



# The Baptist Ministers' Journal

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# Editorial

It is sometimes suggested that our culture is one in which 'faith' has been replaced by 'systematisation'. In education, in health and social services, in voluntary organisations anxiously seeking their Quality Mark, priority is given to the production and development of schemes of work and the composition and adoption of an exhaustive range of policies and procedures.

We know that the devising and implementing of policies intended to protect the vulnerable and bring greater safety in the workplace should bring benefit for all. We know that to have clearly expressed aims and objectives should bring best use of limited resources. We know that such things should be good. I hold no brief for either Lollards or ostriches.

Yet we hear anecdotally of an exodus from a whole range of 'caring professions' because the sense of showing paper evidence of planning and tasks done has overtaken the people for whose benefit it is intended. Teachers complain that they are no longer given the time and encouragement to teach. Clergy in churches with highly centralised structures are heard to complain that "this is not why I was ordained" as they speed on to yet another administrative or 'strategic planning' meeting or sit into the night filling in forms and records. It is hard to avoid the sense of things that matter being constantly pushed to the margins.

We can be sure that when things which matter – another word for which is 'spiritual things' – are neglected or squeezed out, they will re-emerge to shock and disturb. As church, participating in cultural trends as well as sometimes

seeking to subvert them, we are not immune from this. What 'things which matter' have we become adept at putting out of our normal reach? The authors of the articles in this issue of the Journal bring some provocative thoughts and prompt some uncomfortable questions:

How might we respond as conversation partners with (not as 'preachers to') those who, like the artist Damien Hirst, perceive an essentially un-redeemed tragedy in human existence?

What have eschatology and pensions to do with one another?

What really drives the engagement between our worship and God's world? And when does the delineation of 'a theology' hinder us from engaging with God to whom people bear witness through contradiction as well as coherence?

These are some of the questions that occurred to me as I read through the variety of material for this first Journal of 2004. There will doubtless be many others that emerge from your reading. We have cause to be grateful to those who respond to requests for articles so graciously and those (more occasionally!) who offer their work without prompting. **bmj**

# Gospel and Monkey's Paw

**Would our discourse about things that matter be deeper if we engaged better with those who see the world with 'raw honesty' though without Christian faith?**

**Mark Woods, Baptist Times News Editor, reflects on the recent Damien Hirst exhibition.**

Twelve bloodstained glass and steel cabinets crammed with medical glassware, surgical implements, weapons, and apparently randomly-chosen objects lined two of the walls. Each had a bull's or cow's head in front of it, pickled in formaldehyde. On the other two walls were collages made of dead butterflies and an arrangement of glass shelves surmounted by a dead dove, in front of which was another tank with nothing in it. Upstairs were four more severed heads, stuck full of knives, scissors and shards of glass.

It was, of course, the Damien Hirst exhibition at the White Cube in Hoxton.

Each of the twelve cabinets represented the martyrdom of one of the Apostles, the shelves with the dead dove were the Ascension, and the empty tank was Jesus. Two of the butterfly pieces were called Hope and Pray. The heads upstairs were the Gospel writers - each tank contained a commentary on one of the four.

And it was brilliant, it really was. I went fully expecting to hate it, and I came away thinking that this was a man who'd done something really remarkable with the Gospel. It wasn't, let it be understood, that he'd been converted by it - it's much more interesting than that.

What I believe I saw at the White Cube is the effort of someone who has a fundamentally tragic, nihilistic worldview to find a partner in dialogue. Hirst has looked for a way in which he can express perceptions that are in fact deeply spiritual. Among these perceptions are that death is terrible and not romantic, and that there is always a grinning skull beneath the soft and tempting skin. Life is also terrible, and eternal life would be unbearable (in John's cabinet a lighted candle is juxtaposed with a monkey's paw

- see the eponymous WW Jacobs horror story). Beauty is illusory, because it depends on the suffering and death of other people or other creatures - butterflies, for instance. And gospels and gospel writers end up mutilated because of what the people they are meant to enlighten do to them.

I was deeply moved by this exhibition, not least because someone with this worldview could find it, not supported, but matched in the gospels. In a society obsessed by health, wealth, image, choice, and personal gratification in every area of body, mind and spirit, this latter-day prophet has sought a language in which to say, "Actually, it isn't really like that" - and found it in the Bible. It is in the Christian scriptures that he sees a raw honesty, the admission that suffering is at the heart of things, which provides for the depth of spiritual response he seeks. Hirst does not, in fact, have a specific image of crucifixion, but he might as well have done. For Hirst, the whole world's crucified.

Now, the danger is that we start praying for his conversion. "How sad", comes the evangelical cry, "that he stopped at Good Friday and didn't progress to Easter Sunday!" My question would be, "Converted to what?" and my instinct

would be that for many Christians the process needs to be the other way round - because, while Hirst has of course a partial view, his view is correct as far as it goes.

People do lie, cheat and steal. Wives are unfaithful to their husbands, and vice versa. People lose their jobs or have jobs they hate. Our potential for good is wasted, and our potential for evil is fulfilled. Henry Thoreau said, "The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation". That, of course, is if they're lucky - I've just read of the discovery of the body of a year-old child which was encased in concrete fifteen years ago. An untended abscess had eaten through its jaw, and it died in agony. The poet Carolyn Fourché said, "There is nothing one man will not do to another", and assuredly she is right.

Of course it is easy to multiply horror stories in a rather undergraduate way, and it would be absurd to say that because of this we cannot with integrity rejoice in our experience of goodness. For many of us this is very great, in large matters and small. A friend who has been taken seriously ill spoke to me of being profoundly moved by having, as he felt, lost many acquaintances and gained many friends. No-one who loves and is loved by another person can doubt that God is good. And there is so much beauty in creation -

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil."

However, this goodness and beauty do not seem to me entirely to answer the case. The truth is that much suffering is not redemptive, that much pain is both unalloyed and unallayed, and that some people's lives are vandalised by the actions of others beyond all possibility of

restoration. And if Christianity is supposed to help, we ought in honesty to admit that very often it doesn't.

It seems to me that many Christians have enormous difficulty accepting this, and that their difficulties themselves place intolerable burdens on those who already have enough weight to bear. I have another friend who is disabled and has a generally low quality of life. Not himself a believer, at a particularly low point he was taken to a "celebration" evening by two Christian friends who thought he needed to be blessed. Standing on either side of him, they forced him to join in the worship by taking an arm each and raising it in the air.

At one level this is an example of spiritual abuse. At another, it seems to me, it stands as a metaphor for our approach to problems, including the problem of suffering, in general - that is, we try to solve them. This is presumably a function of the Western mindset, in which it is taken for granted that problems must be solved and that the world should be a better place than it is; and again, it would be absurd to regret the benefits of this approach. However: we are attempting to decide what, if anything, Damien Hirst has to say to us; and one thing is surely that some problems cannot be solved, but must be permanently incorporated into the identity and self-understanding of both the individual and the Church.

This is not a view which is foreign to the New Testament. In John's Gospel, the wounds of Jesus are still visible on his resurrected body. Furthermore, they are not healed: Thomas is invited to put his hand into Jesus' side (is there not a fine preaching point in Thomas being invited to explore the wounds of Jesus?). In Revelation, a different John sees a Lamb, "looking as if it had been slain" - that is,

sacrificed, with the wounds still visible - and not, pace the hymn, in beauty glorified, but raw and bleeding. Once someone has been crucified, they may be resurrected, but they cannot be un-crucified.

I believe that if Hirst has anything to teach us, it is that we should find room for a theology of crucifixion which is true to the real emotional, spiritual and physical experience of many Christians today. In this experience, Christ does not actually heal. The sick are still sick, or die, the bereaved still grieve, the bitter are still bitter, and the disabled are still disabled. To deny that this is in fact the norm is to create a two-tier structure of grace, in which those who are happy, healthy and well-adjusted are, in addition to their natural advantages, spiritually superior to those who are not. It is also to place a great burden on those who know that they are not "healed", and who believe that they ought to be.

This is very clear, and perhaps easier to deal with, in terms of physical disability. In Barbara Kingsolver's book 'The Poisonwood Bible', Adah, who suffers from hemiplegia, says, "The arrogance of the able-bodied is staggering. Yes, maybe we'd like to be able to get places quickly, and carry things in both hands, but only because we have to keep up with the rest of you."

Theological purists may respond better to a similar perception from a recent World Council of Churches report, "Church of All and for All". It says in paragraph 28, "If Christ is the true image of God, then radical questions have to be asked about the nature of the God who is imaged. At the heart of Christian theology is a critique of success, power, and perfection, and an honouring of weakness, brokenness and vulnerability."

In paragraph 30 it says, "Christian theology needs to embrace a non-elitist, inclusive understanding of the Body of Christ as the paradigm for understanding the imago Dei. Without the full incorporation of persons who can contribute from the experience of disability, the Church falls short of the glory of God, and cannot claim to be in the image of God."

There is a great deal in these brief sentences worthy of further reflection. However, my point is that what applies to physical disability applies equally to emotional, psychological and spiritual disability.

This is not, perhaps, as easy to accept. When I was in pastoral ministry, I found that when people - including myself - had to pray for people who were seriously ill or dying, we found it much easier to pray that God would give them spiritual strength than that they would actually get better. In other words, we believed that God could more easily adjust a mental reality than a physical one. At some stage I realised that this was bad faith, in the philosophical as well as the religious sense.

What, then, does the Christian community have to offer to those who are not well, in mind, body or spirit? Briefly, I would suggest two things.

First, an acknowledgement of the dark and tragic element in Scripture, with which, as I have said, Damien Hirst appears more familiar than many preachers. I do not know how many of us would preach on the book of Joshua, and admit that its theme is genocide and ethnic cleansing; or Noah's ark, and characterise God as a destructive child who destroys what he cannot control; or Ezra, and recognise the roots of the racial divisions which trouble the East today; or Jacob, and use his story as an illustration of

dysfunctional families. I wonder, even, how often, other than on Good Friday, we preach about the Crucifixion.

There is, it seems to me, room for this darkness in a proper understanding of the nature of God, an area in which it seems to me that we need to beware of too great a philosophical sophistication. He is not, if we are to be true to Scripture, "without body, parts or passions"; rather he is, in Clark Pinnock's words, a "Most Moved Mover". If we attempt to defend the indefensible - and 'explain' the Crucifixion in terms of our pet atonement theory, for instance - we may actually be vitiating the power of the God-story for those who need it most, who simply want a story to express their suffering. And because the stories are Biblical stories, God is in them - even if, as with Damien Hirst, he is not a God with whom we might feel particularly at home.

Second, we need to identify what we can offer that is fundamentally good for people who are damaged in some way. In part, as I have attempted to say, this rests on an acknowledgement that we cannot necessarily make them better. However, to imply that a Christian community cannot offer anything but a stiff upper lip would seem bleak indeed.

Alison Webster in her recent book, "Wellbeing" (SCM 2002, £9.99), suggests this: "The opposite of wellbeing is not illness, but dis-ease, in the sense of unease - being ill-at-ease with ourselves. Wellbeing is not the result of 'cure' but of

the incremental building of networks of relationships and human connection, self-esteem, self-belief, purpose, meaning, value and good relationships" (p.41).

There will, of course, always be "miracles", and those who have had specific experiences of grace will have stories to tell. We should not be cynical about these, but we should, I believe, be very careful about how we receive and re-tell them. The quotation suggests that our aims as ministers are in fact rather more modest, but I suspect that many of us can recognise in it a description of what actually happens in our churches.

The function of a church in pastoral terms is not really to provide solutions to problems. Rather, it is to provide a moral framework with a reach and complexity, an honesty and depth, such that the various experiences and perceptions which contribute to the definition of a human being can be matched - to use the word again - within a system which reflects, if in a partial and unsatisfactory way, something of the nature of God.

Damien Hirst's work is, and is intended to be, deeply offensive. So, of course, is the Gospel. There is nothing offensive about saying, "We have a product which will make you happier and healthier". But it is, I suspect, rather offensive to say, in the 21st Century UK, that happiness and health are not attainable for everyone, that providing them is not God's priority, and that our problems cannot necessarily be solved. **bmj**

"I wandered into a church which stood near some railway lines leading to a former concentration camp. I sat thinking of the prayers that had been said in that church... the slight changes in liturgy that had been anxiously debated, the meetings of the women's guild. All this had taken place while the terrible cargo of human suffering was passing by on the railway tracks, and there was no connection. The religious engine did not connect up with reality - the clutch did not work."

(Lionel Blue.)

# Music, Worship and Spirituality

Tony Cross, Regional Minister, Kent Baptist Association

Visit any Baptist Church and you will notice the prominence of an Organ or Microphones, Music Stands and drums. Music is obviously important to this group of people! Visit the letters pages of the Baptist Times or the Minute Books of the Members Meetings of these churches and it will become equally obvious that though music is important, there is little agreement on what type of music! Study the print and it is clear that, for most people, the music is easily divided into two types – the type I like and the type I do not! The former is usually described as ‘inspired’ while the latter is traditional/old/modern, depending on your point of view.

Sit in the Sunday service and you will often find that a part is described as ‘worship’ and consists of songs.

Unlike most Baptist Ministers I find myself at the receiving end of much modern worship and rarely in the same church on consecutive weeks. I am more of a ‘consumer’, these days. So I am in sympathy with the declaration of one delegate at a recent Baptist Union Council meeting that worship these days leaves me ‘bored’!

**So how do we link up Music, Worship and Spirituality?** To answer this I must take you back to the very beginnings of my Christian experience. I was not brought up to attend church. My first experiences in a Baptist church were at the tender age of almost 16 in the early 1960s. I soon discovered that there were two types of service – those with four hymns and those with five! In those days you started with a hymn (hence needed five) or with the short prayer (when you needed only four).

The two periods of prayer were designated by short and long in line with the time involved. The short one included praise and confession, the longer, intercession.

The congregation stood for the hymns, benediction and in some places the

offering. The Lord’s Prayer was regularly said or sung and, in the mornings only at the church I started to attend, a Psalm was sung!

With the exception of the notices and, occasionally the single reading, everything was conducted/led by the minister in the pulpit and we were ‘treated’ to an anthem by the Choir.

All this was soon to change – though not drastically across the denomination. The influence of the Liturgical Movement with its responsive readings and prayers brought more participation from the congregation. This way did not last long! A new movement altogether different and with a more radical agenda was about to emerge. Charismatic Renewal did away with the organ (almost), most of the hymns and especially the celebrated and revered ‘Order of Service’. It was all unplanned, unrehearsed, unscripted and a lot of fun. We waved our arms, fell over, spoke unintelligibly and unprompted and a whole lot more. It wasn’t that we failed to meet God before or to be led by the Spirit, it was just that we found this all so much more meaningful. It did not last, either.

As modern tunes came off the printers in vast numbers, the standard and complexity increased. Music Directors

would dread the return of a group from Spring Harvest with another music book and a host of new songs to learn. It meant getting better musicians, better singers to 'teach' and lead the singing. It required improved Public Address systems and the dreaded 'drums'.

So now we have very competent musicians and singers who 'lead' us. They tell us whether to stand or sit, how to respond to the songs, what they all mean. They do everything. Many of the songs are so complex that congregations have stopped singing them altogether. There are no longer any long prayers, not even short ones and the congregation are reduced to spectator status! Is there really 'nothing new under the sun'?

I don't want to play the traditional role of the older minister who declares 'it was so much better in my day' primarily because I don't think it was. I do think the last forty years of change has left us with nothing but a 'mess of pottage'. Let me give you an example.

It's an evening service and four ladies (the Christian version of the Barber Shop Quartet?) are about to lead us in worship. They introduce themselves (top marks there) and declare that we are to follow the theme of *Sonship* (this is NOT the theme for the sermon!), *Christ's Sonship* (Theme 1) and *ours* (Theme 2). A reading is announced – Is 52 (and 53!!) and the subject of *Sacrifice* (Theme 3) which is the *means* for our sonship (Theme 4?). We then sing several songs on the theme of Christ's suffering and our redemption followed by a reading of Ephesians 1 –the *glories* we have in Christ (Theme 5), more songs – on our sonship- and another reading, this time Ephesians 4 and I am confused! I will slip over the concept of four ladies speaking about our *sonship* as just too mind boggling. We end with some

thoughts about *Love* (Theme 6) and how we need to *share God's love* with those outside the church (Theme 7), some more songs, the reading of a chorus from a song which is then sung (badly) to us as a solo. We finally get to the sermon and the Minister leads us in a short intercessory prayer – the only prayer in the service!

You will tell me this is a bad example but I reply that it is fundamentally typical. I am left with the impression that we have been served with an experience not of worship but four sisters seeking to engage with us on a subject of their choosing. I have not been led to engage with God at all! When I draw to someone's attention that we did not have any prayer, they did not notice! What does this show us about the understanding of folk in the pews? Are they just not getting enough positive examples of how we need to lead worship or even what worship is?

I have just finished a sabbatical in which my chosen subject was ***Celtic Spirituality***. Part of this was the obligatory visit to Iona. The Community there seeks to practice *Engaged Spirituality*. I am one of those people who think by asking questions and the question 'What would unengaged spirituality look like?' came to mind.

I would like to suggest a diagram.



*Our Spirituality* is that aspect of us that involves spiritual activity and, therefore, our 'worship' – be that what we do in church, our personal devotion or our life of service. It needs to 'engage' or it spins freely.<sup>1</sup> It is my uneasy feeling that this is precisely what usually happens in today's 'worship'.



Our spirituality needs to engage with God. This may state the obvious. I ask you to pause and consider the last time you worshipped and whether *de facto* you engaged with God. Or did you hope that God engaged with you, which is not the same thing at all. In our diagram, we could become very complex and ask which of the cogs is the driving force, turning the others. I shall argue that they should take *it in turns*.

If our spiritual lives only engage with God we are of little earthly use. Some research has suggested that large numbers of Christians find this to be the case and it is one reason for dropping out from church<sup>2,3</sup>. It is to be hoped that attending Sunday worship and whatever spiritual experiences Christians have at other times, equips them for their daily lives. If this is not the case, then one wonders what use the faith is.

The way we engage with what I have described as *Our world* will alter in some degree from person to person, town to town, culture to culture. What it means to be a Christian as a young mum with two small children in a tower block in Birmingham is likely to be very different from a peasant farmer in Ethiopia trying to provide for his family on a drought ridden farm and a business executive living in Surrey and commuting to central London every day. It is my thesis that **unless the spirituality offered to these people by the church helps them to engage with their world, it fails to care pastorally for them.**

We must again ask the question as to which is the *driving cog*, the spirituality or the world? Since we are in the language of metaphor we must not push the picture too far. There must be times when God drives the spirituality to enable it to drive

the 'world' of the individual. There will also be times when the situation of the believer, in the true spirit of the Psalmist, leads in crying to God. On this occasion it is the believers 'world' that, in turning, drives the 'spirituality' cog which in turn 'drives' God, who in response 'drives' the other two cogs.

The over-riding question is how does this function? It will hardly function in the believer's daily life unless it happens on Sunday. Worship leaders and pastors must seek to facilitate this process of engagement, as an enabling experience and as a learning environment that will last from Sunday to Saturday.

Nigel Wright has helpfully observed that, for many, the criterion for worship is not progression but fervency<sup>4</sup>. It has long been my observation that most worship seems to consist of the leader's favourite songs rather than any logical 'leading'. John Bell has also observed that the very arrangement of music stands, microphones and singers is inclined to induce the congregation NOT to sing.<sup>5</sup>

Bell believes that most can and all should sing in praise of God. If we are disenfranchising our congregation by inducing them into assuming they should only observe we are not leading them anywhere. I can get great benefit not singing but thinking about the words as others sing them. I am rarely given time to do this before we are off on another song, another theme and another mood. Can worship leaders please help us by leading us to *worship God*, facilitating the engagement mentioned above? This may mean those leading worship are prevented from worshipping themselves at that time.

Turning to prayer. Intercessory prayer is very rare in our churches. A rambling

prayer by one person that goes all round every subject in one perambulation is fairly common. Space for the congregation to pray – openly or quietly on their own, is now not common, in my experience. Bidding prayer where we say what we will pray for but don't actually do it, does seem popular – at least with those 'out front'

So can worship leaders get some structure to prayer? Separate prayers of praise and thanksgiving, confession and intercession, some led, some suggested and some silent. I do think getting someone who can pray to do it - to give a good example - is very well worth while but not all the time and not solely.

Could we have topical prayers? On one visit I made a point of asking the Pastor to include intercessory prayer himself. He was not 'leading' and the order of service suggested this would not otherwise be covered. He spent 5 minutes on Sunday morning looking at teletext (the News Pages) to provide the topics. It was so refreshing!

Prayers that cover the concerns of the congregation are good. I knew a minister who spent ten minutes on Sunday morning at the door, talking to folk as they came in. He picked up what was on their minds and incorporated it into the prayer. Clearly this had to be done with care so as not to breach confidentiality but I don't think it was possible to identify the people holding the various concerns unless you knew already.

Here are **ways in which the world is brought into the spirituality**. Readers will say they do all this and maybe they do but do the others who lead worship at their churches and do they occur in some form every Sunday or just occasionally? When do we pray for folk at their places of work and other life placements?

That leads me to the sermon. I am not against having two sermons but can they be by those designated as preachers for the day so that we do not confuse preaching with leading worship? Some sermons lend themselves to influencing the theme for the service but this is not always the case. I think we may be too easily locked into the sermon being last of all. More than once I have built in a time of response and even when I do not, I try to enable a brief pause for response.

When you are always a visiting preacher it is, perhaps, much easier to continually drone on about relevance. I suppose it is my former work as a teacher that has conditioned me to have in mind what I perceive as the aim of the service and sermon. What do I expect the congregation to do as result? I hope I seek to do more that expand their understanding<sup>6</sup>. I hope that throughout I seek to enable people to engage with God and for him to touch their lives and their 'world' in some transforming way. I will not be able to do this with everyone each Sunday but if no-one is helped, what is achieved?

So what do I use? I am now much more visual in services. As well as using images as part of my preaching I will use pictures as a background to prayers of praise and intercession. I have used verses from the Psalms linked to suitable pictures. The pictures come from my own resources and from the Internet. These are sometimes used in silence and even without the verses as an aid to prayer.

I have started to use some liturgical resources from Iona, Northumbrian Community and other 'Celtic' sources. I try to go for things that are earthed in human experience and not overtly liturgical in form.

Stories I find of great use on their own. I look for stories that are akin to Jesus' parables in that they prompt thought without any words of application. I am even finding this to be a wonderful solution to the 'children's spot'. The stories are adult enough not to patronise the children and challenge the adults.

Here are some simple ways in which I seek to raise the reflective element of the service. I seek to engage the congregation's emotions – their hearts as well as their minds. I hope, thereby, to bring their human lives in touch with their spirituality and enable God to meet with them. This might sound a bit of jargon but the feed back I have had suggests it works!

### Some Further reading:

**Bell, John L.** *The Singing Thing, A case for congregational song* Wild Goose Publications 2000. This is essential reading for anyone seeking to lead people in worship. John has some very strong things to say about 'non-singers' and how churches can enable God's people to praise Him in song.

**Rob Harley** *The Power of the Story* Willow Creek Resources 2001. This one is more for preachers. As well as a very good insight into the use of stories it has some very useable resources.

**Lynch, Gordon** *After Religion 'Generation X' and the search for meaning* DLT 2002. Gordon describes himself as no longer a Christian. This book seeks to look at those who have dropped out or are not likely to consider Christianity. He has some hard things to say about evangelicals. A book to disturb!

**Riddell, Mark** *Threshold of the Future* SPCK 3<sup>rd</sup> impress 2002. Riddell, in Chapter 9, sets out a reformation of worship that equips modern people for 21<sup>st</sup> century life. Well worth a read.

**Wright, Nigel, G.** *New Baptists, New Agenda* Paternoster Press 2002. Nigel is well known as a forthright communicator. This book addresses what Baptist Christianity needs to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. His final chapter addresses worship. He develops some of the ideas expressed in this paper more fully.

For those wanting to look at alternative forms of worship, I can recommend <http://www.alternativeworship.org/> as a useful source for interesting ideas. <http://images.google.com/> is a very useful source for images. There are also web pages for stories, illustrations, prayer information resources **bmj**

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Riddell (*Threshold of the Future*) p73 distinguishes between separation and involvement

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Murray-Williams, Michael Fanstone, Mark Green and others have written or spoken on this subject in a variety of formats.

<sup>3</sup> The words of a group of people who formed *Fresh Worship*, an alternative worship group in East London says it all 'The major motivation at that stage had been dissatisfaction, an increasing frustration at church culture which played music we'd never listen to at home, used language we wouldn't use anywhere else and served up a diet which had become over-familiar and often irrelevant. Church had become something that was 'done to us' '

<sup>4</sup> Wright, N *New Baptists, New Agenda* p158. I wonder if, in the example quoted above and many others fervency has now been replaced with a 'profundity' factor.

<sup>5</sup> Bell, John *The Singing Thing* pp113-120. Here he feels that there is fall out from the 'performance culture'. Later in an excellent book he high-lights the worship environment and bad leadership.

<sup>6</sup> Some time back a Family Service resource had as its aim for one service 'To understand why David was a good King!'

# Old Testament Theology: Can It Be done?

**Deborah Rooke, Lecturer in Old Testament Studies, Kings College London, finds the question still lurking in Walter Brueggemann.**

The name of Walter Brueggemann, William Marcellus McPheters Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, is one that is well known in the circles of Christian biblical interpretation. Listed in the 1998 IVP *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* as one of 13 influential twentieth-century interpreters from North America, Brueggemann is a prolific writer, whose output is designed as much for the devotional world as for the scholarly community. An ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, whose academic education and teaching career have taken place almost entirely within the context of Christian seminaries, Brueggemann's approach to the Old Testament is that of a Christian interpreter, steeped in the seminary tradition, carrying out exegesis from within a faith community and for a faith community. This is reflected in his academic interests, which he lists on the Columbia web-site as 'interpretive issues that lie behind efforts at OT theology. This includes the relation of the OT to the Christian canon, the Christian history of doctrine, Jewish-Christian interactions, and the cultural reality of pluralism.'

In 1997, Brueggemann produced a large volume entitled *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. As a work of scholarship, this volume invites examination. In the first place, it represents the distillation of many years of theological reflection from an acclaimed Christian interpreter of the Old Testament. However, it is also an example of a genre of Old Testament scholarship that has been challenged on two major counts. The first potential difficulty is that Old Testament theology belongs firmly within the sphere of Christian Old Testament scholarship, as is obvious from its association with scholars such as Gerhard von Rad, Walther Eichrodt, and Brevard Childs, all of whom are Christian rather than Jewish. However, the Old Testament is not just a Christian book, and so to write a theology of the Old Testament on the basis that it is arguably illegitimate. But an even more serious challenge to the legitimacy of the 'Old Testament theology' exercise is the fact that by its very nature it concentrates on themes and schemes, and so tends towards generalisations that will either distort or ignore the parts of the

text that are inconvenient for the scheme. The Old Testament is not a treatise of systematic theology, but writing a 'theology of the Old Testament' assumes that it is. Why, then, has Brueggemann chosen an Old Testament theology as the vehicle for his mature academic self-expression; and has he succeeded in overcoming the inherent pitfalls of the genre? Can Old Testament theology be done?

In the introduction to his volume, Brueggemann states that he is aware of the problems of the genre, but still thinks it is an exercise that needs to be undertaken, not only to counteract excessively historicising approaches towards the text that fail to provide any meaningful interpretation (p. 105), but to challenge the doctrinal reductionism of churches, which ignores the parts of the text that do not fit and dictates how the rest should be interpreted (p. 106). However, laudable though such aims are, neither of them requires a monolithic 'theology of the Old Testament' as their fulfilment. In fact, the tendency towards doctrinal reductionism in particular would seem to be reflected in

the urge to create a single 'theology of the Old Testament', instead of a series of theologies of the Old Testament. There seems to be some semantic slippage here in Brueggemann's self-justification. Be that as it may, though, Brueggemann tries to avoid the difficulties of his predecessors by speaking in terms of 'thematization' rather than 'systematization', because 'thematization' is a more open concept (p. 268), and by adopting the approach reflected in his book's subtitle, namely, 'Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy'. This subtitle refers to the process of legal trial, whereby so-called 'truth' is defined in relation to the perceived validity of elements of the testimony of witnesses. In a trial, the verdict essentially indicates that a particular set of testimony (or testimonies) has been accepted as true by the jury, and so 'truth' is in what the jury finds convincing. Applying the metaphor to the Old Testament, the whole of it is Israel's testimony about Yahweh, and truth about Yahweh can be determined to the extent that the testimony is found convincing (pp. 120-21). The question is, then, whether these strategies have enabled Brueggemann to rehabilitate the genre of Old Testament theology; and in order to assess that, we shall summarise Brueggemann's treatment before offering some comments on it.

### **A five-part work:**

Brueggemann's treatment falls into five major parts, of which the first four constitute the body of his theology, and will be summarised here (the fifth part is his assessment of his treatment's implications for biblical interpretation).

**The first part** is entitled *Israel's Core Testimony*. Here, Brueggemann pursues the idea of the Old Testament as testimony about Yahweh, which characteristically presents Yahweh as acting directly on Israel, on creation and on other nations.

He then focuses in turn on the three types of speech in terms of which testimony to Yahweh is offered: verbs, adjectives, and nouns. In Israel's verbal narrative declarations about Yahweh, Yahweh is said to have performed specific deeds which characteristically consist of creating, giving promises for the future, delivering people, commanding, and leading them (pp. 145-212). Adjectives then generalise this testimony into a description of the character of Yahweh as discerned by Israel from Yahweh's actions; the resulting 'credo of adjectives', found in Ex 34:6-7, recurs in various contexts, picturing Yahweh as a god in relationship, with a focus on fidelity as the overriding divine characteristic, and giving a warning about the real possibility of punishment (pp. 213-28). Finally, the nouns and metaphors characterising Yahweh fall into two main types: metaphors of governance (e.g. judge, king, warrior, father) which speak of Yahweh's mercy, love and power, and of the possibility of untamed severity; and metaphors of sustenance (e.g. artist, healer, gardener, mother, shepherd), which again allow for the possibility of destruction (artists can destroy their work, gardeners can uproot plants, etc.) (pp. 229-66). Summarising Israel's core testimony (pp. 267-313), Brueggemann concludes that there is a tension at its heart: 'Yahweh is at the same time sovereign and faithful, severely preoccupied with self-regard and passionately committed to life with the partner' (p. 283). These two themes - Yahweh's self-regard, and Yahweh's commitment to the covenant partner Israel - have 'proximate resolution' in Yahweh's righteousness; but there is 'no ready convergence of sovereignty and solidarity' (p. 313).

**The second part** of the *Theology* is entitled *Israel's Countertestimony*. Here Brueggemann deals with

material embedded within the text itself, which cross-examines the version of truth that is furnished by the core testimony. He refers to three aspects of this countertestimony. The first is that Yahweh is not always open and evident in the life of Israel; however, this hiddenness is not the same as absence, and Yahweh's presence can be discerned in the ordered, ethical works of creation and in providence (pp. 322-58). The second element of countertestimony is that Yahweh is ambiguous, sometimes deceiving people, acting in a contradictory fashion, and being unreliable - rejecting Saul (1 Sam 15), tempting David (2 Sam 24), making prophets lie (1 Kgs 22) (pp. 359-72). Finally, Yahweh can also be negative, failing to protect the covenanted people (Ps 35:11-17), punishing them excessively (Ezek 23), and allowing the wicked to prosper (Job, Ecclesiastes) (pp. 373-99).

**The third division** of the *Theology* deals with *Israel's Unsolicited Testimony*, that is, Israel's testimony about matters other than Yahweh. In this section, Brueggemann discusses material that refers to the relationships in which Yahweh is involved, which are 'intimately and intrinsically pertinent to the character of Yahweh' (p. 408). The testimony is included, he argues, as necessary for a proper understanding of Yahweh who is always Yahweh in relationship (p. 409). Brueggemann deals with this testimony under four representative headings: Israel as Yahweh's partner, human beings as Yahweh's partner, the nations as Yahweh's partner, and creation as Yahweh's partner. All of these partnerships follow a broadly similar pattern: creation of the partner for glad obedience, followed by a failed relationship, followed by rehabilitation for a new beginning (pp. 552-56).

**The fourth division** is entitled *Israel's Embodied Testimony*, and covers the

question of how Yahweh's presence is mediated to Israel. Brueggemann identifies five main vehicles of mediation: the Torah, which gives Israel its particular identity as Yahweh's people (pp. 578-99); kings, whose function was to mediate the rule of Yahweh, especially by establishing and maintaining justice (pp. 600-621); prophets, who give what they claim to be authoritative utterances in three major forms: the accusatory lawsuit, appeals for repentance, and promises of hope (pp. 622-49); the cult, which consists of worship that mediates Yahweh's real presence, and shapes Israel as the community related definitionally to Yahweh (p. 650-79); and sages, that is, wisdom teachers and scribes, who offer a kind of natural theology arising from close observation of lived experience rather than revelatory utterances (pp. 680-94).

**Does, then, this Old Testament Theology manage to avoid the pitfalls of its genre?** One of its most positive characteristics is that it is not afraid to tackle the contradictions and the negative sides to the testimony, and does not offer facile resolutions to the tensions which pervade the Old Testament. Tensions are frankly acknowledged and are not explained away. Another very refreshing aspect of Brueggemann's treatment is that he acknowledges the openness of the Old Testament, that it is not purely and inevitably a Christian book. Christianity is just one possible response to the Old Testament, and systematically to read back the New Testament into the Old as if the New is the only possible outcome of the Old is illegitimate. However, in other ways, Brueggemann's treatment is less satisfactory. In the first place, he relies quite heavily for his evidence on the parts of the Old Testament that have been traditionally appropriated most readily to Western Protestant Christianity, namely the Psalms and the Prophets, along with Deuteronomy. That is not to say that he

completely ignores other texts, but there is a definite majority movement towards the parts noted, and hardly any treatment at all of the narrative, legal or cultic parts of the Old Testament (despite the sections on Torah and the cult mentioned above). And yet, this is supposed to be a theology of the Old Testament, not just a theology of the Prophets and Psalms. To be fair, Brueggemann does acknowledge the propensity of Protestantism in general and the tradition in which his own Christian and scholarly nurture took place in particular 'to sideline the worship materials of the Old Testament in deference to the prophets and the Psalms' (p. 653); but it is clear that when he wrote these words he was still to a large extent bound by the tendencies he describes. Indeed, it is interesting to speculate whether the concentration on prophetic and psalmic material throughout Brueggemann's treatment is a function of his 'testimonial' approach, because the concept of 'testimony' relies heavily upon statements about Yahweh, and such statements occur most abundantly in the Prophets and Psalms; or whether the 'testimonial' approach is driven by the prime value that is placed on the Prophets and Psalms and the kind of material they consist of.

Brueggemann's treatment also raises **the question of the definition of 'theology'**. Surely the essence of a 'theology' of anything is that it produces a coherent scheme; so in resisting the desire

to schematise, has Brueggemann in fact nullified the possibility of producing a theology? Can his 'thematization' approach truly produce an Old Testament 'theology', or does it just boil down to a description of Old Testament content? In attempting to re-invigorate the genre of Old Testament theology, has Brueggemann in fact demonstrated its non-viability?

Soon after Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* was published, I reviewed it for *Regent's Reviews* (RR 13 [1999], pp. 17-18). In that review, I praised Brueggemann for resisting categorisation and normalisation, for taking full account of the negativity of Yahweh, and for resisting full-scale Christianising of the Old Testament and the resultant supercessionist approach while still writing relevantly for a Christian audience. I still think that those are positive elements of his treatment. But from a wider perspective, I am not convinced that it is ultimately possible to do what he apparently sets out to do, namely, to write a coherent theology of the Old Testament in which every contradictory aspect and every part of the Old Testament is appropriately incorporated. The Old Testament - indeed, the Bible as a whole - is the raw material of faith, and a rich resource on which to draw; but it is not a systematic theological presentation, and to treat it as such runs the risk of silencing, and thereby trivialising, the difficult and contradictory

"When we pray (the) Psalms, in community or in private, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who count on our prayers. These witnesses include first of all the Israelites who cried out against Pharaoh and other oppressors. But the cloud of witnesses include all those who hope for justice and liberation. This does not detract from the conviction that God is powerful Spirit. It does not reduce the Psalms to political documents. It rather insists that our spirituality must answer to the God who is present where the questions of justice and order, transformation and equilibrium are paramount."

(Walter Brueggemann 'Spirituality of the Psalms' Fortress Press 2002)

# Pensions and matters of ultimate concern.

**Ian Tutton, Ecumenical Industrial Chaplain, Glamorgan Industrial Mission, thinks about pensions and eschatology.**

So-called sector ministries have never sat that comfortably within a Baptist understanding of ministry. Invariably they are defined as chaplaincies - health, education, industry, prison, armed services - and the best way of justifying their continued existence within the denomination's ministerial portfolio has been to describe them in terms of the pastoral work that is done. That is, as an extension of the pastoral care that is administered within the worshipping community by the pastor to that congregation. It is a going out from the church into the community to share with the wider community what is already being shared within the church community. However, to see sector ministry in this 'one-directional' way is severely limiting in respect of the contribution that it can make to the ministry of the denomination, and even the wider church. There is a real benefit to be gained from allowing insights gleaned from within the context of sector ministries in terms of developing and maintaining a contemporary and therefore relevant theological perspective. Traditional theological categories can assume an altogether more radical identity when they are informed by sector ministry.

## **'Realised Eschatology' a contradiction in terms**

From my work as an industrial chaplain, I want to share just one example. How might the current crisis affecting occupational pensions inform our understanding of eschatology?

'Realised Eschatology' has always appeared to me to be a contradiction in terms. (Just like, 'Limited Atonement', but that's another story!). How could the end have happened before the end? It never seemed to be anything more than a doctrinal abstraction. A hermeneutic sleight of hand devised to allow Christian Doctrine to be accommodated to a presupposed philosophical agenda: one that found it difficult to accept that any idea of the finite nature of creation could be explained in other than cosmological terms. Then, the pensions' crisis, and all of a sudden, it began to make sense. There was the 'realisation' that the key to understanding eschatology is not chronology but certainty. The 'real' impact of Hebrews 11.1 hit full force with devastating consequences for my

otherwise settled theological understanding: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

The double whammy was completed courtesy of the recent BUGB Council. Members, acting on the advice of the actuaries, decided to raise the level of pension contributions required from minister and church, (one mustn't say employee and employer, but that's yet another story!), in order to safeguard the benefits to be anticipated in retirement. Was this the beginning of the end? Would the volatility of the world wide money markets lead inevitably to the end of any prospect of certainty - will 'final salary, (or should it be stipend)', have to be jettisoned in favour of 'money purchase'? How much will I have when I retire, and what will it buy me? Indeed, if the Government has its way, the question may well be, when will I be allowed to retire, if allowed to retire at all? This would be tantamount to pushing back the eschatological horizon beyond even the eyes of faith. Is there to be no end to it all?



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## **KEEP THE MUSIC PLAYING**

Advances in electronics in recent years have made sophisticated sound systems much more affordable to the church community but recently one of my surveyors came across a most impressive "recording studio" set up in a very large and active Baptist Church in a city centre location. The facilities were such that worshippers could obtain a CD recording of that morning's service within a few minutes of its finish.

Not only did the Church have professional quality recording, P.A. and mixing equipment, but computer driven projectors for the words to hymns, and an aid to preaching. The value of all of this was considerable - not only the cost of the equipment itself, but also the cost of its installation (professional wiring fitted unobtrusively around the Church).

The "Studio" - room - at the West end of the Church was very securely locked, fitted with an intruder alarm system and all of the equipment (including each microphone) was locked away in this area at the end of the service. Each item was also marked visibly with the Church's name - using a good quality security marking kit.

So what's this to do with your church I can hear you say? I have to admit that this is an exceptional case and not the normal situation seen in smaller Churches. However, the steps taken to protect all of this equipment were excellent and reflect its attractiveness to thieves.

Many Churches do now have simple PA/Loop systems with quite good quality amplifier/mixing desk/speakers/CD player and microphones - many of which are not really protected at all.

It is not necessary to go to the lengths taken by the above major city Church, but simple measures should be taken in all cases.

Microphones (especially radio-microphones) must be locked away after use.

The mixing desk/amp and so on should not be easily visible to casual visitors or in view of windows - if possible they should be locked into a secure enclosure. Once wired up, these items cannot easily be relocated, so if you are considering up-grading or changing the installation, consider the best and most secure place to locate the control centre first and wire from there.

Invest in some form of visible security marking so as to render the items less easily disposed of by thieves. The simplest way is to use a permanent marker and/or an invisible marker pen.

Proper security marking kits are (relatively) expensive but very good if there is a lot of valuable equipment in the Church/Hall/Office Rooms. It can also be used on Computers and their accessories/Microwave Cookers/Telephone Equipment/Keyboards etc.

Electronic equipment is very attractive to thieves and easy to dispose of in local car-boot-sales. Don't make it easy for them and "Keep The Music Playing"

Yours Sincerely

Alf Green ACII

ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER

Allied Steel & Wire, (ASW), had been a prosperous company. It had relatively full order books, good products, and excellent customer relations. It had long been regarded as a flagship of Welsh manufacturing. So you can imagine the disbelief with which the announcement that the company had gone into receivership was greeted. Apparently, the firm had over borrowed at the banks; the security offered against further loans wasn't sufficient, and that was that. Trading ceased almost overnight and well over 500 people were made redundant. But that wasn't all, the local press were soon reporting that there was something 'not quite right' in respect of the pension fund. When the auditors opened the books they found that the assets were far less than imagined and that as a consequence there would be no money available to pay the pensions of any presently deferred beneficiaries. So, you work for 25 years, you pay your contributions, you lose your job, and your pension too! Mind you, the situation wasn't helped by the announcement that two highly paid directors, had left the company in the months leading up to its demise having found themselves equally lucrative jobs elsewhere. Because they had left before the company had been wound up, their pensions - final salary based - were protected.

There is something of a happy ending to the ASW story, at least in part. Thanks to the determined efforts of the Welsh Assembly Government, a buyer has been found for the business - Celsa, a Spanish steel company. They have reopened the works, and many previous employees are back at work, but their pensions are another matter.

The Westminster Government is about to publish a bill which will amongst other things, attempts to deal with the problem of what happens when a pension scheme

has to be wound up for lack of assets. The 1997 Pensions Act, post-Maxwell, provides compensation for those who lose out because of fraud. However, if the loss is due to the under performing of the fund, provided it was managed 'honestly', there is no redress, because funds are not meant to guarantee returns. The Government is sympathetic to extending these compensation arrangements to cover situations where assets are found to be insufficient due to the vagaries of the market. Unfortunately for the workers at ASW there is little hope of such legislation being made retrospective although that is still the subject of ongoing discussion between local representatives and Government officials.

This is where the problem remains, from the perspective of the employee, a pension is guaranteed: something of which one is certain even though yet it is not seen. When that pension is defined in terms of a final salary settlement, it used to be possible to say with certainty what the cash value of anyone's pension would be on retirement. Nowadays, even well managed and relatively profitable pension schemes are having to admit that such arrangements are impossible to guarantee any more. The certainty of a specific income on retirement is having to be exchanged for the promise of a pension at retirement, the actual cash value of which has to remain uncertain until the actual day of retirement itself. That is, provided the fund remains profitable in the meantime.

### **On promise and guarantee**

This present day pensions 'fiasco' can serve as a parable. If certainty is the touchstone of eschatological reality, is it best understood in terms of a promise or a guarantee, or does one inform the other?

Faith is (i) being sure of what we hope

for, & (ii) being certain of what we cannot see. Each is a way of understanding faith, yet at the same each informs the other in terms of an understanding of faith.

In terms of, 'the parable of the pensions', every prospective pensioner is, (i) sure that there is something to hope for - what is promised, and (ii), certain that there will be something there when she/he retires - that much is guaranteed. Without the guarantee, the promise is of itself worthless. Because of the guarantee, the promise remains alive. When what has hitherto been guaranteed is found to have been illusory, unattainable, unrealistic, then one's confidence even in the promise itself is shaken. Many potential pensioners are having to live according to a promise which has no guarantee attached. Life is all of a sudden less certain, more provisional.

More than that, one's outlook on life itself changes. Life becomes far more immediate. It is no coincidence that the demise of the guaranteed final salary pension has been paralleled by a huge increase in the numbers of people, particularly those under 30 who are making no provision for a pension at all. Without a guarantee, what value a vague promise?

How might this parable be interpreted in terms of the mission of the church? Gospel is a combination of promise and guarantee. Response in faith is made in the light of such promise and guarantee. In terms of Gospel presentation, which takes priority - promise or guarantee? In terms of our understanding of the Gospel, which informs the other? Regarding our appreciation of the unfolding of the future, either in terms of the life of faith, individual or communal, or in terms of the eschatological horizon itself, on what is mission predicated, promise or guarantee? There is a danger that our proclamation of

the Gospel can and does reflect something of the 'spirit of the age' - the 'mood music' of each generation. Remaining truly counter-cultural is not easy. Yet, the parable of the pensions is precisely that, a call to counter the culture of the age. We cannot afford to give up our guarantee for the sake of a promise. We cannot allow the inherent vagueness of what we might promise to compromise that which God declares guaranteed in Christ. God's creating, saving, redeeming, restoring, recreating purpose is very much couched in 'final salary' terms. Certainty is rooted in guarantee; a promise is not sufficient.


### **Practical theology**

For those of you who are serving pastors, can I urge you to take an interest in the whole area of pensions?

- Introduce it into preaching.
- Be aware of the circumstances of members of the church community.
- Take an active interest in the future financial security of your people, not just their spiritual status.
- Provoke discussion amongst young adults regarding how they intend to secure their future financial well being.
- Be sensitive towards those coming up to retirement who may be facing the prospect of a much-reduced income to that which they thought had been guaranteed.
- Make pensioners aware of the full range of post-retirement benefits that are available, and if necessary help them with the forms!
- Lobby your local MP in respect of the proposed Pensions Bill to ensure that the Government does all that it can to provide guarantees rather than merely make promises.

We began with realised eschatology. I have to confess I remain unconvinced by its arguments, although I am more convinced than ever of the reality of eschatology. The parable of the pensions reminds one that the future can only be secured, to whatever degree, by actions taken in the present. Declaring Jesus to be risen from the dead, testimony to which is provided by the present mediation of the Holy Spirit, provides a foundation of living the life of faith today in anticipation of the fulfilment of a promise made, but also confident of what has been thereby guaranteed. The empty tomb is the guarantee that seals the promise revealed at Calvary. Without the guarantee of resurrection, what value the promise of forgiveness offered to the world by God in the person of the crucified Christ?

- The Gospel requires that people make provision for the future out of what they enjoy in the present.
- The Gospel reminds us that we all, together, share collective responsibility for ensuring that it remains possible for every present generation to avail themselves of the future certainties.
- Each of us is challenged to invest something of our present life experience in order to safeguard ourselves in the future.
- God in Christ has invested His very Being in order that in and through Christ, our future destiny might become a living reality. **bmj**



**BMM**

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**Write, phone, fax or email us!!**

# Guided Self Appraisal

Some of you seeing this title will experience cold shivers down the spine. I'd like to take this opportunity on behalf of the Ministry Department to allay some of those fears.

First of all I want to stress that Guided Self Appraisal is all about **YOU**. We want to give you the opportunity to think about your own spirituality and nurture as well as giving you a means of taking stock of your work, your use of time, your strengths and your limitations. You do that with someone who has been trained to journey with you. You need to pay particular attention to the title of this scheme. Guided Self Appraisal means that **you** are at the steering wheel.

The Department provides a Guide (yes you do have a choice) who will help you over the course of three meetings. Think of the Guide as your critical friend, someone who is prepared to probe and prod. The Guide however, is fully aware that the outcome of the appraisal remains in your charge. (The Ministry Department do not ask to see the outcome of an appraisal, and no confidential information relating to an appraisal is ever sent to us.)

At the end of your time together, you and your Guide will devise an action plan. Six months later the Guide will contact you to see how much progress you have made with this. (There's nothing like a little accountability for holding one to an agreed course of action is there?)

I want to stress here that we do not see Guided Self Appraisal as a means of having your performance reviewed by a third party. This scheme is all about enabling honest reflection and stock taking with someone who is *not* immediately involved with your situation.

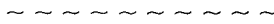
If your interest in Guided Self Appraisal has been stirred, and you feel ready to take the next step, then contact the ministry department and we will give you all the information you need.

**Vivienne Lassetter. Ministry Department, Baptist House.**

"The mind has many levels. A human being operates in many different ways. A Russian staretz said: 'Prayer is to stand before God with the mind in the heart'.

"... to begin to descend with my mind into my heart and to begin to be able to touch and handle my experience, to explore it, to speak of it: to myself, to others, even to God. Another word for 'the mind in the heart' might be imagination..."

(Simon Bailey 'The Well Within: Parables for living and dying' DLT 1996)



Adolf von Harnack to Karl Holl:

"I wish you would unlearn your fatal trick of turning away every fruit tree that God sends you into a weeping willow."

# Comment

It is impossible in a quarterly Journal to respond with immediacy to particular events and situations as they arise. By the time of distribution each matter has moved on. And sometimes it seems as if we claim the luxury of reflective consideration long 'after the event' without recognising the heavy responsibility borne by those who have to make decisions with consequences for many.

As the final proofs of this issue were being checked, the news broke of the capture of Saddam Hussein and was followed in our closer national domestic context by the 'guilty' verdict pronounced on Ian Huntley by the jury in the Soham murder trial. The former not only recalls the great evils perpetuated by one person but also leaves outstanding questions about the collusion of his present captors with his former activities. The latter, amongst many other things, raises questions about the way in which stringency of employment procedures did not in fact protect two children.

Without more creative and consistent engagement with what it means to be 'community', and drawing this word back to a deeper reality, away from its slippage through popular politico-luvvy-speak into the murk of irrelevance, we are always going to be trying to shut the proverbial stable door.

Over twenty years ago, David Shepherd spoke with prophetic insight about the dark side of the 'Global village' phenomenon, in which we are "emotionally, yet despairingly, involved" and pointed to withdrawal as "the most damaging attitude of our times."<sup>1</sup>

When he notes (p.27) that "Power corrupts, but powerlessness corrupts also" he is speaking of the way in which groups in big cities often come to feel impotent and unable to change anything, or have access to the means to change their environment. But what he says has a wider application to the persistence that is required from people of faith in a century that is tending to regard information above discernment, rolling news above considered response, notoriety above wisdom. He is talking in part about the relationship between environment and individuality, but today may still stir our commitment to the Kingdom issues of community and inter-dependence.

"The God I believe in denies that heredity plus environment equals you. He transcends the pressures of environment and wants to set (people) free to do so too.

He is often indignant about the framework in which we cause one another to live. Christians should often be indignant too, not with the indignation which means that you 'blow your top' and storm out of the room feeling better that you've got it off your chest, but the burning indignation which steadily works at changing things that are wrong." (p.34)

There are dozens of ways in which it is easier to storm out of the room: be it frustration with situations which repeat themselves locally, or with the resources available to individuals and groups fighting to bring release from captivity to drugs, alcohol, violence.... or with the blocks that are set between people whose work draws them together but who

find they have to compete for the same pot of money... or with churches who enjoy the language of worship but would rather be entertained than re-sourced for sacrificial living... .

But this will not help the return to community which is deep in the 'prophetic heart' so beloved of Evangeli-speak.

In Jerusalem there live two rabbis, married to each other. The husband of the couple is one Arik Aschermann. A little of his story was told in the press last November.<sup>2</sup> Many mornings his journey to work takes him, not to office or synagogue, but to stand in the path of a bulldozer, or to re-build a Palestinian home, to help with the olive harvest of a family whose livelihoods are threatened or to plead for rapid transit through a road-block for the critically ill. As an orthodox Rabbi living in Jerusalem, such actions bring him death threats and he has been roughly treated many times. He is the General Secretary of Rabbis for Human Rights and bears one of those sharp lights to bear on us that challenge our complacency in mouthing the word 'community' as if we knew what it really meant.

"Our tradition makes it very clear — that chosen does not mean you are better than anybody else. Chosen for responsibility, perhaps. Our most basic teaching, which we learn from the very first verses of the Bible, is that all human beings are created in God's image, and from that grow certain obligations for respecting and honouring that spark of God in every human being. All human rights flow from that."

This is the reason why a Palestinian family whose home has been destroyed send their ten-year-old son out to meet him, because they want the boy to know that not every Israeli arrives with guns and bulldozers, that some come to rebuild their homes: "Otherwise what do we say when he says, 'I want to grow up to be a terrorist?'"

Storming out of the room is simply not an option for this man who understands and experiences the real risks

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<sup>1</sup> David Shepherd 'Built as a City' p.20 ff

<sup>2</sup> The Times, November 5th 2003

Philip Yancey, reflecting on the gospel story of the prodigal -

"In his story of the prodigal son, Jesus does not dwell on the prodigal's motive for return. The younger son feels no sudden remorse nor burst of love for the father he insulted. Rather, he tires of a life of squalor and returns out of selfish motives. Apparently, it matters little to God whether we approach him out of desperation or out of longing..."

('Soul Survivor - How my faith survived the church.' Hodder & Stoughton 2001 p.42)

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# J-Mail

I read John Weaver's 'A Theology of Energy' with interest, then found that a question that has been in the background of my own thinking for a long time began to nag at me afresh – what do we do today with eschatology?

The New Testament ends with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, for 'the old order has passed away!' (Rev 21:4 REB). The ministry of Jesus was shot through with an eschatological perspective: he proclaimed the coming of a new Kingdom.

We have witnessed in the last thirty years an explosion of 'bad eschatology' – Hal Lindsey and his ilk. The highly fantastical visions found in this material, such as final battles in the Middle East between the forces of good and evil (once portrayed as a straight fight between the good ol' US of A and the USSR) have had a significant impact on Protestant Christianity. Some would argue, also on US foreign policy.

But I am not sure that this can be countered entirely by silence. The fact is that the language of energy conservation, and 'responsible and accountable stewardship' does not seem to me to capture enough of the eschatological force of the New Testament material for it to be a satisfactory place to locate a gospel ethic for the creation.

All this is not to say that a doctrine that gives rise to such an ethic should not be sought after. And it is certainly not to conclude that there can be any realistic form of Christian faith in the modern, ecologically challenged world, that promotes wasting energy in the belief that God will top up the oil reserves when the

Kingdom comes.

Nevertheless; is it possible to conceive of any human living on this planet that does not use up its resources eventually? That was surely inevitable, once the first hunter-gatherers laid aside their wanderlust and chopped down trees to build huts and light fires. We are predestined to progress, and I doubt we can replace such an instinct with anything worthwhile under the general theme of sustainability.

My concern is that we do not become so attached to the laudable project of conserving things and saving things (in an increasingly cautious age) that we find we have no further use for the language of sacrifice, going the extra mile, and dying in order to live. For then we shall also find that we have no language for expressing the uniquely Christian hope, which is not based on some future pastoral, but upon an end to death, mourning, tears and pain, and the beginning of a new creation – incidentally, with a new city at its heart.

I cannot, myself, see what a contemporary eschatology might look like, but perhaps it will have to include an element of prophetic warning. There is, yet, a hard road for humankind to travel before the Kingdom comes, and conservation cannot put off its arrival for ever. Mervyn Peake captures it well in his poem 'Thunder the Christ of it' -

While bibles burn, Leviticus and all,  
Christ is forgotten in a world of wit:  
Soak up the planets in a swab of gall.  
This is the day and we must pay for it.

**Michael Docker,**  
**Tyndale Baptist Church, Bristol**

# Book Reviews

*Edited by John Houseago*

**How to Pray: A Practical Handbook, John Pritchard, SPCK 2002, ISBN 0-281-05454-1, 110 pp, pb. £9.99**

Whether your experience of prayer is much or none, this book has much to offer. As the title says, this is a handbook which is practical. It is written in five parts, with five sections in each part. Each part deals with a different aspect of prayer. Beginning with the first stirrings of awareness that there is more to life than just what meets the eye, there are suggestions on how to slow down and listen, how to get started in the business of formulating what we call prayers, while avoiding becoming a "spiritual nerd". Later parts of the book take us on into more specific types of prayer - meditation, praying with the bible, Celtic prayer and so on. Perhaps most importantly there is guidance on how to pray in the bad times.

As well as practical teaching, each section includes a key question for reflection, suggestions for practical application, quotations and either an illustrative story or prayer. Each part includes a "Marker on the Way". These include the Lord's Prayer as a model prayer, balancing prayer with action, prayer as a rule of life, sacred times and places and finally the importance of self-knowledge in knowing what best helps us spiritually.

I found this an easy book to read because of the handbook format. It can be used as part of one's own devotions, by anyone wishing to brush up on their prayer skills, or for group study and guidance. It offers help and guidance in a practical and realistic manner, which values the

experience of all and meets people where they are.

**Kath Lawson,  
Todmorden, West Yorkshire.**

**The Churches in Europe as Witnesses to Healing. By Keith Clements. WCC Publications, Geneva. 2003. ISBN 2-8254-1382-8. 128pp. £10.50**

I have to confess that I did not know whether I was looking forward to reviewing this book, however I am glad to say that I thoroughly enjoyed an excellent read. Keith Clements is a Baptist Minister who has pastored a number of churches, tutored at Bristol Baptist College and since 1997 been general secretary of the Conference of European Churches in Geneva.

This book is a collection of papers and sermons given during the past six years addressing the challenges faced by the churches of Europe in their calling to embody and communicate the gospel of healing and reconciliation. It is a consideration of the nature of Christian mission in a Europe that is changing politically and economically. The book begins with a chapter entitled "Are we still of any use?", a question posed to Christians and churches in a Europe that is on the way to integration but still unsure of the moral and spiritual values by which the Community will be shaped. Clements demonstrates the challenge of this question in the light of the fact that religion has been blamed for many of the conflicts in Europe from the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth century to Northern Ireland and former Yugoslavia in the last. He asks, is it any surprise that Europe today is

suspicious of institutions and tired of rhetoric, secularized, post modern and post-imperialist. Clements makes a convincing case for his conclusion, "Europe today therefore seems in many respects a bleak climate for the churches."

His response to this is to remind us that though the churches may seem on the margins of power and culture in Europe, compared to former times, this can be a good place in which to rediscover the power of the gospel to bring unity, peace and reconciliation for the sake of the disempowered. He reminds us it is precisely to the *ends* of the earth - the margins, and the marginalised - that Jesus sends us as his witnesses. "We are called together so that the next millennium may be one of healing and reconciliation, for the wounded body of Jesus Christ on earth and for the earth itself."

I found this to be a fascinating book full of historical references, theological reflection, missiological challenge as well as pastoral insights. It is a well-timed look at European Christianity by someone at the heart, and travelling the breadth, of Europe today.

**Ian Birch,  
Kirkintilloch Baptist Church**

**Christianity in a Post-Atheistic Age, by Clive Marsh. SCM Press ISBN 0-334-02869-8 £9.95**

This little book is based on 95 'Discussion starters', or 'theses' (cf Martin Luther), which are also listed in Appendix 1 for ease of reference. The author suggests that they might provide the basis for 6 small group discussions (outlined in Appendix 2), or 3 month's worth of daily readings for those for whom theology books might usually be hard to stomach. Setting out to read the whole book, by chapter 4 I was beginning to suffer from indigestion! The

theses do indeed deserve slower consideration. Marsh's 'raison d'être' for writing the book is that he considers that most people in Britain today are suffering from the abuse of spiritual neglect, and argues that a 'new Christianity' is needed that will benefit society.

Chapter 1 asserts that we must recognise who we are - class, where we've lived, gender, ethnicity, all matter, and that all religion is political. I found this the easiest and most interesting chapter, as Marsh gives his personal details. Chapter 2 deals with our religious context (so-called secularisation, the new interest in spirituality), and defines what he means by 'post-atheist'.

In Chapter 3 Marsh says that it is important to know in which tradition you stand, and describes various theological strands, giving most time to Liberalism and what he calls 'post-liberalism'.

Chapter 4 attempts to describe 'a chastened Liberalism'. If God is creator of all, then all truth is God's truth, but people simply cannot believe what they want and be Christian. However, to be theologically educated necessarily means becoming open to fresh ideas, i.e. 'liberal', and Marsh argues for theological education on a mass scale.

In Chapters 5 Marsh describes what he calls 'Protesting Christianity' (*not* anti-Catholic), and in Chapter 6 his vision of a new Christianity as a viable religion.

This book would be useful for a church discussion group that wants to wrestle with the theological ideas, and may provide preachers with some models and concepts with which to talk about contemporary Christianity. It's not expensive. Buy it.

**Brenda Morton.  
Grove centre, Sydenham.**

The Angry Christian: A Theology for Care and Counselling. **Andrew Lester**. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press 2003, pp.308, £20, ISBN 0-664-22519-5.

I looked forward to reading this book. I was not disappointed. Arguably 20 years in gestation, the scope of this book is ambitious and footnotes and bibliography are extensive, if not quite exhaustive.

Lester's case is built systematically in parts one and two; from a study of emotion and the physiology of the brain, through to recent neurological research. This summary provides a helpful background to the experience of anger.

Lester then challenges what he calls the 'anger-is-sin' tradition developed in historic church teaching. He goes on to demonstrate that anger should not be associated with sin and fall, but instead be seen as an important part of God's image within humanity.

Chapters 9 and 10 on 'The Anger of God and Jesus' and 'Toward a Pastoral Theology of Anger' are the core of the book. Lester gives a succinct and convincing treatment of the 'wrath of God' and develops and expands a balanced and healthy pastoral theology of anger.

This is a book which could inspire many other books. For example, Lester's observations invite a study on emotional repression and expression in the modern church. Equally, there is scope for more research into how anger expressed within the church can fuel legitimate struggles against social injustice.

While Lester is both learned and readable, the preponderance of quotes sometimes seems over-done. And although he succeeds thoroughly in his aim of challenging the 'anger-is-sin' tradition, he is, I feel, less thorough in providing

guidance for church ministers in dealing with anger in pastoral ministry. There are, however, some thought-provoking case-studies and a helpful guide which outlines eight steps to take in 'befriending' anger.

Lester's next book, *Coping with Your Anger: A Christian Guide*, which is due out in 2004, should provide an important companion to this wide-ranging and stimulating study.

**Colin Cartwright**  
**Trinity Baptist Church, Chesham**

The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects. **Craig Bartholomew, Robin Parry and Andrew West (Editors)**. IVP. £12.99. ISBN 0-85111-399-0.

"Evangelicalism has much to reflect on, much to repent of, and a great deal to learn" says Craig Bartholomew in his introduction to this comprehensive critique of the Evangelical wing of the Church. There follow twelve separate chapters, focussing on a huge and diverse range of subjects upon which Evangelicalism is perceived to be 'weak'.

Evangelical approaches to theology, ecclesiology, biblical interpretation, mission, ethics, spirituality, philosophy and politics all receive a thorough treatment. Most chapters begin with an overview of how Evangelicals have approached the topic, along with a sensitive yet robust criticism of the weaknesses in their approach. The parachurch nature of the Evangelical movement, and its stress on the salvation of the individual, is blamed for its poor understanding of the nature of the church. An emphasis on 'inerrancy' and 'proof-texts', it is suggested, has made some elements of Evangelicalism less than biblical. A gulf is identified between what Evangelicals profess to believe and the way Evangelicals tend to behave. Evangelicalism is challenged to be more

creative, more humble, incarnational, Christocentric, communal. Evangelicals are called to be “clear on and committed to the core Christian doctrines” (Bartholomew again).

Many of the featured authors speak about how Evangelicals must reflect upon the ‘big picture’ of the story of the Bible. It is only the divine drama of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation that can properly inform our thinking about God’s grace to all people, and form the basis for an Evangelical identity.

The authors’ reflections on the *future(s)* of Evangelicalism tended to be rather more vague in nature than were their criticisms. However, I found this book stimulating as well as challenging with regard to my own pastoral practice.

**Marcus Bull.**  
**Trinity Church, Rawden**

Baptist Sacramentalism. **Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (editors), Paternoster Press, 2003, xiv + 278pp. Soft Cover.**

This significant collection of fifteen papers comes as volume five in the series ‘Studies in Baptist History and Thought.’ It is a testimony to the state of general Baptist thinking that many might think the title alone to be questionable. In his foreword, Jim Packer confesses his surprise in finding such a collection of essays, seeking to reawaken sacramental awareness in Baptist church life.

The essays range extensively from general considerations of the nature of sacraments, through historically focussed studies, to more specific discussions of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, ordination and preaching. The common thread is that all would encourage Baptists to recover an understanding of sacrament as some form

of mediated divine-human encounter, which avoids the tendency to objectify grace on the one hand, while disavowing the common inclination to over emphasise the human response of faith on the other hand.

Among the general papers, Clark Pinnock raises questions concerning the nature of God’s presence and the dangers of the Enlightenment divorce between matter and spirit. Timothy George and Stanley Grenz, among others, place greater weight on the ecclesiological context. The historical papers cover Spurgeon (Tim Grass and Ian Randall), H. Wheeler Robinson (Anthony Cross), and a fascinating examination of reactions to the 1959 publication *Christian Baptism* (Stanley Fowler). Alongside the papers covering Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, there are concluding essays on the theology of ordination (John Colwell and Stephen Holmes) and preaching (Brian Haymes). These are stimulating and sometimes provocative. To what extent has our emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and ‘body ministry’ served to undermine any notion of ordained ministry? Not all will agree with the conclusions, but the questions posed are vital.

This collection of papers will prove to be a seminal work and is a must for all involved in the practice of ministry.

**Graham Watts**