

But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship.  
Acts 27.11.

Having listened to Paul's defence, King Agrippa knew that he had done nothing wrong, but because Paul had appealed to Caesar no less, he was now in the system, and to Rome he had to go. So they set sail for Italy and here ch27 records the journey from Caesarea via Cyprus to Crete. But it was at Crete that things started to go wrong. The wind got up. Paul told them to wait, but the Centurion, under pressure to be in Rome as soon as possible, ignored him and followed the ship's pilot's advice that it would be all right. After all, what did Paul know? Surely the ship's pilot was the expert. And the ship's owner would hardly risk his ship, would he? So the centurion listened to the advice of the experts, the advice he wanted to hear, and away they went - but with disastrous consequences. A terrific storm ended in shipwreck.

Well, so much for the experts! Paul, the tentmaker and rabbi who knew nothing about the sea was right. I heard a good definition of an expert a long time ago: 'ex' a has-been, and 'spurt' a drip under pressure. How many Russian experts did we have, and not one of them predicted the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the total collapse of the USSR? We witnessed a catastrophic collapse of banks and the biggest recession for over seventy years, and yet not one economic expert predicted it. The Queen put it well: 'if it was so big, why did no-one see it coming?' No wonder economics is called 'the dismal science'. Some-one once called it guess-work in jargon. But my granny could have told me that debt is bad.

Experts are very often wrong because they group themselves around a consensus. It is called Groupthink. Everyone signs up to a prevailing orthodoxy which individuals are fearful then to question. Words like bandwagon, peer-pressure, collectivism, spring to mind. Then opinions become so right they're wrong. People agree too much. That is groupthink. It led Ibsen the playwright to say: 'the majority is always wrong'. A fisherman would know that only dead fish swim with the current.

Until harsh reality kicked in recently, the groupthink was spend, spend, spend. Debt is OK. Remember all those leaflets coming through your letter-box day after day offering easy credit? We allowed ourselves to be bewitched by rapacious money-lenders. Debt is good, we were told. It is fuelling the economy, the 'experts' told us. Never mind what your old granny used to say. Like the centurion, we followed the expert advice we *wanted* to hear, and covered our ears to the truth.

Only dead fish swim with the current. After WW1 when everyone was naturally sick of war, Winston Churchill urged the country to re-arm. The whole establishment, the whole nation, turned on him as a war-monger and a trouble-maker. The groupthink in the 1930s was 'appeasement'. Wasn't that the best way to deal with nice Herr Hitler? But Churchill was right.

Let me tell you about a remarkable man called Rick Rescorla, a Cornishman who went to the US to fight in the Vietnam War and who afterwards joined Morgan Stanley in their HQ in the World Trade Center as their Director of Security. In 1992 he warned of the possibility of a terrorist bomb in the underground carpark of the World Trade Center, because it was

the symbol of American economic power. He was ignored. In 1993 a terrorist bomb exploded only 30 yds from where he predicted. Rick Rescorla knew that the Islamic terrorists who failed the first time would try again. He fantastically predicted that the terrorists' next attempt would be to fly a plane into the building. He strongly urged Morgan Stanley to quit Manhattan for new premises in New Jersey. They ignored him because the lease was not due to run out until 2006.

Of course, the rest is history. In 2001 9/11 happened. And even on that dreadful day itself, when Rescorla was proved right, the authorities were still giving out the wrong advice. Since Morgan Stanley would not move, the next best thing, Rescorla thought, was to practise evacuation drills over and over again. This made him very unpopular and many thought he was mad. But on the day, the official advice, when the planes struck, was to stay put. It was *this* advice which caused so many people to die. Rescorla urged people to follow his well-rehearsed evacuation drill. In the event, he was able to get 2,700 people out to safety, He himself died trying to get others out who followed the official instruction to stay put.

Paul was right, the sailing experts were wrong. Churchill was right, the appeasers were wrong. Rick Rescorla was right, the officials disastrously wrong on 9/11.

In our country today, the groupthink is that Christianity is a lot of tosh. The experts say that it is a childish delusion, a crutch for weak people. No-one goes to church today, especially the young. So surely the majority is right? Right? Wrong! Rick Rescorla was in a minority of one.

Seventy years ago thousands upon thousands came to listen to Adolf Hitler at the Nuremberg rallies. 2,000 years ago only a handful of people stood around the Cross of Jesus. Who was the one speaking the truth? Hitler mobbed by thousands or Jesus with the few? Things are not true just because millions believe them. Truth is not a democracy, something to be voted on.

Paul who was no seafaring expert warned them not to put to sea. He was right. The centurion, the captain, the shipowner, were wrong, because they were following their personal agendas. Paul tramped around the Roman empire telling people about Jesus. Some listened, some didn't. But being in a tiny minority in a vast sea of paganism did not make him wrong.

We Christians today in our increasingly pagan and aggressive secular society find ourselves also in the minority, sneered at, pushed out of public life. They sneered at Winston Churchill and Rick Rescorla, but they were right. A second world war? Planes flying into the World Trade Center? Wise up! But they stuck to their guns and saved lives. That's courage!

If we Christians speak of sin, and hell, and judgement, the population at large will laugh at us too. But we are right. How? Because God has told us in this book. Rick Rescorla was right. Thank God he didn't worry too much about being popular. How many would have died if he and Churchill had worried about being liked? And how many will perish if we Christians don't tell people about God's righteous judgement, the reality of hell, and the need of Jesus the Saviour? Don't follow groupthink. Listen to the truth. When Jesus was transfigured God said: 'this is my beloved Son. Listen to *him*'.