

the baptist ministers'
journal

January 2012 volume 313

Godly decision making

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From the editor

Hello, goodbye and thank you

A happy and peaceful New Year to all readers, and I do hope there will be something in this mixed issue that you will enjoy reading. Feedback on articles is always welcome, either directly to the author or to myself, and please do get in touch if you'd like to put pen to paper yourself.

We need to thank, and give thanks to God for, the service of some BMF officers. Ted Hale stands down as ex-chair at our AGM, and we have been grateful for his input over the years. Ron Day (current chair) and Jenny Few, recently appointed as vice-chair (to be ratified at the AGM) will continue the work. Niels Waugh, who has so faithfully administered our finances, stands down at the AGM also, but will be handing over to Ronnie Hall from this January. Please contact Ronnie about finance from now on.

Thanks too to all those who serve the BMF as local reps and in other ways. If you do not have a rep in your area, do consider standing or encouraging someone else. Please also encourage ministers in your patch to join BMF if they are not already members—often people think they belong automatically.

Every blessing for 2012 to you in your ministry. *SN*

Justice rolls on

November 2011 saw the launch of the Disability Justice Group (DJG), part of the BU's trinity of Equality and Diversity committees (the others being the Racial and Gender Justice Groups), with Rev Glen Graham as Convenor.

The Disability Justice Group is keen to stay close to its roots and plans to consult with churches, individuals with disabilities, and existing groups such as BUILD and Prospects. Initial tasks for the Group include collecting data about the kinds of needs within our churches, producing guidance on language about disabilities, and looking at accessibility—not just physical, but also cognitive and sensory access.

For more information please see the BU website <http://www.baptist.org.uk/justice.html> and look for 'disability'.

Godly decision making

by Barrie Smith

What is the purpose of the deacons' meeting? I believe it is to give *godly leadership* to the church. By this I mean that the leadership offered (given the constraints of being human!) should be as close to the will of God as it is possible for people to discern. There is, of course, a legal requirement that deacons be the managing trustees of a local church, and there are responsibilities which flow from that. I do not want to undermine these responsibilities, but the primary task of the deacons must be that of trying to discern the will of God, and then offering that discernment to the church so that it can be tested.

People who become deacons

It is really important that the calibre of the people who serve on the diaconate be as high as possible, so that there can be nothing in them to prevent them from being able to discern what God is saying, or of having their discernment rejected by the church members on the basis of their personalities. Not only is it important to consider the qualities of the individuals concerned from the perspective of how others will regard what they do and say—we should also consider whether someone's experience of life has so blunted their perception that they will be unable to discern that which God may be doing or saying. Just as people can be brutalised by repeatedly violent behaviour, so that they are immediately ready to react with defensive violence to anything that happens around them, so people whose lives leave God 'out' will find it hard to sense what God might be doing and saying. As Moberley (p 132) would put it: 'What matters for present purposes is the principal that when it comes to seeing God—which is in essence the nature of discernment—the condition of the qualities of the person who would see may be crucial in either enabling or disabling the act of seeing...?'

Everything that we do or say is overlaid by memories, some of which may be partly forgotten, but which continue to have an impact upon the views we express and actions we undertake. When it comes to trying to discern the mind of Christ, the background experiences of the people exercising discernment need to be taken into consideration.

The search for high calibre individuals to serve as deacons is not a matter of moral prudence, but a matter of selecting individuals sufficiently sensitive to God to recognise God's leading and know what is possibly within God's will. Walter Wink (p 103) notes that 'Liberation from negative socialisation and internalised oppression is a never completed task in the discernment of spirits. To exercise this discernment, we need eyes that can see the invisible. To break the spell of delusion, we need a vision of God's domination-free order and a way to implement it'.

Deacons' meetings

Whenever people meet for a common purpose, they always set about their task with a given understanding of the best way forward. In the church we have become formally organised and decision-oriented, with the objective of the deacons' meeting often appearing to be primarily efficiency. The agenda-bound procedure, with its carefully numbered items, has channelled our thinking patterns into the mould of a business meeting which has to be effective in terms of its output of decisions and recommendations and efficient in terms of getting to those decisions and recommendations as quickly as possible.

On occasion the meeting may become adversarial, with the opposing viewpoints being expressed so that in the clash of ideas something useful may emerge. The upshot is that a community which speaks about its love for God as a father finds that its principal leadership occasion is the least relaxed and the most formalised moment in the life of the church. There is a contradiction here, where the intimacy and gentleness of the parent-child relationship, which can best be described as love, is governed by a ritualised pattern of decision-making that is more dependent upon procedure than on relationship.

The meeting programme

To fulfil the objective of making the diaconate a place where godly leadership is offered to the church, the meeting could be shaped around the only worship event that was described by Jesus and which may draw out the best from all the participants. Leonardo Boff (p 19) comments that 'we may think of (Jesus') prayer as summing up the quintessence of his purpose and mission'. So if there is to be a statement that expresses comprehensively the most significant desires of each believer, it is the Lord's Prayer.

The Lord's Prayer provides a structure that is theologically complete and may provide a suitable framework for the programme of leadership meetings. It starts with concerns about God himself: that he shall be worshipped; that he shall be hallowed; and that his

kingdom may come here on earth. Then it focuses upon the individual needs of the worshipper or the worshipping community for daily sustenance, for forgiveness and personal integrity.

This sequence of petitions can be seen to divide into a number of sections, each of which has an overall theme. Each theme could be the deciding factor about the issues which are debated at each deacons' meeting, because these are the themes that Jesus selected as the most significant. This structure could result in a deacons' meeting programme as follows.

1. Worship for the encouragement of the deacons.
2. How have the Sunday and midweek worship programmes been going? What plans are needed for upcoming festival occasions? What overall developments would be good?
3. The mission of the church, including long and short term plans for outreach: evangelistic and social; local; national and international.
4. Minutes of the previous meeting, finance and fabric reports.
5. Review of the last month. Matters for concern.
6. Pastoral concerns and the teaching programme of the church.
7. How we discern God's will

Discernment

We must now turn to the process we use for discerning the mind of Christ. It is something that is occasionally achieved quickly, but frequently requires much prayerful thought, research and examination. It occurs both individually and collectively.

Individually. How might we try to discern the mind of Christ for ourselves individually? Pierre Wolff (p 22) draws attention to Caiaphas, who was the Jewish high priest during the time of Jesus' ministry. John the gospel writer says of Caiaphas: 'He was inspired to say...Jesus' death would be not for Israel only, but for the gathering together of all the children of God scattered around the world' (John 11: 51-52). Wolff describes this verse as a song sung by one of Jesus' adversaries but which, nevertheless, 'resounds with the truth'.

Wolff goes on to say that within this song four melodies can be identified, each a significant sequence which, put together, allowed Caiaphas to be correct about Jesus and which, if they were reflected in every decision that is made, would allow every believer

to follow God's preferred opinion on whatever is topic in hand.

This sequence can be presented as a set of criteria for choosing (Wolff, pp 23-24):

1. Which solution will give me the opportunity to be incarnate...to accept the here and now of the situation I am dealing with?
2. Which solution will give me the possibility of giving and being given up...to be given up through openness, welcoming and vulnerability?
3. Which solution will open my person to universality...to be open to all the currents of the society I live in?
4. Which solution will best permit me to leave bonds among the ones I meet...to build communion among them and with them?

Those four tests, when applied to any decision that we need to make, would direct us towards a decision that is genuinely Christ-like. We may not personally enjoy the outcome, but we may be able to take some satisfaction from knowing that if these decisions were made, the outcome would be of a similar nature to that which Jesus would do were he in our position.

Collectively. The second thing is to be aware of is the way in which the individuals in each meeting react and respond to each other. Suzanne Farnham (p 57) has listed 10 points as guidelines, which could help towards the goal of spiritual discernment. Two more have been added to make explicit the moment of decision-making.

1. Take time to become settled in God's presence.
2. Listen to others with your entire self (senses feelings intuition imagination and rational faculties).
3. Do not interrupt.
4. Pause between speakers to absorb what has been said.
5. Do not formulate what you want to say while someone else is speaking.
6. Speak for yourself only, expressing your own thoughts and feelings referring to your own experiences. Avoid being hypothetical. Steer away from broad generalisations.
7. Do not challenge what others say.
8. Listen to the group as a whole, to those who have not spoken aloud as well as to those who have.
9. Generally, leave space for anyone...

10. ...who may want to speak for the first time, before speaking a second time yourself.
11. Hold your desires and opinions, even your convictions lightly.
12. Pause for prayer, silent or audible.
13. Express what you sense God is saying to you.

Decisions of principle and note

When it comes to making group decisions about significant matters, it is important to ensure that each participant is fully aware of the way in which that decision is to be made. Personal discernment is the prerequisite of any group decision. Because such discernment is a personal process, there could be elements within it that are so distinctly individual that there is little initial agreement between two or more people who are seeking to discern the mind of Christ on the same issue. Therefore it is important to have a way of discernment so that a clear decision can be reached with which everyone can concur, if not agree. The space for those who cannot agree is important. The task here is a delicate blend of activities and experience, which may lead people to different conclusions. Experience suggests that occasionally a minority voice turns out to be correct. So there must always be a place for the dissenter and a holding lightly to the eventual decision.

The Jesuit Ignatius Loyola devised a process of group discernment. Commentary upon this process can be found in David Lonsdale's writing (p 126). Based on that process, it would be possible when dealing with big decisions of principle and note to have a procedure spread over several occasions, as follows.

1. The issue is outlined, with the implications of agreement or disagreement presented.
2. Each group member goes away having agreed prayerfully to explore the matter biblically, from church history, from contemporary secular writing and from their own perspective.
3. At the next meeting each person in turn outlines the reasons they have discovered against the proposal. The virtues of all the negatives are discussed and the reasons put in order of significance.
4. Then each person outlines the reasons they have discovered in favour of the proposal. The virtues of all the positives are discussed and the reasons put in order of significance.
5. The matter is then discussed with the virtue of each negative and positive being ex-

plored, some being accepted and some being discounted. Then each individual can offer their newly formed personal view on the proposal. If there is a common agreement the matter has been resolved, if there is not common agreement the discussion is scheduled for another occasion after a similar round of individual preparation work based upon what has been said thus far.

The challenge is that few people within each local church may be able to undertake this level of exploration. There is a role here for the theologically educated minister or other person within the life of the church, or perhaps from the wider fellowship of churches who have committed themselves to each other.

Godly decision making

One of the great promises that Jesus made is ‘where two or three gather together because they are mine, I am there among them’ (Matthew 18). It is possible that Matthew was trying to indicate that some difficult decisions will have to be made in the life of the church, and that it is important that such decisions should be resolved in a context where people are explicitly gathering as followers of Jesus. Their primary reason for meeting together, and the procedures they use, are bound up with their faith; therefore the outcome at which they arrive should also be bound up with their faith. So church decisions are to be made with explicit reference to God and to godly process. The outcome can be a remarkable sense of unity among the participants, tempered by due humility. That is the moment at which the group discerns the mind of Christ for the issue of the day.

Barrie Smith is a regional minister in HEBA, email b.s57@btinternet.com. The full version of this article, with appendices, may be found at <http://www.baptist-heartofengland.org/index.php/vision/leading-issues>.

Further reading

- L. Boff, *The Lord's Prayer*. Orbis Books, 1979.
- S. Farnham, S. Hull & R. T. McLean, *Grounded in God*. Moorhouse Publishing, 1996.
- D. Lonsdale, *Listening to the music of the Spirit*. Darton, Longman & Todd, 1992.
- R. W. Moberley, *Prophecy and discernment*. CUP, 2006.
- C. M. Olson, *Transforming church boards*. The Alban Institute, 1995.
- S. Pattison, *The faith of the managers*. Cassell, 1997.
- W. Wink, *Engaging the powers*. Augsburg Fortress Press, 1992.
- P. Wolff, *Discernment—the art of choosing well*. Liguori/Triumph, 1993.

Liberal theology among Baptists

by Philip Clements-Jewery

Whatever else we may wish to say about Baptist life today, it is not balanced equally between theological liberals and theological conservatives. Over the past 40 years, theological liberals have become an endangered species among Baptists. My own faith was born and nurtured in the conservative evangelical tradition and I shall forever remain grateful for that grounding in Christian faith and life. But my ministerial training exposed me to other ways of expressing faith, and I found that the theological horizon was much further away than I had previously thought. I regard this as a necessary part of my spiritual development. A number of theologians have written on the theme of escaping from fundamentalism.¹ And, yes, it did and still does feel like a liberation.

If my internal pendulum has since swung back towards the centre, I have always sought to be free in my theological thinking. Over my years in ministry I have met both those who have wanted something deeper and more thoughtful than they had previously been offered, and those who have been deeply hurt by their treatment at the hands of fundamentalists.

Grace, order, openness, diversity

My thinking for this article has been stimulated by reading Ian Bradley's *Grace, order, openness and diversity*.² Bradley notes that in the King James Bible the word 'liberal' is used 'to denote generosity, open-heartedness, benevolence and an attitude of blessing'.³ However, liberalism in theology has often emphasised its intellectual and rational aspects. It has sought to be open to contemporary thought and culture, to welcome the insights of biblical criticism, and to engage in dialogue with the physical and social sciences, the arts, politics, and other faiths—giving rise to the common criticism that liberal theology tends to bend to every new wind. So, in addition to openness and diversity, grace and order are also necessary.

Grace. Bradley's thinking is based on the contention that a liberal outlook is rooted in the nature of God as Trinity. The first characteristic of true liberalism in theology is grace, primarily associated with the first person of the Trinity. Liberals emphasise 'God's open,

generous, perpetually forgiving nature, while not ignoring themes of judgement and righteous indignation which are also present in the scriptures'.⁴ However, there may be a difference between Christian liberal and conservative evangelical understandings of grace, with liberals emphasising the 'primary, foundational, prevenient nature of God's grace (seeing) it in terms of a disposition to bless, while evangelicals tend to lay more stress on the specifically salvific and redeeming aspects of what they refer to as "saving grace"'.⁵

While liberals would agree that grace certainly does have a salvific function, they would also claim that grace abounds not just for sinners and not only to deal with sin. Liberals, to be sure, do not accept Richard Niebuhr's caricature of their theology: 'A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross'.⁶ In fact, the flaws and failings of both individuals and society are acknowledged by liberals. Liberals, therefore, would wish to rebut the charge that they downplay the holiness of God. Nevertheless, they assert that to relate grace exclusively to sin is to belittle God and to narrow the scope of God's dealings with humanity.

One area of Baptist disagreement with liberal theology lies in the way it may consider an emphasis on grace to favour the baptism of infants rather than believers.⁷ To some liberals, infant baptism perfectly expresses the doctrine of prevenient grace, while believers' baptism, by tying grace to a definite and particular conversion experience and turning it into a personal possession, seems to them to imply a restriction of grace. To be sure, some ways of speaking of baptism among Baptists provide support for this criticism: for example, when baptism is spoken of as a witness to the faith of the baptised rather than as a witness to the saving act of God in Christ, by which baptism becomes an expression of the faith of the church in Jesus as Lord. The problem, on both sides of the debate, surely lies in the sundering of divine and human action in baptism. Fortunately, a renewed interest in the nature of the sacraments among Baptists,⁸ may help us to recover the meaning of believers' baptism as a means of grace, 'a human event through which a divine event occurs'.⁹

Order. The second characteristic of liberal theology is order, which is related to the second person of the Trinity, the Logos. Admittedly, to many

Baptism is a witness to the saving act of God in Christ and expresses the church's faith that Jesus is Lord

people 'order' may suggest the kind of regulation, control and authority that contradict liberal values. It is important, therefore, to link order with grace so that it may be 'understood as rhythm, harmony and balance, but also as limitation, boundary and self-restraint'.¹⁰

In emphasising order, theological liberalism may be open to the criticism that it has a tendency to rationalism. Nevertheless, this emphasis on order does allow us to affirm that the ethical outworking of a liberal theology is not licence, but rather a strenuous, selfless ethic,¹¹ not an ideology of 'anything goes', but a commitment to the way of Jesus.

Openness. The third distinguishing characteristic of liberal theology is openness, seen as one of the essential attributes of God, and related in particular to the role and working of the Holy Spirit.¹² The words of Jesus in John 16 about the Spirit 'guiding into all truth' are therefore to be interpreted in terms of progressive revelation, implying that there is always more to be revealed and that the New Testament may not be the last word from God.¹³ Truth for the liberal is nothing but a work still in progress, never complete and always open to new insights and interpretations. It involves constant questioning and values doubt and uncertainty.

Such a stance has deep roots, for it belongs to the apophatic tradition in Christian thought with its insistence that faith embraces mystery. Liberal theology cannot therefore be accused of excluding mystery. A sense of mystery may, however, be missing from many contemporary expressions of Baptist life and worship. However, the embrace of mystery by liberal theology also stands alongside the commitment to reason with which it is more commonly associated. Openness to liberals does not mean their faith becomes vacuous; the epithet 'woolly' as applied to liberals is to be rejected. Rather, liberal openness is rooted in stability and order, and in the end is nothing less than a response to the free and generous outpouring of God's grace and love.

Diversity. So we come to the diversity and pluralism that appeal to the liberal mind. Liberal theology identifies diversity as a key characteristic of the triune God. The divine Persons of the Trinity form their unity through diversity. The Trinity, then, for liberal theologians, is the starting point for an open, pluralistic theology that embraces the other. It is possible, that in thinking about God, conservatives tend to emphasise unity and exclusiveness, and liberals diversity and open plurality.

What, then, of 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14.6), a saying that on the surface does not appear to offer much room for religious diversity? There is more than one way of interpreting Jesus' self-description. The saying does not necessarily carry a closed, exclusive meaning,

and it is balanced by other statements from Jesus expressing a preference for diversity and pluralism.¹⁴ The liberal theologian, therefore, may have a preference for the inclusivist view of the relationship between Christianity and other faiths, with Christ gathering all to himself in unity. Christ as the Logos embraces all faiths and is to be found within them even when he is not explicitly acknowledged.

The balance between unity and diversity also finds expression in the quest for church unity. But there are other areas where this key liberal theological principle also needs emphasising, for instance in countering the drive to establish and enforce a single view on highly contentious issues. 'The mind of Christ' need not imply that we need be all of one opinion. There are some issues, such as attitudes to war, where we live with different opinions. Why should diversity be accepted in some cases while on other issues (*eg* homosexuality) it is not?

Another criticism that is often levelled at liberals of both the theological and political kind is that their radicalism is of the armchair variety. Liberalism may be the creed of the comfortable and of the optimistically naïve. There may be a measure of truth in this. On the other hand, conservative evangelicalism may have an especial appeal for people from economically or emotionally deprived backgrounds.

Concluding thoughts

So, in conclusion, what of my original question: can liberal theology still find acceptance among Baptists? The four liberal values of grace, order, openness and diversity need to be balanced by other values: judgement, freedom, faithfulness, and unity respectively. Conservatives can help liberals achieve that balance, but conservatives may also need the help of liberals to achieve a similar balance. Liberals also may need the help of conservatives to engage with issues of God's holiness, sin and human depravity, and the call to repentance and humility, while conservatives, again, may need the help of liberals to adopt attitudes of blessing and affirmation in the face of the temptation to become intolerant, judgemental, and narrowly focused. To adopt the liberal values of graciousness and generosity is not necessarily to show weakness, but requires the strength to confront all that threatens to diminish human beings created in God's image.

The answer to my question therefore may be: can Baptists afford not to accept liberal theology? The healthy balance of the whole body may depend on it. I suggest that the Baptist Union's Declaration of Principle actually grants us permission to be liberal in our outlook, because for Baptists, authority resides not in the Bible *per se*, but in the living Christ present among his people by the Spirit. We are bound, not to any creed or statement of faith, but to a commitment to listen to God speaking to us through one an-

other as well as through the Bible. This requires a degree of patient humility, and not always an insistence on the rightness of our way of seeing things.

We also need to be able to retain in our churches those who are moving away from a conservative view rather than let them disappear out of the back door. Our young people are asking questions, especially in the face of the new atheist onslaught upon faith and its ethical outcomes and the proliferation of TV programmes about science and the origins of life and of the universe. The old simplistic answers may no longer be enough. This will require much patient pastoring, careful teaching and sensitive preaching, but we need to help people see that giving liberal thinking more space among us, rather than impoverishing and weakening our witness, will instead enrich and strengthen it.

Philip Clements-Jewery, who retired last year from the pastorate of New North Road BC, Huddersfield, can be contacted on philip.clementsjewery@gmail.com. This article is a shortened version of a paper given at the Northern Baptist Theological Consultation at Blackley on 7 April 2011.

Notes to text

1. James Barr and Keith Ward are just two names that come to mind.
2. Ian Bradley, *Grace, order, openness and diversity: reclaiming liberal theology*. London: Continuum, 2010.
3. Bradley, p 1.
4. Bradley, p 41.
5. Bradley, p 49.
6. H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*. Chicago: Willett, Clarke & Co, 1937, p 173.
7. Bradley, p 53.
8. See John Colwell, *Promise and Presence*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005.
9. Colwell, p 133.
10. Bradley, p 73.
11. Bradley, p 89
12. Bradley, p 102
13. Bradley, p 107. See also the hymn by George Rawson which was inspired by the words of Separatist pastor and Pilgrim Father, John Robinson, *We limit not the truth of God*, with its refrain: 'The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word'.
14. *eg* John 10.16.

All-age services

by Ashley Lovett

All-age services seem to be Sunday's equivalent of Marmite. Some people love them; others hate them. What follows is my attempt to explain to those who hate all-age services why I think they are an important part of our time together as God's people, and what I hope to achieve through them.

First, all-age services are not services exclusively for children (just as no service should ever be exclusively for adults); rather they are services in which children are involved along with the adults. They are services that are meant to be accessible to all ages.

Being accessible to all ages does not mean that all the content is aimed at five year olds. If anything, the all-age services I lead have been weighted towards the adults—for the obvious reason that there are more adults than children present. Ideally there should be good material to engage everyone.

The theological basis of all-age services is a belief that God intends to bring people together in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28). Keeping people in separate groups (as we often tend to with children on Sundays) is ultimately a denial of the gospel and undermines the church's witness to the world.

This belief does not mean that all our services should be all-age—we can bring people together and work towards the sense of unity that God desires for us in Christ in many ways—but it does mean that we must from time to time demonstrate this gospel imperative in the activity that currently most defines who we are.

In other words, if we say we believe the gospel is about bringing people together (in and through Jesus, through forgiveness, through the presence of his Spirit *etc*) but we don't try to work that through in a Sunday service, then we aren't practising what we're preaching. We must be who we say we are or we should shut up!

In summary, I think that all-age services are important because they get to the heart of who we are as God's people: gathered by God into a body of all ages, different genders, from different backgrounds, with varying capabilities and so forth—and not a group that has simply chosen itself.

All-age services are not (as I have said) the only way we express this. But they are a very important way of doing so, because in most congregations there is no other opportunity for us to join together as a whole church in a shared act of worship, in shared learning (which includes learning from each other), and in a shared reflection on what it means to serve God together as his people.

All-age worship: the aims

What do I hope to achieve through all-age services?

The answer is: lots of things!—but let me first affirm that my vision is for all-age services as a regular part of our life together and not any one all-age service. I am looking at a big picture or taking a long view. The following seven points describe what I hope all-age services will achieve over time.

1. I hope that a regular pattern of all-age services will strengthen our identity as the church together. We are not disparate individuals who happen to collide on Sunday mornings. We are the body of Christ, called to him and called into renewed relationships with each other, and gathered into this fellowship to discover and then live out together his purposes for our lives and for this community. All-age services are one important tool in strengthening that identity.
2. I hope that all-age services will enable children to see themselves as valued members of the church—those who have something to contribute and whose contribution will be listened to because we are acknowledging that God can speak through children as much as he does through adults. As a result children will not see themselves as brought along simply to be entertained.
3. I hope that all-age services will teach adults to value the place of children in the kingdom of God and recognise that we have things to learn from them, as Jesus said (Matthew 18:1-5). Is there a more telling word for us today than Jesus' reprimand of his disciples who wanted to keep children in their place? (Matthew 19:13-15) Let them come, he said. Let them come!
4. I hope that a regular pattern of all-age services will communicate to those currently outside the church that we belong to a community which makes everyone welcome. In particular, given our ageing congregations, we are a community in which there is a welcome for younger people and families. All-age services are an important part of our witness.

Sample outline for an all-age service/Pentecost

Theme: *We are his prophets*

Welcome

Story: Moses' wish¹

Song: Be still, for the presence of the Lord

Simple prayer

Offering and prayer

Activities²

Youngest children: making tongues of fire

Older children/youth: dressing the OT prophet

Adults: 'Name the prophets' challenge

Reading: Acts 2:17-18 (CEV), by OT prophet!³

Songs: Peace like a river (Come Holy Spirit)

Spirit of the living God

Simple one-line prayer:⁴

God of Pentecost, thank you for keeping your promise to send your Spirit, fill us again today, so that we might live and speak for you. Amen.

Story: The Holy Spirit comes⁵

Simple comment and discussion:⁶

We have God's Spirit in us = we are his prophets

We are the ones that God wants to speak for him

What things do you think he wants us say?

Prayer in song: Thuma mina⁷

Video clip: It's Pentecost!⁸ *

A challenge: to say something for God this week

Simple one-line prayer

God who spoke through Jesus, give us the right words at the right times, so that we might say something that makes a difference this week. Amen.

Song: O God of burning, cleansing flame

Simple blessing

* downloaded with permission from www.workingpreacher.org

Notes on the Pentecost service opposite

1. *Storytelling is a key part of all-age services because stories can work at a number of levels. This story was based on Numbers 11, highlighting v 29—Moses' wish that all were prophets—and was used to set the scene. It should be noted that I follow the Revised Common Lectionary and try to work with one or two of the set readings for that day.*

2. *Activities are a great way of getting the children involved but can exclude older ones and most adults, leading to the suspicion that all-age services are really just childrens' services. For this reason I try to have activities for everyone.*

3. *Dressing someone up as an OT prophet (as if I knew how they were dressed) was just done for fun!*

4. *The way we pray can be one of the most alienating aspects of our services. My preference for all-age services is to have a few short one or two sentence prayers.*

5. *The more participative a story is, the more effective it can be. The story in Acts 2 invites creative telling. The younger children waved their (crêpe paper) tongues of fire while the older ones and adults joined in as the wind or by speaking other languages.*

6. *Although I have one point to make, which I try to keep simple, I like to engage everyone in thinking about what this might mean for them.*

7. *Our use of music and song in all-age services can add or detract from the whole. I try to use songs that underline the theme and invite some kind of response to it. Thuma Mina was just brilliant for this service and it was simple enough for everyone.*

8. *I like multimedia resources, but I think it pays to be selective. My preference is only to use video or other media when there's a good link to the theme. Ideally I would choose something short.*

5. I hope that all-age services will help those who struggle with a more didactic (or learning-focused) approach to discipleship to grow in their faith and obedience to Christ's call. We do not all engage with God in the same way, and worship is not just about forming minds but whole people. All-age services are intentionally less didactic and more creative for this reason.

That said, I am convinced that for those who listen and reflect on the theme being explored (albeit through the media of stories, games, crafts, video and music rather than in a sermon), there is more than enough to stimulate and challenge them. If nothing else we read the Bible, and God will always speak through the Word if we are prepared to listen!

6. I hope that all-age services will enable the less academic and the more artistic (not the same thing), to feel that they also have something to contribute to the life of the church. God has given us a variety of people with a diversity of gifts. All-age services are one way of celebrating that and of encouraging those whose gifts are not currently being used to offer them to the life of the church.

7. Finally, I hope that a regular pattern of all-age services will allow us to have some fun together on a Sunday. Without doubt the church is guilty of taking itself too seriously at times. We need to lighten up. And we need to do that in the context of worship and in the presence of God and not just at other times. *Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about too many things!*

In conclusion, I want to make an appeal and then offer a final comment to any who are still unconvinced about all-age worship.

The appeal is this: all-age services are hard work to prepare and hard work to deliver. They invite a greater contribution from others and therefore are likely to fall flat when those contributions are not forthcoming. You may not have enjoyed all-age services before, but that doesn't mean you won't in the future—but even if you're not convinced, then at least recognise the effort that goes in and support those who work so hard.

The final comment is this: stop griping, you get all the other services your way (Philippians 2:3-5)!

Ashley Lovett is minister of Socketts Heath Baptist Church in Grays and can be contacted on ashley.lovett@virgin.net.

Incarnational retirement ministry

by David Doonan

In 2003, after 24 years with BMS in Brazil and 16 years in a south London suburban church, we moved to a tiny village in northwest Essex. The removal truck was unloading our furniture, and we needed milk to make the removal men a cuppa—so I walked the 500m to the shop/post office—the only shop in the village. The postmistress greeted me with the words: ‘You must be David’. ‘Yes’, I said cautiously, ‘how did you know?’ ‘Oh, everyone in the village knows you’re coming’, was her reply!

This was my introduction to village life and ministry. Of course, our arrival was a little different from the arrival of other new villagers. We came with an obvious identity—I was minister of the Baptist church. This culture was to be very different from ministry in London. The Baptist church, or chapel, as some call it, has been in the village for over 200 years. Between 1843 and 1846 baptisms totalled 63 and the church reached its membership peak, with 124 members in 1847. By the time we came in 2003, the membership stood at 16 and with deaths and people moving away it declined to 8 members at one point.

This calling is a retirement ministry. The church cannot afford even half a BUGB recommended stipend and therefore would not be considered for a Home Mission grant. With a good suite of buildings and a manse it is in a better position than many small churches, but the future is still precarious. Is it possible to maintain and grow the church’s life in a missional way? Indeed, is there any point in seeking to maintain this outpost of the Kingdom?

Opportunities

As I write, I have just led the Remembrance Day service at the village war memorial. I alternate with the vicar year on year, because she ministers in a neighbouring village also. Some 100 or more village folk stood in silence to remember the village dead in two world wars. This morning I took the early bus into the town four miles away. On the bus I met ‘Olga’ (I’ve changed names in this article). Olga comes to our lunch club in the chapel (I call the building ‘the chapel’ and the people, ‘the church’) We

talked about ‘the real meaning of Christmas and about bereavement and loss. The first time I took this bus, Olga introduced me to the five other passengers as ‘the minister of the Baptist church, where I go to lunch club’. In town I met Shirley from the village, who lost her husband earlier this year, and we chatted about how she was coping. On my way home I dropped into our toddler club, where my wife had welcomed parents and toddlers and engaged in interesting conversations with them.

Yesterday we worshipped with around 15 others. But ‘church’ for many of our contacts does not involve attending on Sunday mornings. The church’s involvement with people includes the lunch club, which 30 senior citizens attend, and are given lunch and ministered to in various ways. With a vision for the future, the church built a new kitchen as its bicentenary project to serve the community better. Two ladies who had vowed never to set foot in either church or chapel are among those who attend the lunch club.

Our toddler club interacts with young folk and their children. My wife’s role as toddler club leader, advisor to the village pre-school committee, and a governor of the village school, has opened doors into the school community and families. We are invited to do assemblies and the school now holds its annual carol service in the chapel. Children and parents cram the small building to overflowing and the ‘real meaning of Christmas’ is emphasised. Classes from the school come to the chapel to have an explanation of ‘what Baptists believe’ and hear why we immerse believers instead of sprinkling babies.

Friendship and faith

‘Would you do it for me’? This was Walter’s request when his wife Grace died. ‘You know we are not church people, but I’d like you to do it, David’. I’ve played carpet bowls with Walter and Grace on Monday evenings in the village hall over the years, and have got to know people who rarely enter a church. When I bowl a good wood, which is not too often, they say, ‘You’ve been on your knees again this week’, or ‘You’ve got help from above that we don’t!’ and I tell them that ‘help from above’ is available to them too. Conversations on a bowls evening can range from bereavement and loss to what Baptists believe about this or that. At Grace’s funeral the chapel was packed with our bowls club members and members of clubs from surrounding villages. The gospel was preached and comfort and hope was offered.

I know there are questions about the missional effectiveness of a small church like this. If our focus is primarily on church membership statistics then perhaps this

church is not effective. When I am asked, 'Has your church grown in the past year?' I want to ask, 'What do you mean by growth?' If our focus is on numbers and doing things in the traditional Baptist way, perhaps we are breaking rules. At one stage, with only eight members and four deacons, I had to ask if it was necessary to have a deacons' meeting the week before the members' meeting or whether we could have a deacons' and members' meeting at the same time! If you really want statistics we have increased our membership by 50% recently by welcoming into membership two new couples! Our Sunday morning congregation has increased from eight or ten when we arrived to between 15 and 25.

It's not just about numbers

But it's not mainly about numbers, is it? It's about the opportunity to help church alienated folk to move a step or two along the 'Engel scale' towards the open-armed Christ who spent his time living and serving among village people.

'This was a new thought to me. I'd never understood it before'. This was Mary's comment on the concept of 'grace' explained in the Y course we recently held with the Anglicans. Mary had been told from childhood that she needed to earn God's love and forgiveness. To be told it is all by grace was a new truth for her. She has taken another step towards the Saviour. Margaret confessed that what she learned from the Y course was that it's about 'relationship with God and not just dogma'. Martin confessed, 'I may not have got to the Damascus Road yet but I have crossed the Channel and I'm on my way'!

This work is a retirement ministry and it is village life ministry. Is there a theology for this kind of ministry? I believe there is. On the retirement side, where does scripture tell me I have to stop ministering at 65? I am not taking the place of the next generation. The church cannot afford a younger, full-time, minister. While I have health and sufficient energy, why not enjoy the less pressurised and more relaxed ministry in a small but vibrant church and see God at work in Kingdom ways among the non-churched and perhaps the 'never to be churched' in the traditional way?

On the village side, this ministry is incarnational ministry. It requires living in the village; becoming part of the village life; being present in the school, on the bus, at the village museum, where the church secretary and organist is the curator and maintains his witness. Village ministry cannot be done by commuting into the village to 'conduct a service' on Sunday. This only keeps the traditional church life going until the elderly folk die off. Incarnational ministry means being there day in day out to hear and share the joys and sorrows of the village community and by being there have the opportunity to minister to them in their need.

I believe there is a challenge here for our denomination. While much energy is rightly spent on church planting, usually in urban areas, is there not a place for a strategy to energise and develop village churches so that the Kingdom witness they represent is not allowed to die out? There is also a challenge to those of us who come to retirement age: there is a ministry to be enjoyed in the many very small village churches who cannot come near to attracting the attention of Home Mission, but who can be light and salt in the hidden areas of our countryside. Can we ignore this opportunity to continue to serve while the Lord gives us health and vigour to continue the ministry to which he has called us for another few years?

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Whitley Lecture 2012 at the London Assembly

*Religious liberty in Europe and the Middle East:
campaigning by British Baptists 1840-1940*

by Ian Randall

In this presentation I will look at the ways in which British Baptists were involved in active campaigning for religious liberty across Europe and the Middle East from the 1840s to the 1940s. I will seek to show how British Baptists cooperated with others, for example through the Evangelical Alliance and the Baptist World Alliance. British Baptists were central to these bodies. The defence of religious liberty was a major cause taken up by the Evangelical Alliance from the 1850s, and by the Baptist World Alliance in the early 20th century. Baptists in various countries were glad to have wider support for their struggles to gain freedom for their communities to witness. One statement spoke about the actions that were being and could be taken for 'the removal of the restraints which are imposed upon the human conscience by many of the Governments of Europe, so that full Religious Liberty may be enjoyed by all their peaceful and loyal subjects'. Progress was made, but the issue of religious liberty is still a pressing one in the contemporary world, and I hope to draw from our past experience some pointers that can inform the present.

Essay review

Peterson's spiritual theology II by Michael I. Bochenski

In two previous *bmj* articles (October 2004 and Jan/Feb 2009), some of the prolific writings of arguably the best-read pastoral theologian of recent decades were outlined. Peterson wears many hats: husband, father and grandfather, Presbyterian pastor, theology professor, raconteur, Bible translator, aesthete, walker, and mentor to Bono, to name but a few! In this article, I will reflect on the two volumes that complete Peterson's ground-breaking spiritual theology series, and comment on the importance of this series for those of us called to pastoral ministry. In his first three spiritual theology books—*Christ plays in ten thousand places*, *Eat this book*, and *The Jesus way*—Peterson reflected on the ways that the risen Christ is actively involved in creation, history and community, on the importance of spiritual reading, and on contemporary discipleship with integrity. In *Tell it slant* he turns his attention to the power of language and words, and in *Practise resurrection*, to ecclesiology.

Volume 4: *Tell it slant*

Towards the beginning of this book, Peterson explains his purpose in writing it. He wants, he declares, to '...tear down the fences that we have erected between language that deals with God and language that deals with the people around us (because) it is, after all, the same language'. The book's title stems from an Emily Dickinson poem about sharing truth in a gradual and sometimes oblique way: 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant'. Human language continues to be necessary, Peterson affirms '...for conveying the revelation of God in Christ Jesus, spoken from street corners and pulpits all over the world: God alive, at work and speaking here and now, for you and me'. And yet language is undervalued and is used, too often, in a careless and slipshod way: 'Most of us are more attentive to keeping the dishes and knives and forks clean that we use to eat our meals than to keeping in good repair the words we use to speak our love and promises, our commitments and loyalties.' Peterson challenges his readers about their creative use of language through Jesus' stories and prayers.

Jesus in his stories. Parables, Peterson reminds us, are '...an earthquake opening up the ground at your feet'. They are 'stories which get us into The Story'. Peterson explores the everyday language used by Jesus during his journeys from Samaria to Jeru-

salem (Luke 9:51-19:27). Peterson's ability to move between the world of the Bible and our own with a blend of expert exegesis and thoughtful application will already be familiar to those who have read him before. Two examples are enough here. In the first, Peterson laments self-righteousness:

At the time when Illich was noticing that the medical establishment constituted a serious threat to the physical health of Americans, I was taking up my work as a pastor and noticing what I had never taken seriously before—that the religious establishment in which I now had responsibilities constituted a serious threat to the Christian faith in the form of self-righteousness. I was noticing that, unlike the sins that are commonly noticed and repented of by a worshiping congregation, self-righteousness is almost never recognized in the mirror. Occasionally in someone else, never in me.

In the second, Peterson applies Jesus' parable about one of God's poor, Lazarus:

...Lazarus is invisible. Nobody sees Lazarus. In his invisibility he shares the fate of the poor, the sick, the exploited, and all the wretched of the earth. Every society finds ways to shut its eyes, put fingers in its ears, and by the extravagant use of deodorants and garbage trucks to get rid of the smell of decay, uncleanness, stench, and squalor. We put our sick in hospitals, our elderly in nursing homes, our poor in slums, and our garbage in landfills. We are never entirely successful in keeping them out of sight and smell and sound, but we do our best. Every once in a while a novelist or poet, a journalist or preacher, tries his or her best to stick our nose in it. But by and large, by averting our gaze, tuning out the sounds, and sanitizing the environment, we manage pretty well not to see or hear or smell or touch Lazarus'.

Jesus in his prayers. In this section, six different prayers of Jesus are considered. Two examples of Peterson's reflections on John 17 will help us to assess this book's relevance for pastors. Jesus' prayer for unity is contrasted with the divisiveness of his followers over two millennia: 'Given the accumulation of carnage across the centuries—wrecked churches, wrecked families, wrecked souls—it is hard to stay in the John Seventeen Prayer Meeting with the eleven, quietly submitting ourselves to Jesus' prayer to the Father that "they may be one, even as we are one". In a single, brilliant sentence, Peterson captures the range of those for whom Christ prayed this prayer: 'It is important to know that there are many, many stalwart and mature and obedient followers of Jesus all along the spectrum, from the pope in the Vatican to a coterie of snake handlers in the Appalachian hills'. Writings and reflections on prayer have long been part of the Peterson corpus. Towards the close of this book Peterson (at his finest) expresses why and, in the process, takes us to the heart of *Tell it slant*:

I want to knock down the fences that keep prayer confined to religious settings and religious subjects. I want to enlarge the field of prayer—exponentially if I am able—to take in the entire creation and the whole of history, our entire lives gathered in intention before God, leaving nothing and no one out. I want my prayers, and the prayers of my friends, to ricochet off the rock faces of mountains, reverberate down the corridors of shopping malls, sound ocean deeps, water arid deserts, find a foothold in fetid swamps, encounter poets as they search for the accurate word, mingle their fragrance with wildflowers in alpine meadows, sing with the loons on Canadian lakes. I will continue, of course, to pray in sanctuaries and prayer closets and at death-beds. But I want far more. I want to participate in prayers that don't sound like prayers. Prayers that in the praying aren't identified as prayers. Prayers without ceasing. I don't mean to say that all our words and silences are, in themselves, prayer, only that they can be.

Volume 5: Practise resurrection

The fifth and final volume in the spiritual theology series focuses on the letter to the Ephesians and on what the message of resurrection means for the church. Here Peterson concentrates on the quest for the 'full stature of Christ', drawing on a lecture course, *Soulcraft*, he wrote and delivered when teaching at Regent College, Vancouver. As he observes: 'Maturity cannot be hurried, programmed or tinkered with. There are no steroids available for growing up in Christ more quickly. Impatient shortcuts land us in the dead ends of immaturity'.

The four sections of this book each contain fine examples of the enviable ability Peterson has to reflect on the everyday and the ordinary and to rework it in the service of spiritual theology.

Section 1: Ephesus and the Ephesians. This introduction reminds us of a truth that the first few years of pastoral ministry usually knock firmly into us: 'Sometimes we hear our friends talk in moony, romantic terms of the early church: 'We need to get back to being just like the early church'. Heaven help us. These churches were a mess, and Paul wrote his letters to them to try to clean up the mess'. Peterson's reflections on some of the pressures he came under early in his ministry are also revealing:

The ink on my ordination papers wasn't even dry before I was being told by experts in the field of church that my main task was to run a church after the manner of my brother and sister Christians who run service stations, grocery shops, corporations, banks, hospitals and financial services. Many of these experts wrote books and gave lectures on how to do it. I was astonished to learn in one of these best-selling books that the size of my church

car park had far more to do with how things fared in my congregation than my choice of texts in preaching. After a few years of trying to take all of this seriously, I decided that I was being lied to.

Once again Peterson uses, to great effect, some marvellous words of the poet Emily Dickinson, ‘...the truth must dazzle gradually/Or every man be blind’, to set an appropriate context for exploring the life-long journey towards Christian maturity.

Section 2. *The blessing of God.* Peterson’s love of Greek and his appreciation of language breathe through its pages and yield an insight into the mental furniture of a man who has spent years meditating on scripture. He comments: ‘The rest of this long sentence (Eph. 1:11-14)—there are another seventy words before we come to the full stop that lets us catch our breath—has eight more references to Christ and six more to us that elaborate and give texture to this huge blessing that orients us in this resurrection world. These are the on-the-ground results of the explosive, cosmic verbs. These results will be elaborated in the rest of the letter’.

Section 3. *The creation of the church.* Peterson starts this section off with the challenging words of Annie Dillard:

Why do people in churches seem like cheerful brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... On the whole I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

The market for easy spirituality, the sense of the coherence in the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the way that church life reflects orthodox Christology—at one and the same time human and divine—are all considered by Peterson in this part of the book.

Section 4. *The closing chapters of Ephesians.* A description of the Holy Spirit as ‘the shy member of the Trinity’ is convincingly drawn. Failures of love in church life are illustrated with a telling illustration: ‘If professional football teams made as many errors in passing, tackling and shooting as the church does in love and worship, they would be playing to empty stadiums’. The implications for ourselves (at church, home and work) of the Trinity’s relationality are next explored. Finally, the ugly real-

ities of the spiritual battle are exposed alongside the advocacy of an effective counter-strategy. One testimony to what this might mean in practice comes to mind: a pastor once said to me: ‘However badly they treat me I will not let them make me act badly’.

Peterson’s equivalent of this is an observation by the Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield, which he uses as a kind of theological litmus test: ‘...when the world is in extremities, the doctrine of love becomes the ultimate measure of our conduct’. Peterson is at his best when he is helping the scriptures come alive in fresh and exciting ways. This he has done supremely in his Bible translation, *The message*, and in earlier books on Jonah; Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and Esther; Jeremiah; the Pastoral Epistles and Revelation. Practise resurrection, with its many insights into Ephesians, is another example of a master expositor at work. That observation leads me to some conclusions about the importance of Peterson for those of us engaged in pastoral ministry.

Peterson for pastors

Many of us reading this article will have had the importance of good commentary work drummed into us from our theological training. From time to time we will also have read articles introducing the latest in a bewildering list of new Bible commentaries. The voices of our biblical tutors then haunt our consciences—breathing the words ‘commentary work’—into our already uncalm and troubled minds! In practice, however, we face a problem. Many of these commentaries are largely of academic interest, however hard we try to apply them. I would like to suggest here, for busy pastors who want both biblical help and exegetical insight, that Peterson offers us an alternative to commentary guilt. With a copy of *The message* in one hand (to complement our preferred preaching version), and his works of pastoral theology in the other, we will find that we have some of the finest preacher’s commentaries around. The use of human language to communicate eternal truths remains our calling. Peterson offers all kinds of practical help to help us—his work was primarily that of a local church minister, lasting nearly three decades.

Secondly, Peterson’s writings remind us of the importance of reading books—paper or electronic. My practice, since ordination, has been to keep two books on the go at any time—a book on Christianity and a novel, play or book of poetry. Peterson calls this, I think, spiritual reading—*lectio divina*. My ministry, preaching and life have, I am sure, been all the richer for this discipline. Peterson’s books are full of the fruit of his own spiritual reading—Joyce, Dickens, Dostoevsky and Manley-Hopkins appear alongside Bonhoeffer, von Hügel, Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis and John Henry Newman for

example. We may not be able to emulate Peterson's use of all he has read, but we can learn from it.

Thirdly, we can also learn from the scale and scope of Peterson's understanding of Christianity. He is someone who has become accustomed to finding spiritual truth in the whole of life. In his father's butcher shop; in country walks across Montana; in the love of his wife or grandchildren; in a soccer game or a pastoral encounter; in the muddled discipleship of a typical congregation, in a student's question, or in a cataclysmic event.

An accessible alternative to sometimes dry academic commentaries, a reminder about the discipline of continuing to read books even when, to misuse Kipling, many around us are losing theirs, and a challenge to be constantly surprised by God's presence wherever we may find ourselves. These are, I suggest, three of the potential legacies from Eugene H. Peterson's deeply impressive spiritual theology series for those of us in pastoral ministry. For these books ask of us all a familiar question (from *The message*): 'Are you listening to this? Really listening?'

Michael I. Bochenski is the minister of Rugby Baptist Church and was formerly the Rector of the Warsaw Baptist Theological Seminary, Poland. A fully referenced review can be obtained from Michael at minister@rugbybaptist.org.uk.

**Baptist Assembly 2012
BMF Seminar and AGM**

Revd Geoff Colmer

New monasticism: something old, something borrowed, something blue

**Friday afternoon, 4 May 2012
time and venue to be confirmed**

Reviews

Edited by John Houseago

A simplified life: a contemporary hermit's experience of solitude and silence

Verena Schiller
Canterbury Press, 2010
ISBN 978 1 84825 025 3

Reviewer: Philip Clements-Jewery

Verena Schiller is an Anglican nun who, after living in a religious community for 25 years, has spent another 25 years living as a hermit at the tip of the Lleyn peninsula in Wales overlooking the holy island of Bardsey. This book is her account of her life of solitude and silence.

There is much spiritual wisdom to be found here, complemented by frequent and helpful poetry quotations. What hermits do, they do on behalf of us all. In a quote by Mother Mary Clare SLG, words that loom large in Verena Schiller's thought and experience, hermits 'live at the point of intersection where the Love of God and the tensions and suffering we inflict on one another meet, and are held to God's transforming Love'.

The notion of place, where we become rooted and within which our lives may

grow and develop, is also an important theme, expressed in the words of Abba Moses, 'remain in your cell, and your cell will teach you all'.

Even so, Schiller's book is a curious and disjointed mixture of a spiritual journal, an historical account of the monastic movement from its 2nd century Egyptian origins to its outworking in mediaeval Wales, and evocative, beautifully written observations of the natural surroundings in which she lived.

There are signs of padding to fill the book out—a paragraph on p 100 repeats very much the same content as a paragraph on pp 90-1. There are also sudden switches of mood and theme. Just when you think that the author is going to plumb the emotional and spiritual depths, and she is quite honest about a whole year in which she lived in a condition of accidie, she launches into another instalment of monastic history. Three consecutive chapters begin with a note that it is winter. Which winters were those—at the beginning, the middle, or the end of her eremitical life?

I am not saying that the book has no value. But I can't help feeling that Sara Maitland's *A book of silence* better describes the emotional and spiritual aspects of solitude, and that Edmund de Waal's current best-seller, *The hare with amber eyes*, explores the notion of place just as well, albeit in a very different way. Interestingly, he shares a similar history with Verena Schiller, in that both their families left Vienna in the aftermath of the 1938 Anschluss, and both found their way not only to England, but also into the Anglican Church.

There are helpful lists of selected reading and of selected poets, but no index. In the end I feel that there is possibly a better book waiting to be published, in the form of a spiritual journal with dated entries.

Learning to speak Christian

Stanley Hauerwas

SCM press

ISBN 978-0-334-04409-3

Reviewer: Robert Draycot

I found this title intriguing and fascinating. It suggests that there is something comparable between learning to speak a foreign language and the language of faith. To illustrate this point Hauerwas writes, 'if you are to serve the church well in ministry you must become a teacher and, in particular, a teacher of a language called Christian'.

He makes this suggestion because of what he calls 'the loss of the ability of Christians to speak the language of our faith'. As one who had to learn a second language as an adult, that 'rang bells' for me. Learning a language starts with listening, which leads on to imitating: the key therefore is to whom do we listen, who do we imitate? If those leading worship, those who preach, speak poorly then the message becomes ever more incoherent.

Hauerwas is a wordsmith who seeks to make every word count, one who un-

derstands the need for clarity in the written word. This means that he develops his arguments carefully and often at some length. The effort involved in reading his distinctive style is, I believe, well worth it.

First, he comes up with original angles and fresh insights on, for example, Augustine's account of evil, on the interpretation of Acts, and the cross. Secondly, I found many 'nuggets' which set me thinking in new directions. Phrases such as 'the desire of modern people who want to get out of life alive' in the context of medical ethics. Dip into *Body matters* and you find, 'Our grammar often betrays us. We say we have a body': a mistake, as Hauerwas explains, with reference to both 1 Corinthians and current controversies in the church. In that same sermon he says, 'Never forget, behind the Mill-like slogans there lies a terrible loneliness'. Elsewhere there are equally seminal thoughts on ethics, friendship, greed, and poverty.

This book is a collection of 21 essays divided into three sections. The first section is entitled *Learning Christian: to see and speak*. This begins with a sermon in which Hauerwas points out that we are tempted to 'stare at rather than see Jesus on the cross'. The second is headed *The language of love: from death to life*. In the light of the ongoing financial situation *More: a taxonomy of greed* provides much to 'profit' from. The final section refers to some well known teachers. Thoroughly recommended.

Baptists in the world: renewing the vision

Centre for the Baptist History and Heritage Series, vol 8

J. H. Y. Briggs & A. R. Cross (eds)

Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2011

Reviewer: Andy Goodliff

This collection of papers from the Baptist Historical Society's 2008 conference at IBTS in Prague is the latest addition to the Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Series. Sixteen chapters cover a wide range of topics: the evangelistic theology of Benjamin Keach; 19th century women (the latest in a series of papers from Karen Smith on women in our Baptist history); the social theology of John Clifford; the role of British Baptists in the beginnings of the Baptist World Alliance; and a perspective on Baptist identity from the southern hemisphere among others.

Two papers stood out for me. The first is Catriona Gorton's paper on the importance of Baptist history for the health of the church, which calls for the *Baptist Quarterly* to renew its vision. Gorton is concerned that Baptist history is a minority interest—too many Baptist ministers don't take it seriously in their formation and the *BQ* is too specialised (the total readership in 2008 was 540, which included 277 libraries). Gorton argues that for an inter-relationship between Baptist history and practical theology—that is, as we enter into our history and listen to

the stories of the women and men who have gone before us, there is much we can learn for our own life and practice for the health of the church today. The *BQ* and the *bmj* can here play an important role in helping Baptists cherish the past and 'to see something of the church's future' (citing Rowan Williams).

The second paper is from the current editor of the *BQ* and arguably our leading Baptist historian, Ian Randall. Randall explores the recent history of the relationship between Baptists and Anabaptists. While accepting that the Anabaptist influence on Baptist beginnings was marginal (argued most persuasively by Barrie White), Randall traces the rise among Baptists of Anabaptism as a resource for Baptist life and witness in the past 60 years, beginning, perhaps, with Ernest Payne.

The Baptist Theological Seminary in Rüsclikon and its successor the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) in Prague has been a centre of the interest. IBTS under Keith Jones continues to explore theology with a Baptist—Anabaptist focus (what they term 'baptistic', following James McClendon) and hopefully their work will find its way across Europe into British Baptist theology and practice.

Alongside the developments in Europe is the Anabaptist Network, which has a broad membership, but includes a number of leading British Baptist thinkers—Nigel Wright, Stuart Murray-Williams, Brian Haymes, Ruth

Gouldborne and Randall himself. Again there is much that we can learn from these conversations for the future shape of Baptist life and mission.

For these two papers and many others, this collection is well worth reading.

Common English Bible

Common English Bible (CEB)

ISBN 978-1-60926-015-6

Reviewer: Bob Little

The Common English Bible (CEB)—a new Bible from Nashville, Tennessee—claims to be a new translation aimed at ensuring a ‘smooth and natural reading experience’ of scripture to enhance both communal worship and personal Bible study. It could also encourage those young in the faith to explore the Bible for themselves.

There are 37 Bible-related products available from CEB, including this bible. They vary in price from \$1.99 for a New Testament to \$99 for an *Everyday outreach New Testament kit*.

There’s no doubting the credentials, intention or sincerity of the team of some 120 translators, from 22 faith traditions in American, African, Asian, European and Latino communities, and five countries. Their work was validated by 77 field testing groups with 400 participants drawn from 13 denomina-

tions. The CEB is published by an alliance of denominational publishers.

Given the many imponderable questions involved in Bible translation—including whether one should be faithful to the original text or to the audience’s contemporary culture—those responsible for the CEB have decided on a hybrid approach.

Their translation method is verbal equivalence (where the emphasis is on reproducing the modern English equivalent of the ancient words, with a tendency to use the same word order as the ancient language) with dynamic balance and common language. As their basic texts, they used the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (4th edition), *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (5th edition); Nestle Aland 27th edition (1993), Gottingen *Septuagint* (in progress) and Ralf’s *Septuagint* (2005).

The result is extremely ‘readable’. Some passages from the history books of the Old Testament now read like the adventure stories they would have been to their original hearers—and Ezekiel 16 is, at times, quite racy. There are a few crosscultural issues, where the American culture and approach to language provide some challenges for a British audience. For example, at the end of Romans, Paul’s friends turn out to be ‘coworkers’ (cowboys?) rather than ‘co-workers’.

The whole endeavour begins with the assertion that ‘God’s wind swept over the waters’ (Genesis 1: 2). There’s

nothing wrong with that to a US audience, but in the UK it could conjure up images of flatulence which would only occur to Americans if the phrase was 'God's gas swept over the waters'.

Nonetheless, this is a generally highly successful attempt at a contemporary translation of a really good book.

Who needs words?

Richard Littledale

Saint Andrew Press, 2011

ISBN 978 0 7152 0943 1

Reviewer: Ronnie Hall

This book is advertised as a Christian communication handbook. The first part describes communication theory. It covers areas like the use of words, the different meaning of words and how to spot and interpret symbols. There is a helpful section on the use of silence, which is so crucial in a noisy world. Sometimes what is not said is more important than what is said.

Part two moves away from the theory into the actual practice of communication. Building on the theory of part one it covers preaching, worship, written media, broadcast media, and social media among others.

Part three then offers some tools to allow the communication practitioner to assess and learn lessons on how well s/he communicates.

This book implicitly invites the reader to go through the Kolb learning cycle as an aid to improving their communication. The writing style is very easy going, as is typical for Richard Littledale, although the style is deceptive and some of the ideas and concepts are enormously difficult and require some thought. It is written in a style that conveys the author's deep concern about the lack of good communication in churches and belief that good communication is crucial to church health.

Much as I enjoyed reading this book, it is difficult to know for whom it is written. I would be rather alarmed if experienced preachers didn't already know most of this stuff. What preacher doesn't know that body language and tone of voice matters in preaching? The communication theory section is very Christian and biblical but is far too short if someone is looking to learn communication theory.

Perhaps this book is for first year students at college beginning to learn the fundamentals of Christian communication and preaching. The other people who might benefit from this book are ministers looking for a quick overview on the current trends of communication. For someone in my position, less than five years out of college, it did remind me of my first year preaching and communication module. The author is quite correct that communication media are constantly evolving. A book like this will be out of date in a few years, so we have to keep learning.

The Word that redescribes the world

Walter Brueggemann

Fortress Press 2006/2011

ISBN 978-0-8006-9829-4

Reviewer: John Matthews

This book comprises a collection of 11 pieces by Brueggemann, the renowned and prolific American OT scholar, previously published in various periodicals from 1999-2004.

They have been edited by Patrick Miller, who draws attention to certain themes for which the reader might watch. These include judgement and hope, the possibility of imagining a world different from the one in which we live and, most importantly, Brueggemann's concern to explicate how the scriptures point to the mystery, presence, power and claims of the Lord and what these mean for human life. Hence the book's subtitle, *The Bible and discipleship*.

The four essays of the first section, entitled *The Word redescribing the world*, focus on the biblical text as a lively word that will have its subversive say among us without excessive accommodation to cultural or religious pressures. This includes helpful expositions of four instances of speaking truth to power; Moses, Nathan, Elijah and Daniel.

The second section of four essays, entitled *The Word redefining the possible*, is particularly concerned to show that

God makes possible what the world sees as impossible—for example, in the exodus from Egypt and the resurrection of Christ. It also contains excellent chapters on *Evangelism and discipleship*, and what it means to live as citizens of God's kingdom rather than consumers.

The third section, entitled *The Word shaping a community of discipleship*, considers ways in which 'the impossibility of the text' is not only to be understood 'but lived out in glad obedience'. 'In the very longest run, the key church issues are not about whose genitalia qualify for ordination or whether everyone enlists in multiculturalism, but whether a culture of generosity can at all be fostered midst a world of commodity...' (p 194).

For Brueggemann, preaching is not only a championing of the metanarrative of scripture, but must also wrestle candidly with what is problematic, even if the outcome may not be without ambiguity, as scripture itself is not. He encourages us to preach from Romans 8 at times other than funerals because 'the seething power of despair is more dangerous and insidious in many other contexts of wretchedness, anxiety and greed' (p 13).

Don't let the American context put you off. Brueggemann's knowledge of the scriptures is well applied in challenging us to live counterculturally, and helping us to do so. Here is much food for thought, Bible studies and sermons.