

# Publishing Editor's column

I WAS AMUSED to read recently that David Beckham, perhaps the world's most famous soccer player, when asked if he was going to have his child baptized, replied, "Yes, but I'm not sure what religion". This anecdote appeared in an article by an Anglican clergyman to illustrate the fact that many people today are completely ignorant of religion but have a vague desire for some sort of religious identity. Beckham, and his pop singer wife Victoria, have been cited as role models for today's young people. They are conspicuously wealthy and materialistic, and stars of the worlds of sport and show business, which makes them modern-day icons, most apt as an illustration of the accuracy of Paul's words to Timothy in relation to the world we live in: "lovers of money . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Tim. 3:2,4, RV).

In a bid to counteract declining churchgoing, many churches have attempted to reconnect with people by linking into their widespread interest in sport and entertainment. This is evident when there is a major soccer tournament, such as last summer's World Cup. In order to compete with the attraction of a big match on a Sunday, churches hired big-screen televisions and invited families to come to a short service before watching the football. We occasionally receive through the door a copy of an evangelical publication, mostly about personalities of the sport and entertainment worlds with 'Christian' beliefs, but it contains hardly any Scripture. Churches have services of blessing for pets, motorbikes and even teddy bears in an attempt to bring some people through their doors, often with considerable effect on the day, but not for any length of time.

The situation is that few people are willing to commit themselves to a church, or to a set of beliefs, or to a way of life, but have not abandoned religion altogether. According to one set of figures, two-thirds of Britons sometimes pray, and research by a major motoring organisation discovered that three-quarters of motorists occasionally do so. Much of this is no doubt petition in time of trouble, with very little of the praise and thanksgiving to God that are an important part of prayer. Few people hold to any doctrinal creed, yet many are attracted by the vague and muddled notions of 'New Age' thinking, or have a belief in the supernatural. People think

of religion solely in terms of what they can get from it, abandoning any idea of responsibility to God or of following a pattern of life because it is God's will. People do not generally have any clear conception of what orthodox Christianity teaches, let alone what the Bible says.

In such a situation religion is no longer a regular topic of discussion by people, nor something that attracts much interest. In nineteenth-century Britain, lectures which challenged contemporary beliefs by putting forth Bible teaching filled halls; today we are pleased to get one or two to a special lecture. New methods of preaching have been devised and tried: Bible exhibitions; Bible reading groups; Bible reading seminars; telephone call lines; correspondence courses. These have considerable success in attracting interest in the Bible but little success in getting people to recognise the need to accept its teaching. Like the churches, though not to the same degree, we seem sometimes to be pushing out our limits as to what we will do to attract interest: Christmas carol services, coffee mornings and puppet theatre, for example. Many of us are uncomfortable with such activities, and rightly so, I believe.

Paul urged Timothy to "preach the word; be instant in season, out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2). Ezekiel was instructed to carry out his work as a prophet, "whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear" (Ezek. 3:11). We who live in the apathetic and materialistic Western world, and have perhaps become apathetic ourselves, can take comfort in the fact that the Truth still has its appeal in places such as India or Africa. God's Word is still calling men and women to the way of salvation elsewhere in some parts of the world while we await the coming of the Master. In the meantime we must persevere in our preaching, for one here and one there still respond to the Word amidst the general apathy. Noah preached for 120 years about the coming of the Flood and the need to take refuge in the Ark, yet he had no response outside his immediate family. Our society has not sunk to such depths of unbelief or indifference. Some in Noah's day may have believed at first, and fallen away in the years of apparent delay. So may we, if we fail to hold fast to the Word but become caught up in the ways of the world in which we live.

*Tony Benson*