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A table of contents for *The Fraternal / Baptist Ministers Journal* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bmj-06.php

**the baptist ministers'
journal**

January 2017 volume 333

Desert Island Books

Anne Phillips

Spurgeon's approach

Stephen Cooper

21st century Baptists

Brian Talbot

The courage to be Baptist

A group statement

Philemon

Pieter Lalleman

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From the editor

Of the prophetic, and of printing

I was talking with a friend about how human beings often dislike what we might call 'liminal' spaces—places where we approach a boundary of some sort. We might push boundaries, and we often identify and label them, but actually crossing boundaries is much harder! It is 'different' over there and we don't always like 'different'. Maybe we might think of approaching God—but he is holy and we are clearly not, so the space near him is unsafe; maybe we're thinking about a dangerous space between life and death; maybe it's about engaging with different kinds of people. There are good anthropological reasons for all this, of course! (See Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger*.) I like the idea that prophets are people who are willing to look into these uncomfortable spaces, and articulate what they see. Prophets are those who can speak the truth as they see it, even if it is unpalatable.

Baptists, as a marginal people (in the UK, at any rate), are surely called to speak in these 'betwixt and between' spaces. Such speaking is usually against the stream because historically we have been located on the edge, and have seen things from that place. In this issue of *bmj* you will find several 'baptistic' articles, speaking into liminal spaces—and we also need, corporately, to test such voices. If you are prompted to respond to anything you read, then *bmj* will be glad to hear from you.

On another matter, many of you have now given us your email addresses to receive *bmj* electronically. Economic pressures have forced us to review our costs and this is the best way to keep *bmj* as a resource for your ministry. For now we will continue to print a smaller number of copies for a higher membership fee that covers the costs. If you know someone who cannot access *bmj* on a computer, maybe you could print it for them?

Our thanks and blessings go to Keenan Print, who have served us so well for many years. It is a joy to work with them. We also thank Jem Sewell, who has been our distributor for the past year. Both will continue for now, with the reduced print run.

It remains for me to wish you a very happy new year and every blessing on your ministry. May we be prophets in our communities in 2017. SN

Anne Phillips'

Desert island books



The healing potential of a desert island is the therapy I need right now: enduring an attack (the only appropriate word) of shingles, I dream of lying on soft sand in the shade a palm tree soaking up treasured volumes, with sun-warmed water gently falling over a nearby cliff edge to offer respite to my itching skin. This is a reality sadly beyond the many talents of the *bmj* editor to conjure up for me; instead, incapacity gives me the opportunity to fulfil my promise to her and reflect on my book selection, reading that would nurture mind, soul and spirit even while the body aches.

The two most magnificent resources are already 'on tap', the Bible and Shakespeare, each in its own right a vast library of narrative and reflection on God and the human condition. So what more to add? For my first, theological, choice it's tempting to include one of the seminal works of theologian or biblical scholars which have formed, informed and re-formed my faith and ministerial life over the years, but they belong to the heritage I carry with me, and to quote Kahlil Gibran: 'Life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday'. I'm stranded on a desert island, a new context for me, so consistent with both my past as teacher of contextual theology, and my present as pilgrim undertaking the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises in daily life, I will want to engage in a disciplined routine of reflection on where I am and where God is in whatever I'm facing—and I guess that will be pretty tough in reality, organising the most basic practicalities of food and shelter, for which even the Girl Guiding wide games in the Surrey woods of my youth and more recent experiments in solo DIY (oh, for that occasional extra pair of hands!) are barely adequate preparation.

I hit a problem, though, choosing between two very different books. The desert island is not so called for nothing: it is not all sun, sea and sand, but will have its literal and metaphorical desert component. So choosing Belden Lane's *Solace of fierce landscapes: exploring desert and mountain spirituality* could provide spiritual nourishment for living in harsh places. Drawing on a vast range of experiences and texts, ancient and modern, Lane sets out on an inward and outward journey accompanying his mother in her

protracted dying. I found his writing an enormous support when living through my own parallel experience and I have returned to it subsequently in dark times. But of course scripture offers adequate resources for reflection on desert experience: Hagar and Naomi, Moses and Jesus all had their faith tested there too.

Instead, then, I looked for a perspective on faith different from my own, something that challenged me, shaped as I am by my white western educated female worldview, however uncomfortable that is still to own: despite a lifetime's commitment to doing theology 'outside the box' (from before I ever knew there was a 'box'), there will always be much more to learn. I've opted in the end for a little book I picked up in Blackwell's for its intriguing title—not a foolproof way of making a wise purchase, but I struck lucky, for this is a gem. *Theology brewed in an African pot* is by a Nigerian Jesuit priest, Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, now a theological educator in Nairobi.

Based on his introductory courses for students, the book is addressed to any reader wanting to learn more about faith and its implications for living, as well as about how 'theology is done in Africa'. A critically grounded scholar and astute commentator on life in many countries and contexts, Orobator discusses with refreshing contemporary candour all the major doctrines of the church from different African perspectives (and of course a Roman Catholic position, but with much ecumenical awareness). Most powerfully for me, he does it in dialogue with the now classic African novel which exerted the greatest influence on my own growth as a global Christian while I was teaching many years ago in West Africa. Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart* is a tragic story from a subaltern standpoint of the devastation caused by early western missionary activity. At one level, Orobator may have written a simple book, but to have it as companion on my island would stimulate new and renewed focus on the heart of faith in a context where my identity will be challenged to the core. And unless I misread him, when Pope Francis' recently announced Commission on Women Deacons has reported and women move towards ordination in the Roman Church, Orobator will be supportive. We live in hope for our sisters-in-faith!

After all this deep stuff, what other literary companions will create a balance? Although theological and spiritual reading will undeniably foster the imagination, my next choice offers the chance of escape through its elusive imagery and whimsical poetic musings. Mary Oliver's poetry regularly accompanies me on retreat and I hope I can have a compendium of her work (if not, her *New and selected poems* (vol 1) will suffice). Like Annie Dillard, Oliver has the ability to get beneath the skin of a mundane

encounter (with an airport toilet cleaner), a natural scene (picking blueberries, a fox in the headlights) or a gospel story (the stilling of the storm) and so seduce the reader with her simple scene-setting that you follow her to unexpected depths, and are left with a wondering, often breathless ‘wow’. The final lines of perhaps her best known poem, *The summer day*, offers a profound encouragement to live purposefully and intentionally the days we are given, even in the challenges of an island exile:

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

And so to fiction, and a toss-up between Tolkien and George Eliot, with *Middlemarch* winning out. Such a choice does not contradict my desire to be forward looking. Set amidst the political and social tumult of the mid-19th century, it resonates with our own extraordinarily confusing times: although I’ll be protected from outside news on the island, I will carry current heart-rending turbulence with me. Eliot’s plot is both complex in its range and simple in its core theme—it’s a love story. In many ways I can identify within the heroine, Dorothea Brooke, as she journeys painfully to greater self-and world- awareness: she learns that a seemingly safe choice can in reality pour acid on your dreams, and that liberation and full flowering can come from taking a risk and following unconventional pathways. There are many turns of plot, touches of humour, and interesting characters to analyse—plenty to reward multiple readings, and simply to enjoy.

What, finally, about the luxury I’m allowed? A sensible choice would be a ball of string and some scissors, a deliciously indulgent one would be shampoo. But if I were confined to this island for any length of time, I would need to doodle and above all to write, to play with words, grow my thoughts and pour out my troubles—and compose letters to my little grandsons hoping the polluted oceans would deposit a bottle or two on the shore for me to fill, and commit to hope and the tides. So please could I have a large pile of those gorgeously or quirkily covered A4 or A5 notebooks from Paperchase, with pencils, rubbers and sharpeners thrown in for good measure?

Building on long experience of teaching and pastoring in schools, churches and theological college, as well as of (grand)mothering, Anne Phillips now ministers as a writer and spiritual accompanist.

The ‘Spurgeon approach’

by Stephen Cooper

As a Baptist pastor in Australia it’s a delight for me to read the *bmj* from the UK. In 1994 an elderly pastor gave me a bundle of old *bmjs*, and I was hooked! I asked to be added to the mailing list and have received it in the post for over 20 years. I enjoy being informed about the insights, issues and concerns of Baptist ministers on the other side of the world. The *Journal* is always stimulating and thought-provoking. Recently my wife and I were in the UK, and the Baptist churches we visited on Sundays were very friendly and welcoming. It was special to meet with the *bmj* editor and her family, and enjoy a day of leisurely conversation.

Variety in worship

Like most pastors, I try to vary the elements of gathered worship and experiment with new ideas. Recently I’ve experimented with an old approach to Bible readings and preaching. It’s an approach which was practised regularly by C.H. Spurgeon (1834-1892). During his Sunday services Spurgeon would often read a lengthy passage of scripture. It might be a whole chapter, or most of a chapter, or sometimes even more than a chapter. His reading was ‘accompanied by a shrewd, earnest running commentary, which, though sometimes lengthy, never became wearisome’.¹ Usually this was followed by a hymn and prayer, then the sermon, which was based on one or two verses (sometimes three) of the scripture passage. This is what I call the ‘Spurgeon approach’—a lengthy reading of a Bible passage with brief running commentary, then a sermon based on one or two verses from this passage.

Of course, such an approach was not invented by Spurgeon. We are the inheritors of a long tradition of lengthy Bible reading with explanation. Think of the scene described in Nehemiah 8 where God’s people listened to the scriptures read for hours—‘Daybreak till noon...all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law’ (v3). Paul urged Timothy to ‘devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching’ (1 Tim 4:13). There are about six times as many references in the Bible to hearing or listening to the word as there are for privately reading it.² Justin Martyr reported around 150AD that ‘on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things’.³

This approach is different from my normal practice and probably different from most Baptist churches today. I usually preach on a passage of about 10 verses in length, with the sermon touching on several of the verses. The Bible reading before the message is usually just this passage of about 10 verses. In the rest of the gathered worship there are other short passages quoted at various points. When I visit other churches in Australia I discover that some don't have a Bible reading segment—a few verses are quoted when introducing songs, and the preacher might read a few verses in the early part of the message. I wonder if there is something we can learn from the 'Spurgeon approach'?

Bible reading as a practice

It seems that Christians these days are reading their Bibles less than they used to. In general, people read less. This is odd when most read daily on computers, mobile phones and so on. But most people are not used to reading a lengthy text, and reading it slowly, imaginatively and thoughtfully. The result is that the average Baptist Christian does not know the Bible like earlier generations. So I wonder if the 'Spurgeon approach' of a 'running commentary' with a lengthy Bible reading might help our people to know more about the Bible?

Another concern is that sermons are usually focused on a narrow band of biblical truth. If people attend Sunday services every Sunday (which is not so common these days!) they will learn about various parts of the Bible, but they will also miss large sections. In some Christian traditions where a lectionary is followed the pastor and congregation are reminded of a wide variety of themes and biblical information. Many Baptist churches don't follow a lectionary, so during a year major sections of biblical truth, theology and Christian practice are not covered.

This shows why the 'running commentary' of lengthy passages could be valuable. It forces the pastor and congregation to cover many truths which might not be dealt with in sermons. It helps us proclaim 'the whole will of God' (Acts 20:27).

I decided to try this 'Spurgeon approach' during our Sunday evening services. This is a small congregation, averaging about 20 people of middle age. We sit around tables in the church hall, so there is scope for interaction and dialogue. My experiment was a series on the NT letter of James. The series

Could the
'Spurgeon
approach'
encourage
Bible reading?

went for five weeks. Each Sunday we read an entire chapter, with the sermon based on one or two verses from that chapter. One advantage of covering the whole letter of James in five weeks is that we moved through the entire letter at a good pace and the series did not become boring.

I found that reading an entire chapter all at once is too long for the average person to maintain concentration, so I divided each chapter into two sections. Early in the service we read the first section, with the second just before the message. Variety helps to keep it interesting and engaging! So sometimes I read a passage, and added my own brief running commentary. Sometimes I introduced the passage with a short explanation, and someone else read it. At other times someone read it, and I added comments at the end.

As I pondered the chapter during the week I selected a text for the message which summarised important themes of the chapter. The text was one or two verses. I didn't try to copy the style of a Spurgeon sermon. To be honest, I don't like most of his messages—for our era they are too long and tedious! There is, however, great value in a message based on one or two verses. It forces the preacher to be very focused on a particular theme. It means there does not have to be a lot of explanation—most of that is done during the earlier reading and 'running commentary'. The preacher is free to tell more stories, give illustrations, show a short video clip, tease out the application, and explore the implications of the verse(s). Since the verse was a summary of important themes of

Interested in the history of Baptist ministry?

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There are some gaps—if you have any old copies that could fill them, then we'd love to hear from you. We can scan an issue and return it to you.

Our grateful thanks go to Rob Bradshaw, who has carefully generated this archive for us.

the chapter I was able to refer briefly in the message to other parts of the chapter.

This approach also means that the sermon does not need to be long. The lengthy Bible reading takes extra time, so the message can be about 15 min instead of 25 min. There is still adequate time in the sermon to give relevant information, touch the heart with stories, and challenge to application and action.

New preachers

On one of the Sundays the preacher was a church member who is keen to develop his skills in preaching. Once I explained the approach to him he found it easy to select two verses from the chapter for that service. He was free to choose a topic which was interesting for him. His message only needed to be 15 min long. So this approach is a good way to give preaching opportunities (or ‘running commentary’ opportunities) to those we are training and encouraging to preach or lead.

I’ve started a new series on King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-20), which will take five Sundays. I’ll keep to the same pattern of lengthy Bible readings with running commentary (including maps!), and a short message based on one or two key verses from the passage. Perhaps to keep the Bible reading interesting I’ll have two or three people reading the text, with a hat on their head or a cloak to represent the character each is representing!

I’m not suggesting that every service of gathered worship should follow this pattern. Variety is necessary! This approach would not be appropriate for a topical series, where verses are quoted from a range of biblical texts. Often there are other elements in a service which need to be covered (eg communion), so there is not enough time for lengthy Bible readings. However, the ‘Spurgeon approach’ could be an option to bear in mind which supplements other approaches. It teaches our people to see the context of a verse in a larger passage. It helps our congregations consider a broader range of the Scriptures, and to focus deeply on God’s message in one or two verses.

Stephen Cooper is the Pastor of Eastwood Baptist Church in Sydney, Australia.

Notes to text

1. Report in the *Leeds Mercury* (15 Nov 1879) of a visit to the London Metropolitan Tabernacle, quoted in W.Y. Fullerton, *Charles H. Spurgeon* (Moody, 1966), p126.
2. Simon Gillham, *Inclusive people of the word*, Southern Cross (August 2016), p24. From sydneyanglicans.net/southerncross.
3. *The First Apology*, 67. From www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm.

21C Baptists: who are we?

by Brian Talbot

Over the past five years I have had the privilege of serving as a member of the Street Pastors team in Dundee, in particular working as a member of the team in our suburb of Broughty Ferry. It is largely a professional middle-class area, though the clientele of the pubs and clubs might include people from across the city and beyond on any given evening.

Some people recognise the distinctive uniform of the Pastors and then usually offer warm appreciation for the work we do. However, there are always new people encountered, who ask puzzled questions about our identity and why we are out on the streets at that time of night. The response we give to these enquiries in the first instance is to declare that we are Christians from local churches who work together to serve their community. If there is genuine interest we may go further and indicate which branch of the Christian family we belong to.

For many, denominational labels beyond ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ are ones with which they are unfamiliar. Many people are happy to talk about Jesus and his identity, his claims and ministry, but none so far have wanted an exposition of Baptist principles! In the context of engaging with people who have yet to experience a living encounter with the Lord Jesus it is surely a cause for rejoicing that they focus on the One who is the head of the church rather than on differences between particular expressions of the Christian faith. In an increasingly secular society, mainstream Christians and their denominational bodies rightly prefer to focus on what we have in common rather than on the differences in our convictions and practices. Is there then a place for a distinctive Baptist witness today, and does it really matter?

It is not only people who have yet to come to faith in Jesus who may be less than convinced of the importance of ecclesiological distinctives. In many, and probably in most, Christian constituencies these kinds of questions have been asked. On 24 June 2011 the Co-operative Baptist Fellowship in the US held a workshop in Tampa, Florida, sponsored by the Baptist History and Heritage Society, entitled: *A future without Baptists—who cares?*

Between 2005 and 2015, and probably at other times, the Baptist World Alliance Heritage and Identity Commission had been asked to spend some of its time exploring issues of identity. The initial catalyst for this development was the battle between Southern and Co-operative Baptists in the US over the nature and soul of the largest

Baptist body in the world, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Assuming we are not retaining the name 'Baptist' for franchise identification, or abolishing it and changing the theological nature of our local churches to appeal to a greater proportion of our local community, there has to be some theological framework that undergirds the identity we affirm. Saddleback Community Church in California, for example, does not use the word 'Baptist' in its name because it was deemed a hindrance to many local people of Roman Catholic background. Although this church is open about its affiliation to the SBC and has made no change to its theological principles, the choice of name was deemed significant with respect to its local evangelism.

A Scottish Baptist response to this question was given by Jim Purves, then the minister of Bristo Baptist Church, Edinburgh, at the Scottish Baptist Ministers' Conference in June 2009. He identified three historic roots that have produced fruit within our ranks.

- **Reformed/Puritan**, emphasising the Word of God.
- **Post-charismatic/continuationist**, profiling the Spirit of God.
- **Continental Anabaptist**, profiling the Community of God.

He followed this point by highlighting three strands to explain more clearly the nature of this baptistic identity, and used the term Baptists to describe those who share in:

Christ-centring: using the biblical story as trustworthy in guiding us in faith and practice; and in effecting a direct narrative link between the present community and the communities of the apostles.

Communally discerning: community discernment is the key to understanding baptistic churches today and brings in a more radical ecclesial dimension to life.

Intentionally discipling: emphasising that Christian convictions predicate shared practices, both in forming disciples and pursuing mission. That is, promoting the development of 'thick' communities of shared conviction and practice, as distinct from 'thin' communities of shared virtues.

What is most important to Baptists historically is not so much a name on a noticeboard, but the ecclesiological framework under which the local congregation was constituted. What made our spiritual ancestors Baptists? Henry Cook in his 1947 book, *The why of our faith*, declared: 'the first question with Baptists was not: What is the right way to baptize people? But, Who are the right people to be baptized? It was the view of the Church that Baptists held that made them Baptists' (p84). It is this concern by which Baptists and baptistic Christians will be most readily identified in the 21st century.

By taking Jim's three strands above as a working basis I want to suggest that there has been emerging more of a covenanting communal identity among baptistic Christians from the 1980s into the 21st century, although changes in denominational life in BUGB in more recent years may point to a direction away from that trend. There have

been clear signs that the defensiveness of more liberal evangelicals against covenanting and confessional identity has begun to disappear from most Baptist ranks, together with the more strident claims of some conservative evangelicals who placed too high an emphasis on using statements of faith to exclude those with whom they disagreed.

Paul Fiddes noted that in the earliest years of its witness in the 17th century, Baptist communal life was associated with the covenant by which the community renewed its pledge of faithfulness to its Lord, and committed itself to a common life and mutual sharing. Confessions of faith were produced first as teaching aids for the congregation, sometimes accompanied by a catechism; secondly for making plain for potential new members the basis on which that group of Christians had covenanted together; thirdly as a tool for explaining their belief and practice to those outside Baptist communities (*Introduction: The question of identity*, in *Tracks and traces*, pp8-9). Discussions about our identity are not fruitless exercises. They can allow us to explore and to affirm what it is that we stand for as Baptist Christians at this time. Understanding our historical roots and appreciating our distinctive theological convictions allows us to chart a course for our continuing witness.

Since 1989 the European Baptist family has been associated with the production of three statements of Baptist identity which bear remarkable similarities to the confessions or covenants of a former era. In 1889 the BWA Commission on Baptist Heritage was asked by the BWA leadership to produce a document that would form the basis of studies by member bodies of BWA in the 1986-1990 Quinquennium. This three-page document was adopted at the BWA Annual Meetings in Zagreb in 1989. In its summary conclusions, this document declared the following.

Baptists are:

- members of the whole Christian family who stress the experience of personal salvation through faith in Jesus, symbolised both in baptism and the Lord's Supper;
- those who under the Lordship of Jesus Christ have bonded together in free local congregations, together seeking to obey Christ in faith and in life;
- those who follow the authority of the Scriptures in all matters of faith and practice;
- those who have claimed religious liberty for themselves and all people;
- those who believe that the Great Commission to take the Gospel to the whole world is the responsibility of the whole membership.

In September 1992, *A statement of identity by Baptist Christians in Europe* was produced by the European Baptist Federation Council. This confessional declaration had 13 sections, stating what the European Baptist family affirmed:

1. We are part of the whole, world-wide Christian Church and we confess faith in One

God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

2. We affirm the need for personal faith in Jesus Christ and for discipleship in his likeness.
3. Our final authority in faith and practice is Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Scriptures and present among his people through the Holy Spirit.
4. We recognise the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the primary authority for knowing God's revelation in Christ.
5. We understand the Church to be a fellowship of believers, sharing the table of the Lord.
6. We practice baptism, for believers only, into the Body of Christ.
7. We affirm the freedom and responsibility of each local congregation to discover the purpose of Christ for its own life and work.
8. We affirm the 'priesthood of all believers', in which all members of the church are called to ministry; but some are called to exercise spiritual leadership, which is always to be understood as serving.
9. We believe that the mutual commitment expressed in baptism and in membership of the local church should lead to wider partnerships between churches wherever possible.
10. We believe that every Christian disciple is called to witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and that the Church as a part of God's Kingdom is to share in the whole mission of God in the world.
11. We affirm the need to preserve freedom of conscience, and so we accept differences among us.
12. We stand for the separation of church and state, rooted in the sole lordship of Christ and concern for religious liberty.
13. As Christian believers, we live in hope of the final appearing of Christ in glory, and the transforming of all creation.

The third and final *Statement of Identity* was produced at the BWA Centenary Congress in Birmingham, England, in July 2005. This document was based on a fuller declaration prepared for study after the Congress. I think it can be fairly stated that some Baptists at least are prepared to articulate a vision of who we are and why it matters that our voice continues to be heard in the contemporary ecclesiastical landscape.

Although the 'crisis' of identity that currently afflicts much of western culture and organisations (not just Christians or Baptists in particular) will not disappear from view in the near future, there are pointers that are encouraging from a Baptist point of view.

Worldwide, year on year, our numbers continue to grow, albeit not at the same pace as our Pentecostal colleagues over the past century. It is no accident that most of this growth is in countries where Christians rarely have the luxury of agonising about 'Baptist identity'. I sense that a more humble covenanting community, unafraid to confess its faith and pay the price that will be exacted by an ever more intolerant secular cultural mainstream, will be our experience in the coming decades. All the agonising about church membership and the phenomenon of more seriously committed adherents compared with lukewarm members could largely disappear if this new approach were to take us back closer to our 17th century Baptist heritage. Yet it may also require greater efforts to include new people within our ranks making them feel part of the local Christian community.

If we annually declared the faith we affirm and the commitments we will give to one another and ensured the high regard for this action within the local church it could help us break through the 19th century society model of membership that has been predominant over the past two centuries. How this approach would fit with the charity commissioners and our obligations to them in the ordering of our churches is another matter altogether. I began this paper with the question: *21st century Baptists: who are we and does it really matter?* I have not answered this question directly, nor did I see it as my responsibility to do so, instead I hope to have stimulated your thoughts to reflect further on the nature of Baptist identity in the 21st century.

Brian Talbot is the Minister of Broughty Ferry Baptist Church, Dundee, and Extraordinary Professor, Department of Theology, North West University, South Africa.

Psalms and Hymns Support Fund

The fund is a registered charity (no. 1089179) established in 1925 which exists for the specific relief of Baptist widows, widowers and orphans of ministers, missionaries and accredited church workers and also for the relief of retired Baptist ministers, missionaries and accredited church workers.

If you would like to find out more please contact the fund's treasurer, Rev Steven Hembury who will be pleased to advise further on grants.

The courage to be Baptist

A statement on Baptist ecclesiology and human sexuality

1. Preamble

Every Western denomination is struggling with ethical questions about human sexuality. The authors of this statement do not pretend to have the solution to those questions; indeed, we disagree amongst ourselves on them. We do agree that Baptist churches, associations, and unions will respond best by having the courage to be faithful to who we are called to be: faithfully Christian and faithfully Baptist. Such faithfulness has often served us well in other debates in the past,¹ and will, we trust, serve us equally well when different disagreements arise in the future.

We see in the very fact that we are struggling with questions that seem intractable an opportunity, a call, even perhaps a gift from God. Those of us in the Baptist movement in the West today have the chance to rediscover the ways of walking together under the rule of Christ² that made us, as Baptists, what we are. We have been given the possibility—and the responsibility—of living out the Baptist vision before the world and before the other churches. We need to grasp this opportunity, and show that we are Christians by our love for one another.

The authors of this statement believe that in our Baptist way of being church, we have something to declare, a vision of how God's people and God's churches can be together that is truly gospel-shaped, that models unity in disagreement in a world that struggles to believe that unity can exist without uniformity. We dare to hope that living differently could be a powerful witness to the truth of the gospel.

In the Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain we find an expression of what God calls us to be and to do. All that follows in this statement is an outworking of that calling. We will navigate our current disagreements well if we can only dare to be faithful to God's call to us as Baptist Christians expressed in the DoP.

What follows is not intended as criticism. Rather, it is a summons—we believe possibly a prophetic summons—to face our disagreements and divisions not with fear, or with unbaptist attempts to assert control, or by deferring to expertise or authority, but in love, in fellowship, in association, in union, seeking together to know the mind of Christ, to walk together and watch over each other³ even where we disagree, until such time as the Lord shall give us more light and truth.⁴

In the book of Acts we read of a crisis engulfing the infant church in Jerusalem: issues of poverty and justice and race coalesced into a problem that, humanly speaking, could have

destroyed the body of Christ almost before it had begun. The apostles responded by refusing to allow a crisis to divert them from their proper calling, but also by acting swiftly. The result was renewal and revival out of crisis and response, so that 'the word of God spread. The number of disciples...increased rapidly' (Acts 6:7).

We challenge all Baptists to consider whether by responding to our present troubles in courageous faithfulness rather than fear, distrust, or contempt, we too might see the word of God spread and the number of disciples increase rapidly. In expecting great things of God, we can surely attempt great things for God.⁵

2. Affirmations and consequences

On the church: theological affirmations

The church belongs to the triune God. Born again of water and the Holy Spirit, we are called together by the Father to become one with Christ.

Christ is the foundation of the church, its head and shepherd. Only in Christ Jesus can the church hold together (Eph 2:21). In Christ Jesus, despite all our failure and faithlessness, the church does hold together.

The church is given life by the Holy Spirit, who also gives gifts to every member of the church, so that through each one of us the church may be built up, and we may all grow to be mature in Christ.

The church is sent into all the world to proclaim the good news and to work and pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Because the church belongs to God, the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

On the unity of the church: theological affirmations

The church is one because Christ has one body and one bride; there is one Spirit who gives us new life, one hope to which we are called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

The unity of the church, then, is not based on shared agreement on disputed issues. Disagreement is a sadness and perhaps a scandal, but it is not a breach of unity.

This true unity of the church is a rebuke to our visible divisions and a summons to travel beyond them.

In prayer to the Father, Jesus asserted that our unity is the necessary basis of successful evangelism (Jn 17:23).

On the unity of the church: practical consequences

Disagreement, particularly on practical issues, can lead to visible disunity; people who

are committed to doing things differently will often end up doing things separately.

Our congregationalist ecclesiology allows us to maintain our union and association, and so our visible unity, even in the face of such practical disagreements. This is a strength and a treasure in our tradition; one that we believe is of God, and that is a prophetic witness of the love of Christ that breaks down every dividing wall.

If it is ‘the duty of every disciple to...take part in the evangelisation of the world’,⁶ then it is the duty of every disciple to ‘make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace’ (Eph 4:3). World evangelisation depends, in part at least, on our visible unity.

Maintaining visible and organisational unity even in the face of disagreement, then, is the Baptist way, a response to Christ’s call, and necessary for mission.

On local churches: theological affirmations

God gathers disciples into churches, and makes covenant with us in churches. The call to grow in Christ is a call to grow together.

Each local congregation is gathered by God, has Christ as its head, and receives the gifts of the Spirit. Because of this, each local congregation is complete in itself.

Each local congregation is called to be in a particular mission context. It is called to so proclaim the gospel that it may be heard in the language of that place, and to so know its context so that it may work and pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God in that place.

The God-given liberty of each local congregation to interpret Christ’s laws⁷ is thus a missional imperative. We must always ask and keep on asking what must be said and done to make the gospel understandable and credible in the particular place where God has called us to serve.

On local churches: practical consequences

The life of every local congregation is a contextual response to God’s call to worship and mission, inexplicable apart from a knowledge of both the gospel and the particular context in which it is called to live and share the gospel.

There is thus a proper respect to be given to the particular decisions of every local congregation; they should not be disparaged or challenged without good reason.

Of course, local congregations can and do misunderstand or only partially understand their context, and can and do mishear the call of God; there is a proper provisionality and humility to all our decisions. We ‘walk together in the ways of God, known or to be made known’.⁸

This provisionality should never, however, be an excuse for inaction. God calls us to follow boldly, to be energetic in the mission of Christ in the best ways that we can discern.

On churches associating together: theological affirmations

Each local congregation is called to walk together in love and fellowship with every other congregation which it can recognise as a true church of Christ.

Churches have the same responsibility towards each other in association as Christians do in the local church.⁹

It is therefore a Christian duty for churches to form structures—associations, networks, and unions—to express, facilitate, and further their relationships.

Associations, networks, and unions can have no formal authority over a local church; that belongs to Christ alone. This is a core Baptist conviction.

On churches associating together: practical consequences

The responsibility of associating is first of all a responsibility to know and to be known. The prayer, counsel, support, and rebuke that are the proper modes of associational life can only adequately be offered if lives are shared.

Association and Union life, then, should primarily be a facilitated practice of talking together in trust and love, with missional purpose. Local churches must know and love one another.

Associations and Unions can never take authority over a local church, but may and should offer support, challenge, and counsel to local churches as they develop their own response to Christ's call in their context.

Equally, the local church should welcome and take seriously the wisdom and counsel offered by Associations and Unions in its own deliberations.

Baptists have never been independents. The instinct to associate runs remarkably deep in our tradition and is very rarely refused, even when there has been hot dispute about the appropriate forms of association. It is not an authentically Baptist option to refuse to associate.

On the authority of scripture: theological affirmations

Christ's ways are made known to us in God-breathed scripture, which is 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness' (2 Tim 3:16).

'Each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer [Christ's] laws'.¹⁰ Therefore, the primary context for hearing and understanding Scripture is the gathered local church.

The task of biblical interpretation is unfinished, and will remain unfinished until the Lord's return. 'The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word'.¹¹

On the authority of Scripture: practical consequences

That the task of biblical interpretation is unfinished does not mean that the church cannot

reach a settled place on certain issues: the affirmation of Christ's deity, or the repudiation of slavery, would be examples of settled issues.

How may we discern whether an issue is settled? Only when there are no credible arguments remaining to the contrary.

Groups of churches may nonetheless come to agreement that a particular issue is settled amongst them, even if still disputed in the wider church. Baptist churches unite around the claim that 'Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ',¹² for instance.

We British Baptists have united around a minimal statement of shared principles and so modelled living together in unity and love despite differences. Because of this we live with a measure of disagreement on the interpretation of scripture, even on issues that we have discerned as settled amongst us. We have, for example, affirmed the call of women to the ordained ministry or allowed the remarriage of divorcees, but not sought to disassociate churches that disagree on these points.

On human sexuality: theological affirmations

No differently from any other aspect of our human existence, our sexuality is a good gift of God, created to be exercised in ways that glorify God.

No differently from any other aspect of our human existence, our sexuality is marred and distorted, tending to our destruction and the frustration of our divine calling.

No differently from any other aspect of our human existence, our response to the gospel call includes embracing patterns of life that discipline our sexuality, re-ordering our desires to conform us more and more to the pattern of Christ's perfect life.

No differently from any other aspect of our created existence, none of us can pretend to be without sin in the area of our sexuality, and there is full and free forgiveness in Christ for all our sexual failures.

On human sexuality: practical consequences

'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...' (Rom 3:23): we refuse any account of human sexuality that claims certain sexual desires, orientations, or relationships are unfallen or free from sin. Equally we refuse any account that judges certain sexual desires, orientations, or relationships to be peculiarly broken or sinful.

'...being justified freely by his grace.' (Rom 3:24): there is no place for prejudice in our churches; God's grace welcomes all people without distinction, whatever their sexuality.

The peculiar contextual challenge we presently face is that questions of sexual ethics are magnified in importance on both sides of the debate. Where, at the extremes, some see a nightmare of a dangerous and perhaps devastating 'downgrade'¹³ in morality, others have a dream of 'justice springing up in the desert and freedom ringing for all God's children'.¹⁴

Both the fear and the hope grow from a desire to be more faithful to the ways of Christ as revealed in scripture, and so both must be regarded with respect and empathy.

There is no qualitative difference between disagreements on sexuality and (say) the ordination of women. Any refusal to follow Christ's laws is sin, by definition. We cannot relativise some practices we regard as disobedience to Christ by pretending they are merely 'matters of order' or the like.

The introduction of laws permitting same-sex marriages in England, Wales, and Scotland in recent years has posed a particular challenge for our churches. Marriage is a Christian good, a way of ordering our lives according to the gospel; can same-sex marriage be so? Or does marriage, Christianly understood, depend so fundamentally on openness to procreation or on sexual difference that this is not possible? We cannot pretend that such questions are settled amongst us; rather, as a theologian of another tradition put it, we see 'a conversation waiting to begin'.¹⁵

The broad unwillingness of churches in the majority world to countenance any movement on this aspect of sexual ethics places a further burden on us; we need to walk together in the ways of Christ with brothers and sisters from across the globe, taking seriously their perceptions, and asking them to take ours equally seriously.

Every worthwhile position on Christian sexual ethics in the contemporary West will be in some measure agonised, troubled and unsettled. We are strangers in a strange land, the pilgrim people of God, and we cannot expect to be comfortable here.

3. A call to Baptist churches

'What, then, shall we do?'

We cannot cry 'peace, peace', because there is no peace. We cannot pretend the specific question of churches registering for same-sex marriages will go away; nor will broader questions of how we respond to changing societal understandings of human sexuality. Nationally, and in many local areas, the question is unavoidable now; in other local areas it will inevitably become so in the next few years. There will continue to be gay and lesbian Christians in our churches, who need to be loved and guided in practices that tend to holiness just as straight Christians do. By God's grace, same-sex couples will continue to come to faith and will need to be disciplined well.

We could seek to reach unity by imposing uniformity, tying the body of Christ to a procrustean bed to distort and dismember it until it fits our current (and of course deficient) understanding of what it should look like. The authors of this statement believe that any such attempt would be faithless and born of fear, a denial of our shared Baptist confession of how God calls us to live together.

We could give up on our associational structures and become independents, in ~~the~~

belief that what divides us is greater than what unites us. But what unites us is shared faith in and commitment to the active lordship of Jesus Christ; are our disputes about sexual ethics, however weighty they may be, really greater than that? To become independents, to despair of our associational structures, would again be faithless and fearful, and a denial of our shared Baptist confession of how God calls us to live together.

The authors of this statement believe that the courageous and truly faithful response is to trust that the ways we believe God has called us to live together are adequate to this present crisis.

We call for local churches to engage together much more deeply and honestly than before, so that we truly know and are known.

We call for serious, open-ended, and respectful conversation, directed towards enriching our shared mission: this is our ‘conversation waiting to begin’.

We call for shared trust and good faith, a commitment to believe that those churches with whom we disagree take their positions out of a desire to shape life according to the gospel, and to follow faithfully the laws of Christ disclosed in scripture.

We call for a willingness to allow every church to follow its own discernment of Christ’s call on its life, and a willingness on the part of every church to allow its discernment to be questioned and challenged by others.

We call, rather simply, for Baptist churches to have the courage to be Baptist.

We do not pretend that this will be easy. It will be costly. It will take time and effort that could be given elsewhere. It will involve our churches making themselves vulnerable at deep points. It will require churches to live with tensions and disagreements that some will find close to unbearable. We believe, however, that however protracted, painful, and precarious this existence might be, it is in fact our only place of true safety and security, because it is the place where God is calling us to live.

There will be churches amongst us who believe the demands of justice for LGBT+ people are so urgent that they will wish to resist this call to conversation and co-existence; there will be other churches who believe their own contextual mission will be so compromised by any re-examination of marriage that they will also want to resist. We call both sets of churches to have patience with those churches that are not yet so certain, to walk with them and help them to know better Christ’s ways, despite the cost that comes with such patience.

There may be other churches on either side who will be uninterested in further conversation because they cannot imagine how a position other than their own could be faithful or biblical. To such we say, gently but seriously, that the limits of your—or our—imagination are not a good source of theological insight. The gospel call remains to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, to discover that sometimes, often, God gives more than we can imagine. The smallness of our imaginations can never be a reason to denigrate God’s gifts.

Among the authors of this statement are some who believe that a properly Baptist

engagement over sexual ethics will lead our churches to re-assert that male-female marriage is the only Christian way and others who believe that it will lead our churches to embrace same-sex marriage as a profoundly Christian option. We talk about these things in private, and (some of us) in very public spaces too. We do not expect to convince each other any time soon, but in maintaining our friendships, learning from each other, and discovering more of the missional contexts and biblical insights that make us advocates for our differing positions, we encourage each other to follow Christ more faithfully even as we disagree. This, we believe, is our Baptist way.

Beth Allison-Glenny, Andy Goodliff, Ruth Gouldbourne, Stephen Holmes, David Kerrigan, Glen Marshall, Simon Woodman. See more information at www.somethingtodeclare.org.uk.

Notes to statement

1. Astute readers will pick up the many allusions in this text to events within our Baptist history. This is more than a literary flourish, rather it is an attempt to place today's events within the context of a Baptist people who have grappled with controversy before and made us the people we are today.
2. This phrase echoes language used in the 1644/6 London Confession article XLVII, which in turn borrows the language from the 1596 (Separatist) True Confession, article 38.
3. This is a common description of the shared responsibility of church members in Baptist history.
4. 17th century Baptist confessions often ended, or ended their preface, with this phrase.
5. The title of the sermon William Carey preached at the founding of (what is now) BMS World Mission was 'Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God!'
6. Clause 3 of the BUGB Declaration of Principle.
7. Clause 1 of the BUGB Declaration of Principle.
8. A common phrase in Baptist church covenants and association agreements.
9. This affirmation echoes the founding document of the Abingdon Baptist Association, from 1652: 'every church ought to manifest its care over other churches as fellow members of the same body of Christ in general do rejoice and mourne'.
10. BUGB Declaration of Principle, clause 1.
11. These words are found in George Rawson's nineteenth-century hymn, 'We limit not the truth of God'. They echo a sermon preached by John Robinson as the Pilgrim Fathers departed for America on the Mayflower. Robinson had been pastor of the sister church to the one led by Smyth and Helwys, and so his words reflect the understanding that led to the birth of the Baptist movement.
12. BUGB Declaration of Principle, clause 2.
13. Recalling the language of Charles Haddon Spurgeon in his famous 1887 article.
14. Recalling the language of Martin Luther King in his famous 'I have a dream' speech.
15. The title of a book by Oliver O'Donovan, reflecting on the debate over sexuality in the Church of England and the wider Anglican communion.

Philemon: a narrative exegesis

by Pieter J. Lalleman

We slaves do not have easy lives. We have no rights. They can do with us whatever they want. 'Living tools', the philosopher Aristotle called us.¹ But society is dependent on us, and they know it. We are the teachers of their children. Many people even in the upper classes can neither read nor write, but they do want their children to learn, to advance in society. So one of us slaves acts as their teacher.

That's not too bad—but agricultural slaves and especially those working down the tin mines live a wretched existence. No, it's better to be a slave-steward in the home of one of these stinking rich people. In fact, strange as it sounds, many people sell themselves into slavery to improve their social position. You know, most teachers, administrators and doctors are slaves. And they get to live and work for the great landowners in their country mansions and villas! Other slaves have more menial jobs but they at least enjoy the protection and provision of their masters.

Luke and I talk about these things, how such stewards are to act. Luke is the friend of Paul, and now he's also my friend. Luke knows what Jesus said about these things.² We agree that it is a good thing that slaves are often released once they reach a certain age.³ That's at least something to look forward to. I heard that in one of the churches founded by Paul, in Corinth in Achaje, freedmen are playing a major role. That seems like a good thing to me.

I ran away. Why? I just could not bear the thought. I can read well but I cannot teach. I'm also unsuitable as a steward. I just wanted a better life and to have some fun. So I thought I could go to the jail where Paul is, the friend of Philemon, and that's the best thing I've ever done! Paul is such a nice guy! He can speak so wonderfully about Jesus. It always touches me, again and again, even when his fellow prisoners don't listen to him. So over time I wanted to follow this Jesus, just like Paul.⁴ I took the decision to join The Way,⁵ and I'm really pleased with it!

But now I have to go back—and I am very sorry about this. Philemon will be mightily surprised when he sees me again! I had never expected to go back myself. But Paul insists that we must stick to the rules which say that runaway slaves have to be returned to their masters. He has written a letter to Philemon, which I have here. And I have even read it! Look, its form is that of a conventional letter, with a formal opening and conclusion. But it's quite a long letter compared to other letters I have seen. Most of it Paul dictated to the secretary but the last bit he wrote himself.⁶

Paul adheres to the law—but at the same time he is asking for my release! He's smart enough to address the letter to others besides Philemon, so Philemon will have to react to it

in the presence of Apphia and Archippus.⁷

I have to go with the letter and the letter carrier.⁸ Please pray for a good outcome, that Philemon will not have me put to death.⁹ I was quite a useless slave, you know. Lazy and dishonest. No, I'm not going to give any details! The Lord Jesus has changed me, but Philemon does not yet know about this. So it is now vitally important that he first reads the entire letter before he sees me, otherwise all might not end well with me.

I wish that Paul was a bit more radical. He should just tell Philemon what to do. And he should condemn slavery outright. But he does not manage to do these things. He always says that he is committed to the good name of the followers of Jesus in every city.¹⁰ He says that Peter also feels this way: We should not cause offence to outsiders.¹¹ But why can he not simply keep me here? He likes me, I know, and that's mutual. But he had this urge to write this letter to Philemon and to ask formally for my release. Well, at least it is better than returning me without a letter... But I see that in his writing he has not even used the word release. He is merely asking Philemon to treat me well. Listen:

*I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary.*¹²

Yet I firmly believe that one day slavery will be abolished. Why? Because Jesus' teaching was so radical. You know what he did? He taught women! One of them was called Mary, I believe, and her sister was called Martha. Luke says that Martha complained to Jesus because Mary only listened to his teaching. Martha thought that Mary had to help in the kitchen, but Jesus said that Mary could listen to his teaching. Compared to what I know about the Jewish culture that was quite startling!¹³

And there's more! As Jesus went through the land of Israel, he was followed not only by men but also by women. One of them was called Mary, Mary Magdalene. Another name was Susanna. And then there was Joanna, who was married to a wealthy courtier. A leading lady! They made Jesus' ministry financially possible.¹⁴

How do I know these things? From this friend of Paul's, Luke. He always has a small notebook with him to take notes when Paul speaks of Jesus. He also knows a lot about Jesus' earthly life. When Paul returns to the land of Israel, Luke wants to go with him.¹⁵ People say that the mother of Jesus is still alive and Luke wants to talk to her. He does not yet know enough about Jesus to write his biography but he is working on it.

What was I saying? Oh yes, the women who were with Jesus. You see, I am sure that one day people will accept women as equal to men. Jesus' ideas will bring them to accept women fully. Would you agree with me? Then they will hopefully also realise that slavery is wrong. That we slaves deserve the same rights as others. And then we will be free! Free at last!

In his letter Paul alludes to my name. It's a pun, because Onesimus means 'useful'.¹⁶ He clearly hopes that I will come back here, to be with him again. I hope so too. I would love to be his helper and to talk to people about Jesus. Especially to other slaves. Of course I do not want to go back to Philemon, but according to Paul it is my duty as a follower of Jesus. So I will be leaving shortly...

Paul has learned a lot from Jesus, but he is so extremely careful. Listen:

*Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for ever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow human and as a brother in the Lord.*¹⁷

Do you hear this? Paul is suggesting that I am a brother to Philemon. He himself already recognises me as 'a beloved brother'. Whew! When the other followers of The Way read this, they will surely also recognise me as a brother, won't they? And your brother cannot possibly be your slave at the same time? People who read this letter will have to come to the conclusion that slavery should be abolished!

Paul is asking Philemon to welcome me as he would welcome Paul himself.¹⁸ That's quite something! Paul is putting himself and me on the same level. But otherwise he is merely trying to influence the conscience of Philemon. Why is he not more radical in his requests? As an apostle of the Lord, he surely can issue orders?!¹⁹ I would have written a very different letter! Paul only makes an appeal to love.²⁰ However, as a good friend and as a follower of Jesus Philemon will hardly be able to refuse the request, I suppose. And at the end Paul very cleverly announces that he wants to come to Colossae as well, so that's extra pressure on my dear owner.²¹

It's time to go. The letter carrier²² is ready for the trip to Colossae.²³ I still hope that I will come back here! Return as a free man, that is. And when the time comes that people take Paul and Jesus seriously, all slaves will one day be free. When believers accept that we slaves are their very brothers and sisters, they surely cannot but release us! Let's be honest!

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Notes to text

1. Quoted in D. A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, methods and ministry formation* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), p669; cf Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (2nd edn Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp56-58; Simon Jones, *The World of the Early Church: A Social History* (Oxford: Lion, 2011).

2. Luke is with Paul, see v24; cf Luke 12:42-48 and chap 16.

3. cf Acts 6:9.

4. cf the use of 'son' in v10.

5. cf Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

6. cf v19, Galatians 6:11 and E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Leicester: IVP, 2004).
7. v2.
8. v12.
9. cf deSilva, *Introduction*, p670.
10. See in particular 1 Timothy.
11. 1 Peter 2:12-20.
12. vv12-14.
13. Luke 10:38-42.
14. Luke 8:1-3.
15. cf the 'we' in Acts 21 and 27:1.
16. vv10-12.
17. vv15-16.
18. v17.
19. See v8 and deSilva, *Introduction*, pp671-673, 675.
20. I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove / Nottingham: IVP, 2004) p364.
21. v22.
22. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*.
23. cf the presence of Archippus in Colossians 4:17 and Philemon 2.

Response: How should Christians view death?

by Faith Bowers

Michael Peat's article about euthanasia prompts me to ask why we never seem to give similar thought to keeping alive officiously. I have always found this disturbing, though I deplore it with slight ambivalence since I am deeply grateful to the doctors who resuscitated the very sick youth who later became my husband. There is a time to live and a time to die.

My first close encounter with death was that of an elderly and much loved family member. Aged 10, I knew her death was a relief from pain and that she would be glad to go to Jesus, so I was bewildered by adult distress. We would miss her, but surely this was best for her.

The next time I saw death as desirable came 10 years later. My father had MS, which over several years had taken his sight, then his legs, weakening his body and dulling his mind. I was summoned home from university when he had a stroke. The doctors said he could live on unconscious for many days. The ward cleaner told us he had asked her, a

few minutes before the stroke, if she believed that God is love. She belonged to the Salvation Army so was clear in her reply. It was a good ending. I looked at my exhausted mother, who had already spent many hours at the hospital. I sought the privacy of the Ladies to pray that death would come quickly. A few minutes after my return to the bedside my father took his final breath. Silently I gave thanks—but still wondered if I had been wicked. It was many years before I could share with anyone what I had done.

When my second son was born with Down's Syndrome, his strong hold on life helped us to accept that he was meant to live. He did not, like many people with Down's, have a major heart defect. Had he struggled to survive, we would have been deeply unhappy about surgery to prolong life in those early days, given the doctors' pessimistic description of his likely future. In the 1960s they had probably only seen those in institutional care with relatively little stimulation and no education. There is less excuse today, yet prenatal testing and pressure to abort Down's fetuses continues. Meanwhile doctors go to great lengths to preserve life in other babies with severe impairments. Nature, which I would prefer to accept as God's providence, would often be kinder. There will be heartbreak for the family, whether the child dies or lives.

My mother was diagnosed with cancer in her late 70s and told she had three to six months to live. During the first three months pain was controlled and she enjoyed seeing family and friends, giving them her 'treasures', and generally preparing for the end. She insisted that I should go on a planned visit to the US, although she was weakening. My sister reckoned she would hold on to see me back and then die. I had a good visit with her on my return but the next morning found her comatose, apparently unaware of my presence. After a while I went to the window and looked up at the nearby Cotswolds. I must have spoken aloud: 'I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help'. To my amazement, from the bed came, 'My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth'. Those were her only words that day. Wonderful last words—but then a nurse came in, saw her patient's state, and rang the alarm bell. Staff rushed in to revive her. I begged the registrar, who was probably a Muslim, to let her die, telling him that she was a woman of faith and more afraid of losing her hair than of death. He said he understood about a person of faith. Presumably others did not: they revived her for a further three months of increasing pain and misery, including the breakdown of previously supportive friendships.

My sister, a senior occupational therapist, rang me: 'Faith, you've got to do something: I can deal with doctors but ministers are your pigeon!' Mum could no longer bear to see her church friends because she knew they were praying for her recovery when she just wanted to die. She felt they were helping to prolong the agony. That day I went to a committee meeting in Baptist House and spent the lunch break with Michael Quicke, thinking about the kindest way to approach her minister. That helped, but the medical efforts ensured she had to endure the full, wretched six months.

While we resist euthanasia, surely we should think more about when it is or is not right to strive officiously to keep alive. I write as one now in the later years of life.

There are serious pastoral issues here. Are we, like some modern preachers, to rationalise away the Christian hope? If not, surely we should try to be more positive about death, as in the old hymn:

*And now most kind and gentle death,
waiting to hush our fading breath,
Now praise Him, alleluia!*

Faith Bowers is a theologian.

bmj Essay Prize 2016/7

The *bmj* invites entries for our first Essay Prize from those serving in the leadership and ministry of Baptist churches. We would like an essay of 2500 words on a topic and title of the entrant's choice that fits into *one* of the following categories:

Baptist History and Principles
Biblical Studies
Theology or Practical Theology

We are looking for clear writing and argument, and a creative engagement with our Baptist life. The prize will be £75.00 and the winning essay (and any highly commended contributions) will be published in *bmj*.

We particularly encourage entries from those in the early years of their (Baptist) ministries, including MiTs and those who are not in accredited or recognised leadership roles.

Closing date: 30 March 2017

Entries should be submitted electronically, double spaced and fully referenced, to the editor including details of your name, address, church, role, and stage of ministry.

Judges will be drawn from the Editorial Board of *bmj* and subject-appropriate academic Baptist colleagues. We reserve the right not to award a prize if the entries are unsuitable, of an inadequate standard for *bmj*, or do not meet the criteria.

Please share this competition with colleagues to whom it might be of interest.

Contact the editor if you have any queries.

Reviews

Editor: Michael Peat

Proverbs: The two horizons Old Testament commentary

by Ernest Lucas

Eerdmans, 2016

ISBN 978-0802827104

Reviewer: Helen Paynter

When choosing a commentary, it is often necessary to trade-off accessibility against scholarship. One that is useful homiletically may not engage with the deeper issues which the text raises. Conversely, a book which discusses the scholarly debates of the day often entirely fails to meet the needs of those needing to prepare sermons, small group study notes and so on. A marker of the *Two horizons* commentary series in general is the desire to bridge this significant gap; this latest offering, from the eminent pen of Ernest Lucas, is exemplary in that regard. Rather than descending from lofty heights of scholarship to present pre-digested nuggets of information, he seeks rather to elevate the reader towards a competence in reading the text. One might indeed say, 'Let the wise hear [or read!] and increase in learning' (Prov. 1:5).

As with all the commentaries in this series, the book is constructed in two broad divisions, following a sizeable but not overwhelming introduction. This

helpful section covers questions such as the nature of wisdom writings in Israel and the ancient Near-East; authorship and structural issues. Then comes the commentary proper. Lucas has sectioned this according to 'clusters', exploring the way in which the understanding of one proverb is influenced by its context. Finally, there is an extended section on the important themes of the book. For example: is there a simple acts-consequence theology in this book? To what extent is it valid to read Christ as the personification of the wisdom to which the book points?

For me, this was the most helpful section of all. In a book like Proverbs, where the 'take-home' message is not univocal nor the argument linear, an experienced guide through the maze is very helpful. See, for example, his discussion on the integrated spirituality of Proverbs. Although this is sometimes referred to as a secular book, with only 10% of its verses making reference to YHWH, Lucas shows how its worldview thoroughly integrates the sacred and the secular, addressing issues from the full range of human experience. It provides an instructive challenge to single-issue evangelicals, 'Such issues as drunkenness and secular immorality... do find a place in Proverbs, but such issues as injustice, exploitation, oppression dishonesty, lying, anger and arrogance are dealt with just as forcefully'.

As will be no surprise to those who know him in person, Lucas wears his learning lightly throughout this volume. His analysis is thorough but unpretentious; he takes no pleasure in parading the difficulties of a concept (and by inference

his own brilliance), but rather takes pains to present each new idea with clarity and lucidity. So Hebrew and technical terms are used when they are helpful, but always with accompanying transliteration and translation, or gloss.

In sum, I whole-heartedly commend this book to the minister who wishes to engage with Proverbs for personal discipleship or sermon preparation. However, at 400 pages, it probably does not wholly demonstrate the truth of Proverbs 11:12b!

Thomas Merton, peacemaker: meditations on Merton, peacemaking, and the spiritual life

by John Dear

Orbis Books, 2015

Reviewer: Richard Kidd

Having been an enthusiastic advocate for most things Merton, it was with anticipation that I began a new book about him as peacemaker. I knew this would not be a comfortable read. I am never quite sure how to locate myself with respect to 'pacifism', but an invitation to 'contemplative non-violence' in the company of Thomas Merton is not something that can be shrugged off lightly.

The book has many frustrations. I was keen to engage with Merton the peacemaker from the very beginning, but there is a great deal of preamble,

including lengthy accounts of the author's own engagement with issues of peace.

As the book unfolds, however, direct quotations from Merton gather momentum. I have been around much of the primary material before in other contexts, but there is something different about gathering Merton material like this, around a single theme.

There is something so attractively robust about Merton's engagement with the contemplative life; it has qualities that I do not always find in other more recent writers. It is just too easy for retreat' enthusiasts to be drawn into a rather sentimental and inward-looking version of spiritual individualism. So Merton is a good corrective. His is a world-aware model of contemplation, thoroughly earthed and not afraid to be hands-on in messy times. I never cease to be amazed that someone who spent so much time alone in monastic environments could have had such an enormous impact on global spirituality and global politics.

It is hard to pick a single quotation from Merton that catches the full force of his message concerning peace. Merton want us to take seriously the presence of the risen Christ in ourselves in our world. He wrote:

True encounter with Christ in the word of God awakens something in the depth of our being, something we did not know was there. True encounter with Christ liberates something in us, a power we did not know we had, a hope, a capacity for life, a resilience, an ability to bounce

back when we thought we were completely defeated, a capacity to grow and change, a power of creative transformation.

Merton wanted us to harness this energy for non-violent resistance and action, and to challenge global forces of evil and human wickedness. In this vein he is not short of honourable companions, among whom Martin Luther King Jnr will be foremost in mind for many of us Baptists.

This book will serve as a useful resource to those who will enjoy the challenge of pithy extracts from Merton's prolific writings—perhaps with a view to using them as a focal point for occasional prayerful contemplation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecumenical quest

by Keith Clements

Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2015

Reviewer: Craig Gardiner

In this important new book Keith Clements writes with all the detailed precision of a diligent historian combined with the theological depth that is to be expected from someone whose life has been devoted both to the ecumenical movement and the study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. These attributes alone should demand that this book be studied both far and wide, but Clements has also managed to craft his 300 pages of careful research into a most compelling read. So while the pages may turn easily there is much here that will

reward repeated diligent returns.

Central to Clements's thesis are the questions posed by Bonhoeffer at the international gathering at Fanø in 1934, namely: is there a theology of the ecumenical movement, and will ecumenists act as the church of Christ among the nations, taking a stand against war, racism and social injustice? Bonhoeffer asked such questions against the backdrop of Hitler's rise to power, the resistance of the Confessing Church and widespread concern over the escalating militarisation of Europe, but at the time some felt he had 'charged so far ahead that the conference could not follow him.' That vital quest, as far as Clements is concerned, remains unfinished, but still urgent, ecumenical business.

To appreciate the importance of this enduring challenge, Clements carefully traces Bonhoeffer's growing ecumenical convictions from his first boyhood encounter with Roman Catholicism through a meticulous chronology that examines the influence of key figures such as Max Diestel, George Bell and Visser't Hooft. This is woven into an enlightening analysis of the personal and structural tensions of ecumenism at the time. Through this rich biography we discover how numerous overseas excursions impressed upon Bonhoeffer the potential for a global witness of Christian faith, but also come to appreciate that his persistent theological determination valued not simply the unity of the Church of Christ *per se*, but its place as a concrete *stellvertreter* (responsible deputy) in the *oikoumenē* of

the whole inhabited earth. For Clements this too remains part of the great unfinished task: what does ecumenism need to become in a world come of age?

Throughout the book we are skilfully reminded that behind Bonhoeffer's notable speeches and popularised hagiography lies a man who was ready to critique ecumenism when it was no more than an association of Christians and yet he was no idealist: we are presented with an account of someone committed to a heavy burden of paperwork and the endless organisation that was needed to bring the movement together. And for all its many strengths this is perhaps the book's greatest gift. A simple reminder that the fragile advances in ecumenism are dependent upon hard and understated graft from dedicated people. Towards the end of the book Clements asks of Bonhoeffer, 'What is outstanding about him? The answer is: nothing, and that is the whole point' (p284). He reminds us of Bonhoeffer's own words in *Life together*. 'The community of faith does not need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus and of one another. It does not lack the former but the latter'.

This book will be welcomed by students of Bonhoeffer who already appreciate him as a faithful servant of Christ, but may not have hitherto realised the determined ecumenical *cantus firmus* that underpins his life and work. But the book is not simply an account of what ecumenism meant for Bonhoeffer, it also powerfully restates the challenge of how his theology and witness can still challenge and inspire ecumenism today.

Never bow to racism

Baldwin Sjollema

WCC, Geneva, 2015

978-2-8254-1654-9

Reviewer: Stephen Heap

Sjollema had a significant role in one of the most contentious works of the WCC; the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR). Here he tells his story of that programme, and more.

A young adult in Nazi-occupied Rotterdam, he learned to resist oppression, finding resource for resisting in the Bible. He went on to work with ecumenical agencies, eventually the WCC, and captures the excitement of being ecumenical in those days, a sense, he says, of being part of 'the exodus to the Promised Land...the road to justice and real peace'. He admits that sometime between the 1968 Uppsala Assembly of the Council and that in Nairobi in 1975, the initial excitement waned.

Uppsala did, however, set a direction for the Council, including the creation of the PCR, of which Sjollema was Director from its inception in 1970 until 1981. The meat of the book is his personal account of PCR, in particular its engagement with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Part of the Programme was the Special Fund to Combat Racism, which gave grants to groups struggling to overcome racism, including in South Africa. He describes some of the battles with the South African government, with member churches not comfortable with this form of direct engagement, and around making

decisions about whether particular groups should receive grants or not.

As Sjollema says, in part this is the story of a shift from a privatised view of Christian faith to one which sees the need to engage systemically to bring change; something the South African Baptist Louise Kretzschmar has written about in her reflections on *Baptist life under apartheid, Privatisation of the Christian faith. Mission, social ethics and the South African Baptists* (Legon Theological Studies, Accra, 1998).

Apartheid fell. Sjollema is reluctant to

evaluate the impact of PCR in that, but it is noteworthy that Nelson Mandela thanked the WCC for its contribution to the struggle.

Sjollema suspects the churches today are not likely to have the impact they once did. The WCC has 'lost its pioneering role' and churches 'their influence in society' (p199). The book prompts the thought that there are plenty of big issues out there to tackle. Maybe engagement with them will indicate the route to some sort of Exodus, if not signalling the arrival of the Promised Land.