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## REVIEWS

**Brian Haymes**, *The Concept of the Knowledge of God*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1988, xi + 201pp. £27-50.

**Keith W. Clements**, *Lovers of Discord: Twentieth Century Theological Controversies in England*, SPCK, London 1988, x + 261pp. pb £8-95.

In an age of widespread Christian anti-intellectualism it is a good sign that in the colleges of one communion at least time is found for the writing of books on theology. These two books by Baptist scholars are very different, but each welcome in its own way.

Brian Haymes' book is a revised doctoral thesis, and is technical and detailed, but not obscure. It is an interesting attempt to integrate work in the philosophy of language with questions arising out of biblical studies: 'to examine, with special reference to the Bible, the concept of the knowledge of God'. Its starting point is firmly philosophical, taking 'it for granted that the way to discover a word's meaning is to ask how it is ordinarily used'(p.2). The proposal is to show in the light of that assumption what knowing God means in the Bible and in theology generally.

The way is prepared by a review, moving to a discussion of Wittgenstein on certainty, of different meanings of 'to know': inferential knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance and description, objective knowledge and the rest. In the second third of the book the author turns to the Old and New Testaments, looking at them through the lenses provided by the linguistic discussion. By them knowledge of God is treated as a given, and is many-faceted. 'It includes acknowledgement, recognition, obedience, etc. It is a practical, intellectual and experiential matter.' Similarly, and importantly in view of the fact that we are often told that there is a complete diversity in the theologies of the Bible, 'there are no signs of disagreement about what knowing God entails'(p.120).

The final third of the book is devoted to bringing together the two sides of the enquiry in a more general discussion of what it might mean to know God. The concepts of knowledge which were introduced in the opening chapters are brought into play and a conclusion is made by appealing to the Wittgensteinian idea of the form of life. The author's main suggestion is that 'the concept of God is the fundamental proposition of the form of life or language-game of religious belief'(p.167).

Much light is shed by this book on several important matters. Particularly interesting is the fact that for the Old Testament it is essential that people should be taught *about* God. So dominated are we today by the concept of experience that we forget that for a large part of the canon 'To be taught these things about God was to have knowledge of God... It is this knowledge, rather than any particular "acquaintance experiences" that is foundational for most of the people of Israel'(p.89). On the other hand, doubts about Dr Haymes' general approach derive from the question of whether an approach to the Bible with a fully formed philosophical armoury does not run the danger of imposing too rigid a pattern upon it. There is also a specific danger arising from the use of Wittgenstein. The history of the interpretation of this difficult and rightly influential philosopher suggests that he is, like his own favourite philosopher, Kierkegaard, better used as a springboard for further thought than as a kind of authority. When used as an authority, he so often either slips away or becomes distorted, so that Dr Haymes' use of the concepts of the form of life and language game is not entirely convincing, for all the suggestiveness and value of the discussion.

Keith Clements' book is in a more popular vein, lively, witty and anecdotal, though not at the expense of wide learning. It traces the course of that strange beast, English theology, during the controversies that have dominated the twentieth century. On to the scene step all those eccentrics and radicals, dons, bishops and deans, some

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of whose often half-baked outpourings have been elevated, largely by media attention, into a series of *causes célèbres*. They are all there: R. J. Campbell, Frank Weston, Hensley Henson, T. R. Glover, Bishop Barnes and their seemingly duller successors, Robinson, Cupitt, Jenkins and the rest. A good, if often depressing, story it makes, and it is well told.

The least successful chapters of the book are the latter ones, which record chiefly the Cambridge scene and the theology from the sixties to the present. They confirm the truth of the judgement that contemporary history is the most difficult of all. The tone becomes more reverent, and the earlier slightly caustic wit disappears. Yet do the *Soundings* and *Honest to God* disputes, which represent very little intellectual advance on the more robust and original liberalism of their predecessors, really deserve a chapter each? Here the sheer parochialism of English theology, of which the previous chapters give such swashbuckling account, seems finally to be almost, though not quite, embraced by the author himself.

Along with the study the author makes a number of general observations. One striking feature is how the history repeats itself, at least in the sense that the same kind of responses follow the same kind of controversy, with parish clergymen arising to demand the trial or dismissal of some menace in high places. And yet, of course, there are differences, so that what is an attempted restatement of the faith in an earlier writer appears more like reductionism in a later. A second impression is of the limited intellectual range of so much that has made the headlines in recent English theology and in particular its narrow systematic horizon. Often it seems as if the chief question at stake, for example in the debate about miracle, is the use of a belief as evidence and the degree of its offence to the modern mind. The point that it might have implications for the systematic coherence of Christian belief appears to have occurred to virtually none of the contestants, obsessed as they mostly were with the post-Enlightenment problem of evidences. As the author comments, systematic theology is not strong in England, yet how can we come to terms with these questions without a measure of systematic integration?

A third concern pervading the book is of the nature of conflict in the Christian church, particularly in the modern era. How shall we face the challenge of the times? Here, the trumpet gives a somewhat uncertain sound, perhaps rightly in view of the way things are, the author wishing neither to dismiss the benefits to theology of modern institutions, nor unaware of the perils. It is certainly true that doors, both intellectual and personal, have been opened in the present century. But at what cost? It is also undoubtedly true that great theology has nearly always arisen out of conflict and upheaval, but where is the greatness in most of the stuff recorded here? Do we read here the tale of a final decadence of a once great tradition, or is there something true to the intrinsic drive of Christian theology still to be found?

Perhaps the most disturbing impression given is that the modernists appear this century to have made all the running, so that conservatives of all kinds look for the most part like timid reactionaries. Is this merely the effect of the media? If it is not, what are the implications? If Don Cupitt is the logical as well as the chronological outcome of the book's course, it appears that Christian theology has less and less to say. What becomes now of the biblical injunctions to teach the knowledge of God?

Colin Gunton

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Christopher J. Ellis, *Together on the Way: A Theology of Ecumenism*, British Council of Churches, 1990, pp.146.

This book is important for several reasons. First, as the main title suggests, it is very

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timely, appearing just when 'Churches Together in Pilgrimage' is being translated from vision into reality with the formation of new ecumenical instruments in Britain and Ireland. This also means the time when some of the hard realities of that pilgrimage are being made evident, and encouragement is very welcome.

Second, as the sub-title indicates, it is neither an apologia nor a blueprint for ecumenical relations, but an explication of the theology with which the whole exercise should be undergirded, whether in Local Ecumenical Projects, in national bodies or on a world scale. This theological enterprise is badly needed, for much of the recent ecumenical endeavour has still been relying on the biblical theology movement of an earlier generation. There is nothing wrong in that, but perspectives have shifted significantly even since the 1950s and 1960s, when such as D. T. Niles and W. A. Visser't Hooft held centre-stage. The significance of Ellis's contribution is notably recognised by the present General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Emilio Castro, in his preface.

Third, this theology of ecumenism has been worked out by a minister who has himself experienced eight years in a Local Ecumenical Project. Here is no idealising thought hoping for a landing-ground in some utopian scheme, but a vivid, committed and eloquent exposition wrought out of the variegated experience of the local scene.

Fourth, it is especially significant for Baptists in being written by one of their own number.

Ellis sketches his theology of ecumenism on a wide canvas. The search for unity must be grounded in nothing less than our view of who God is and what God's purposes are throughout creation and redemption. That means taking diversity seriously, not as contradictory to unity but as the raw material of the harmony in which unity delights. This is where the ecumenical debate must be located, and so rescued from the trivializing preoccupation with merely ecclesiastical questions of order and authority in isolation from the boundless activity of the triune God.

So the main issues in the ecumenical debate emerge: a multiple history - what it means to confess one Lord in many different ways, the proper 'visibility' of the invisible church, and the nature of truth as always involving several positions in tension, since the absolute truth of God's own self transcends the limitations of particular expressions of it. There is an especially important section on how Scripture is to be used in discussions of patterns of the church, where Ellis says provocatively, 'Even the church of the New Testament must be tested against the Lord before we can follow it in its way'. What is more, I know of no other writer who, in face of some sceptical sociologists, faces in so original and mature a way the matter of so-called non-theological factors which have encouraged ecumenism.

I would raise just one finger - on the historical outline on the origins of the modern ecumenical movement. The famous conferences from Edinburgh 1910 onwards are indeed the great landmarks. But they were erected largely by people whose ecumenical education and experience had begun much earlier in the 'unofficial', impatient, missionary-orientated and above all *lay* student movements of the 1890s and early 1900s. This is not just an historical quibble: it raises pertinent questions about the dynamics and leadership of ecumenism today.

But this is an excellent book. Helpfully, questions for group discussion or individual reflection are provided. It deserves wide study, not least in fraternal, and both its readers and the ecumenical movement will benefit greatly from it.

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## THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, Broadman Press, Nashville, 1990. ISBN 0 8054 6587 1. xiv + 239pp. pb \$12.95.

The director of publications and communications of the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention is warmly to be thanked for this well-referenced, timely book. He opens with a foreword followed by five chapters in which the covenant idea and Baptist covenants in Britain, America, Canada and elsewhere are discussed. In chapter six we have the texts of seventy-nine covenants, of which the earliest is that of Broadmead, Bristol (1640), and the most recent that of Halawa Heights, Honolulu (1988).

Whereas Dr Deweese notes (p.200) that church covenants are responses to God's gracious initiative, he emphasises (e.g. p.81) the human aspect of covenanting. No doubt this is prominent but, happily, many of the texts he reproduces show clearly that the church members knew that their covenanting with one another was an *enabled* response to God, who had first moved towards them (e.g. p.118, 132, 156, 184, 194). Again, although it is true that confessions of faith are more doctrinal, while covenants are more ethical and practical (p.viii), we should not overlook the substantial doctrinal assertions which appear in some of the covenants (e.g. p.134, 140, 142, 158, 165).

It is interesting to observe that (as with Congregational covenants, which this reviewer has discussed elsewhere) the wording of Baptist covenants reflects the wider theological and intellectual climate. For example, we may correctly infer from the phraseology of the Baptists of Great Ellingham - 'a little handful of the meanest, both of the Children of men and of the Children of God' - that the question of assurance and the way of introspection were in vogue in 1699 (p.121). Seventy-one years on the Baptists of Caerleon resort to Enlightenment language in declaring that 'it is the duty of all reasonable creatures to obey [God] in the whole of His revealed will' (p.125).

Inner-Baptist differences of emphasis are also of interest. Thus, whereas the saints at Meherrin Baptist Church, Lunenburg County, Virginia, happily described themselves in 1779 as 'part of the Baptist Church of Christ' (p.144), those at Cherokee Creek, North Carolina, had in 1783 decided that there were Baptists and Baptists: 'There are Several Classes of Antepaedobaptists, with which we Cannot agree. Namely, the Seven Day Baptists, the no Sabbath Baptists, and those that Dip three times in Baptism . . .' (p.146). Consider this: 'We promise . . . solemnly to renounce all evil words and actions, foolish talking, jesting, cursing, lying, malicious anger, extortion and fraud of every kind, covetousness, drunkenness and keeping evil company and to abstain from sinful whispering, backbiting, all wilful hypocrisy and dishonesty, all excess or superfluity to the gratification of pride and also resist from gaming, wagering, singing of carnal songs and all Carnal myrth, fidling, dancing and vain recreation and all sinful contentions and not wink at the disorder of and [*sic* - ? any] under our care, but prudently use the Rod of correction when necessary and not neglect family devotion . . .' (p.150). It would seem either that it was not much fun being a Baptist in Dumplin Creek, Tennessee, in 1797, or that there was an excess of saintly sin to be combatted there, or both. More seriously, we are reminded how easy it is to cross the line between disciplining one another under grace, and policing one another under new laws of the saints' devising. For their part, the Freewill Baptists of 1858 balanced their negatives with socially-orientated positives: 'we will not traffic in, nor use intoxicating drinks, as a beverage, and . . . we will sustain the other benevolent enterprises of the day, as Missions, Sabbath Schools, Moral Reform, Anti-Slavery, Education, and all others which, in the use of holy means, tend to the glory of God and the welfare of man' (p.163).

None was more enterprising than Peter Philanthropos Roots, who provided

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both prose and metrical versions of his 1806 covenant. Thus, according to taste, we may decline 'lavicious [*sic*] talking, foolish jesting, evil speaking', or sing:

No frothy wit, nor tattling vile,  
Shall waste our time, our hearts beguile. (pp.154-155)

The timeliness of this volume emerges in the following remark, which applies equally to others in the gathered church tradition, and not only to those in America: 'A dilemma facing contemporary Baptists in America is how to reconcile mounting trends towards an uncommitted church membership with doctrinal statements that require a committed membership' (p.vii). Dr Deweese writes interestingly on the ways in which the preparation today of church covenants could foster the restoration of the ecclesiology which underlies them, and to which they give expression. He pleads for the imaginative use of covenants - not least in connection with the 'church covenant meeting'.

But why the decline in local covenants? The author's reasons (pp.89-91) may be summarised thus: (1) The increasing availability of printed covenants. (2) Resistance to covenants legalistically applied. (3) The decline in moral standards accompanying secularization. (4) Weaknesses discerned in the widely-used Brown covenant of 1853. (5) Slowness to depart from Brown's covenant, which was often (wrongly) regarded as official. (6) Baptist failure to take seriously the ecclesiology of their confessions of faith. (7) More concern with numerical growth than with regenerate membership. No doubt these are pertinent points, but something important is missing. May we not say that in the wake of the Revival, evangelical individualism (which can be uncomfortably close to Enlightenment individualism in religious dress), aided and abetted by western consumerism, has led to the privatisation of religion in many quarters? Is not this at least a partial explanation of Dr Deweese's sixth point above? Is not the remedy that of proclaiming a Gospel whereby people are saved into a covenant *community*?

The collecting of covenants is time-consuming but not unduly difficult - a few elusive ones apart. The accurate placing of covenants in their intellectual and social contexts is a more demanding objective, and here Dr Deweese has performed valiantly. It is to be feared, however, that his objective of restoring the covenant ecclesiology in all its richness and challenge will prove to be the most elusive goal of all.

ALAN P. F. SELL

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## CHAPEL HISTORIES

Irene Spackman and John Ashton, *Not Bricks Alone: 100 Years of Worship and Service*, foreword by the Revd Donald D. Black, 1989, 134pp. £2 from Miss I. B. Spackman, 113 Priory Road, London N8 8LY (Tel: 081 340 2191).

Austin Day, *Living Stones: A History of Bethel Baptist Church, Swavesey, 1840-1940*, 1990, 57pp. £3 from S. J. Bull, 1 Gibraltar Lane, Swavesey, Cambs., CB4 5RR (Tel: 0954 31404).

*Not Bricks Alone* describes the growth of Ferme Park Baptist Church, its subsequent numerical decline and its eventual merger with Park Chapel to form Union Church, Crouch End. The book falls into two parts: the first, written by Irene Spackman from Ferme Park, describes the history of that church; while the second, written by John

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Ashton from Park Chapel, traces the way the two churches worked together until they merged. Ferme Park, formed as a General Baptist Church, will always be associated with the ministry of Charles Brown from 1890 to 1925, the membership increasing from about 100 to 1105 during this period. Three of his successors were called to be Area Superintendents, while Donald Black has served the Baptist Union in London and Didcot. In the years after the war the problems of ageing buildings and declining memberships affected both churches. They gradually drew closer together until in May 1974 the two churches decided 'to live, work, and witness as one community'. The Ferme Park building was closed in 1973 and demolished and a new building erected in which the lower part was designed for use as a Community Centre. While the story of Ferme Park Baptist Church and Park Chapel can be seen as the account of the rise and decline of two leading nonconformist churches, Irene Spackman rightly points out that those who moved away from the area were not lost to the Christian Church. Nonetheless, the book poses, but does not answer, the question as to how Christian witness is to be maintained in urban areas such as Crouch End.

Austin Day in *Living Stones* has written an interesting account of the history of Bethel Baptist Church in the Cambridgeshire village of Swavesey. The book is attractively produced and is a fitting tribute to 150 years of witness. The author's account of the beginning of Baptist witness in the village is important. He traces nonconformist witness in the village back to 1766 when a few people began to hold regular meetings for prayer. They were joined by a newcomer to the village, a lady who had sat under the ministry of the Revd John Berridge, the evangelical vicar of Everton. He then sent his own lay preachers to the village and, with the help of local nonconformist ministers, a congregation was gradually gathered. In due course a wooden chapel was erected, with Berridge and his friends giving generous support, and in 1789 an open communion Baptist church was formed.

It seems that the congregation became influenced by Unitarian views and in 1820 the church of 96 members dissolved itself and one week later reformed itself 'on the belief of the Trinity of Persons'. This left an unattached group of Unitarians in Swavesey and the author refers to a building in the village which from 1831 to 1860 was known as the 'Church of the Unitarians'. He does not appear to have consulted the *Baptist Manual* 1845 which refers to this as the 'Third Church' and gives the date of formation of the church as 1830, with J. Coulson as the pastor from 1832. It was not mentioned in the *Baptist Manual* after 1845. However, in 1860 the building was 'taken over' by a Baptist congregation with the interesting stipulation that the new congregation 'must retain the existing Unitarian preacher while he was of good moral character'. The building was purchased by the Primitive Methodists in 1884. The original church, known as the 'Old Meeting Chapel', adopted close communion in 1834 and in 1837 agreed 'not to admit new members without baptism'. In 1839 differences arose in the church and a number of members seceded and in the following year Bethel Baptist Church was formed. After its formation it was often referred to as the 'Second Baptist Chapel' and later in 1863 as the 'General Baptist Chapel'. The Strict Baptist Chapel ('the First Church') moved from its original site in 1869, a move partly necessitated by the death of four members of the congregation in 1863 and there being no room in the adjoining cemetery for their burial! The Strict Baptist historian, Ralph F. Chambers, compiled an admittedly incomplete list of the pastors of this church. It is to be hoped that the story of this church will also be told so that we have a more complete account of Baptist work in the village.

MICHAEL J. COLLIS