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journal**

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From the editor

Rigour and Spirit

From time to time individual Baptists distinguish themselves in various ways, and we all hold our heads a little higher. Perhaps because of our denominational emphases on mission, exhortation, and the equality of the contributions of all members, we do not produce large numbers of 'transferable' theologians: those whose contributions will have a lasting impact on the wider ecumenical task of theology.

In Paul Fiddes we are privileged to have a theologian of such stature, yet all his work emerges solidly from his Baptist conviction and practice. Perhaps, like me, you will have read books by Paul, and been profoundly impressed by their depth and breadth. As a ministerial student, I never had the privilege of Paul's teaching, but when I eventually met him properly for the first time, I found that behind the serious scholarship is also a true pastor.

There is an argument around that theology should never have left the monastery. When abstracted in the academy it runs the risk of becoming a sterile and reductionist exercise that is able to compete intellectually with the 'secular' disciplines, but lacks 'heart'. The challenge to those who practise theology within ministry is to combine rigour with Spirit, so that the result is a work of disciplined compassion that mirrors the love of God. Paul is a great Baptist theologian because he does this so beautifully; and he is a great teacher of ministers because he has not allowed his theology to become arid.

In this special issue of *bmj* there are four tributes to Paul from the younger generation of Baptist minister-theologians. You will find good thinking in them, but more than that, you will see the affection and respect in which he is held by those he has taught. Paul's legacy is not just in the written word, but in the lives of his students.

This issue also sees the start of a new occasional column, *Reflections*, theology which wrestles with the pressing questions of the pastorate. The popular *Desert island books* will return in January.

SN

Paul Fiddes: Baptist servant of the church

by Andy Goodliff

Have British Baptists ever had a theologian of the stature of Paul S. Fiddes? Fiddes, who has turned 65 this year, has been our foremost theological mind for the past quarter of a century.¹ Beyond Baptist circles he is also one of the leading British theological voices of his generation, alongside the likes of Colin Gunton (another nonconformist), David Ford, John Webster, Oliver O'Donovan and Rowan Williams.

Fiddes is a theologian with broad interests. His academic output has engaged with the doctrines of God,² the atonement,³ the Trinity,⁴ eschatology,⁵ ecclesiology,⁶ the sacraments,⁷ and the intersections between theology and literature.⁸ This achievement was recognised in 2002 by the University of Oxford, his academic home, when they made him a Professor of Systematic Theology and then in 2005 (the same year he delivered the prestigious Oxford Bampton Lectures, which remain currently still unpublished—but hopefully for not too much longer!), when he was awarded the title of Doctor of Divinity. Fiddes' academic career has been focused at Regent's Park College, Oxford, where he was first Tutor in Christian Doctrine (1972-89), then Principal (1989-2007), and now Professorial Research Fellow. This paper is an attempt to draw attention to the key contours of his theology.⁹

You cannot read Paul Fiddes without recognising an undoubtedly Baptist theologian. So, in the introductory chapter to *Tracks and Traces* (TT, pp15-16), he writes:

I have stood with fellow Baptists at a service in Sam Sharpe Square in Montego Bay, Jamaica, a place named in memory of the Baptist deacon and slave who was executed for his protest against the British slave system. I have prayed with fellow Baptists by the side of the Han river in Seoul, Korea, and witnessed several thousand young people being baptized - not in a media spectacle, but each one greeted personally by his or her pastor. I have lectured with fellow Baptists in the University of Timisoare, Romania, near the square where more than fifty young people were killed in the revolution of 1989 as they demonstrated for freedom, shouting 'God exists'. I have talked with Portuguese Baptists in Lisbon, where the great earthquake of 1755 is still remembered as the event which shook people's faith in a good creator, and destroyed a whole system of natural theology. I

Paul Fiddes tribute

have shared in a Sunday morning service in the black township of Tembisa near Johannesburg where the previous night Zulu Inkata terrorists had massacred nearly a hundred people, and I have experienced Zulu and Chosa Baptists worshipping together in acceptance of each other. I have sat with Baptists in Cuba, listening to the way that they understand mission in their neighbourhood, led by a pastor who was serving as a Deputy in the government of Fidel Castro, and suffering rejection by fellow Christians because of this involvement in politics. I have received hospitality from Baptists in Myanmar, and admired the way that their ethnic groups express their faith, and their hopes for a common society, through their different styles of song and dance. Through these experiences, my thinking has been shaped in a way that would not have been possible without a shared identity as Baptists.

Having noted these Baptist credentials, Fiddes also sees Baptist heritage as part of, and in conversation with, the wider church. Fiddes is committed to the ‘ecumenical adventure’ (*TT*, chap 9) because he affirms that ‘Baptists belong to the long story of the church universal’ (*TT*, p1). He argues for a distinctive Baptist contribution: that other churches and denominations have something to receive from Baptists. At the same time, Baptists equally have much they can learn and receive in return.

Covenantal theology

Fiddes is a covenantal theologian, and this focus has increasingly become the mark of his Baptist theology: a recovery of covenant (the key articulation is in *TT*, chap 2, but it pervades the whole book). Fiddes sees covenant as a central Baptist track from the past that must be recovered for the present and beyond. Covenant, argues Fiddes, has two dimensions—vertical and horizontal. It is both a covenant with God and a covenant with one another.

Covenant, according to Baptists, was expressed in the language of ‘walking together’ which assumes a commitment to life together, but also an openness to where and what that life together might lead and look like. One of the most helpful parts of Fiddes’ argument is how covenant challenges the temptation to mere voluntarism—church is a collection of individuals who have freely chosen to belong. Fiddes claims that alongside this and more importantly preceding this is the ‘initiative of God’, who gathers and makes this covenant with human persons (*TT*, p 42).

A covenant ecclesiology recognises that the church has its source both in God and in humanity, and has implications beyond the local church in terms of associating. A covenant ecclesiology challenges the pragmatic thinking that we partner and relate because it seems sensible to argue that ‘associations and unions of churches are thus not merely task-orientated, but means of exploring the purpose of God in his world’ (*TT*, p

45). A covenant ecclesiology locates the doctrine of God as prior to the doctrine of the church (see *On being the church* by Brian Haymes *et al*, Paternoster, 2008, to which Fiddes wrote the foreword).

With covenant comes a theology of participation (most fully expounded in *Participating in God*, but present in *TT*, chap 4). A theology of covenant allows us to see the church sharing or participating in the ‘covenant fellowship of God’s life’ (*TT*, p 8). For Fiddes, God does not simply act through the church, but there is ‘the sharing of the church in God’ (*TT*, p 66). The New Testament images of church as body, temple and people are interpreted by Fiddes theologically and in Trinitarian terms: body with Christ, temple with the Spirit, and people with the Father. This is not just a participating in God at work in the world (economically), for Fiddes, this is a participating in the very Godself (ontologically). He says, ‘the church participates in the external activity of God because it shares in the inner life of God’ (*TT*, p 72), or to use another Fiddes phrase, ‘[the church] is caught up in the life of the triune God’ (*TT*, p 73). Covenant and participation are held together—a covenant not just with God, but in God.

Sacrament

A theology of covenant and participation leads to a highly sacramental account of baptism and communion, and ultimately the whole world. ‘The universe is sacramental’ says Fiddes and as such ‘any object, act or word can become sacramental’.¹⁰ He explores his understanding of the sacramental in the final chapter of *Participating in God* (*PG*). He claims that we can move from the particular to the universal. So through the particular sacraments of baptism and communion, where we encounter God, we can be awakened ‘to the God who can be met through the bodies of the world’ (*PG*, p 283). The sacraments here are dependent upon the incarnation, because in the incarnation ‘God achieved a unique depth of participation, and received a unique human response’ (*PG*, p 289).

In participating in baptism and communion, we are participating in that unique relationship of God and Christ. From this Fiddes develops a ‘pan-entheism’—the participation of everything in God. As we experience (and participate in) the presence of God in the particulars of Christ—bread and wine and the waters of baptism—so we find, quoting the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins, ‘Christ plays in ten thousand places’ and (in a different poem) ‘the world is charged with the grandeur of God’.¹¹ Elsewhere Fiddes puts it this way, ‘both creation and incarnation therefore tell us that the God who relates God’s self to human beings also has a kind of relation, and evokes a kind of response, within created reality at every level’ (*TT*, p 118).

For Fiddes, covenant, participation and sacrament present a God who is in relation with

the whole of creation: ‘...we should envisage sacraments drawing us deeper into the heart of the interweaving flow of relationships in God. The key is participation, so that God is always open to make room for the world, while remaining an event of relationship in God’s self (PP, p300)’.

Fiddes’ theology has been in constant conversation with literature—both novels and poetry—and wider forms of culture (film, art, music).¹² His undergraduate degree saw him receive a double first in theology and English literature. He takes seriously the contribution of literature and the arts to the doing of theology. In a recent programmatic article he explores ‘how the images and stories in literature outside scripture can contribute to the actual making of systematic theology, not just to an illustrating of it’.¹³ I say ‘programmatic’, because Fiddes hopes to write a fuller theology shaped profoundly by literature. His book *The promised end* gives some idea of what this might look like as he explores eschatology in conversation with the likes of William Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Samuel Beckett and Martin Amis. Fiddes argues that theology is never a discipline or activity that should or can separate itself from the world. It is always in conversation with the world and its cultures. The ‘interesting question’, says Fiddes, ‘is how the church absorbs influences from other cultures and how it employs them, not whether it does so or not’.¹⁴

Fiddes has sought to serve the academy and the church, and is an international theologian. He believes that some are called by God ‘to do an academic theology, which has a more rigorous intellectual approach, looking for a higher degree of consistency and coherence’,¹⁵ and there is no better example than he as one such called. For the church, the theological academy, and the university, those like Paul Fiddes are a blessing.

Paul is a minister of the gospel and a servant of the church, and while this has mainly been expressed through his academic career, he has also worked tirelessly on behalf of the Baptist Union, serving on BU Council (he was the first chairperson of the Doctrine and Worship Committee, 1994-96¹⁶), and in wider roles within the European Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance. For 10 years he chaired the BWA’s Baptist Doctrine and Inter-Church Cooperation Study Commission (2000-10), leading conversations with the Anglican Communion,¹⁷ the Roman Catholic church (currently awaiting publication) and more recently the Orthodox church.

It is fitting that the *bmj* offers this tribute to a theologian who has done so much to shape so many Baptist ministers. I am richer theologically and spiritually for the feast of Paul’s theology. I hope that this short article has either reminded you of the delights of Paul’s theology, or whetted your appetite to discover the riches that lie in his work.

Happy 65th, Professor Fiddes!

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Notes to text

1. Beyond British Baptists, his theological contribution ranks alongside the likes of Stanley J. Grenz, James McClendon, and (more conservative), Millard Erickson.
2. *The creative suffering of God*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1988.
3. *Past and present salvation: the Christian idea of atonement*. London: DLT, 1989.
4. *Participating in God: a pastoral doctrine of the Trinity*. London: DLT, 2000.
5. *The promised end: eschatology in theology and literature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
6. *Tracks and traces: Baptist identity in church and theology*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003.
7. See *Tracks and traces*.
8. *Freedom and limit: a dialogue between literature and Christian doctrine*, Macmillan, 1991; *The promised end*; see also Paul Fiddes (ed), *The novel, spirituality and modern culture*, University of Wales Press: 2000.
9. There is of course one theme of Paul's work missing in this study, and it looms large in his work, which is of course the suffering of God.
10. Paul Fiddes, *Ex opere operato: re-thinking a historic Baptist rejection*, in A. R. Cross & P. E. Thompson (eds), *Baptist sacramentalism 2*, Paternoster: 2008, p 228.
11. Fiddes cites both poems from Hopkins in *Participating in God*, pp 280, 290.
12. *Tracks and traces* contains references to the TV series *Ally McBeal*, the music of Madonna, the poetry of T. S. Eliot and the novels of Dostoyevsky, among others.
13. Paul Fiddes, *Concept, image and story in systematic theology*, in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 2009, 11 (1), 5.
14. Paul Fiddes, *Ecclesiology and ethnography: two disciplines, two worlds?*, in P. Ward (ed), *Perspectives on ecclesiology and ethnography*, Eerdmans: 2012, p16.
15. Paul Fiddes, *Dual citizenship in Athens and Jerusalem: the place of the Christian scholar in the life of the church*, in A. R. Cross & R. Gouldbourne (eds), *Questions of identity: studies in honour of Brian Haymes*, Regent's Park College, 2011, p136.
16. During that time he was largely responsible for three important reports: *Forms of ministry*, *Believing and being baptised* and *The nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain*.
17. See *Conservations around the world 2000-2005*. The Report of the International Conversations between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance; and *Pushing at the boundaries of unity: Anglicans and Baptists in conversation*, CHP, 2005.

Inclusive participation in God?

by Beth Allison

I first encountered the work of Paul Fiddes as a teenager during religious studies, exploring how we might appropriately use language for God. Encouraged by a wonderful—if unconventional—teacher, I had just read the feminist theologian Mary Daly. Her polemical critique of God-talk, that ‘if God is male, then the male is God’, had deeply challenged my faith.¹ Language about humanity as ‘man’ occurred in the hymns and songs, preaching and prayers of the church, but I was able to accept that sexist language was a human error. The difficulty was whether God was male—certainly ‘he’ seemed to be: our prayers addressed a ‘heavenly Father’, to whom we gave thanks for ‘his Son’—and comments would even be made about the ‘big man upstairs’.

Presuming that God would not have wanted to be seen as male, I held human error accountable for this as well, and blamed the culture and language of the New Testament world and the continuing patriarchal bias of the church. If God was not male, I argued, then a simple and fair solution was to replace the male language by which we addressed the Godhead, such as ‘Father’, with gender inclusive metaphors, such as ‘creator’. However, in the debates that followed, it was the participatory theology of the Godhead proposed by Fiddes that undermined my argument: if it is Jesus Christ’s relationship with the Father that we live in, not our own, then it is not our place to dispense with the language that he used in prayer, since such language was not only metaphorical, but God-given.

Paul Fiddes tribute

Ultimately this conversation led me to study theology, which in turn led to a call to Baptist ministry, so when invited to write something on the work of Paul Fiddes it seemed like an appropriate opportunity to return to the first theological debate I ever had: how does Fiddes’ theology of participation in God fit alongside a feminist desire for inclusive theology? I will consider how both feminism and Fiddes share a desire to link experience and theology, discuss whether God is male in the theology of *Participating in God*, and look at the implications of participating in God for our understanding of human gender.

The experience of God

Feminist theology and the evangelical church have had, at best, an uneasy truce. Feminist theology holds human equality to be a self-evident measure of truth, so it is unafraid to raise a critical voice against the Christian orthodoxy it perceives it to be oppressive. On the other hand, evangelical theology struggles with the insight of women's experience over and against other forms of revelation. As Woodhead comments, 'it shuns attentive engagement with Christian tradition, scripture and community in favour of the higher authority named "women's experiences"'.² This privilege is given in feminist theology, as Daly explains, because the way in which we observe God will impact our experience of God. Revelation is not received neutrally, since the models of oppression in the world alter our understanding of language. Daly suggests that because of our gendered language, we encounter God 'on an imaginative level exclusively as a He-God'.³

Feminism supports its methodology by showing that all theology is reliant on experience—as even scripture and tradition document the experience of God, so 'the uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but in its use of women's experience'.⁴ Feminist theology promotes a pastoral, or practical, theology as it seeks to equate the experience of women with the experience of God.

The importance of experience in theology is also the concern of Fiddes, so to some degree he defends the pastoral motive of feminist theology. In *Participating in God*, Fiddes explains the need for a pastoral doctrine of the Trinity, promoting the important role of experience as theologians have always sought to 'articulate the richness of the personality of God that they had found in the story of salvation and in their own experience'.⁵ He differs from feminism, though, because his theology of God argues that the Trinity is not a separate holy template to which we have an abstract relationship, or from which we can draw an example, but rather that we are invited to participate in the very relationship of the Trinity. He understands the persons in God as divine relations, into which we are drawn, and which therefore shape our knowledge of God and our pastoral practice. We are not trying to observe the ends of the relationships, the persons, he explains, but we are sharing in the speech and worship of the relations themselves. So for Fiddes this importance of language is increased rather than decreased, as the 'language of God is not that of observation but of participation'.⁶

We begin to see that central to our relationship with God is the question of how we use language to know God. For Daly, among others, the assumption is that language is a human construction that speaks metaphorically of a divine reality. For example, to say

'God is Father' is not literal, but creates an idea that God is a father in some sense. If Daly's critique is to be heard and acted upon, then the predominantly male language for God must be challenged to make space for gender-neutral and gender-inclusive terminology. Elsewhere, Johnson suggests, 'if women are created in the image of God, then God can be spoken of in female metaphors in as full and a limited a way as God is imaged in male ones'.⁷ While God is beyond all gender, there is no reason that feminine language would be any better than masculine language: so there would be no good reason not to use 'Mother' alongside 'Father'.

Fiddes encourages such a use of metaphor to supplement our language for God, yet suggests that some language for God has a primacy, since we are given the language God uses for Godself: 'the saying of 'Amen' by every member [of the church] becomes a sharing in the Amen of the Son to the Father'.⁸ While we can choose to supplement our language for the Godhead with other metaphorical language, there is a God-given primacy to the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit, because this is the language which gives us entry into the life of the Trinity. As we share the Amen of God, the church does not have a distinct human relationship with God, but we are invited to dwell in the salvific relationship of Jesus Christ. Because the historical person of Jesus Christ was fully God, we cannot consider the language of Father and Son as a limited metaphor, but we must adopt it as the key to divine communion: it opens up for us God's relationship with God. So although there is a space for metaphor, when pushed, it is this seemingly masculine language for the Godhead that is the most important. The masculine language of Father is God-given.

However, Fiddes disagrees with Daly about the consequences of this experience of God. Sensitive to the difficulties of such language, Fiddes explains that Father does not necessarily mean male. He examines the non-oppressive intent behind the language of Father, as it was rarely used in the Old Testament, but frequently used by Jesus. He argues that the lack of prior use meant it was as though the language was an empty concept, waiting to be filled, and the content Jesus gives is not one of patriarchal oppression, but tenderness, pity, nurture and compassion. Further on he explores how God the Father is given a womb, which again causes us to question the gender we assume is attributed in the language of Father.

Fiddes' argument for Father not meaning male is an insightful, if limited apologetic. The very necessity of the discussion surrounding fatherhood suggests that for most people the language of Father is inextricably linked to a male parent, especially if we dwell in the eternal relationship of God through the historical person of Jesus Christ, whose language was human as well as divine. Interestingly, he draws on Old Testament images for the description of this 'motherly-Father', which questions the

lack of content in the Old Testament language. So, if the relationship we are to dwell in is the one described to us as 'Father and Son' in historical, human language, does that not suggest something different than if the relationship revealed to us had been described as 'Mother and Son', or even 'Mother and Daughter'? Moreover, we do not dismiss the challenge of Daly: by privileging this language, whether we do it in an orthodox manner or not, we remain with the perpetual challenge that a human father-son relationship seems to have a divine exemplar.

'The male is God?'

As Fiddes strongly rejects the application of human gender to the Godhead, he then also addresses the question of how gendered humans should live out the *imago dei*. He looks to the difference and unity within the Godhead as exemplary for how we live out our human understanding of sexuality. The different functions within God, such as creating, are not limited to any one person or personal relation within the Godhead, but the mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*) of the persons of the Godhead means all of the persons are associated with all of the work of God in the world, for example, the Father, the Son and the Spirit all create. As we participate in that indwelling of God and reflect the mutual relations of God, then we do not find in God an example for excluding one gender or another from a certain type of work in the world. Living in the *imago dei* means that women cannot be excluded from 'male' work, or *vice versa*.

However, Fiddes does note that the persons of the Trinity are also distinct, and suggests that the Father may create differently from the Son. To consider how this might apply to humanity, he looks to the feminist theologian, Reuther, who argues that while it would be too crude to distinguish between 'male characteristics' and 'female characteristics', there might be a female and a male way of putting those characteristics together. Fiddes shows that participation in the Trinity means we are given a way to live out the tension between our difference and our similarity.

While Fiddes is clearly keen to promote the equality of women, feminism warns us of the limiting factor any gender stereotypes often have on women, and a divine ratification of living a female way could quickly become a benevolent form of patriarchy. Alert to this issue, he looks to feminism's own critique of gender androgyny: the problem that the evangelical feminist Elaine Storkey terms 'double-take' feminism. Feminist theology struggles with the need to insist that any difference between male and female is stereotypical and to be denied, while simultaneously asserting the need for a women-centred culture that will allow the flourishing of certain characteristics. Having found a feminist support for being 'equal but different', he also draws a distinction

between this and 'equal but submissive'; a discussion that has mostly been voiced in evangelical circles around the discussion of headship within scripture and usually to the detriment of women's liberation. It is therefore significant that this discussion within *Participating in God* is made elsewhere by Fiddes in an exegetical discussion of the Corinthian premise that woman's head is man.⁹ He dismisses the argument that women are to be Christlike in their humility, where men are to be the monarchical Father, by emphasising the interdependency of the Father and the Son. He shows that a proper understanding of the mutuality of the Trinity rejects any concept of hierarchy or subordination that could justify the oppression of anyone.

So while Fiddes argues that, beyond biology, there exist maleness and femaleness as we live out our *imago dei*, he draws heavily on feminist theologians for his development of this idea. He cautions that such gender difference is more easily sensed than analysed and it is only with the full equality of women in work and church that we shall discover what the distinctions are which can enrich our relationships and community. It is living in engagement with the Trinity that helps us to foster different ways of expressing the same function which allow us to be truly equal.

In *Participating in God*, Fiddes gives a significant space to dealing with feminist concerns about the Trinity, while navigating a need to use the language for God opened up to us through Jesus Christ. Here we have examined a small part of his discussion, considering his response to the feminist challenge that divine Fatherhood necessarily means divine maleness of God. While I and other feminist theologians would remain cautious about whether we can ever fully distinguish the two, Fiddes provides a pastorally engaged response, allowing the experience of women and the concerns of feminist theology to greatly influence his work. He refutes any former patriarchal abuse of Father language and presents a case for a non-gendered and non-hierarchical understanding of a compassionate Trinity. In addition to this, we are shown how the Trinity gives us an example of how humanity cannot draw arbitrary distinctions between male and female, but we share characteristics and roles that we sometimes live out differently but we should always live out equally. In his inclusive and participatory understanding of the Godhead Fiddes shows us that God is not male, nor is the male God.

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Notes to text

1. M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1977, p19.
2. L. Woodhead, *Spiritualising the sacred: a critique of feminist theology*, in *Modern Theology*, 1997, **13**, 191.

3. Daly, *ibid*, p18.
 4. R. Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-talk*. London: SCM , 1983, p12.
 5. Fiddes, *Participating in God; a pastoral doctrine of the Trinity*, London: DLT, 2000, p5.
 6. Fiddes, *ibid*.
 7. Johnson, *She who is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse*. New York: Crossroad, 1992, p54.
 8. Fiddes, *ibid*, p89.
 9. Fiddes, *Woman's head is man: a doctrinal reflection upon a Pauline text*, in *Baptist Quarterly*, 1986, **31**(8).
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A suffering God

by Rowena Wilding

When I was a child I used to wonder why my mother didn't leave my father. He treated her appallingly: in fact, he treated all of us with a great deal of violence, and I was subjected to some things when I was growing up that no child should ever know about. As such, my youth wasn't a particularly happy one. I was 12 when we finally left home, though we had nowhere to go, and were homeless for a while. We managed to get by: we lived with a local minister for a while (I have said many times since that this time was the closest I ever got to 'happy'). Finally we were given a home and began to get back on our feet. Then my mother had a nervous breakdown and I ended up in hospital, having overdosed on drugs and alcohol.

It is no secret that life is difficult. My story is very similar to thousands of others, and we have all heard of much worse. Suffering is a universal and unavoidable truth. Yet most of us expend a great deal of time and energy attempting to avoid a direct confrontation with this reality. The problem is that our attempt to avoid the inherent difficulties of life does not mean that we are free from suffering, but rather that we are oppressed by it.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer sat alone in a Nazi prison, he wrote, 'It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but the participation in the

Paul Fiddes tribute

sufferings of God in the secular life'. To deny God's participation in our own suffering is to deny God's participation in our lives.

When I was growing up, the idea of God was laughable. No—worse than that: it was offensive. But I, like many others, discovered a great sense of relief and consolation when I came to know the God who suffers with us, the God who experienced the torture of death on a cross. For many, that knowledge is enough; I believe it would have been enough for me, had I not gone off to study theology, and stumbled across Paul Fiddes' book, *The creative suffering of God*. In it, Fiddes begins to unpack some of the questions surrounding God's suffering and how they shape God's relationship to humanity and creation. I would like to use this article to explain the journey on which I went with this book, in coming to terms with my own suffering, God's suffering and how the two are related. For me it was a powerful transformation that took me from a vague knowledge that I'm not in this alone, to an undeniable conviction that the graciousness of God is such that God abdicates power and control to be injured and afflicted, not just by the cross, but by our sufferings.

Responding to the cross

For Christians, the cross is the centrepiece of faith. It is certainly preached as the defining moment of our faith, and one of the ways it is often portrayed is the moment that God came alongside us and truly undertook our suffering. I have heard it said (indeed, I've said it myself), that because of Jesus' act on the cross we can never be alone in our suffering. God knows intimately what we are experiencing.

The universalising feature here, Fiddes notes, is the human response. The centre of the crucifixion act lies in our 'noticing' it. In essence, God is not required to suffer in all human suffering, but all who suffer recognise some suffering in God—but this isn't quite right. While it is true that we can recognise our suffering as akin to God's because of the cross, that isn't the end of the story. God, because of God's very nature, has been suffering since the dawn of creation. Moltmann, in *God in creation*, depicts the resurrection as the awakening of the Spirit to a greater yearning for the unredeemed.

Fiddes questions how this monumental, world-changing event fits into the metanarrative that is all of history, from creation to eschaton. If the cross was the pinnacle, the moment in which God came to know our suffering, what effect does that have on the entire history that came before it? How did God suffer and understand suffering in the past?

He also asks how the pinnacle of the cross has an effect on subsequent events. Surely

this key moment must have changed God in some way, so the question is, how did the cross affect Godself? Fiddes suggests that the cross plays a decisive role in the way in which God participates in our suffering. To answer this question, many have made references to John of Patmos who saw 'a lamb slain from the foundation of the world', and invoke the timelessness of God. However it is clear that if God is a God in history, then God must be inside time, even if God's experience of time is not the same as ours.

The concept of non-being

To unpack the meaning of the suffering of God inside time, Fiddes talks about the concept of the 'non-being', which, he is careful to note, is not a mythological being, but an entity which must be objectively real because it happens in relationship between God and the world. Jungel notes that in Jesus' death, God's 'yes', which constitutes all being, was exposed to the 'no' of nothing (non-being). In the resurrection, it was yes that prevailed over no, settling the dispute as to why there is being rather than nothing. Barth describes non-being as the endpoint of sinning, and notes that only Christ goes right to the end of that pathway, encountering total non-being there. As the sin is there engulfed, so the sin is killed. In this description, God uses the non-being in some way to serve God's purpose, using the punishment for sin as the means to abolish.

Though Fiddes has questions surrounding this theory, in as much as sin, being our responses and attitudes, must be dealt with within us, in the here and now, he does pick up on an important point raised in Barth's theories; that at the heart of atonement is the cancelling of sin, rather than the placating of God's wrath. So if the non-being has its objective reality in the interaction between God and the world, its negation can only occur in that realm also. How then, Fiddes asks, does God negate the negative in the act of suffering it?

To claim that God conquers this non-being means that God is not destroyed by it when exposed to it. Indeed, rather than being destroyed by it, God is defined by the non-being, and it is in this way that death is made to serve God. Non-being is taken into Godself; the experience of it becomes a continuing event within God's life. This process is likened to a person taking the sting of a bee into themselves, and in suffering the sting, destroying the bee.

However, Fiddes reminds us, when we talk about the dying of death, we are not really making a statement about death itself, but instead we are describing what has happened to God in confronting it, bringing about alienation, and relationlessness. Death now belongs to God in the sense that it leaves a permanent impression on God's life. It becomes a way

of defining God, since death is now the thing that was unable to shatter God. And it is this understanding that brings us to the true importance of the cross, because above all, God uses Jesus' death to define God, and this definition continues eternally. Instead of cancelling out the cross, the resurrection is the act which solidifies it, making crucifixion eternal in the life of God. But it is not solely in the cross that God uses non-being to define God's own self and in so doing overcomes it. It has occurred throughout history: from the beginning of creation, God has been encountering death and making it serve God's purpose. It does however find its deepest expression in the cross, due to the depth of the Father-Son relationship.

God suffers with us

It is a consolation to those who suffer to know that God also suffers. On the one hand we must be able to speak of a God who is victorious in suffering, and on the other we must speak of a God who suffers universally so the range of empathy is not restricted. It is imperative that suffering must be something that happens to God, as well as something that God actively undertakes. God's suffering must not only be a feeling or an act on God's part, but also an injury to and constraint of God. In this way, by being afflicted by suffering, God participates in our estrangement, which moves us to trust God. This trust robs non-being of its aggressive power, as death becomes a place of trust in God. It is not only God that is changed, but also death, because our perception of it has changed, and we ourselves are changed. As such, wherever trust in God is created, death ceases to be the instrument of hostile non-being. In other words, when our suffering brings about trust in God to protect, death and 'nothingness' lose any power they might otherwise have, as they become no more than a definer of God.

The fact that God suffers means empirically that God cannot directly cause suffering. God does not move people and events around like pieces on a chessboard, as the gods of Greek philosophy were thought to, and God doesn't 'send' suffering. Though there aren't many who believe that God directly sends suffering to us, many have argued that God allows suffering; but Fiddes argues against this idea, explaining that if God were able to do something to remove suffering and stood idly by, it would be tantamount to causation. If this were the case, our trust in God would be hampered, and a God who actively participates in our suffering could not also be the cause of it. This leaves us with huge questions regarding God's sovereignty and overall power; if

God does not send suffering, and would not allow it to happen to us if there were any other choice, then God must in some way be limited, for if the limitation on God is imposed from outside of Godself, there is no meaning to this 'permission'. This therefore leads to the conclusion that God freely accepts self-limitation for the sake of the freedom of creation. It is humanity, as Jüngel has noted, that poses a threat to itself.

The place of free will

So if free will is the explanation we have for human suffering, then the affirmation of God's suffering is still needed to give credibility to a defence of the world as God's creation. Fiddes argues that if humanity is free, people must have the option to refuse God's purpose and make destructive choices. God therefore must have created humanity with this possibility, which, as John Hick has argued, makes the fall inevitable. This means that God bears the ultimate responsibility for the fall, and for our subsequent suffering, it is the 'risk' God has taken by moving out beyond Godself to create other beings. For this sort of responsibility to be consistent with a God of love, three things must be the case; the good attained by the suffering (the good being, in this case, the creation of our personhood) could not be attained by any other means than the risk of suffering, second that God should do everything within God's power and in accordance with God's nature to overcome evil and suffering, and third that God must not only limit Godself by taking the risk that humans may suffer through their freedom, but must also be limited by sharing in that suffering. For, as Fiddes notes, it is this alone that makes credible the creation of the world as an act of love.

Clearly there is not room here to go into the complexities of every theory expounded in *The creative suffering*, but I hope I've been able to communicate a little of the liberating truths that Fiddes so often reveals in his writing. For me, *The creative suffering of God* was a moment of realisation about the truth of God's participation with me, with each of us, through suffering, and the action of God taking that suffering into God and in so doing allowing us a place of trust, refuge, freedom and love.

Thank you Professor Fiddes, for sharing a lifetime of wisdom. Happy 65th birthday!

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Deacons and the go-between God

by Ed Kaneen

In 1983, Paul Fiddes published a short and timely monograph on leadership in Baptist churches.¹ *A leading question* (subsequently *LQ*) was a model of deep and clear thinking, rooted in scripture and the tradition of the church, while also demonstrating particular awareness of, and sensitivity to, the trends and needs of today's Baptist churches. In *LQ*, Fiddes addresses many important issues of ministry, but is particularly concerned to explore the relationship between the 'elder(ship)' and the 'diaconate', making the point that the elder/minister is 'set apart in fellowship with the wider church' to minister, while the deacon is appointed within the local church only (eg *LQ*, p33). It was important to reflect theologically on how a plural leadership of elders and deacons, now embraced by many churches, operates within a Baptist understanding of church government, and so the predominant focus of *LQ* is on the theological role of the minister/elder/overseer. In this contribution I want to take forward the thinking about deacons—those who continue to fulfil an important role in most Baptist churches. I will do so by reflecting on a change in understanding of the term *diakonos*, from which is derived our word 'deacon'.

Fiddes wisely, and perhaps presciently, leaves the Greek noun *diakonos* untranslated most of the time. For the benefit of his readers he explains that 'A fitting translation of the term "*diakonos*" in the New Testament would be "pastoral servant"' (*LQ*, p32). The 'pastoral' part of this translation owes much to Fiddes' reliance on 1 Timothy 3:8-13 as the closest we get to a working definition of the New Testament deacon (although it is worth noting that the pastoral element is only made explicit in the preceding section about 'overseers', 1 Timothy 3:5). I will explore this later.

Paul Fiddes tribute

The 'servant' aspect of Fiddes' translation has a long history, and has been influential on the understanding of the purpose of the diaconate. In continental Europe, for example, in many Lutheran influenced countries, the *Diakonie* is a significant social ministry of the church, doing an excellent job of serving those in need. This was the understanding of the early Baptists, in whose confessions² deacons (who are 'men and widows', says Article 16 of John Smyth's *Short confession*) are concerned with the

church's ministry to the poor, the sick, and the disabled. This also seems to have been the inspiration for the Baptist deaconess order in which, from 1890, a great many women fulfilled a ministry of support for the poor, evangelism, and preaching and pastoral care.³

Yet the notion that the word *diakonos* holds the idea of lowly service to those in need has been overturned in recent years. In a landmark publication in 1990,⁴ John N. Collins surveyed *diakonos* in ancient sources outside the Bible. He discovered people described by this term doing such varied work as ambassadors, pagan priests, Lotharios, and even contract killers! While the term could also be used to describe servants and those who 'wait on tables', these ideas did not form the core semantic field. Rather, Collins proposed such ideas as 'go-between', 'representative', and 'agent', and suggested that this was true of the New Testament also. The significance of this change should not be underestimated: as Collins puts it, 'a redefinition of the Greek words is inevitably going to work towards a reassessment of the deacon and his [sic] office' (*Diakonia*, p41).

Nonconformist understandings

Such a claim initiated serious discussions in Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, in which becoming a deacon is the first step of ordained ministry. Yet the new understanding of *diakonia* has also been influential in nonconformist denominations. As far as I am aware, however, Baptists are yet to apply this shift of meaning to our own understanding of the diaconate.⁵ This is surprising, since, while our expression of the diaconate is very different from these other churches, nevertheless most churches still continue to describe their local leaders as 'deacons', despite the incomprehensibility of the term to most of the contemporary world. The importance of the name 'deacon', I suggest, indicates at least three things.

It indicates a desire to continue a tradition. It is a Baptist tradition, handed down by earlier generations; but it is also a biblical tradition which, in spite of the difficulties of English translations, is clearly present in the New Testament. Of course, traditions can be unthinkingly upheld, but here think it represents a conscious commitment to continue spiritual leadership according to a scriptural picture.

It indicates a desire to represent a leadership in the church that is distinct from leadership in the world and from other ministries within the church. The name 'deacon' singles out a particular group of leaders within the church (the minister, for example, is not called a deacon), and is not a name that is found in secular leadership at all today.

It indicates that the name has significance, not simply as a label for an office, but as a description of those known by it. Thus, the name 'deacon' (*diakonos*) is itself important

in understanding the kind of ministry in which those called by the name engage.

In the light of Collins' work, and of the commitment to a biblical tradition, I want to think about how the name *diakonos* contributes to an understanding of the role today. The Pauline literature follows Collins' understanding of *diakonos*, and so 'go-between' is an appropriate gloss for the New Testament 'deacon', and can contribute to a theological understanding of the modern diaconate.

Apart from the gospels,⁶ the term *diakonos* only occurs in the Pauline literature, where we find nine individuals so named.⁷ Only in two passages are deacons referred to in a corporate sense (Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8, 12), where they probably represent distinct groups of church leaders. This has led to a tendency, found also in Fiddes' work, to draw a distinction between the former examples, where *diakonos* is a description of the ministry of some New Testament figures, and the latter two examples, where *diakonos* is probably the title of an ecclesial office.

There may be some validity in this distinction when we consider the writings of the second century church (although I think this is often exaggerated), but as far as the New Testament goes, I want to challenge it. It seems to me that using *diakonos* as the title of an office seeks a very deliberate continuity with the New Testament ministry of *diakonos*—in the same manner as the modern 'deacon' seeks some continuity with the biblical example. So, our understanding of the biblical diaconate should be shaped by the way in which *diakonos* is used in the Pauline corpus.

If we now consider some of the clearest examples from the three periods of the Pauline corpus—the undisputed Pauline letters; the disputed letters; and the Pastorals—we can see that there is remarkable consistency in the use of the term, and that it corresponds with Collins' redefinition. It also illustrates the varied, and possibly unhelpful, way in which English Bibles, in this case the NRSV, translate it.

Stage 1: undisputed Pauline letters

2 Corinthians 3:6: [God] who has made us competent to be ministers [plural diakonoi] of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

The suggestion is that God has made Paul and his companions to be 'go-betweens of a new covenant'. The metaphor of the letter is also used (3:3), clearly representing the same idea of the go-between. The relationship seems to be between God (and his new

covenant) and the believers, leading to a letter from Christ to the world (3:2).

Romans 16:1: I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon [diakonos] of the church at Cenchreae.

Here, Paul is recommending Phoebe to the churches in Rome. It is possible that she is also the letter carrier, and therefore Paul wants her to be well received. But she is clearly a go-between and representative, establishing a relationship between two churches: Cenchreae and Rome, and between Paul and the Roman Christians.

Stage 2: disputed Pauline letters

Ephesians 3:7-8: Of this gospel I have become a servant [diakonos] according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ.

Here, Paul is styled as a go-between, bringing the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles. He is therefore a representative of this gospel, establishing a relationship between it and his hearers. Therefore, as in 2 Corinthians 3:6, a go-between can act on behalf of something inanimate, like the gospel of the new covenant. However, these are so closely associated with God's own action that we can reasonably infer that the relationship is fundamentally between God and the Gentiles here.

Colossians 4:7: Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister [diakonos], and a fellow servant [sundoulos] in the Lord.

Tychicus, almost certainly depicted as the letter carrier, is here (and in 4:8) explicitly identified as Paul's representative, a go-between between Paul and his hearers. Like the other examples, he has a clear purpose defined by the one he represents, but he is also here sent—a necessary step for any representative, but made explicit in this case.

Stage 3: Pastoral epistles

1 Timothy 3:8-13 gives the clearest (and only) description of the qualifications for the role of deacon, but this passage does not indicate what the role involves. However, elsewhere in the letter, Timothy is described as a 'deacon' in the same way as the previous examples. This description is consistent with the 'office' whose requirements are laid out in 1 Timothy 3.

1 Timothy 4:6: If you [Timothy] put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant [diakonos] of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed.

If Timothy does as he is told, then he will be a 'good deacon', just as those who serve well and are suitably qualified are described in the previous chapter (3:13). Moreover, the benefit of Timothy serving in this way (4:6cd) is likewise reminiscent of that which concludes the section on 'good deacons', where faith is also mentioned (3:13). In this case, Timothy is representing Christ in his teaching (although, in effect, the letter writer), and his obedience as a go-between aims to bring his hearers and Christ/the letter writer closer together.

These examples demonstrate that, across the period of the Pauline corpus, there is a consistency in the usage of the term *diakonos*, and it corresponds with that found in classical literature and popular usage by Collins. Those described as 'deacons' are go-betweens, bringing together, as we have seen, God/Christ and believers; the gospel/new covenant and hearers; one church with another; and Paul as missionary leader with his converts to whom he writes. It is noteworthy that these deacons are, explicitly or implicitly, sent, and therefore are representatives of the sender (whether that be the gospel, God, Paul *etc*). In some cases (*eg* Colossians 4:7-8), and perhaps this may be generalised, it is as if they are making the absent party present to those to whom they are going. This seems to be a matter primarily of speech,⁸ but also of way of life (*eg* 1 Timothy 3:8-12).

Therefore, it would seem that there is a commonality of intent in describing individuals as 'deacons' in the New Testament. The essential quality is one of relationship, rather than one of function. It is not so much the actual activities undertaken ('service') that characterise a deacon, but rather those whom the deacon both represents and is a representative to. The tendency today to consider deacons to be functionaries, with particular responsibility for, say, 'fabric' or 'children's work', while pragmatic, may unintentionally obscure something fundamental about the role of the deacon. The 'function' of the deacon, as indicated by the way the name is used, is as a 'go-between', bringing people together.

This is important for Fiddes, also, who says, 'They [deacons] gave service in two directions—to the community and also to the episkopos [overseer = elder/minister] whom they assisted' (*LQ*, p32). However, we have seen far more examples of relationships in which deacons might act. They might bring together: God and his people in the church; the gospel and new hearers outside the church; two or more churches, and so on. This means that deacons may fulfil all manner of roles, both

inside and outside the local church. The assumption, for example, that teaching is to be left to the ‘elders’ (*episkopoi*), at least as far as the NT examples cited above go, is an artificial one. Moreover, while it is true that many of those described as *diakonoi* in the NT are connected with a particular local church, nevertheless, the local church does not act as a boundary to their ministry (this gives support to the notion of wider ‘diaconal’ ministries⁹).

Therefore, as with the earlier understanding, it is not that deacons do something different from other Christians, for, in this case, all Christians are called to represent Christ, to proclaim the gospel, to bring people together inside and outside the church. Yet deacons particularly represent this calling in and to the church. Fiddes identifies the importance of ‘being’ for ministers (*T&T* pp 99-103), but we can now do this also for deacons. For they convey a key aspect of the being and mission of God, who, in eternal corelationship, sends his Son as go-between, precisely to bring together God and God’s kingdom with his people, and them with one another; and who sends the Spirit to continue this work. With Fiddes (*T&T* p103 n 39), recognising this may make it entirely appropriate for those newly called to the diaconate to receive some form of ordination.¹⁰ However, simply acknowledging this nature of the *diakonos* within our churches may give a new depth to seeking out those called to the diaconate, and a fresh encouragement to those already ‘deaconing well’ (1 Timothy 3:12), that the ‘go-between God’¹¹ should have been pleased to consider them his ‘go-betweens’

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Notes to text

1. Paul S. Fiddes, *A leading question: the structure and authority of leadership in the local church* (Didcot: Baptist Publications, 1983); *Idem, Authority in relations between pastor and people: a Baptist doctrine of ministry*, in *Tracks and Traces: Baptist identity in church and theology*, Paternoster, 2003, 83-106 (subsequently *T&T*).

2. From William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist confessions of faith* (revised). Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969, pp100-101: *Short confession* by John Smyth (1609) – Art. 16 (here 101); 116-123: *English declaration at Amsterdam* (1611) – Art. 20 (here 121-2); 224-235: *The standard confession* (1660) – Art. 14 (here 230-1); 297-334: *The ‘Orthodox creed’* (1678) – Art. 31 (here 319).

3. Ian M. Randall, *The English Baptist of the 20th century*. Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005, pp45-46. In 1975, all remaining deaconesses were recognised as ministers and transferred to the accredited list; *idid* p390. See also, *The story of*

women in ministry in the Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot: BUGB, 2011, pp18-19.

4. John N. Collins, *Diakonia: re-interpreting the ancient sources*. New York: OUP, 1990. Repeated and summarised in many subsequent publications; *idem*, *Deacons and the church: making connections between Old and New*. Leominster: Gracewing, 2002. For a thoughtful reflection in an English context, see Paula Gooder, *Diakonia in the New Testament: a dialogue with John N. Collins*, in *Ecclesiology*, 2006, **3**, 33-56.

5. British Baptists have made use of Collins' study, but not from a Baptist perspective. R. Alastair Campbell has engaged with Collins' NT exegesis, agreeing with his general analysis but suggesting that the NT maintains the sense of 'humility'. *The elders: seniority within earliest Christianity*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, pp133-5; also, Myra Blyth (with Wendy S. Robbins) has worked with the ideas as part of the WCC Programme Unit on Service and Sharing: Eadem, *No boundaries to compassion? An exploration of women, gender and diakonia*. Geneva: WCC, 1998.

6. The gospels occasionally use the term, primarily in one saying (Mark 10:43 and pars), but we do not have space to pursue this here.

7. Rulers (Rom 13:4); Christ (Rom 15:8; Gal 2:17); Phoebe (Rom 16:1); Paul (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; 11:23; Eph 3:7; Col 1:23, 25); Apollos (1 Cor 3:5); Timothy (2 Cor 3:6, 6:4; 1 Tim 4:6); false apostles (2 Cor 11:15, 23); Tychichus (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7); Epaphras (Col 1:7). Note that twice these 'individuals' are groups: rulers and false apostles.

8. Perhaps explaining the importance of the second condition for becoming a deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8: not being double-tongued.

9. *Forms of ministry among Baptists: towards an understanding of spiritual leadership*. Didcot: BUGB, 1994, p10.

10. Common practice in Eastern Europe. John H.Y. Briggs (ed), *Deacons and elders: a dictionary of European Baptist life and thought*. Paternoster: Milton Keynes, 2009, pp136-7.

11. This reference recalls my first encounter with Paul Fiddes, at my interview for Regent's Park College when he was Principal. I was trying my best to explain what I thought of the book we had been set, which, in reality, I had hardly understood at all: John V. Taylor, *The go-between God* (2nd ed). London: SCM, 2004.

Following the fiery, cloudy pillar

by Gethin Abraham-Williams

Wales, with a population of some three million people, may be the smallest of the UK's four nations, but its Christian tradition, nurtured in the age of the 6th century Celtic saints, has been a guiding light in moulding its two-language culture and witness.

Four decades ago, challenged by the destabilising effects of two world wars, some of the leading Christian traditions of Wales (Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Reformed, Baptist) embarked on a path towards presenting a united witness to the gospel in changing times. They made a 'solemn covenant before God and with one another, to work and pray in common obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, in order that by the Holy Spirit (they might) be brought into one visible Church to serve together in mission to the glory of God the Father'. Over the years that witness has borne fruit in commending the wholeness of the gospel in an age fractured by many uncertainties: economic, social and spiritual.

This autumn, in the west coast university town of Aberystwyth, with Dr Olav Fykse Tveit as their keynote speaker, those churches will be holding a Gathering to reassess their progress in achieving those mission goals. The Gathering will also be an occasion to wait again upon the Holy Spirit for the moment that will 'create out of their separated lives a new ecclesial community committed to common mission in the world'. Preparing the congregations and parishes of Wales for this major event in their calendar of cooperative mission and evangelism, thousands of copies of a little booklet, *Covenanting for mission*, have been prepared and distributed. To download a copy: www.cydgynulliad.org.uk.

In the words of Wales's best known hymnist, William Williams of Pantycelyn:

*Open now the crystal fountain,
whence the healing stream doth flow;
let the fiery, cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through.*

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Reflections

Reflections

Bad or broken? by Rob Trickey

The thoughts in this article began to crystallise in Advent 2010, while using a book of devotional readings based on the Anglican Lectionary, including the collect for the day. As I read these over a period of several months, I was struck by two things: the frequency with which the collect referred to sin and our need for forgiveness and/or deliverance from temptation; and the extent to which this failed to connect with me. The exercise offered a fascinating insight into a particular form of spirituality; but more significant was the revelation that 'sin' (in the normal understanding of the word) was no longer a helpful or relevant way of thinking about myself.

I am certainly not claiming some sort of moral perfection—I'm very much aware of my shortcomings and conscious of making wrong choices, of behaving badly towards others, of shameful attitudes. The question is not whether I do or don't do these things—but where does all this stuff come from? Do I do these things because I am fundamentally a bad person (or perhaps, because I have a streak of badness in me)?

Here would be the starting point for many a 'gospel' presentation: we're all sinners, unable to stand before a holy God, utterly helpless until he does something to save us. We have no goodness of our own. So deeply is this embedded in our thinking that it seems impossible to formulate things differently, without the whole Christian

edifice crumbling to dust. Without feeling that I have abandoned the gospel, I am convinced that this is not the right starting point for thinking about God and our relationship to him.

There are other contributory parts to my current thinking.

Theologically, I am one of those who increasingly find the notion of penal substitution unhelpful—certainly when the metaphor is pressed too far and is presented as the dominant or only way of understanding the cross. At the same time, over the past 20 years or so, I have had a growing sense that the whole ‘Jesus event’ matters, that the life of Jesus has significance, not merely as a prelude to the cross.¹ Reading Paul in the light of Jesus (rather than the other way round) frequently offers a different perspective—for example, there is no sense in the gospel accounts that the forgiveness Jesus offers (in words and actions) is in any way conditional, that it can only be fully realised through the cross. Rather, Jesus often seems to declare what is already true.²

In my *preaching and pastoral practice*, I have come to see the importance of knowing who we are as children of God: those in whom the Father delights. I talk with people who are very ‘sound’, full of Biblical ‘information’, yet crippled by deep feelings of worthlessness and insecurity. Whatever version of the gospel they’ve heard doesn’t seem to be doing them much good! There are many faithful, devoted followers of Jesus who don’t know what it is to be embraced by the Father. Personally speaking, the past few years of ministry have been quite difficult, and I have been very grateful for the support of good friends. But above all, it has been my sense of who I am before God which has sustained me, when many other ‘certainties’ have turned out to be less solid.

Who is made in God’s image?

Another strand to my thinking is a growing sense that there is not (in the end) an awful lot separating me from my ‘neighbours’. All seven billion of us are made in the image of God, which means that fundamentally there is no ‘us and them’. And my observation is that, once we remove the need to create an ‘us and them’ (so that we can share with ‘them’ what ‘we’ have found), there is a basic goodness in people, however mixed up and obscured this is. As a Street Pastor, I have observed great qualities of love, friendship, care and loyalty among people whose behaviour in other

ways is difficult to stomach. Theologically (and Romans 8 notwithstanding), the verdict pronounced on the finished creation in Genesis 1:31 has never been rescinded; and (as Rob Bell points out) taking Genesis 1 as our starting point, rather than Genesis 3, makes a big difference to how we view the world and those who share the planet with us.

God at a distance

For these (and other reasons), I find that I can no longer hold to what might be called 'the standard model', the usual evangelical understanding of the gospel.³ Theologically, this model places God at a distance from us, a God who (so to speak) holds his nose and averts his eyes from our shame and degradation, until such time as we can get ourselves cleaned up. This is not to dismiss or downplay the reality of God's anger and the possibility of judgment—in fact, love demands anger when it is violated (the opposite of love is not anger but indifference⁴)—but is it the best starting point? Does it fit with what we see in Jesus, God's best word to us? It is worth noting that in the aftermath of Adam and Eve's disobedience it is they who hide from God. God comes looking for them and meets their disobedience with grace, providing them with clothes and ensuring that they cannot live for ever in their fallen state. And in the seminal story of the prodigal son/father, the instruction to fetch new clothes for the boy comes after the embrace, and not before.

Jesus did use the metaphor of God as judge/king, but he did so in a way which personalised it—the judge/king acts directly, subject to no-one and nothing else. In the standard model, more abstract notions of 'law' come into play, to which even the judge is subject—so God cannot simply forgive, without the moral fabric of the universe collapsing—which seems to contradict the notion that God holds all things together! The moral character of God is abstracted and depersonalised, 'stamped' on the universe, so that even God himself is rendered powerless, subject to something ('justice') outside of himself—which is deeply problematic!

Although Jesus made use of 'judgment' language, his dominant model for speaking of God was that of father, especially in relation to those who felt themselves to be excluded. Culturally, this includes the notion of authority in a way that is perhaps less obvious to 21st century families; but it seems that this use of 'father' language was distinctive and hugely significant. Although Jesus had many hard and challenging things to say, the overwhelming message of his ministry, expressed supremely in his

table fellowship, was: 'you are welcome—come as you are, and join the feast'.

Spiritually and psychologically, starting with human sin is potentially disastrous, because it declares that fundamentally we are unacceptable. As a parent, I would be horrified if my children picked up this message from me—and yet we predicate this of God, the ultimate 'significant other'! Of course, many of us do pick this message up and limp through life with it—only to have it confirmed and reinforced by the 'good news'.

Moreover, taking separation from God as our starting point immediately sets us on a course whereby we are seeking to earn God's love and approval. In terms of spirituality, the problem with the standard evangelical understanding of the gospel is that it doesn't really get to grips with grace. For one thing, the model still requires that debts are paid and not cancelled (contradicting Jesus' parable in Matthew 18, for example); and although it may appear that we have no part to play in our salvation, this is not true. To access eternal life, there are certain things we have to believe—including an acceptance of our sinfulness. Furthermore, repentance is called for—and for repentance to be meaningful, it will often involve taking steps to rectify wrongs. And certainly within most evangelical traditions, there will be all manner of subtle (and maybe not so subtle) expectations as to the conduct required of Christians who are 'saved'—prayer, Bible reading, evangelism, tithing, lifestyle, and so on.

Grace alone?

These things are not unimportant. But to assert that such a salvation rests on 'grace alone' is misleading—these are works of a particular kind, without which (according to the model) we cannot be saved. My point is not that we should dispense with these things. Rather, the issue is that by taking our starting point as being 'sinners before an angry God' we fuel a spirituality of appeasement, whereby we are constantly seeking to make ourselves acceptable to God (and are therefore anxious lest any slip will cause his favour to be withdrawn). However much we emphasise that 'God was in Christ', the message which is often heard is: Jesus is your friend but God doesn't like you.⁵ If God is against us, we have to do something about it.

There are difficulties theologically and spiritually with the standard model; it is also problematic when it comes to evangelism. There will be many people around us who struggle with guilt and are desperately looking for forgiveness. For them, the standard

model works well—they don't need persuading of their sinfulness, they need to know what they can do about it and whether it's possible to make a fresh start. But arguably most people do not see themselves in this way. If pushed, most would admit they're not perfect—but few would see themselves as fundamentally bad. As I've suggested above, it's difficult to disagree with that assessment—most people we come across are decent enough, trying to do the right thing, willing to help others. It becomes increasingly difficult to persuade people to follow Jesus if the starting point is that they have to accept that they're bad people—and not just bad, but really bad! Against a backdrop of Christian hypocrisy and abusive priests, this becomes even more untenable.

Again, the point is not to gloss over the reality of sin and the need for forgiveness—but to ask whether it is the best starting point. Is it 'good news' to tell people that their goodness counts for nothing before God?

Broken not bad

The old cliché has it right, I think: the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. It is not that our hearts are bad—but that we are broken. We are wounded and damaged, uncertain of who we are and whether we matter, desperate to be loved (and to love) but deeply unsure of whether that is the case. It is no piece of spiritual jargon to say with John that 'perfect love casts out fear' (1 John 4:18), because the converse is true: where there is no love, fear can flourish. And fear is a particularly toxic poison, whether we're considering the micro-interactions of our lives or large-scale ethnic conflict. Out of our brokenness our 'sin' is acted out, in behaviour and attitudes.

To clarify: I am not suggesting that sin and guilt are no longer issues, and that our need for forgiveness is not real. But these matters are symptoms of this deeper problem. For the past year or so, I've been unwell with some sort of mystery illness, some of the symptoms of which are pain in my neck, shoulders and hands. I've had some physio and sometimes taken painkillers, which have helped—but I know that the pain is not the real problem—there is something deeper that needs healing (which is not just physical—but that's another story!). Our basic problem is not that we are bad but that we are broken—our deepest need is not for forgiveness but for healing. It is not that forgiveness is unnecessary but rather that it is inadequate as the remedy for what is really wrong with us.

If this diagnosis is correct, how do we find the healing we need? Or to put it another way, what is the good news we offer, to each other and to the world?

Bishop Gene Robinson was asked 'What would you say to someone who asked you "what must I do to be saved?"?' His response seems to me to encapsulate the gospel in a way that A-B-C presentations never could:

I would say, probably: 'Believe that God loves you beyond your wildest imagining, and begin to live your life as if that were true.' I think it transforms your life dramatically if you believe that. I would go on to say that I believe that Jesus is the perfect revelation of God and of God's will for us. Take a look at what he said, what he did, and how he lived his life, and that's the way you will discover most clearly what God's attitude is towards you and what God's will is for you.⁶

It seems to me that this is good news! This meets us at our point of deepest need and offers us hope. And it points to another key issue, that of discipleship. Did Jesus come to provide a way for God to forgive us, or to show us how to live? We may want to answer 'both'—but in practice, the latter has tended to be overshadowed by the former, producing believers rather than disciples.

My 'here I stand' passage of scripture is Luke 15, and especially the story of the prodigal son/father. The context of the story is important (vv1-2): Jesus tells it to explain what he is doing—it's a kind of manifesto, which adds to the sense that this story is foundational. At the heart of it is the father, who longs for his sons to know him as such—whereas one of them is a rebel and the other (it turns out) is not much more than a servant, in his own eyes. In leaving home, the younger son assumes that he has lost all rights to sonship—the best he can hope for is servanthood. But the story turns on the fact that, in the father's eyes, he has never stopped being a son, and so his welcome home is never in doubt. It's very hard to square this story with notions of penal substitution.

At first, the story seems to support the notion that to receive grace, we need to acknowledge our sin and repent. But on closer inspection, it is less clear. All the story says is that the younger son realised he was in a mess; sensed/hoped that his situation could be improved if he went back home; and came up with a form of words which he thought would impress his father. Although we assume it to be the case, there is no direct suggestion here that the son actually felt remorse for his actions—his plan could be quite cynical (or shrewd, as in the story of the steward in

the following chapter in Luke). If the son's motives are unclear, what is in no doubt is the overwhelming grace of the father, who is not interested in hearing the son's prepared speech. It doesn't actually matter whether the son is sincere or not—all that counts is that he's home. And in being welcomed home there is the real possibility that the son might find the healing he needs, from which comes true repentance, forgiveness, transformation and godliness. It seems to me that Jesus' whole ministry reflected this conviction.

This article is no theological treatise, and the shift of perspective implies some major recalibration of thinking in other areas. It's more of a testimony, sharing something of the way my thinking has changed—but I share it not simply as a way of working out what I think but because I believe passionately that we have a gospel to share that is able to embrace and affirm all that is good in life and at the same time, to offer genuine hope that that which is broken can be healed.

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Notes to text

1. I have no scholarly big guns behind me, but I wonder whether one of the reasons for the writing of the gospels was to correct an overemphasis on the cross.
2. My thinking has been significantly shaped by Tom Wright, especially *Jesus and the victory of God*, as well as the writings of W. H. Vanstone (especially *Love's endeavour*, *love's expense* and *The stature of waiting*).
3. Another designation could be the 'A-B-C model': Accept you're a sinner— Believe that Jesus died in your place—Confess that Jesus is Lord.
4. When we understand love properly, and grasp the fact that God doesn't just love me but the whole of creation, there is no need for the duality in God which pits love against holiness/justice, as if love on its own is insufficient.
5. Conversely, Adrian Plass describes his spiritual awakening in terms of discovering that 'God is nice and he likes me'—typically tongue-in-cheek but profoundly true—the notion that God likes us seems to me to be very powerful.
6. In *Third Way*, March 2009

Reviews

Edited by John Houseago

***The origins of Christian Zionism:
Lord Shaftesbury and evangelical
support for a Jewish homeland***

Donald M. Lewis

CUP 2010

ISBN 978-0-52151-518-4

Reviewer: Brian Talbot

This book addresses the significant issue of the origins of Christian Zionism through assessing the contribution made by the most prominent Victorian social reformer, Lord Shaftesbury. Lewis examines why British Evangelicals became fascinated by the Jews and promoted 'a teaching of esteem' to counter the 'teaching of contempt' that had been predominant in British society.

These passionate evangelicals transformed the way Jews were presented in Christian literature, but at the same time were totally committed to funding and supporting evangelistic work among the Jews. They worked with the German Pietists to found a joint Anglican—Lutheran bishopric in

Jerusalem and changed British public opinion to favour a Jewish homeland in Palestine which culminated in the Balfour declaration of 1917.

The author convincingly shows the importance of Philosemitism; that is viewing Jews not as 'Christ-killers' but as a people 'beloved for the Fathers' sake' (Romans 11:28). Theodore Beza and Martin Bucer, key Reformation figures, had highlighted the significance of the future for the Jews in Romans 9-11, a perspective taken up by many Puritan writers, and promoted in the notes of the Geneva Bible.

Evangelical Christian indifference to the Jews in the 18th century was transformed to passionate advocacy by several key people and influences in the 19th century. Many of the most influential evangelicals espoused this cause including Charles Simeon and Charles Spurgeon. Advocates of historicist premillennialism fervently promoted this cause in the middle of the century, but it was not weakened after the waning of that influence from the late 1860s.

Lewis highlights the importance of Jewish converts to Protestant evangelicalism, who were most effective at promoting a Jewish national identity at a time when most European Jews had no time for Zionism, together with other key figures that straddled the

German Pietist and English evangelical worlds, such as Karl Steinkopf and John Nicolayson. Key biblical interpreters that are credited with influence in shaping this debate include lesser known figures such as Baptist minister James Bicheno (ca1752-1831).

In summary, this is one of the clearest and most convincing interpretations of the history of this movement. Lewis' research is very thorough and his style irenic. His work will probably serve as a standard text in this field for the foreseeable future

The world of Jesus and the early church: identity and interpretation in early communities of faith

Craig A. Evans (ed)

Hendrickson, Peabody, 2011

ISBN 9781598568257

Reviewer: Pieter J. Lalleman

This well produced collection of 13 essays is conveniently summarised by the editor on pp1-6, but his efforts to argue that they are all about communities of faith fail to convince.

Four essays are on the Dead Sea scrolls, one of which (by John Collins) argues that they should not be too closely connected to the Qumran Community, whereas another (Peters) simply

presumes that connection. George Brooke discusses systematically how the scrolls use scripture, while the fourth essay (Bodner) shows how freely the scrolls handle the Book of Samuel.

Elgvin briefly argues that Hebrews and Revelation both use the concept of a heavenly temple and thus (!) stem from priestly circles. Chancey surveys what others have said about the social and economic conditions in Galilee at the time of Jesus. The more we know, the more scholars disagree; so we can no longer preach a parable as if it reflects a situation of poverty and suppression! Margaret MacDonald demonstrates that in the world of the early church slaves, slave children, and free children lived together—and heard the gospel if a house church met in the property. The editor, Evans, shows how Jews would bury even executed criminals in the family tomb: against John D. Crossan, he argues that Jesus must have been buried.

I was fascinated by Shimon Gibson's illustrated article which illuminates the trial of Jesus before Pilate with the help of new archaeological evidence regarding the Praetorium. In an interesting essay—but out of place in the present collection—Stephen Andrews discusses the Khirbet Qeiyafa inscription (discovered in 2008) as well as ancient fragments of the Hebrew

scriptures, while James Sanders surveys the latest efforts to edit and print the Hebrew Bible. Finally, both Larry Hurtado (repeating what he has written elsewhere) and Paul Foster discuss early manuscripts of the NT. I enjoyed these two essays but will you?

The value of a book like this for Christian ministers is only indirect. College tutors and university lecturers can use it to prepare classes but nobody can preach directly from this material or teach a congregation. If this brief review has nonetheless kindled your enthusiasm, then do consider studying towards a master's degree, and if you have one, consider further studies. The church needs scholars just as much as practitioners, and these two roles are not mutually exclusive.

The Greek of the Septuagint: a supplemental lexicon

Gary Alan Chamberlain

Hendrickson Publishers, 2011

ISBN: 9781565637412

Reviewer: Ernest Lucas

Tradition has it that about 250 BC a group of 72 (or 70) Jewish scholars translated the Pentateuch into Greek in Alexandria in Egypt. Over the next two centuries or so the rest of the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek by

various people. The resulting 'Septuagint' was the first Bible of the early Christians, most of whom spoke Greek.

For this reason, it had a significant influence on the New Testament. It provided some of the vocabulary that the NT writer's drew upon. They used Septuagint words or phrases that were not commonly used in 1st century Greek. There are allusions to the OT that are recognisable because they use a phrase from the Septuagint. These are sometimes theologically significant since they direct the readers to the OT passage that the writer had in mind. There are some 300 direct quotations from the Septuagint. For these reasons the ability to read the Septuagint has considerable value for anyone who teaches or preaches from the NT. Adolph Deissmann wrote, 'A single hour lovingly devoted to the text of the Septuagint will further our exegetical knowledge of the Pauline Epistles more than a whole day spent over a commentary'.

Septuagint grammar has its own peculiarities. *The grammar of Septuagint Greek* by F. C. Conybeare & St George Stock is an accessible guide (1995 reprint by Hendrickson Publishers). Even without this, anyone who can read NT Greek can read the

Septuagint. The biggest stumbling block is the much wider vocabulary of the Septuagint. There are specialist Greek—English lexicons of Septuagint (eg T. Muraoka, Peeters, 2009) but they are expensive. This lexicon by Chamberlain provides a supplement to a standard NT lexicon such as the widely used one by F. Bauer, F. W. Danker *et al.* It contains definitions and important lexical information for over 5000 Septuagint words not found in the NT, and so not in any NT lexicon. It also contains supplemental information on over 1000 additional words which do appear in the NT but have unique Septuagintal meanings not covered in NT lexicons. In addition, some words which occur as textual variants in the Septuagint but are not found in standard classical or Septuagint lexicons are included. There is a helpful introduction and several useful appendices, including a detailed cross-reference index charting the places where Septuagintal chapter and verse numbering differs from that found in the Hebrew and English Bibles.

The reliability of the New Testament

Bart Ehrman & Daniel Wallace

Fortress Press 2011

ISBN 978-0-800-69773-0

Reviewer: Nik Hookey

The book arose out of the Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint forum in 2008, an annual forum to allow ‘respectful debate’ on a variety of cultural or religious issues. The 2008 forum focused on the textual reliability of the New Testament, and Bart Ehrman and Daniel Wallace were the dialogue partners. The biggest chunk of the book is taken up by a transcript of the debate, and as such, is very accessible.

The transcript is followed by a number of papers presented in response to the debate, which are rather more technical, and probably of interest only to those who want to explore the subject more deeply.

Michael W. Holmes’ essay, *Text and transmission in the 2nd century*, focuses on issues of canon and textual variants through the various manuscripts that are available. An up to date copy of Nestle-Aland is not essential for the essay, but it would certainly help to have a key of the principal manuscripts and versions cited in the textual apparatus!

Dale Martin argues for the necessity of a theology of scripture, and suggests that it should be taught more rigorously in seminaries, so that seminarians better understand textual criticism as a tool rather than something which can deliver a ‘pure’ version of the biblical text.

David Parker asks ‘What is the text of the

New Testament?’ He recognises that early Christians did not have a single canon of 27 books presented for them, but a variety of different lists (4 gospels, 14 or so Pauline letters and so on), and believes that they lived in a textually rich world. He suggests that new technology is beginning to re-open that world to us, as we are more able to see variant manuscripts on various websites.

William Warren examines how the text of the NT changed between manuscripts, and attributes it to the copyists, through scribal error in rushing a manuscript copy after a day’s work, or occasionally because of the scribe’s own ideas about which words should be given particular emphasis.

Martin Heide presents a careful look at the stability of the text, using a comparison with Shepherd of Hermas, and concludes that the areas of commonality give a high degree of confidence in the transmitted text of the NT.

Craig A. Evans looks at some of the ‘errors’ in the NT text, and asks whether these damage the credibility of the text. His conclusion is that we have a highly reliable corpus in our Nestle-Aland NT.

Finally, Sylvie Raquel has an essay looking at the culture and character of

the scribes who copied the NT, and how far they saw themselves as preservers of the tradition or shapers of the tradition, and concludes that, although many scribes were not focused and making sure that every word and letter was copied exactly, they did regard the NT as scripture, and so aimed to communicate the message as precisely as possible.

All in all, this book is a relatively accessible introduction to current issues in NT textual criticism.

Baptist theology

Stephen R Holmes

T & T Clark 2012

ISBN 978-0-567-00031-6

Reviewer: Philip Clements-Jewery

This fine book by one of our colleagues who currently lectures in theology at the University of St Andrew’s is published in a series (*Doing theology*) in which authors from different Christian traditions seek to explain their tradition to others.

Yet, the book’s title does not accurately describe its contents. This volume is not a systematic explication of Baptist beliefs, at least not to begin with. Nearly half the book is given over to an historical account of the development

of Baptist life and thought, both in the UK and, particularly, in the Americas, although proper recognition is also given to the missionary work of J.G. Oncken in continental Europe.

I suspect that the author was writing, not to his own brief, but to that of the publisher, who was especially mindful of the need to market the book in the US. Certainly, the cover picture could not be one of a Baptist church building in the UK, although architecturally it could very well be one in the US.

I'm also not sure whom the book is aimed at: non-Baptists will require some (too much?) prior knowledge to appreciate it fully. But it is very readable, even if, stylistically, the author is a little too fond of the semi-colon. There are also a few instances of poor proofreading.

That said, this a goldmine of succinct insights into Baptist beliefs. Again and again, reading the opening historical chapters, I was struck by the many judicious comments as the story unfolds. Holmes is quite clear that Baptist theology exists between the two poles of individual discipleship and life in the community of the gathered church. While there are no particular Baptist distinctives concerning the major doctrines of trinitarian Christian faith, it is also

noteworthy that there have been few Baptist systematic theologians, although today Paul Fiddes stands out as a significant exception to this judgement. We have produced far more missiologists, and this must be a product of the historical Baptist emphasis on mission.

There are no surprises for Baptists in the themes Holmes chooses for a distinctively Baptist vision of the church. The great value of the book lies not so much in the choice of themes, but in the theological judgements made upon them as Holmes unfolds the historical and intellectual development of the Baptist movement.

This is a book that deserves to be read widely, within and beyond the Baptist community, and I thoroughly recommend it.

Could YOU review?

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with your areas of interest
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