, and repent, I should buy the person another car. It is just common sense, and without it, we are not people of integrity.

Payment of recompense was required under the Law of Moses, namely five oxen for one ox, and four sheep for one sheep.²⁸ In the Gospels Zacchaeus is regarded as exemplary in his conversion, because his repentance was evident and public in his promise of recompense to those he had oppressed:

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.'²⁹

What of practical Christian teaching on this matter? Richard Baxter, a Puritan minister of the 17th Century, wrote extensively on the duties of Christians in his *Christian Directory*.³⁰ In Chapter XXXII, he wrote of 'Cases and Directions about Satisfaction and Restitution.' Here are some of his comments on common duty of believers to provide satisfaction and restitution when they hurt others:

²⁷ Romans 1:30-32

²⁸ Exodus 22:1.

²⁹ Luke 19:8.

³⁰ Richard Baxter, [1990], *A Christian Directory, The Practical Works of Richard Baxter, Vol. I*, Ligonier: Soli Deo Gloria Publications. It was written in 1664-1665, and first published in 1701.

- ‘Restitution is of the same thing which is taken away. Satisfaction is something different, for compensation or loss, but of equal value or use to the receiver. We should provide restitution, but if not possible, satisfaction.’

Who is bound to make Restitution and Satisfaction?

- ‘Every one that possesseth and retaineth that which is indeed another man’s, and hath acquired no just title to is, must make restitution.’
- ‘Those that concur in the injury, being accessories, are bound to satisfy.’
- ‘To whom made? To the true owner, if that cannot be, then to his heirs, who are the possessors of that which was his.’
- In the case of Murder, ‘The Damage of heirs, kindred and creditor, must be repaired to the offenders estate.’

He then gives some useful Directions:

- ‘Foresee the trouble of restitution, and prevent it. Take heed of covetousness, which would draw you in such a snare.’
- ‘Do nothing which is doubtful, if you can avoid it, lest it should put you to the trouble of Restitution.’
- ‘When really you are bound to restitution or satisfaction, stick not at the cost or suffering, be it never so great, but be sure to deal faithfully with God and conscience.’
- ‘If you are otherwise unable to satisfy, offer your labour as a servant to him whom you are indebted...’³¹

Of course we cannot earn our forgiveness from God. Forgiveness of any sin is always a free gift, given to us by our God of grace through the atoning death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Restitution, satisfaction, recompense are not ways to earn forgiveness, but are signs of true repentance. They are signs of costly grace, rather than cheap grace³² The scandal of God’s free grace is that he even forgives theft and murder. But Christ’s blood, though it makes us clean, does not remove the duty of restitution and recompense to those we have harmed.

As early as 1832, two Quakers, Backhouse and Walker, urged the British Government to return 20% of the land to the Aborigines, to no effect at that time.³³ As Saunders preached:

³¹ Baxter, *Christian Directory*, 896-898.

³² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, [*The Cost of Discipleship*, London: SCM Press.

³³ ‘Does Australia need a Treaty with its indigenous people?’ no author named, but submitted by World Vision Australia, in *Faith and Life*, Issue 2, July 2009, p. 11.

Then it is at once our duty, and our wisdom to humble ourselves in penitence before God. But repentance supposes reformation, and where injuries have been inflicted it involves recompense....But the next step to reformation is restitution. And do we start at this word? It is one an honest man need never shrink from; it is one a noble mind will never discard; it is one which religious man will cheerfully adopt. It is our duty to recompense the Aborigines to the extent we have injured them.³⁴

We European Australians often claim that one of the strengths of the Australian character is 'caring for the underdog.' That claim is rank and blatant hypocrisy. We do not act with justice, let alone care.

I recognize that some people have done their best to care for indigenous people, and to remedy wrongs. I recognize that some Christians have also done their best to remedy wrongs, to care for indigenous people, and to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Thankfully there have also been efforts to provide some sort of recompense. The Aboriginal Protection act of the Queensland government of 1897 aided the provision of Reserves. The recent Mabo judgment of 1992 and Native Title Act of 1993 has enabled some repossession of land, especially in northern Australia. In some parts of Australia there has been a policy of securing pastoral lease or freehold land for it to be owned and controlled by native title holders. These are encouraging first steps: I think that a more drastic act of recompense is required.³⁵

5. **Recompense: a practical proposal**

What might recompense, or what Baxter called 'satisfaction' require of us who arrived since 1788?

- i. We would recognize that recompense is a duty and responsibility, that we owe it to the indigenous peoples of this land, out of respect for them as our brothers and sisters made in God's image, and out of awareness of the vileness of the crimes which have been committed against them and their ancestors.
- ii. We would recognize that recompense is based on our duty, not the needs of indigenous people. I am not saying that we should not care, but that we must act with integrity and justice.
- iii. We would recognize that no recompense could ever be satisfactory, because what was done was so vile, so immense, so universal, so pervasive, so destructive, so devastating, and so irreparable.
- iv. We would ask the indigenous people if they wanted those of us who have arrived since 1788 to leave [Baxter's 'Restitution'], or to provide an equivalent recompense [Baxter's 'Satisfaction']. Leaving would be a drastic and complicated action, but, as I have pointed out, it has happened in India, Africa, and Indonesia in the last sixty years.

³⁴ Saunders, 'Claims of the Aborigines'.

³⁵ See Harris, 1998, pp. 429-496 for background to land rights.

- v. If we do not leave, then we would need to ask each of the indigenous peoples of this land what kind of recompense would be appropriate for them. This would be an extremely complicated and extensive task, but must be done.
- vi. We would need to be prepared to give costly recompense, lest it trivialize what has happened.
- vii. We would then need to adopt a national recompense policy, in the form of a Treaty. It would need to be implemented locally, according to the wishes of each indigenous tribe.
- viii. By negotiation, it could be a one-off act of recompense, or it could be a constant and long-term series of acts of recompense.
- ix. We could also implement voluntary recompense by churches in a coordinated way, and should include support of indigenous Christian ministry and training, as negotiated by the leaders of Christ's indigenous people. Christian churches should lead the way in this, not least in supporting indigenous Christians and their ministries. For churches too have benefited from the land they use, and from income from those who have usurped the land.

It would be difficult to agree to do this, complicated to negotiate, and costly and demanding to deliver. The alternative is to fail in our moral duty, to admit that, for Australia, in Martin Luther King's words, 'the bank of justice is bankrupt.'³⁶ We owe the indigenous people of Australia not only their full rights as citizens of our nation, but also recompense for the damage we have done. Recognizing citizenship and recognition of Native Title are just the first steps in a long process of appropriate restitution and recompense.

The idea of recompense is not alien to our society. As one well-known example, James Hardie has had to provide recompense to workers harmed by working with asbestos. There is wide-spread feeling that this is right. If this recompense is right, then it is also right to offer recompense to the indigenous people of Australia.

Ernest Gribble, a son of John Gribble, and also a worker among indigenous people said:

We have a three-fold debt to pay to the Aborigines. We owe them a debt for the country we have taken from them. We owe the race reparation for the neglect and cruelty... We owe them the best our civilization has to give, and that is the gospel of our Lord.³⁷

It is time to pay our debts: for, Paul, writes,

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are

³⁶ Martin Luther King Jr. 'I have a dream.'

³⁷ As quoted in John Harris, 'Ernest Gribble', in Dickey, 1994, pp. 136,137.

summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.³⁸

Love involves duty, as well as charity. We have wronged our neighbours. It is now time to pay our debts, to confess our sins, to give the recompense that we owe. We who know God's great love in Christ should be the most active in loving others. May God strengthen us to love the Lord our God, and so to love our neighbours.

³⁸ Romans 13:8-10.