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A Baptist wandering

David Humphries

I have to thank my friend and colleague David Warrington for suggesting the idea of going on a pilgrimage as part of my sabbatical. We were both on the five-yearly BU Ministry Refresher Conference at Swanwick, and I was struggling to come up with something to do during the sabbatical period. David knows I find it difficult to sit still for more than ten minutes and so he suggested something practical – which literally changed my life. I left Swanwick wanting to find out more about the pilgrimage known as the *Camino de Santiago* or the Way of St James.

The Shrine of St James at Compostela (Santiago de Compostella) in Galicia has been the goal of pilgrims for more than



Walking through Galicia

1000 years. Legend has it that James, one of the 'sons of thunder', preached in Spain before returning to Jerusalem, where he was executed by Herod. His then disciples placed his dead body in an

unmanned boat which sailed back to Spain, where it fetched up on the Galician coast near what is now Padron. The body was carried inland and buried. Around AD 813 a hermit named Pelayo claimed to have received a vision that St James was buried on a hill under a field of stars. He told the local Bishop, Theodomir of Iria Flavia, who went to the site, discovered the ancient tomb, and declared that it was the ancient tomb of the apostle; just in time to act as a rallying cry for those fighting the Moorish invasion of Spain. The news was declared to the world by the Pope (Leo III); and the place, Santiago de Compostela (St James of the field of stars), became a place of pilgrimage; while St James became the patron saint of Spain.

For Christians of the mediaeval period, belief was about a lifelong penitential cycle: a believer passed from grace to sin, from sin to confession and absolution, and then back to grace again.¹ After confession there would be a penance. Any unexpiated sin was atoned for after death, in the excruciating (but temporary) suffering of purgatory. One of the possible penances was to go on a pilgrimage. Within the UK, cathedrals often held a particular relic to which a person could pay homage. Canterbury was a famous pilgrimage site and Chaucer's *Canterbury tales* is a book about the stories that pilgrims told to keep themselves entertained on the route, a mediaeval equivalent of the in-flight movie!

If you really wanted to gain some credit the three big trips to do were (in order of importance): Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago. By the 14th century many hundreds of thousands of

pilgrims would be making the journey to Santiago and a whole industry grew up to supply the needs of pilgrims along the route, including a 12th century guide book *Codex Calixtinus*. The Knights Templar were also highly active along the various roads to Santiago, offering much needed protection against robbers and brigands on the many wild parts of the route.

So why was a Baptist minister going on a mediaeval and somewhat Roman Catholic pilgrimage? A pilgrimage does not earn me any credit with God, but we do often speak about the Christian faith journey as a pilgrimage. I wanted to put aside a significant time to seek God, to pray and to ask His guidance for the future, and this seemed a good way of doing it. The more I found out about the pilgrimage, the more it gripped me.

After some research on the routes, especially from the Confraternity of St James, a British organisation set up to help pilgrims from the UK, the route I decided take to Santiago was the most popular one: the *Camino Frances*. Routes to Santiago start from all over Europe but tend to meet in one or two places. One of these places is St Jean Pied de Port on the French side of the Pyrenées. The route then crosses the Pyrenées to Roncesvalles on the Spanish side, before heading in a loop southwards to Pamplona, Burgos, Leon, Astorga and then Santiago - a journey of about 500 miles.

One of the big questions was how much to carry. Received wisdom is about 11 kg, including water. That is not a lot. Much thought went into this decision, remembering that I



The dormitory at Roncesvalles

would have to carry everything for 500 miles. Then all too soon I found myself in St Jean, staring up at the Pyrenées and wondering what on earth I was doing there, feeling every one of the 1000 or so miles away from my family! It seemed to take me ages to get started. But after two cups of coffee and a cake, and then a stop for water, I started the long haul up and over the Pyrenées. It was glorious sunshine that day but a hard slog, and I was so glad I had booked ahead to an *auberge* about 10 km into the route. It meant that I eased into the route slowly. Nearly all those I met who fell by the wayside had started off too quickly, and got blisters or some injuries. I saw some horrendous blisters on the route but I did not get a single one! I learned to walk 'in a relaxed manner'.²

The second night was a bit of a shock to me. The weather had deteriorated and in fact it went on to become one of the wettest Mays since records began in northern Spain. The first *refugio*, as they are termed in Spain, is the monastery of Roncesvalles. In a single large barn there were 120 male and female pilgrims in bunk beds, with only four toilets and showers for everyone. But, from these total strangers, I met some with whom I am still in touch, from all over the world.

So began the routine that would be mine for the next 40 days. I

would wake with everyone else at around 6 am, get up, pack, and then walk for an hour or so before settling down to a much desired *café con leche grande* and a *croissant*. I would walk anywhere between 11 and 25 km, along trails through woods, fields and villages, looking for the *fleche jeune* or yellow arrow that marked the route. As I progressed I became very adept at spotting this welcome sign at junctions or forks in the trail.

For large sections I would walk on my own, and then maybe walk for a time with others, talking a mixture of German, French, and Spanish. In fact for about three weeks I did not meet another English person. Occasionally along the trail, especially on parts that were more remote, kind supporters of the pilgrims would come out and set up a small stall giving away cakes and coffee to bless the travellers. One such person was an Englishman who asked if anyone spoke English. I answered: '*Un peu*', since I had hardly spoken English up till that point. I then realised what I had said and blurted out: 'Actually I speak quite a lot of English'!

One of the concerns each day was 'will I have a bed for the night?' It was not possible to book ahead to stay in the *refugios*, so one had to fight the urge to rush ahead. But around 2 pm I would reach the place where I had planned to stop and never failed to get a bed, always sharing a room with at least 20 others. On arrival I would get my pilgrim record signed, a document which testified that I was a *bona fide* pilgrim, and then get showered, wash my clothes, put on what I was going to wear the next day, care for my feet, rest, and then go out for a meal before settling down at the latest at 10 pm for sleep.

As the days passed, the routine started to find its way into my soul. Things that had burdened me no longer seemed important and I found just walking day after day did in fact bring me closer to God. I experienced grace-filled moments and much kindness and love from others on the route. On one day, when it had rained for hours, I was soaking wet, footsore, and very hungry. The expected shop was in fact closed, and I had had nothing to eat since the night before.

Despondent, I began to pray to God, ‘ Lord I am really hungry, I feel faint, and there is still 15 km to the next town: please provide something’. Only five minutes later I took shelter from the incessant rain under the eaves of a house, and a young French Canadian girl came up and asked if I would like some biscuits! I knew God’s provision and protection on that route in many special ways.

In the middle of the *Camino Frances* is a section known as the *Meseta*. It is a high plateau that takes about two weeks to



cross, and it is exceptionally flat and boring. Many miss out this section, but in my opinion it is the most important. It is in the boring section

Moving on: fitter in body and spirit

that one starts to get in touch with what is going on inside. I found myself slowing down and literally spending hours alone in prayer. It was a very special time and I don't think I will ever really fathom the depths of what I experienced along that section.



Journey's end: Santiago

I walked every day except when I was in the cities of Pamplona, Burgos and Leon, when I had a day's rest each time. Arriving in Santiago itself was a very moving experience. Like many *peregrinos*, as we were termed, I cried. For me the most moving moment was receiving communion in the cathedral from a German Catholic priest with whom I had walked. He knew I was a Baptist minister and not a Catholic, but it didn't matter. Tears were coming down his face and there were tears on mine as we were united around the table that has so long divided.

On the walk I met literally hundreds of people who were on a spiritual journey. They came for all sorts of reasons, but for nearly all, the spirituality of the route started to have its effect. Many were seeking, but sadly not inside the traditional church, despite doing a Christian pilgrimage.

I probably gave more spiritual direction on that route than I

had for a long time in ministry in England, and I believe I came back a different person. I was certainly a lot thinner! My prayer life and faith have been deepened, and if I could do it all again tomorrow, I would.

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Notes to text

1. E. Cameron, *The European Reformation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
2. K. Rupp, *Walk in a relaxed manner: life lessons from the Camino*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2007.



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Leadership among Baptists

Andy Goodliff

Within the church, ordained ministry is often understood principally in terms of leadership, modified by the words 'spiritual', 'pastoral' or 'servant'.¹ Recently, one academic commented that 'leadership is a growth industry and remains a "sexy concept" and a buzz word'. Over the past 20 years there has been a huge increase in books concerned with church leadership; and the popular church growth strategies, epitomised by Rick Warren's *The purpose-driven church*, argue that church growth is a result of leadership.

Gifts for ministry

In 1990 Paul Beasley-Murray, then Principal of Spurgeon's College, published *Dynamic leadership*, in which he argued that the goal of the College was not training people to be ministers, but to be leaders.² Beasley-Murray recognised that this description of ministers and pastors as 'leaders' was relatively new, but noted an increasing sense that 'the gifts of preaching and pastoral care are less significant for growth than the gifts of administration and leadership/vision'.³ In 1993 Beasley-Murray further argued that the 'concept of leadership is the distinguishing concept between the ordained ministry of the church and the general ministry of the church'.⁴

In *A call to excellence* (1995), Beasley-Murray explored the seven 'most' important aspects of ministry, which he lists as the professional pastor, the effective leader, the charismatic preacher, the creative liturgist, the missionary strategist, the senior care-giver, and the exemplary pilgrim.⁵ Here we find the emphasis again that ministry is equal to leadership. As in his other work, Beasley-Murray refers to Peter Wagner, who developed the Church Growth Movement and argued that leadership was a vital sign of a growing church.

This stress on leadership and church growth can also be found in more 'popular' writings: Rick Warren says that 'the longevity of leadership is a critical factor for the health and growth of a church family';⁶ while Mike Breen says we live in 'a management-orientated society ... [where] for many, a management-orientated pastor feels "safer" than a leadership-orientated pastor'.⁷ What the church needs, according to Breen, is to restore and encourage leadership. What Breen means by 'management-orientated' is a pastor who focuses on maintaining the congregation, rather than growing a congregation. Breen argues that Jesus was the best possible leader and leadership trainer, and that by following him 'we can be the leaders God intends us to be'.⁸ Where in scripture does it say that Christian discipleship is about becoming 'the leaders God intends us to be'? This is one example of a repeated pattern of eisegesis found in both Breen and Warren.

Steven Croft has criticised this emphasis on 'leader', which he says is 'becoming the most commonly used title for a person called to full-time Christian work within Churches'.⁹ It has

become a substitute for the more traditional language of 'priest,' 'minister' or 'pastor'. Croft's concern is that although there is something to be learned from the world of management and leadership studies, an uncritical adoption of their ideas has the danger of making leadership more important than exercising a ministry of prayer, preaching and pastoral care.¹⁰

God is not a manager

Stephen Pattison believes that 'leadership and management ideas are not neutral in terms of values'.¹¹ In embracing these ideas, we may also embrace their associated political and cultural assumptions, and he is uneasy with the increase in managerial and leadership theory in the church. He comments that 'a recent anthology on managerial leadership in the church provides a negligible amount of religious thought about leadership while enthusiastically commending managerial derived ideas to a religious audience'.¹² He goes on to say, against those that appear to suggest otherwise, 'God is not a manager. Jesus was not a management expert'.¹³ The language of 'leader' is loaded with the need to be effective, to reach goals, to grow, while I would suggest that the language of 'pastor' and 'minister' is foremost about being faithful to a calling and a promise from God, not to a set of tasks or qualities.

Nigel Wright argues that it is not a question of 'whether there should be leaders in church but the content and style of that leadership', which is 'Christ-like leadership' and 'not opposed

to service, it is a form of service'.¹⁴ Wright continues that 'to deny the nature of Christian ministers as leaders is to ignore the development of a significant part of their work and of the skills they need to acquire'; however, 'the leadership paradigm should [not] dominate our description of ministry' although those skills should be 'valued and prized'. Instead, for Wright, ministers are primarily 'listeners to and bearers of the Word of God; they are theologians in residence and pastors of people' and for this reason he argues, 'while acknowledging the crucial skills of leadership the language of "ministry" remains more appropriate as the dominant paradigm for the task'.¹⁵ Wright's concern is not leadership language, but the exclusive use of it with regard to the other tasks of ministry.

Authoritarian styles

Wright, along with two other Baptist theologians – Paul Fiddes and John Colwell – have all recently noted that the influence of the charismatic and restoration movements have resulted in a more authoritarian practice of church leadership. Paul Fiddes writes that 'on the British scene there has been a powerful influence from what is called "Restorationism" or the "Community Church" movement, and here the leadership in the church is conceived in terms of elders ...'.¹⁶ He goes on to say that 'very few Baptist churches in Britain have adopted the pyramid of powerful shepherds in its totality, but *the influence is there in a weakened form*; there is a general mood of submitting to the spiritual insight of elders, and this

can – and does – *undermine the place of the church meeting*’ (italics mine).¹⁷

John Colwell writes that ‘in most Baptist churches today, or at least in those positively influenced by the charismatic and restorationist movements, ordained ministry, if it is acknowledged at all, is identified with respect to the *leadership* of the congregation’ (italics mine). In opposition to this view, Colwell argues for the ‘ministry of word and sacrament ... in line with the overwhelming tradition of the Church catholic – to be the nature of Christian ministry’.¹⁸ Nigel Wright writes that ‘it is out of more charismatically orientated churches (I am not necessarily thinking of Baptist churches here but they have not been immune) that patterns of *authoritarian leadership* have emerged’ (italics mine).¹⁹ As indicated above, the issue for Wright is not leadership *per se*, but an authoritarian leadership that threatens to exclude the church meeting.

NT ecclesiology

At the centre of the restoration movement is the return to the ecclesiology of the New Testament: ‘the church should be run by divinely-appointed apostles, prophets, and elders’.²⁰ The key restorationist leader, Arthur Wallis, argued that: ‘There are, in the local church, chosen and fitted leaders, by which the heavenly head exercises his control over the local body. Rule in the church is not to be a dictatorship – a one man rule, nor a democracy – any man rule; it is to be an oligarchy – the rule of the few. New Testament churches were governed by a

team, a select body of men called elders ... Notice these elders were not appointed by a vote of the church, or by any other human method, they were appointed by the Holy Spirit – ‘The Holy Spirit hath made you overseers’.²¹

The claim that leaders are divinely appointed is surely ludicrous and a form of self-deception. Martyn Percy calls it ‘a kind of “creationism” at work in ecclesiology, in which the ordering and functioning of the church is held to be above ordinary critical scrutiny’.²² All human projects and institutions are culturally situated and all churches, movements and denominations are both shaped by, and not shaped by, culture.

Ordination liturgies

A clear indication of the shift can finally been seen in liturgies of ordination for Baptist ministry. In *Orders and prayers for church worship*, ordained ministry is understood as follows: ‘He [sic] is being ordained to preach and teach the word of God from the Holy Scriptures, to lead the worship of the church and administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, to be a faithful shepherd of the flock of Christ and to do the work of an evangelist’.²³

In *Patterns and prayers for Christian worship* the language used is generally similar: ‘He/she is being ordained to preach and teach the Word of God, to lead the church in worship and mission, to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and to be a faithful pastor of the people of God’.²⁴

In *Patterns and prayers* there are two patterns of ordination. The quotation above is from the second pattern. The introduction to the first pattern says ‘... to set [name] apart for the pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament ...’.²⁵ However, the explanation that precedes the liturgy states that ‘in ordination a person’s call from God to the pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament is given public recognition as he or she is set apart to serve and to lead’.²⁶

The most recent ordination text can be found in *Gathering for worship*. The introduction to this service says:

All are called to be disciples.

All are called to be servants of God in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

*Yet God calls some to servant leadership in the Church and these are to be honoured among us.*²⁷

The ordinand is later asked the following questions:

Will you serve and pastor the people of God with gentle nurture and faithful teaching?

Will you set before them the whole counsel of God as you proclaim Christ, the living Word?

*Will you be faithful in worship and prayer, and, through Word and Sacrament, will you celebrate the grace of God, seeking to pattern yourself and those who serve after the likeness of Jesus Christ?*²⁸

These questions echo the language of the earlier introductions found in *Orders and prayers* and *Patterns and prayers*. The explanation that precedes the liturgy in *Gathering* says: ‘the

Church has always recognized that some are called to forms of leadership and service within the Church of Jesus Christ as ministers of word and sacrament, pastors of the flock and proclaimers of the good news, the gospel'.²⁹ There is an evident move from 'faithful shepherd' (*Orders and prayers*, 1967), to 'faithful pastor' (*Patterns and prayers*, 1991) to 'servant leadership' (*Gathering for worship*, 2005). The question is whether these terms are equivalents, or whether the understanding of ministry has shifted to a position like that of Paul Beasley-Murray. One answer to this is that *Patterns and prayers*, and to a greater extent, *Gathering for worship*, reflect an attempt to hold together the diverging views of ministry that is a feature within the churches of the Baptist Union.

Another reason for moving away from the language of 'shepherd,' despite its classical roots, is the critique that has been brought to bear on what some have called 'heavy shepherding' within the house church movement.³⁰ The concept of 'shepherd' and 'shepherding' has been unhelpfully tainted. However, this problem surely reflects an emphasis on ministry as leadership that was not previously there, or at least, was not articulated in the same way. The use of 'servant' shapes how that leadership should be understood, but I would contend that whichever word is used – servant, spiritual or pastoral – it is the word 'leader' (or 'leadership') that stands out and is heard.

Within this discussion of ministry and leadership, Paul Fiddes has argued for 'a dynamic view of authority in the community, in which oversight flows to and fro between the personal and the communal'.³¹ Leadership is accepted as necessary but

is something shared between minister and church meeting, and both are empowered and enabled to bring oversight and direction to one another. This emerges out of a growing 'trust' and willingness to 'serve', that characterises both the minister and the members.

Behind this article lies a concern that we may adopt the language of leaders and leadership uncritically and that we do not pay attention to how leadership functions within our Baptist understanding of church, which I would suggest (following Fiddes) does not see leadership existing solely in one person or a team, but as something dynamic and shared within the church. Leadership may come from the minister or deacons, but equally it may come from the church meeting as it deliberates and explores its life and mission. If as Baptists we are committed to congregational government, making decisions will sometimes take time and not be something presented merely to be ratified. We need to continue to explore and reflect on how we can create good processes that allow leadership, but which do not confine it to one or two people.

Andy Goodliff is currently training for Baptist ministry and completing an MTh in Applied Theology at Regent's Park College.

Notes to text

1. S. Western, *Leadership: a critical text*. London: Sage, 2008, p 25.
2. P. Beasley-Murray, *Dynamic leadership*. Eastbourne: MARC, 1990, p 10.
3. *Ibid*, p 10.
4. In P. Beasley-Murray (ed), *Anyone for ordination?* Eastbourne: MARC, 1993, p 161.
5. P. Beasley-Murray, *A call to excellence*. London: Hodder, 1995.

6. R. Warren, *The purpose-driven church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, p 31.
7. M. Breen & W. Kallestad, *The passionate church*. Ontario: NextGen, 2004, p 109 ff.
8. *Ibid*, p 111.
9. S. Croft, *Ministry in three dimensions*. London: DLT, 1999, p 22.
10. *Ibid*, p 109.
11. In J. Woodward & S. Pattison (eds), *The Blackwell reader in pastoral and practical theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p 289.
12. S. Pattison, *The challenge of practical theology*. London: J. Kingsley, 2007, p 87.
13. *Ibid*, p 88.
14. N. Wright, *Inclusive representation*, *BQ*, 2001, **39**(4), 164.
15. *Ibid*, p 165.
16. P. Fiddes, *Tracks and traces*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003, p 84.
17. In A. R. Cross & P. E. Thompson (eds), *Baptist sacramentalism*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003, p 229.
18. *Ibid*, p 242.
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21. J. Wallis, *Arthur Wallis: radical Christian*. Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991, p 137.
22. M. Percy, *Clergy: the origin of the species*. London: T & T Clark, 2006, p 1.
23. E. Payne & S. Windward, *Orders and prayers for church worship*. London: BUGB, 1967, p 218.
24. *Patterns and prayers for Christian worship*. Oxford: OUP, 1991, p 187.
25. *Ibid*, p 176.
26. *Ibid*, p 170.
27. M. Blyth & C. Ellis (eds), *Gathering for worship*. Norwich: Canterbury, 2005, p 121.
28. *Ibid*, p 125.
29. *Ibid*, p 114.
30. In L. Osborn & A. Walker (eds), *Harmful religion: explorations in religious abuse*. London: SPCK, 1997, pp 26-42.
31. P. Fiddes, *Tracks and traces*, p 87.

Reviews

edited by John Houseago

Spirituality or religion?

Do we have a choice?

Gethin Abraham-Williams

O Books, £11.99

ISBN 978 1 84694 149 8

Reviewed by John Rackley

Gethin Abraham-Williams raises these title questions because the current relationship between religion and spirituality would suggest that the answer is a resounding 'yes'. In recent times the two have bumped around each other like plastic ducks in the fast-flowing stream of culture and society. The relationship has been strained. Spirituality is seen as liberating; religion as controlling. Religion has maintained the structure and tradition of the relationship

of faith and God. Spirituality has come to represent the search for meaning and direction beyond the hindrance of formal systems of belief.

The author is well placed to explore this choppy arena, knowing some of the main protagonists and a lifetime spent crossing the religious borders. He declares that they need each other and the current state of uneasy stand-off is unnecessary. His response includes:

- a) the story of Branwen contained within the Celtic epic, *The Mabinogion*;
- b) an extended series of reflections on the Lukan version of the Transfiguration using the innovative translation of John Henson's *Good as New Bible*;
- c) stories from his own life, especially in the ecumenical movement and in meeting people of other faiths.

It is all written in a lyrical style that beguiles whilst it explores, for there is a sharpness of analy-

sis beneath the surface that is not satisfied with easy answers.

His answer is this: we need compassionate religion and realistic spirituality. The former has been challenged and eclipsed by spirituality, yet they have both lost their memory. Religion has forgotten that it has its roots in the borderless energy of spiritual searching. Spirituality, in its contemporary upwelling, has forgotten the sifting and testing power of belief and behaviour: *ie* if what you believe is not making a difference to the deepest needs of culture and society it's not making any difference at all. So the author argues that spirituality is the inspiration of religion, yet the latter is the memory that will provides the grounding that will prevent spirituality getting lost in its own excitement.

Chapters on the environment, institutional evil, and racism discuss the way in which spirituality can make a significant difference to culture, where the

religious systems have not.

The author looks at the current debate over believing and belonging and ecumenism, and finally a pastoral chapter on life beyond death, inviting both religion and spirituality to come to our service at the point when all talk ceases; where we wait on the welcome of eternity, and the Transfiguration is not history but our destiny.

The call and the commission

R. Frost, D. Wilkinson, & J. Cox (eds)

Paternoster, 2009

ISBN 978-1-84227-608-2

Reviewed by Nigel Coles

The call and the commission is certainly a timely contribution to a growing debate around questions concerning 'the challenge of how the Church equips a new generation of leaders for a different world' (the books'

strapline). It's never going to be a best seller, but the issues it raises really need to be addressed by all us who are concerned about the future of the church here in the UK.

Twelve different contributors provide a variety of different denominational perspectives, which allows this book to be read without too much individual defensiveness (I hope). Potentially, *The call and the commission* provides the opportunity for us to recognise that our contemporary challenges are bigger than any one church stream can adequately answer.

It was useful to hear how one college principal is genuinely grappling with these challenges as well as to hear the more radical elements, which could easily throw out the baby with the bathwater. In many ways this is a book, which succeeds in bringing together a variety of the voices and perspectives which need to be heard if we are to

move significantly beyond providing for what is, as opposed to reaching for what could be.

So what does the book offer?

It challenges us to re-examine the connections between initial ministerial formation and present expectations: for example, 'if you graduated before 1985, you were trained to lead a church that no longer exists'.

It will challenge Baptists, in particular, about the tensions between nature of church 'leadership' and 'ministry'.

It will offer hope – in what God is doing in spite of our systems.

It could open our eyes to the ways in which the cultural shifts we are embroiled in may not all be negative after all. However, at the very least we need to engage with them more fully.

I think that whatever the focus of our own particular sense of gifting within the fondly termed 'five-fold ministries', this book could prove a helpful stimulus

for further reflection towards the ongoing development for any minister – because when all is said and done, a three or four year ministerial formation period can only ever provide so much and then everything following that is in our own hands. It offers insights and glimpses into pathways for the future even though we may have some radical rethinking to engage in.

Let the Bible be itself

by Ray Vincent

O Books, 2009, £11.99

ISBN 978-1-84694-148-1

Reviewed by Robert Draycott

What is the Bible? That appears to be a very simple question for Christians to answer. Obviously it is the Word of God, but having said that it is clear that Christians do not agree on 'how' it is God's word. Ray Vincent has written the sort of book

from which every Christian could benefit. His intention is clearly stated in the title, *Let the Bible be itself*: in other words, the author is offering an alternative to some of the stridently authoritarian attempts to hijack the Bible for what is ultimately a human agenda, however well intentioned that may be.

The subtitle is also very instructive, *Learning to read it aright*. One of my convictions after many years in the ministry is that most Christians do not in fact read the Bible, because they do not know how to. In Ray Vincent we have a trusty guide whose book could enable people to read the 'good book' profitably and with understanding. The author knows that people have great expectations of God's book and he begins by gently pointing out that 'the Bible in fact says remarkably little about God'. He then explains that if we take it as the 'Maker's instructions' then it is

extremely confusing, and that one could wonder how it ever came to be called the 'good book'. Some readers may already be horrified by these snippets, but the whole point of the first chapter is to ask the fundamental question: 'what if it was never really meant to be any of these things? Any book will disappoint or offend us if we misunderstand its nature'.

The second chapter sets out to answer the question, 'What is the Bible really like?'. First, it honours the underdog; for example, 'the whole story of the Exodus conveys a message subversive of all imperial power'. Although it seems an irreverent thing to say, much of the Bible is the product of the imagination. This contention is clearly explained and illustrated so that 'we can see the Bible in a whole new light'. Lack of imagination is surely one of the major weaknesses in the Christian use of the Bible, but it is an unsurpris-

ing fault if one cannot allow the possibility of any biblical writers, let alone Jesus himself, using the imagination to convey meaning and spiritual truth.

Who were these writers of what is 'not actually a book at all but a collection of many books'? The third chapter explains the process whereby words, speeches, stories, liturgical material, laws *etc* were collected together to become writings. These in turn became 'Scriptures', and in a further step they became the Bible. The fourth chapter then explains why those books were included while others were excluded.

The next two chapters look at questions of authority and interpretation. Because these two factors are intertwined the argument needs to be considered as a whole. In this review I want to give a brief taste of Ray Vincent's approach and commend its coherence and its relevance. One example must suffice: the

author contends that no-one has escaped the 'impact of modern ways of thinking about the Bible. Those who now hold a fundamentalist or conservative view of the authority of scripture hold it self-consciously and defensively'. One only needs to keep an eye on the letter pages of Christian periodicals to see how true this is; not for many Christians is Spurgeon's comment: 'defend the Bible, I would as soon defend a lion'. In other words, in being defensive (subconsciously at least), such Christians are recognising the weakness of the claims to biblical inerrancy.

I have sought to inform potential readers of the value of this work, which is readable, sensible, sensitive, irenic, coherent, clear, illuminating and instructive. I thoroughly recommend it because I believe that if Christians follow these pointers they will be able to read, mark and learn from the Bible in a fresh

way which empowers their Christian pilgrimage.

Book reviewers wanted

It is some years since I last edited this section of the *BMJ*. I have long since deleted the list of people who wrote reviews. Many new people have entered the ministry. So, I need a new list!

If you would be willing to write a review please email or write to me. My contact details are on the inside front cover. I'll try to get the books to you about 6 weeks before the review is due. Reviews are usually about 400 words in length, and you get to keep the book! Please let me know if there are particular subject areas that interest you.

John Houseago