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From the editor

Fifty years.....

From time to time I am offered a collection of *bmj* issues when someone retires or moves. As I write this, I am looking at a large box of journals, which will soon be on its way to a library, to serve a new lease of life there. I thought readers might like to hear just a little from the issue from exactly 50 years ago, April 1966. This is a quote from a 'Letter to a probationer' (named only as 'John'), written by Henry Bonser (presumably John's Senior Friend), shortly before Henry's death. For the younger readers—a probationer is what a NAM used to be; and a Senior Friend is now called a Mentor.

It is rumoured in 'progressive' circles that Christianity is no longer intellectually respectable...Such a climate of opinion makes the work of a young minister difficult and dangerous. If the scorn of a sceptical world is aggravated by unjustified criticism and obstruction from within the fellowship, he might be tempted to heed the seductive suggestion that some other occupation could provide more comfort and greater opportunities. However, I believe that you have enough grit and faith to view the present situation as an exhilarating challenge and to cry, with Rupert Brooke: "Now God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour." Even so, the strongest and bravest disciples have periods of depression.

The letter continues with more comment and encouragement, and assurances of prayerful support.

All kinds of things can discourage us in ministry, and this letter reminded me of the power of an encouraging word—maybe there is a colleague (he or she, since we no longer assume the former!) who needs such a word from us this Easter.

If you would like to explore the riches of the past in *bmj*—not least as a record of social history—please see the archived material (*details on p3 of this issue*). SN

Jonah and the worm

by Simon Woodman

The relationship between humanity and the natural world has been one of hardship and toil since humans first emerged from the Great Rift Valley, to go forth and multiply upon the earth. The struggle for survival is as old as our species, and we have battled on many fronts over the millennia. From early competition with other hominids, to struggles to adapt to hostile environments; from diseases and disasters, to famine and crop failure—humans have been at war with planet Earth in a battle for survival since the very beginning. Our current fights about fossil fuels, global warming, and climate change are simply the latest skirmishes in a war that has claimed more lives, and done more damage, than any other conflict in the history of humanity.

So it is no surprise that the Hebrew Bible reflects this struggle for survival in many of its narratives. Those who told these stories down the generations, passing the wisdom of the Israelite tradition from parent to child, knew first-hand what it was to do battle with the earth; and in their stories they reflected before God on what it might mean to be human. What we find in their traditions are a range of responses to the question of how humans might exist in relation to nature.

The Genesis creation narrative, for example, starts by affirming the goodness of all things: from the heavens above, to the depths of the ocean, and everything in between; and it locates humans as part of this God-inspired created order. However, it goes on to describe the fracturing of the relationship between humanity and nature, pointing the finger firmly at the sinfulness of the representative humans of Adam and Eve as the originators of the battle for survival.

If we fast forward to their sons Cain and Abel, we meet the battle between the hunter-gatherer and agrarian lifestyles. Agriculture first developed in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, where Israel is located, sometime around 10,000 years ago, and we have an echo of this in the deadly conflict between Cain the cultivator of land, and Abel the herdsman. The suggestion of this story is that God is more pleased with Abel's animal than with Cain's grain, but of course it's ultimately Abel who dies at Cain's hand, and it's Cain and his descendants who survive to continue planting the land and reaping the harvest.

Then we come to the story of Noah and the flood, with God washing his hands of the whole created order, and ordering a total wipe-out and reboot, with just Noah and his

family and a selection of animals surviving. According to the Noah story, human sinfulness had so spoiled nature that the whole thing was ruined beyond salvation, and just needed to be destroyed and re-created from scratch.

We could go on, through the wisdom tradition and the prophets, through the books of history and monarchy, describing the battles for land, the times of famine, all the stories of plague, pestilence, and hardship that humanity has faced. In all of these, the Hebrew way has been to try to reflect before God on the relationship between humans and the natural order.

So we come to the book of Jonah, which is many things, including, I want to suggest, an ecological parable in the tradition of the Hebrew wisdom literature. I believe that it has something profound to say to us about the relationship between humans and the natural order.

The clue comes right at the end of the book, in 4.11, when God says:

*And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city,
in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons
who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?*

It's always worth paying attention to the way biblical stories end, and this one ends with 'many animals'. Once we've spotted this, when we start to read back into the story, we find that the natural world plays an especially prominent role in the book of Jonah.

The book starts with Jonah being called to go and preach a message of repentance to the great city of Nineveh, but deciding to do a runner in the opposite direction, and jumping a ship. At this point, the forces of nature start to move in against him. We're told in the 4th verse of the first chapter that,

...the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.

As soon as Jonah puts himself where he shouldn't be, he finds himself at war with natural forces beyond his control. When the sailors on the boat ask Jonah what's going on, he realises that there's a link between his own disobedience to God and the disturbance in the natural order, so he says to them that he's a Hebrew, a worshipper of the God who made the sea and the dry land (1.9). He tells the sailors that if they pick him up and throw him into the sea, the great storm will quiet down and their lives will be spared (1.12), and this is, of course, what happens. The link between Jonah, and God, and the natural order moves at this point from the theoretical to the practical; as Jonah's actions are seen to have a clear effect on the forces of nature.

But then they take a turn from the practical to the surreal, as instead of drowning in the

sea of chaos, Jonah find himself in the belly of a fish; and not just any fish, but a fish provided by God to rescue him. The story is at pains to tell us that this isn't some random act of luck—rather, God is at work in the natural world to bring Jonah back to where he should be in the order of things.

Eventually, Jonah is spewed up onto dry land, as he escapes the clutches of the sea, and makes his way to Nineveh to preach his message of repentance. The response he gets is astonishing, and surely intentionally amusing—not only do the people repent, not only does the king repent, but so also do all the animals! The king even issues a decree, demanding that both humans and animals together must fast, and put on sackcloth; with human and animal voices together crying to God for mercy (3:7-8).

Of course, what Jonah knew would happen does happen, and God lets the wicked city of Nineveh off. No judgment, no fire from heaven, no punishment; just mercy and compassion. This doesn't suit Jonah at all, and so in disgust that justice has not been done, he wanders off to sit under a shelter and sulk. The sun beats down on him, relentlessly baking him into submission, but then God appoints a bush to grow up by him, giving him some shade from the sun, and for a little while he seems to lift out of his bad mood. But then God appoints a little worm to come and destroy the tree, and then God sends a sultry wind and more sun, and Jonah decides that he's had enough of these games and that he wants to die. God may have been merciful to the wretched Ninevites with their comedy cows in sackcloth, but now seems to be setting the whole of nature systematically against Jonah.

Of course, it's all a matter of perspective, and so with the set-up complete, Jonah and God have their big argument in 4:8-11:

[Jonah] said, "It is better for me to die than to live".⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die".¹⁰ Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night."¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Jonah pitied the plant, but did not want God to pity Nineveh. The irony is inescapable, and the inconsistency of his position becomes obvious. God is not the God that Jonah hoped he was. God does not judge as Jonah judged, and Jonah had set himself above God, and at odds with nature, in his attempt to create God in his own image.

Those of us reading Jonah's story are invited to join him in reflecting on our own place within the natural order. The recurring theme in all of this is that whilst Jonah is disobedient to God, the natural world acts not only in obedience to God, but also to bring Jonah back to a right relationship with both God and nature. Here's the parable:

Jonah represents humanity. He represents all of us. We are Jonah. The lesson of the parable is that when we humans, like Jonah, put ourselves at war with God and God's world, the consequences are catastrophic.

However, the hopeful message of the Book of Jonah is that God is also at work through the natural order to bring humans back to a place of repentance and restoration. Humans have consistently created a philosophical and practical division between themselves and the rest of the natural world. I don't think we can entirely blame Descartes, but his famous dictum, 'I think therefore I am', is probably the best summary of this approach. We who 'think' have come to view animals as automatons incapable of consciousness, and so we have taken permission to treat animals as, in effect, machines, which exist as a means rather than for their own sake.

In this we are acting entirely against the wisdom of Genesis, which declares that all of creation is good; but nonetheless we consistently choose to see nature as a tool to exploit, and animals as a means to an end. We have built our civilisations on a human-centred view of the world, which regards nature as a commodity available exclusively for our benefit. Our unfettered and rampant exploitation of nature is challenged by the story of Jonah, who consistently discovers what we must also learn; that when we place ourselves over and against nature, there is hell to pay. We are a part of the natural order, not separate to it. We can no more run from our place in God's creation than Jonah could run from the presence of God. We humans keep placing ourselves at the centre of our own story, we place our own desires above our responsibility to the planet, and so we create a situation where we are at war with nature in a struggle for survival. It's the story of Adam and Eve's rebellion told over-and-over again in each generation, as we somehow convince ourselves that we're right and God must be wrong.

Yet the story of Jonah is that in God's world, it is compassion that lies at the heart of the story. God's mercy in Jonah's story is extended to all creation. God has compassion on the just and the unjust, on animals, plants and planet. In the story of Jonah we find our human-centred view of creation challenged. We, like Jonah, have to learn that God is not just 'our' God, but that he is the God of the entire earth, from animals to plants to the elements to Nineveh itself. Nature is not there to be exploited by humans, as if the two were somehow separable; but rather humans are a part of the natural world, and all exist together and continue to co-exist because, and only because, of God's compassion.

Creation itself suffers because of human greed and idolatry, and the voices of the animals are crying out in our time for mercy, every bit as much as the animals in Nineveh cried out for compassion. Humans and the natural world will rise and fall together, and the wilful human destruction of ecologies is a sin against the nature of God.

There's an interesting comparison to be drawn between the story of Jonah and the Whale, and the story of Noah and the flood. Both stories begin with a threat of destruction against wicked people for their sinfulness. Both stories involve a perilous sea journey. Both stories involve animals. Interestingly, both stories also involve a dove. 'Jonah' means 'dove' in Hebrew, and in both stories it is the dove which flies off and eventually returns, bringing the hope of salvation. In Noah's story the dove brings the olive branch which marks the end of the flood. In Jonah's story, Jonah is the dove that brings the message of repentance.

However, there are important differences. In Noah's story, God destroys the wicked people along with almost all of the natural order, with only Noah's family and a few select animals surviving to repopulate the earth. In Jonah's story, God is merciful to the wicked city; and the natural world, represented by the animals of Nineveh, is spared. Jonah's story can be seen as a reversal of Noah's, and offers a hopeful glimpse of God at work in the natural world, calling humans to discover ways of living in peace with creation.

This way of thinking of the Jonah story raises some prescient challenges for contemporary living. Should we re-think our addiction to meat, for example? There is no doubt that there are far more sustainable ways of feeding humanity than feeding cows, pigs, and sheep and then shooting them and eating them. This may or may not mean that we fully embrace vegetarianism, but it should certainly challenge our relationship to the animals on which we are dependent for our ongoing existence. We might want to think carefully about issues of animal experimentation, exploitation, and genetic modification. We could ask ourselves at what cost are we at odds with the natural world in our own time; there certainly is a cost, but whether we are counting it is far from certain. Maybe GM crops do hold the future for feeding humanity, but if so, where does that leave our battery chicken farms, and our herdsmen industries. If we are not careful, the conflict between Cain and Abel could easily resurface in contemporary guise to haunt a globally warmed world which is struggling with mass starvation.

These are issues that Christians cannot and should not turn away from. We cannot afford to hide our heads in the sand and eat ostrich instead of beef. Rather, we need to keep ourselves educated and informed, and to take informed and educated decisions together as to how we will partner with God in the care of this world that has been entrusted to us.

The message of Jonah is that God has not given up on creation, and that neither has creation given up on humanity. We are part of nature, we are part of God's good creation, and we are called to repent of our wickedness, of our exploitation, of our destructive patterns of living. The invitation is that if we find ways together of existing in harmony with nature, we are opening ourselves up, with the inhabitants of

Nineveh, to the compassion and mercy of God. We are called to repent of our acquisitiveness, to turn away from our obsessions with possessions, and to discover together what it means to live as children of this Earth.

Author's note

In *bmj* January 2015, I offered an ecological reading of the Sampson saga. Continuing this theme, in the current article I offer a comparable reading of the Jonah narrative. I have been helped by reading Yael Shemesh, "And many beasts" (*Jonah 4:11*); *the function and status of animals in the book of Jonah, Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, vol 10: article 6.

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Thomas: the neglected disciple

by Gethin Abraham-Williams

There's a line in a poem by the American writer, Christian Wiman which rings bells for me: '*The minute you begin to speak with certitude about God,*' says the poet, '*he's gone*'.¹

The contemporary struggle—and it's worldwide, particularly within the two proselytising monotheistic faiths, Christianity and Islam—concerns the extent you can ease the pedal on certitude. We may be in a post-enlightenment age, but there's no turning the clock back. Many of us have considerable difficulty with those who think that the essence of faith is certitude. It's a live issue in all our denominations, to different degrees, and I sense it's also the unspoken question in many other world faiths.²

For our non-churchgoing contemporaries, faith, any faith, is therefore seen as confusing rather than contributing to any meaningful public dialogue. The number of enrolments for theological courses may be on the increase, but the interest is mainly sociological: how to understand the phenomenon of religion rather than how to understand God.

It's that issue that has shaped my ministry, and most recently has encouraged me to test my thinking in print, first with *Spirituality or religion: do we have to choose?*³, then with *Seeing the good in different spiritualities*,⁴ and finally now with *Why the Gospel of Thomas matters*.⁵

'*The minute you speak with certitude about God—he's gone*', says the poet. And yet if we want to speak about God at all how are we to do that if certitude confuses rather than clarifies the issue?

Narrative preacher

As a narrative preacher, I need a story to explore a theme. *With spirituality or religion?* was the story of the transfiguration, whereas *Seeing the good* was built around the life and work of that much misunderstood but pioneering exilic prophet Ezekiel. For this last book, *Why the Gospel of Thomas matters*—in what has turned out to be a spirituality trilogy—if certitude was to be my theme, the disciple Thomas was

the obvious choice: Doubting Thomas. That's how he's remembered, even by those who don't have any church background. 'You're a Doubting Thomas' is an easy retort against those who are reluctant to accept what they're told at face value.

In any case, the challenge to Thomas, which the RSV drawing on the AV gets right, was 'not to be faithless'⁶—where the meaning of 'faithful' is closer to the idea of 'trusting', of 'letting go and letting God' than of disbelieving a dogma.

While Thomas is, therefore, an obvious choice for a book about certitude there isn't much to go on as far as the New Testament is concerned, which is a mixed blessing. On the one hand it gives the preacher room to manoeuvre, on the other hand there's the challenge of being true to the text. It's John's Gospel, the Fourth Gospel, that gives Thomas a speaking part, and then only four times. Thomas is listed among the Twelve in the Matthew, Mark and Luke, but that's all. It's in the Fourth Gospel that Thomas emerges from the anonymity of an enrolment register. Why does the Fourth Gospel single out Thomas in this way unless Thomas had some kind of affinity with the community in which the remarkable Fourth Gospel was shaped?⁷

If the New Testament was my primary source, what then might Christian tradition have to add to the picture? You have to go to India to find Thomas regarded as anything but a neglected disciple. There he's venerated as the founder of the church that bears his name: The Mar Thoma Syrian Church.⁸ As some say, Thomas brought the Gospel to India before Peter brought it to Rome! (It was at a meeting of the World Council of Churches that I first came across its representatives in their distinctive pink cassocks and caps.)

There is also a tradition that Thomas was an architect and had a hand in the design of a palace in the Punjab for the 1st century Indo-Parthian king Gondophares. True or not, it's a nice thought that among the disciples, apart from fishermen and a tax collector, there may also have been someone who worked in wood.

I already had two sources, therefore—scripture and tradition—with which to develop my exploration of that haunting line from the poet Wiseman: *'The minute you begin to speak with certitude about God—he's gone'*.

The Nag Hammadi codex

It's at this point that a third strand came into my thinking, and changed the whole dynamic of the writing. I was, of course, aware of the existence of a so-called Gospel of Thomas that was one of the codices that had come to light near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, in 1945.⁹ Was it a 'dodgy dossier', no better than all the other so-called gospels that were circulating in the first and second centuries? Or might it be that rare

thing, a genuine fifth gospel? The problem was that on the surface the Gospel of Thomas looked as if it could have been the product of a religious movement known as Gnosticism, which had run Christianity pretty close in its earliest days. (St Augustine had originally been attracted to it.)¹⁰

Anyone who unravels these sayings and takes their truth as guide, will not experience death (Saying 1), prefaces the whole collection.

Scholarly opinion is still divided, but more seem to be coming to the conclusion that, in the words of one academic: ‘We can be sure of one thing’, that ‘when compared with other typically Gnostic works’, the Gospel of Thomas ‘exhibits much that deviates from Gnosticism, much that comes closer to the doctrines of “the great Church”’. The importance of the Gospel of Thomas, according to that same scholar, ‘lies in the possibility that authentic sayings of Christ do appear in it’.¹¹

Which translation to use, though? There is no shortage of academic translations available, but they don’t make easy reading.¹² The one I chose was Baptist translator John Henson’s *Good as new: a radical retelling of the scriptures*, first published in 2004,¹³ which Rowan Williams described as ‘a presentation of extraordinary power’. I opted for it because it’s so accessible. As a contextual version it succeeds in ironing out the obscurity of many of the standard translations. (I’m grateful to John Henson for permission to include his version of the Gospel of Thomas as an appendix.)

The Gospel of Thomas is a Coptic text, itself a translation of a possible earlier Greek version, based on sayings spoken by Jesus in his native Aramaic. Having passed through so many linguistic prisms, what chance that the cadences and the matter of the master’s teaching still retained something of their authentic origins?

As I read them, even in a translation of previous translations, I detect two trends: the clash of opposites in the style of the book of Proverbs, and resonances of the mysticism

of the Wisdom literature. Stripped bare of the context of the four canonical gospels—no journeys, no miracles, no encounters, no Passion narrative—just Sayings, 114 of them, one after another, Jesus as a teacher in the rabbinic tradition stands out. This material has the feel of a text from a Semitic figure, shaped during the intertestamental period. This Jesus is an unmistakable Jew: a Hebrew of the Hebrews. If nothing else, the Gospel of Thomas is a challenge to rediscover the Jewishness of Jesus and to reassess what that implies in terms of Christian/Jewish relations—and we do not have a good record in this area.

The importance of
the Gospel of
Thomas...lies in its
authentic sayings of
Christ...

Identity

So I had my three strands: scripture, tradition and apocrypha. What, I finally asked myself, if the sayings attributed to Thomas in the Fourth Gospel were to be put alongside the Sayings of Christ in the Gospel of Thomas? What might they tell us? What might they reveal? How might they re-position discipleship? The book therefore grew out of a dialogue between these two voices: that of Thomas in the Fourth Gospel, and that of Jesus in the collection attributed to Thomas.

As I played one against the other, the Gospel of Thomas and the Thomas of the Fourth Gospel, I discovered that certitude was repeatedly being challenged by identity. There was a fluidity over the question of identity in these texts that was quite liberating.

The friends of Jesus said to him, We'd like to know who you really are. Where have you got your ideas from? (Saying 43)

We get hung up over questions such as 'How much of a man was Jesus?',¹⁴ and we miss the point that identity is invariably multifaceted.

Identity has almost become the defining topic of our own times. Are we to continue in these islands as a United Kingdom, or will Scotland become a separate state? Are we to remain part of the European Union or not? Sexual identity is another area that has seen a huge shift since Kinsey's landmark research in the 1960s and 1970s.

The concept of the ambiguity of identity, which Christianity has been too fond of denying or glossing over, is reinforced by the revelation in the Gospel of Thomas, that Thomas is not after all the disciple's name. His real name is Judas/Jude. Thomas, or its Greek variant Didymus, is just a nickname.

Jesus is alive! Here is a collection of some of his most intriguing and challenging sayings, as passed on by one of his closest friends, whose real name was Jude, but better known by his nickname, Twin. Anyone who unravels these sayings and takes their truth as guide, will not experience death. (Saying 1)

'Twin' is a puzzling nickname to give to anyone, unless more is implied, more to be deduced. I may have adopted the narrative preacher's conceit of giving Thomas a background that I can only guess at, but I think there's good reason to suspect that the Gospel of Thomas and John's Gospel, the Fourth Gospel, in their similarities as well as in their differences, owe their origin to the same spring of theological reflection. These two Gospels are themselves twins. And the question, 'Who was

The great
question: Who
was/is the Jesus
of Christian
experience?

Thomas?’ leads into that other, greater question, ‘Who was/is the Jesus?’ of Christian experience.

Hence my subtitle: *The spirituality of uncertainties*. Uncertainty is a Shakespearian word.¹⁵ I chose it because it avoids the indecisive, irresolute, shilly-shally implied by the ‘uncertainty’ of current usage. As I read these texts, uncertainty is not a stage on a journey towards certainty, it is the very essence of a faith that is ceaselessly at ease with questions and eternally suspicious of dogmatic or facile answers.

The four sayings of Thomas

So, playing the Gospel of Thomas and the Thomas of the Fourth Gospel against each other I sensed an ongoing dialogue. The first time Thomas speaks it is outside the tomb of Lazarus. It’s a scene of exquisite tenderness and spiritual challenge. And all Thomas can say is: ‘*Let us also go and die with him*’.¹⁶ And in Jesus’s Saying in the Gospel of Thomas it is met with a challenge that we are familiar with in Bonhoeffer’s phrase, ‘the cost of discipleship’:¹⁷

Jesus said, I select my friends very carefully. I expect them to stand shoulder to shoulder with one another (Saying 23)

The second time Thomas speaks it’s at the last supper, when he says, ‘Lord we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’.¹⁸ It’s the central question of this third millennium. How can we know? And in the Gospel of Thomas we find this unusual slant on the ‘I am’ sayings:

Jesus said, Unless you escape from the patterns of thought and conduct given you by your parents, unless you develop your own personality, distinct from your brothers and sisters, as I’ve done, you won’t be fit to be a members of my team. (Saying 55)

The third time Thomas speaks it’s after the death of Jesus. ‘*Unless I see the mark of the nails...*’¹⁹

Time has passed for us to conceive of life everlasting as natural. Our culture is in transition, reluctant to completely release its hold on religion however tenuous; hesitant to accept the finality of our mortality, but equally hesitant to deny it. Few have written more honestly about this than the Baptist ecumenist and educator, the late Dr David Goodbourn, as he contemplated his own terminal illness.²⁰

Jesus said: Everything that now exists will change—what you see and can’t see. Being alive or dead has nothing to do with breathing and nothing to do with corpses. (Saying 11).

The fourth and final time Thomas speaks it’s in response to his own moment of insight: ‘*My God!*’²¹ How are we to understand the central mystery of the Gospel: the

Resurrection of Christ? Though the Gospel of Thomas has no narrative of the Passion and the Resurrection, it permeates the collected Sayings, and is captured in Sayings such as this:

Jesus said, I'm the light shining everywhere. I'm the sum total of everything. Everything started with me and everything is coming home to me (Saying 77)

Equality and apocalypse

Apart from these four central themes suggested by the spoken reactions of Thomas at key moments in the Fourth Gospel's unfolding of the drama of salvation and redemption, there are other nuggets worth pondering, such as the apostleship of women and its implication of total gender equality that was to apply among all the followers of Jesus, captured in this arresting Saying:

Jesus said to Peter, 'I intend to train women like [Mary of Magdala] to do all the things that men can do and give them the same freedoms you have. Every woman who insists on equality with men is fit to be a citizen of God's New World.' (Saying 114)

And there are variants on the apocalyptic sayings familiar in the canonical gospels:

Some people think I'll get the peoples of the world to live together in peace in no time at all, It's not as easy as that. What I have to say will lead to deep divisions, conflicts, killings, and all-out war. Families will be torn apart, and individual members made to feel lonely and isolated.²²

It is a Saying that I have found particularly disturbing in recent months as the tragedy of Syria has unfolded. All the more so, having chaired a meeting with Assad in 2006 in his palace in the Qassioun hills above Damascus. We were a small Churches Together delegation at a time when a rapprochement between Syria and the West seemed possible. Other Sayings require us to reconsider our relations with those of other faiths, and the nature of the dialogue that must ensue.

In short, as I read the Gospel of Thomas, and why I think the Gospel of Thomas matters, is that it startles us into a fresh evaluation of why Jesus matters—and that is something that I find both terrifying and liberating.

This article is based on the text of a lecture in the Exploring Faith and Spirituality programme at Luther King House, Manchester, 5 October 2015. Gethin is a retired Baptist minister, who was awarded the Cross of St Augustine by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2006 for 'making an enormous contribution to ecumenical relations'. He has ministered to Baptist churches in Coventry, Sutton Coldfield and Sutton Surrey, served as Ecumenical Officer in Milton Keynes and been General Secretary of Churches Together in Wales: Cytûn. (for notes to text, see next page).

Notes to text

1. *My bright abyss: meditation of a modern believer*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013.
2. G. Gerard, *Heirs to forgotten kingdoms: journey into the disappearing religions of the Middle East*. Simon & Schuster, 2014.
3. o-books, Winchester, UK & Washington, USA, 2008.
4. Circle books, Winchester, UK & Washington, USA, 2011.
5. *Christian-alternative*. Winchester, UK & Washington, USA, 2015.
6. John 20:27 (RSV).
7. E. Pagels, *Beyond belief—the secret Gospel of Thomas*. Vintage, 2004.
8. cf O.E. Tveit, *Christian solidarity in the cross of Christ*, chapter 6. WCC, 2012.
9. J.M. Robinson, *The discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices*. The Biblical Archeologist, vol 42, Autumn 1979.
10. cf Henry Chadwick's *Introduction* to his new translation of the *Confessions*, Oxford, 1992.
11. W C van Unnik: *Newly discovered Gnostic writings*. Studies in Biblical Theology No 30, SCM 1960.
12. eg L. Bauman, *The Gospel of Thomas: wisdom of the twin*, 2nd edn. White Cloud Press, 2012; M. Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas: the hidden Sayings of Jesus*, Harper Collins, 1992; H. McGregor Ross, *Jesus untouched by the church*, Sessions, 1998, etc.
13. o-books, *ibid*.
14. cf the address given at the 1970 BU Assembly by Dr Michael Taylor when he was Principal of the then Northern Baptist College, and was wilfully misunderstood by Sir Cyril Black.
15. from Sonnet 107.
16. John 11:16 (REB).
17. K. Clements, *Introduction to Bonhoeffer*. SPCK, 2010.
18. John 14:5 (REB).
19. John 20:25 (REB).
20. *Reform*, October 2013, *Parting Thoughts*.
21. John 20:28 *Good as New*, *ibid*.
22. Saying 16.

Shock absorber ministry

by Rob Trickey

A little while back, I was asked to take part in an induction service at the Baptist church where I am in membership. The situation was slightly unusual in that the minister being inducted was my successor! As such, I was asked whether I could bring ‘a word from the Lord’ for minister and church, and then pray a blessing on both. As I reflected on this, I felt I wanted to say something about the call to love those we serve as pastors. Some of the more obvious passages (John 13, Philippians 2) went through my mind, but none of them quite fitted the bill. I thought about using the Bonhoeffer quote (from *Life Together*): ‘he who loves his vision of the church more than he loves the church ends up destroying the church’. Profoundly true and vitally important words, but a little negative for such an occasion!

Then I was drawn to Ephesians 5:25 ‘husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her’. An unusual verse perhaps, for an induction service—I had no sense that marriage guidance was needed! But it was the second half of the verse that seemed right for this occasion, and as I have reflected on these words, they have come to seem increasingly important for all of us who are engaged in Christian ministry.

Images of the church

First, of course, the verse itself reminds us that, for all its institutional garb, the church is more than just another human construct, a way of organising people towards a particular purpose. It is a divine creation, and its life and being is drawn from Christ, both historically and in an ongoing sense.

The surrounding verses contain two powerful images of the church. It is the body of Christ (v23), for which he feeds and cares (v29); and it is the bride of Christ, to which he is wedded in ‘one flesh’ (vv31-32). This language might give us reason to reflect on our own attitude to the church, for all our frustrations at its foibles and failings.

Secondly, if Christ loved the church and gave himself for her, then how can we who claim to follow Christ do anything less? Every disciple is called to love the church

and to give themselves for her—and this is especially and intensely true of those called to pastoral leadership. This is the ultimate test and measure of any ministry, more so than growth in numbers or any other metric we might choose.

Since the service itself, I have continued to reflect on these words, and especially to consider in what sense Jesus ‘gave himself for the church’. There are of course many ‘windows on the cross’ (to use Tom Smail’s phrase), many perspectives from which to consider its meaning. But it seems to me that central to the dynamic of the cross is that Jesus took upon himself all that was thrown at him—he absorbed hatred, violence, fear, pain, rejection, but without retaliating or fighting back.

Or, as Smail memorably puts it:

Jesus did not smash his opponents by the dramatic exercise of divine energy...To attack the enemy in that violent way, whether the violence be natural or supernatural, would be to fight him with his own weapons and so to play into his hands and Jesus knows there is no ultimate victory to be won with such weapons and in such a way. So he strips himself of all the protections his divinity might afford and engages in the battle with nothing but the vulnerability of his self-giving love. It is that love that wins the day (pp 88-89).

In the particularity of those hours of trial and torture, we see the true nature of God who takes upon himself the sin of the world. Similarly, in the seminal story of the father with two sons, the father absorbs the shame and disgrace incurred by both of his sons, to bring redemption.

Absorbing the pain

In the same way, as we are called to follow Jesus in loving the church, so I believe that integral to that calling is the absorbing of the pain, anger, confusion, rejection, sometimes even hatred, of the communities we serve. We take these things to ourselves, drawing their sting, creating a space in which healing and reconciliation can take place. Sometimes, of course, the anger or hurt is directed at us personally, because of some wrong we are perceived to have done, perhaps unwittingly; but often, we are called to sit with someone as they ‘offload’ the pain and anger caused by others, or indeed, their anger and disappointment with themselves. As we do so, we will listen to heartfelt expressions of disappointment, of a sense of failure or defeat, of anxiety concerning the future. If those we sit with really trust us, they might even feel safe enough to tell us what they actually think about God and his way of dealing with the world! In such a setting, our job is not necessarily to offer answers or provide mediation, although that might be appropriate in time. This is not a matter of ignoring

or glossing over things—Ephesians 5 reminds us that Christ gave himself for the church to win a bride who will be pure and blameless, holy in the fullest sense of the word—but our first and primary role is simply to listen and to absorb.

As I have reflected on this with others, the image which comes to mind is that of a shock absorber, designed to do just that, to absorb the impact of the pothole or debris on the road, without transmitting that shock into the chassis of the vehicle. If the shock absorber is too rigid, then it won't be able to do its job; too soft, and the danger is that real damage can be caused to the wheels, as the driver is oblivious to significant impacts.

In the context of pastoral ministry, being a shock absorber means allowing room for harsh and angry words to be spoken, doubts and confusion to be expressed, tears to be shed, without these things being reflected back, so that the negative energy is dissipated rather than amplified. The alternative is perhaps more like a chain reaction, where particles are bouncing around, setting off others, releasing even more energy. All too often, this is what happens, as relatively minor incidents trigger off other things and re-open old wounds. We've probably all witnessed this phenomenon and wondered quite how it got to this; some of us have experienced it at first hand, perhaps even been guilty of starting the chain reaction.

If we are to avoid this kind of meltdown (to use a slightly different image), then shock absorption is necessary, and not just within Christian communities—any group of people within which there is some depth of relationship and longevity of existence needs to be able to deal with the negative energy which can be generated by human beings in contact with each other! But where the relationships themselves are integral to the identity of the group, as with a Christian community, this becomes even more important.

Sometimes, a group contains a number of 'shock absorbers' and so difficult issues can be dealt with on an informal, *ad hoc* basis; but often, there will be one or two within the group who naturally take on (and are given) this role. Sometimes, within a church, the shock absorbers are not formally identified; but often, the expectation is that those in pastoral leadership will take on this role, and in particular, 'the minister'. Perhaps for many of us in pastoral charge, this is a good fit and something we naturally do; but for others, it requires a little more working at. Either way, and albeit that others in our church communities may take on something of this role, it does seem to me to be integral to our calling to pastoral leadership. If discipleship means taking up our cross and following Jesus, then it must mean that every disciple will sometimes be required to absorb the pain of a broken world. If pastoral leadership means loving the church as Christ loved her and gave himself for her (as I believe it does), then part of our calling must be to absorb the hurt and pain of those within our

communities, and to do this often and repeatedly.

Of course, this is costly—it is no easy or comfortable role to which we are called.

The thing about shock absorbers is that they wear out—as my mechanic said after a recent replacement ‘these things go for a pastime’! A friend and colleague recently retired after more than 40 years in church-based pastoral ministry. It struck me how unusual that is, how rarely we keep doing this ‘ministry’ thing for all of our working lives. For all too many, the escape from ministry is more like ‘prison break’ than a considered response to a new calling on their lives! Others of us are able to transition into other forms of ‘approved’ ministry, and so remain ‘on the list’.

Of course, the reasons for stepping out of church-based pastoral leadership are varied and the precise constellation of factors is probably unique to each individual. But perhaps the whole ‘ministry’ deal could be better managed if we recognised the toll that being a shock absorber takes. To begin with, perhaps our ministerial formation could address this more directly, as being integral to our pastoral task, and in terms of providing understanding and skills in dealing with it. In particular, those in pastoral leadership need to be able to hear what’s been said, verbally or otherwise, without taking it personally or immediately thinking that something needs to be done. Often, the ‘something’ is simply the absorbing.

Maybe support structures more akin to the supervision which counsellors are required to undergo would help us in ministry. Of course, there are plenty of resources available—but should it be left to individuals to avail themselves of those resources? Here of course we run up against our treasured independence—but if professional counsellors are required to receive regular supervision (whereby they can in turn offload what’s been dumped on them, to use the technical jargon), then why should our practice of ministry be any less professional?

Furthermore, a recognition—even expectation—that pastoral leadership is not necessarily something to undertaken for the whole of someone’s working life, without a break, would enable us to step aside without a crushing sense of failure, or the need to justify it by putting a ‘spiritual’ spin on it. Shock absorbers do wear out, after all, especially when they’ve been given a rough ride.

Christ loved the church and gave himself for her; our calling is to do the same. The love which marks us out as authentic disciples and is the ultimate measure of our ministry is the same self-giving, healing, redeeming love we see in Christ. Central to this love is a willingness to absorb the pain and brokenness of our communities, creating spaces within which healing can be found and new life emerge.

Among other things Rob Trickey is currently providing ministry support for Radstock Baptist Church. He blogs at prodigal2015.wordpress.com.

The tragic price of peace

by Colin Sedgwick

I am grateful for the special issue on peace matters in *bmj* October 2015—helpful, challenging and stimulating. I read it with interest because this is a topic where (confession time!) I feel a pain in my conscience every time I try to grapple with it. Is there something wrong with me, that I have never felt drawn to join the Baptist Peace Fellowship? Why, in general, have I never felt able to describe myself as a pacifist? Am I missing something? Do I have a blind spot? Am I just plain wrong?

The collection of essays helped me to pin down perhaps a little more clearly what my misgivings are. And so I offer these personal reflections—in, of course, a totally eirenic spirit!

The main problem, I think—one to which I am certainly not the first person to draw attention, and one that is in fact hinted at in several of the pieces—is that while the theory of pacifism can hardly be gainsaid by any thoughtful Christian, the practice raises all sorts of questions. And these questions are ones that have to be addressed biblically and theologically, not simply in terms of pragmatism.

If we take Jesus in particular and the Bible as a whole remotely seriously, how can we fail to conclude that peace is indeed high on God's agenda, and so should be also on ours? Yes, of course Jesus is the Prince of Peace! Yes, of course we are called to be people who both advocate and exemplify peace! Of course, of course, of course! I hope nobody imagines that just because some of us feel unable to identify ourselves as pacifists we are therefore indifferent to peace or, even worse, actually take any pleasure in the idea of violence and war. God forbid! Surely every Christian, almost by definition, is a 'peace person'? But the question is how we move from theory to practice. How can we marry idealism and realism?

Norman Kember and Alan Betteridge speak of the inadequacy of 'noble generalised concepts'. The seven bullet points they suggest are helpful so far as they go, but it's hard to avoid the feeling, to be honest, that 'noble generalised concepts' are precisely what they are. And surely most churches, however imperfectly, are seeking to practice them already, without being officially 'peace congregations'.

The same applies, I suggest, to Craig Gardiner's article on 'practising peace' by the way we worship. He refers to prayer, hymnody, baptism, eucharist, even the offering—and yes, all of these no doubt allow scope to highlight the place of peace in

the mind of God, but to different extents and in different mixes this already happens in most churches.

Norman and Alan ask the basic question ‘Can you defeat an idea by force of arms?’ To which the answer is clearly ‘No, you can’t’. But I wonder if this simply misses the point. The point of war—‘just war’ of course, that is, if we may grant for a moment that such a thing exists—is not intended to ‘defeat ideas’ (if only!), but to curb evil and violent actions. It is a restraining thing, indeed an emergency thing, tragically required in the face of some great danger.

This is the principle which Paul suggests as the justification for the place of ‘authority’ in society—the one in authority ‘does not carry the sword in vain’ (Romans 13:1-5), but is there as a bulwark against a breakdown of law and order. Certainly, the defeat of ideas can only be accomplished by long-term peaceful means—again, what thoughtful Christian could possibly disagree with that? But when the threat is immediate, and the prospect of changing people’s mentalities now is non-existent, what is to be done? Simply sit back and pray?

Joe Haward states that ‘to be peacemakers is to witness to a change of consciousness, to declare that there are other alternatives [my italics], that violence is not our only option’. But that statement prompts the response, ‘All right, but what are these other alternatives? Spell them out, please!’ Joe speaks of calling ‘each other, the church, to live less violently, that we might be salt and light in this violent world’. Well, again, of course!—but is this anything more than a statement of the obvious, a platitude, albeit of course a Christian one? I doubt if such a manifestly laudable aim would cut much ice with a Hitler or an Osama bin Laden, even if they had a clue what it meant.

Craig Gardiner speaks of ‘the myth of redemptive violence’ (I must admit that this was a new idea to me), and describes it as ‘a narrative that believes that violent means can bring about peaceful ends’. But in relation to World War II, as well as various other conflicts, could it not be argued that that is precisely what happened? The fact, whether we like it or not, is that Hitler’s power was destroyed militarily, and this led, albeit after a lengthy period, to peace. All right, by no means a perfect peace—and yes, the ideas behind his actions sadly live on—but an infinitely better situation than what had existed before, or what might have come about if no action had been taken. I hate the very idea of war—but I can’t deny that I am glad my parents’ generation rose up in arms at that horrible time. Is that wrong of me? If it amounts to succumbing to ‘the myth of redemptive violence’, then I suppose I must plead guilty.

The impotence of theoretical, idealistic pacifism was summed up for me by the concluding paragraph of Bob Gardiner’s otherwise excellent article focusing on the Charlie Hebdo murders (now sadly superseded by the recent Paris massacres). Writes Bob: ‘Let magazines like Charlie attack these targets...’ followed by a list of social, economic and political ills that disfigure our world. To which one can only reply, ‘Well yes, let them indeed! Wouldn’t it be great if they did!’ But what is this more²⁴ than

simply a plaintive wish voiced from the sidelines?—'Wouldn't it be wonderful if all political magazines and cartoonists behaved with respect and integrity?' Yes, wouldn't it just! But what does that amount to, in effect, more than a forlorn wringing of hands?

To most Christians, surely, violence and war can only ever be evils. But in our sad and fallen world there may be times when they are the lesser of two evils. Putting it another way, there are times when we have to choose between, not good and evil, but two evils. (Bear in mind, by the way, that Bonhoeffer, who I think described himself as a pacifist, and who is quoted in these pieces, involved himself in the plot to kill Hitler.)

We Christians are citizens of God's kingdom of peace. But we are also citizens of this world, and are inextricably entangled in its messy complexities. We simply can't afford the luxury—one might even say the indulgence—of pacifist ideals. Given that almost all of us in the western world, and many others too, have benefitted from past wars, we can hardly look on without serious unease as others, putting it bluntly, effectively do our dirty work for us.

In the light of this line of thought I ask, 'So why then do I sometimes wobble in my anti-pacifist convictions? Why that pain in the conscience I mentioned at the beginning?' The answer is simple: it happens when I ask myself that most basic question (though one which none of the contributors articulates as such): Can you imagine Jesus toting a machine gun? Or lobbing a grenade? Or launching a missile?

The answer, of course, is an emphatic 'No'. So how can a Christian so much as contemplate a resort to arms! Unthinkable!

The answer can only be that Jesus, beyond his teaching about 'rendering to Caesar', said very little about how his followers should respond to these messy issues of earthly citizenship, implying that this is an area where we are left to rely on our Spirit-led consciences in each and every situation. I wouldn't claim that very much weight can be laid on the fact that Jesus seems to have had real respect for soldiers who came to him in need, and doesn't seem to have suggested that they should leave their military posts—but at the same time I think it is worth mentioning. The fact that Jesus tells his followers not to judge presumably doesn't preclude them from a role in the judiciary? The command to forgive our enemies doesn't, presumably, mean that we shouldn't want proper justice for the person who burgles our home?

And returning to Paul in Romans 13, it seems reasonable to suggest that the role of the 'authorities' he speaks about may in our modern world be extended to peace-seeking nations who feel the tragic necessity of 'bearing the sword' to restrain a great evil. It is when that happens that individual Christians within such a nation have an agonising decision to make: to stand aloof, even if that means letting others do the dirty work, as I suggested earlier? or to take a deep breath and say 'I hate this with all my heart, but for lack of a realistic alternative I have no choice but to sign up to the war effort'?

Discussing how churches might mark Remembrance Day, Norman and Alan advocate ‘a real degree of sensitivity’ towards some who ‘see their war service as a source of their self-esteem’. I confess I wasn’t quite sure how to take this: there almost seemed to be a suggestion that any ‘self-esteem’ acquired in this way was somehow tainted.

If that is the case I can only say this: if somebody, acting in good conscience according to their lights, and doing so honourably and loyally, and striving for a good end, has acquired as a result some element of ‘self-esteem’, then I personally wouldn’t begrudge it to them. But one thing I’m pretty sure of is this: many of those people, probably in fact the vast majority, would be very happy to sling every scrap of such self-esteem in the rubbish-bin if by doing so they could only turn the clock back and prevent the whole vile, rotten, stinking, evil horror from happening in the first place. They did what they felt, in all conscience, they had to do.

Peace matters. Yes, indeed. And one day, when the Prince of peace is enthroned over the world, peace will prevail. But until that day comes there are hard things to be done in order to preserve the measure of peace this world enjoys. May God help his people to know how to react when confronted with the necessity of those hard things!

Prophecy and teaching

by Bob Allaway

I was interested to read the articles by John Smuts and Fred Stainthorpe in *bmj*, January 2016. Taken together, they remind us that there are two ways that the Bible is used in preaching, which I see as illustrating the spiritual gifts of prophecy and teaching.

Prophesying scripture. For many years, I have observed a spiritual discipline learnt from German friends, of meditating on the daily Bible texts issued by the Moravians (this practice is common among all German evangelicals). The morning after my mum had died in my arms, I took up the texts, and found that the Old Testament one for that day was ‘Your dead shall live!’ (Isaiah 26:19). It hit me as a direct word of comfort from God.

When I am preparing a sermon, I will study the passage on which I am preaching, in the expectation that some text within it will hit me in the same way, as a direct message from God—not just to me, but to my church. As Fred Stainthorpe notes, sometimes God can do that with a mistranslation. For that matter, God can speak to us

like that with something that is not even scripture. He spoke to Jeremiah from the branch of a tree and a boiling pot (1:11-14)!

But just because I believe I have a word from the Lord, is it so? We have no doubt all had to deal with those whose hotline to God is actually the symptom of a mental illness. And it is very easy to latch onto words that confirm our own prejudices. That is why we are warned, 'Do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test them all' (1 Thessalonians 5: 20,21) So how do we test them? This brings us to what John Smuts says about 'sound doctrine', and leads me to discuss the other way we use scripture.

Teaching scripture. Where is there a certain, reliable revelation of God, by which all other revelation may be tested? A sceptic might say, 'Other books, such as the Qur'an and Book of Mormon, claim to be inspired. If you reject them, why should you accept the Bible's claims about itself?' That is why the Baptist Union rightly locates authority, not in the Bible in itself, but in 'Jesus Christ...as revealed in the Holy Scriptures'. He has been objectively marked out for us as having authority by his resurrection from the dead, and he gives authority to the Old Testament scriptures, of which he said, 'They speak of me', as well as the New, behind which lies the witness of those apostles to whom he said, 'He who hears you hears me' (at the same time, we cannot give authority to those passages, such as 'an eye for an eye', that he has superseded. Matthew 5:38,39).

To be confident, then, that we shall receive a word from the Lord, we need to listen for that word in those scriptures to which Jesus Christ gives authority, hearing them, as far as possible, in the original language and authorial contexts to which he gives authority. To avoid only hearing what we want to hear, it helps to listen in a passage given to us, whether in a lectionary or by systematically preaching through a section of scripture.

But what of when God appears to 'bless' a sermon from a mistranslated text? It can still be judged by the wider context for which scripture was given: whether it leads to faith in Christ and discipleship in his image (2 Timothy 3:15). This brings us to the other Baptist principle, 'that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret...'. They may not be able to judge how accurate our translation is, but they can certainly judge whether the Word we bring leads to those ends.

Bob Allaway is pastor of Eldon Road Baptist Church until Easter 2016, when he retired. He will be continuing ministry in an estate church plant.

Ignite: a response

by Ted Hale

Having read Ignite, I read with interest Phil Jump's interview regarding the report in *bmj*, January 2016. Ignite, of course draws very heavily on a paper by Roy Searle about the future of Baptist ministry. I have shared my reservations about that paper in other quarters, but as the Ignite report has received publicity via the *bmj*, I feel a response in this journal to Ignite is appropriate: even though I may be labelled as one of those who can be quite vociferous on the public airwaves.

Up front, Ignite offers an introductory summary of its view of what is required in a minister. In short, we need ministers who:

- display consistent character and behaviour;
- are equipped to recognise their developing needs;
- are engaged in active ministry development;
- are engaged in a defined covenant relationship.

This includes nothing which is controversial, nor to my mind anything particularly enlightening. What is more telling is what it doesn't include.

Noticeably, there is no mention here of the gospel, or of preaching. In common with Roy Searle's paper there is little if any sustained thinking here about Baptist ministers being 'ministers of the gospel', and none at all about preaching the gospel (there are just seven passing references to preaching in the entire report—three of which are negative comments).

It is a sad indictment on our denomination in the 21st century that in considering the future of ministry within the Baptist denomination there are just SEVEN references to 'gospel' in the entire Ignite report, as follows:

- * Our understanding of what it means to be a gospel people is changing.
- * Realities that they want to challenge through their gospel convictions.
- * We need women and men who are able to interpret the gospel with faith and imagination, nourishing those whom they serve and equipping them for mission in today's world.

* We need ministers who can engage with their communities and contexts as they find them, recognise how things operate and see what matters to people, so that they can relate our gospel message in, to and through those environments.

* The church is not for itself but for the gospel and for the world, so ministry too is for the gospel and for the world.

* This is (both) an important ecclesiological point about our fellowship together in and for the gospel

* They will be able to bear the gospel in word and deed.

The above shows that some really valuable things do get a passing mention in Ignite. IF these potentially worthwhile references to the gospel had been developed in any significant way, and IF they had been central to an understanding of the future of Baptist ministry, the report would have had much to commend it. Sadly the gospel is not a major focus of this report—because its authors do not seem to see sharing a love of the gospel as central to a minister’s vocation. In the 1960s it was THE primary task of any Baptist minister. The ‘needs’ in Ignite’s introductory summary and throughout the report are all intrinsically about what I call ‘Churchianity’—the minister’s role in organised religion rather than a minister’s contribution to the lives of God’s people.

The SEVEN unexpanded references to Gospel (matched by the same paltry number of references to Jesus!) are completely overshadowed by the 141 references to, and extensive treatment of, leaders or leadership. This graphically demonstrates the unfortunate bias in current BU thinking. As Phil Jump said in the *bmj* (p10), ‘We are unashamedly proposing that the way forward includes a clear investment in leadership’. But this false Holy Grail, the idolisation of leadership, is at the heart of the potential demise of our denomination, of many Baptist churches; and accounts for the increasing sense of inadequacy or frustration of many ministers who have been told they are called to be strong leaders. How unbiblical is that! This focus on leading does nothing to encourage or help ministers, or those who call them to a pastorate, so that all members love and share and live by the Word of Life.

Let me put it like this. We have a fundamental choice: Churchianity or Christianity.

Churchianity is manifest when the life of the church is the primary concern of a minister and church members.

* In Churchianity the church is an organisation which needs a leader.

* In Churchianity the church is a lifeboat which needs a captain.

* Conversely, in Christianity the church may be ‘sinking’ and needs saving by someone special.

* In Christianity the church is the major focus of members’ lives, so it is in the church

that they need someone to teach and inspire them, a role model.

* In Churchianity the church is a mission station (or a ‘missional community’!) which needs a central driving force or personality to lead ‘the church’s mission’

Churchianity is what Ignite commends.

Christianity (literally) means following Jesus—who through the work of the Holy Spirit is our one true leader.

* In Christianity, all church members including the minister will receive Jesus’ commendation because they are salt and light in the world – not in the church!

* In Christianity, because the challenging way of Jesus is followed in daily living, the gospel will need to be shared amongst co-disciples so that all grow together into Christ as our one true head.

* In Christianity, church programmes will only have validity if they encourage extra-church love and service of our neighbours.

* In Christianity, the minister will recognise that he or she has no leadership role where members spend 99% of their time, and where the gospel desperately needs to be shared—in the places where church members live, work, engage with their communities *etc.*

* In Christianity, churches are prepared if necessary to lose their lives to be faithful to the gospel’s call for us to be workers for justice and truth.

We have had 30 years of this nonsense about needing strong leaders. Be honest, where has it led us?

We have some fine minds within our denomination. If they were employed in helping and encouraging churches with the primary task of sharing the gospel, rather than preoccupied with patterns of church management, or minister-led missions, I for one would have much more hope for the future of Baptist ministers, Baptist churches and the Baptist Union—which, incidentally, is not and should not be Baptists Together, as though we are one organisation, but Baptists in Union with each other through our common commitment to our Lord and to the gospel he urged his followers to share in word and action

Is it too much to ask that we might still find some of influence in our denomination whose Baptist identity is strong enough for them once again to be committed to seeking out people whose passion for the gospel will strengthen love in the life of a church, and encourage joyful service in the life of the world. I hope somewhere someone will say such things to the BU Council and invite them to look at where they think they are leading the denomination...and perhaps listen to what some of us are saying from the margins with the same openness to hearing a word from God that Phil asks of us.

Ted Hale is a past chairman of BMF and has held a variety of pastorates.

Reviews

edited by Michael Peat

The Nazareth manifesto: being with God

Samuel Wells

Wiley-Blackwell, 2015

Reviewer: Andy Goodliff

In this book Sam Wells argues for the importance of being with over working for theology and the way the church lives out its mission. Wells wants to show the impoverishment of a theology and ethics of 'working for' and as such the argument of the book is in some ways an 'exaggeration', but he says (in a footnote), that 'if I thought there was the remotest chance of my proposals being widely adopted I might speak differently' (p19).

Wells grounds the importance of 'with' in the gospel, in fact, he says 'God with us' is the gospel. The story of scripture is the story of God's desire to be with us, and only within this 'with' can we speak of a 'for'. The book offers a re-reading of the doctrines of the Trinity, creation, incarnation, atonement, pneumatology, ecclesiology and eschatology through the lens of 'with'. The book also seeks to

re-read the Bible's narrative—creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, and church—with 'with' as the central concept.

Wells writes in his usual style, which is both academic and sermon, theology and example. The book leaves you examining your own life and the life of the church in which you belong—am I shaped by 'for' or 'with', is my church shaped by 'for' or 'with'—and the book is a means of offering the means of discovering how we might transition from 'for' to 'with'. It also asks the same question of overseas mission agencies/societies, and whether they take seriously simply being 'with'?

Where the church is full of different kinds of community mission through night shelters, food banks, toddler groups, cafes, parish nursing, street pastor *etc*, *The Nazareth manifesto* offers a means of examining what we are about, both in terms of theology and in practice. Wells believes that at the heart of God and the gospel is 'with', and to be the church we must learn to be with God, with one another and with our neighbours and the stranger—this where the kingdom, and the glory of God are found.

Every minister in training, and every church considering a new, or reviewing a current, project should read it.

God after Christendom?

***Brian Haymes & Kyle Gingerich
Hiebert***

Paternoster 2015

Reviewer: Sally Nelson

If 'doctrine' conjures in your mind an image of a dusty shelf loaded with opaque volumes—then read on! I am just about to teach doctrine to some first year students and I know that there is this kind of anticipatory anxiety abroad! So one of our introductory texts to what might broadly be called the doctrine of God will be this modest and affordable paperback by Brian Haymes and Kyle Gingerich Hiebert. From two experienced teachers of theology, it is clearly presented and accessibly written, and a delight to read.

Part of the now established post-Christendom series, the main question addressed in the book is how we speak about a sovereign God in a culture that has lost the language, stories and insights of the Christian (and possibly other) faith. Who is God? Can we really know God, if God is God? What kind of God is revealed in scripture, manifests as Trinity, inhabits his own creation? The authors tackle all these and more: the problem of evil, the nature of the church and the shape of hope.

One of the features of the book that I particularly like is that it doesn't drift into a reductionist kind of systematics. None

of us—surely?—really believes that God comprises a 'set of topics', such as God's creative practice; God's 'attributes'; a persistent tendency to love and redeem sinners; or the one who sustains the universe. Yet many books about God present this type of fragmented and impersonal picture—and what are we meant to conclude about the deity thus communicated? *God after Christendom* is far less tidy but far more wholesome.

Speaking of such a God clearly presents its challenges. 'It is given to us to name but not to exhaustively describe the first and the last and the Living One', say Haymes & Hiebert. God will never really fit properly in our world of health and safety regulation, targets, and economic consumption. God is far too wild, unlimited and unpredictable for us, so how can we say anything helpful at all? What might an appropriate apologetics look like?

Thankfully an answer is ready: 'we can speak of God, not because we are clever, or especially devout, but because God has spoken. God has spoken in the story of Israel, in his dealings with the world but primarily, crucially, in the person and work of Jesus Christ'. Telling and living his story, inhabiting the faith, holding peacefully the tension of what we can and cannot know—this is the way of faithfulness in this generation. It just isn't easy—no programme or script, just a

deeply and constantly challenging way of life.

Do read it. It would also make a good study book, chapter by chapter, for an engaged theology group in the local church.

Five books on Paul and his letters

Reviewer: Andy Goodliff

The speed of scholarship these days can mean it's not easy for the Baptist minister to keep up to date. So here are five books I recommend on what is happening in Pauline studies these days, which would be worth reading.

1. ***The Paul debate*** by N. T. Wright (SPCK, 2016). This is a short book at around 100pp, in which Wright picks up the conversation that his two-volume *Paul and the faithfulness of God* (SPCK, 2014) has generated. Tom Wright remains a leading voice within Pauline studies, partly because of his ability to write for a wide range of audiences. The Paul debate engages with the themes that run through his other works—Messiah, covenant, Israel—but in critical engagement with where his reading has been contended.

2. ***Beyond old and new perspectives on Paul*** edited by Chris Tilling

(Cascade, 2014). This is a collection of essays that engage with the work of Douglas Campbell and in particular Campbell's important book *The deliverance of God*. Campbell argues that the traditional justification by faith reading of Paul (rooted in Romans 1-4) is wrong and offers an exegetical and theological re-reading of these chapters and Paul's gospel. For those daunted by *The deliverance of God*, *Beyond old and new* is a good way into what Campbell is arguing. Tilling has gathered a series of authors who test Campbell's argument—historically, exegetically and theologically and Campbell offers a response. Campbell is of a new emerging school that is called an apocalyptic reading of Paul, of which J. Lou Martyn was its most prominent proponent. At the centre of Pauline studies today is a debate between Wright and his salvation historical reading of Paul and Campbell and co and their apocalyptic reading of Paul. See also the forthcoming book *Paul and the apocalyptic imagination* (Fortress, 2016), with essays by Wright, Campbell and Barclay and Gaventa (see below) and others.

3. ***Paul and the gift*** by John Barclay (Eerdmans, 2015). This is another book long in gestation and length. It is already gaining lots of good reviews.

Barclay takes a fresh in-depth study of Paul's language of grace and how it was similar and different to Graeco-Roman and Second Temple Jewish interpretations of gift in his day. He then re-reads the relevant passages in Galatians and Romans. At the centre of his argument is that Paul understands the Christ-gift as with regard to worth.

4. ***When in Romans: an invitation to linger with the gospel according to Paul*** by Beverly Gaventa (Baker, forthcoming 2016). This book is due to be published later this year. Gaventa is currently writing a commentary on Romans, which is highly anticipated and so this new book will give us a taste of what is to come. Gaventa is part of the apocalyptic Paul scholarship field. Her work has focused on how Paul speaks of sin and death as cosmic powers. She is one of most interesting readers of Paul. I recommend seeing her earlier work *Our mother Paul* (WJK, 2007).

5. ***Women and worship at Corinth*** by Lucy Peppiatt (Cascade, 2015). This is a shorter book (148pp) and is focused on a particular Pauline issue. The book seeks to re-read the controversial passages in 1 Corinthians concerning women and worship (1 Corinthians 11 & 14). She argues that much of what we attribute to Paul is in fact the voice and perspective of Corinthian male

leadership which Paul wants to challenge. This offers, she suggests, a more coherent reading of the text and of Paul in general. For those who struggle with these chapters in Corinthians and who are committed to a reading of these chapters that supports the restriction of women in worship and leadership, this is an important book that deserves a look.

Blessed are the poor? Urban poverty and the church

Laurie Green

London SCM 2015

Reviewer: Sally Nelson

Green, who wrote the classic *Let's do theology*, offers *Blessed are the poor* as a theological reflection on the life of housing estates in the UK. It is a fascinating combination of social and political history of the postwar period, combined with some searching spiritual and theological questions about British society today. Throughout the book, Green gives illustrative pericopes of life on the estates, letting residents speak for themselves so that we hear the voices that otherwise we might not experience. In particular he frames the uncomfortable question of why the poor are blamed for being poor.

Green structures the whole book around a reflective cycle: starting with the experience of life on the estates of Britain, he reflects with biblical and theological insights and suggests a way forward according to the gospel imperative of justice. Is this a step we are able to take?

He identifies key movements in the economic and social landscape that have led to the fresh marginalisation of the poor in the land that was meant to be fit for heroes. With cutting insight he contrasts the values of the Kingdom of God with the values of our consumer culture, and explores what it really might mean to be blessed as the poor: essentially that the poor are those with whom Jesus identifies. God is with the poor, even today. God reveals Godself among the marginalised, and for that reason the poor can show us things we will otherwise miss.

Green discusses the practice of cultivating a 'hermeneutic of justice' in place of the church's existing tendency to a 'hermeneutic of order', quoting liberation theologian Bonino, 'The true question is not "What degree of justice (liberation of the poor) is compatible with the maintenance of the existing order?", but "What kind of order is compatible with the exercise of justice

(the right of the poor)?".' Green argues that once we start to adopt this hermeneutic of justice, we must read the Bible in new ways. This means stripping away the power and status that the church may secretly enjoy—and although, as Dissenters, that should be second nature, maybe it is harder to do than we might think.

Fresh ways of being church are coming; and they are coming relentlessly from the 'new' margins—defined by material poverty and social exclusion. It feels unsettling to hear the prophetic from the people we might have expected to be ministering to: this is upside down, gospel stuff and we may not want it.

The book will challenge us to think about what justice really means. Read it wearing a yellow high-vis jacket, because it isn't safe!

**Interested in
reviewing? Contact
Michael Peat with
your areas of
interest. You get to
keep the book!**