

LOOK, Here Is Water

You can lead an Anglican cleric to water but you can't make him get into it - or so it seems after reading Michael Green's latest book 'Baptism: Its purpose, Practice and Power' (Hodder, £1.95, 141pp). Leaving the issue of infant baptism aside for the moment, Michael Green has written a clear and popular exposition of the meaning of baptism. He begins by showing that baptism contains three strands - the human side (repentance and faith); the churchly side (baptism into the Body of Christ); and the divine side (forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit). Not much wrong with that. He concludes with a chapter on Spirit Baptism which is very helpfully dealt with (honestly, there is no need for any theological ink to be spilt over Michael Green's handling of the Scriptures on this point). However, the middle part of this book is very likely to give any self-respecting Baptist severe bouts of apoplexy. Well-worn and (very) surprising arguments are brought out in defence of properly administered infant baptism and confirmation. But this reviewer was left marvelling at some of the mental gymnastics involved in advocating this position. He was also perplexed by several passages that made about as much sense as gobbledygook - perhaps cases of the 'argument weak, shout louder' syndrome.

Having said all this, the challenges to me after reading this book were other than theological. The first challenge is this - where is the equivalent popular, well researched, short paperback written from the believer-baptism viewpoint? The nearest I've got to it is George Beasley-Murray's 'Baptism Today And Tomorrow' published in 1966. Several Reformed Baptist books have been written much more recently but they don't match the easy style of Michael Green's book.

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The second challenge is the need to face up to the characteristically deficient understanding to be found in our churches of the rich biblical material on baptism. The baptismal apologetic of the average church leader is abysmal. All too frequently all we hear about baptism is that it is an act of witness.

The third challenge is the sheer diversity of the practice of baptism among Baptists. Is this really something to glory in? Some baptise immediately (tough if you haven't got a change of clothes). Others baptise at Easter. Some baptise children, others will not. A few advocate that it is inappropriate to baptise a believer of long standing because baptism is essentially an act of incorporation and initiation and therefore belongs only at the beginning of Christian experience. Some churches only admit members who have been baptised as believers. Some churches with 'open' memberships admit those who have never been baptised in any shape or form (irony of ironies!) many are baptised in our churches who do not become members. And so on.

It can only be concluded that this Baptist distinctive is remarkably indistinct. Indeed, we seem to hold views of baptism that are incompatible. At least Michael Green claims to know what Anglicans believe and is convinced about it.

I would be glad to receive any submissions on this matter for publication. I advise you that anything over 1200 words is unlikely to be published. For what it is worth I will state some of my convictions about the practice of baptism.

1. I believe in 'open' membership (but 'closed' leadership). I will not make believer-baptism a shibboleth. I have welcomed (and subsequently baptised some) Anglicans into membership without insisting that they be baptised as believers. I will impress upon them the rightness of being so baptised but I leave it to the Holy Spirit to bring about a change of conviction. Too many Christians have been clubbed over the head with this issue when they really needed acceptance, patience and teaching. I have been very happy to live with this 'inconsistency' for the sake of fellowship in the gospel.

2. I will not baptise anyone who is not willing to accept the responsibilities of church membership. Baptism is into the Body of Christ and requires an unashamed identification with God's people.

3. I do not baptise children. I find it helpful to picture baptism as the putting on of the yoke of discipleship. In the Great Commission, baptism is linked with making disciples and teaching obedience to Christ's commands. Jesus invites us to place his yoke upon our necks and to learn from him (Matthew 11:29). Such a discipleship is a discipleship unto death. Such a serious responsibility cannot be grasped fully until at least puberty has been passed and faith tested in some discernable way. This I believe was the practice of the Anabaptists.

Some may think that I leave children who believe, in the lurch and not in the church. I would deny this charge. I meet many more people who regret having been baptised as a child (or as a young teenager) than those who are glad. All I would say is that children are not yet ready to make public vows and promises. Here I would draw an analogy with marriage. You may be in love with a childhood sweetheart and be great friends but you cannot marry such a person until you're 16 at the earliest. Such a commitment is inappropriate for a younger person to consider undertaking.

4. I do not regard infant baptism as a valid baptism and I have no qualms about 're-baptism' as it is so called. This issue calls forth a very sympathetic chapter by Michael Green for all those concerned. I find it odd that Michael Green is so anxious to emphasise one-stage initiation in his chapter on Spirit Baptism, and yet he is quite content to put an enormous distance between infant baptism and the moment of faith and repentance. He has to concoct a theology of confirmation to do this. I cannot see what advantage there is in treating an extra-biblical rite of confirmation and Michael Green is, I think, uneasy over this matter. Surely he is only succeeding in putting asunder what God has joined together in the act of baptism, namely, repentance, faith, forgiveness of sins, baptism in the spirit and into the Body. If the current baptistic approach is not ideal at least it is arguably more faithful to the theology of the New Testament.

And now we come to the well rehearsed arguments from Scripture for infant baptism. I don't propose to enter into detailed counter arguments but some comments can be made about Michael Green's approach. All paedo-baptists have to read the Old Testament as if it were the New, and the New Testament as if it were the Old. This approach fails to recognise sufficiently the historical character of revelation. The unity of the covenants is not to be found in the rites of circumcision and baptism. Ah, but what about the household baptisms of the New Testament? Michael Green has to resort to the argument from silence. But I feel that he begins to lose his sure touch of Scripture at this point. If anything, the evidence adduced in these passages excludes the possibility of infants being baptised even if some were present. There is always a covert appeal to sentimentality in this debate and it is present in Michael Green's book. Baptists do no more and no less than what Jesus did with little children, namely, bless them. Lastly, on Michael Green's use of Scripture, I was amazed to find Matthew 13:30 applied to the Church.

Those who want to read a de-bunking of the argument from history can do no better than to get hold of a copy of Paul Jewett's book 'Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace' (Eerdmans, 1978). He deals with all the other issues as well, in a very efficient and helpful way.

I remain thoroughly unconvinced by the central part of this otherwise excellent book. The only new argument that I came across was a curious, self-defeating argument from experience on page 79. I don't think Michael Green will be disappointed with my conclusions. His aim is to renew the confidence of Anglicans in the validity and efficacy of infant baptism in the face of a growing movement towards re-baptism within the Anglican Church. To be fair, he is very hard on the widespread misuse of baptism and he calls for discipline in its practice. His irenic spirit throughout this book is to be praised.

It is clear that water baptism will remain a very awkward issue for a long time to come. Meanwhile, let us put our own house in order - I think the swimming pool has a leak.

Terry Griffith.

Why Do We Seem To Have Good News Which Nobody Wants?

Good news is curiously difficult to communicate. Popularly we believe that 'no news is good news'. Conversely the media implies that good news is no news - they seem only interested in broadcasting bad news. There seems a curious connection between good news and silence. But we cannot dismiss so lightly the reasons why the church seems to have good news which nobody wants.

A Theological Perspective

It is a mistaken assumption that if we got our methods right people would immediately respond to the good news we have. An examination of the NT should save us from such simplistic thinking.

1. Jesus' teaching makes it clear that the message we have will be rejected by some. The parable of the sower (Mk. 4: 1-20) leads us to expect a varying response to the good news whilst the demands made on disciples (Mt. 10: 13-14; 22:14) cause some to reject the good news because the price is too high. John's gospel presents the rejection of the good news even more starkly through his concept of the world which is opposed to God and will not and cannot receive the truth of Jesus Christ (e.g. 1:11; 15: 18-25).

2. Jesus' own experience should caution us against expecting a mass and enduring response to the good news. Although at the start of his ministry there is evidence of mass popular support, it is clear that Jesus sought to discourage this. In John we read that his hard teaching resulted in many turning away and no longer following him (6: 60-71).

3. Certain groups within society were opposed to the good news Jesus brought from the beginning because he threatened their vested interests or challenged their blinded theological perceptions.

4. The later teaching of the New Testament continues to betray a minority consciousness. Although the ultimate triumph of God is emphasised and never in doubt there is a persistent understanding that Christians will stand over against mainstream society and that Christian truth will never be fully accepted by it (e.g. Phil. 1:27-30; 2: 14-16; 1 Pet. 4: 3-6 etc.).

5. Scripture goes beyond this description and attributes an explanation for this curious state of affairs. People are not free and unbiased agents able to make a neutral choice or come to a rational decision about the good news. The activity of Satan is an obstacle in the way of them making a positive response to the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4). The clearest presentation of the truth; the most reasonable explanation of the gospel; the most winsome of the gospel's messengers and the obvious and deep needs of people, all combined, still will not lead to the gospel inevitably being accepted.

6. Over against all this we must set the fact that the ministry of Jesus struck a chord with people and produced a response in a way which seems lacking today. The people sought him out, took their troubles to him, seemed confident that he could help and reacted with wonder and amazement at his teaching. Granting that he had unique authority as the Son of God, we may still ask what it was about his ministry that provoked such a response.

The central issue seems to be that the people perceived a relationship between their situation and needs; their interpretation of the world and what Jesus was saying and doing. An example of this can be seen in Mark 5. Many saw their situation as one of helplessness or powerlessness in the face of oppressing forces. They saw their world as bounded by horizons which were dominated by demons, death and disease. The coming of the kingdom of God gave them a way out of oppression and introduced them to a liberating authority which was stronger than the destructive authorities which intimidated them. So there was an important link between their needs and Christ's ministry which must not be overlooked. But the link took place within a ready-made framework - of interpretation - a supernatural view of the universe, the expected coming of the messiah etc. - for which their history and tradition had prepared them.

It is this resonance between the good news, the perceived need and the accepted framework of interpretation which seems absent today.

A Sociological Perspective

We might argue that one reason why we seem to have good news which nobody wants is that we really do not have good news at all. The temptation to preach a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all has always been a fact of the churches life (Gal. 1: 6-7). In Paul's day, and in some circles today, the temptation is to propagate a new brand of legalism. More commonly in our world it is to offer people a version of humanism over which we have laid a thin veneer of Christianity. We might also argue that the message is fine but it is the method of delivery which is wrong. But another perspective might also be adopted.

The social historians Currie, Gilbert and Horsley in their book Churches and Church-goers argue that response to the church's message depends chiefly on three factors; proximity, utility and congruity.

By proximity they mean that the churches and their members must be close enough to the people in physical terms if their message is to be heard. In many case our church buildings are close to where populations lived a century ago but have not kept pace with where they live now. A slow bureaucratic institution like the church is often ill-equipped to respond to the changing needs of a mobile population quickly. Whilst it may be doubted that building churches inevitably leads to a positive response to the good news, it cannot be doubted that there is an urgent need today to plant new churches in the new communities in which people live. Proximity, too, demands that church members must break free from their ghetto mentalities and build relationships with non-Christian sections of the population. This particular challenge is probably more applicable to the Free Churches or Evangelicals with their sectarian orientation rather than to the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches with their more positive orientation to the world.

By utility they mean that the church must be seen to provide services and facilities which prove useful to those who are not yet its members. In a way this expresses, twentieth-century style, what we have already seen in the ministry of Jesus, namely, that he ministered to the felt needs of people. But is a factor which gives rise to other considerations.

For many sectors of our society, although not for all, there are no felt needs although there may be felt wants. The welfare state has had a major effect not only in increasing comfort in life but in changing attitudes towards life. Thus, it has not only reduced mortality rates and prolonged life, but sanitized death by taking it largely out of the home. In doing so it has buried peoples' fears and emotions concerning death so that it is no longer the felt need it was in the Victorian era. Until recent financial restraints were imposed, there was a pervasive belief that life would get better and better and that sooner or later all our problems would be cured. Such an attitude was not conducive to looking beyond human resources to find help from God to deal with our felt needs.

But even where we have identified felt needs and ministered to them it is not always clear that it has enabled the good news to be heard and received. Sometimes we have been content to resolve the felt need without exploiting it as a sign of the kingdom or as a bridge for sharing the good news. Far from presenting people with costly grace we have therefore been content to act as a christian welfare organisation. So part of the answer to our question must be that we, as Christians, have often not acted as if we possess good news. We have been diffident and apologetic about it and certainly have not behaved as if we either have news or that it is good.

By congruence the social historians have social stratification in mind. They argue that the church needs to be a socially homogeneous unit and socially compatible with the people they are trying to reach. I want to develop the point in terms of cultural homogeneity rather than social homogeneity. We saw that Jesus provoked a response because he was speaking within an agreed framework of interpretation. His ministry harmonized with their world view. Whether we can find such congruence is a more difficult question.

Another Sociological Perspective

In *The Homeless Mind*, Peter Berger has outlined the features of our society with which our message must resonate. They are:-

1. Technology which has introduced a particular mind-set which includes a general belief in the world as a closed system and a disbelief in the supernatural. All problems are solvable without recourse to the miraculous and the supernatural is not considered real. God and spiritual truth therefore becomes less plausible.

2. Pluralism. Our world is peculiarly open. Education instills the virtue of taking all sides into account; mass communications brings all cultures to our doorstep; mobility renders people less and less fixed in their views as well as in their homes; open-ended discussions are valued more highly than dogmatic pronouncements. Pluralism also takes the form of a divorce between the public and private world. The public domain is the world of reality, of economics, business and technology. The private domain is the world of fantasy or leisure where nothing serious or of public consequence takes place. Religion fits in this private world.

3. Bureaucracy is the third feature and at first sight it seems less hostile to religion. But on reflection its influence is inimical. It introduces a culture which believes in impersonal and anonymous justice and which therefore is contrary to the Christian world view which centres on belief in a personal God of grace.

These are broad brush-strokes, but they reflect pervasive if sub-conscious attitudes and values. The good news we have will not be heard unless we take them into account as we communicate it. They are brush-strokes which paint a hostile picture for faith. Technology makes belief in a living and almighty transcendent God dispensable. Pluralism makes belief in the one who claimed to be the truth implausible. Bureaucracy finds grace untidy.

It is true that the picture is not quite as simple as has been painted since these values are not universally and consciously accepted. It does not surprise me when a friend, ministering in the heart-land of ICI, can claim that he has never met the secular man described here. There is still a residual amount of religious belief around, often of a superstitious kind. There is some fear as to where technology is leading us and whether it is not becoming a tyrannical master, every bit as oppressive as the demons of a former age. The anti-nuclear lobby is an expression of that. There is also a great deal of impatience with pluralism. Hence the toleration of the sixties is giving way to a new dogmatism in politics as can be seen in, for example, the success of Margaret Thatcher. And there is doubt as to whether the wheels of bureaucracy, which are grinding ever more slowly, will be able to cope with administering society in the future. The cost in all these dimensions is a people cost. Technology, pluralism and bureaucracy increasingly render people powerless and the protest against them is mounting.

Religions which touch the raw nerve of these discontents are strong and growing. The growth of New Religious movements is rapid, even if on a comparatively small scale. These movements are the kind that offer a set of teachings which run counter to the dominant values and question the accepted framework of interpretation. Religions which seem to have news which people do hear are those which offer spiritual experience instead of scientific rationalism; supernaturalism rather than naturalism; authoritative answers rather than endless and tolerant negotiation and personal grace rather than bureaucratic and achievement orientated formalism. Of course, this does not prove them right. It simply shows that they resonate with the deep and inner needs of man.

The Challenge before us Today

If we wish the good news to be heard we have to present it in such a way that it effectively challenges dominant interpretations of the world and exploits the uncertainties men have about it. So the need for subjective experience, community, grace and release from alienation and powerlessness are the points at which the needs of men can be met today. Yet, such an approach is dangerous. Moltmann in his Theology of Hope has argued that by responding to these needs we might only be creating cosy clubs for the righteous and in doing so we might be failing God. He says that we must reject the roles which society would impose upon us and display a kind of conduct which points beyond men's desires. In practice it does not seem to me to be a matter of either/or choices. By responding to the needs of ordinary men and women we are questioning the dominant values of society and will create opposition and invite persecution and ridicule. We will be standing just where Christ stood. Our gospel is one of release, light and life as well as of cost and a cross.

There are extremes in our society. Some live at the extreme end of powerlessness and are unresponsive to hope. Others live at the extreme end of contentment and are unresponsive to the thought of judgment. But most lie within this ambiguous middle. They live in a

world where officially God is implausible and unrelated by the church to their needs and yet, deep within, they know that such a world cannot possibly be right and that it certainly cannot be satisfying. Only as our good news resonates with people's needs and with their mind-set will it be good news which is heard. Apart from that it will remain a spiritual abstraction locked up in the church.

Helmut Thielicke has written,
The gospel must be preached afresh and told in new ways to every generation, since every generation has its own unique questions. This is why the gospel must constantly be forwarded to a new address, because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence.

We would do well to work out the new address before we decide to post the letter.

Some people do not want the good news because they are in the grip of evil or are spiritually blind. Some do not want it because it is not presented as good news - they do not like the look of the postman! Some do not want it because what is being presented is not good news. The message is phoney. But many more would accept it, if only we had not lost the address.

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The New Gospel of Health & Wealth



(The Editor is grateful for permission to reprint this article by Andrew Brandon which appeared in Harvester Magazine in February, 1987. Andrew Brandon is author of 'The New Gospel of Health and Wealth', published by Kingsway, priced £2.25).

The cross has always been something of an embarrassment. Jesus without the cross would be acceptable; the stigma drawn from Christianity like the sting from a bee. The cross has left its awful shadow over the two thousand years of history between the ugly death of the carpenter from Nazareth and our uncomfortable corner of the twentieth century. That cross has had a radical and disturbing effect upon millions of people. It led Francis of Assisi to renounce his wealth and become a pauper. Polycarp to burn at the stake rather than deny his Lord, Madam Guyon to endure the persecution of an unspiritual Church, and in our own century, it inspired Jim Elliot to lay his life for the Indians of South America. A Christ without the cross would be a popular fellow.

Name It and Claim It.

A new gospel has emerged which has done away with the stigma of the cross.

This 'new heresy', as Peter Cotterell has called it, is referred to under a number of evocative titles, each emphasizing a certain peculiarity of its theology: 'the Faith Message', 'the Theology of Success', 'the New Gospel of Wealth and Health', 'the Prosperity Message' and the 'Name it Claim it' movement. Wealth, health and long life are considered to be the rightful heritage of the Christian. Christ died to make the American dream a reality.

The curse that Jesus rescinded on the cross,² according to their theology, was not the curse of a broken Law, but the curse of sickness, financial disaster, premature death, mildew, , and so on.³ Through the death of Christ, sickness, poverty and all negative experiences are removed. To succumb to any of these evils is not deemed a misfortune but sin. Kenneth Copeland, one of the most exponents of this new gospel, is brutal in his equation of sickness with sin:

'You need to fight the temptation to be sick just as you would fight the temptation to lie and steal. Satan will tempt you with sickness, but you don't have to give in. You can resist him with the Word of God as Jesus did'.⁴

To those Christians who are cut down and crushed by sickness, the message is simple: If you had faith you'd be healed.

Biblical Support?

An interesting of this teaching is that many of its foremost champions rely on extra-biblical revelation. Jerry and Kenneth Hagin, for example, claim to have spoken to Jesus face to face. Many of their visions, in my opinion, have more to do with chicanery than Christ, and are often in conflict with scripture. Hagin, finding little support for a theology of wealth in the New Testament, recounts how Jesus appeared to him and said:

'If my children will listen to me, I will make them wealthy'.⁵

The is unmistakable: the impoverished Christians of the world have not listened to the voice of God; cold comfort indeed for the starving children and the troubled Church of Ethiopia and Sudan.

Words and Faith

The stress on wealth and health is merely the epiphenomenon of a deeper theological malaise. The gospel is totally reinterpreted. God, it is taught, created the world out of faith. The words of creation 'let there be . . . ', were the means by which God released his faith and brought the universe into being. This eccentric emphasis on words as the means of unleashing faith is carried over into the creation of man. To fulfill the creation mandate of dominion over the earth, man released his faith and controlled nature by speaking words. If, for example, an elephant were to trespass on a field that he was cultivating, Adam could speak the thing that he desired, 'Elephant you are no longer trampling my field', and the elephant would vanish in what can only be described as creation ex nihilo in reverse.⁶

After the revolt of man, Satan assumed control of man's tongue and used its unique creative potential to devastate the planet. In the redemption of Christ, however, the tongue is recaptured and tamed and used to further the work of God. To confess negatively, i.e. to confess to sickness, defeat, failure or any negative experience, is to bring about a corresponding result. To confess positively, i.e. to confess to healing even if the symptoms continue, is to bring about the desired effect.

God, in this theology, has relegated his sovereignty to the most unreliable and capricious of human organs: the tongue!

God's Sovereignty

The scriptures do not underestimate either the creative or malevolent power of the tongue, but sovereignty in human affairs is never attributed to it. God is the supreme ruler of history and human destiny.⁷

Furthermore, Hagin's statement that there can be no faith without confession finds no precedent in scripture. Faith in God precedes public confession and is not dependent upon it -

'Since we have the same spirit of faith as he who wrote, "I believe and so I spoke", we too believe, and so we speak'.⁸

Not content to remove the stigma from the cross, the majority of the prosperity teachers subscribe to a novel and heretical theory of the atonement. Christ's death, they teach, was a dual death. On the cross, Christ experienced physical death. Later, his spirit went to hell to be tormented by Satan. During this period, Christ experienced spiritual death and shared the evil nature of Satan. After three days, He was born again and raised to the Throne of the Father. This theory of the atonement is based on an inadequate knowledge of the original languages of the Bible. The A.V. translates Acts 2:27 as '... thou will not leave my soul in hell'. In fact, this is a very misleading translation of the Greek. The word accurately translated 'hell' is the Greek 'gehenna'. Whereas the Greek word in this passage is 'hades' a more general word describing the abode of the dead.

The theological and practical force of this view of the atonement must not be overlooked. Christ redeemed mankind in hell. In this theology, the blood of Christ has little significance. Hell, not Golgotha, was the place where Satan, sin and hell were conquered.

Where Does Authority Lie?

Rejecting Christ's claim to possess all authority in heaven and earth,⁹ the prosperity teachers argue that Christ was disqualified from wielding power on earth by reason of his resurrection. No longer a man but the 'glorified Christ',¹⁰ Jesus relinquished his power over the earth to the Church. Without his Body, Christ is powerless. God becomes the servant of man. But what are the practical implications of this teaching? Positively, the triumphalism of this new gospel engenders faith and encourages a spirit of victory.

Negatively, it leads inexorably into a religious fantasy world. To trade the truth for error has disastrous consequences. Already the British Church has recorded its first death. A young pastor, a convert of the prosperity teaching, refused to take his medicine and died, leaving a wife and three children to mourn him. Too late, the wife realized that the teaching was a lie.

Reality or Fantasy?

Those who practise positive confession do reap certain benefits. They tend to escape from the cynicism and defeatism that blights much Christian endeavour, but the refusal to admit to any negative experience gives them a distorted view of reality. This fact was brought home to me recently when I was talking to a young convert. He was a very likeable and attractive personality but had been influenced by the teaching of positive confession. During our conversation, I mentioned his tattoos. His reaction startled me. 'They do not exist', he said defensively. The tattoos were so conspicuous that it was impossible to miss them. Names of girl friends and other personal

memorabilia had been reduced to the skill of the tattooist's needle. 'What are they then?' I asked, pointing at the tattoos. Unperturbed, he replied: 'By faith they don't exist!' Faith, for this brother, was the denial of reality, his positive confession that the tattoos no longer adorned his body, the magic spell that made them invisible.

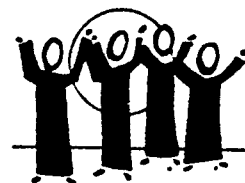
Western Materialism

Those who adopt a wealth theology tend to confuse the treasure of the Kingdom of God with the wealth of earth. The prayer letters and magazines of some of the prosperity teachers have a tragic/comic quality. To those who send in a donation, a hundred percent return is guaranteed on the gift as well as a thirty three percent restoration of all that Satan has stolen. As if this isn't enough, each donor will receive, free of charge, a replica widow's mite in a genuine calf-skin wallet. This Stock Exchange gospel makes the ministry of giving highly attractive. Who in their right mind would not invest money if a hundred percent interest was certain? The theology of wealth is the perfect justification for Western materialism and consumerism. The Jesus of the prosperity teachers has more in common with the J.R. of Dallas than the central figure of the New Testament. As is always the case with error, it should push us towards a more vigorous study of scripture and a more determined desire to communicate the real Jesus-and his true message-to a needy world.

1. Hebrews 13:13; 1 Cor. 1:18. 25.
2. Galatians 3:10. 14.
3. Deuteronomy 27/28.
4. Kenneth Copeland, Our covenant with God, pp.28.
5. Kenneth Hagin, I Believe in Visions, pp. 124.
6. Charles Capps, Dynamics of Faith and Confession (W.O.F. Publications), pp.52.
7. Daniel 4:34,37.
8. 2. Corinthians 4:13.
9. Matthew 28:18.
10. Charles Capps, Authority in Three Worlds. pp. 226,227.

BELONGING TO ALL THE OTHERS

Part 2



In the first part of this article we examined what membership of the local Church means in terms of the contribution I make to the corporate life of the Church. Now I want to look with you at what I may expect to receive from other members and my relationship with the leaders of the Church.

II. RECEIVING FROM OTHERS

Being a member means I am committed to giving myself to other people in the Church, making a contribution and not sitting back and expecting to be given. But if we are all doing what God wants us to, then at some time or another we shall be on the receiving end of ministry from someone in the Church.

I receive THE MINISTRY OF GOD'S WORD. It is one of the easier things to receive (on the surface at least). For most Christians good, sound, practical preaching and teaching of the Bible is what they expect from their commitment to Church life. Rightly so. It is the special responsibility of those in Pastoral charge to share the word of God with the Church. It is an onerous task under God to be skilful handlers of the Bible. Doubtless the preacher doesn't always get it right and he (or she) is certainly not six feet above contradiction any more! But as we submit ourselves, preacher and listener alike, to the authority of Jesus and his word brought to life by the Holy Spirit moving among us, we shall know the truth and be progressively set free by the truth. But I must receive both the easy things and the hard, both the palatable and bitter pills, both the encouragements and the rebukes of God's word. In preaching I have been interested to note how often, when God has been speaking discipline to individuals, the word has been deflected as "the Pastor's message" rather than "the word of God" (I Thessalonians 2:13)!

I receive the DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH. I am subjecting myself to the discipline of the Church as a whole and of the leadership (Pastor, Elders, Deacons or whatever other title they may have) in particular. I have to realise that I am responsible for my behaviour to the whole groups. If I live a life of disobedience to Jesus, in whatever part, I should expect someone to tell me about it, inviting them to help me back into God's ways. This is an aspect of Church life that has sadly been lacking in recent times and which we need to re-discover. Discipline has to do with love, not punishment; with restoration, not exclusion; with acceptance, but not condoning the sin. Discipline has to be gentle, not harsh; just, not judgemental (Galatians 6:1.21. When leaders and the Church see discipline in these terms and apply it without dissimulation or favouritism everyone is safe and secure in God's company and with each other. Parents who don't discipline their children invariably discover the children don't respect them and go astray. Even if we didn't owe it to ourselves now, we would owe it to our children and the Church in years to come to re-establish Church discipline as a cardinal tenet of our faith. In membership I am subjecting myself to the authority and discipline of the gathered community of believers under the shepherds of the flock to keep me in Christ's narrow way. It is also worth noting that the shepherds themselves are only safe when they are subject to the same discipline.

I receive THE MEANS OF GRACE at the hands of the Church. There are many and various means of grace, the most important of which are the times around the Lord's table, and, when I first came to Christ, baptism. These days, I cannot easily be away from the Lord's Table on a Sunday. Indeed, having celebrated Communion every Sunday in Kingsbridge for the past two years. I often feel deprived if I haven't had that opportunity because other Churches don't have the same practices! Having other people pray FOR me, especially before leading worship, is a means of grace. Being able to confess sins and mistakes to my fellow-workers is a wonderful means of God's grace to me. These, and many others besides, are God's way of blessing me through the community of the Church. I am committed to receiving them as often as possible.

There are also many PRIVILEGES OF MEMBERSHIP which become mine when I am in a covenant relationship with others in the Church. I can expect others to pray for me when I am in trouble. I can expect them to care for me when I have needs. I can expect them to bear my burdens with me (Galatians 6:2). I may even be able to receive financial help if I find myself in dire straights. It is good to know I am surrounded by people who love me, whatever I am like! Such is the privilege of belonging to all the others.

I receive PASTORAL CARE within the membership of the Church. All of us need to be shepherded and know that Jesus is the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4; Hebrews 13:20) but that those who are leaders have a responsibility to "shepherd the flock" (1 Peter 5:2). It doesn't mean I can't move without the leaders' say so, but that I have people around me from whom I can receive advice and direction. That gives me a wonderful security and freedom to move into what God is doing in my life. Knowing that I am surrounded by people who love me enough to help me avoid making mistakes makes it possible to step out far more boldly into God's way. Far more would get done for God in our Churches if deacons and elders acted in this way for the Pastor if he happened to be the only full-time worker.

III GIVING TO AND RECEIVING FROM YOUR LEADERS

ENCOURAGE your leaders. At least, if they are anything like me they do! It is so easy to be negative about your leaders. Very quickly after joining a Church, however wonderful it appears at the beginning, you will begin to discover faults and failings and that the leaders have feet of clay. If they are to continue to be effective, they must be encouraged and know that the work which is being done is producing fruit. The thing that encourages me most is when people respond to God's word in something specific: "God spoke to me about spending more time in prayer this morning, and I'm going to come to the Wednesday early morning prayer time from now on." That is a real thrill to hear. Christian leaders know that they will have bricks thrown at them and accept it as part of the job. But throw a few bouquets as well! And when you are critical, be constructive. I used to go to football matches when I lived in Brighton and discovered that the spectators on the terraces always knew how to play the game much better than those on the field! Such an attitude is unhelpful to leaders. Bless them by giving them a possible solution to the problem and saying that you would be willing to work with them to sort it out instead of shouting "What a load of rubbish"!

BEFRIEND your leaders. It's easy for you to think they are too busy to get to know you personally. There are few Pastors for whom that is true, and fewer who want it to be that way. Invite your minister and his wife for a meal - take the initiative with them, especially on a Sunday which is a very busy day. Think well in advance and don't assume they can come next Friday getting disappointed if they can't. There are few leaders but many people, so give your friendship to those who lead you.

WORK FOR AND WITH your leaders. They need to know that you are available to work in God's kingdom. Tell them you would like a job, and if you are asked to do something specific, assume God wants you to do it unless there is a compelling reason why you shouldn't. In the Young People's Fellowship at Holland Road Baptist Church, Hove, we were told to apply that policy. It often brought out gifts and talents previously unknown in those young people and was extremely constructive for God's work.

PRAY FOR YOUR LEADERS. Give them time in the most vital ministry of praying for them. Every leader needs to have the support of the people in prayer. Your prayer will make the sermon more effective, the counsel more wise, their prayers more powerful and their vision for the work stronger.

RECEIVE THEIR LEADERSHIP. God appoints leaders and the Church recognises them. But there is no point in going through all that rigmarole in the Church Meeting of appointing Pastor, Elders, Deacons and House Group Leaders and whatever other kinds of leaders you have if you don't accept their leadership. I have discovered an interesting thing - many people will accept strong leadership until they don't agree. Then the leaders are always wrong!!! Most leaders would be the first to admit they don't always get things right, but is it possible that those you appointed on the basis of God's calling and anointing a few months previously have suddenly suffered irreversible spiritual decline? It is our attitude that determines the difference between constructive criticism and open rebellion and we have to know in ourselves the difference.

RECEIVE THEIR COUNSEL. Especially in the early days of leading the work in Kingsbridge, I found quite a number of people came for counselling to seek support for decisions they had already made. There was no possibility for counsel in those cases. If you seek advice, you have to be open to the advice you get. The biblical principle of mutual submission, submitting "to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21) actually means being open to the ministry that others can bring to you. Your leaders have to be open to the whole Church in this way when they are seeking the support and advice of the Church and Church Meeting. Openness to God and to your leaders goes hand in hand.

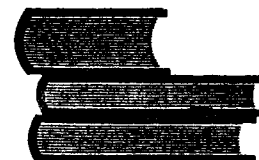
You may expect them to give you a GOOD EXAMPLE to follow. Paul commended the Corinthian Church to imitate him as he imitated Christ (I Corinthians 11:1 (AV)). They were to follow the example he set in the areas of life in which he followed the example of Jesus. It is right for members to believe their leaders will set them a good example. So pray for them to do so.

SHARE THEIR VISION. Part of God's calling and anointing in leadership has to do with the vision for the fellowship. Your leaders will always have far more information at their fingertips about the Church and its life than you do. They should see the whole picture whereas you only see a part. They should be aware of the faults as well as the good things in the Church. Leaders cannot lead unless the fellowship shares their vision. The vision will not be fulfilled unless it is shared by the whole company and acted upon under the guidance of God.

Finally, you must understand that your leaders want the very best for you. I've never met a Pastor or any other spiritual leader who deliberately led his people astray. All of us make many mistakes. But I don't know any who deliberately repress gifts, frustrate the enthusiasm of the saints and prevent the good work of members. So give them the support of a fellow-worker who is a partner in the gospel (Philippians 1:5).

David Slater, Kingsbridge.

Reviews



SIMON PETER From Galilee to Rome Carsten P. Thiede. Paternoster Press. 194pp. text, 75pp. bibliography, notes and indices. £7.95.

With great learning, yet in a very readable style, the author assembles all the references to Peter in the New Testament, together with anything that can be gleaned from other sources, and endeavours to present a biography of the leading apostle. In the first part he seeks to show how Peter's character was moulded through his experiences with Jesus in Galilee. In the second after following Luke's account of the earliest days of the church he vigorously defends the letters as true sources for Peter's later life and thought. There is much fascinating detail here, but I find myself asking for whom the book is intended: specialists are likely to find both the detail and the main conclusions insufficiently rigorously argued, while others are likely to find it rather dry and should in any case be warned that things the author claims are generally agreed or safely established are in fact nothing of the kind.

Alastair Campbell, London.

Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity; Eugene Peterson, Berdmans/Paternoster, £6.50.

This is a realistic book on the problems of the traditional one-person ministry, written by a North American Presbyterian minister. The author makes a heart-rending cry for a recovery of the three 'angles' of the authentic pastoral calling - prayer, reading scripture, and pastoral direction - which together form a triangle whose connecting lines are preaching, teaching and administration. Too many pastors are so busy with committees, social projects and techniques, that they have neglected their proper calling, and have ceased to pray.

The main weakness of the book is precisely what it sets out to defend, i.e. the one-person ministry. The Pastor is seen as a set-apart, professional God-person. There is no suggestion of shared leadership according to gifts, nor are there any practical suggestions as to how a pastor can reduce the administrative load to pay greater attention to vocation.

There is also no hint that in many situations, traditional church models (including the solely preaching ministry) have failed. Nevertheless, for those of us not blessed with the 'super church' situation, but slogging it out in the small church, this conservative battlecry is a salutary reminder of pastoral priorities.

Steve Latham, Clapton, London.

Grow Your Own Leaders: Anton Baumohl, Scripture Union, £4.95, 208pp.

This book complements Anton Baumohl's excellent 'Making Adult Disciples'. As SU's National Training Co-ordinator he is well qualified to help us in the fields of learning and training. His major point is that training is not the same as learning. In our teacher-centred church patterns we tend to think that if we have taught something we have trained people. But training addresses the practical issue of how to equip people for specific tasks and responsibilities. Because training is learner-centred we need skills other than only teaching skills.

Each section is crystal clear, practical and very specific. Topics covered include how to write job descriptions, analyse roles, apprenticeship training, supervision, planning and running training courses, skills and roles of the trainer. There is a helpful reminder that training is not about using people but about developing personal awareness and growth in service. There is also a warning that training will raise expectations which must not lead to disappointment.

There are oodles and oodles of examples and case studies. There are 13 pages of addresses and relevant books. No matter which half of the denomination you are in there is something here for you.

The Urban Christian: Raymond Bakke, MARC Europe/ECUM. £4.95, 213pp.

This is a book of surprises. The author takes Charles Simeon of Cambridge as his model for ministry for a kick-off. This is followed by some hair-raising tales about the 1968 Chicago race riots (where Ray was Pastor of an inner-city Baptist church). Then we are treated to stories about an Indonesian Christian entrepreneur who moved his family to a slum, and helped pay for and build a mosque for his Muslim neighbours; and about Christians who baby sat for prostitutes while they did their soliciting. God was pleased to mightily bless these evangelistic efforts.

Personal testimony, statistics, analysis of the churches' failure to evangelise, bible study on the city in the scriptures, pointers on how to move forward in building congregational life and vision, worship, work and witness flow forth in a torrent of stories from around the globe.

Ray does not shirk the problems. He says it takes 20 years to establish a congregation in an unchurched district. The family suffers and yet is enriched by inner-city experience. He gives some practical exercises to do as well.

This book is mis-titled. It is for the Urban Pastor. I came away from reading this book with mixed feelings. I felt that Superpastor was being described and that depressed me - do I really have to be the kind of activist that Ray expects me to be? But the stories are great - some of the most exciting things God is doing are happening in the inner-city.

God the Evangelist: how the Holy Spirit works to bring men and women to faith. David Wells, Paternoster, £4.95, 128pp.

This is a summary of the Oslo Consultation on the Work of the Holy Spirit and Evangelisation and contains a preface by Jim Packer entitled 'On being serious about the Holy Spirit'.

If you are looking for a very condensed treatment of the doctrine of the Spirit then this will serve you well. There are some very good short sections on the development of the doctrines of the Trinity and of grace.

But the main burden of the discussion concerns the relation of the Holy Spirit to creation, other religions, and the effects of urbanisation and information technology on society. The work of the Spirit in preaching is given emphasis in the power encounter between prevailing philosophies and revealed Truth.

Of special interest are the appendices which document the place of signs and wonders in recent revival movements in China, East Africa and among Australian Aborigines. The general conclusion is that signs and wonders have evidential value in a context of initial evangelistic endeavour. John Wimber, who attended this consultation, would want to say more than this I'm sure, but his influence is not evident in this final report.

Terry Griffith.

Lament For a Son: Nicholas Wolterstorff, Eerdmans/Paternoster, £5.70
In The Shadow of the Cross: Egil Sjaastad. Marshall Pickering, £1.95
The Courage to Hope: Peter Sampson, Scripture Union, £1.95, 143pp.

Nicholas Wolterstorff's book is a gushing torrent of the experience of shattering grief. Written by a sensitive, sorrowing philosopher father, whose son, Eric, was killed in a mountain climbing accident in Austria in his twenty-fifth year. This articulation of grief is not a triumphal, superficial handling of such a delicate theme, but the expression of a shattering loss and its consequent effects. Intense pain and devastation are set in close proximity with the knowledge and experience of a suffering yet resurrecting God sharing with the sufferer.

The second volume, written by a Lutheran Bible scholar, deals with spirituality and the testings of life with sensitivity and scholarship. The depths of distress and despair, the heaviness of soul and the complexities of affliction in the Christian life are faced with much needed realism. It is a small but significant antidote to superficial spirituality. It's unerring thesis is that 'the paralysing fogs of trial and doubt must yield to the rising sun of the gospel'.

The last book, written by Baptist minister, Peter Sampson, is a very handy and practical distillation of the classic works on dying and bereavement. This is a pocket-sized introduction to this important subject and is very easy to read. A must for any engaged in counselling and visiting work in our churches. Written in the context of a personal tragedy.

Patrick Goodland,
Terry Griffith.

Power Evangelism and the Word of God: Donald Bridge, Kingsway, £5.95.

This is a very thoughtful and helpful book. Too often 'signs and wonders' has been set against most traditional forms of evangelism as if they were opposites. This book attempts to place power evangelism in the context of the total outreach of the church - affirming its strengths while criticizing those who claim it is the panacea for all evangelistic ills! I found his careful examination of the world scene very helpful and a very healthy corrective to some of the exaggerated claims made for the place of the miraculous in evangelization. Yet this is not a negative book but one which urges churches to adopt a multiplicity of forms of evangelism in order to reach a lost world.

I think the book loses its way a bit at the end, rehashing some pretty well worn controversies. Other than this, a balanced, sane, yet exciting book.

Stephen Gaukroger, Luton.

Imaging God: (Dominion as stewardship), Douglas John Hall, Eerdmans/Paternoster, £7.95.

Hall's study centres on the imago Dei, its theology and outworking. Despite the hard-worked theme, this Canadian writer has created an immensely readable study which, at the same time, is thoroughly scholarly. Even the footnotes of this book carry the sort of detail that renders them worthy of perusal on their own. This book is more than a thesis; it is a mine of facts and useful appraisals of imago Dei thinking through the ages.

Hall is conscious of the shifting nature of 'truth'. The result is that his exposition of the sociohistorical factors affecting all theology helps him to avoid dogmatic pronouncements. Perhaps it is this more than anything else that makes his approach to the imago Dei so refreshing.

Whilst completely Christocentric, this book draws the Evangelical eye towards a more inclusive view of Creation. The subtitle 'Dominion as stewardship' indicates that it sets out to lend an ethical angle to the incarnation.

This is a gently provocative book which uses all the tools of Biblical and historical theology. Yet for all the scholarship that has been poured in, Hall cannot help but deliver an indictment of a selfish society which has abused its privilege of being created in the image of Christ.

Mark Rudall, Enfield.

Friendship Across Cultures: by Tim Stafford, Marc Europe, £3.95.

Originally written for the American market under the title 'The Friendship Gap' this book is a gentle and thoughtful look at the tensions and possibilities for missionaries settling into cultures different from their own.

It is not intended to be an expert analysis, but rather a personal reflection based on the author's experience of mission work in Kenya. Stafford faces firmly many of the problems, such as the cultural fatigue which arises from the constant grappling with an unfamiliar environment, and the mistake of only relating to fellow westerners. He outlines the inheritance of colonialism which taints the way Africans and others look at us, and notes that even the current emphasis on partnership in mission has the hint of neo-colonialism if the 'foreigners' remain the real, though hidden, leaders and financiers. He is not in the business of questioning the value of missionary work, but rather the way it is done.

There is an interesting chapter 'Who's in a Hurry?', which defines the Westerner as a time-centred, destination orientated individual, anxious to complete the job, in contrast to the cultural attitude which puts the event before the time, the journey at least as important as the destination, and the relationships with people on the job as more vital than the job itself.

Stafford sums up his approach: 'Grace is never divided from work: it impels us to work, to struggle, to suffer. If we shy away from this work, we are equally shying from God's grace.' God helps us make friends only as we work at it.

The book is a little expensive at £3.95, but still an interesting read.

Brian Nicholls, Nottingham.

Seconds Away: David Cormack, MARC-Europe, 183 pages, £5.95.

David Cormack, formerly Head of Training and Organisation Development at Shell International and now Director of Management Training for MARC-Europe, has written this most challenging book. Sub-titled 'Fifteen rounds in the fight for effective use of time', this is a work book to be used rather than a text book to peruse. Indeed, therein lies its challenge. It is impossible to casually read this book as exercise follows exercise; the reader is forced to think through his own goals and then organise his life in order to achieve those goals. I confess that I did not find it an easy read precisely because it forced me to re-evaluate my life and to think through where I believe God would have me go. All the more reason therefore to recommend this book.

Paul Beasley-Murray.

Worship the Lord: Ed. James R. Esther & Donald J. Bruggink, 1987, Eerdmans, 85 pages, £3.70.

It was with some anticipation that I began to read this manual. As one who teaches worship at Spurgeon's, I am ever on the look-out for material that might be of help to my students. Alas, I was somewhat disappointed with this particular offering. Prepared by the Commission on Worship of the Reformed Church in America, this collection of orders of services does not seem to meet the needs of our churches. In part this is because the ecclesiology of the Reformed Church is different from ours; in part, too, because the language, although not archaic (there are no 'thee's and 'thou's), is not contemporary (e.g. 'we beseech you to hear us'). To be fair, there are some helpful tones of phrase in the marriage and funeral services - but they scarcely justify the purchase of this book.

Maybe while we wait for the revised edition of Payne & Winward, Mainstream could feature a series on orders of service? Certainly, if my experience is anything to go by, our churches are desperately in need of guidance and help in this area.

Paul Beasley-Murray.

Two Million Silent Killings: Margaret White, Marshall Pickering 1987 160 pages, £4.95.

You need a good stomach to read this book. Without in any way exaggerating, the author describes in detail the horror of an abortion. Margaret White is Vice President of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children and a member of the General Medical Council. She traces the history of abortion and pulls no punches as she castigates the medical profession for its tendency to depart from the Hippocratic oath in the twentieth century. Particular attention is paid to the way in which Germany even before the Nazi regime developed an interest in the 'super race' mentality. The results of this are to be seen in the desire today to abort handicapped children.

One chapter describes the early biography of everyman and if you are not sure of your foetal roots then this is for you - after reading it you will surely say with the psalmist we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Perhaps the weakest chapter is that which tackles all the usual arguments in favour of abortion, her replies here lack the confident tone found in the rest of the book. Whether you are pro or anti abortion this is essential informed reading.

Books

RECEIVED



Church Growth And The Whole Gospel: Peter Wagner, MARC-Europe/BCGA, £4.50, 208 pages. I have it on good authority that the only worthwhile book on Church Growth by Peter Wagner is 'Leading Your Church To Growth'. That is excellent, but this is somewhat dated and culturally irrelevant.

How Do Churches Grow?: Roy Pointer, MARC Europe/BCGA, £2.95, 246 pages. If you haven't been to a Bible Society Church Growth course then this will tell you all you need to know. Among some circles it is popular to knock Church Growth. A careful read of this book will dispel some popular misconceptions and present a challenge to well-worn methodologies. The Growth Book: Roy Pointer, MARC-Europe/BCGA, £1.95, 87 pages. The practical workbook companion to Roy's other book. Thank you, Roy, for your ministry.

The Set Of The Sail: A. W. Tozer, STL/Kingsway, £1.95, 159 pages. R. T. Kendall of Westminster Chapel gives Tozer a rave review. Tozer's serious and no nonsense spirituality is needed as much as ever in our superficial age. 44 pithy chapters on Christian maturity. If you haven't yet read Tozer you will find that this £1.95 cannot be better spent.

Following Jesus: Gunter Krallmann, Hodder, £1.95, 127 pages. 31 chapters in note form giving a discipleship training course. Just simple one line headings with scripture references. No fancy stuff. Understanding The Way: Bob Gordon, Marshall Pickering, £6.95, 368 pages. Another discipleship course in basic principles of spiritual growth. Much more wordy, being the substance of courses at Roffey Place Christian Training Centre. You will need to pick up both before choosing which is most useful to you. Both present a charismatic understanding of the Christian life.

The Table Of Inwardness: Calvin Miller, Marshall Pickering, £2.25, 118 pages. Another offering on spirituality. I feel a bit like my friend who managed to collect three copies of 'Enough is Enough' in his library. If you like Calvin Miller anyway you will want to get this. Gordon MacDonald recommends it in his 'Restoring Your Spiritual Passion'. If only we spent as much time in prayer as we do in reading? The Church As The Kingdom: Peter Price, Marshall Pickering, £4.95. Adds little to what has been written already. An overview with some inspiring examples. Some theological confusion between 'Church' and 'Kingdom' detectable. (SL).

Jesus Loves Brixton Too: Michael Armitage, Marshall Pickering £1.95. This book rides on the back of 'Bias to the Poor' and the 'Faith in the City' report. Like them it left me feeling helpless. Nevertheless, Armitage, who is a vicar in Brixton, has made an earnest attempt to produce a Christologically-shaped paperback which comments on current inner-city themes and highlights very directly some of the major injustices imposed by society on Brixton today. (MR).