

# The Fraternal

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January 1985

Vol. 210

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Due January

# God's Adventure of Love

## An introduction to some leading ideas of Process Theology, and their Pastoral Implications.

No theological approach is completely new, though often ideas and thoughts will be put into a new combination by a novel approach. So it is with Process Theology. In this article I want to 'open up' some of that school's particular ideas, and show how they resonate with, and interpret, major biblical themes. I do not intend to give a comprehensive account of Process Theology: many of its less endearing traits will not be mentioned. But the ideas we examine offer a serious challenge to the way in which many of us read the bible and so interpret our faith, often innocently unaware of the many presuppositions we employ.

Perhaps I ought to start by putting my cards on the table and saying a little about the relationship between scripture and theology. The scriptures are the originating and controlling resource for our theologising, our thinking about God and his way with men and his world, yet the scripture-theology relationship is a reciprocal one. Most of us accept the cultural conditioning of certain ethical beliefs stated in the bible: few churches now insist that ladies cover their heads; many try to 'excuse' the NT hard-line on slavery. But we rarely allow ourselves to go on to ask whether the way in which certain doctrinal beliefs were formulated were not also culturally conditioned — not the beliefs themselves, but the way in which they were expressed. In particular, I want to ask whether the scriptures do not present two contrasting models of how God operates in the world, and whether for too long the Christian tradition which influences the way in which we read and understand the bible has not majored on the 'wrong' model to the exclusion of the other, and so impoverished our faith and our expectations of God.

Let me explain what I mean precisely by relaying to you two quotations from the man who gave Process Theology its initial impetus, Alfred North Whitehead, mathematician, physicist and philosopher (1861-1947). Psalm 24 is one of my favourites, though it was not one of his. There is of course much in the Psalms which seems less than Christ-like, and the strength of the Psalter is in its ability to articulate the whole range of human feeling and offer it to God. Whitehead comments that the 24th Psalm is "magnificent literature" (you always know that there is a 'but' coming when someone starts like that) but "a barbaric conception of God ... (a) worship of glory arising from power." Whether or not this is a correct deduction from this source, Whitehead has surely mined from a seam present throughout scripture. So elsewhere he remarks, more tellingly, that when the early Fathers formed the earliest doctrine; "When the western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers ... The brief Galilean vision of humility flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly. In the official formulation of the religion it had assumed the trivial form of the mere attribution to the Jews that they cherished a misconception about their Messiah. But the deeper idolatry, of the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers, was retained. The church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar." He is thinking here of the doctrine of God as one who rules the world just like some ancient, and terrible,

emperor, by whose fiat, at whose word, the world jumps and does exactly as he commands on pain of terrible retribution. The charge is that the doctrine was culturally conditioned by the ancient understanding of kingship. In objecting to this type of God Whitehead anticipated the Bonhoeffers ("God is edged out of the world onto a cross") and Moltmanns (a "crucified God") who were to write later in the century, and who were to draw us back to the other model which scripture offers for understanding God.

It will be objected that this 'dictatorial God' who can always insist on his own way is part and parcel of the Scriptural witness. To be sure, it is — but only as one strand, and not the whole story. Interestingly, it is perhaps at its strongest in the most primitive scriptural witnesses. The OT notion of God as the great totalitarian from heaven is rooted in the militaristic vision of Israel's, or rather Yahweh's, Holy War: e.g. Exodus 15 vv 7, 21. The military prowess of Yahweh is celebrated as he is the vanguard of the tribal amphictyony, the bodyguard of the anointed (Psalm 2), and the embodiment of the 'last powers'.

This image of God, as the final power who compels his way, is not the only one. The prophets provide a useful example of the tension between a God who forces his way and predetermines human life, and a God who only ever waits for response. When the prophets announce judgement on Israel, do they announce something already signed, sealed and delivered? or do they indicate to the people where their actions will lead unless they change course? Is the prophet proclaiming a God whose will is unbending, and who will do exactly as he pleased, or a God who waits and responds to people? A passage like Isaiah 43 vv 1-7 gives a rather different picture of God. Here is one who loves and cherishes, who preserves his people through all calamities (compare Psalm 23 v 4). Here is a God who is not mainly, or adequately characterised by his use of brute force, but exposes himself in love, and offers himself for his people. This is the God revealed in that high point of the OT, the Servant Song in Isaiah 52 v 13 - 53 v 12.

Some passages are ambiguous when examined closely, and while they may normally be used in support of the idea of God as sheer power, may in fact be interpreted in another way. Isaiah 41 vv 21-24 is an example. Is this referring to the reliability of Yahweh's promise and the bogusness of the idols? or is it that the idols cannot foretell the future whereas Yahweh can, because he determines the future without reference to other (creaturely) power?

What I have tried to establish is the existence of two contrasting models for God in the OT. One is an emperor-like figure, with all the power there is, and the readiness to use it, brutally if need be; the other is more tender, a God who seeks to woo and win people, whose characteristic is love which seeks response. Maybe you think they do not contradict one another, and perhaps you would be right: but the two models cannot simply be left in blunt juxtaposition, and ultimately one model must dominate the other, interpret the other. Those who believe in some sort of 'progressive revelation' might suggest that a finer idea of God was given which took over from the more barbaric one. However we account for the two models my contention is simple: the wrong one has dominated Christian thought for too long — we understand love too much in terms of power, instead of power in terms of love — and so we have made God in the image of Caesar. I want now to draw out some more of these thoughts and their implications under a roughly trinitarian scheme.

## 1. Creative Love

We must begin by making a point which is as unexceptional as it is vital. God creates free creatures and wills to have a relationship of love with them. God's love is real love, and the love which exists between God and men is reciprocal — our love matters to God. The bible is in no doubt about this, but we too often read the bible through the theological hang-ups of earlier theologians who insisted that God did not need us, and that he was 'impassible' — without passion. And so they ended up saying things like "When thou beholdest us in our wretchedness, we experience the effect of compassion, but thou dost not experience the feeling" (Anselm), and "For in God there are no passions. Now love is a passion. Therefore love is not in God" (Thomas Aquinas). Thomas goes on to say that God "loves without passion"! But God's love is real. Scripture often talks of his sorrow and remorse, yet we tend to treat it as anthropomorphism.

Love, if it is real love, must contain in the lover the ability to be moved by passion. God seeks to love us and must allow us the freedom to reject that love, or to freely accept it: so the cross of Christ expresses the pain in God at his continual rejection by men and women. The cross is a sign of God's willingness to be rejected, which is a part of his purpose and character, and a vital resource for what we must go on to say about the whole creative process. The cross, God powerless and rejected in his own world, is the divine folly which is at the heart of creation itself. "Divine folly is wiser than the wisdom of man, and divine weakness is stronger than man's strength." (I Corinthians 1 v 25) This is what Whitehead had in mind when he lamented that the 'Galilean vision' has only been adopted insofar as we say that the Messiah was not quite what was expected; yet the cross, God's cross and folly, has done little to shape the way we think about God at work in the world, his world. Power and strength we deal in and value so much, that we make God in our own image after the wisdom of men instead of the foolishness of God; we read scripture with only one eye open, and are unable to see the cross at the heart of God — his power in his weakness and love.

So far I have avoided using the word 'persuasion' — but Process Theologians claim that the mode of God's action in the world is persuasive rather than co-ercive: God woos and can be rejected; he does not dictate and compel obedience.

This persuasive working of God is true not only for the human level but throughout creation. God enters into dialogue in his creative process, speaking and calling to his creatures, luring them forward but never compelling them. 'God proposes, the world disposes', one has said. So God's creative word speaks to each of his creatures, according to its own particular situation, persuading it to bring forth that which God wills there and then. The creation account of Genesis 1 has the recurring "God said ..." "Let there be ..." — the repetition representing the constant urging of God. A spoken word calls for a hearer, a response. The same creative word addresses us now, as it has spoken to and in all things: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh, and the Word calls us still. All the same word linking creation with redemption by providence. The continuity between creation and providence (all creation, a continuing act of God) is easily demonstrated by Psalms 135 and 136, or Isaiah 51 vv 9-10).

In terms of creation itself, this Word which calls can be made to make sense of creation-through-evolution by quoting from Kazantzakis' *Report to Greco*:

Blowing through heaven and earth, and in our hearts and the heart of every living thing, is a gigantic breath — a great Cry — which we call God. Plant life wished to continue its motionless sleep next to stagnant waters, but the Cry leaped up within it and violently shook its roots: “Away, let go of the earth, walk!” Had the tree been able to think and judge, it would have cried, “I don’t want to. What are you urging me to do! You are demanding the impossible!” But the Cry, without pity, kept shaking its roots and shouting, “Away, let go of the earth, walk!”

It shouted in this way for thousands of eons; and lo! as a result of desire and struggle, life escaped the motionless tree and was liberated.

Animals appeared — worms — making themselves at home in water and mud. “We’re just fine here”, they said. “We have peace and security; we’re not budging!”

But the terrible Cry hammered itself pitilessly into their loins. “Leave the mud, stand up, give birth to your betters!”

“We don’t want to! We can’t!”

“You can’t, but I can. Stand up!”

And lo! after thousands of eons, man emerged, trembling on his still unsolid legs.

The human being is a centaur; his equine hoofs are planted in the ground, but his body from breast to head is worked on and tormented by the merciless Cry. He has been fighting, again for thousands of eons, to draw himself, like a sword, out of his animalistic scabbard. He is also fighting — this is his new struggle — to draw himself out of his human scabbard. Man calls in despair. “Where can I go? I have reached the pinnacle, beyond is the abyss.” And the Cry answers, “I am beyond. Stand up!” All things are centaurs. If this were not the case, the world would rot into inertness and sterility.

(Quoted by John B. Cobb Jr, in *God and the World*.)

But the call of God goes far beyond the creative process as we normally conceive it. It creates covenant people of Israel and the body of Christ. This covenant between Israel and Yahweh exhibits the reciprocity of the relationship: always grounded in divine initiative, always waiting on human response. Israel’s emergence and continuing existence as a people depended on the conjoint presence of divine Word and its own faithfulness to that Word, and this can serve as a paradigm for the whole of creation and all of God’s activity in the world.

If God really persuades and cajoles instead of forcing and compelling there are far-reaching implications for our understanding of God and his creation, of his creative love. For we see then that his creation is the gracious first step in a massive adventure of love. My dictionary defines ‘adventure’ as a “dangerous enterprise”, and it is for God on this reading — for the one who speaks and waits for an answer is the one who must take an enormous risk with himself and his creation in allowing freedom its integrity and turning on it only the glare of love. For while he calls us all who will respond in this life, and promises to receive us into himself for all eternity, the destiny of *this* creation is part of that adventure.

Any risk requires great forbearance and courage, enormous love. This risk requires from God that his love be prepared to suffer with and for his world in order to redeem it, and requires that God has infinite resources of patience.

## 2. Suffering Love

Allow two more quotations. The first, from Origen, shows that these ideas have some pedigree in the Christian tradition.

((The Saviour)) came down to earth in pity for human kind, he endured our passions and sufferings before he suffered the cross, and he deigned to assume our flesh. For if he had not suffered he would not have entered into full participation in human life ... What is that passion which he suffered for us? It is the passion of love. The Father himself and the God of the whole universe is 'long-suffering' full of mercy and pity'. Must he not then, in some sense, be exposed to suffering? So you must realise that in his dealings with men he suffers human passions. 'For the Lord thy God bare thy ways, even as a man bears his own son.' ... The Father himself is not impassible. If he is besought he shows pity and compassion; he feels, in some sort, the passion of love, and is exposed to what he cannot be exposed to in respect of his greatness, and for us men endures the passions of mankind.

(from *Homilies on Ezekiel*, vi. 6)

Even this quotation contains within it an embarrassment about its subject matter, as the last sentence shows. Moltman is more adequate:

There is unwilling suffering, there is accepted suffering and there is the suffering of love. Were God incapable of suffering in any respect, and therefore in an absolute sense, then he would also be incapable of love ... The one who is capable of love is also capable of suffering, for he also opens himself to the suffering which is involved in love, and yet remains superior to it by virtue of his love. The justifiable denial that God is capable of suffering because of a deficiency in his being may not lead to a denial that he is incapable of suffering out of the fullness of his being, i.e. his love.

(*The Crucified God*, p.230)

'Passion is obviously associated with love, and you'll know also that its root sense is moveability and suffering — hence we speak of the Passion of our Lord, having firstly in mind his suffering, though the link in English between passion and love is very fortuitous on this count (and may have led to a sermon or two?). The problem of divine suffering has arisen partly, as I hinted earlier, because we read the bible through particular theological glasses. Those who apparently despise theology fool themselves if they think they imbibe the bible 'neat': in fact it is only other people's theology they despise. The point is that for many of our theological forbears suffering has been taken as a sign of weakness and imperfection, and so God has been thought to be incapable of it. Those who profess to despise theology, and many who embrace it, reproduce such an idea from their 'tradeo' as it is handed on to them. "God does not suffer, he is perfect." For the Greeks, who moulded so much of the Fathers' thought, and many a mind today, suffering implied a changeability and responsiveness alien to their notion of divinity. Greeks and Fundamentalists prove strange bedfellows.

In part, Process Theology encourages us to take the OT seriously when it speaks to us about God. I remember reading the commentaries and hearing about 'anthropomorphism', yet perhaps we embrace that dismissive term too eagerly sometimes. Our Scriptures, and many theological insights,

testify to the fact that *anthropos*, man, has been taken into the very heart of God. This is, after all, one of the messages of the Trinity. The man Jesus is true God, and humanity is now in some sense part of God and what it means to be God — a certain existing for and with creatures is part and parcel of the Creator. The doctrine of the Trinity was formulated to say that what is true about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is *always* true about him. Jesus tells us something about the eternal nature of God, is the fullest revelation of God. And what symbol focuses the meaning of Jesus for us? — a cross, a symbol of pain and vicarious suffering, the greatest truth about God.

The ancients groped towards this with their idea known as the '*communicatio idiomatum*' — the properties of one person of the Trinity are also truly properties of the other persons of the Trinity. That's how they could say that God 'really' did suffer — because God got it by some sort of osmosis from the humanity of Jesus. (Origen said, in fact, that God suffered in Christ in his human nature not in his divine nature; suffering is only a metaphor when applied to the divine nature.) But we must assert that the cross is at the very heart of what God is, and what he is about. The most vital part of our definition of him is that he is, in Moltmann's arresting phrase, 'the Crucified God'. When we talk in our sermons of God suffering and dying we are not indulging in powerful oratory without theological base — in this sense, our worship has often led our theology, our hymnwriters have made the leap that theologians and biblicists resisted.

O wonder of wonders, which none can unfold;  
The Ancient of Days is an hour or two old;  
The Maker of all things is made of the earth,  
Man is worshipped by angels, and God comes to birth.

God suffers. Really suffers. Not by proxy, but in himself and eternally. This is the uncomfortable fact of the Incarnation, and the truth which our hearts know from the crosses which clutter our churches, our art, and even our jewellery: here is the universe's great truth.

Even if this is convincing, why all the fuss? Supposing you believed all this anyway, what does it mean if we take it seriously? In fact, only when the suffering of God is taken with full seriousness can certain things be gotten right. Here are three 'only whens':

(i) Only when we allow the bible to speak on its own terms instead of through the filter of Greek thought through which we all read it, can we uncover the true gospel and the true God of Israel, as the responsive God who is love. Love and suffering go inseparably together. Think of your 'amours' — think, better, of the raising and loving of children: here love, suffering, and letting-go are all bound in together, so that the anguished parent has a profound insight into the heart of God. Suffering is integrally part of loving.

(ii) Only when we accept that our God is the Crucified God, the suffering God, do we discover again one of the most potent of all Christian resources for pastoral care in our ministry. Whitehead called God "the companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands." In much recent writing on theodicy, the problem of evil, this point has recurred. Though we always fall short of a 'theoretical' answer to the problem of evil, let us never forget the great power of the more 'existential' answer of the gospel — that our God is one who has himself suffered, and who can therefore say "my grace is all you need, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (II Cor. 12)

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(iii) Only when the cross is embraced in this way as the central reality about God and our world can we learn to see through the cross and beyond it — beyond the cross of Christ is an empty tomb. But 'resurrection' only follows death, the second movement of a painful process of redemption — the completed work of God which turns destruction and suffering into newness of life. Only when we see this suffering as central to God's very self can we learn to look to him in constant hope as the One who contains within himself also the power and gift to resurrection, who in Whitehead's phrase "with tender care loses nothing which can be saved", and who in Paul's words "works for good through *all* things with those who love him." Too often we dispense resurrection rather slickly, without its inevitable prior part: resurrection is through and from suffering and death. And God contains within himself both the suffering and the resurrection, only so can resurrection be possible for those who participate in Christ's suffering.

### 3. Patient Love

That 'God is love' is one of the first memory texts of every Sunday School student, we hope. It is the most basic fundamental of theological statements. You may know the story about Karl Barth, which may or may not be apocryphal. Towards the end of his life, with his Church Dogmatics running already into dozens of volumes and millions of words, he was asked to summarize his theological position. He said "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so."

How do we understand, and expand and expound, that love is the question at issue in theological debate? The Process Theologians charge that too often we have been content to think of God's love in a very authoritarian way. If this third part were to have a text it would be from 1 Cor. 13: "Love is patient ... Love does not insist on its own way."

One of Paul's more sweeping statements, you might say, for how often is love not patient! The old popular song "You always hurt the one you love" captures an important truth. It is ironic that when my temper goes it is almost certain to be with my wife or one of our toddlers. My love is frequently very impatient. But at such times we are quick to recognise that, while our reactions are thoroughly human, moments like these debase our love, disfigure it rather than demonstrate it at its best. But surely we must hope that this ideal of love which Paul holds up describes *the* ideal love, God's love.

If we were to read on in that paragraph of Paul's the general picture built up seems to me to be unmistakable: patient, kind, not envying or boasting, or proud; not rude, self-seeking, not easily angered, no record of wrongs; rejoicing in the truth not in evil — always protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres. Quite a list. Notice how patience heads it, and how the picture is one of allowing someone else their own 'action space', of enduring and persevering ... Perhaps these things posited of 'God-is-love' have not really informed our preaching and our thinking about God enough? Certainly, that is Process Theology's main contention. In the loosely Trinitarian structure of this essay we have now come to the Holy Spirit, Patient Love: God's mode of being and working in the world is aptly and accurately described as 'patient'.

Process Theology is inspired by a new description of reality offered by a philosopher who was first a mathematician and physicist. He pictured countless units or entities which make up the world, all with a similar structure, and all necessarily related to God who is their source and their goal. Each of these units — which might be you or I now in this split-second,

or one of the sub-atomic particles in the chair you're sitting on — receives from God an 'aim'. This is a realistic indication of what God would have it do at any given moment. It represents an always present divine will for every fragment of creation. We can choose to ignore what God wants us to do at any time — can we not? — and do something else: either completely different or close to God's aim for us, but not quite 'spot-on'. Traditional theology has talked of this as freedom, and freedom to sin! The important thing about this conception of Process Theology is that it is not merely talking about free-will when it speaks of God being linked to every unit of creation; it is also saying that unless God is linked in this intimate way with every aspect of reality the world would simply collapse.

God suggests, lures, persuades by his provision of an aim to every part of creation. He coaxes all reality to do his will, "works through all things for the good". But ultimately he does only, can only, coax — according to this way of seeing God and his love as primarily Patient Love. He never co-erces or overrules, but only persuades. There is then, a sort of "metaphysical patience" (!) at the root of the universe.

The idea that God either cannot, or chooses not to, force his will upon creation is by no means new. In our own times John Hick, for example, has advanced it in his seminal work on the problem of evil, *Evil and the God of Love*. But while many of us would accept that God does not compel us into doing things which our will resists, we nevertheless slip back into a sort of High Calvinistic language sometimes about a 'Plan', and inscrutable purposes, and of "not knowing the reason now but..." Predestination, in one of its forms, seems a very popular Christian idea: but it fits in very uneasily with this Patient Love, who trusts us, and perseveres with us.

In closing I want to indicate very briefly five areas where this idea of Patient Love might, if we take it with proper seriousness impinge upon our Christian reflection and alter our attitudes to life, death, providence and God. Again, the approach may prove satisfying pastorally.

(i) The sovereignty of God has now to be rethought in terms of his Patience! Ours is not a battering-ram God, he does not twist our arms and compel us. Ours is a patient, waiting God, who trusts and perseveres. So it is no longer true to say, if it ever was, that everything that happens to us and around us expresses the will of God. The 'aim' is offered, and may be taken up or ignored by all creation. It may be a disaster, an illness, an accident: it need not be conceived as God's will (though sometimes it may be), for ours is a Patient God who waits, watches, and breaks his heart on a cross for a wayward world.

The Process Theologians have actually redefined 'omnipotence'. Having all the power there is, they say, makes no sense. Power only makes sense when it is used in a context in which some may resist it. So they define omnipotence as being "the greatest power in a creation of competing powers."

For myself, I feel that this understanding of the sovereignty of God, which stresses our own responsibility for our actions and God's goodness and patience, is a liberating idea with none of the old fatalistic 'will of Allah' feel about it that 'Calvinism' at its worst shows off.

In the case of illness then we may affirm that this is certainly not God's will, but a turning from God's will by a fallen world. However, through the cross we know that God suffers with and for his world, and that he redeems his world in its suffering through his own suffering. And that resurrection is the obverse of the cross.

(ii) Related to the above is that the problem of evil is seen in a new light in this Patient Love. Calamities and woes are not just the will of God, part of the 'Plan'. They are the result of freedom exercised at all creaturely levels — the freedom of the human self in torturing and killing, or lying and deceiving; the freedom of cells in mutation and reproduction; the freedom of chance as the weather works out its path ... At the centre of all this, coaxing and wooing (an appropriate word when the subject is Love itself) is the God who suffers with and for his world that it might have life and life in all its fullness.

(iii) To see the world as the place in which God's creation is given the opportunity to align itself with God's creative will at every new moment, inevitably asks us to take more seriously our own actions and responses as we live out our discipleship. We are called to respond to God as he 'works his purpose out'. The body of Christ is indeed his hands and feet. But there is another side lest we get too mindful of our own part ...

(iv) God coaxes all reality: you and I, our churches and others' churches, atoms and cells. But he coaxes 'ordinary' people too, wooing them to respond to his loving purpose even though they may not know him. The 'kind pagan' has always exercised the Christian mind. But this way of looking at God in the world encourages us to see that God is at work in all things, and in all people. That is not to say that all are 'saved', or any such thing. It is to say that, like a famous celebrity on a long and public journey, God often travels incognito in his world, surprising us with acts of love in the most unusual place, and among the most unusual of people. The religious types in Jesus' own day had to learn to rethink their attitude to people outside their own circle: they had to learn of God's love and concern for them, and their own peculiar potential. Today we have to learn again of the 'kindness from barbarians' of which the Acts speaks. And learn that this is also 'of God', who is no respecter of expectations and moulds, but only of people and love.

(v) Finally, and related, to see God's patience in these ways removes from us the Great Excuse, and I deliberately write that as A.A. Milne might have done! For how often have we said "If it doesn't work out, it is not to be"? or "the answer came, and it was 'no'"? And how often have we made such statements not from a proper piety but because of a lack of faith and vision. Do we not recognise often enough in our better moments that such a Great Excuse is merely a 'cop-out', a denial of our part and powers in God's purposes? We are too unready to rage over the world before God with the Psalmist. We take the frustration of God's purposes lying down, explaining and rationalising it as 'meant to be'. The Church Militant indeed! The Church Militant has become the Church Malingering, weak, indecisive, clutching to straws of excuse. The Great Excuse will not do, for we serve not Allah, but the God of the Crucified and Risen Christ, to whom we must daily pray 'Thy will be done' because we can never take it for granted.

God is love. "Love is patient ..... Love does not insist on its own way." Ah yes, how much easier it would be if he did. But how much more worthwhile it is that he does not — for this is his, and our, Adventure of Love.

**Robert Ellis**

### *Further Reading in Process Theology*

John B. Cobb Jr and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*;

Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*;

Norman Pittenger, *The Lure of Divine Love*;

John B. Cobb Jr, *God and the World*. 12

# Some Recent Old Testament Studies and the Preacher

In the present time Old Testament studies are certainly undergoing a significant period of change, and there is very much less in the way of a consensus than at one time prevailed among scholars. Most startling of all to the student of the Bible is the way in which scholars now seem willing to question a number of hypotheses and conclusions that had at one time enjoyed the status of representing a kind of critical "orthodoxy". The effect is that, although there are still a number of standard volumes of introduction and historical background to the Old Testament, many of the most interesting discussions are taking place over the questions whether such approaches to a religious literature are really what is needed. In many ways this type of fundamental questioning has a good deal of relevance to the preacher, and it has certainly produced some very interesting books, even though they may be looked upon as having a kind of exploratory character.

We may begin our brief look at some recent studies by referring to one which undoubtedly was written with the preacher in mind, and which has a great deal to offer by way of stimulus to thought and fresh insights. This is entitled *The Courage to Doubt. Exploring an Old Testament Theme* by Professor Robert Davidson of Glasgow University (SCM Press Ltd., London, 1983. Price £6.95). The title is more or less self-explanatory, and the book takes its theme from the assertion of Isa. 45:15. God who is known by, and active on behalf of, his people Israel, nevertheless remains a God who is hidden. Therein lies a paradox, since knowing God might be assumed to resolve doubts and to remove uncertainties. Yet we experience in practice the realisation that this is not so, and when we explore the Old Testament we find that there is an abundance of material to demonstrate that the men of faith in biblical times also found that it was not so. The book begins with a fresh look at the psalms of lament in which the individual, or the community, voice a feeling of anguish and complaint that God is not intervening in the manner that his devotees expect of him. From this Professor Davidson moves on to look at the small number of wisdom psalms, which, although few in number, raise deep questions. Pss. 49 and 73, for example, put questions about a just and providential order of divine government of the world which have a very contemporary ring about them, and which savour of a quest for a kind of existential enlightenment. Ministers may well feel able to guess how the book further unfolds its theme, by studies of the narrative presentation of Moses and the popular rebellion of Israel against him, by some searching studies of the prophets, and most especially of Jeremiah, and then on to an examination of the theme in Job and the author of Ecclesiastes. However, the reader should certainly not suppose that, once given the main theme, he can work the rest out for himself. There is a good deal that is fresh, illuminating and suggestive of further reflection in the book. Most of all, it has some very relevant and pertinent comments to make about the inevitability of doubt in any honest and serious theological quest, which does not make doubt into the badge of a form of intellectual one-upmanship, and which sees it as a necessary adjunct of faith.

The Old Testament shows with abundant clarity, especially in the books of Jeremiah and Job, that the attempt to stifle doubt by simply clinging on to a set of traditional propositions only leads in the end to a sterile kind of faith. Even as an intellectual discipline theology can become moribund if it loses the vital touch with real life and real enigmas which call for a constant re-appropriation of its basic conviction. Nor is there any shame in not knowing all the answers, since this is preferable to living with a set of illusory ones. If the preacher wants to get beyond mere exhortations to "have faith", and to offer some sound and thoughtful biblical reasons why faith is a sound and effective response to the demands of living, then Professor Davidson's book will not prove disappointing.

My next choice of book is of a very different kind, and will certainly tax the intellectual courage and determination of those who are not *au fait* with modern literary critical themes and theories. It is entitled *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature* by the internationally eminent literary critic Northrop Frye (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Melbourne and Henley, 1982. Price: £9.95). A paperback edition of this was released in 1983. Professor Frye has already achieved a wide international reputation for his outstanding interpretations of the imagery of William Blake, whose description of the Bible as "The Great Code of Art" provides the source of Frye's title. Beyond this Frye's course on a literary approach to the Bible, conceived out of a realisation that the vast majority of young students of English literature in the Western World are more or less biblically illiterate, has been used in many countries.

What is particularly important and thought-provoking about Frye's book is that it is frankly and firmly intended to offer a critical approach to the Bible, but wants to begin by asking what the assumptions and aims of such criticism should be. Ultimately it must be intended to increase our understanding, and enjoyment, of the Bible by giving us a clearer insight into its literary forms and devices, and so ultimately into its meaning. It is fully aware that there is in existence a very professional subject of "Biblical Criticism" which has enjoyed more than 150 years of fairly continuous research and acclaim. Frye recognises that other forms of literature have benefitted from the expertise developed by biblical scholars. Having said this, however, Frye goes on to point out that such biblical criticism, which exists almost universally as a sub-division of theology, has got stuck, and tends in the present to go on "threshing at straw". Its textual, grammatical and historical excellence is second to none, but it has become woefully out of touch with other aspects of literary criticism. It seems that the most that the professional Bible scholars can offer the general Bible reader is another translation, when this is not what is really required. The Bible is literature and, often unconsciously, the kind of questions about "Is it historically true?", "Is Genesis a book of myths?" and "Is that the right translation?" provide so limited a framework for biblical study that many of the Bible's most important characteristics are missed, or misinterpreted. I have certainly found Frye's book to be immensely stimulating and challenging, and you do not have to agree with it all to get a great deal from it. A word of caution is in order, though, especially if you are concerned about the use of the Bible in classroom work. This book is a tough assignment, and although it offers an enormous amount of help to anyone thinking through how to go about setting up a worthwhile syllabus of biblical instruction, it does

not hand it out in readymade assignments. It is a quite fundamental examination of what it means for the Bible to be literature. The title gives away the author's deep commitment to an understanding of the Bible which stresses its aesthetic quality, and so there is rather less interest in theological questions, and even a rather secular air about some of the points made. Nevertheless, for its freshness of outlook and challenge this is a book which demands attention from all involved in teaching from the Bible.

Every preacher who is genuinely concerned to proclaim the Christian message is concerned with an inevitable element of tension which he, or she, cannot avoid. The Bible is an ancient book, rooted in historical circumstances and a given social context, which means that it possesses a background considerably different from that of the modern world. Added to this is the rather exaggerated expectation that many people feel that times have changed so much that nothing from the ancient world can have much bearing on the pressures and tensions of the modern world. So the preacher has to be relevant to the modern situation, while at the same time keeping in genuine touch with the roots and source of our faith in the Bible. It is all too easy to perform an unconscious trick of "modernising" the Bible — a process which is rather assisted by such modern translations as that of the Good News Bible with its metrication of measurements and interpretation of biblical metaphors. At the other extreme it is all too easy for the preacher with a scholarly turn of mind to become so immersed in explaining the historical setting of the Bible that the sense of distance and remoteness from modern life is actually increased, rather than bridged by the sermon. This means that the preacher who wants to be faithful to the biblical basis of faith has no easy task before him, or her. If the going can be difficult, however, the rewards are many, and one can feel deeply thankful that the Bible is a good deal more than a short manifesto of Christian faith. There are undoubtedly a number of basic essentials, which can be quickly grasped, and which never become so obvious that they cannot bear regular repetition. At the same time there are also some more searching and exploratory questions of faith which explains why even those who have spent a lifetime in studying the Bible recognise that they have still a lot to learn. Much of the Old Testament clearly belongs to this more advanced area of study for Christian thought and understanding, and the sense of freshness and vitality that permeates much recent writing on the Old Testament, serves as a good illustration of this. If Northrop Frye's book can say some surprising and very challenging things, then there is also a lot to commend the book by Dr John Barton entitled *Reading The Old Testament. Method in Biblical Study* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1984. Price £7.95). It needs to be said that this is not yet another attempt to organize the reader into some regular system of Bible reading, although it might readily stimulate such an undertaking. It is rather an attempt to deal with the very fundamental question of the kind of meaning we are looking for in reading the Old Testament. It should serve as a very good bridge between the more established approaches of critical Bible study, that will be familiar to anyone who has taken a course on theology in a British University, and some newer critical approaches, of which Frye's is an outstanding example. Texts mean something, and what this meaning is is conveyed by that most intricate and complex of all human inventions — language! We might suppose that the more accurately and regularly we

consult a dictionary the more precisely we shall know what stories mean because we shall know what the words mean. There are many more aspects to a good story than this purely verbal feature, however, and questions of form, content and structure all have something to contribute. All too easily the reader can assume that he, or she, has got the message, when in reality it has been almost entirely missed. Barton's book is directly aimed at offering some explanation of what the different aims and methods of professional biblical scholars have been designed to achieve. He also has some good things to add in the way of showing how well, or badly, they can be thought to have succeeded. Not only the familiar patterns of literary criticism, as the standard approaches to Old Testament introduction have conceived it, but also the value of form criticism and its derivative redaction criticism are dealt with. Probably of even greater help to the reader who has not kept up with the most recent debates are the very clear and sympathetic treatments of the subjects of canon criticism and structuralism. The latter, particularly, has carried with it a jargon all its own, which threatens now to become even more *recherché* and esoteric with the advent of deconstruction. All of this may sound rather remote from the needs of the pulpit, but essentially Barton's book is concerned with the question of how do people read the Old Testament. It has lots of examples which present some stimulating insights into the less familiar parts of the Old Testament, and its overall thesis is that there is no one self-evidently "critical" way by which the Bible should be read. which can rule out all the others. Each has something to offer, even though it will not, in itself, be a total expression of the meaning of the biblical text.

I should be surprised if most readers do not find a great deal that is unexpected, stimulating and relevant to the preacher's concern in Barton's book. It has the great merit of starting from the recognition that people today will be reading the Bible in an English translation with a twentieth century world view as the background to their thinking. How important are questions of translation, authorship, literary sources, and what does it mean that there are different "types" of literature in the Bible? Should one read the Bible from end to end, or is it really a question of reading sixty-six quite separate books? A not insignificant accompanying feature of Barton's book is to draw attention to ways in which it is possible to misunderstand the Bible, not least by trying to understand the Old Testament as though it were the New. It can make reading the Old Testament a much more rewarding exercise than it so often is, and gets away from regarding this literature simply as an encyclopedia of "texts" which can serve as pegs for sermons.

If John Barton's book can serve to remind us that the Old Testament is first and foremost a literature, then it is undoubtedly the case that it has often been misunderstood and has been forced to yield meanings which are bizarre, and even dangerous. It is not all that uncommon to find people trying to adjust their lives and their thinking to a view of reality which they erroneously believe they have learned from the Bible. The recent expedition to look for the remains of Noah's ark on Mount Ararat would clearly have done well to sit down and reflect seriously on the question of what kind of story is that concerning Noah and the Great Flood! Nor are the dangers of misinterpreting the Old Testament limited to this, since there is abundant evidence of misdirected faith in the

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efforts of people to prove that creation took place in seven days, that the earth is flat, or that Great Britain is the true Israel, which readily claim a far from unintelligent following. Although it is not restricted to the Old Testament, there is therefore a lot to be gained from a reading of James Barr's book *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (SCM Press, London, 1984. Price: £2.95). An earlier book from Professor Barr dealt with the subject of Fundamentalism as an approach to the Bible and Christian faith in a rather technical and academic fashion. In this country it is seldom the technically minded and academic who represent the strongest supporters of a fundamentalist position.

The book consists of nineteen relatively brief studies, written in a non-technical fashion, each of which would make a most useful basis for a series of Church study sessions. The subjects dealt with explore the borderlands between the Bible as a literary collection and the questions and needs that are foremost in theology. So the issues of biblical authority and inspiration, Jesus and the Old Testament, legends and myths, law and morality, the Bible and the origins of the world are covered, to name only a few of the more prominent subjects dealt with. Barr is very well aware that many people find themselves faced with a fundamentalist attitude to the Bible, without becoming wholly aware of why, or how, this has happened. Home and upbringing, a persuasive preaching ministry, or the warm encouragement of a particular circle of Christian friends may all provide an active stimulus to very rigid and apparently traditional Christian beliefs about the Bible. Yet such beliefs may well be wrong, and may well be markedly off-centre as far as Christian tradition is concerned. The volume of studies therefore has a warmly evangelical purpose, besides being concerned to advocate a genuine intellectual honesty in using the Bible. All too often the evangelical preacher hears particular views regarding the Bible labelled as "unsound", "modernist", or even "liberal", when the views such labels are pinned to cannot properly fit any of them. Barr is therefore concerned to be intellectually honest and critical, and most of all to demonstrate that a genuinely clear and intelligent use of the Bible can be the most truly evangelical approach to it. What is particularly helpful in the book is the fact that it starts from assumptions that are commonly held regarding the Bible, and from the kind of question that an intelligent reader is soon bound to ask, regarding, for example, such features as prophecy and prediction and the nature of inspiration. In some respects the title does the book a disservice, since many of the points raised by it are by no means the exclusive preserve of fundamentalists, but represent a number of popular ideas and misconceptions about the Bible which are commonplace among Christians of all persuasions.

Of all the questions which appear to create difficulty for the modern Bible reader, and which really ought not to do so, that relating to the story of creation "in seven days" in Genesis 1-2 must be the most significant. Having recently observed a number of serious-minded students of the Bible at a conference whose sole purpose was devoted to defending and declaring the seven days of creation as the central and defensible core of Genesis, this point comes very much to mind. Probably, however, in order not to alert people to difficulties which they have not thought of, and to avoid unnecessary conflict, most preachers keep fairly quiet on the subject. Nor is it only preachers who have been guilty of this, since biblical studies generally have passed through a phase in which all the emphasis was placed upon history, to the neglect, and even disparagement of the Christian understanding of nature. Happily this has

changed considerably in the past few years, and there are at last beginning to appear a number of very useful books dealing with the biblical doctrines of creation and the natural order. One such has recently appeared in the series *Issues in Religion and Theology* from SPCK with the title *Creation in the Old Testament* (No. 6, ed. by B.W. Anderson; Price: £3.50). This is a selection of nine essays, all of which have previously been printed elsewhere, one even from as far back as 1895 (H. Gunkel). They derive from eminent biblical scholars and deal with aspects of the doctrine of creation in the Old Testament. That by Hermann Gunkel is concerned with the relationship of the Genesis account to the Babylonian Creation story. Several provide an exegetical development of particular topics, or passages, in the Old Testament, but others by George Landes and Bernard Anderson are concerned with the wider implications of the doctrine for a biblical theology. In particular Anderson's approach is concerned with the subject of ecology. Few issues seem to have caught theology more unprepared than that of the range of ecological and environmental issues which loom so prominently on the contemporary social scene. Yet the Bible is a very richly documented literature on the subject of the divine gift and preservation of the natural order. The volume should certainly be capable of sustaining some fresh ideas regarding the subject, and, in particular, it shows how overwhelmingly more important are the Bible's central truths than the issue of a complete creation in six days.

We began by noting that there has been a good deal of fresh thinking in contemporary studies on the Old Testament. New themes and new ideas are appearing in the literature on the subject and, not least, there is a growing awareness that many of the most important themes that theology has to deal with are raised most clearly in the Old Testament. We have not touched here upon the issue of one God and many religions, of the belief in "human rights", nor of the issues of nationhood and patriotism, all of which are highlighted by parts of the Old Testament. What is to be found in several of the books mentioned is a deep conviction that a truly "classic" literature such as that of the Old Testament is capable of yielding a wide range of meanings to different generations of men and women.

R.E. Clements

## **Adult Christian Education — another bandwagon?**

There is a new activity to add to the many in the local Church. It's called adult christian education. It is yet another demand on Ministers.

This may sound somewhat cynical, yet I have a feeling that unless this current mood about adult education is not taken with utter seriousness, it will be seen as just another phase, and in five years or so we shall drop it, having "done it". Adult Christian Education must not be seen as just another activity of the Church alongside evangelism, pastoral care, worship, children's work etc. ... rather a context in which the Church's programme of worship, pastoralia, mission and evangelism are continued. But what are the appropriate images with which to proceed?

## SOME OBSERVATIONS

There is in this country an adult boom. It could just be that when churches scratch their heads and wonder what they should be doing for children, bemoan the fact that they have not many children, that they are missing the best opportunity of the lot. They should not worry overmuch about that but rather concentrate on the people in the Church who are "adults". I heard an interesting story of a Baptist Church which had a Sunday School campaign in its neighbourhood and produced literature entitled '*Is there a child in the house?*' They visited fifteen roads adjacent to the church with a view to recruiting for the Sunday School. At the end of the campaign they had not gained one single child. They had discovered in fact that there were hardly any children in their neighbourhood. They had the highest population of retired people in any district of Birmingham. So they changed their tack, and instead of worrying about the Sunday School they are now concentrating on a mission to the elderly.

John Briggs, a former president of the NCEC, writing in an issue of NCEC "LINK" a few years ago referred to adult education as "The Peter Pan of the Church". Peter Pan is a very interesting, fantastic and magical creature, but he is a great menace and a danger.

Peter Pan is alright in the world of fantasy, but not in the Church if the leadership is uninformed. Peter Pan can play havoc in the Church if the people leading the Church are leading in the wrong direction. Peter Pan can play havoc with the Church's energy, paralyse it and thwart its mission, if the leadership of the Church has not grown and developed in its faith. Peter Pan in the Church, is sinister.

If adults have stopped learning and are no longer growing in their faith, if adults believe that they finished their education when they left school, then there isn't much hope for the life of the Church. We tend to concentrate on children because *they* have to 'grow up'. A lot of effort and energy is put into children, with classes and teachers, programmes and curricula, until they are baptised, leave Sunday School, and join the Church. Everybody under sixteen is graded into groups and classes, but everybody else stays in church because the assumption is that they have had their education, and they are now adults.

I observe two kinds of spirituality in the Church: the active, curious, enquiring and attentive, (*the children*) and the formal, passive, dull and finished, (*the adults*). Children want to speak about life and death. Adults not only do not want to speak about life and death but are unable. The children want to make doctrine together, the adults are afraid. The children are open, critical, evaluative, receptive whereas adults, thinking they have arrived, have no more criticism, no more evaluation and no more enquiries. Yet those who are willing to enquire into the faith are much more likely to be serious about it. That's why some of us find a lot of faith in children and not much in adults.

WHY DO ADULTS STOP LEARNING? The key to successful work in children's education in the Church lies in adult education and that is long overdue for recognition in all our Churches.

## SOME RECENT CHALLENGES

a) Two documents which have challenged us to look at Christian Education are *The Child in the Church* and *Understanding Christian Nurture*. They attack severely the generational control in many of our churches; where what matters in Christian growth is the age of a person, which determines his status. Children are really "only children". They are not really fully human because they have not yet grown up.



# WEST HAM CENTRAL MISSION

York House 409 Barking Road,  
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Patron: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother

Dear Fellow Ministers,

1985 is a very significant year for the West Ham Central Mission. Our work was founded in 1905, so we are celebrating our 80th birthday.

I will not bore you with a history of the Mission. Suffice it to say, however, that throughout that period God has seen fit to bless, to modify and to use the ministries we have tried to offer. The evolution from the "simple" outreach of a local Christian church in a deprived area, to the much more specific and specialised ministries we now exercise is indeed a fascinating story. What is more important, however, is the conviction that here and now we are responding to the needs of our contemporaries and, by the grace of God, trying to meet them.

Throughout its long life, the Mission has valued the close link it has enjoyed with the Denomination as a whole. There is hardly a church which has not had some kind of association with the Mission at some time, and I am still delighted to find in so many Deacons' Vestries a current edition of the Mission Calendar (although it is not always open at the correct month!)

If our work is to survive and indeed grow, it is vitally important that this link with the churches — now far fewer in number than in 1905 — should be strengthened in every possible way. There seems to be an almost inexorable trend in fiscal policy which will deprive our work, and that of similar organisations, of much of the funding we now enjoy from statutory sources. The survival of the Mission, therefore, may well come to depend upon significantly increased financial support from our fellow-believers. We are convinced that it is God who has brought us to this juncture in our history, and that He still has work for us to do. If this is so, then His people will rise to the challenge, I am sure.

Thank you for all the prayerful support and encouragement you have given us. Please do all you can to commend our work to your people, especially to the younger members of the church, for our future is in a very real sense in their hands. May the Lord bless you in your home and in your church, and give you the deep joy of knowing that He is using you for His glory.

Yours in His service,

**Trevor W. Davis**  
Superintendent Minister

The suggestion is that in God's kingdom there are only people. Some are three, some are ninety-three, but all are in process of growing up in Christ.

This begins to point away from the popular reduction of Christian Education to a children only, classroom based, subject controlled, instruction dominated activity, to one that is person-centred, open, critical — thoughtful not thought-stopping, active not passive, changing — developing, not fixed and final. The old biblical images of pilgrimage and journeying are more appropriate.

b) There are important insights from the world of Education itself. Education must not be reduced to a knowledge based process. Clearly there is a cognitive element, for an aim of education must be the development of desired states of mind. Yet, education has more to do with the nature of a transaction between persons than the content. Educationalists draw important distinctions between education, nurture, indoctrination, socialisation, training and instruction. If we engage in adult (or child) Christian Education in the Church we must be sure that we are educating, lest we end up doing something else.

A major challenge from Third World educationalists is what education does and should do to people? It's put in the form of two words: *liberation or domestication*.

An education which liberates is one which begins with the conviction of the intrinsic worth and dignity of each individual. It expresses basic commitment to human rights, both individual and social. This is demonstrated not only in curriculum objectives but all aspects of the educational process including the relationships between learner and teacher. Further, education which is liberating will commit itself to furthering those aspects of society which encourage the above and will resist those that deny it. Thus it is value loaded, and not neutral. It demands a continuing process of evaluation at every stage.

'Domestication' relates to that education which fosters the wrong kind of individualism, social alienation, denies personal choice and will not permit questioning, criticising and choosing. It is a system which perpetuates unjust political and social norms and values and seeks only conformity as its result.

The method which emerges from the Liberation movement in Education and Theology is that of *PRAXIS*: a continual process of action and reflection, issue based, and community oriented.

c) What is FAITH? Faith is a matrix of disposition, attitude and action which includes three poles within a living experience: KNOW/DO/BE. The word which best sums up this process is *SPIRITUALITY*. Maybe we need a word to capture this matrix, how about "*FAITHING*"? What does it mean to live by faith and how do we prepare for it and in it?

It raises questions of prayer and worship, of knowing and learning and also of behaving and doing. It is liturgical, moral catechetical, pastoral, spiritual, and political. It treats seriously the lack of wholeness and tries to unite liturgy and life, learning and acting, praying and doing. It is best done in a Group way as a shared activity. It wants to engage mind and imagination, spirit and living. It will incorporate peak and gradual experiences, conversion and nurture motifs. Life in God needs a unified approach.

## **SOME RECENT INSIGHTS**

Many Ministers have been familiar for a long time with the idea of *development* and some of the insights of researchers such as Jean Piaget, Laurence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson. Whilst not all would accept their conclusions yet there are some important things for those working with people in education. I want to challenge the whole idea of development recognising that this word is not the prerogative of psychologists and educationalists, but also used by

politicians and economists, historians and sociologists. Images associated with the use of the word are so important, for it is through those images that people will be motivated and programmes worked out.

Here are some new insights helpful to those in adult Christian education:

1. **James Fowler** has researched the development of faith. He characterises the development of faith from the infant stage which he calls an indifferentiated faith : a mythic, fantastic faith where God, Jesus and Father Christmas are not much different to the final stage of faith, which he calls reflective conjunctive faith. This is the universal faith which can take into one scheme of understanding everything that comes its way. Fowler says that those who reach it are few. He names Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa — people who can contain within their spirituality a complete unified picture of life and creation, in which everything finds a proper and inter-related place. What this says to those of us with housegroups is that we may have twelve people in our group, from 25 to 60 years of age, but they are not all at the same stage of faith. It could be that in some groups younger people have a sharper, more critical faith than some of the older people. It doesn't follow that the faith has matured as the years have gone by. At times we get the most astonishing naiveties and immaturities from people who have been Christians for 30 or 40 years. Faith does not necessarily develop in a pattern commensurate with the rest of life, so when we put all the adults together we could be making a big mistake.

2. **Bernice Neugarten** has studied people in middle life. She says that when you reach middle age your personal human growth is determined by the norms of your social life. Your children are growing up and no longer needing you. You conclude that you are no longer going to get promoted in your career. You may have lost your partner or your marriage may have gone wrong. Neugarten suggests what happens to people in middle years is determined by the structure of their social life. In our church meetings and in our groups when someone makes a contribution, although it may be explicitly on the grounds of faith or doctrine, implicitly it may be nothing to do with that. It may be measured much more by social status and the norms of society which that person is feeling at the time. Marriage, parenthood, grandparenthood and career are extremely important for adults. Adult stages of life are not biological, but social. She goes on to make an interesting discovery about time. What matters to adults in middle life is the mental clock : the hidden time span which causes parents to say to their 25 year old daughter "You ought to be married by now", and when daughter and son have been married for 8 or 9 years, mother drops a hint "It is about time you had a family or it will be too late". Biological growth controls childhood, when the body is growing and the brain and other functions are developing, but in middle years *other* factors govern growth.

3. **Daniel Levenson** has studied men in middle life (according to him 35-50). He says that stages in life are measured by our social relationships. His stages are: 1. Leaving your family (16+ - 24+) 2. Getting into the adult world (in the 20s and 30s) 3. Transition stage (28-32) 4. Settling down stage (30-40) 5. Middle life transition stage (30-50) 6. Restabilisation (45+).

He goes a stage further and suggests what many people need in these stages are other adults with whom they can relate. The most important thing when you are moving through those early stages of the adult world is a 'mentor' — another adult to help you through your stages of growth. I wonder who, in your church, acts as a mentor, or to use more traditional language, a 'Father in God'.

Researches like these are very important. For too long attention has been given to childhood and its stages of development with an assumption that after adolescence growth ceases. Critics are quick to point out the weaknesses.

There are cultural differences which pose major challenges. Psychologists in other parts of the world have challenged Piaget's conclusions about child development on the grounds that they are conditioned by a Western, European, middle class background. Many of us have Church members from ethnic minorities and it doesn't follow that they develop in the same ways and the same pace as others. Generalisations are always dangerous. Some criticise the researchers in adult growth as not only too Western and middle class but also too male! There is a dearth of information on human development after adolescence as adults journey through life. More investigation might throw light upon the factors which influence, say, voting and political choices, illness and disease and how it is received by people at different stages in life, relationships between the generations, perhaps one of the most critical of all issues in any society.

However, some things seem clear to me. First it is false to see childhood as a sequence of stages in cognitive, emotional and personal development (including faith) to the fixed stage called 'adulthood'. This is what tends to happen in so many 'family church' practices. The children are graded into their classes according to ages (Beginners, Primary etc..) but the adults (i.e. those over 16) stay in the same "class" (the Church?) to be part of the one experience, the sermon. Whilst liturgy may demand that (and if so why abstract the children?) adult education and learning might demand grading the adults as well. Second, just as children need enablers to assist them in their growth from one stage to another, so also adults need guidance on their journey of life. Third, the real mistake against which all child psychologists warn is putting too rigid an age structure on stages of development. It is tempting when faced with, for example, Piaget's developmental theory to see that at about 12 years of age a person should be in what he calls the stage of Abstract thinking. All teachers know that many never reach it, let alone at that age. Personal development is influenced by opportunity, circumstances, environment, and a whole range of external and hereditary factors and to see age as the determining factor is grossly misleading. Many older people in our churches, some with years of Church membership to their credit, cannot cope with abstract ideas and logical rational thinking. What price some of our sermons as means of encouraging faith and enabling understanding? Experience, circumstance, interest and commitment go hand in hand and make nonsense of age.

### **SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL CHURCH STRATEGIES**

1. The researches into human development, despite many inadequacies and even neglect of whole areas of human experience (for example, how does one measure and study spiritual development; what are the concepts with which to work?), yet suggest growth as a fundamental notion. The problem with the word growth is that it is used by different people in different situations and made to refer to different matters. The politicians talk of growth, the biologist, the economist, the psychologists and the theologian also. Even within the well known researches of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg and Fowler there are different understandings drawn from a variety of sources. When we talk of growth in grace and faith, or growth in our understanding of the Lord and His Will, we need first to be sure what models and concept we are working with. Our first objective must be that men and women shall grow up in Christ and live by faith. There is a need for a theology of growth in faith, indicating structure, goals, models and ways of proceeding.

2. This leads me to suggest that we need to look again at what it means to live by faith. I have used the word "faithing" to indicate that faith is about life and must not be swapped for something else, e.g. belief, belonging, or membership

of the Church. There are those who flatly abhor this idea of faith as a verb. Its merit is that it directs us to how we live. My suggestion is that faith is a kind of matrix of attitude, disposition and action. It will be expressed in what a person does with the thousand and one issues and problems of everyday. We need images of faith relevant to life which can then be nurtured and supported in a process of life-long Christian education

3. One significant contribution in the current debate about Christian Adult Education is that of John Westerhoff of America. He suggests a model of LIFE CYCLE Education. The Church has tended to see its education as geared to the obvious beginnings of the process such as baptism or church membership, or life's crises such as death and marriage. So we have church membership and baptismal classes, counselling for the bereaved and classes for couples about to be married. Life Cycle education in the Church would be a continual process of education around all the major moments of life such as parenting, work, retirement, families, and not only "how to cope groups", but also corporate celebrations for the whole Church. So, the 'so and so family' are sad today, because of the death of mother, so we all share the sadness. The 'Xs' are grandparents for the first time, so we all share that.

4. Adult Christian Education of the sort suggested by these insights must be far more than simply 'instruction', telling people what to do and what to know. We are obsessed with the schooling model of education. Maybe this is what turns people off and the reason why they don't come to our Bible study groups or our discussion sessions. So often the image in the popular mind is one of classes with teachers, lots of information, and things to be learned. Most people say with their feet 'that's not for us'. Growth and formation suggest sharing, the validity and importance of all human experience, that all have something to give and to receive. Perhaps if our Adult Christian Education was an issue based, action oriented and reflective model then not only would the school image disappear, but our learning and growing would be true (real life), would lead to achievement (action) and be more spiritual (prayerful and reflective). Many fail at the action level because they fail at the prayer level and vice versa. The reason is that we begin at the wrong end. To focus on a real life issue would cause serious thought and research about life itself, would take us to the Bible to discover insights there, would demand some action if possible and before long we would be seeking the mind of God in prayer and thought. A marvellous example of "praxis based Christian education" is given in Luke 24 with the event of the disciples on the road to Emmaus!

Christian Education, of adults and children, is nothing short of every activity by which the Church celebrates and imitates the action and Word of God. The key questions are the HOW questions not the WHAT questions:

How is faith acquired, enhanced and shared? (How do we know God as saviour and Lord?)

How is God's revelation made known to us? (How do we live in relationship with God?)

How is vocation (reflective action in our life and the life of the world) realised? (How do we act with God in His world on behalf of Salvation?)

## **FINALLY**

My fear is that unless we look seriously at the scope and challenge of Adult Christian Education it will become just another activity, demanding

denominational resources — you know, more programmes, more money, even a specialist Department Secretary. We shall “do it” for a few years until another demand is made upon us. It could be that renewal in adult Christian Education is the clue to renewal in other aspects of Church life, like evangelism and pastoral care. My hunch is that we need to take human growth much more seriously and see conversion, by which I mean the radical transformation of people and society, as the motif. Perhaps our slogan for Adult Christian Education might be “DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH IN CONVERSION”. This would enable Christian Education to be not so much an activity alongside all other activities, to be programmed and financed, rather a dimension of ALL THAT WE DO IN THE CHURCH. Thus our Worship, our Church Meetings, our Housing schemes, our Youth Work, our Pastoral care, even our Tea Parties would have an educational dimension. Life was never so abstract as our Lesson material and bible study groups make it to be!

“Growth **IN** conversion” would take us back to fundamentals. Or is it forward?

**David F. Tennant**

**For further reading:**

**Books by John Westerhoff III** (*Learning Through Liturgy* Seabury Press 1978;  
*Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle* Seabury Press 1980 – both distributed by SPCK;  
*Building God's People* Seabury Press 1983).

**James Fowler** *Stages of Faith* (Harper & Row 1981)

**Gabriel Moran** *Education Toward Adulthood* (Gill and MacMillan 1980)

**Kevin Nichols & John Cummins** *Into His Fullness* (St. Paul Publications 1980). (This is No.2 in a series of 3).

**Wim Saris** *Towards a Living Church* (Collins 1980).

**Daniel Levinson** *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York, Knopf 1978).

**Bernice Neugarten** in *The Psychology of Adult Development and Dying* ed. by C. Eisdorfer and M.P. Lawton (Washington DC American Psychology Assn 1973).

**Bernice Neugarten** *Personality in Middle and Later Life* (New York, Atherton 1964).

**Thomas Groome** *Christian Religious Education* (Harper & Row 1980).

**The Child in the Church** and **Understanding Christian Nurture** (British Council of Churches, 1976 + 1981).



# **Baptist Housing Association** LTD

1984 has been another successful year for the Baptist Housing Association Limited. Nine new schemes have been completed, with at least seven now officially opened, these include:

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| Shepherd Court    | — Rochdale           |

This expanding Association now has over seventy properties and provides homes for over 2,000 residents in a warm, friendly and caring atmosphere.

If you would like to see a twenty minute video of the Association's work, or if you would like to receive a copy of our 1984 Annual Report, to be published in April, please contact:

**The General Secretary,  
Baptist Housing Association Limited,  
Baptist Church House,  
4 Southampton Row,  
London. WC1B 4AB.**

# HOLIDAYS 1985

The holiday houses below, available to ministers at reduced rates, were fully booked in 1984. They are offered again, but, except for 17th to 26th June, the Isle of Wight chalet is already fully booked by Baptist ministers between 25th April and 7th September 1985.

## **St. Lawrence, Ventnor, Isle of Wight**

A fully furnished detached chalet in a large garden with sea views. The surroundings are attractive at all times of year on "the garden Isle" near "the Madeira of England". There are four bedrooms with seven single beds and a baby's cot. Facilities include a washing machine, refrigerator, colour TV, telephone, garage and sun lounge. There are storage heaters and logs for an open fire. Sorry, no pets.

## **Tiverton, Devon**

A fully furnished two bedroomed bungalow on a quiet estate, with views of the surrounding hills. It is an ideal touring centre in the beautiful Exe valley, not far from Exmoor and midway between Minehead and Exmouth. There are four single beds, central heating, refrigerator, colour TV, telephone, and a garage. Sorry, no pets.

*For both the above addresses apply to Bryan Pinches, 12, Castle Street, Tiverton, Devon, EX16 6RG. A stamped addressed envelope is appreciated.*

## **Bognor Regis**

The Surrey & North-East Hampshire Baptist Assn. has a fully-equipped seven-berth caravan on a pleasant orchard site on the outskirts of Bognor Regis. Preference is given to ministers, for whom the charges range from £27 to £58 per week according to season. Details from Mrs E. M. Price, 'Grassendale', Ricksons Lane, West Horsley, Surrey KT24 6HU. Tel: 04865 3905.

# Book Reviews

*Paul Rowntree Clifford: Politics and the Christian Vision*

SCM 1984  
15p p.p. £5.95

Paul Clifford, through a distinguished career, has consistently been committed to two things: first the ecumenical understanding of the mission of the whole People of God in and for the whole world; and secondly the importance of critical understanding and intellectual endeavour in the service of the mission. In this book we have further evidence of this as he shares the fruits of his involvement with the Foundation for the Study of Christianity and Society.

It is a wide ranging survey of the issues facing our society evaluated in the light of basic Christian insights as he understands them. There are many points

that challenge, stimulate, and illumine our perspectives. Above all there is a consistent reminder of the main issues that face us as a nation. The first chapter provides the setting by giving Paul Clifford's own case for the imperative of Christian involvement in politics. He takes politics to be, primarily, the affairs of society at every level. Christians are committed willy-nilly in these concerns both because they live in society and because the Gospel impels them. But there is also a note of caution. The Christian Vision can only be a constant critical hope in a fallen world, though this Niebuhrian stance is modified by the claim that Christian understanding is not found in generalities or principles but in relation to particular issues and immediate decisions. He then tries to find a way of uniting the insights of Niebuhur, Temple and others with the thrust to committed action of the Liberation theologians.

The weakness of the book is, oddly, set out on its front cover. There we have picture of Margaret Thatcher looking out at us under a title that talks about *the* Christian vision. Those who read the *Baptist Times* will know that Paul Clifford is far from being uncritical of the present government. Indeed there are in the book hard hitting attacks on the new right. Who could have dreamed up the connection? It is, however, illustrative of the weakness of the democratic socialist (radical liberal/left of centre) style. Now it no longer commands a consensus it appears fuzzy and open to abuse from all directions. But there is a great deal to be said for the values it embodies as an attempt to combine freedom and responsibility, the pursuit of excellence with a fundamental commitment to social justice, plurality and variety with a care for the commonwealth. I certainly would want, broadly, to ally myself with all that. In the present climate, however, with left and right polarising into populist simplicities, it is a very difficult position to defend. And it can only be defended on the basis of a thorough 're-think' that really comes to grips with the new arguments put forward, especially by the new right, which are being represented as necessary forms of nature and history. Unfortunately one is left with the feeling that not much has happened since 1977 when the B.C.C. study on Britain Today and Tomorrow produced a Butskellite Swansong. We are not given among the unexceptional principles enunciated, the hard facts and detailed arguments necessary to refute current orthodoxy, whether theological or political.

It is, however, a sign that the situation is changing that this discussion is emerging again, for the alternative to the new right is not the hard left. I believe that the liberal social democratic vision has its own inherent, if fragile, beauty that comports well with a Gospel of reconciliation, forgiveness, peace and justice. One point that is surely central to the contemporary political debate which Paul Clifford usefully highlights is the need to find ways of helping people to feel involved in and responsible for the welfare of all in a society that is necessarily complex and bureaucratic. That is an area that could be taken up both sociologically and theologically.

**Paul H. Ballard**  
University College,  
Cardiff.

**Christian Worship**, published by the Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1 South Parade, Headingley, Leeds LS6 3LF. 35pp. 80p.

The Yorkshire Association is to be congratulated on the compilation of this book and for making it available to a wider readership. It reflects the various movements which are today influencing public worship in our Baptist churches. To these movements it adopts an even-handed approach, dealing with the possibilities and problems raised by each with a commendable restraint. From its opening affirmation that communion is central to all our worship it goes on to deal with architecture, music, healing in the context of worship, the use of charismatic gifts in worship and the place of the house group in the life of the local church. Perhaps we shall have to wait fifty years before we are able to see these phenomena in the perspective of the times in which we are living and of God's dealing with the universal church. Until then we seem to have no option but to test the situation and trust that what we are doing is of God. Certainly, the YBA booklet will help us to avoid those fears, divisions and misunderstandings that too often are characterising our churches in this turbulent time of change.

The booklet is welcome for another reason. The English are still two nations and churches share in that one-eyed vision of what God is doing in the world. The lush pastures of the south east reach their farthest extent at Luton and little is known of what happens beyond there. The YBA in this booklet show us that their churches are vigorously alive and that they are able to retain their Yorkshire common-sense even in the most elevated of subjects.

## Of Interest to You

*"Blest be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds  
Is like to that above."*

We pray God's richest blessing upon our brethren who are entering new spheres of service:

Gordon Brand (Twerton) to St Mary St., Bridgewater

Alan Butler (Thornbury) to Addlestone

Alec Cheyney (Trowbridge) to Eythorne Group, Dover

Ian Coffey (Southend) to Saltmine Trust

Iain Collins (Rawtenstall) to Priory Street, York

Roy Connor (BMS) to Bognor Regis

Gwilym Davies to Hengoed and Bryn Seion, Ystrad Mynach (supplementary)

Keith Foster (Newark) to Colwyn Bay

Roger Gray (Yardley Wood) to Halton, Hastings

James Grote (Leicester) to Littleover, Derby  
Kenneth Hibbs to Pontesbury  
Martin Hulbert (Plymouth) to Bethesda, Rogerstone  
Vivian Lewis (Kinshasa) to Christchurch Road, Worthing  
Anthony Mason (Pitlochry) to Muswell Hill  
David Morris (Barnet) to South Parade, Leeds  
Paul Mortimore (Crofton Park) to Department of Ministry  
Donald Page (Bootle) to Oakham  
Barrie Petterson (Cowbridge) to Albemarle, Scarborough  
Peter Radford (Colwyn Bay) to Grenfell, Birmingham  
Roy Wheatcroft (Mirfield) to Beeston Hill, Leeds

We especially remember those who are beginning their ministerial service, and pray that they will both know God's blessing, and the prayerful support of the fellowship:

Stuart Banks to West Croydon (Spurgeon's Tabernacle) [Associate])  
Brian Carpenter (Northern) to Higham Hill  
Brian Chaplain to Sion, Morecambe  
Barry Cheeseman (Spurgeons) to Seer Green  
Nicholas Fawcett (Regents Park) to Leigh  
Andrew Fitz-gibbon (Northern) to Stocksfield  
Robert Green (Regents Park) to Croxley Green, Rickmansworth [Assistant]  
David Middlemiss (Spurgeons) to London Road, Lowestoft [Associate]  
Billy Montgomery to Poynton [Associate]  
Eileen Parkman to Cippenham, Slough [Associate]  
A.A. Peck (Regents Park) to Central Bradford Fellowship  
Andrew Rossiter (Northern & Cardiff) to Free Church Chaplaincy,  
Southampton University  
John Taylor (Northern) to Acomb, York  
Andy Williamson to West Bradford [Assistant]

Other brethren have announced their retirement from the active pastoral ministry, not always for the first time (!) and we commend them to God:

Fred Bacon (Bristol)  
Peter Bradford (Northfield, Birmingham)  
Frederick Cockett (Bridgwater)  
Norman Renshaw (Itinerant Ministry)  
Will Stewart (Blaby and Beaumont Leys)  
Edgar Wright (Priory Street, York)

*"When for a while we part,  
This thought will soothe our pain,  
That we shall still be joined in heart,  
And hope to meet again."*