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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

April 2017 volume 334

New Focus for BMF

BMF Committee

Imagination and gospel

Lisa Kerry

Bible software tools

Graham Criddle

Life and death

Simon Woodman

Responses to 'The courage to be Baptist'

Keith Jones, Andy Glover, Bob Allaway

Retirement

Peter Shepherd

Bible translation

Fred Stainthorpe

the baptist ministers'
journal

April 2017, vol 334, ISSN 0968-2406

<i>New focus for BMF</i>	3
<i>Imagination and gospel</i>	5
<i>Bible software tools</i>	11
<i>On life, death and dying</i>	17
<i>Responses to The Courage to be Baptist</i>	19
<i>The call to retirement</i>	26
<i>On translation</i>	28
<i>Reviews</i>	30
<i>Of Interest To You</i>	38

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From the editor

A strange kingdom

A king who dies on the cross must be the king of a rather strange kingdom. Only those who understand the profound paradox of the cross can understand the whole meaning of Jesus' assertion: my kingdom is not of this world. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his Lectures to the congregation in Barcelona.)

What would this 'strange kingdom' be like?

At the time of writing, the terrorist attack on Westminster has just taken place, an assault presumably directed at our government, which resulted in the death and injury of several civilians. Film footage from an upstairs window in the Palace of Westminster showed the Prime Minister being rapidly hustled out of the building and into an armoured car, then driven away to safety. The rest of the House was 'locked down' for many hours.

We expect key and representative figures in our society to be protected. In York, not too far from where I live, it is possible to tour a nuclear bunker 'left over' from the Cold War. It certainly isn't big enough for ALL the citizens of York to crowd inside. I can imagine the 'guest list'—and most of us would naturally have had to take our chances.

The 'strange kingdom', in which the king experiences an unjust and dehumanising death instead of preferential protection, must look very different—but how? Does God's 'preference for the poor' simply invert the social order so that a different set of people suffer? We must surely believe that kings, prime ministers, presidents and leaders are still important to God—just not *more* important than anyone else.

If that is true, then the 'strange kingdom' is all about *realised* (not aspirational) equality, justice and love. A truly ethical place: a place where human engagement is lifted above competition, disempowerment, violence and greed, and into true compassion (in the sense of 'suffering with') and mutual submission.

Of course we all know this already!

So: are we, and our churches, 'strange' enough?

A very blessed Easter, and may we all encounter this Strange King afresh.

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A new focus for BMF

from the BMF Committee

As Baptist life continues to undergo change, the committee of the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship (BMF) wants to respond to such change, to reflect better its aims and objectives for our current situation.

The BMF exists for all those involved in Baptist ministry in some kind or another.

We recognise that the best we have to offer is the *Baptist Minister's Journal (bmj)*, which appears four times a year. Until this year it has been distributed as printed copies, but now comes as a .pdf sent straight to your inbox (and still for the moment a hard copy for those who want it through their letterbox). Through the *bmj* and a planned new website we seek to:

- Reflect on issues and matters relating to Baptist ministry, and when appropriate to represent these to regional and national bodies.
- Encourage academic, practical and contextual theology that encourages reflection on the practice and theology of Baptist ministry.
- Enhance the sense of contact, concern and compassion among those involved in Baptist ministry.
- Encourage members to commit themselves to mutual prayer on Sundays mornings.
- Offer practical care through the administration of a benevolent fund.

The future of the BMF, we believe, is now to recognise the opportunities to encourage and resource theological fellowship among our members. We believe the *bmj* remains the journal of practical theology for Baptist ministers, and we believe the journal has the potential to develop possibly in frequency, but also in shaping, engaging, and reflecting on, issues of concern among Baptists. The *bmj* belongs to its members because we look to the membership to be its contributors. With its mix of individual and themed articles, we believe it uniquely offers theology being done by Baptists.

In recognising the contribution of the *bmj*, we have sought to make its archives freely available, providing hundreds of articles over the past hundred years. We are also tentatively exploring whether there is scope for second journal of Baptist theology,

which would offer more academic essays, and so give an opportunity to publish more widely the many BA and/or MA dissertations and essays produced in our colleges, which too rarely are made available to a wider audience, as well as new material.

Alongside the *bmj*, through our website we want to be a means of networking and information for BMF members. There are growing number of theological reflection groups appearing around the country which we want to champion and encourage. We want also to be able to point people to good theological, biblical, pastoral resources.

In these ways, we hope that we might offer the possibility of new friendships and connections being made, not just locally, but cross-country, that provide forms of theological encouragement, as well as pastoral support.

We welcome any feedback between now and the middle of May. At the BMF AGM, on 15 June at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, we will agree a new constitution that reflects this new focus.

Interested in the history of Baptist ministry?

You might like to know that we are archiving past issues of *bmj* for research purposes. If you'd like to look back at *bmj* and its predecessor, *The Fraternal*, go to:

http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bmj-05.php

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.

Imagination and gospel

by Lisa Kerry

As Christians we would want to affirm that we have a beautiful truth to share with the world, a beautiful truth that saves. How we communicate that truth has varied immensely from tradition to tradition and been influenced by the culture in which we seek to bear witness. In this article I hope to explore the role that imagination has in communicating that truth. This will involve discussion around the very nature of imagination: its benefits and dangers, its ability to define us as human, and what it has to say to theological questions about who God is and what he is like. The discussion will also necessitate some questions about the nature of truth and what kind of truth we are trying to share when we communicate the gospel. I shall do this in conversation with several significant theological voices speaking on the role and importance of imagination.

When discussing imagination and its role in our lives we start with an immediate problem of definition. For some of us imagination is the stuff of fairy tales and a dangerous add-on to empirical truth,¹ while for others it is the very vehicle that turns truth into something that has meaning.² Some of this can be explained by personality and learning styles, perhaps, but it is also true to say that discussion of the imagination as a useful tool in conveying and communicating truth has seen a new dawn in recent years. Our post-enlightenment position in history, and its associated loss of received objective truth, potentially frees us to hear and experience truth in new and imaginative ways.³

Robin Stockitt has some interesting ideas about the role of imagination and specifically its ability to convey deep truth.⁴ In his exploration of the views of the Romantic poet, Coleridge, he raises some insightful points. Stockitt believes that by engaging the imagination in narrative storytelling, essential truths can be conveyed 'obliquely', which, he suggests, is powerful. In particular, when trying to communicate life-changing truth such as the gospel, he maintains that the oblique route is effective because it draws the hearer into the story at an emotional level.

His choice of the prophet Nathan's narrative approach to King David's adultery with Bathsheba is an excellent example of the cathartic benefits of appealing to the imagination and the emotions. He describes this as receiving truth through 'imaginative encounter'. What happens to David as he hears the story of the two shepherds and the imagined relationship that one of them has with his lamb, his emotional identification with the poor shepherd, his ability to imagine past his own circumstances and empathise with a complete stranger, rings true with our own

experience of life. Entering into a story is a powerful way to understand somebody else's truth.

This view of biblical truth, seeing the gospel as a series of narratives which invite us in at an emotional level as well as being an historical account, tells us something about the immanent God whose gospel we are communicating.⁵ This gospel is not, it seems to me, a fixed equation which we accept or not—rather it is a metanarrative which invites us to enter it with our own stories, and challenges us to appropriate the bigger story for ourselves. This is a gentle way of sharing truth. God does not seem to bludgeon us: it seems to be a wooing process via a series of stories that charge our imagination.

Furthermore, Stockitt suggests that engaging the imagination tells us something about the God who created us, the ontological nature of the Trinity. He uses the analogy of imaginative play when he describes the way in which the members of the Trinity may relate to and draw near each other. The beautiful symbiosis of mutual love and exaltation that we see there reveals an understanding and joy in each other's roles reminiscent of the freedom of play in a secure and happy child—so much so, that this relationship can even thrive when one part of it takes on the experience of becoming human.

*Play is the conscious and intentional relaxing of boundaries of what is normally considered possible yet contained within a framework of rules and conventions.*⁶

Stockitt helpfully likens this attribute of God to a jazz musician, who, while playing and pushing the boundaries of key and melody, still remains willingly within the constraints of a given framework.

In using the analogy of play to describe how the imagination is a God-given gift, evident within the Trinity itself, Stockitt raises an important point, that a godly use of our imaginations reflects our being made in God's image. In fact he goes as far as to suggest that imaginative play is where healthy children grow, morally and intellectually. This freedom to be lost in an unreal world of imaginative situations and scenarios, the role of play acting and of rehearsing behaviours and reactions as a child, is a precursor to the imaginative leap we make as adults. The sheer joy we can experience in this process, Stockitt argues, is an aesthetic activity of a divine nature. It requires that we learn in community and with all of our experiences to date, while at the same time employing the imagination and empathy which form such an important part of being made in God's image.

It seems that Stockitt is not the only theologian to have realised the significance of imagination in the form of childlike play. Jeremy Begbie suggests that the literary device of telling a story through the eyes of an imaginative child is a uniquely Christian perspective.⁷ He argues that it was Christ himself who challenged the view that children had nothing of importance to say, first by being a child who could challenge adults in the temple, and secondly as an adult by valuing the simplicity with which a child sees the world. He sees real value in the untainted and imaginative way the child sees the world

and how that tells adults a much deeper truth about life.

Begbie's example is Harper Lee's novel, *To kill a mocking bird*,⁸ where the observations of an innocent child throw new light on the horror of racism that a more direct approach would miss. It seems that this 'oblique' approach, this insistence in narrative art to leave some things to the imagination, can by its very avoidance of a direct polemic, actually communicate a deep truth far more effectively. Many important works of literary art have certainly followed this course with dramatic effect. Yet Begbie would seem to want to go even further by suggesting that all literary art 'bears witness to the mystery of incarnation'. This is a wholesale embrace of all things imaginative which may go a bit too far for some. Begbie's suggestion that the very process of creating something from the imagination speaks of the incarnate, creating God within us, works when we consider what is created to be beautiful, or at the very least to have moral worth; but how do we respond to something from the imagination that we find offensive?

A strong voice on how we use our imaginations is that of Scott Anniol. He seems to be of the view that we can train our imaginations to focus on those things which are helpful and beautiful, to retrain our tastes to fall in line with what he would consider to be godly.⁹ This certainly keeps us safe, but at some point we have to ask who is qualified to decide what is godly or even beautiful? Anniol himself argues that human nature tends to stick with what it knows and likes and needs encouraging to explore other things, and this realisation seems to suggest that we don't all have a uniform view of what is beautiful or helpful or godly.

The idea that all art can be helpful and point us in some way to the ultimate creator of our imaginations challenges the view that we already have all we need to know God. The difference between accepting what we have in scripture and the life of Jesus as the definitive Word, and freely exploring other ways God may want to reveal himself to us, tends to divide people. There are, of course, real dangers in both. The philosopher Simone Weil could see some real dangers in narrowing down one's worldview and only focusing on those things deemed beautiful and acceptable: 'This world is the only reality available to us, and if we do not love it in all its terror we are sure to end up loving the "imaginary", our own dreams and self-deceits'.¹⁰ Weil had a strong view that all fine art was inspired by God and as such is helpful to keep our imaginations searching for the right things.

Of course there would be many who would be very concerned that in embracing all art we might well be opening ourselves and our imaginations to very unhelpful material, and in fact running counter to the words of Paul in Philippians,¹¹ but an overly simplistic view of this verse may lead us to a formulaic view of the world, and the arts, which misses some of what art can teach us about ourselves and our place in God's world.¹²

In refusing to look any further than scripture we can miss out on all that creation ~~and~~

the ever-creating God may want to tell us about himself and us. Perhaps the very business of being so sure and prescriptive undermines something of our God-given enquiring mind, but even more significantly it may point to a lack of a robust theology of the work of the Spirit. Artists over the years have argued that art releases something of a God-given mystery in us, and gives us, in our imagination, a glimpse of something beyond the here and now. ‘Through art we occasionally receive—indistinctly, briefly—revelations the likes of which cannot be achieved through rational thought....For some this transcendent experience will be a glimpse of what it is to be truly human. For others “a glimpse of the Inaccessible.”’¹³

Sherry suggests that despite a recent outpouring of work on the Holy Spirit, there has been precious little on the specific role of the Spirit in aesthetics.¹⁴ He complains of a silence in the area of the Spirit moving through the artistic efforts of human imagination to reveal something new of God. Strangely, he acknowledges, this lack was not shared by some of our great novelists. Victor Hugo’s opinion is that ‘Nature is God’s immediate creation, and art is what God creates through the mind of man’.¹⁵

And so it would seem that some of our best-loved authors were ahead of the theologians in this area. They don’t seem to have a problem with God revealing new things through the imaginations of people and artists in particular. In fact, there seems to be an appreciation that God might choose to add to what he has already said through his Son and scripture, to what has been received, and lead human beings to what can subsequently be found.

Ben Quash suggests that this process takes nothing away from the given revelation we have in Christ, but that God can only enrich this in our imaginations through the found revelation in all that has come since Christ.¹⁶ This is an exciting proposition for the imagination—this understanding of how God might make himself known to us not only opens the door to self-expression and exploration, but also roots this exercise in the fixed historical truth of Christ. However, far from being a fixed and immovable truth, which, with each passing year, becomes more and more irrelevant to subsequent believers, this understanding of revelation renews and remakes the immovable truth within a new aesthetic and imaginative process. It is both historically fixed and ever-changing. Is this the jazz-playing God that Stockitt describes? I think it might be.

Quash suggests that even the process of translation of biblical material entails a certain amount of new ‘foundness’ of the gospel story, as a new vernacular inevitably throws new light on even the words of Jesus himself.¹⁷ In describing this phenomenon he accepts that this process makes people fearful, as though something of the original truth may be lost as new layers are added. But he argues that the truth of the gospel is a dynamic thing that helps us live out our lives in its truth in whatever time and place we find ourselves—that this truth is bigger and more dynamic than one person’s ability to describe or understand it.

The potential problem of the ‘space’ that occurs between a received understanding and what might be found in our imagination is explored from another perspective by David Brown. In his book, *God and grace of body: sacrament in ordinary*, he explores the benefits and fears surrounding our appreciation of the arts.¹⁸ He seems to be suggesting, in his chapter on classical music, that music is potentially problematic because it is actually too prescriptive for our emotions. He argues that the original text has more space in it to explore with the imagination than a composer leaves us with when describing in music the same event.¹⁹

This is an interesting dilemma. In leading our emotions in one area of the text, does that detract from the possible revelation of the rest of the possible emotional avenues of that text? In other words, is the text a living thing that grows in meaning and revelation as more and more imagination is used to interpret it? Certainly we would want to say that biblical material grows in its significance to us the longer we spend thinking about it.²⁰ But does subsequent understanding and imagination bring something extra to bear that is helpful? Who is in control in this process? Is the text serving the imagination or the imagination serving the text? Wright suggests a complex relationship of both the reader/receiver of the text and the objectivity of the text itself.²¹ Brown would seem to agree broadly with this understanding of a layering of revelation—in which case, that renders more significance to those artistic pursuits that help us to exercise our imaginations and remain open to the Holy Spirit’s revelation. Brown suggests that this has long been the case that actually we tend to shy away from art that has too much realism, tending instead to lean towards those arts that leave us space for interpretation and imagination. He illustrates this in the irony of the lack of colour of ancient Greek statues that Victorian scholars took to be an essential part of their aesthetic value, despite the fact that they had originally been a riot of realistic colour.²²

So we can see that the role of the imagination in conveying the truth of the gospel is complex. It brings us back to the original source of theology, before it morphed into an exercise of reason and was in its purest terms, messy narrative.²³ It requires us to question what kind of truth we are trying to communicate, and it highlights the complexities of the human mind with all its influences and cultural dynamics. We can see that theological opinion on the role of imagination is diverse even among those who would see it as a vital part of our being made in God’s image. As human beings we have problems assimilating deep truths—we need something to hang it on, something to enable our imagination to make it real for us.

Jesus knew this; he told stories which were open to misunderstanding and ambiguity, stories that opened up people’s minds and imaginations. There is something of the creator God’s nature to be seen in the story telling Jesus; something of the revealed and the hidden, which marks all of our experiences of God. This imaginative, creative God has created us in his image to be able to conjure up that which we have not experienced and to see beyond ourselves to something bigger. He who lives in perfect community

has made us to live in the shared experiences of others so that we might broaden our own experience of him.

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Notes to text

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2. C.S. Lewis in Trevor Hart, *Between the image and the Word*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p14.
3. Colin E. Gunton, *The one, the three and the many: God, creation and the culture of modernity*. Cambridge: CUP, 1993, p69.
4. Stockitt
5. John E. Colwell, *Living the Christian story: the distinctiveness of Christian ethics*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001, p81.
6. Stockitt, p100.
7. Jeremy Begbie, *Beholding the glory: incarnation through the arts*. London: DLT, 2000, p39.
8. Harper Lee, *To kill a mocking bird*. London: Heinemann, 1960.
9. Scott Anniol, *Change your tastes*. April 10th 2014, religiousaffectations.org [accessed 23/05/14].
10. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p xxxiii.
11. NRSV, Phil 4:8.
12. Patricia Lamoureux in *Seeking goodness and beauty: the use of the arts in theological ethics*. Patricia Lamoureux & Kevin J.O'Neal (eds), CSCR. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, p 5.
13. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *Lamoureux*, p5.
14. P. Sherry, *Spirit and beauty*. London: SCM, 2002, p18.
15. Hugo in Sherry, p103.
16. Ben Quash, *Found theology: history, imagination and the Holy Spirit*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p xiv.
17. Quash, p35.
18. David Brown, *God and grace of body: sacrament in ordinary*. Oxford: OUP, 2007.
19. Brown, p229.
20. NRSV, Joshus 1:8.
21. Stephen Wright in *Renewing biblical interpretation*, Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene & Karl Moller (eds). Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003, p249.
22. Brown, p25.
23. Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, *The novel as a source of dangerous memory in God's grandeur*. David C. Robinson (ed). Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007, p95.

Bible software tools

by Graham Criddle

More pastors and preachers than ever before are using electronic tools to enhance their sermon preparation, academic research and private study. These tools range from web-based tools through mobile apps to sophisticated desktop applications. How reliable are the answers that we get to the questions we ask of these tools? How much confidence can we have that what we are telling our congregations, or sharing with our homegroups, is accurate and correct? This was less of an issue when all these tools did was to make the same resources we have been using for many years available in a convenient electronic format, but as the sophistication and functionality of the tools increase so does the information built into them and, with that, comes questions of reliability.

This article focuses on the use of ‘tagging’ in Bible software tools—and uses Logos Bible Software (LBS) to explore it. Tagging is where the developers add additional information to the biblical (or extrabiblical) text. This information includes associating underlying original language words with English ones, annotating pronouns with the related people or places (so, for example, ‘he’ is tagged with ‘Peter’), or tagging nouns as subjects or objects of verbs. This tagging is done by teams of experts employed by the software product companies—people having deep knowledge of original languages, semantics and so forth—but they sometimes make mistakes and sometimes have to make tagging decisions on ambiguous cases.

It is important that those who preach, teach and engage in academic study are faithful to the biblical text and that the things they say and write about it are as accurate as possible. It is, therefore, important to understand how much the sophisticated tagging now available to scholars, pastors and students supports this requirement. If it does, then it will be a significant benefit to those who use it and those they serve; if it does not, then caution needs to be observed and the software may need to be changed or clarified.

Bible study techniques

Early Bible software tools provided efficient computer-based access to published resources. The next level of functionality provided by Bible study software is that of searching for occurrences of words or phrases. So, for example, it can be used to find

that the word ‘apostle’ (or variants of it) occurs 34 times in the book of Acts, with instances of it being highlighted in the text for easy identification.¹

Deeper levels of tagging provide the ability to represent, among other things, original language texts, including morphological information, in different language translations such as English. Continuing with the study of the word ‘apostle’, the associated tagging shows that the underlying Greek lemma is *apostolos*. The search for that lemma across the entire New Testament shows that it appears 79 times and is sometimes translated using terms other than ‘apostle’, such as ‘messenger’ and ‘representative’, which makes it easy to see where the same original language term is used and how it is translated.

Even more sophisticated capabilities have been made available with recent developments in tagging and a few examples are outlined below to demonstrate.

Entity tagging provides the ability to search for a ‘tagged object’ (such as a person or place) and returns results even when the object is not explicitly named. So, for example, running a search for Mary the mother of Jesus returns results when she is referred to by name (as in Matthew 1:18), by the word ‘her’ (as in Matthew 1:19) and by ‘his mother’ (as in Matthew 2:21).² This makes searching for people much more comprehensive.

Speaker tagging adds another level of functionality with each spoken word in the biblical text having been tagged with its speaker. This enables, for example, finding every time Peter is recorded as speaking the word ‘repent’ (Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31, 8:22). This type of search could be done without this type of tagging but would require more work. One would need to search for all occurrences of the word ‘repent’ in the New Testament and then discount the ones not spoken by Peter. There are 55 occurrences so checking through them is feasible but it is much easier and, assuming the tagging is correct, more accurate to be able to do these ‘speech-based’ searches.

The Bible Sense Lexicon (BSL) is designed to enable searches based on meaning as opposed to just specific words. It provides information regarding the precise sense of the word; the ability to search for that sense across Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic languages and the position of the word within the overall hierarchy of the lexicon. This ‘sense tagging’ enables identification of where the same sense occurs even when different underlying words are used. So, for example, the term ‘house’ is defined, by the lexicon, as ‘a dwelling that serves as living quarters for one or more families’ and is tagged to some occurrences of the Hebrew word *bayit* and the Greek words *oikia* and *oikos*. With this tagging, it is possible to search for the overall sense of a term as opposed to the specific words themselves. One of the times I found this tagging particularly interesting was when studying 2 John. The word ‘truth’ appears five times but is tagged with different senses. Three of them are tagged as referring to the ‘gospel of Jesus’ (2 John 1—‘all who know the truth’, 2 John 2, 4) while two are tagged with more ‘general’ truth (2 John 1—‘love in the truth’, 2 John 3). This led to a fascinating study of the 28 times in

the New Testament where the text has been tagged with the sense ‘gospel of Jesus’—not that I necessarily agreed with them all but it did provide some useful insights.

Clause participants tagging provides the ability to examine entities associated (as subject or object) with a verb even when their names are not identified explicitly. This provides very powerful search capabilities allowing us to see, for example, that the two times Jesus appears as the subject of the verb *phainō* (shine, appear) are in Mark 16:9 and 1 John 2:8.

The Psalms Explorer is an instance of a new class of LBS tools designed to provide visually helpful ways of analysing a range of biblical (and related) material. It provides ‘point and click’ capabilities to order the Psalms in a variety of ways such as genre, structure and author and to filter down to smaller groupings based on themes, authors and other tags. I used this recently to identify the set of Psalms (31, 86, 102) that are tagged as Lament Psalms and that speak of God’s faithfulness, mercy and grace even in times of persecution.

This is not a comprehensive list of capabilities but outlines some of the powerful features that are now available using sophisticated tagging.

Potential issues

While the capabilities outlined above are powerful, there are potential issues in using and relying on them as outlined here. Reliability can be related to questions of ambiguity, of clarity, of consistency with other reference resources, of completeness and of accuracy.

Sometimes in the text it is not totally clear to whom (or to what) reference is being made, but the software doesn’t have the capability to indicate ambiguity and so the developers make decisions about how they tag the terms. In Exodus 4:24, for example, there is significant uncertainty over which person (Moses or Gershom) is being referenced when it says ‘about to kill him’,³ but the software simply tags it as Moses. While this may be correct, it results in a search for Moses returning this verse without any indication that there is any ambiguity, whereas there would often be an indicator when reading the biblical text directly.

So-called Red Letter Bibles indicate where Jesus is speaking, but sometimes the break points are not clear. There is, for example, a dispute over whether the words of Jesus in John 3 finish at v15 or carry on to v21,⁴ but the software has the whole of the speech from vv10-21 tagged as spoken by Jesus. This means that, for example, running a search on the word ‘Son’ spoken by Jesus in John 3 returns results for verses after v15 without any indication of ambiguity.

The classification of Psalms in the Psalms Explorer, and their structural analysis, is

helpful but is done within a context of significant debate, and uncertainty, on how Psalms are actually structured. Taking Psalm 100, for example, the Psalms Explorer Tool shows it as comprising two sections, vv1-3 and vv4-5. However, there are different views on how this Psalm should be structured,⁵ and these are not reflected in the tool resulting in a misplaced sense of clarity.

Reflecting on the results

It is apparent that there are some issues when using sophisticated Bible software such as LBS. There is no mechanism to flag ambiguity so search results obtained, or structural information shown, are presented as definitive whereas, in some cases, there may be a significant degree of uncertainty. In other cases, tagging is incorrect or incomplete.

None of the concerns raised above are visible to the general user, which can lead to a higher than appropriate level of confidence in the information presented by the software. But this concern needs to be balanced by the powerful capabilities provided and the insights which can be gained through use of these tools.

Thinking about bias

The question of bias; the presence of ‘pre-existing filters’ through which texts are seen; the systems through which exegesis is done; the reality and implications of worldviews are all historic interpretation issues, and affect commentators, writers of monographs, producers of lexicons and, for our purposes here, developers of Bible software tools. Does the tagging applied to the software derive from a particular theological perspective and, if so, what are the implications of that for study and research?

By examining tagging associated with the word ‘spirit’ in Genesis 1:2, we can highlight this issue. It is tagged with two different BSL senses: ‘wind’ and ‘spirit (God)’.⁶ These provide, in relatively neutral terms, some perspective on how the word is being used semantically and lexically, even though in the second there is the assertion that the God who is being spoken of here has a relationship with the people of Israel. However, the word is also tagged as the Bible person ‘Holy Spirit’, a much more overtly, not universally accepted, theological position.

As another example, the word ‘angel’ in ‘angels of the churches’⁷ is tagged to indicate that these are the ‘spirits’ of the churches although there are many different views as to actually what they represent.⁸ As well as applying this tag to these terms it is also applied to the seven spirits before God’s throne,⁹ the seven lamps blazing before it¹⁰ as well as the seven horns and eyes of the Lamb.¹¹ Taken together, the applied tagging links together a number of different concepts and presents them as an interesting, interconnected whole with these spirits being both before the throne of God and ‘sent out

into all the earth'.¹²

These examples demonstrate that care must be taken to not simply assume that the tagging used is 'neutral' or consistent with any particular tradition or perspective.

Software tools and hermeneutics

It is interesting to reflect on how the tools provided by LBS can aid in the hermeneutical process outlined in books such as *The hermeneutical spiral*.¹³ A detailed study,¹⁴ examining the major steps outlined by Osborne, showed that LBS, and its associated tagging, can aid the hermeneutical process and provide relevant information in an integrated manner. It also raised a question which potentially calls for a change in approach to the process itself. There is a widely accepted principle that the student of the text should make their own study of it first before engaging with the work of other scholars to refine and challenge their own thinking. Osborne refers to this first stage as 'inductive study' and stresses its importance so that students can engage critically with other resources¹⁵ after coming to their own initial conclusions. However, he recognises that those involved in the hermeneutical process are often busy and may not be able to give the time to explore some of the issues in depth.¹⁶ With a limited time available for exegesis and hermeneutics, it is appropriate to question whether it is always right to start from a 'blank sheet', or to use insights from a range of tools as the starting point. Not that these tools should be treated as definitive but rather seen as providing a platform for further study and evaluation. With the tools now available, and the increasing functionality they provide, it may be time to envisage a different starting point for the exegetical process providing a more streamlined approach.

Conclusions

This article has summarised some of the key early developments in Bible software tools and then addressed the topic of value-added tagging, outlining some of its incremental capabilities and how they can be used.

This extra functionality and capability brings complexity which, in turn, has the potential of leading to issues of accuracy and completeness. At a detailed level, there are cases where the results obtained from LBS are incorrect, due to faulty or incomplete tagging, or provide unrealistic levels of confidence overlooking real ambiguity in the text. Furthermore, some of the tagging seems to be influenced by theological bias and perspective which affects information obtained through use of the software. All these factors need to be recognised by users of the software.

Even while recognising these issues, this article demonstrates that tagging in software tools can provide significant value to the serious and discerning student of the biblical

text when this tagging is seen as enabling highly functional and feature-rich tools without elevating them to an unwarranted ‘infallible’ status. There is a strong argument that such tools could be used, and recognised, more extensively than is currently the case and could become an integral part of standard textbooks on the hermeneutical and exegetical process as well as much more intensively used in theological education. Software tagging does enhance biblical study and should be seen as a welcome development enabling deeper insights into, and understanding of, the text. It should be used and relied on while recognising the limitations outlined in this article (and in more detail in the original dissertation).

Graham Criddle is minister of Tamworth Baptist Church. His full MTh thesis (on which this article is based) is available in Spurgeon’s College library or by email from Graham.

Notes to text

1. Unless otherwise specified, searches are done against the NIV.
2. This is not a complete list but demonstrates the point.
3. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006, p152.
4. D.A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Leicester: IVP, 1991, p203.
5. Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas, TX: Word, 1998, p536.
6. The definition of this sense asserts that the God spoken of is the God of Israel
7. Revelation 1:20, 2-3.
8. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas, TX: Word, 1998, pp107-112.
9. Revelation 1:4.
10. Revelation 4:5.
11. Revelation 5:6.
12. Revelation 5:6.
13. Grant R. Osborne, *The hermeneutical spiral: a comprehensive introduction to biblical interpretation*, 2nd edn. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
14. Outlined in the original dissertation.
15. Osborne, pp30-31.
16. Osborne, p64.

On life, death, and dying

by Simon Woodman

It may seem obvious to say it, but living is the natural precursor to dying. This biological machine which I call 'me' is winding slowly down, and will, one day, stop. I hope that day is far off, and that the days between now and then will be healthy and happy. But, as a minister of a church, I am all too aware that for many of us, life ends too soon, and in ways that we would not choose.

This was brought home to me at a funeral I took in my late twenties, when I stood at the front looking at the girlfriend and young children of the deceased man, who was the same age as me, and heard the daughter ask her mother, 'Is that Daddy in there?' How I got through my lines I will never know.

Through my thirties I saw over many years my wife's mother deteriorate with early onset Alzheimer's, to the point where the person we had known and loved was replaced by a body that was deeply distressed and yet inarticulate and inactive. And I saw the medical industry keeping her alive long after her life had ended.

These are just two examples from my own story, and I am well aware of the danger of extrapolating policy from personal experience. But I'm not going to argue policy, I'm going to talk theology; and it seems to me that if our theology doesn't resonate meaningfully with our experience, then it's not really doing its job.

So what, I wonder, might a Christian perspective on end-of-life choice look like? There is clearly no one 'right' answer to this, and I will let others argue their positions, but it seems to me that, sometimes, death might not be the worst thing that can happen to a person. Actually, I'll put it a bit more positively than that. Sometimes, death is the best thing that can happen to a person. And I say this born out of a deep theological conviction that, from the perspective of eternity, death is not the enemy, because ultimately, I do not believe that death gets the final word on life.

I think that the author of the book of Revelation grasped something of this when he offered his readers a vision of the death of death. He said, 'Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and...then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire...Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.' (Revelation 20.13,14; 21.4). The author knew all about suffering and torture and pain and death, but he didn't accept that death gets the last word on life. If he is right this means, practically speaking, that life can be lived free from the dominating and debilitating fear of death. This, I think, is a profoundly Christian perspective, challenging the ideology of 'life at all costs' that determines so much of our medical approach to death and dying. If death is not the ultimate

enemy, then death can be embraced as a good part of life, to be welcomed rather than resisted when its time has come near.

Moving from the end of the Bible to the beginning, the garden offers a picture not of a world without death, but of a world where death is a friend, and not an enemy. The vision of Eden in Genesis is not of a world rapidly facing over-population and resource-scarcity due to the immortality of the animals and humans that live there. Rather, it is a vision of a world where death is so much a part of life that it is as much a friend to those who live there as the rising of the sun on another day. The Bible thus both begins and ends with a vision of life where death is transformed, and humans are released from its tyranny.

Even St Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, maintains a remarkably ambiguous perspective on life and death, commenting that, 'For me, living is Christ and dying is gain.' (1.21). And this biblical-theological perspective, I believe, is profoundly relevant to the pastoral realities that we encounter in our own lives and in the lives of those we love. If death does not get the final word on life, then our lives, both temporal and eternal, are so much more than the moment of our passing.

I firmly believe that every good moment of life is held safe by God and passes into his eternal embrace; and that nothing true, honourable, or just, pure, pleasing, or commendable, is ever lost to the love of God—so at the moment of our death we are neither constrained nor judged in the manner of our passing. We are rather freed to embrace death, knowing that in death we are held eternally in God's love. To put this another way, death is not a final salary pension scheme. Who we are in eternity isn't who we are at the moment of our passing, and our moment of death (or even our manner of death) is included within, but not determinative of, our existence in God's eternity. I do not believe that we 'go anywhere' when we die. But I do believe that God is eternal and that we are held eternally by God's loving embrace.

And so, to assisted dying. It does not seem unthinkable that modern medicine has a gift to offer those who are nearing the end of their life. It could even be a gift from God to be received with the same gratitude that we receive the other medical miracles that make our lives so much more bearable than those of any generation of humanity before us. I hear and echo all the arguments around safeguards and ethical constraints, but these should no more prevent us using assisted dying appropriately than the safeguards and constraints that govern surgical or pharmaceutical medicine prevent us using those services.

My point has been to establish a Christian theological perspective on assisted dying which sees it as a gift and not a curse, and which states very firmly that, in Christ, death need neither be feared nor fought, because death does not get the final word on life.

Simon Woodman is minister at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church.

Responses to *The courage to be Baptist*

January's *bmj* (vol 333) carried the group statement, *The courage to be Baptist*, (find it at www.somethingtodeclare.org.uk). Here we publish some responses.

Response by Keith G. Jones

Given the current movement in European society to address issues around sexuality, not least regarding same-sex marriage, most of the great Christian World Communions¹ in the northern hemisphere have felt it incumbent on them to clarify denominational policy and theology related to this theme.

It is not a new issue, and has certainly been a running debate within the Baptist Union of Great Britain since the 1980s. Initially, there were those who wanted a clear statement by an Assembly resolution, and there have been annual attempts since the early 1990s to put to the Assembly a Public Resolution² which would set a clear position for the Union. As an officer of the Union³ in that period, I was of the firm opinion that what was needed was not a 30-minute debate in Assembly resulting in a firm and unequivocal statement, but rather an informed discussion within churches, associations and colleges—the constituent elements of the Union—around the theme of human sexuality and gender preference, with adequate resources available in terms of quality biblical and theological reflection. This discussion should be accompanied by input from those who had some understanding of biology, and those who could bring resources from the world of psychology.

What was apparent to me was that those denominations who had tried to address this issue by resolution in Synod, General Assembly, and Conference, had found such approaches inadequate and divisive, and to be lacking the necessary journey of prayer and reflection which such an emotive and charged set of concerns might properly require of believers.

I was encouraged that the Baptist Union took the decision in the 1990s to establish a group drawn from different skills and backgrounds to reflect on human sexuality. This group provided resources to enable discussion within local communities of believers so that they could come to (if possible) a common mind about such issues.⁴

More recently, I have been party to discussion groups in local churches struggling with issues of human sexuality and what constitutes marriage; and the discussions around gender where there are those who feel they have been classified in the wrong gender, those who experience movement on the gender continuum, and those who are struggling to determine the relationship between their physical attributes and their mental preferences.

A pastoral issue

If we believe in a loving God who reaches out to everyone in God's only offspring, Jesus Christ, then surely our first instinct is pastoral. Abstract debate on the subject of sexuality and gender appear only to have provided pain and division in the body of Christ. Local churches, associations and colleges will inevitably, if we are truly missional, experience within our porous communities women and men actively struggling with these realities of being truly human.

Yet, do we need more?

Placing to one side the notion of abstract debate and concentrating upon the reality of the women and men within the heart of our communities and beyond—in the penumbra of our ecclesial reach—is, I believe, the proper starting point. I know of local churches who have taken firm stands on liturgical activity, such as being willing to hold same-sex marriage services - not because they have spent long hours engaged in abstract theological debate, but because they have encountered the reality of women and men in their own community for whom they have love and care, and who were in need of necessary rites of the church to (from their perspectives) regularise the reality in which they found themselves.

Churches I might not have expected to have embraced these realities because of the encounter within their communities of those facing struggles, hopes, and joys, for which the ecclesial community had a potential and available remedy in the love of Christ.

Yet, our baptistic way of 'being church' has always assumed and required that the decision of the local gathering, intentional community of faith look to sisters and brothers beyond themselves to offer a critique of their journey of discipleship.

The authors of *The courage to be Baptist* turn our minds afresh to the BUGB Declaration of Principle,⁵ which places prime responsibility upon the local, gathering community of faith to determine the will of Christ for them in their circumstances. Yet, interdependency is our mark and we must not shirk from that. We know disagreement has existed within the body of Christ since the first generation and the Council in Jerusalem—was Christianity a Jewish sect or was it possible for Gentiles to accept Christ as Lord and Saviour? What foods might it be appropriate for Christians to eat? For 2000 years the strategic reality among us has been not that we disagree, but how do we handle that disagreement, and move always onward in the unity of faith?

The four orthos⁶

The courage to be Baptist reflects the importance of the 'four orthos', which we find among ourselves. For the most part, save for the aberration of some General Baptists who slid into Unitarianism, we have been very *orthodox* in our theological beliefs. We have taken the biblical account of faith and the historic creeds of the church—the Nicene Constantinopolitan and Apostolic Creeds as being statements of Christian believing

around which we can cohere. Yet, unlike some other traditions, we have always assumed them to be, of themselves, uttering the words alone as being some sort of facile or partial believing. We have demanded of baptistic disciples *orthopraxy*. That is to say that the words themselves are only of significance and value when we see the truth of them lived out in committed discipleship. Where we have failed throughout our history in associating locally and beyond the local is in *orthohexy*. That is to say, in behaving towards one another in a right attitude, even when we disagree. This is the heart of the issue in *The courage to be Baptist*. The fourth theme of *orthopyrie*, ‘right fire’ (or a passion for mission) can, as the authors of *The courage to be Baptist* make clear, be impeded and negated if these other three ‘orthos’ are not properly attended to.

The courage to be Baptist statement rightly makes it clear that churches have the same responsibility by associating together as do believers in a local gathering community. This cardinal point is, by observation, being breached and ignored in some parts of the Baptist Union. It is becoming apparent that disagreements in some associations around these issues are changing attitudes and respect between congregations, therefore *The courage to be Baptist* comes as a very timely reminder that our DNA includes orthohexy as well as orthopraxy and orthodoxy in our necessity of relating to each other.

The call to engage with one another

The series of ‘calls’ towards the end of this paper for respectful conversation, deeper honest engagement, willingness to allow each other to follow our own discernments in these challenging areas of being human and respect are, at heart, a call for true orthohexy among the people of God called Baptist. It is a call worth heeding, and we should be grateful to Beth, Andy, Ruth, Steve, David, Glen and Simon for taking the time, thought and energy to produce the statement for us.

It is true to our spider’s web⁷ form of ecclesiology that an informal group of those with theological gifts should engage together in this type of reflection. However, am I alone in feeling we have lost something in the dismantling of the committee structure of the Union, so we no longer have a national Doctrine and Worship Committee⁸ engaging in such reflection among us and producing resources to enable us to engage in our local gathering communities, in our associating and in our national expression in an appropriate search of the scriptures and our theological heritage to help us discern the mind of Christ?

Keith G. Jones has held many roles within the Union and Associations, and was Rector of IBTS in Prague until his partial retirement.

Notes to text

1. Here I am noting the debates and disagreements that have happened within the Reformed, Episcopalian/Anglican and Methodist traditions in particular.
2. The record of requests by churches and the decisions made by the Assembly Public Resolutions

Subcommittee will be found in the BUGB archives at the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

3. I served as Chairman of Council 1987-1990 and then as Deputy General Secretary 1990–1998.

4. I note this resource no longer seems to be available in the BUGB online shop.

5. The Declaration of Principle is helpfully examined in Richard L Kidd (ed) *Something to declare: a study of the Declaration of Principle*. Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1996.

6. See John H.Y. Briggs (ed), *A dictionary of European Baptist life and thought*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009, p371.

7. There are various forms of ecclesiology among us. My own preference is for the 'spider's web'. On this, and other prevalent forms, see Keith G. Jones, *The European Baptist Federation: a case study in interdependency 1950-2006*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009, chap 2.

8. Examples of their work include *The nature of the Assembly and Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain*. Didcot: BUGB, 1994; *Forms of ministry amongst Baptists: towards an understanding of spiritual leadership*. Didcot: BUGB, 1994; *Believing and being baptized: baptism, so-called re-baptism and children in the church*. Didcot: BUGB, 1996.

Response by Andy Glover

As I write this response, the news has just broken within the Anglican community that the nominated Bishop of Sheffield, the Right Reverend Philip North (current Bishop of Burnley), has notified the Prime Minister of his intention to withdraw from his nomination to Sheffield.¹ Behind this decision, as many will know, is that Bishop Philip is one of those within the Church of England who, 'on grounds of theological conviction, are unable to receive the ministry of women bishops or priests',² and so, after a couple of weeks of debate and discussion with some very strong reactions on both sides, Bishop Philip decided to withdraw.

In the hours afterwards on social media there has been a flurry of comments and reactions and statements have been issued by various other bishops. A line within the statement from the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, stood out for me. He wrote: 'There will be continuing debate in the coming days and weeks of lessons to be learned, how that learning might inform and inspire us to act as a Church in our dealings with one another and how, when we disagree, to disagree Christianly, remembering at all times that our identity is in Christ alone'.³ It was the phrase 'when we disagree, to disagree Christianly, remembering that at all times that our identity is in Christ alone', that has stuck in my mind as I come to write this reflection on the recent statement, *The courage to be Baptist*.

First of all let me say that I welcome this statement and thank the authors for taking the time and effort to write it. As Nigel G. Wright says in his commendation, 'This statement offers a thoughtful and compassionate rationale for such an approach and as such is to be

commended'.⁴ Secondly, I recognise, as the authors do, that the relationship of homosexuality to Christianity is without doubt one of the main subjects of Christian cultural conversation today. If you are a Christian in the UK, it is nearly impossible to talk about your faith without this subject being raised. Although it is not central to the gospel message at the heart of Christianity, right now the cultural moment requires that we be prepared to address this issue whenever we are publicly identified as Christians. Thirdly, not only within the Baptist family, but within every major Christian denomination, this issue generates very strong feelings and opinions. The authors of the statement themselves reflect on this reaction, and their statement carries added weight since among the authors there are different views and opinions held on this issue.

I wasn't involved in a Baptist church until I was 22 years of age. My childhood experience of church was Anglo-Catholic. I had a personal encounter with God when I was 17 which led me to connect with a local Assemblies of God congregation, until I went off to Bible College at 19 (Birmingham Bible Institute, which was non-denominational). After three years I came to Chester and began working for a Baptist church. It was some five years later that I became the pastor of this same Baptist church and began the process of becoming an accredited Baptist minister, finally accomplished in 2001.

Why do I tell you this? Primarily because over the course of this journey and in the years since, I have felt that Baptist ecclesiology is a faithful application of New Testament Principles, and so for me the Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain is important and should be understood rightly as the 'basis for our Union'.⁵ Over the past few days I have read (for the first time, I must admit!), the study of the Declaration of Principle (*Something to declare*), written in 1996 by Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd and Michael Quicke (then the principals of four Baptist colleges).⁶ Written just over 20 years ago, one of its hopes was that what they had written together 'would be something important...for our present and future life, as a Union', and this is certainly something on which *The courage to be Baptist* authors focus in their desire to place the Declaration of Principle front and centre, as a guide to how we might face discussions and decisions on the issue of same-sex marriage within Baptists Together. On this matter I fully agree, and applaud their aspiration and hope. The understanding and application of the first statement within the Declaration, written here in full, is something we must take seriously.

That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.

As I read the paper, *Something to declare*, I was reminded of this quote, 'Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it'. I found the story of how Baptists came to form this Declaration really helpful. Allow me to quote from the paper:

The Declaration begins where we must always begin, with Jesus Christ who is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega, the A and the Z of the alphabet of faith. This very first sentence addresses the source of our authority for what we believe and the way we live, and it affirms that ‘...our sole and absolute authority in all matters relating to faith and practice’ is Jesus Christ. It recalls the words of Jesus about himself in Matthew 28:18: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me ...’

*That is, our final authority is a person, Jesus Christ. It is not a book, nor a creed, nor even a basis of faith—but a person in whom God expresses himself fully: ‘Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh’.*⁷

For me the focus on Jesus Christ is key, and the first sentence of the Declaration therefore sets out three kinds of authority: Christ, Scripture, and Church Meeting; in that order. This blend, I believe, has something peculiarly Baptist about it. The way that these three elements come together belongs to our story, our identity, though of course others share the story in various ways. It is this ‘peculiarly Baptist’ way of doing things to which the authors of *The courage to be Baptist* are appealing, and urging us to use it to underpin the ongoing dialogue around same-sex marriage.

They recognise, as I do, that this approach is not easy. It is highlighted in a number of letters, including one by Richard Kidd (one of the authors of *Something to declare*), written in response to the Baptist Union Council statement on the Registration of Buildings for Same-Sex Marriage released by the BUGB Council in March 2016.⁸ Many of these letters make reference to the Declaration of Principle,⁹ lamenting the fact that the said Council statement undermines and is contrary to the Declaration. For me, it is interesting to note that within the statement from the Council they use the Declaration of Principle, quoting it twice to help justify the conclusions it reached in its desire to give direction to the churches and ministers within the Union!

So is it possible, as the authors of *The courage to be Baptist* ask, to have the ‘conversation waiting to begin’ in a context where there are such strongly held convictions and disagreements? Is it possible, as Archbishop John Sentamu puts it, ‘when we disagree, to disagree Christianly’? This is where we do need courage and a fresh approach to how we express our views, and where we have this conversation. The Declaration of Principle is the basis for our Union, but the state of our Union troubles me. The institutional nature of our Union means that the relational aspect of walking together seems lost; the language of ‘us and them’, especially regarding Council, immediately puts distance within the conversation. Add to this the strong sense of independence and autonomy in local congregations, and we can undermine the sense of us all being under the Lordship of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is easy to forget that we are a Union not just of churches, but also associations and colleges. Together we are in covenant relationship with one another, and so what we believe and how we act matters. In spite of all this, I believe it is possible to begin this

conversation—and I would want to urge us all to keep Jesus Christ at the centre of it, and to seek to engage one another by seeing each other (and all involved in this issue) through the eyes of Jesus. This would, I hope, lay a good foundation.

I believe it is possible, because there is more that unites than divides us—but we must take time to build and develop trust and love, for as we do, we can create the context and atmosphere in which we will have opportunities to develop this conversation.

Andy Glover is minister of Hoole Baptist Church, Chester and Team Leader of Fresh Streams.

Notes to text

- 1.<http://www.archbishopofyork.org/articles.php/3610/archbishop-of-york-statement-on-bishop-philip-north>
- 2.<http://www.archbishopofyork.org/articles.php/3610/archbishop-of-york-statement-on-bishop-philip-north>
- 3.<http://www.archbishopofyork.org/articles.php/3610/archbishop-of-york-statement-on-bishop-philip-north>
- 4.www.somethingtodeclare.org.uk/commendations.html
- 5.http://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220595/Declaration_of_Principle.aspx
- 6.http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366068/Something_to_Declare.aspx
- 7.http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366068/Something_to_Declare.aspx
- 8.http://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/273782/Same_Sex_Marriage.aspx
- 9.<http://baptistssm.weebly.com/letters>

Response by Bob Allaway

I would like to offer a couple of comments on *The courage to be Baptist* statement in the January issue of *bmj*.

1. Is it really true that ‘There is no qualitative difference between disagreements on sexuality and (say) the ordination of women’ (p22)?

Both sides arguing about women’s ministry can appeal to scripture. Those opposed will appeal to 1 Corinthians 14:33-34 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12; those supporting it to John 20:17 (Jesus commissions a woman to take his message to men), Acts 2:17-18 and many other passages. Consequently, there have been advocates of both points of view from the earliest 17th century Baptists onwards (see *Baptist Quarterly*, 2010, **43**, p260ff).

By contrast, while I can see how some biblical friendships could serve as models for (celibate) civil partnerships, I cannot see any biblical model for a ‘same-sex marriage’, while Jesus’ words in Matthew 19:4-5/Mark 10:6-7 would seem clearly to rule it out, and I

am unaware of any historical Baptist advocating such a situation.

2. Since ‘the specific question of churches registering for same-sex marriages’ (p22) underlies much of the controversy in our denomination, I am surprised that there is not more discussion of why *any* of our churches should want to be registered for *any* marriage. If ‘we stand for the separation of church and state’ (EBF statement quoted on p15), would it not make more sense for all couples to be married under civil law in the registry office and then have a Christian ceremony in church? This is already the normal pattern in countries such as France.

Bob Allaway (a retired Baptist minister, but still active!).

The call to retirement

By Peter Shepherd

Thirty-nine years ago I left Spurgeon’s College, having undergone three years of preparation for the Baptist ministry. Since then, apart from a few months in 1978, I have been continuously working as a minister in Baptist churches. Moves between churches occurred when I accepted an invitation from a new church to come and be its minister, believing it to be a call from God. Now, for the first time, Rita and I are moving not because of any such invitation, but through personal choice. Our new home is not attached to any church; no congregation awaits our arrival. I am not fond of the notion of retirement, but that is the conventional description for what I am doing.

The ending of any meaningful relationship is a significant moment, and can be emotional. Leaving a close-knit community like a Baptist church is such an event, especially for its minister. Retirement brings an extra dimension of finality for the minister, and raises particular issues. Housing can be a challenging one, for example. Many, like me, live in a ‘tied house’, meaning that when the ministry comes to an end, the provision of accommodation in the church house does too. Possibly for the first time, the minister can choose where to live.

Important though they are, the practical questions are less profound than the psychological and social ones. When the minister's special role in the community of a local church comes to an end, it involves the loss of a position of status and respect, unless, of course, the minister takes up a ‘retirement pastorate’ in a church. But it is not simply a matter of

status. Ministers are in a highly privileged position, sharing deep moments of joy, grief, conflict and anxiety with members of the congregation. They play a central role in marriages, funerals and baptisms, as well as in other major life events such as divorce, major surgery and redundancy. Leading a congregation as its minister inevitably involves struggling with collective decision making, working together on major community events, sorting out personal conflicts, etc. All this is not easily left behind.

This personal bond between minister and church has been influenced in recent years by a trend to regard ministry as a profession similar to other professions. This amounts to a tendency to think of the minister as an employee, which naturally changes the impact of retirement. A clear distinction is made between ministerial responsibilities and the minister's personal life, a distinction which profoundly affects the relationship between minister and church. It becomes more formal and defined; less open ended. While retirement still involves the breaking of personal ties, the emphasis, when it occurs, is more on relinquishing ministerial duties than the ending of the communal element of a minister's life.

Any minister needs some degree of personal independence from the congregation, for their own wellbeing, but a relationship of mutual openness and trust, which the move towards a professionalised ministry threatens, is worth nurturing. The close bond between pastor and church has traditionally been central to Baptist ecclesiology, and is one of the gifts we can offer, not only to other church traditions, but also to wider society, where relationships of all kinds are increasingly contractual and superficial, and where loyalty is undervalued. By making themselves vulnerable, ministers may make it more likely they will be hurt, including at retirement, but by doing so they also offers churches the opportunity to build a community based on personal commitment and love, rather than defined roles and duties.

It may be true that moving from one church to another is different from retiring from pastoral ministry altogether because of the absence of a call from a church, but perhaps this misses the real point. For any Christian, God's call is involved in every major change in life, whether these are chosen or imposed. To accept an invitation from a church to be its minister is to recognise it as a call from God, but retirement from pastoral ministry too is a call from God. No-one can escape the responsibility (and privilege) of hearing and responding to that call, for God's interest in the service we can offer him does not disappear. The Christian life offers freedom and hope through hearing the invitation God gives, at every stage of life. Retirement is more than an ending. It is a chance to hear again God's call to something new.

Peter Shepherd is recently retired. This article was first published in a blog at <https://eucharistosblog.wordpress.com>.

On translation

by Fred Stainthorpe

Some of us might well baulk if confronted by the words *Bereshith, bara Elohim eth ha shamayim we'eth ha aretz*. We may feel a little more at home with *en arche en ho logos kai ho logos en pros ton theon*, but most of us would acknowledge that we have not maintained our Hebrew and/or Greek, which we started (perhaps enthusiastically) at college. 'In the beginning was the Word' presents us with no problems, since the scriptures have been available in recognisable English for well over 500 years. They are essential to our preaching ministry and the fascinating story of their translation is well worth reading. The same is true of translation today.

Protestant missions have always placed a high priority on the translation of the Bible into local languages. We do so because we believe that God translated himself into human life in the person of Jesus, thus giving us warrant for such work. Yet many Christians, maybe even some ministers, are unaware of the complexities of translation. It resembles an iceberg, the lower part of which supports the visible portion but which is hidden beneath the sea and sinks Titanics.

Translation demands much mental readjustment on the side of the translator and the 'native' speaker alike (using this term in a non-pejorative sense). To those tribes living, say in Central Africa, the initial arrival of translators must have posed a question. Were they really human beings? Paleness of skin to them denoted sickness and death. Were these people spirits who had returned from the world of the dead? Why had they come? It was not to trade with or enslave them, merely to talk to them! The whole process of writing and reading would have been new.

The pioneer missionaries also needed to make their own mental adjustments. The national tongues were languages often as complex as English. They needed to be mastered—and not all pioneers were natural linguists. All had to scorn delights and live laborious days producing a grammar and dictionary of a language before they could even consider translating it. This could often take years.

It could not have been properly done without the help of national helpers. Thus, John Whitehead, or Nkasa (to give him his African name), in the foreword to his *Grammar and Dictionary of the Bobangi language*, paid tribute to his African helpers Monkaku and Bokakola. May God richly bless them both. The work, day after day, was no easy task for them, the discussions were necessarily monotonous and weary, sometimes a severe task to their patience and temper, but 'with loving devotion they kept on to the end'.

The translators had to decide which parts of the Bible to translate first. Perhaps they chose some stories about Jesus or a few parables. This meant that they had to teach reading and thus laid the foundation of literacy. As children proved more able to learn quickly, this demanded the building of schools and an educational process ensued which the pioneers had hardly envisaged at first.

Other practical considerations then raised their heads. The text had to be proofread—not a thrilling job! Often the pioneers needed to learn the art of printing to expedite their work, otherwise long months elapsed before Bible societies were able to help them. And when the first copies arrived, should they distribute them freely or sell them?

What has this to do with British pastors? Like the pioneers, we need to immerse ourselves in the life of our people, as far as this is possible. It should make us all the more thankful for our rich heritage of biblical resources, of biblical scholarship and above all of divine scripture. We are spoiled for choice. On our bookshelves stand a plethora of translations to please everyone, from the most fastidious to the most radical. When we read them we should remember our fellow ministers abroad who often possess only one battered Bible, sometimes with pages missing. How would we fare in such circumstances?

We should also encourage our congregations to learn more about and appreciate the history of the English Bible. Few of them realise that the books they hold in their hands come to them stained with the blood of such people as William Tyndale. At the same time we should support attempts to increase Bible literacy in our own areas by such means as Gideons, and Bible Society's Open the Book programme.

More importantly, we should remember congregations abroad who do not possess individual copies of the Bible and are thus impoverished. When we replace our existing Bibles with the latest version, we ought not to throw the old ones away. Organisations such as Book Aid will gladly accept them and send them to Africa where Christians will fall on them like flies round a jam pot.

We can also encourage members to cull their stocks of Bibles. Often we take pride in the number of Bibles we possess—yet we only need one. Why should we own lots of copies when many of our fellow believers do not have even one? We should trim our own libraries too.

Finally, we should not be content to send abroad that for which we no longer have a need. Too often the two-thirds world has had to do with our cast-offs. We should keep our congregations well informed about the world's need of Bibles and urge them to give generously, even sacrificially, to reduce if not abolish the 'Bible gap'. Where millions of people, even after 1900 years, still have not even heard about the Bible there is still much to do. Bible translators are still needed and we can encourage young people to consider this vocation.

Bible work should be high on our list of missionary priorities. I am sure that while many individuals support Bible Society and Wycliffe Bible Translators faithfully, relatively few churches do so wholeheartedly. There are also many opportunities to engage in the many ways in which we can help these societies without ever leaving Britain ourselves. We who have inherited so much should not only treasure our heritage. We must translate it into good deeds for the benefit of those who have so little.

Fred Stainthorpe is a retired Baptist minister.

Reviews

Editor: Michael Peat

Why the Gospel of Thomas matters: the spirituality of uncertainties

by Gethin Abraham-Williams

Christian Alternative Books, 2015

Reviewer: Pieter Lalleman

Fellow Baptist minister Gethin Abraham-Williams died at the end of last year. In this book, his last, he presents an erudite, eloquent and passionate plea for the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. This Gospel was never part of the Bible, but he thinks it should be used in our churches nonetheless.

A bit of background first: The Gospel of Thomas is hardly ever mentioned in the early church, and the text was quietly lost until a Coptic translation of the original Greek was discovered in 1946. It does not contain any stories about Jesus (nothing on his death and resurrection), but consists of 114 sayings.

Some of these have similarities with the biblical gospels, others are very different. Since 1946 some scholars have argued that this gospel contains the authentic words of Jesus, but most are convinced that the Gospel of Thomas was only written in the middle of the 2nd century in a conscious effort to change the picture of Jesus presented in the biblical gospels.

Of this book Abraham-Williams writes: ‘...the Gospel of Thomas is a useful addition to the narrative versions of the four evangelists, in that it captures, in both content and form, the way Jesus probably spoke and taught’ (p11). He puts the book at the same

level as the Gospel of John (eg pp102-103). He is glad that Thomas brings us 'incertainty' (a Shakespearean word, p8) by presenting a Jesus who differs from the Jesus of the other gospels.

He connects the book closely with the apostle Thomas, although scholars know that Thomas is not the person who wrote this text. This means that what Abraham-Williams writes about the biblical Thomas is strictly speaking irrelevant for the study of the Gospel of Thomas. And much as I agree with his condemnation of anti-Semitism and with his anti-capitalism, these views cannot be based on the Gospel of Thomas, which exactly removes Jesus from his Jewish context.

The book also contains the text of Thomas. It is striking that this is not a literal translation but a paraphrase by Abraham-Williams' friend John Henson, in which Thomas sounds much more orthodox than in a literal rendering or indeed in Coptic.

Abraham-Williams has consulted some older and newer books on Thomas, but he has not used two recent volumes. Professor Francis Watson's *Gospel writing: a canonical perspective* (2013) might have supported his argument, but Dr Simon Gathercole's books (2012 and 2014) argue (convincingly, to my mind) that Thomas is not a good guide when it comes to the person and work of Jesus.

This book contains many valuable thoughts but at the end of the day it does not bring us closer to the historical Jesus—because the Gospel of Thomas does not do so.

Working from a place of rest: Jesus and the key to sustaining ministry

by Tony Horsfall

Bible Reading Fellowship, 2010

Reviewer: Ronnie Hall

This is a book for people who are too busy to read books. Most Baptist ministers would be able to relate to that sentiment. Every so

often we need a reminder to stop, reflect and learn that when we say 'yes' to one thing we also need to say 'no' to something else. That is the premise of this book.

The author has taken as a structure the story of Jesus and the woman at the well from John 4. Horsfall realised that everything happened because Jesus was doing nothing: he was resting. From this Horsfall begins a stretched exegesis to form the basis of the book.

I genuinely could not see the point of what Horsfall was trying to achieve. For a book that is for people too busy to read, there is far too much filler—and it is not particularly stimulating or interesting. The book comes in at 130 pages but the message could have been given in much less than half that total. For example, there is a completely unnecessary chapter on the humanity of Jesus; there is another meandering chapter describing what it means to be a contemplative activist. This is great—except for all those who are not contemplative activists!

The book runs out of steam in the fourth of five sections with a completely bizarre series of unconnected ideas that covers a lot of ground: for example, the nature of worship and the work of the Holy Spirit, making little sense as a whole work.

Jesus was human as well as divine. Therefore he got tired, thirsty and hungry like the rest of us. He rested and went to quiet places to refresh himself and sustain his ministry. Christian ministers need to do the same. It seems fairly obvious to me but that is what this book says at great length. The book reads like a single idea that has been stretched to breaking point and then unrelated thoughts make up the rest.

Did I learn anything from this book? No. Was anything useful? Well, the little exercises for reflection may be slightly useful. Would I read this book again? No. Would I recommend it to anyone? No. Instead, for something similar

there is *Working without wilting* by Jago Wynne, published by LICC.

Overall: do Baptist ministers need a book to tell them to have a day off? I hope not.

The contemplative minister: learning to lead from the still centre

by Ian Cowley

Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2015

Reviewer: Philip Clements-Jewery

Many years ago I remember being struck by an insight of Henri Nouwen in one of his early books (*Creative ministry*, 1971). In it, Nouwen suggests that for Jesus, and therefore for us too, time spent in prayer is not simply for the sake of ministry, but is actually ministry in itself. Ministers who are not directly available to people because they are praying are 'creatively unavailable' through being available to God on behalf of others.

Ian Cowley makes a very similar point in this book. He urges us to resist the pull of activist, managerial styles of ministry and to return to what was perhaps an older pattern, in which the main emphasis is on knowing God, to make God known. Being comes before doing; our primary vocation as ministers is to keep our relationship with Christ alive, and to deepen it.

The book contains a short foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and sections deal with contemplative ministry, prayer, being rooted in Jesus, letting go and contemplative living. One section applies these principles to the life of congregations.

This is a very useful and challenging book about the spiritual disciplines we need in order to keep our ministries alive. Written from an Anglican perspective—Ian Cowley has served in parish ministry in both South Africa and the UK—there may well be one or two points where Baptists might raise a theological or ecclesiological eyebrow, but we

must not let such disagreements (over baptism, for example) detract from the very real value of this book and its call to allow ourselves to become people in whom others may see God.

I would urge every minister to 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest' the insights Ian Cowley seeks to share in this book. Very much recommended.

When the trees say nothing: writings on nature

by Thomas Merton (edited by Kathleen Deignan)

Ave Maria Press, 2015

Reviewer: Rosa Hunt

This short, beautifully illustrated book is an edited collection of Thomas Merton's writings on nature. For many of us, Thomas Merton needs no introduction, but if you have not come across him before, be prepared to have your ideas on prayer challenged.

Merton took his monastic vows at the end of 1941, at a time when the western world was experiencing great upheaval. Merton was convinced that his calling was not to engage with this chaos directly, but rather to model a different way of living. He lived out his vows in a forest monastery, where he trained himself to be alive to the presence of God in all things—the beauty around him in spring and summer, and the hardship and suffering of winter. The stability of this place, and its changing yet recurring patterns as the seasons and years revolved, grounded Merton, and allowed space for his radical conversion to Christ—a lifelong process. To deepen this process, he entered into silence, and poured himself out in writing instead.

This collection of his writings on nature show how Merton studied the natural world, only to find that every aspect of it sang of God's presence. He admired creatures for knowing how to be themselves, which he believed was

the true essence of holiness. 'In the end', he wrote after watching a hawk kill a bird, 'I think that the hawk is to be studied by saints and contemplatives; because he knows his business. I wish I knew my business as well as he does his'.

Merton was a true contemplative who thrived on solitude. 'As soon as I get away from people the presence of God invades me', he wrote. Clearly, this is a particular calling, and not one shared by many. But reading his work always restores in me a sense of perspective, a hunger for life, a desire to experience the presence of God in the way that Merton did, and a restlessness with my own environment. Thus Merton retains all his prophetic power to challenge and disturb, and I would recommend this book to all.

The God of the Gulag vol 1: Martyrs in an age of revolution; vol 2: Martyrs in an age of secularism

by Jonathan Luxmoore,
Leominster: Gracewing, 2016

Reviewer: Michael Bochenski

Jonathan Luxmoore's two-volume account of the 20th century persecution of faith communities in the communist bloc is well written, impeccably researched, and deeply moving. The first volume traces this persecution from its roots in the 1789 French Revolution to the terrors of the cold war 1960s. The second continues the story up to and including Solidarity, Gorbachev, and the melting of the Iron Curtain.

Richard Wurmbrand's speech in 1964 (to a US Senate committee) captures well what these pages reveal: 'I speak for a suffering country and a suffering church, and for the heroes and saints of the twentieth century. We have had such saints in prison to whom I did not dare to lift my eyes'. These volumes are magnificent companions to Beeson's *Discretion and valour* and Chadwick's *The*

Christian church in the Cold War. In *The God of the Gulag*, Luxmoore chronicles the recurring nightmares of torture cells, mass graves, death camps, blackmail campaigns, informers and Orwellian surveillance. Stalin's reign of terror, in particular, is harrowingly portrayed along with his dismissal of his supporters in the West as 'useful idiots'. The impact of this on religious leaders, and on their families, characters and lives, is harrowingly documented.

Christians of all denominations, as well as Buddhists and Muslims, were all targeted in the name of an ideology fuelled initially by Lenin's hatred of any concept at all of God: 'Every religious idea, every idea of God, even flirting with the idea of God is unutterable vile-ness'. While concentrating on countries such as the then USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Albania and Romania, Luxmoore's account stretches further afield to Mexico, Korea and China. Courageous leaders shine from these pages: Mindszenty in Hungary; Wyszynski and Wojtyla and Popieluszko in Poland; Ratushinskaya and Solzhenitsyn in the USSR; Wurmbrand. Negrut, Tokes, and Cornea in Romania. For example, the consternation when the 'Polish Pope', John Paul II, emerged on to the world stage is also brilliantly captured, along with the furious attempts to discredit, and indeed assassinate him. The then Pope's passionate campaign for Europe to 'breathe with two lungs again' echoes powerfully through these pages. In the words of one priest (Fr Novitski) the communist regimes had sought '...to poison the soul, break morale, strip away faith...and compel the crushed spirit to collaborate in a struggle against the Church'.

As well as chronicling what this meant in practice, these two volumes portray the reasons why, in the end, that struggle failed. Luxmoore also portrays here compassionately some of those who apostatised, broken by the pressure and the torture. He quotes here the German Pope Ratzinger who on a papal visit to Poland (I heard him there!) appealed for compassion

towards those who had collaborated or whose faith had collapsed; 'We must guard against the arrogant claim of setting ourselves up to judge earlier generations, who lived in different times and circumstances' (Warsaw, May 2006).

Luxmoore is a freelance writer based in Warsaw and Oxford. His outstanding chronicle stands now alongside the (Anabaptist) *Martyrs' mirror* or Foxe's famous *Book of martyrs*. Above, all he bears witness to a century of martyrs '...their names and testimonies preserved only in the unwritten annals of eternity'.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

by Dallas M. Roark

Peabody Ms: Hendrickson, 2016

Reviewer: Bob Allaway

I was hoping this might be a simple introduction that I could use with ordinary believers. In fact, it is a re-issue of a theological introduction from 1972, though Roark does begin with a simple, succinct and accurate biography, in the first chapter. This concludes with criticism of John A.T. Robinson and his ilk, for reading things into isolated phrases from the *Letters and papers from prison* which distort Bonhoeffer's intentions. By contrast, Roark proposes to survey the whole of Bonhoeffer's work and thought, as it developed.

Each chapter summarises a key writing of Bonhoeffer, finishing with critical questions which are often quite astute. Chapters 2, on *Sanctorum communio* (the communion of saints), and 3, on *Act and being*, are heavy going. Roark recognises this, advising that some readers might like to skip them and jump to chapter 4, but I persevered!

At this point, I make a couple of caveats about the endnotes. In chapter 1, there is mention of Barth quoting Bonhoeffer in his *Church dogmatics*. When I checked the associated endnote, for the citations, I found that,

though they were plainly in later volumes of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, the work cited was 'Die Christliche Dogmatik ... 1927'. This was Barth's first, abandoned, attempt at a dogmatics, utterly superseded by the later *Church dogmatics*, so why is it in this citation? What other mistakes are there?

A quotation from Bonhoeffer in chapter 3 incorporated a chunk of Latin. Having no Latin myself, I turned to the endnote, hoping it would give me the English translation, but found only the citation. Bonhoeffer was writing at a time when any theology student could be assumed to have studied Latin at school, but even Oxford does not have it as an entry requirement nowadays, so why, in 2016, did the publisher not add a translation?

In a final chapter, Roark considers *The significance of Bonhoeffer* for his day (1972), covering such things as his stress on the presence of Christ in the church as a mediating concept for Protestant/Catholic dialogue and the importance of spiritual formation in ministerial training. Over four decades later, these are still relevant.

This is not a book for the 'person-in-the-pew', but could be helpful for a minister or theology student who knows little of Bonhoeffer's work. But I wish the publisher had corrected and updated the endnotes!

Prayers of great traditions: a daily office

by Christopher Voke

London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013

Reviewer: Bob Little

Drawing on the practice of regular personal prayer—encouraged by every Christian tradition—this book provides daily structured prayers covering 28 days. That's sufficient for most Februaries, and, in other months, readers are left to their own devotional devices for only a few days. Over this period, the devotional focus begins with prayers from the Bible, moves to prayers from the words of Jesus and then to prayers of the early church

fathers. These prayers progress historically, via those of Martin Luther, Lancelot Andrewes and William Laud to John Wesley, Charles Spurgeon, on to Karl Barth, and end with 20th century prayers inspired by the Celtic tradition and prayers inspired by the 21st century doctrine of creation. While the original sentiments of all these prayers have been retained, the prayer language has been updated for a modern audience.

Each daily prayer section is structured in the following manner:

* Preparation: praise, penitence and psalms for the day.

* The Word of God.

* Prayers—for myself and family; the community; the church; the world, and the Lord's Prayer.

* Conclusion: looking to the future.

Towards the end of the book, there are devotion-orientated sections of psalms, as well as a lectionary setting out readings to cover the whole Bible—except, naturally, 1 Chronicles 1: 1 to 8: 40. This enables the New Testament to be read in 84 weeks and the Old Testament in two and a half years.

Although not intended for corporate worship, many of these prayers could be adapted for such use. However, the overriding value of this helpful book is in providing a framework to aid and inspire personal devotion. It does this through wisdom and spiritual insights distilled from a wide spectrum of experience based on the truths of the Old and New Testaments.

A faithful presence: working together for the common good

by Hilary Russell.

SCM Press, 2015

Reviewer: Stephen Heap

Hilary Russell's work is likely to be known to any who have engaged with issues of poverty and justice in Britain over the past

25 years or so. A Liverpool-based academic working on urban issues, and activist who once chaired Church Action on Poverty, one of her post-retirement roles is with the Together for the Common Good project (<http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/>). That project seeks to build on the legacy of Derek Warlock, David Sheppard and various Free Church colleagues (Baptist Keith Hobbs is mentioned) who worked together for the good of Liverpool, and encourages communities and individuals to follow their example in seeking the common good. It's an important encouragement in our fractious and divided society, some of whose problems, such as growing inequality, the pursuit of wealth, and ecological damage, Russell discusses.

Russell briefly explores a number of ideas which might inform thinking about, and action towards, the common good. Solidarity, subsidiarity, social capital and spiritual capital are among the ideas considered. There is a chapter on ecumenism which begins with a statement of the Lund principle: 'Churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately' (p24). Reading that was a trip down memory lane! Yet, as Russell says, Christians of different traditions are working together and making a huge contribution, with others, to the common good through such things as food banks and debt counselling, and through being present in communities, working not just for but with those 'on the periphery' (p41). Nationally, the churches are working together through, for example, the Joint Public Issues Team, again seeking the common good. How the church can be a conversation partner 'in the public square' (p81), including tackling systemic injustice, is the subject of chapter six.

Doing such work is gospel work. It 'draws its significance directly from the second great commandment' (p56). It is about love of the

neighbour, who is always worthy of respect, and who has God-given talents which can be liberated to work for change for the better. It is about the Kingdom and about the church serving the Kingdom, 'not protecting the interests of the church' (p82); a diminished, marginalised church getting its priorities right.

That last bit is bang up to date, but there is something about parts of the book which feels a little dated. That might be because it was published in 2015 and much has happened since then, not least in connection with the EU, which gets a mention early in the book. The ecumenism the book affirms is not the flavour of the month (sadly). Russell is also dealing with pressing issues in a readable way, accessible to the non-specialist. The book will be useful to someone thinking about how and why churches should be working for the good of the community, and an encouragement for those already engaged.

Theologygrams: theology explained in diagrams

by Rich Wyld

Darton Longman and Todd, 2014

Reviewer: Martin Gillard

An interesting concept of explaining faith with colourful visual diagrams; a bit silly (he says 'cheeky') at times, but a creative and thought provoking way of communicating beliefs. It may spur on our more home-made visual diagrams to help congregations engage with sometimes complicated ideas, which can't be a bad idea.

There are five sections, covering Old Testament, Gospels, The Rest of the New Testament, The Life of the Church and Theology. My theology may be a little different to the author's, so it didn't quite work for me. You may like to check him out on his (I'm told 'popular') blog THEOLOGYGRAMS. This is a good idea that

could do with further development.

Where is God at work?

by William Morris

Oxford & Grand Rapids: Monarch, 2015

Reviewer: Ronnie Hall

This book is written by a tax lawyer. Don't let that put you off because he is also a priest in the Church of England. He wrote this book as he sees no distinction in his day-to-day work (which some might say is unethical) and his work in the parish. His starting point is that God is as much in the workplace as he is anywhere else, and that there is no distinction between somewhere which is meant to be holy (church) and something that is not (corporate finance).

Part One is semi-autobiographical and covers all the characters you might expect to find in any workplace. So there is advice on how to handle the boss, the office gossip, your own staff and even how to think differently and positively about receiving a P45. There is a particularly helpful section on approaching retirement. This part of the book has 10 short chapters of only eight pages each, which is not enough to be complete but enough to get the gist of what is intended. I found this section particularly helpful as it applies to me, the section on open plan working doesn't apply to me but it was still interesting.

Part Two is a reference guide for ethical issues at work. Each of the 10 chapters covers 'what if I am asked to lie', 'what if I have done something wrong' and other topics similar to this which are highly relevant to the workplace. Like part one, these are short chapters and, again, I found them very helpful.

Part Three is an exposition of the parable of the talents found in Matthew 25. You may not agree with his conclusion but you will admire his honesty and integrity.

Most of you reading this are church ministers

so this book isn't necessarily useful directly to you if you are in full time church ministry. However, for those who are bivocational or working in chaplaincies it is very interesting and useful indeed. The real value, though, will be for churches to use this book and the study question found within it for small group work. We probably don't talk about the place of work enough, which is strange considering it is a major part of life (or was) for probably most of our congregations.

The gift of leadership according to the scriptures

by Steven Croft

Canterbury Press, 2016

Reviewer: Bob Little

This book, by Steven Croft, currently the Bishop of Oxford and formerly the Bishop of Sheffield, comprises 10 reflections on passages from the Old Testament on the theme of leadership in communities. As such, the book is intended not merely for the clergy but for all Christians who exercise some form of leadership within their community.

In writing this book, Croft keeps in mind his four-domain leadership model, covering: watching over myself; working with individuals and teams; guiding and guarding a community, and leadership in the wider world. It's helpful for the reader to bear these domains in mind when reading the book's 10 sermon-like reflections on leadership.

These reflections begin with Rehoboam in Shechem (1 Kings 12: 1 – 19). Having outlined three things about leadership that Rehoboam got right, Croft identifies the king's failure to lead through service to his people. Prompted by Psalm 23, he then considers the leader as a shepherd and,

exemplified by Ezekiel, as a bringer of hope.

He moves on to focus on Elijah, Moses, Ruth and Samuel, as well as providing insights into leadership from Proverbs and even Genesis 1. There's also a chapter on visionary leadership, inspired by the 'old translation' of Proverbs 29: 18 ('Where there is no vision, the people perish'), using Caleb and Joshua (from Numbers 13 and 14) as examples.

This slim volume punches above its size in terms of providing perceptive comments which help clarify key qualities of Christian leadership. Offering challenging and instructive insights based on secular as well as biblical and Bible-influenced sources, this book deserves careful, and repeated, study, both for private and group use.

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