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# The Baptist Ministers' Journal

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"The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily  
reflect those of the Editorial Board"

# Editorial

*Concorde* is gracing Leeds skies; good-looking, noisy, horrendously expensive, and, seating only 100 passengers, hardly commercially viable. A fine example of prestige for the sake of prestige, with just a little *entente cordiale* thrown in.

So much of modern life appears to take its cue from the *Concorde* mentality. For this is the age of promotion and projection, in which, if you are not "high profile", then you are nothing at all. The sophistication and psychological manipulation of the modern marketing machine means that products, parties and ideas can be alluringly "dressed to kill", with less and less chance that the general public will be able to resist. The word "hype" has taken only about ten years to find a secure place in our dictionaries. Consequently, that which is modest, understated and self-effacing increasingly looks quaint, as though it belongs to another age and has appeared, embarrassingly, in all the wrong clothes. "The louder you shout, the more effective you will be": clearly that is the message.

And in a time when the Church has its back to the wall, this issue is particularly relevant. How do we announce to our society that we are still in business? How do we market the Church so that it becomes, at least noticeable, and at most compulsive? And what claims do we make which we can morally justify? Because we are *in extremis*, the temptation is to simply ape secular promotion and shout as loudly as we can.

Now balance demands that we concede that others quite outside the Church do indeed raise their voices against the bare-faced exploitation of even the most dubious commodities and ideas. But for us the issue is more critical, since the very nature of the gospel is involved. After all, the images of the Kingdom are *submerged* images: yeast, salt, seed. They transform from *within*; they do not attract attention. And then there is the servant figure himself. How can you market a servant? The very idea is absurd. How, then, do we legitimately mission, so that our methods are in harmony with the essence of our life in Christ?

This issue forms the burden of Arthur Grimshaw's article, in which he identifies a number of irritants that just won't go away. This is followed by the first of two biblical articles. Here, Larry Kreitzer invites us to re-consider the problematic millennium concept of the Apocalypse, in all its New Testament uniqueness. Peter Shepherd then pleads for renewed confidence in the local church, believing it to have special significance in the age in which we live, in terms of holding out the possibility of real community. The second biblical contribution comes from Ron Armstrong, again a marginal doctrine: the descent into Hell. What is it really saying? Finally, it is refreshing to have an article from a theological student in one of our colleges. We would invite more. Jon Green addresses the relationship between children and the sacraments, as we Baptists understand them.

As a postscript, we would emphasise again that we are pleased to accept unsolicited articles. Word count should not be greater than 2,500 and articles should be double-spaced. Book reviews, too, are invited. (300-400 words) Please include all publishing details: date, price, pages and publisher.

# The Church in the World: For Whose Sake?

From time to time it is a good thing to ask what we are doing in and through the Church. That involves asking who “we” are, ministers or all the members of the Church, and whether we work out our vocations in the Church or in the world. I write of one Church in the conviction that its manifestations are either local congregations or denominations of that one Church, and that there is no such thing as the Baptist Church, as Christians of other denominations often misrepresent us. Neither are other denominations *The Church*, though they may think they are! No, we are in the Church together, however loosely, and must get our act together for the sake of its mission.

## The Nature of Ministry

Is the Church dominated by its ministers or are all the members involved in the ministry of the Church? We could note the efforts of the Anglicans and Catholics to involve the laity more, but I intend to address my theme chiefly to Baptist life in this country. Earlier this century, and perhaps even more recently, some of our churches had that sort of ministry which someone compared to a mighty oak. Nothing grew under it! The emphasis, then, should not be on the minister as leader or manager, as some are suggesting, but as a resource person enabling and encouraging.

Clearly, ministers have a responsibility to guide the members and congregation of all ages as students and exemplars of the gospel. Yet this cannot be done by abstract sermonising nor in isolation from life in society. Certainly the Church itself needs maintaining in its worship and pastoral care, but must act in society as part of the mission of, and to, the Kingdom of God, and not as an end in itself.

So what is the teaching role of the minister within the congregation in helping it to be part of the Church in the world? I expect that most would agree that we are to expound the truths of the Bible in a systematic way. Here we could be helped by following a good lectionary so that we do not dwell on our favourite theme nor miss the wide sweep of the Gospel. As an ex-industrial chaplain I believe that there is much to be gained by a method of service preparation common to its pioneers, such as E.R. Wickham in England, and Horst Symanowski in Germany, both during the war years, 1939-1945! They invited people from the factories they visited, along with members of the congregation, to share in the preparation of the service so that it was relevant to the needs of the local congregation - although they might not attend the actual service.

David Edwards, in his book on *Christian England*, describes the Church's loss of contact with industrial society during the Industrial Revolution as its greatest failure. Unfortunately, its effects are still with us and we need similar efforts to those of Wickham if our efforts in mission are to be real. Yet most ministers continue to compose sermons with little consultation with the congregation and even less with society at large.

What is the nature of our mission to the people we are, in fact, in contact with? Is our ministry to the whole of life or only to leisure time in the evenings and weekends when we see them? More crucially, what is our own experience of life which enables us to minister to anyone?

## The Context: Church or Society?

In recent years many entrants to our ministry have been considerably older than in previous years, apart from immediately following the 1939-45 war. I have heard that the average age is 33, which indicates a wider experience of life than those who heard the call early in life and progressed from school to college to church. And yet this does not solve the problem of training for the ministry, whatever the experience of the candidate before college. This raises the question of what is an appropriate training for the ministry and the type of mission for our society today.

In 1987 the British Council of Churches standing committee on theological education invited a group of theologians from developing countries to visit some churches and colleges of different denominations in Britain. Some of their comments were as follows:

1. Ministers received insufficient preparation for, and engagement in, the life of society. They were equipped only to function in gathered church congregations.
2. Colleges who were the sole provider of their own training tended to create an ethos that was insular, focusing on personal and moral issues in a way which separated those concerns from wider social and world issues.
3. The Kingdom of God tended at times to be viewed as entirely a gift from God in an other-worldly manner. The churches lacked an active sense of God reaching out to humanity.
4. Church members showed limited interest in connecting their faith with their daily work.
5. Colleges and churches were found not to be representative of British people as a whole but showed a cultural and ethnic élitism.
6. There was a tendency for British Christians to label those from other cultures rather than allow them to express their own identity. (The visiting theologians were assumed to be in Britain to study rather than to contribute relevant insights as equals and partners!)
7. No real emphasis was placed on women's concerns and experiences.
8. There was an absence of interest in, and motivation towards, ecumenism.
9. There was a fear of change in British society and the visitors felt there was a focus on keeping 'Old Britain' alive.

These comments are pretty damning, although some college staff and members of churches were ready to change their attitudes and methods. The emphasis of the visitors on the relevance of the Church's mission to society is important. Jesus' own mission was among ordinary people, who were very often excluded from the synagogue because of their work.

However, it seems we are still a church-centred denomination. Our of 45 courses available through the B.U. Christian Training Programme only five are concerned with mission to the world, a heavily unbalanced emphasis however important we regard an understanding of faith and order. (Those relating the gospel to society are listed under **F. Thought and Action**: 1. Christian Ethics. 3. Catching the Tide: The Church and Today's Society. 7. Wealth, Work and leisure. 12. The Stewardship of Life and 13. The Christian and Politics).

A weighty conference held at Oxford in 1937 to deal with the desperate state of society at the time, was entitled, *Church, Community and State* and declared that

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'loving your neighbour' meant action in society for justice. Such action was not to be part of the official system of the Church, nor carried out by ministers, but by church members. Christianity was seen as the most materialistic religion since the Word became flesh. Therefore the gospel had to be translated into public policy, or politics, and was unashamedly a battle between love and callousness. The relevance to today's society is obvious. It would seem that membership of a political party would be an implication of that conference - and a test of our sincerity! Is it not a reflection on the influence of the local church that few members are involved in politics, whereas our parents and grandparents often were?

I have met one person who has studied the CTP course, *Wealth, Work and Leisure*, but many who have taken the biblical papers. There may be a fascination with the Bible but not with the application of its principles to society. Is this a reflection of the call to conversion and church membership seen as an end in itself? Can it be any more than this if the criticisms of the overseas theologians are still true?

Perhaps their most damning criticism is that of insularity. It is true that our forefathers had to set up academies to train our ministers because they were excluded from Oxford and Cambridge, but we believe that the quality of our training should be of the highest standard. This usually involves acceptance of university and ecumenical approval, and is necessary to meet the highest ability of our students and to be open to the unrestricted search for the truth. Sectarian, narrow and unscholarly standards cannot be tolerated in attempting to discover the truths of the gospel.

The point has to be made that the ministry has to be educated to a level to be able to meet the intellectual needs of society, not least those specialists in other disciplines who believe that theology need not receive the scrutiny and standards of their own disciplines. Our denomination of local churches suffers from an amateurism which is not allowed in other disciplines and professions, whereby an enthusiast can take over a local church without reference to the wider denomination. This may occur in other local congregationally based denominations, not least the House Church movement, but it is an ecumenical embarrassment and detrimental to the united mission of a gospel of reconciliation. If we are a Baptist Union of churches then we ought to see that our principles are upheld so that the quality of our presentation of the gospel to world is of the highest standard. At the same time we need to make no apology for our open, warm welcome to strangers at our services, nor our witness to our evangelical experience, individual and corporate spirituality, social stance and dedicated vocations. These, in fact, are aspects of our evangelism which can give pause for thought, repentance and conversion.

The ethos of other denominations and faiths is different from ours and, while avoiding uniformity, we can learn from them in many ways, as, in fact, we have done in recent years in the areas of stewardship, liturgy and social commitment. In my own experience, I am learning from the readiness for anonymity by Anglican colleagues, the non-discrimination of Quaker friends, the commitment of Catholics, and the warmth of Methodists, not to mention the erudition of rabbis and the charm of particular imams I have met. Would that we could develop the virtues of other denominations and faiths and exhibit none of the faults of our own!

### **Incarnational Ministry**

Perhaps the most crucial area of the minister's teaching ministry is that of

relating the gospel to the whole of life, especially the industrial, commercial, economic and political ordering of our society and world civilisation, since our ultimate concern is the Kingdom of God! We have majored in Bible study and ministry to the family at home, over the years, whilst largely neglecting mission to the working and social life where we spend most of our lives from school onwards. However, there is a hint that this might at last be tackled by a "sea-change" in the redeployment of Free Church ministers, as broached in two recent Free Church conferences.

There have been basic attempts to relate the gospel to *Work, Wealth and Leisure* by Baptist industrial chaplains in the Christian Training Programme series. Anglican chaplains produced a similar study for 'Industry Year' (1986), and there are an increasing number of University courses, e.g. Manchester and Hull, relating the gospel to industry and society in general. Such study has to be backed up by practical experience of these areas and involves ministers in their locality through such agencies as the William Temple Foundation at Manchester University, and the Industrial Mission Association, through local groups of industrial chaplains.

As the whole Church begins to take seriously its mission to the whole of life, ministers will recognise their responsibility to equip their congregation to relate the faith to secular members of society. They may not feel qualified to do this themselves, but in such areas as the Christian education of children or the teaching of counselling skills to church members, they will have to take steps to see that this is done.

These two areas are important in so far as a recent report shows that Christian education is being skimped in some schools and adequate skills for communicating the gospel are needed. Ecumenical cooperation is clearly needed in these areas since we compare unfavourably in resources with the larger and sometimes with the smaller denominations. We have largely failed to cooperate ecumenically in the Decade of Evangelism, particularly where we have indulged in 'planting' Baptist churches where there is already a Christian witness. Here there is need for the theologically trained minister divinely gifted in leadership, to win over their congregation to ecumenically acceptable strategies so that the enthusiasms for the gospel may be directed to the most advantageous ways for people outside the churches.

Given that the Church is the handmaid of God for the sake of His coming Kingdom, the minister is the servant of the local congregation to the extent that their lives are reflected in the worship and services offered to the community. Following the incarnational principle of the coming of Christ among us, and his visiting of fishermen, shepherds, tax farmers, and families at work and at home, our dialogue with God in church and with each other generally, should be of the 'earthiness' of the gospel in every area of life.

Could it be that the cries of the unemployed be heard as part of the petitions during worship, that the sacrifices and pleasures of shift work be uttered from the pulpit, that the wranglings and compromises of trade union and management meetings be related to the glory of God? In these ways the gospel of Jesus Christ could become meaningful to our generation and have its saving and converting effect for the sake of the Kingdom.

**Arthur Grimshaw**

# The Millennium of Revelation 20:1-4: Some Suggestions for Study and Discussion

The Book of Revelation has been described as “the playground of the eccentrics”. Nowhere is this more evident than in the variety of ways in which the idea of the final parousia of Jesus Christ has been interpreted, particularly in connection with its relationship to the millennium described in 20: 1-4. There are a number of curious, not to say downright bizarre, interpretations which may be noted in passing. It would take too much space to discuss these at length but given the centrality of the millennial kingdom within discussions of Revelation in particular, and within Christian apocalyptic literature in general, it seems appropriate that we mention briefly some of these interpretations as well as some of the critical reactions to them.

## A Singular Doctrine

Some interpretations of the millennium approach it from the standpoint of the Book of Revelation as a whole. For example, R.H. Charles (1920)<sup>1</sup> takes Rev. 13-20 to teach that the parousia of Jesus Christ is applicable only for those who have been martyred in the great tribulation ( for it is only they who will be raised at the parousia); this has been described as ‘the universal martyrdom of the church’. However, this interpretation is plagued with difficulties, not least the fact that it runs against the presentation of the parousia contained in Rev. 1-3, where the hope of the parousia is presented as something for *all* of the Church (not just those who have suffered martyrdom) to await eagerly (As I.H. Marshall (1964) rightly notes in his critique of Charles)<sup>2</sup>. However, more generally it is true to say that the main battleground of interpretative debate is to be found in Revelation 20 itself.

Debates about the interpretation of Rev. 20:1-10 are among the most heated, particularly in some conservative circles, where one particular line or another is made an axiom of Christian belief. Does the passage teach a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth, or is it to be taken as a symbolic or metaphorical reference to God's kingdom? It is striking that the word translated ‘millennium’ (chilioi) occurs some six times in 20:2-7, and probably should be associated with the idea of a cosmic week based on the statement contained in Psalm 90:4.<sup>3</sup> How do time and eternity come together within the Seer's apocalyptic vision? And where does the parousia, or as it popularly tends to get described when speaking about Rev. 20, the *rapture*, fit into the author's scheme of things? In fact, the appropriateness of the term *rapture* to describe the future parousia of Christ has been the subject of considerable theological interest.<sup>4</sup> Does the parousia inaugurate the Messianic kingdom, come during it, or conclude it? Are we to interpret the passage as espousing a pre-tribulation rapture, or is it expressing a post-tribulation rapture, or perhaps even a mid-tribulation rapture? Or are we much nearer the truth when we adopt the position of amillennialism when interpreting the book, effectively refusing to be drawn on the question of how the parousia and the millennium fit together by refusing to see the millennium in literal, chronological terms? Should we see the judgment following the millennium described in 20: 7-10 as merely a doublet for the judgment enacted at the parousia of Christ which is portrayed in 19: 11-21 (as

R. Schnackenburg (1963) suggests)?<sup>5</sup> These matters of millennial interpretation have long been contentious within the history of the Church, even from its earliest days.<sup>6</sup> It is possible to find early Christian writers arguing for a literal millennium based upon the passage ( a classic example being *The Epistle of Barnabas* 15: 3-9); at the same time it is also possible to find other Christian writers vehemently opposing such a literalism (a classic example being Augustine's *City of God* 20:6-7)

## **A Pervasive Influence**

the idea of the millennium in Revelation has had an enormous impact upon literature the world over, providing inspiration for a wide range of materials. The English-speaking world has certainly had its fair share of classic works which are based upon the millennialism of Revelation. For example, Milton uses it in *Paradise Lost* (12.585-587) as part of his description of the promises made to fallen Adam; indeed there is much to suggest that for Milton millennialism becomes intimately tied up with his beliefs about England as the seat of Christ's millennial kingdom. The French Revolution was viewed in millennial terms by most of the Romantic poets, including Byron, Wordsworth, Blake, Coleridge and Shelley. More recently, two English writers of considerable international stature, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, have turned to the idea of the parousia of Christ as titles for volumes within their popular children's fantasy stories (*The Last Battle* (1956) and *The Return of the King* (1965) respectively). Music has often been another popular way of expressing millennial hopes which are founded on the future parousia of Christ. Perhaps the most memorable example is Julia Ward Howe's famous 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' (1862). This patriotic song uses imagery drawn from the Divine Warrior motif in Revelation, notably the wine-press image, as a way of relating millennialism to national hopes of people living within the United States during the crisis of the Civil War; the image is, of course, one that also underlies the title of John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, many of the most radical political movements in history drew inspiration from their chiliastic interpretations of Revelation, frequently mixing together a social critique with an extreme anti-establishment stance in the process. We could mention such figures as Montanus in the 2nd century; Joachim of Fiore in the 13th; Thomas Müntzer and Melchior Hoffman in the 16th; Joseph Mede and Johann Alsted in the 17th; Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcote in the 18th; J.N. Darby, William Miller, C.T. Russell and Joseph Smith in the 19th. Neither is our own age immune to the temptation that chiliasm offers, as demonstrated by the heavily dispensationalist Scofield Reference Bible (first published in 1909), the popularity of what might be termed 'The Dallas school' in the United States (the writings of such figures as L.S. Chafer, J.F. Walvoord and W.A. Criswell), and the immensely influential books of Hal Lindsey (notably *The Late, Great Planet Earth* in the 1970's and 1980's. Nor should we be allowed to forget how prominent a role the book of Revelation played in the twisted thinking of David Koresh as his fated Ranch Apocalypse in Waco, Texas, went up in flames in April of 1993.<sup>8</sup>

## **Exegesis and Experience**

Indeed, within this century, volume after volume, article after article, sermon after sermon, have been put forward to debate this matter of millennialism, often with an aggressiveness of spirit not in keeping with Christian demands of tolerance and charity. In fact, all of the positions just described have been credibly argued by competent scholars, and most good commentaries of recent years will provide

some discussion of the issue.<sup>9</sup> Beyond that several specialized volumes and articles have been published which offer an in-depth comparison of the various millennial perspectives and are well worth considering.<sup>10</sup> It goes without saying that in such controversial matters a sense of the contribution that church history can offer is an invaluable check against presumptuous claims concerning the parousia of Jesus Christ and the arrival of the millennium.<sup>11</sup>

Hopefully, if we are conscientious in our approach to the idea of the millennium in Revelation 20:1-4, fully applying the insights of biblical exegetes while consciously keeping an eye on the lessons that church history has to offer us on the matter, we can avoid the pitfall of allowing our interpretation of the theme to demonstrate that we are but another eccentric on the playground.

**Larry Kreitzer**

**Footnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> R.H. Charles, *The Revelation of St John*, 2 volumes, (ICC, T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1920)
- <sup>2</sup> I.H. Marshall, *Martyrdom and the Parousia in the Revelation of John* in *Studia Evangelica* 4 (1964) pp 333-339)
- <sup>3</sup> See Colin Brown's contribution to the article on *Number* in *NIDNTT2* (1976), pp683-704 for a discussion of this.
- <sup>4</sup> G.E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) is a classic study of this issue.
- <sup>5</sup> R. Schnackenburg, *God's Rule and Kingdom*, (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1963)
- <sup>6</sup> As H. Bietenhard, *The Millennial Hope in the Early Church* SJT6 (1953), pp12-30 argues.
- <sup>7</sup> See the articles on 'Second Coming' and 'Millennium' by M. Reeves and D.L. Jeffrey in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in Christian Literature* (ed) D.L. Jeffrey, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp687-691 and 509-512 for a full treatment of this.
- <sup>8</sup> See the articles by N. Gibbs, 'Tragedy in Waco', *Time* (May 3, 1993), pp20-35 and P. Arnold (with J. Tabor), 'The David Koresh Manuscript: Exposition of the Seven Seals', (Houston, Texas; Reunion Institute, 1994).
- <sup>9</sup> Such as those by G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCB; London:Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1974); W. Lane *The Book of Revelation*. (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1977); G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (BNTC; London A & C Black, 1966); G.E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Eerdmans, 1972); M. Wilcox, *The Message of Revelation*, (BST; Leicester, IVP, 1975); L. Morris, (The Revelation of St John), (TNTC; London Tyndale Press, 1969); G. Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation*, (Exeter, Paternoster, 1984); J.F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1966); R. Summers, *Worthy is the Lamb*, (Nashville, Broadman, 1951); and C.C. Rowland, *Revelation* (EC, London; Epworth, 1993).
- <sup>10</sup> Including G.R. Beasley-Murray (with H.H. Hobbs and R.F. Robbins), *Revelation: Three Viewpoints* (Nashville, Broadman Press, 1977); J. Barr *Fundamentalism* (London; SCM Press, 1977); R. G. Clouse (ed), *The Meaning of the Millennium; Four Views* (Leicester; IVP; 1980) and G.R. Osborne 'The Rapture Question'. *Themelios* 2 (1977), pp77-80.
- <sup>11</sup> N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York; Harper and Brothers, 1961); J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming; Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); C.B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Baker Book House, 1960); D. MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin*, (Kansas City; heart of America Bible Society, 1973) offer some starting points for such an historical study.

# Recovering Confidence in the Local Church

God speaks to the Church about different things at different times. Particular issues that are relevant and important in one period lose their vitality in another. There are times, for example, when God's word leads the Church to revival, with large numbers experiencing personal conversion; there are times when a reformation of the Church takes place; there are times when the Church is called to social and political action; there are times when the focus is on personal holiness and spirituality; on the importance of Church unity, etc.. Often these movements overlap; sometimes they are short-lived and limited in scope; at other times they are long lasting and widespread in their impact. It is not that any of them lose their importance at any time, but that the Spirit of God moves to lead the Church in particular directions at particular moments of its history.

Normally these 'invitations' from God arise unexpectedly. It is only with hindsight that one can see their place in the whole historical development of the Church and can analyse them, sociologically or theologically. It is important, however, to be always open and alert to what God might be saying.

## **A Lostness in Society**

An important starting point is to keep listening to the voice of God as he speaks through developments in contemporary society. Today, these are bewildering in their variety and in the speed with which they occur. The implications of the accelerating growth of technological and scientific knowledge are impossible to calculate or predict. There is an unsettling loss of moral coherence. The decline in stable employment raises important questions about the meaning of work and its relationship with life. One could go on to refer to threats to the environment, increasing global interdependence, multiculturalism, etc.. There are positive aspects to many of these changes, but their overall impact gives a sense of unmanaged and unmanageable change. There are many practical and personal ways in which they make an impact on people's lives: the breakdown of family relationships; redundancy and long term unemployment; the disintegration of previously stable communities; violent crime; poverty, etc.. There increasingly seems to be a loss of both social order and personal security.

We would sum this crisis up in the idea of 'lostness'. Many people feel that the world and their society do not provide them with a stable, rational and secure place to live. Rather than complaining about this, we need to ask: How is God speaking to us through these events? What invitation is the God and Father of Jesus Christ - the author of salvation - offering us, as Christians, in the face of all this?

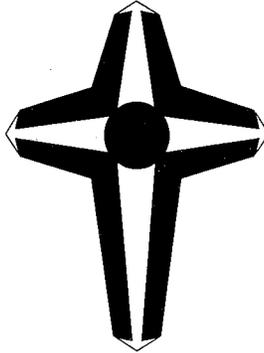
## **The Idea of the Gathered Church**

As Baptist Christians, we also need to keep listening to God's particular word to us. This may seem a very limited and parochial thing to do, compared with the needs of contemporary Western society, but we can take courage from the fact that God often seems to take delight in precisely this way of speaking. It is to and through the apparently insignificant that his most significant message comes.

An important part of the task of hearing God speaking to us is trying to identify

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who 'we' are. Just who are the Baptist Christians God is speaking to? What, if anything, makes us distinctive? To hear God addressing us, and so telling us who we are, is where we must start. As we consider our Baptist 'identity', then, one of its central elements must surely be our concept of the 'gathered church'. This, obviously, is not all there is to be said, but our historical focus on the Church as the local community or congregation of believers, has a very important part to play in discerning God's word to us for today. It embodies many other emphases that unite us: the importance of personal conversion and believers' baptism; the notion of a covenant uniting church members; the rejection of clericalism; the importance of separate churches supporting and encouraging each other in association.

The sense of lostness in society and the doctrine of the gathered church have a clear relationship with each other. Potentially, at least, the concept of the gathered church would seem to meet the needs of society at a particularly pertinent point, providing community and security. God's offer of deliverance from lostness, insecurity and chaos involves incorporation into the body of Christ.

This incorporation, if it is to be real, must be locally expressed. It must take the form of actual, face to face, relationships. It is only in the context of human relationships that we can best explore and experience what it means to have a living relationship with God. It is in human love and acceptance that the love and acceptance of God can be made real. The quality of those human relationships is vitally important. We all know that relationships characterised by such qualities as trust, stability, forgiveness and faithfulness are vital for human well-being. In a lost society, full of lost people, we can see in the local, gathered community of Christians a powerful way of offering, in the name of Christ, and by the power of His Spirit, the means of experiencing relationships like that.

Of course, the reality is not always quite like that. Salvation has not yet arrived in all its fulness. But perhaps part of the reason for the failure of the local church to live up to its potential is that we have underestimated its importance. We have been distracted by other things. We have not realised just what a wonderful thing it could be, nor how much God wants to bring renewal right here. Could it be that He is inviting us Baptists to appreciate afresh the value of the communal life of the gathered church as an instrument in his saving purpose for the world?

### **Changing Baptist Perceptions of the Church**

Historically, our Separatist ancestors, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, practised their faith in a world that seemed alien and frequently hostile, and this brought them together, primarily within their individual churches, but also within their Associations, with an urgency and commitment we find hard to appreciate. Theirs was a very different social environment from ours, and their theology would in many respects have seemed strange to us, but our present circumstances call us to view with sympathy their understanding of the Church. Similar things could be said about the primitive Christian communities of the early Church, whose sense of separation from the world and 'body life' was precisely what the more radical reformers of the seventeenth century wanted to recover.

The dramatic growth in numbers and prestige of Baptists (and other non-conformists) in the nineteenth century, together with their - by and large successful - search for acceptance and equality, meant that their pattern of church life was drastically altered. The end of that century, and most of this one, have been characterised, not by a sense of close-knit communities bound together by strong

convictions about Divine election, grace and baptism, but by a sense of being part of a much wider and diverse Christian community. The development of national denominational and other church structures, and the ecumenical movement, have been important aspects of this change in perception.

For the typical twentieth century Baptist Christian, belonging to the Church has come to be far more closely associated with fellowship, mission and worship beyond the boundary of the local church than ever used to be the case. Often this is denominational in character, but just as frequently involves links of various kinds across denominational boundaries. One has only to consider the vast and growing array of 'parachurch' organisations and resources existing on a national or international level to see the importance of this trend. On a denominational level, the scale and financial demands of the national structure of the Union would have been incomprehensible and strange to earlier generations of Baptists. For them, the 'Baptist denomination' meant a category of churchmanship characterised by certain principles and practices; for many contemporary Baptists, it means belonging to the Baptist Union. This subtle, yet powerful, change says a lot about our understanding of the Church.

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, we need to reassess the value and importance of the concept of the 'gathered church'. If we are to do so, our motivation must not be a nostalgic desire to 'get back to basics', but a desire to be the kind of church that can witness effectively to the love of God in Christ in today's world.

### **The Danger of Introversion**

A renewal of interest in the centrality of the gathered church runs a number of risks. One is that it could lead to a preoccupation with internal church issues at the expense of mission - one of the major obstacles faced by Carey and Fuller two hundred years ago. Another is that it could be seen in a negative way as escapism - a running away from the pressures and questions of our contemporary world. It could result in a retreat from the challenging task of seeking greater unity with Christians from other traditions and ecclesiologies. In the light of these possibilities, some might describe such a change of emphasis as a retreat to a more sectarian and introverted churchmanship.

It would be naïve not to accept that such risks are there. The answer, however, is not to reject the gathered church concept altogether, which has so much to offer the needs of contemporary society, but to develop an understanding of it that emphasises its potential for facilitating mission, and minimises the risks of introversion. This article is in part a plea for such a development.

Only one or two brief comments about what this might involve can be made here. First, an accompanying renewal of interest in Association life would help avoid an unhealthy congregational introversion. Lively and regular inter-church fellowship is always an essential dimension of congregational church government.

Second, a recommitment to the gathered church concept should be seen, not as a move away from ecumenical debate, but as a way of reaffirming the Baptist contribution to it. The more clearly we understand and grasp the value of our own particular approach to being part of the Church of Christ, the better we shall be able to play that part to the full.

Third, we need to think of deliverance from 'the world' as a positive thing, not

negatively as escapism. The world is, and always has been, dominated by ungodly and dehumanising forces. What we offer, in the name of Christ is a way of escape. We offer, therefore, not only to the wider Church, but to our society, a commitment to the local community of believers as an instrument of God's saving grace.

Fourth, there needs to be a recognition that what Christ offers is not only personal and individual salvation, but salvation in relationships. Healthy, Christ-honouring relationships, between men and women, adults and children, black and white, employed and unemployed, pastor and church members - these are the signs of his saving presence that will be most readily noticed by outsiders. It is above all in the local church that these can be manifested. As part of our commitment to the church as the local community of Christian believers, we need to spend more effort promoting a 'relational' understanding of church life.

The Need for the Local to be at the Top of the National Agenda If God is speaking to us about the importance of the local gathered church in his purpose for the world, then it follows that there is an urgent need for those in leadership within our denomination to put it at the top of their agenda. Denominational social action programmes; debates about the places of the Union and the Superintendency; papers about future ministry within the denomination; networking; national mission strategies - these all have their important place, naturally. The heart of the matter, however, is the local church.

It is frequently asserted, with all sincerity, that all that is done - whether by the Union or other national and international Christian groups - is for the sake of the local church. The truth, however, is that we have failed to recognise the weakening effect of many national initiatives and schemes on the vitality and confidence of the local church, which often seems to find itself running behind the latest scheme, trying to make sure it does not fall behind and 'miss out'. There is no time or energy left for truly local initiatives. Ironically, the local church often emerges from these schemes with a lower reputation than before, having failed to achieve the potential promised in the pre=scheme publicity.

Our commitment to the gathered community of believers has too often been half-hearted (or worse). We have found it easier, and believed it to be more important, to promote national programmes and a national image, rather than facing the challenge that will really determine our future - what it means to be a local church in today's world. The national needs to submit to the local; the large and powerful to the small and weak; the well known to the little known. We need to take seriously within our denominational life the fact that God loves the small and insignificant and works our his purpose there, or nowhere.

It is primarily in the local church that we find the body of Christ. It is here that 'God lives through His Spirit'. As we face the needs of today's world, and consider our identity as Baptist Christians, God is calling us to see the local church for what it is - his gift to us, and the means by which his Kingdom will come.

**Peter Shepherd**

# The Descent into Hell: Preaching the Descensus

At one time it seemed that the Third Person of the Godhead was neglected in preaching. The Charismatic Movement, whatever we may think of it, changed all that with its renewed emphasis on the Holy Spirit. At one time the Doctrine of Christ's Ascension deemed to be a neglected theme for preachers. This also has changed, with more preachers taking on board the significance of the Christian Year and Baptist preachers using the Christian Year themes. One might argue that it is time for the Doctrine of Christ's Second Coming to receive similar treatment, but so far one looks in vain. Until I was sixteen, and a regular churchgoer, I did not even know there was such a thing as the Second Coming of Christ!

However, my purpose in this article is not to draw attention to the Second Coming, but to look at another neglected doctrine of the Creed, "He descended into hades" (The Descensus). The Nicene creed omits all reference to it. so perhaps by that time preachers were already embarrassed by it! Some modern preachers might find the twin themes of Hell and Christ's Descensus embarrassing, as we try to make sense of them. Perhaps this may be why the Descensus is neglected today, but there can be no escape unless we take the line of attributing the New Testament references to mythological sources. There certainly were similar stories circulating in the ancient world of the Persians, Egyptians and Greeks.

The key verses for the Descensus are 1 Peter 3:18 and 4:6, which Barclay describes as amongst the most difficult in the New Testament. However, Peter is not alone in his references to Christ's visit to Hades. We have to come to terms with Paul as well. The Apostle to the Gentiles seems aware of the tradition that Christ visited the realm of the dead (see Rom 10:7 and Eph 4:9). Some scholars also see echoes of the Descensus in Philipians 2:10 and Revelation 1:18.

1 Peter 3:18-20 not only speaks of the Descensus itself but it tells us why Christ went into Hades, namely, "he went and preached to the spirits in prison who formerly did not obey..in the days of Noah". 1 Peter 4:6 seems to corroborate this. These statements have been a real headache to commentators from the earliest days of the Church, and there is no unanimity now. Alan Richardson goes out on a limb with this statement: "While Christ's body lay in the tomb, he remained in Hades until the Resurrection".

Barclay recognises three main interpretations:

(i) Peter refers to Christ preaching to those who were disobedient in the days of Noah. God gave them an opportunity to repent but they refused and perished. One interpretation suggests that it was during Noah's time that Christ preached to those in Hades. This assumes the pre-existent Christ was active in salvation even before his incarnation. (modern exegetes might feel this doesn't make things much easier!)

(ii) Rendell Harris and Moffatt suggested that the name of Enoch was missed out in copying the manuscript and Moffatt's translation actually reads "In the flesh He (Christ) was put to death, but He came to life in the Spirit. It was in the Spirit that Enoch also went and preached to the imprisoned spirits who had disobeyed at the time when God's patience held out during the construction of the ark in the days of Noah". This suggests that it was not Christ but Enoch who preached to the dead in Hades.

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One wonders where Enoch came from, but Barclay has done his homework and explains. There were, apparently, Jewish legends about Enoch. Dr Barclay says that Rendel Harris argued that Enoch was originally in this text but was dropped, either through a mistake in copying, or simply to make sense of the passage. (See Barclay's commentary on 1 Peter, pp 282-39). Barclay rejects this construction, and one has to admit it is highly speculative with no evidence to back it. Note: 2 Peter 2:4 refers to fallen angels, to whom, indeed, Enoch was believed, by Jewish teachers, to have preached.

(iii) Some commentators have suggested that Peter did claim that Jesus went to Hades to preach, *but not to all the occupants of Hades*. The suggestion is that Christ's ministry was only to those who had been contemporaries of Noah, who were being offered another chance.

(iv) The simplest explanation might simply be that Christ went to Hades to give the devout of pre-Christian times a chance to believe on God's Messiah and Saviour. Some suggest that this evangelistic visit to Hades was simply to give a second chance *to all who died without faith*. This interpretation would have been a comfort to Christians with unbelieving relatives, and perhaps it was intended so. This reinforces Paul's great claim that Christ's atonement is effective in every realm and there is no situation in which His triumphant redemption is not effective. (Phil 2:10-11)

### **History of the Doctrine**

Prof. du Toit says that although the writings of the early Fathers contain few references to Christ's Descensus, it is clear that the New Testament references were known, although they were not explained.

The first interpretations seem to be linked to concern for the destiny of Old Testament believers. The Epistle of Hermas suggests that the apostles also, after their death, went to preach to the deceased. With the passing of time the facts were embroidered and a whole mythology grew up around the doctrine.

du Toit says it was not until Clement of Alexandria and Origen that these verses were used polemically. Augustine rejected the exegesis which suggested that Christ's preaching to the deceased was to give them a second chance.

The doctrine received more attention during the third and fourth centuries, with speculative treatment in the Gospel of Nicodemus, Acts of Thomas, Acts of Andrew, Acts of Paul, and the Gnostic Pistis Sophia. Parallel with this spectacular treatment, the straight theological treatment continued with Tertullian, Hippolytus and Cyprian, limiting Christ's visit "to the regions under the earth", simply to announce the reality of His grace and salvation to the Old Testament saints. (cf. W. Beider)

For the Alexandrian school, the idea of Christ's descent to Hades was developed into a more universalistic theme, containing an offer of salvation to all the dead. Clement saw it as a continuation of Christ's earthly ministry. Beider sees this as a possible origin for the later developed doctrine of purgatory. One can see this trend in Origen's thinking on universalistic lines. Others used the doctrine as proof of Christ's deity.

Kroll says that the doctrine was prominent in liturgical texts from the end of the second century. du Toit says that the doctrine of Christ's descent became a much loved and very popular theme in the early Church, particularly in the Eastern Church. Later it was portrayed in a very imaginative, one might say psychedelic way! Even Luther, in his Torgau Easter sermon, portrayed Christ's victorious procession through Hell vividly, and when he was challenged about embroidering

the them too much, he said it was not to be understood in dogmatic terms.

## **The Descensus and Preaching**

What is the relevance of the Descensus of Christ for preaching today?

1. We can remember that the first references were simply to emphasise the reality and finality of Christ's death, and that Christ, as part of His passion, went through that process of dying as all people must. It emphasised, contra those who still doubted if Jesus had literally died at all, that "Christ died for our sins", and his death was not a swoon or play acting. He completely identified with our condition by tasting death for everyone. Against docetism, the doctrine was used to prove that Jesus was human enough to really die. This was an answer to those who denied his true humanity.

2. This biblical theme also emphasises the comprehensiveness of Christ's saving work. In Paul's words, he who became obedient unto death on a cross, was raised by God, and highly exalted, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven, on earth, and under the earth..(Phil 2:10-11 and Rev 5:13). After he died, Jesus was still doing the work he came to do, ie preaching good news. In Romans 8:21 Paul argues for the significance of Christ's death for the whole creation. Christ's death, resurrection, ascension and descensus have cosmic significance for the whole of creation, and for all time and eternity.

3. Bearing in mind du Toit's warning, however, we cannot go too far in using the Descensus as a basis for universalism. As noted above du Toit notes that, although this passage offered what appears to be a sound argument for universalism, the Church of the early centuries did not so use it. Only Origen used it in this way. Later the doctrine became a powerful argument for the reality of hell and of God's eternal judgment (see du Toit's essay in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, pp90-91 ed Nigel de S. Cameron). Ratzinger gives a contemporary and relevant interpretation of the Descensus as "The descent of God into the worldless dark silence of the Absent".

Despite the difficulties of interpretation, and perhaps even uncertainty about exegesis, or even whether the material in the New Testament is integral, preachers must avoid the temptation to ignore the doctrine altogether. We recognise that other doctrines are controversial, but also recognise that we cannot pick and choose what we will preach about as authentic. If we are tempted to ignore the Descensus on these grounds, we need to look again at our integrity and obedience before the Word of God. We cannot limit our preaching to congenial and popular themes and avoid those which pose difficulties and with which we ourselves feel more comfortable.

One thing is certain, the subject will not go away. It forms part of our traditional theological confession; it has christological and soteriological connexions. Old Testament, and later Apocalyptic literature, portray Hades as the abode of the dead. Some see it in punitive terms; for others it is a place of waiting. We may not be able to come to a final definitive interpretation. Experts have argued about whether the dead wait for the Resurrection, or, following Jesus' words to the dying thief, whether the dead pass immediately into God's presence.

The question, "What happens when we die?" is still being asked, more urgently than ever before. The further question, "Are there few or many that be saved?" is also a burning issue. Any minister who counsels the bereaved must know that this

is so. It is in that context that we need to wrestle afresh with the significance of Christ's Descensus, whether it is historical, what its soteriological significance is, and for whom. There is no easy answer, but people are seeking an answer, and we cannot run away from the subject.

**Ronald Armstrong**

NB: I have not provided footnotes and sources because many of the books come via quotation in other authors and are from German books.

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# A Baptist Dilemma: Children, Baptism and the Lord's Supper

That "Baptists do not baptise infants" rather implies that Baptists, instead, baptise adults, but this is largely to miss the point. The baptism of infants is argued in several different ways. The Catholic view is that baptism has a regenerative effect upon the infant, removing original sin so that a person may receive the continuing saving benefits of the other sacraments. This is incompatible with Paul's teaching that salvation is by "grace through faith..not by works."<sup>1</sup> A Reformed view links baptism with the grace of God at work in the life of every person even before they have come to faith in Jesus. The faith expressed in baptism is that of the Church, parents or God-parents on behalf of the baby. However, while God is clearly at work graciously in the lives of children and adults who have evidenced no personal turning to Christ, the NT connects baptism not with prevenient grace but with grace which, by faith, has been appropriated. A third line sees NT baptism as a direct replacement of OT circumcision by which baptised infants are entering into a continuing 'covenant of grace'. This approach does not take seriously enough the discontinuities between the OT and the NT, and goes beyond the NT position that circumcision and baptism are analogous, and rather regards them as directly equivalent.

But Baptists do not baptise adults as opposed to infants. Rather, they baptise believers as opposed to those who have not expressed a personal, un-coerced faith in Jesus. So a policy of believers' baptism surely demands that any believer may be baptised, indeed NT precedent suggests the sooner the better. Therefore, 'believing' children are by definition in a position to receive baptism. But what constitutes 'belief' and is it dependent upon age?

## Components of Belief

An infant clearly has insufficient mental capacity or physical ability to make a public profession of anything other than hunger, and a mentally handicapped adult may have very limited capacity to understand and give assent to the significance of Jesus' crucifixion, for example, much less a fuller statement of faith. So the question of how much one needs to understand is not necessarily one of age alone, but of one's capacity to comprehend and affirm Christian teachings, for whatever reason that may be limited.

But there is a distinction to be made between the ability to reason or understand and the capacity to trust. Is not 'belief' a relational term rather than one of intellectual assent? A small child is able to trust adults quite apart from their comprehension of an adult world. The child's ability to trust may even be far greater than that of the adult, but based on naïve expectations of the grown up's trustworthiness. But can we ever over-estimate the reliability of God himself? Perhaps a four or five year old is better placed to literally trust Christ, unencumbered by learned cynicism through the fallibility of human nature. So there may be a genuine trust of God without much understanding of Christian doctrines about God. Or, similarly, someone with limited intellectual capacities may have an obvious relationship with Jesus but have minimal grasp of 'the faith that was once entrusted to the saints.'<sup>2</sup>

However, the early church confession, 'Jesus is Lord!' implied more than a simple trust of Christ. There was also the converse issue of allegiance. It is one thing to believe God is committed to you, but quite another to know that you are

committed to God. 'Jesus is Lord!' also recalled the politically subversive fact that it was a recently convicted ex-carpenter to whom greater loyalty was being given than to state power. Perhaps modern gospel telling needs an increased emphasis upon the story of Jesus as a real person to balance the tendency to us 'the cross' basically as a rubric for the theological significance of atonement. So 'belief', as a rational term, implies not only trust but also allegiance, which itself requires some understanding of the one to whom fidelity has been promised. therefore 'belief' operates at all three levels. It involves at least some degree of intellectual awareness and understanding, a level of personal trust and a commitment of loyalty to Jesus Christ.

But what of those who have been unable to trust, understand or make a pledge of dedication to the Lord, perhaps because they are infants or have severe learning difficulties? These cannot fulfil such a criterion for 'belief'. Or what of those who have been so traumatised by others that any kind of trust seems almost beyond them? An awareness of God may be apparent in a young child before they have any understanding of Jesus as a real historical person whose death had a saving significance; a kind of embryonic faith. Others, such as babies, will not as yet have demonstrated even the remotest openness to spiritual life. No doubt the faintest glimmer of 'faith' in a child is to be nurtured, but at what point can this be construed as a faith which they have made their own rather than an unchallenged set of assimilated parental or church values?

### **Children and Status**

What, then, in a believers' church with its clear in/out boundaries, is the status of infants and others who do not have the capacity to express personal faith? Are they in the Kingdom or out of it? Jesus welcomed small children and babies and turned social convention upon its head by suggesting adults had to learn from them because 'the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these'.<sup>3</sup> Paul taught that the children of Christians were set apart, holy.<sup>4</sup> This is hardly the language of infant damnation! To 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength...and your neighbour as yourself'<sup>5</sup> suggests a full commitment at the limit of one's moral, intellectual and emotional capacity. Thus what God requires of a tiny child or someone with severe learning difficulties will be different in its implications from a grown adult. But, in any case, it is not long before apparently 'innocent' children consciously and willingly break their own codes of moral conscience, thus affirming the inherent tendency within the human heart towards moral wrongdoing and alienation from God. It is difficult to see babies, without the capacity for moral choice, as culpable, and thus under the wrath of God, for sins they have not personally committed, such as that of Adam. However, the Fall brought about a situation between God and humanity such that all babies will grow up alienated from God, all having a tendency towards selfishness and independence. But the baby is not personally responsible for this situation, although suffering its effects. When they confirm Adam's sin by their own moral wrongdoing, or they become aware of God and yet have no inclination towards him, then they have made a responsible moral choice and can be held morally liable for it.<sup>6</sup> If a driver unwittingly speeds in a 30 limit they can be prosecuted because they should have read the signs and known better. But if the signs have fallen down they cannot be prosecuted because they could not have known better. They are just as guilty of speeding as before, but now their guilt does not incur a penalty.

## **Children and Baptism**

So when can children be baptised as believers? Baptism is a public declaration of faith. It is a renunciation of the past and a pledge to walk with Christ in the future. A child who evidences a genuine relationship with Jesus based on their own (limited) understanding and voluntary choice is a believer and should be eligible for baptism. That the child may not recall a time when Jesus was not real to them does not strengthen the case for infant baptism. Their formative faith is not invalidated or denied by the 'delayed' baptism and it does not automatically mean that the child was under judgement rather than grace until they express personal faith. Rather, their baptism is the public affirmation as a convinced believer of their pledge of discipleship into the future. Perhaps this gives a reason why baptism ought to wait until a young person is developing sufficient independence to make choices about their own future lifestyles, values and convictions. There may also be some sense in encouraging a child to wait until they are old enough to really remember their baptism in the future. However, delaying baptism because a young person may fall away during adolescence seems a little like inverse ageism in the light of Michael Fanstone's research<sup>7</sup> into why even adult believers of many years standing in the church lose their faith. If anybody, child or adult, is seen to have a genuine experience of life with Christ there can be little excuse to deny them baptism. But there may be reasons to suggest they wait a while first, though in view of the promptness of NT baptism there would need to be a fairly persuasive argument for this delay. Can a specific age be suggested? Given the range of development for different children each case must be treated on its own merits, looking primarily not for an age-related barrier to be crossed but for genuine faith to be evidenced.

## **Children and the Lord's Supper**

Jesus commanded baptism once only for his followers but Communion is intended as an experience to be repeated.<sup>8</sup> But the interpretation of the Lord's Supper will have a direct bearing upon those who should receive it. The views that the bread and wine either are the actual body and blood of Christ (the traditional Catholic position) or contain the actual body and blood (the Lutheran view) suggest that ingestion of Christ's real substance of itself confers grace on the recipient. Then all in need of grace surely ought to take it, but "all denominations are agreed...it must not be administered to someone who is not a disciple of the Lord".<sup>9</sup> But are believers the only ones in need of grace? Surely it is not-yet-believers whose need is the greater. the Reformed view is that Christ is spiritually present at Communion. "There is a genuine objective benefit of the sacrament...not generated by the recipient; rather it is brought to the sacrament by Christ himself".<sup>10</sup> But if one comes to a spiritual encounter with Christ at Communion, why would one want to create barriers so that only the faithful encounter him? The whole ethos of evangelism is to bring those who have not yet encountered Jesus into the kind of contact with him such that they respond positively by faith. The Zwinglian approach points to the Lord's Supper as a commemoration and reminder of Christ's death. Christ is everywhere present and the spiritual benefit from receiving Communion will depend upon the attitude and faith of the recipient. This best makes sense of Paul's solemn injunctions for self-scrutiny before taking part.<sup>11</sup> What does 'recognising the body of the Lord' imply? "In Baptist terms, this means that ideally the table is open to those who have been baptised as believers and have become members of their local churches...For...baptism and church

membership are the inevitable signs of commitment to the Lord Jesus and his people. It therefore does not make sense theologically..to allow young people, who have been brought up in a Baptist church, to eat bread and drink wine before they have been baptised and become members of the church.”<sup>12</sup> But if Communion is basically a memorial then its efficacy depends on the faith of the participant and faith can be the only requirement; age is hardly the issue. On the other hand, interpretations by which Communion actually imparts grace seem to positively encourage the participation of Church children and especially those who have consciously believed. In consequence, all Church children must be theologically deemed Christians (effected, for example, by infant baptism) to avoid the contradiction of either i) opening communion to non-Christians or ii) excluding children from a channel of God’s grace to them.

The same questions of age restrictions that apply to children and baptism also relate to children and Communion. If they are believer enough for baptism, they are believer enough for Communion. The issue is faith, not primarily age.

But how far is there a connexion between modern Communion and Jesus’ Last Supper? The Lord’s Supper is a reinterpretation of the Passover, the commemoration of God’s redemption of Israel in the Exodus, in which all the family, servants, aliens, the ritually unclean and those absent from the Israelite community had a part, as a communal meal given religious and cultural significance. So have we taken Jesus’ table fellowship with his disciples and, in transforming it into a religious ritual, lost something of its meaning? In Luke’s account, Judas the traitor is present with Jesus, participating in the meal, the bread and the cup, his hypocrisy not being reason for exclusion by Jesus even though there would be no sacramental benefit for him. So if Communion is primarily intended as an aide memoire to keep the Cross central in the culture, life and faith of the Christian community, then the trappings of ritual obscure its real intention by suggesting the elements have a mystical power to convey. So in this light I am not sure how far Paul’s comments given in the context of the Lord’s Supper and Agape can be applied directly to modern Baptist observance. Indeed, if we simply apply Paul’s words as though our context was his, by setting regulations for Communion in the local church, are we not taking the prerogative of would-be recipients who are to ‘examine themselves’? Should we rather welcome all and allow them to make their own judgements?

Much of the difficulty disappears if we do away with the notion that Communion actually confers grace or ‘makes you a Christian’, because it then removes the potential contradiction of an unbelieving person being in a saving relationship with God through the rite. Instead, any touch from God would depend entirely upon the receiver’s response to Christ’s expression of love in his death. If Communion were not for convinced believers only, but for all who want to recognise the importance of Jesus and his death, it would not need imposed regulations for protection of its sanctity.

The key word in “believing children” is “believing” and not “children”, so I would be unhappy to baptise anyone not evidently a believer, regardless of age. I am disinclined to give the benefit of the doubt. I am also unhappy to legislate an age limit for genuine relationship with Christ by faith. The same holds true for believers-only Communion. However, I do not exclude the possibility that further reflection upon Communion, Agape and Passover may lead towards a less traditional approach to the Lord’s Supper in which children - who are understood not yet to be

personally convinced believers, by virtue of young age, but are welcomed as part of the Christian community - would be fully encouraged to celebrate Jesus's death, resurrection and return in a communal sacral meal.

**Jon Green**

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**Footnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9  
<sup>2</sup> Jude 1:3  
<sup>3</sup> Matt 18:1-5; 19:13-15  
<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 7:14  
<sup>5</sup> Mark 12:30-31  
<sup>6</sup> Erickson, M., *Christian Theology*, pp631-639  
<sup>7</sup> Fanstone, M., *The Sheep That Got Way*  
<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor. 11:25  
<sup>9</sup> Erickson, M., op cit p 1112  
<sup>10</sup> Erikson, M., op cit p 1120  
<sup>11</sup> 1 Cor 11: 27-32  
<sup>12</sup> Beasley-Murray, P., *Radical Believers*, p28

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# Book Reviews

## ***Counselling in Context*, by Francis Bridger and David Atkinson (Marshall Pickering, 1994, 302pp, £7.99)**

This book is an early volume in a new series of 'Handbooks of Pastoral Care' and would appear to act in a key role of offering a theological framework for the series. It is aimed at those who are Christian ministers, those who are training for ministry, and Christians who are interested in counselling.

'Context' in the title refers to a number of different contexts. There is the context of the development of psychology and consequently of counselling through the present century. The summary of such development and the different approaches to counselling is useful, but the way this has been uncritically employed by Christians is challenged.

The social context is also summarised, with a stress on the importance of social conditions for counselling, both summarising the approaches of figures in the field, and underlining the importance of the social context of the counsellee. It includes a challenge to individualism within our society and its reflection in the popularity of the one-to-one pattern of counselling.

Finally, there is the theological context, drawing from philosophy and theology, which provides the basis for specifically Christian counselling. There is the recognition that Christian counsellors need to understand the philosophy that underlies their practices, a recognition that is often missing.

The second part of the book develops a theological perspective which is strongly trinitarian, providing a rich basis for Christian reflection. Christian counselling within the framework of the Faith and of the Church provides a unique and vital ministry, and this book offers much to make us reconsider our counselling practices.

**Nigel Howarth**

## ***Church For the City* ed Eric Blakebrough (D.L.T., 1995, 176pp, £7.95)**

The specific city in question is London. Eric Blakebrough was commissioned to edit this book by London's "Church leaders" (Hume, Hope, McBain et al.) as part of Pentecost '95, the ecumenical celebration which culminated in "The Great Banquet", and related activities, last June.

Contributors include a nun, a Bishop, a journalist, the president of Mildmay Hospital, and several London clergy, including the ubiquitous Steve Chalke. In the first of the book's two parts, four chapters are given over to "Assessing the Situation". Ian Hargreaves, editor of *The Independent* newspaper offers an urbane and thought-provoking overview of London. This is followed by a very good theological reflection from the Bishop of Stepney, Richard Chartres, from whose pen may we receive more good things. The editor himself then contributes a chapter on some of the pressing social issues affecting the metropolis, and Kenneth Leech concludes this section of the book with a chapter on racism.

Part two is called "Addressing the Situation", and the six chapters tell six very different stories of creative Christian responses to some of the issues and situations highlighted in earlier chapters. It is good to have this record of effective attempts by churches to grapple with such matters as homelessness, drug abuse,

Aids, Community degeneration.

You don't have to live in London to appreciate this book. Indeed, those glad not to live in the capital, may appreciate it all the more! But they will also find insights and inspiration to help them reflect on their situation, wherever that might be. With ten authors involved, there is an inevitable measure of unevenness, but when *Church For The City* is good, it is very, very good and even when it's not so good, it's not at all bad. Anyway, the first two chapters are worth the price of the book.

**Barrie Hibbert**

***Confusions in Christian Social Ethics - Problems for Geneva and Rome*  
by Ronald H. Preston (SCM, 1994, 216pp, £12.95)**

The Professor Emeritus of Social and Pastoral Theology in the University of Manchester, known and loved by several generations of theological students in that city, has written a penetrating critique of current Roman and ecumenical social ethics. He has also included in the first 50 pages of the book a comprehensive outline of the history of the subject in both spheres during this century, which I am sure cannot be found elsewhere in such a succinct form.

As someone who has been involved personally in this field of ecumenical social ethics since the Oxford Conference of 1937, Ronald Preston mentions five critiques which have been given of Geneva and Rome, the fifth being from a group of which he himself is a member and which includes Dr John Habgood, who has just retired as Archbishop of York. He writes of this group: "I have attached the name Christian Realist to it because all the members of the group were committed to the radical challenge of the gospel to social, economic and political injustices, but also to allowing for the parameters within which those in public positions in plural societies must move, especially if they have to satisfy a majority of the electorate. The criticism of the group is that the WCC has lost ground as a facilitator in this whole area because its social theology and ethics has lost the quality of dialogue, analysis and study."

He then applies this critique to three current issues: problems created by the collapse of the Soviet system, economic growth and sustainability in a global context and technology, humanity and the environment. On this last subject he has some interesting things to say about "the integrity of creation" and the very topical subject of the relationship between humans and animals, where he is more appreciative of recent Papal statements than of those of the WCC, which he describes as "not impressive, biblically or doctrinally". He quotes with approval a saying of Lady Thatcher: "No generation has a freehold on this earth. All we have is a life tenancy with a full repairing lease".

Baptist readers may raise their eyebrows at some of his statements. On page seven he uses "Baptistry" as a collective noun for us! On page 186 he confuses the Southern Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Churches. More seriously, he caricatures and then dismisses those who criticise the concept of one united church, saying, "if we agree with this point of view we have no use for the Ecumenical Movement". He acknowledges that one of the noteworthy changes in theological outlook since 1945 has been the growth of social awareness among evangelicals, but he then dismisses this as simplistic, without going into detail, and concludes this section with a statement which will probably surprise Baptist critics of the WCC: "this outlook seems to have had a great deal of influence on WCC work in the last decade or two".

This, however, is a book well worth buying by anyone who wants a reasonable summary of past history and present issues in social ethics.

**John Nicholson**

***Setting the Captives Free: Models for individual, marital and group counselling* by Bruce A. Stevens (Marshall Pickering, 1994, 314pp, £8.99)**

'In most emotional problems a little help is a lot of help'. This quote from the introduction is the premise on which this book is offered to clergy, lay pastoral counsellors and Christian professionals, and the aim is to help them deal with the emotional problems of those who come for help. The book is part of a new series produced by Harper-Collins which aims to teach counselling skills to those in ministry. This particular, wide-ranging book covers basic and (what it calls) advanced counselling skills in twenty-nine pages and then discusses use of these skills in the grief process, depression, suicide, child sexual abuse, marital conflict, self-esteem and assertiveness. The book ends with a psychiatric supplement which contains a technical discussion of the use of drugs and ECT, and which attempts to describe the mechanisms by which they work. It is in this section that my favourite sentence appears which states: "Not surprisingly, these anti-psychotic drugs are called 'postsynaptic receptor blockers'"

In general, the book takes a fairly secular approach to counselling and there are many useful references to further literature, although not all would be readily available. There is some unevenness in the presentation. On more than one occasion when particularly difficult problems are encountered it is suggested that it might be good to pray and ask for a 'miracle'. This did not appear to be tongue in cheek. The book covers marital problems in greatest depth in the expectation that these will most frequently be brought to ministers. Each chapter ends with exercises which vary between reading the Bible and talking things over in a training group.

My overall impression of this book is that it makes an admirable attempt to introduce the range of emotional and mental health problems to Christian pastors. However, it covers such a broad area rather thinly and my fear is that it may lead to people skating on thin ice. I am reminded of something I once read: "There is only one person more dangerous than an untrained counsellor and that is a partly trained counsellor who thinks they are adequately trained". This book may form a useful part of the repertoire of books that a minister may use, but it should not be the only book on the shelf.

**Judy Holyer**

***The Heart of a Great Pastor* by H.B. London and Neil B. Wiseman (Regal Books, 1994, 250pp, £7.99)**

This book, subtitled "How to grow strong and thrive wherever God has placed you", is a much needed resource for helping both successful and disillusioned pastors re-focus on the ultimate purpose of their ministry. Each pastor needs to be a growing person, both spiritually and emotionally, and this book sets out how this can be achieved for pastors today. If you are sick and tired of being sick and tired, and wondering why God has placed you in such a discouraging situation, then this book is for you.

The American authors are H.B. London, Vice-President of Pastoral Ministries at James Dobson's Focus on the Family organisation, and Neil B. Wiseman, Professor of Pastoral Development at Nazarene Bible College in Colorado. Their

combined insight and experience have produced in this book a great realistic resource for all pastors. Their main theme is that a great pastor "is not measured by the size of his congregation, but by the willingness of his heart".

The book focuses primarily on how, as pastors, we are seen and valued by God. It is out of our being in harmony with God's purpose and plan, as a person in our own right, that the ministry flows. The authors affirm that, as pastors, the congregations we serve will remember more about the person we are than about the words which we say.

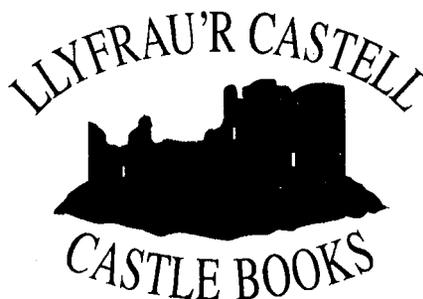
God specialises in resurrecting dead churches, resuscitating dying church members and re-energising church pastors. The book proceeds to illuminate how we can bloom where God has planted us by dreaming faith dreams of what God would have the church we oversee be. This, coupled with passion and priority, will accomplish and direct the purpose of our ministry.

As we have a fresh spiritual encounter with God, this will be seen in our ministry and start to change the hearts and the lives of the congregation and the people we minister to week by week.

One of the most helpful chapters of this book is the final chapter entitled "Living above Reproach", which considers building protective hedges around our life, family and ministry to prevent spiritual drought, loneliness and infidelity, and to ensure balance, integrity and accountability.

This easy-to-read book is one that can be read and re-read throughout a pastor's ministry as he/she seeks to fan into flame our gifts and talents for the glory of God.

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