

GEOFFREY CYRIL BINGHAM

1919–2009

HIS PUBLIC LIFE AND MINISTRY

Funeral Oration 10th June 2009

Martin Bleby

with acknowledgements to Geoffrey Bingham and Lesley Hicks

Geoffrey Bingham was born in New South Wales on 6th January 1919—the Christian festival of the Epiphany, or the manifestation of Christ to the nations. Geoffrey proclaimed the gospel in twenty-six countries, and made a lasting impact on this nation of Australia. In 2005 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia ‘For service to the community through Christian ministry, encouraging cross-cultural theological education and as an author’. I have here a hand-written letter from Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, written to Tim Leeder:

Dear Tim,

Thank you for your thoughtfulness in letting me know about your grandpa’s funeral. I am very sorry that I am unable to join you in celebrating the life of a remarkable Australian, who gave so generously and so courageously in serving our country, a man who stood for the finest values and principles. You and your family are in my thoughts in your grief and sadness.

Yours sincerely,

Quentin Bryce.

As a boy, Geoffrey knew he was going to be a preacher of the gospel, even before he was converted to belong to Christ at the age of twelve. Always conscious of ‘the Presence’—the inescapable awareness of God—both in and outside the church building, he loved wandering in the bush around Wahroonga. Here he gained his early appreciation of God’s creation—particularly the birds, the animals, and the human creatures—which was to remain with him all his life. He would later say that the primary thing in all history is creation, as far as God is concerned. God goes to the trouble of redeeming, because He loves His creation, and is determined to bring it to the goal of His plan and purpose for it—the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells!

With his conversion at the age of twelve, he came into the total forgiveness of all his sins and the joyful freedom from guilt that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. He immediately set about trying to convert his whole family, in what he would later say was a presumptuous way, and he has never ceased since bringing people to that knowledge of God as Father that comes through our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ’s saving death and resurrection and Lordship over all.

Geoffrey entered Moore Theological College, Sydney, in 1939, but in 1940 he enlisted for Army Service with the Australian Imperial Forces, serving until 1946. He became a physical training instructor and, as a Sergeant, was head of a cable-laying team in 8th. Division Signals. He was in Malaya from 1941. He was decorated with the Military Medal and a Mention in Despatches for bravery in the field. Badly wounded, he was a Prisoner of War

from February 1942 to August 1945 in Changi and Kranji Prisoner of War Camps on Singapore island. When partially recovered from his heavy wounding he was appointed Librarian in the hospital.

It was here in prison camp that Geoffrey's faith in God was confirmed, and much of his later theology was forged. Here, among prisoners as well as their captors, he saw human depravity at its worst, and so came to appreciate the depths plumbed by the action of the cross of Christ to redeem us. Ever since, as a keen observer of humanity, and as a participant in human life and action in many different settings, he has made it his business to see that human beings are accorded their true God-given honour and dignity. Along with this has come his fierce opposition to anything that would belittle or demean human persons. Here in prison camp was settled, in the oft-related incident of the rice cakes, his understanding of the eternal law of God as love, and of the universe as a moral entity. It was in Kranji hospital camp that Geoffrey experienced, with a group of men who met together around the Scriptures, the vital reality of true human community in God, that issued freely in practical acts of love. Here, at one time close to death, he heard God say: 'Thou shalt not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord'. A leaflet encapsulating the heart of Geoffrey's teaching is enclosed in the order of service—not for reading now, but for later!

Geoffrey returned to Sydney in 1945 and on being discharged in 1946 went on to be married to Laurel Chapman of Turramurra. For sixty-three years of married life together, Laurel has helped to make possible Geoffrey's unstinting ministry of preaching, teaching and writing, while exercising her own Christian ministry in the family and beyond. Their six children, eleven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren are listed at the end of today's order of service. Geoffrey's teaching, counselling and writing on marriage, human sexuality and family living has been profound and far-reaching.

Geoff and Laurel then went farming at Eungai on the north coast of New South Wales to put into practice the love that had come to them in God, particularly as Geoff had experienced this in the prison camp community, and to enable Geoff to continue his writing. Thirty-four of his short stories were published in *The Bulletin*, and some were included in other anthologies.

Geoffrey then returned to Moore Theological College where he obtained First Class Honours in the Australian College of Theology Th.L course, second class honours in the Moore College Diploma. He became Rector of the Garrison Church at Millers Point for four years, had a wide ministry in evangelism and teaching throughout Australia, and was the Honorary Vice-Principal of The Sydney Bible Training Institute. His church experienced something like a powerful revival. This came about after Geoffrey was shown by God the emptiness of anything built on the power of personality, and both he and Laurel received an empowering dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Geoffrey's thoroughgoing teaching on the Spirit of God has saved me and many from the superficialities and pitfalls that can accompany renewal movements.

Geoff and Laurel and their growing family then served for ten years in Pakistan with the Church Missionary Society where he was Founder Principal of the Pakistan Bible Training Institute, and a wide ranging speaker throughout West and East Pakistan, India and Ceylon. He was a delegate to the first World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin in 1966, and in 1968 to the South East Asian Congress on Evangelism at Singapore. He took many clergy conferences in different countries, and lectures in a number of theological seminaries and colleges. It was on one such occasion, taking studies on the Cross at a convention in Calcutta, that Geoffrey was given a rich and lasting apprehension of the personal reality of knowing God as Father. Geoffrey's subsequent teaching on the Father and His Family has been called his most distinctive contribution to theology, and to people's lives. Towards the end of his

time in Pakistan he witnessed a powerful revival—this in addition to two previous awakenings. These experiences of revival left him with an indelible impression of what true faith and life can be, and never allowed him to settle for anything less in the life of the church.

Perhaps because of this, it was not easy for him on his return to find his place in the life of the church in Sydney, and God had other plans for him. From 1967 to 1973 he was Principal of the Adelaide Bible Institute, later the Bible College of South Australia, in Victor Harbor, where the student body of seventy grew to one hundred and twenty in two years, and his Monday Night Lectures in Adelaide, and other ministries of missions and conventions, were palpably fruitful. Many lasting and powerful ministries across Australia and beyond have been the fruit of these years.

Sensing a wider ministry beyond Bible College campus he—in concert with a number of like-minded folk—founded the New Creation Teaching Ministry in 1973, becoming its Executive Director. The present site for New Creation at Coromandel East in the Adelaide Hills was provided in a remarkable way in 1975–76. Missions, teaching series and Bible schools in various venues followed, and others were drawn onto the team as the site grew into a large campus with a fully equipped teaching centre, library, publication, sales and administration facilities, and a print room. Geoffrey's published books number over two hundred—theology, Bible commentaries, short stories, novels, essays, poetry and hymns—along with materials he has encouraged others to write—all freely downloadable on the website. Thousands of teaching talks have been recorded on cassette, MP3, video and DVD to spread the teaching across the globe. True to the voluntary principle that Geoffrey learned from Roland Allen's writings, all of this has been funded by God through the unsolicited gifts of God's people. Wide-ranging as this New Creation Teaching Ministry has been, Geoffrey was never contained by it, but ministered far and wide. Remaining a loyal Anglican minister, he never sought to become a new church, but served across all denominations to supplement and strengthen their ministries.

We have received this message from Pastor Bill Vasilakis, writing on behalf of the Heads of Christian Churches here in South Australia:

Last Friday the Heads of Christian Churches in South Australia met for our bi-monthly meeting. Part of our discussion centred around the incredible legacy Geoffrey Bingham has left to the State of South Australia and the wider Australian and International community in the form of his inspirational preaching, and insightful writings around the centrality of the Cross of Christ.

I remember as a university student, and then as a young pastor at the Christian Family Centre, in the 1970's being deeply influenced by Geoff's ministry. For example a set of Geoff's audio tapes on the Book of Romans had a significant impact on my life and ministry for several years. I then, like hundreds of other pastors, devoured his books and they became fuel for my own teaching and preaching ministry. Geoff's work will be timeless and, as an example, our youth and young adults pastor shared from one of Geoff's books in our monthly staff chapel service a couple of weeks ago.

I, like so many others, had the privilege to sit under Geoff's ministry on many occasions and in recent years came in contact with him once again as he ministered at a small Greek Evangelical church, where he regularly helped this new congregation in their spiritual journey.

He was deeply loved and highly respected by everyone who got to know him and his fervency of faith, integrity of heart and intolerance of a cross-less Christianity shone out of him through to the end.

The Heads of Christian Churches wish to express their condolences to Laurel, his children and grandchildren, and also express their thanks to God for a 'good and faithful servant' now gone to his reward. Geoff's legacy will not be forgotten and his influence will continue to be felt through many generations.