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

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

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From the editor

Preaching the Word

This summer issue of *bmj* brings us a variety of content—first of all, a focus on preaching in a short series commissioned by Andy Goodliff, one of the BMF Committee members. Andy says:

Preaching is still an activity that most Baptist ministers are doing most weeks. The task of preparing and delivering a sermon of some kind is part of our calling. These three articles are offered to help us reflect on that task. One comes in the form of a lecture given by Brian Haymes, a very good preacher and former Principal of Northern Baptist College and Bristol Baptist College. It is published here for the first time. The other articles are from two Baptist ministers reflecting on how they go about the task of preparation and delivery. We hope that these articles are of help and interest to those still new to preaching and to those who have been preaching for a very long time.

We also bring the winner of the 2019 *bmj* Essay Prize—Caroline Friend, who has just completed her MiT period at Cranmer Hall (through NBC) and is settling at Alnwick this summer, is our winner. Caroline wrote an essay for her studies on lament and the judges deemed it the best of the entries this year. Our congratulations go to Caroline, as well as our best wishes for her future in ministry—and we encourage readers to think about entries for next year, when we run the competition again. We are trying to encourage those in the earlier stages of ministry but it is open to all. Details will be published in the October issue of *bmj*. Maybe you could enter—or maybe you know someone who could be encouraged.

Finally there is the usual offering of book reviews, personal news, and a short reflection on the number of Bibles we each possess.

As ever, this is your journal, for Baptist ministers 'at the coalface'. Do get in touch if you have something to say. My email is revsal96@aol.com.

Every blessing for a refreshing summer. *SN*

Integrity in preaching

by Brian Haymes

The preacher comes to the pulpit. The choir and other ministers are close at hand and the waiting congregation are not far distant. But the preacher stands alone, sensing perhaps once again that the pulpit can be a very exposed place. For a moment there is silence. Before the preacher lies a nigh impossible task, certainly impossible were it not for the living God. The challenge is not to come to the pulpit to discourse about God. That is easy, a game played by many. For sure the preacher must speak of God but something else is going on in preaching, in this moment of worship. The challenge is hinted at in the many metaphors describing the preacher; a herald, a witness, a prophet, a servant of the Word, for the task is not to moralise, or to discuss some social issue that is assumed to interest the people. Preaching has to do with Someone at once both awesome and compelling. Paul says of this ministry that it is as though God did beseech you through us (2 Cor 5:20). What a picture this is! God beseeching through us! Preaching has to do with speaking the word of God. But, that word, when it comes, comes through a very human being.

Being a preacher is not like having a hobby, a particular interest which we might indulge for our personal pleasure. The preacher is called by God and the church has recognised and tested that calling. But every week in worship, for a moment that pregnant silence prevails and there is expectancy in the air. Yet, for all the support of the congregation, longing to hear the word of God, the preacher at this moment stands alone. The more the preacher is serious about the calling the deeper seems to be the tension. It costs, this exposure in the pulpit, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. It is not the fear of the congregation that can set hands and knees trembling. It is the thought of God. That is why the first words come often in a rush, even with a stumble from the most experienced of lips. Some resort to telling jokes to ease the tension but they leave the impression that, in the last analysis, all this is not to be taken too seriously.[1] They deal with their fears by reducing the task, distorting the calling.

So, there are temptations which go with preaching. We did not need Elmer Gantry to remind us of them. The pulpit is potentially a place of power over other people's lives. Here is an opportunity to address others, at least initially to have them listen. Here we might make something of ourselves in the eyes of others. For a moment, we are the centre of attention. The history of the pulpit includes stories of crook and charlatans, those who have exploited all this possibility of God to their own ends.

Mercifully, it also includes honourable servants of the Word for which the congregation regularly thanks God.

All this is serious because, properly, issues of life and death are at stake, life before God. Students would sometimes complain about those occasions when their teachers came to hear them preach as part of an assessment. The teacher's presence, they said, weighed heavily on their mind. It was unreal, not fair. I used to tell them of an occasion when a reporter asked Billy Graham if he wasn't just a little bit anxious on those occasions when he was invited to preach before the Queen of England. Very quietly he replied, but I always preach before a King. If ever there is a place where integrity is needed it is the pulpit. If ever there is a place where integrity may be compromised and distorted by naked personal ambition or other expressions of sinful human pride and the desire for popularity, it is the pulpit. My theme is integrity in preaching.

It is an issue as old as preaching itself. Paul faced some misleaders in Corinth, possibly preachers, and against them he claimed 'we have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God' (2 Cor 4:2). Preaching happens before God, in the sight and hearing of God.

Integrity is not itself a simple concept, such that its attainment is only a matter of desire and practice. Indeed John Huxtable confessed that integrity is a state of soul even more difficult to describe than to achieve.[2] Anyone has integrity to the extent that everything they do is derived from the same fundamental core convictions and values. Integrity is about wholeness of life, the integration of thoughts, emotions and deeds; head, heart and hands. To lead a life of integrity is to be sincere, honest, before others, with yourself, and before God. It is this inner consistency which reflects the degree of integrity. It is there when someone acts according to their beliefs and values at all times. Their words and deeds and dreams are one. By contrast, hypocrisy is evidence of a lack of integrity. It happens when someone plays a part, their words and deeds are not integrated. Instinctively we know that such people are not to be trusted, even though they may have found a way into the pulpit.

In the light of which, integrity is an urgent matter for the preacher and the congregation. The congregation assumes, expects it. They are ready to suspend their common scepticism about humankind, as least as the sermon begins. They have high hopes which over-ride natural suspicions. Helmut Thielicke, reflecting on his experience in Nazi Germany and the power of propaganda and advertising, recognised that every congregation wants to ask whether the preacher drinks what is being commended in the pulpit. Is the preacher to be trusted?[3] Is the preacher part of what is being proclaimed, a living expression of God's activity? We have all had enough of the culture of spin. Where will a true word be spoken? Karl Barth said this was the fundamental congregational question, 'Is it true, this talk of a loving and good God, who is more than one of the friendly idols whose rise is so

easy to account for, and whose dominion is so brief? What the people want to find out and thoroughly understand is, is it true?'[4]

Perhaps the people ask too much. Anna Carter Florence suggests that in our present context, in the move from modernity to postmodernity, my authority may well be determined by other people's perception of my performance—what they think about me and not just what I say. In postmodernity, the old structures have been shaken so that we ask what still stands; commentaries, tradition, doctrine, experience, witness, we have become suspicious of them all. What does it mean for a preacher to preach with integrity where the word is assumed to be only your opinion and only as good as the hearers' rate it?[5] Asking for integrity is proper but every Christian knows that it requires deep dedication. It is to resist the temptations that go with preaching, among which is the desire to be liked and praised by the hearers.

It should not be thought that the issue of integrity touches only on the preacher. Integrity is required of listeners. It will show in their response, immediate and long-term. Do they encourage the preacher with their active attention, with those comments and questions which indicate that this really matters to them? There is something in the old assertion that the congregation gets the preacher it deserves. We are called to listen and respond with integrity.

So, the topic of integrity is huge in its implications. It has a number of crucial aspects, each one worth a lecture in itself. For example, there is the preacher's integrity before the Bible, honesty in exegesis. There is the whole issue of plagiarism, the use of other people's work and passing it off as your own. There are the issues of pastoral confidentiality and care with the preacher's personal history or autobiography. Or take the prophetic aspect of preaching, when a hard word needs to be spoken to the people of God without fear or favour. There is the temptation to misuse rhetorical skills, the tricks of the speaker's trade which many a preacher learns far too easily. Competence in speech without integrity is nothing worth. The gift of the gab is no substitute for solid honest work.

For the purposes of this lecture I shall not be focusing on any of the above. Instead, there are three other particular matters concerning integrity which I shall pursue. If you ask what has guided my choice then part of the answer is that these chosen issues bore in deeply upon me during my recent ministry in London. Again and again, I found myself wrestling with temptations in these areas. I have felt these concerns personally, the challenge to my integrity.

First, there is the preacher and the task of proclaiming the Christian faith. The preacher is not in the pulpit to announce his or her own views, as if the task is to match the Sunday newspaper columnists for entertainment or influence. The preacher has a responsibility to expound and proclaim the Christian faith, the God centred interpretation of life and history. It is why the church properly requires those years of preparation, of study of the

scriptures, and the story of the church's reflection through the generations on the scriptures. So we learn the grammar and the practices of the faith, learning to watch out for what the church has discovered in experience is a distortion, a dead end. We are call to be faithful to this deposit of the faith. We may have informed questions as to whether there ever was one clear form of the faith delivered to the saints. Historical studies show that there have always been arguments about what the faith is. We can discern such debates going on in the Bible itself. But there have always been boundaries and such matters have always been of proper concern. The pulpit has never been the place where anything goes. The charge is to proclaim the whole counsel of God.

In his recent and very helpful book *Preaching and Theology,*[6] James Kay indicates that every preacher has some kind of working theological frame of reference. Through this frame, which may be evangelical, reformed, Thomist, Pentecostal, or other options in the theological catalogue, the preacher reads and interprets scripture and shapes a working theology. Such a frame is inevitably a major influence on the practical understanding of preaching and of what is preached. Being in a critical relationship to your own theological frame is crucial if idolatry is to be avoided.[7] Let me come at it this way.

We are often told that our generation looks for certainty, strong clear teaching. In more than one sense, too much fudge makes you fat and flabby and then you cannot blow the strong certain sound of the trumpet calling people to action. What the preacher proclaims is a test of theological integrity. There are temptations lurking at the pulpit steps. There is a difference between being clear and definite in preaching and claiming to offer absolute certainties. If we do not allow for this difference between our words and the word of God then we risk turning our theological formulations into idols, a serious but subtle sin. Remember Paul knew that for all that we see, it is through a glass darkly.

Moreover, there is sometimes a gap between our own personal struggle for faith and the Faith we are called to proclaim. Certainty is not always given to us however much we may wish it were the case. So, at this point there comes the temptation to say more than we really know and believe. Often the volume rises, only to indicate we are not so sure of what we are saying as we might appear. And, of course, some of the most severe of theological pastoral questions do not admit of an answer. I recall the doubtless apocryphal story of the preacher pencilling in a marginal note to his script, 'argument weak, bang Bible'.

Rowan Williams has an interesting observation about heresies and theodicies, those attempts to answer what we call the problem of evil. He argues that heresies are wrong not because they are wrong answers but because they purport to be answers. They attempt to kill off once and for all, as it were, some crucial questions. The church's doctrinal formulations are important not the least because they provide what he calls

'the abiding stimulus to certain kinds of theoretical questions'.[8] Closing down such questions of theory beguiles us into thinking we have the answers. Faith statements then become bland. We end up saying more than we can ever know. H.H. Farmer used to say that there are forms of the faith too confident to be true by which he meant that we try to claim too much, we overlook the ineffable mystery of God, claiming light when we are but still groping. A message which confesses no questioning, no hesitations, does not reflect that awe before the mystery of God.[9] Integrity requires the acknowledgement of the gap between our words and God's words. The temptation to overcome it is strong, sometimes fuelled by the assumed longing of the congregation, or the nervousness of the preacher, or the assumed expectations of the denominational leadership calling for numerical growth.

Often enough, in spite of such pressures, we preachers are all too aware of our own frailty in faith. Every preacher is vulnerable here and has to face incidents and experiences which challenge anyone's faith. We stand before the open grave; we are by the bedside seeing the cancer work its way of death; responding to the phone call in the night we have rushed to the home that is crushed under the weight of the car accident, or the cot death, or some other unexpected horror. The preacher knows these experiences and feels them, and the experience of helplessness that goes with them. They have their effect on us as we realise that faith, to be faith, must carry its own load of doubt. However, facing that with integrity in the pulpit, resisting all desires to answer the problem, may well speak more that the words we utter.

Howard Williams, one of my predecessors at Bloomsbury tells of such an experience in his book on preaching.[10] He recalled going one Sunday evening to a little chapel in Cardiganshire where the service was in the Welsh language. 'The congregation was small, made up of people from the farms nearby. The preacher was thin and pale with dark, blue marks of coal dust in his face from the days when he had been a miner. His language was lovely like the tongue of a bard and his theme was resurrection. He told us that to believe in resurrection was a wonderful thing for the fulfilment of life not yet made complete…for a nation struggling hopefully towards the promised land…and then he paused and went on quietly to tell us that there were times when a dry doubt came over him and he could not say whether he believed it or not. At the close of the service, said Williams, I heard that the preacher, but a little time before, had lost in this changing life his only daughter. The blow had been swift and grievous. It was this struggle with doubt which impressed so much and made it impossible to forget'. The unnamed local preacher proclaimed the faith. He did not parade his own problems but acknowledged the struggle for faith. He preached with integrity.

The issues and temptations here are more than matters of personal existential doubt. We are called to proclaim the faith, to be faithful to the heritage entrusted to us. It is the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3) but as any careful reader of the New Testament

knows that faith never has had one set unchanging form. Think of the different christologies in Paul and John. They are not contradictory, just different. It is not just our ways of proclaiming the faith that changes. So does our understanding of the faith, of what it is to believe and trust in God and the pulpit needs to acknowledge that.

For example, we do not think of God as our grandparents did. On Monday 5 September 1887 the Theatre Royal in Exeter, Devon, caught fire during an evening performance. There was a serious loss of life. Following this disaster the ministers of both the Congregationalist and Baptist churches in town preached and published sermons relating to the event. The text for the Baptist sermon was, in the Revised Version, Amos 3:6, 'Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord has not done it?' Both sermons argued that the hand of God was to be seen at the heart of this event in judgement. Both made something of the assumed evil of the theatre, a not uncommon theme in Protestant churches of the mid-19th century. I do not think we would hear such sermons today because we do not think in those terms. I make no value judgement on this matter. I only observe it happens as it happened in the New Testament. It has always happened as people have thought about the faith in the light of their experience and growing knowledge of the world.

So the preacher inevitably is a theologian. We preach the good news of God, God at once our glory and our problem. The ways in which we think of God undergo change, in the light of our experience and in the light of our changing knowledge of the world, in the light of our reading of Scripture. We do not think of creation as once we did, and do not live as though the old ways of understanding and obedience were wholly true. We know there are problems about our speaking of God acting in the world which are not solved by simply raising our voices in increased dogmatism.

No wonder we are tempted to preach about the church, or the values of religion, or some current social evil. These are human centred manageable themes and we sometimes justify them by saying that they are 'relevant'. Yet we are called to preach the good news of God. For this we focus on the Bible and, if we are wise, we do not forget the great tradition of the faith in which we stand. I was a little surprised to discover during my years in London where the challenge to speak today of God was so intense that I was grateful for the doctrinal work of the church in the early centuries. Issues of who God is in Trinity, of who Jesus Christ is, of the work of the Spirit and in whom that work is done, had, of course, been looked at before, and in dynamic situations where articulating the faith in a religiously plural society was crucial. So, I was not the first to face these dilemmas and even if I could not go so far as one theologian and confess that Chalcedon sets the rules for theology,[11] knowing these things helps keep the preacher within the boundaries of theological integrity. Not that developments are not impossible and necessary. I am sure, in the light of 9/11 and the London bombs of 2005 that, as Bonhoeffer said, only a suffering God can help. Personally I find myself drawn towards

the so-called open theism as I try to understand the scriptures and the ways of God. It is said that this is 'new and modern' theology in that tone of voice which signals disapproval. But re-reading Scripture suggest it is not as novel as some imagine. The suffering God is in the Bible story.

I did not venture down these theological pathways for my own sake, to satisfy my own intellectual theological interests. I found in my pastoral contacts that questions about the faith kept being raised. These searchings and doubts of the congregation had their own significance for preaching. For sure, why bother answering questions no one is asking? But there are questions out there and in here about God and God's ways that need addressing. The preacher must meet these as best he or she can with theological integrity.

I have one other illustration of this I want to raise with you. I do so with some reluctance for only on a very few occasions have I ever spoken openly in this way but when I have done so I have been surprised by the result. There was a time, during my years as minister in Exeter when my questions and doubts became so overwhelming that I do not think I seriously believed in God at all. God was a problem with a capital P and I came near to being what Anna Carter Florence graphically calls dead preacher walking.[12] That is a worrying state for a minister to be in. I was clever enough to go on speaking about God for a number of weeks but I was faking it. Had it gone on longer then I think integrity would have required my resignation from the pulpit. I discover, on coming clean about this awful experience, that it is not unique, that others too have known this practical atheism and for much longer. What brought me back to faith were two related powers, both of which had the deep characteristic of testimony. One was the love of the family, an undeniable expression of something fundamental and deep, the theological significance of which I could only rejoice in. The other was the faith of the congregation. Their minister, unknown to them, might have his difficulties in faith and he knew some of them did also, but they lived their convictions, came to worship, and looked up to the pulpit in hope each Sunday.

So I found wisdom in another of H.H. Farmer's sayings, namely that although it is by the foolishness of what we preach that people are saved, we are under obligation to see that our preaching is no more foolish than it need be.[13] Preaching is a matter of theological and intellectual integrity, a task at which we are called to work, hopefully as those who have no reason to be ashamed. As the churches of Europe decline a number of different responses have been made, most of them having some element of worth. So we have modern worship and songs culturally related to the young generation. We have religious marketing, in the spirit of the age. We have talk of God reduced to therapy. We have invitations to spirituality and personalised forms of prayer. But the real challenge, the matter of the most urgent integrity concerns God, our understanding and proclamation of the good news of God in Trinity.

The second matter involving challenges to integrity concerns the preacher and the newspaper, where newspaper stands for all the media engaging our attention. Long before Karl Barth, the first minister of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, one Charles Brock, commented 'The Bible and *The Times* newspaper are the best materials for the preacher'.[14] In the mid-19th century this was an unusual preaching policy but it was one that has become part of that particular congregation's DNA. I quickly discovered when I went to minister there that should the minister avoid current issues, or speak as if there were no world beyond the church, the congregation would feel cheated. Not that they came for some religiously inclined political comment, quite the contrary, but they looked for a word of God for their day, engaging with what, by reason of the power of the media, was already thrust into their minds. In recent weeks it would have been unthinkable for the preacher not to be mindful of the credit crunch and the unsettling economic earthquakes [readers should note that this lecture was given in 2008].

The temptations for the preacher are obvious. No preacher is without political convictions and prejudices and to imagine that any of us can preach a politically free gospel is at best naïve. So, there are temptations to lay about in criticism and condemnation of the politicians and others, imagining oneself a kind of latter-day eighth century prophet speaking the judgement of God. The other extreme option is the temptation to withdraw from all such matters, offering an individual and privatised salvation which ignores the world with cosy indifference. How is integrity to be maintained before such challenges?

It was during my ministry in London that my country, with others including America, went to war against Iraq. Many in the congregation had gone onto the streets of London in protest against the war. Others were arguing that it was a just war, according to the classic criteria, but few if any Christian leaders in the UK supported that view and many were critical of the Government's action. There was no way this issue could be ignored in the pulpit. I had my own convictions, which were against the war. I believed my country's actions in this matter were wrong. I believed that something should be done to remove the undoubted threat that was Saddam Hussein but war was not the way to do it. I recall many conversations with individuals and groups in the church in the days before war was declared. But what of the pulpit?

When I look back at the sermon scripts of those weeks, I notice that I remained faithful to the lectionary and I am sure that that biblical anchorage was crucial in such a volatile time. It meant that I was at least anchored in the story of God. There were references to the war in the sermons, usually of a critical kind but as illustrations of some point we were faced with in the scriptures. Only once did a visiting American complain, declaring himself in favour of the war after a sermon which hardly mentioned the war at all. He had obviously caught a mood rather than an argument. I do not know if I served the congregation well in those days, as we tried to listen together for what God was saying. But then, all too often the preacher is not sure how helpful the ministry has

been. Much depends on the response of the congregation and their engagement with the preaching, *their* integrity.

I felt the same tension when the news was heavy with other issues, for example, developments in genetics. It was tempting to offer generalised comments, platitudes, and one thing that saved me from indulging in that too often was the presence in the congregation of research professors engaged in this front-line work. I often talked with them, and needed to because of my ignorance. The same applied with the movements the church supported towards 'Making Poverty History' as new international economic relations were sought in liberation of the poor. There were senior influential international bankers in the membership and their knowledge and convictions were crucial for my thinking. I found, as I sought personal and public conversations with these people on matters of their everyday life, an eagerness on their part to engage, grateful for the sense that other church members and ministers were willing to share their ethical dilemmas. So often when it comes to matters such as these the congregation contains members with a knowledge far beyond that of the preacher.

I have always been interested in the approach taken by John Stott to these issues when he was Rector of All Soul's, Langham Place, London. He used to gather a group together, often experts in the field and he would talk with them about the issue citing the biblical material that he judged to be relevant to the discussion. They contributed from their specialist knowledge and recommended books for the group to read and discuss together. He took responsibility for the preaching but in many ways there was shared preparation. This corporate approach seems to me to support the preacher's integrity before the great moral challenges of our time. I do not, myself, think there is a Christian answer to the politics of unemployment, or nuclear power, or local or national housing policy. The Christian, as Christian, has no more political insight into these things than others. But we do have the scriptures and the tradition of reflection on ethics and social policy, with our calling to share in the purposes of God for all creation. With these resources we can bring light to bear on the decisions others with us have to take. The preacher has a contribution, helping us all to think Christianly. This remains a difficult area for the pulpit and once again the preacher's self awareness is crucial if integrity is to be sustained.

There is no substitute for hard work and thinking. I am impressed by Adam Hamilton's book, *Confronting the Controversies; A Christian Looks at Tough Issues*.[15] Some of the issues he addresses are not so pressing in the UK as they are in America but it was the method that I found interesting. Hamilton deliberately attempted in the sermon to outline, as clearly and truthfully as he could both sides of the dilemma. He wanted all his hearers to be able to have the confidence that he understood their arguments and feelings. But the last part of the sermon was proclamation. He said what he thought was a Christian response. He brought scripture, tradition, lived experience and reason to bear on the issue. There would be little doubt where the preacher stood but his tone invited

engagement and common searching in a context of shared discipleship. His biblical and theological work were obvious in the quality of ethical reflection. But the preacher proclaimed the good news of God. Integrity is necessary for such courageous preaching. And integrity is required of a congregation open to the challenge of God, with courageous faith which goes beyond hearing only what it wants to hear.[16]

Thorwald Lorenzen has put the issue well in a recent book, 'Like the Hebrew prophet, the Christian preacher is also called to be a public witness to the truth. One of his or her responsibilities is to claim language for the truth. He or she has twenty or thirty minutes of uninterrupted time to deal with an issue. Given that most issues are complex and that generalities are boring...the preacher must accept the risk and the danger of being specific and proclaiming the will of God in a certain situation. Otherwise they risk being witnesses of emptiness and prefer spin to truth'.[17] It could be argued that among those preachers who have made the greatest lasting impact in the 20th century are those who have taken the risk of saying the unacceptable truth, preachers like Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero and Desmond Tutu.

Just before the collapse of state communism I was in Warsaw, Poland, for a conference. Having some spare time I wandered in and out of many churches of the Roman Catholic tradition. I came upon one heavy with baroque features, glowing with gold leaf. It was the pulpit that caught my attention. It grew out of the wall in the shape of the bow of a boat. The mast rose up in the shape of a cross with sails billowing behind. The boat gave all the sense of being in motion against heavy seas. And I pictured the preacher, standing in the prow, braving whatever the elements threw at him, speaking bold words of comfort, guidance, rebuke or whatever God gave. In communist Poland and all other places the pulpit is a place for courage and faithfulness, for theological integrity. Any preacher who neglects to say what needs to be said because it isn't easy to say it forgets that preaching isn't meant to be easy.[18]

Finally, my third concern with the integrity of the pulpit focuses in a direct way on the integrity of the preacher. There is no escaping the fact that the preacher is a public figure. I am aware that some find this hard to bear. *Leadership* magazine, upon a particular anniversary edition, invited readers to recall the most impressive articles and the most telling of cartoons that had been printed. The cartoon chosen by the majority as being the most memorably incisive had no caption. It was of the manse family living in a gold-fish bowl. Sometimes congregations do not help. I recently preached for a church looking for a new pastor. They had completed their self-descriptive profile with its list of qualities desired in the new pastor; you know the kind of thing, a fine preacher, a caring thoughtful visitor, good with young people and loving towards the elderly, with the ability to fill all the empty pews with out making any changes, of course. I asked them if they wanted their minister to be a saint. They were quite clear that that was not one of their desires. One of them told me that they wanted really wanted was someone good with people.

But the preacher is called of God, to be the servant of God which is more than being the chaplain to a religious club. There is integrity required here. O Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Asks the psalmist, and offers a moral test which includes blameless living and truth speaking, no slander, no evil or un-neighbourliness, but the faithful keeping of their word (Psalm 15). The preacher is under no greater obligation to holiness of life than any other church member, but the preacher is under that obligation quite definitely. Sometimes, as the old saying has it, what we are shouts so loud people cannot hear what we are saying. So we might ask ourselves, is it love for God and God's people that drives the preacher on, or ambition, or envy, or the desire to make something of oneself? *Ambitio praedicatoris est ecclesiae pestis*, said Martin Luther (the ambitious preacher is a pestilence to the church). All this takes us back to the issue of calling, the fact that we have this ministry by the mercy of God. One implication of this for St Paul was that the preacher/pastor was one to be imitated, setting an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity of life (1 Tim 4:12). It is surprising, maybe disconcerting just how often such a point is made.[19] And not only by Paul. James suggests that 'not many of you should become teachers…for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness' (3:1).

There is a beautiful picture of A.S. Peake, the Methodist scholar of an earlier generation, the first Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis in the University of Manchester. Peake was a famous man in his day, praised by some and hated by others for his scholarship. But as a layman he was a faithful church member. The story has it that one of his students was going through a hard time spiritually. He wrote to Peake telling him about his problems but ended by saying that, with gratitude, he marked the Professor's presence at the prayer meeting and the obvious sense of grateful devotion he brought to the fellowship. Then the letter went on, 'if you do not mind my saying so sir, I hung on to you while you hung on to Jesus'.[20] That can happen. We are back with Thielicke's observations about the character and quality of the preacher's life.

In days of decline there can come a busy desperation in the preacher. We determine, that by our efforts and our new projects we will seek to reverse the trend. This self-centredness can become the death of the Christian life and the realisation that we have this ministry by the mercy of God, by grace and not of our deserving. Thomas Merton writes, 'Hurry ruins saints as well as artists. They want quick success and they are in such haste to get it that they cannot take time to be true to themselves. And when the madness is upon them they argue that their very haste is a species of integrity'.[21] It is essential for the preacher to ask who it is that is driving my life, who or what is shaping my character, my ambitions, my fears and goals? Contemporary models of ministry which reflect management styles may possibly have something to commend them but they fall short of the calling of a preacher.

Martin B. Copenhaver, in an article in *The Living Pulpit* (Oct 2007) argues that when we are true to our calling '...We will have reverence for what we do as preachers, for the role

we play in the unfolding of grace. Not only are we witnesses to the mystery, but in some sense we also become part of the mystery of the God who takes on flesh. A wick does not take credit for a flame, any more than a cello can accept praise for a sonata. Nevertheless, it is awesome, indeed, to have even the slightest glancing realisation that God has taken whatever we have offered—our fractures words, our fragile witness—and has spoken through them in ways that are clearly beyond us'.[22] This is the miracle of preaching but it is not for us to presume upon grace in poverty of living and service.

More than a few years ago the Baptist church at Atherton in Lancashire had as its pastor the Reverend Malines Johnson. Malines Johnson's successor in the pastorate was W. Donald Hudson who eventually was to go to Exeter University where he taught philosophy. Hudson belonged in the linguistic analysis school of philosophy, taking arguments apart, showing their weaknesses and strengths and he was brilliant at this task. He was always grateful that he was a Baptist minister and insisted on being known as such in the university, although he could be merciless with slovenly easy pietistic religious utterances. One of his aphorisms was the assertion: 'nonsense does not cease to be nonsense just because it is spoken of God'. I tell you this because Hudson was tough minded, not easily impressed religiously. He was my doctoral supervisor and a church member. One thing he told me I will never forget as clearly he could not forget it—and it has become something of a goal for my life and ministry. I wish for it as much as anything else. It has to do with integrity.

Hudson was struck by the fact that as he settled into the pastorate at Atherton the people, in and out of the church, spoke so well of Malines Johnson. They were obviously very grateful for his ministry and influence. After some months Hudson spoke with one of the elderly deacons about this and asked what made his predecessor such a much loved minister. Ah, Mr Johnson, said the deacon, now he was good man. Whenever you met him he made you think of God.

It seems to me that Malines Johnson, who had no public or denominational claims to fame, offered a graceful ministry and the people were glad. I do not know what kind of a preacher he was but I guess he must have preached with integrity and it showed. He must have lived the life in Christ as an example to the flock of God that was his charge, always one of the marks of an authentic integrated preacher.

We may not have had the fullness of the apostle's experience of ministry but we can recognise the theological integrity in Paul's summary of the reality of our calling, and please God we shall recognise the grace at the heart of it all. Paul says, 'Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In this case the god of this world has blinded the minds of

the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor 4:1-6).

This is the text of the The Lester Randall Fellowship Lecture, 25 October 2008, delivered by Brian Haymes at Yorkminster Park Church, Toronto. Contact Brian on brian.haymes@ntlworld.com.

Notes to text

1. F. Buechner, *Beyond Words.* Harper: San Fancisco, 2004, p196.

2. *The Integrity of Preaching.* London: Epworth Press, 1966, p13.

3. *The Trouble with the Church.* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965, p3.

4. Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man.* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935, p108.

5. Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony.* Westminster: John Knox Press, 2007, p xiii—xxx.

6. St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2007.

7. Another useful reflection on this point is given by Ronald J. Allen, *Thinking Theologically.* Fortress Press, 2008.

8. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p80.

9. H. H. Farmer, *The Healing Cross.* London: Nesbit and Co, 1938, p viii.

10. *My Word.* London: SCM Press, 1973, p23.

11. Edward Schillebeeckx in a public lecture in Manchester.

12. *Op cit*, p113.

13. *The Servant of the Word.* London: Nisbet and Co, 1960, p31.

14. Faith Bowers, *A Bold Experiment: The Story of Bloomsbury Chapel and Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church 1848-1999.* London: Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church 1999, p76.

15. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.

16. Another book which draws on Hamilton's work is by Ronald D. Sisk, *Preaching Ethically; Being true to the Gospel, your congregation, and yourself.* The Alban Institute, 2008.

17. *Towards a Culture of Freedom; Reflections on the Ten Commandments Today.* Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008, p163.

18. Sisk, p54.

19. 1 Cor 11.1; Eph 5.1; Phil 3.17; Gal 6.14-15; 1 Thess 1.6.

20. J. T. Wilkinson, *Arthur Samuel Peake.* London: Epworth Press, 1971, p191.

21. Quoted by Christopher Jamison in *Finding Sanctuary.* London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2006, p84.

22. 'Serving the Word: Preaching as Sacrament' in *The Living Pulpit*, **16**(1), Oct 2007, p7.

Preaching as individual monologue or corporate interaction

by Margaret Gibbs

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.

'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?'

He answered, '"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbour as yourself."'

'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.'

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'

In reply Jesus said...[1]

Reading the gospels as a regular preacher, it amazes me how often Jesus allowed others to determine the subject of his teaching. Some of his best-known lessons were given in response to questions from his disciples, the crowd or even his opponents. Perhaps Jesus's readiness to take up their concerns reflected a rabbinical culture where debate was welcomed and was a common teaching method. Perhaps, having memorised scripture as a child, its story was so much part of him that the most appropriate scriptures for any occasion were always on the tip of his tongue. Even so, considering the uniqueness and importance of Jesus's mission, it seems remarkable that he was willing to spend his limited time apparently responding to the concerns of others rather than pursuing his own curriculum.

In contrast, contemporary preaching in the UK often takes the form of a prepared monologue, and consequently mutterings can be heard that the church is the only place left where anyone would be expected to listen to a 20 minute lecture. I beg to differ. Stand-up comedy has never been so popular, (or so marketable and hence watered-down), yet usually involves listening to a single voice for an hour or more. With the emergence of social media, some stand-up comedy has become more interactive, although I suspect that the more interactive it appears, the very much more carefully it has been set up so that real risk is ironed right out!

Either way, successful stand-up, in common with preaching, is generally observational, easy to relate to, and gets to the apparent heart of a matter in an engaging way. Ideally the time invested in listening to stand-up is sweetened by being funny. Its message is not expected to set anyone 'free' but, at its keenest, stand-up comedy does spring from something truthful.

In preaching, unlike in comedy where tickets have to be sold, there is no place for showmanship. Having said that, preaching is a kind of public performance. Not all preachers (or all performers) are introverts, but it seems to me that many are: good up front we hope, but always tempted to keep tight hold of the reins, and preachers know that monologues are easier to control.[2] Many have received a response in a children's talk that completely wrong-footed them, and so have learned to avoid opening up the floor too far.

I grew up in the individualistic West as an introvert who likes to plan carefully and know exactly where I am going. I went on to spend some years living in various less individualistic cultures with very different preaching styles. Sermons in Nepal for example, rather than leading the listeners on a journey from A to C via B, instead take a circular approach like peeling the layers off an onion until the heart of the matter is reached. Living there for some years provided a helpful apprenticeship in creative alternatives to purely linear planning and presentation. Consequently I have found myself developing more interactive preaching which allows others to have a say and, to some extent even determine the direction or emphasis of an unfolding message. This has worked well in my current fellowship where there is a vast range of cultural backgrounds and views and so little chance that many will resonate exactly with my experiences as their main preacher. Also significant is that some individuals and groups need special encouragement and permission before they will ever speak out so, at best, interactive preaching enables us to move towards the truth together.

Does this mean simply opening up the floor each week for questions or a subject to preach on? In truth, no. Imagine a teacher who, knowing a class well, offers them three books to choose from for their end of day story. The children discuss and vote and believe they have had a genuinely free choice, but in fact the teacher has selected all three books beforehand and is happy with any outcome.

I prepare for preaching as carefully as I can, identifying likely scriptures and themes quite a bit in advance and letting them develop in my mind as I pray. I try to keep the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other[3] and also an ear on concerns current in the congregation, in the community, and in the wider world. I develop some headlined notes which allow a flexible order of delivery, and include a range of options for supplementary scripture, illustrations, and applications.

I try to introduce a subject by using open questions and some discussion with the congregation, either at the beginning of the sermon time or earlier in the service, to give everyone more thinking time. Sometimes people chat with their neighbours first. Significant time is needed to allow people to contribute properly, especially in a larger group, but it often repays the investment in terms of the depth of ideas shared, and in building an atmosphere in which we are prepared to listen to and respect each other. With several roving microphones it is possible to handle a good number of

contributions efficiently, even in a large group, and if individual speakers aren't clear their comments can be repeated or summarised from the front. It's important not to 'correct' or alter contributions, and to avoid posing questions with a single 'right answer'. Affording respect and dignity to contributors is more important than correcting immediately what we may hear as 'errors' and anything especially untoward can be dealt with later in the message without seeming to reprove the contributor.

A little courage and vulnerability are required from a preacher to open the floor early on in preaching and not just at the end, as well as a corresponding willingness to flex their message in response to input. Occasionally a message turns out quite differently from the original expectations, but not usually, and if in preparation I felt there was something really vital to be said, it would definitely make the final cut. However there can be wonderful Holy Spirit-led moments when God's word is heard prophetically through the gathered body in a more immediate and jointly owned way than a monologue could ever achieve.

Jesus's teaching took place mostly out in public spaces, not in a closed shop. He was not generally preaching to the converted. At times he faced doubt, misunderstanding and outright hostility. He didn't pull his punches, he spoke truth to power, but also graciously allowed people to ask anything they wanted to and even test him with their questions, and he knew how to answer a good question with an even better one. Unlike Jesus, no doubt I get into scrapes at times through encouraging interaction. It helps to be able to laugh at oneself, although the temptation to try to be funny or clever in front of others always has to be resisted.

In time the hope is to learn the art of guiding a conversation so that a mutually appropriate theme is opened up, others' contributions are included, truth is revealed, and the whole woven into a more corporate experience of preaching. It has been said that the opposite of love is control.[4] Introducing interaction in preaching may enable both preachers and congregations to be sent out not only entertained or even enlightened but mutually transformed.

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Notes to text

1. Luke 10:25-30a.

2. *The Introvert Advantage* by Marti Olsen Laney, Workman Publishing New York, 2002, provides some helpful insights, tips and general self-awareness for introverts.

3. *Time Magazine*, article by Karl Barth, Friday, May 31, 1963.

4. http://storylineblog.com/2015/09/07/is-the-opposite-of-love-control/.

Reflections on preaching at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church

by Simon Woodman

Bloomsbury has four stained glass windows, two to the left of where the Victorian pulpit used to be, and two to the right. They are all of preachers: John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, Paul; and there in the middle, hopefully not intimidated into silence, stood the 'Bloomsbury preacher'. Well, the elevated pulpit is long gone, as are the days when over 1000 people crammed the building to listen to a sermon. But preaching is still central to the ministry of the church, and it is my privilege to stand on the platform behind the lectern and offer sermons to a discerning and engaged congregation. I try hard not to be too intimidated either by the stained glass windows over my shoulders, or by the ghosts of those who have stood there before me (including Martin Luther King Jr). However it was with some trepidation that I agreed to offer this subjective reflection of my own preaching process, because I am slightly afraid that if I 'show my working' people will see through the preacher to the flawed person behind. But maybe that is as it should be.

Writing

Choosing 'what to preach on' is, for me, the most difficult part of the process. For my first six years at Bloomsbury we followed the lectionary, but returning to the same passages just three years after I last engaged with them was getting repetitive, so more recently we've been following series (including 'The Anti-Lectionary: passages you wouldn't normally expect to hear preached'!) With a text before me (or texts—we have Old and New Testament readings) my first task is to read them carefully and write my initial thoughts down. I prefer to work with a blank sheet of paper and a propelling pencil—there is something about the physicality of this that I struggle to match with a keyboard. I'm a quick typist, and find that writing on paper slows the process down and forces me to think more clearly.

The next step is to start reading around—I'm fortunate to have a good stock of commentaries, to which I add regularly. I also use various online resources, and particularly appreciate the insights of *The Girardian Lectionary* http://girardianlectionary.net/. What I'm searching for at this point is a 'hook', something unusual, something that interests me. I find it helpful to ask, 'Where does this text speak

to power?' Once I've got a page or two of notes, I usually put them aside for at least 24 hours to allow my brain to think about it in the background, and then come back to writing another day.

As an extrovert, I find that I don't know what I want to say until I say it to someone, and the same applies to my preaching: I don't know what the message is until I've written it. So I just start writing: sometimes typing, sometimes with a pencil and paper, and I'm always interested to see where I end up. I don't enjoy the process of writing, but I like having written. I feel like the Miller's daughter in Rumpelstiltskin, expected to spin straw into gold. Sometimes, I find myself turning to the insights of others to help me, and I echo their words to the congregation. I attribute, but not always. As an academically trained person I have a morbid fear of committing plagiarism, but by the same token I don't want to punctuate the rhetorical flow with references. So yes, I footnote my sermons.

One difficulty I face is that I can struggle to find an ending, at least one that has 'practical application'. I think of my sermon as conjuring a theological world and inviting people to step into it with me; but then I find myself thinking that it's not for me to tell others how to take the insights we've gained and relate these back to their own lived experience. That, surely, is for each person to work out for themselves? However, as John Colwell has put it, the key questions of preaching (and indeed theology) are, 'What kind of God?' and 'So what?'. I think I'm OK at shedding new light on our shared understanding of God, but spelling out the 'So what?' can be the bit I struggle with the most.

I have discovered that there is, for me, a profound spiritual discipline in preparing to preach, and my conversations with my spiritual director are often around insights gained through this process. Dare I say it is my main place of spiritual growth? Probably. I preach to myself first and foremost. I write from my own struggles, doubts, fears, and longings; and I wrestle with them in the hope of receiving a blessing. Then, in a slightly depersonalised way, I expose this process to the gaze of the congregation in the (desperate) hope that they have similar issues, and can share with me in the blessing. I find this very 'exposing': I'm afraid people will realise that when they think I'm speaking to them, I'm actually talking about myself. Or maybe they do realise, and I should worry about this less.

Delivery

As someone who preaches from a full script, I find that the main task before me in the pulpit is to deliver my words with as much passion and integrity as I can muster. I generally prefer to trust the inspiration of the Spirit in the study than the pulpit, but I allow myself the freedom to go 'off script' if it seems appropriate. I try to keep good eye contact with the congregation, and most people have no idea that I have a full script before me. I use a technique which I call the 'Churchill method', based on the way he would lay out his speeches on a page for delivery. Raggedy indents of every line, with a break at each 'breath

point': my sermons look like freeform poetry. This means my eye can easily return to its place without needing a finger to keep track, and I can memorise the next line in the breath pause, so when I speak I am mostly looking up and around. From the congregation's point of view, it appears that I am glancing at notes, whereas in fact I am reading verbatim.

During my years as a college tutor, I did a lot of itinerant preaching, and reused sermons a great deal. I got them off pat, and they would be near-identical every time. I have wondered if this is a problem, and concluded that it probably isn't. If you have a message into which you have poured your heart and soul, why should it be preached only once? However, I prefer preaching to the same people week after week, tracing both my own theological development and its impact on the congregation. My sermons still have an afterlife beyond their day of delivery, through the podcasts and scripts that go online.

Response

It's hard for a preacher to judge the response to a sermon, beyond the 'lovely sermon' comments from the faithful fan-club. In a former place I used to judge the effectiveness of a sermon by the letters of complaint on my desk on Monday morning, and I still think that a negative reaction can sometimes be a backhanded compliment. Of course, immediately after preaching I'm at both my neediest and most fragile, and I will lap up both praise and criticism in unequal measure (typically, one negative comment will outweigh ten nice ones!) However, for me the true response is surely found in the lives of those who faithfully return to worship week by week, allowing me the immense privilege of ministering the Word.

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Baptist Ministers' Fellowship AGM

The AGM will be held at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, on 21 August. All BMF members are welcome.

Contact David Warrington, Secretary, for more information:

acbc.pastor@gmail.com

Psalms and lament

by Caroline Friend

John Calvin is quoted as describing the Psalms as 'a mirror to the soul',[1] thereby giving Christians an opportunity to look deeply into the reality of life and identity as they stand before God. Lament psalms are the most prevalent, contributing to a third of the psalter and they 'express the psalmist's response to God when in a situation of need or affliction'.[2] Certain psalms are individual laments (Pss 3, 22, 54, 57, 139); Others are corporate laments (Pss 12, 44, 74, 80); Lament psalms are contextualised by a 'basic human posture of our finitude, of our sinful nature, of our need of redemption, of our trust and communion with God, all in the light of God's purpose for humanity to be created and destined in the *imago dei*'.[3] In this essay, I will describe how lament psalms are a constructive resource for Christian spirituality today in several ways: as a wake-up call; as an expression of disorientation; as a reconfiguration of power in a dialogic mode; and as an expression of trustful humility not proud defiance of God. I will then include discussion of two instances of modern praxis of lament psalms.

A wake-up call

The laments are 'a wake-up call',[4] recognising that at times it is human experience that all is lost, and we are in the deepest pit. They are a call to comfortable Christians, particularly those from industrialised capitalist countries, as they become more aware of the persecuted church, living in an increasingly post-Christendom culture with reduced religious freedom, and the proliferation of mental ill-health.[5] Lament recognises that we are a people in relationship with a living God, created in his image, to love and serve. However, we have limits to our humanity, and are an imperfect people who need to be rescued. This reality check reflects 'upon the human condition and the character of God',[6] and is particularly important regarding the poor and the marginalised, who can cry out, or we can on their behalf. In not remaining silent, all God's people are empowered to cry out to Him, galvanising both the speaker to change and the almighty, who judges and rescues, to hear and respond. We see evidence of this in Psalm 12 where David cries out: 'Help, Lord, for no one is faithful anymore; those who are loyal have vanished from the human race. Everyone lies to their neighbour; they flatter with their lips but harbour deception in their hearts' (Ps 12:1-2) and God's response that he will act because 'the poor are plundered' (Ps 12:5).

Expression of disorientation

Brueggemann suggests that human beings regularly find themselves in one of three places: a place of orientation, in which everything makes sense in our lives; a place of disorientation, in which we feel we have sunk into the pit; and a place of new orientation, in which we realise that God has lifted us out of the pit and we are in a new place full of gratitude and awareness about our lives and our God. The lament psalms articulate disorientation; for example, life was good, now all is lost. It is important that in both individual and corporate worship, Christians have the vehicle by which they can express this bewilderment. Lucas writes: 'the laments give those who are suffering both the permission and the vehicle to express raw feelings to God as they call for justice to be done by God'.[7]

In a state of disorientation, the lament psalms move from plea and petition to thanksgiving signified by re orientation. Brueggemann states: 'in that move the situation and or attitude of the speaker is transformed, and God is mobilised for the sake of the speaker. The intervention in some way permits the move from plea to praise'. We see in Psalm 88 disorientation in an individual lament (vv6-9):[8]

You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.
Your wrath lies heavily on me;
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.

You have taken from me my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them.
I am confined and cannot escape;
my eyes are dim with grief.

Psalm 88 is the only psalm of lament where there is no re-orientation, and where the psalmist remains in the dark, seemingly without hope yet still feels able to be honest with God about his plight.

Psalm 44, conversely, displays disorientation in a corporate lament (vv9-12):

But now you have rejected and humbled us;
you no longer go out with our armies.
You made us retreat before the enemy,
and our adversaries have plundered us.
You gave us up to be devoured like sheep
and have scattered us among the nations.
You sold your people for a pittance,
gaining nothing from their sale.

Reconfiguration of power in a dialogic mode

Brueggemann states that any faith that permits and requires prayers of lament, 'redresses the distribution of power between the two parties so that the petitionary is taken seriously and God, who is addressed, is newly engaged in the crisis in a way that puts God at risk. As the lesser, petitionary party (the psalm speaker) is legitimated, so the unmitigated supremacy of the greater partner (God) is questioned'.[9] Thus, God is accessible to the speaker, who is taken seriously and empowered. Holladay calls this 'the power of the speech of the lament'.[10]

'This reconfiguration of power',[11] through speech, allows the lament psalms both to reflect but also shape faith. Holladay draws on these ideas: 'the psalms not only reflect reality but shift reality'.[12] Therefore, it isn't just that our lament that causes God to think again but lament deepens our relationship with God, keeping 'power relations under review and capable of redefinition',[13] and 'opening up a new world by way of daring protest'.[14] We see that God is not a far-off force but a 'conversation partner',[15] involved in a dialogic interaction between the creator and the created.

Examples of this redistribution of power in lament psalms can be found in the corporate lament Psalm 74. The cries of 'remember' (Ps 74:2,18) are intersected by what appears to be a shift of power when the psalmist asserts 'but you, O God, are my King from old: you bring salvation upon the earth' (Ps 74:12). The psalmist asserts themselves as a more equal partner in the dialogue. Brueggemann states that one of the dangers of not using lament as a Christian resource today is that 'a theological monopoly is reinforced, docility and submissiveness are engendered'.[16] God does not want robots; he wants his creation to collaborate with him in the kingdom of God; to do this both parties need to be engaged in conversation.

Expression of trustful humility, not proud defiance of God

Rediscovering lament gives us an increased openness to God, ourselves, and others. In lament, believers humbly come before God and voice that life is not what it was promised to be, that the world is broken, and this is not acceptable. Brueggemann writes 'lament occurs when the dysfunction reaches an unacceptable level, when the injustice is intolerable, and change is insisted upon'.[17] To reach the depth of relationship that the plaintive feels able to make this bold demand, suggests not a proud defiant approach but one saturated in trust and humility. The speaker fully understands who God is, but still isn't afraid to approach God and appeal for something better. We see that rather than expressing impaired or disrupted relationship, lament is a corollary of right relatedness.

We see this humility in the individual lament of Psalm 22, in the cry of a forsaken and lonely soul wrestling with God who is slow to respond (Ps 22:2), the pain of

estrangement from God coming in waves, interjected by attempts to confidently assert who God is and that he will redeem the situation (Ps 22:3,9,19). The axis on which the psalm shifts is the verse 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you'. (Ps 22:22) We see that the cry is not in proud defiance of God but an expression of trustful humility.

Particularly in a missional context, the ability to communicate with an almighty God when we are dismayed and disappointed and say to God in humility not pride, things must change, is vital. God is often viewed by non-believers as a distant harsh figure especially when a family experiences acute emotional pain such as the premature death of a loved one. To enable people to encounter a God who can be approached in our anger and dismay to 'tell him like it is', may be of great significance. The lament of Psalm 38 would be a helpful resource for someone without faith to communicate in humility that sense of pain, guilt, loss and despair, ending with a short prayer to God: 'do not forsake me, be not far from me...come quickly to help me' (Ps 38:21,22).

Psalm 41. Psalm 41 is one such instance where lament offers a constructive resource for Christian spirituality today. As an individual lament the words particularly resonate with victims of domestic abuse. In v5, the psalmist asks for healing whether that be physical, emotional, or spiritual and recognises that they have sinned; Holladay suggests this reflects the victims 'present sense of unworthiness'.[18] There appears to be progression of healing and restoration when in v12 the speaker no longer talks of their sin but their integrity. Verse 5 appears as a reality check, a victim that has been crushed and extinguished but has not perished, which is a pivotal point of acknowledgement of the terrible situation and a desire to seek help. The powerful words of paranoia pain and betrayal come in vv6-9:

And when they come to see me, they utter empty words,
While their hearts gather mischief:
When they go out they let it abroad.
All who hate me whisper together about me
They imagine the worst for me.
They think that a deadly thing has fastened on me,
That I will not rise again from where I lie.
Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
Who ate of my bread, has lifted the heal against me.

These are words of intimate trust shattered. In v10 the psalmist addresses God and we see the first shards of light and hope falling on the terrible situation. Holladay suggests that the words 'I may repay them' is not about retribution but parity 'the battered one needs to be in parity with the batterer...If there is to be any recovery and healing'.[19] Following a cry of help we see the victim recovering status, gaining assurance and a right view of their

position before God at the end of Psalm 41.

Psalm 60. Recently a 28-year-old local lady, Cassie Hayes, had her throat cut in her workplace by a man, in what was described as a domestic incident. Friends and family took to social media in a corporate lament to express deep sorrow and loss because of mindless evil.

"I am totally in shock. Sat n cried last night. Evil Evil arsehole! Justice will be served"
"Absolutely heartbroken. How can anyone think to do something so bitter and cruel. Everyone is devastated."
"I've cried my eyes out. What's wrong with people man?"

The family statement read: 'Our whole lives have been shattered. This has torn our hearts from our bodies'.

Lament gazes unflinchingly at the present reality of pain and at God's apparent slowness to save. Many, including Brueggemann, have highlighted the pastoral significance of the lament psalms. In reflecting on the value of corporate lament after this outpouring of community despair and grief, Psalm 60 might offer a constructive response.

In v1 we see that the community makes a heart-felt plea. The community feel rejected by God and are left broken and vulnerable. The verse ends with a plea from an estranged people 'now do something about it!'. A sense of shaken ground and the new landscape of life being cracked, and the community being torn open is reflected in the social media response to Cassie's death, 'the earthquake imagery confronts us with God's unsparing handling of what we think is secure'.[20] The reference to 'wine that made us reel' (Ps 60:3) suggests a desperate situation with outward staggering, corresponding with inward confusion and shock. 'Give victory with your right hand, and answer us, so that those whom you love may be rescued' (Ps 60:5). Broyles suggests this is a petition for 'saving action and saving words',[21] the community seeking justice as well as comfort. The psalm then goes on the declare what God has previously promised, outlining the humiliation of Israel's long-term enemies. The fortified city in v9 could be described as the thing beyond the psalmist's resources. The communities' cry might be "who can get us over this unassailable ravine of loss and despair?" The psalm concludes with a plea, 'O grant us help against the foe, for human help is worthless. With God we shall do valiantly; it is he who will tread down our foes' (Ps 60:11-12). A cry to God of hope and prayer and an acknowledgement that only God can overcome this kind of evil. The anger of Cassie's friends and family was mainly directed at the perpetrator rather than God but, regardless, it would be appropriate to suggest that a community could use a lament such as Psalm 60 as a communal conversation with God in this type of tragic situation.

At its very heart, a lament is an expression of trust in the nature, power, and the former deeds of God, this expression of trust looks prophetically beyond our current situation.

It is our challenge then, as ministers, to take up the cry of lament for our congregations, for our communities, for a world that is not in step with God. In using lament as a resource for Christian spirituality today, we must continue to cry out to God, expecting an answer, and living in hope, trusting that our righteous, mighty, and just God, is Lord of all.

This essay won the bmj Essay Prize for 2019 and was submitted by Caroline Friend, an MiT at Cranmer Hall/NBC. She has been called to pioneering work by Alnwick BC jointly with her husband Chris. Contact Caroline on caroline.friend@alnwickbaptist.org.uk

Notes to text

1. B. K. Waltke, J. M. Houston & E. Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament.* Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2014, 1.

2. E. Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament*. Vol 3: The Psalms and Wisdom Literature. London: SPCK, 2003, 3.

3. Waltke *et al, The Psalms as Christian Lament*, xi.

4. N. C. Lee & C. Mandolfo, *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts.* Society of Biblical Literature: Atlanta, 2008, 221-229.

5. https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/haddington-house-journal/17_045.pdf visited on 20th January 2018 - paraphrased

6. Waltke *et al, The Psalms as Christian Lament*, xi.

7. Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament*. Vol 3: The Psalms and Wisdom Literature, 61.

8. W. Brueggemann, *The Psalms. The Life of Faith.* Minneapolis: Augsberg Fortress, 1995, 99.

9. Brueggemann, *The Psalms. The Life of Faith*, 101.

10. W. L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, Minneapolis: Augsberg Fortress, 1993, 292.

11. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 291.

12. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 292.

13. Brueggemann, *The Psalms. The Life of Faith*, 102.

14. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 292.

15. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 293.

16. Brueggemann, *The Psalms. The Life of Faith*, 102.

17. Brueggemann, *The Psalms. The Life of Faith,* 105.

18. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 295.

19. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 296.

20. D. Kidner, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, 216.

21. C. Broyles, New International Biblical Commentary: *Psalms.* Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999, 253.

A pilgrim's progress

by Fred Stainthorpe

In 1949, when I began work, I had some disposable income for the first time. Although I knew very little about the British and Foreign Bible Society, I had heard that it was a 'good thing' and so I supported it financially. In 1951, when I entered Spurgeon's College, I was given, like all in my batch, a New Testament in Greek and an Old Testament in Hebrew. They came from the B&FBS. Presumably they did this for all theological students in Britain.

In 1954, I was in Belgium, polishing my School Certificate in French to enable me to use it with BMS in the then Belgian Congo, where it was the official language. This time I had to buy a copy of a French Bible. A year later, on our arrival at Bolobo, the church presented my wife and myself with copies of the New Testament in Bobangi, a local tribal language. The hospital workers gave us New Testaments in Lingala, a trade language widely spoken in Congo.

I was impressed to see worshippers bringing their Bibles to church. The ability to read was a condition of church membership. Missions had brought literacy and mass education to many countries. However, church members possessed little else, beside a NT and hymnbook. How could one improve their situation?

An American organisation named Lit-Lit wrote to us, offering to supply all our pastors with every piece of Christian literature available in Lingala. We had five African pastors then, four of whom were really regional ministers in our large area. Sadly, I missed this generous offer, and still regret it. However, even if we had responded, there was not that much available.

The Congo Protestant Council published a periodical magazine named *Congo Mission News.* Around 1959 it contained news of a journey which two Americans had made in the lower Congo, distributing copies of innovative picture-type booklets both in French and Lingala. The writer planned to return to this area and 'then' he said, 'we will flood the place with them'. Sadly, independence came and the resulting chaos foiled their plans.

About this time, one of our primary school teachers named Bobenga came to see me holding some cards in his hand. 'I found these in my cupboard', he explained, 'Could I please borrow them to teach my little boy how to read?'. 'Of course', I replied—but as

he left, the Lord spoke to me. I thought of the contrast between his child and our two children, Helen and John. We used to read to them from a Bible story book every evening. They had other books beside and Peggy McKerchar, a member of the Durham Road Church in Gateshead, had a comic sent to them every week. Bobenga was glad to get two or three pieces of card! I realised then that I had to do something to bridge the gap.

I have tried to do this since then in two ways—through Book Aid and Bible Societies. The former, begun in the mid-1980s by Bob Hiley, his family and friends, has sent over 30 million Bibles and Christian books abroad since then and it has been a privilege to take part in this work (even though I have been uncomfortably aware at times that perhaps people were giving away what they no longer wanted and in conditions so bad that books had to be extensively repaired before despatch).

These strictures do not apply to Bible Society support. The chief difficulty I felt was that, by and large, churches in Britain do not want others to have Bibles! Individuals and groups do sterling work in support but churches do not. If they did, support for these societies would figure largely in their missionary giving and it does not. Given the extensive regular use of the Bible in our worship, this indicates something of our inconsistency, if not our hypocrisy. (It may also indicate whether or not our church members really do read the the Bible regularly.)

Many British Christians indulge themselves in having many books. Sometimes it is almost a matter of pride to possess many Bibles. Yet we only need one Bible with perhaps another for purposes of comparison. Why should anyone have two Bibles when millions of people still do not have even one? Some churches that I know have rows of Bibles on their shelves gathering dust and helping nobody. They would gain by giving them away to the people who, in many countries, earnestly wish to possess a Bible. Many of them have never seen one and many more do not even know what a Bible is.

Bible agencies constantly inform us of this desperate need, particularly in areas where the Church is being persecuted. Congregations should face up to this challenge and respond accordingly. Pastors are uniquely placed to encourage them to do so.

Fred Stainthorpe is now retired from Baptist ministry. Contact him on fredandjohn1@hotmail.com.

Reviews

edited by Michael Peat

God of Violence Yesterday. God of Love Today? Wrestling Honestly with the Old Testament

by Helen Paynter

Bible Reading Fellowship, 2019

Reviewer: Pieter J. Lalleman

This book is timely, courageous and good. I therefore strongly recommend it to you and your church members. Helen Paynter of Bristol Baptist College has tackled one of the hot issues of the moment, the violence in the Old Testament (OT). It's unlikely that you have not been asked about this by someone within or outside your congregation; if not, you'll get the question soon: 'How can a loving God condone and even order so much violence?' Paynter helps you to give a Bible-based answer. She does not follow the common escape routes of either denying that this is what the OT really says or ascribing the violence to human authors who had not quite understood God. Instead she listens attentively to what the OT really says.

The book is in two parts, the first of which is a general introduction to the Bible and how to read it well. Paynter explains that her approach will be biblical and christocentric, and she defends the position of the OT within the Christian scriptures. As a potted hermeneutic this part of the book has a more general value. For example, readers learn about the various genres in the Bible and about the distinction between description and endorsement. Here we also find a useful chapter on what violence is.

In the second part Paynter tackles the OT in concentric circles, beginning with the relatively simple texts in which violence is merely described. This is followed by texts in which violence is deplored, psalms which call upon God to use violence, texts about violence against animals and texts in which the use of violence is part of a divine judgement. Throughout her discussions are careful and helpful. Paynter's response to the usual argument that the Canaanites deserved to be punished for their wickedness was a surprise to me; if you want to know what it is, buy and read the book! The final chapter, intended as a positive counterpart to the preceding misery, deals with God's plan of shalom for his good creation.

Throughout Paynter's tone is humble. She is honest about her own struggles and about points where she is uncertain. She refers to the book of Joshua as something that 'feels alien and disturbing'.

For the most part, the book is easy to read; at times it is almost basic, which means that it is largely right for many church members. At the end of the chapters there are summaries and the notes are tucked away as endnotes. Some may find it uncomfortable that Paynter describes the flood as a myth (94-95), but that should not distract anybody.

So it is a perfect book? No: it contains some typos and there is no index of texts. Some elements of the discussion might still be complicated for 'lay people'. I would also have liked to read a bit more about the character of God. But these minor quibbles are just that: minor quibbles. One addition: those who want to study Joshua might also consider a book by another Baptist minister: David Firth's commentary *The Message of Joshua.*

Melodies of a New Monasticism: Bonhoeffer's Vision, Iona's Witness

by Craig Gardiner

SCM, 2018

Reviewer: Tony Peck

This is an unusual and highly original work by one of our younger British Baptist scholars, and based on his doctoral studies. It achieves a most creative synergy between music and theology that is a delight to read.

Gardiner seeks to explore the nature of Christian community, and what is often termed the 'new monasticism' through musical metaphors, in particular that of polyphony (many different voices and melodies moving freely and independently but combining harmonically); and with Christ as the *cantus firmus* ('fixed song', a pre-existing melody that forms the basis of a polyphonic composition).

One immediately thinks of the use made of these terms by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a famous passage in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. And indeed, Gardiner engages with the Bonhoeffer of *Letters and Papers* and *Life Together* throughout the book, especially the latter's insight that the true nature of the church is 'the Christ who has taken form among human beings' *ie* in the world.

Gardiner's other conversation partner is George McLeod, founder of the Iona Community. Macleod was no systematic theologian, but something of a mystic visionary who nevertheless shared the same passion to see Christian community engaging in a deeply committed way with the world beyond the institutional church. In some ways, Gardiner's work is a profound extended theological and musical reflection on the vision and Rule of the Iona Community.

There are many riches to be mined here that repay re-reading, as Gardiner explores carefully and with great theological insight a vision of Christian community at the interface of church and world. He draws especially on the Celtic insight that such communities are 'thin places' where distinctions between 'heaven' and 'earth', church and society, sacred and secular are broken down with Christ as *cantus firmus* of all,

As Gardiner himself admits in his conclusion, his explorations do not extend to considering how such communities engage in mission, beyond identifying those aspects of mission that embrace justice and peace. Also Gardiner does not explore how different theological and Christian political visions can seek polyphony rather than cacophony, a very contemporary concern in

situations where a common *cantus firmus* is sometimes hard to discern.

My main critical observation is that I think Gardiner has sometimes stretched the music metaphors up to and beyond breaking point. The central relationship between *cantus firmus* and polyphony is clear and well expounded. But other terms such as 'counterpoint' and 'counter-melody', for instance, are somewhat wrenched from their musical definition to service a prophetic countercultural vision of the task of the Christian community. A range of musical terms appear: fugue, *cantus firmus*, polyphony, melody, counter-melody, counterpoint, ground bass, and Gardiner does not always distinguish them well enough to draw from them an application based on their particular musical characteristics, which I think might have enhanced his overall purpose.

One excellent musical example of the central relationship between *cantus firmus* and polyphony, referenced by both Bonhoeffer and Gardiner, are the sublime works of Bach such as the Art of Fugue, based on an original theme by Bach, and the Musical Offering, based on a theme given to Bach by Frederick the Great (although these two are confused in a footnote on p56 and in a quote on p61).

Those musical considerations aside, I agree wholeheartedly with the commendation by Rowan Williams in the Foreword, that 'the whole discussion is really a meditation on the fundamental integrity of the church, which is what every serious study of spirituality should be.' Above all, Gardiner articulates well the urgent need for the contemporary church to retain and perhaps even redefine its Christian distinctiveness, in order to be at the same time thoroughly engaged in the world. So often true polyphony proves elusive.

Out of Control: Couples, Conflict, and the Capacity for Change

by Natalie Collins

SPCK, 2019

Reviewer: Helen Paynter

I first met Natalie Collins last summer, when I heard her speak at a conference I was attending. Her presentation on the violent and abusive nature of modern pornography was hard-hitting and deeply unsettling, but insightful and provocative. So when I learned that she had written a book on domestic violence, I was very keen to read it; not least because she is starting from a first-hand experience of the problem. As I anticipated, it was a gritty, challenging and deeply useful read. Collins is frank, outspoken and prophetic. She challenges a great deal of received wisdom and theology.

Yes, theology. Because although this book addresses a general audience, Collins writes as an evangelical Christian who loves God and seeks to see biblical principles outworked in families and churches. She writes in an inclusive way, explaining the church jargon she uses, but concludes each chapter with a suggested prayer. Indeed, her pastoral concern for those who may be re-traumatised by the

book is evident throughout. This is, perhaps, one of those rare books which manages to straddle the divide between 'church' and 'mainstream' audiences.

The book is well-researched and accessibly written. It is full of information which would be useful for those in abusive relationships, those who seek to intervene in such relationships, and those who ought to be intervening—such as church leaders. As a survivor of domestic abuse, Collins speaks with clarity and honesty about her own story.

Addressing the church, Collins challenges 'muscular Christianity', which—she argues—feeds the narrative of toxic masculinity and female submissiveness. She challenges the all-too-prevalent advice to abused women that they should accept and endure their suffering, and win over their husbands by quiet submission (in a misapplication of 1 Peter 3:1). With reference to a case study she has been discussing, Collins says, 'Jesus' model for how to pray includes asking "Deliver us from evil". For any Christian to tell Sarah she should endure evil… seems counter-productive (and extremely dangerous)' (p95). I would have liked a deeper treatment of this question, but Collins is not a theologian and it is for others to do so. Notwithstanding this, she handles the Bible and theological concepts with a dexterity not often found in books of this genre.

The book is above all a practical book, a manual. Collins gives tips for emotional self-care, helpline numbers and many other resources, including a detailed safety plan for protection during several of an abused woman's most vulnerable situations (a violent incident, the act of leaving, living alone, and when the abuser has an injunction against him).

Also particularly useful are the chapters which 'bust myths' about domestic abuse. Collins tackles common misunderstandings such as: there are certain personality types which make particular women more likely to experience domestic violence; debt/ alcohol/ powerlessness drives men to become abusers; a woman who remains in a situation of domestic violence is a weak fool. On the contrary, to quote Collins, 'abusive behaviour is a choice' (p58) based on the abuser's sense of ownership and entitlement. The psychological abuse often long precedes the physical abuse, and effectively incapacitates the woman's fight or flight responses, for when the physical abuse begins.

I have been referring to the abuser as male and the abused as female, as Collins does. She acknowledges that domestic abuse is not an exclusively male-on-female phenomenon, but on the basis of the majority experience and her own area of expertise, she makes the pragmatic decision to adopt this convention (p9). No doubt this will make some readers uncomfortable.

Working within these power and control frameworks, each abuser has patterns of behaviour which seek to gain, maintain and exploit power and control in a relationship. Collins identifies and describes eight such (overlapping, and not mutually

exclusive) patterns: the Humiliator, the Threatener, the Exhauster, the 'Nice one' (manipulator), the Brainwasher, the All-mighty, the Demander, the Isolator. In describing and analysing these abuser types, she tells some hair-raising stories, some of them her own.

The book is not all doom and gloom. Towards the end, Collins sets out her vision for hope and change: her own story of salvation and redemption; the existence of good men who resist toxic stereotypes and honour and value women; the possibility for abusers to change; the many agencies and individuals who help to resource and restore those who have experienced abuse. But she also throws down a huge challenge to the Church. Abuse in churches appears to be as prevalent as in society at large. What are we going to do about it?

Walter Brueggemann (in *Prophetic Imagination,* and elsewhere) says that the prophet names injustice; laments and rages against it; and sets out a vision for a different future, inspired and made possible by the in-breaking Kingdom of God. In all these ways, Collins is a prophet, and her words should be heeded.

Redeeming transcendence in the Arts: Bearing witness to the Triune God

by Jeremy Begbie

SCM, 2018

Reviewer: Richard Kidd

Anyone seeking to formulate a strong theological basis for engagement with the arts as a significant dimension of responsible Christian discipleship and mission will find this book to be a very helpful resource. Jeremy Begbie is already known as an enthusiastic advocate for dialogue at the interface between theology and the arts, and this recent book continues to build on all that is best in his earlier work.

Taking the concept of transcendence as his focus, Begbie seeks to identify the distinctive markers of a genuinely Christian understanding. The meanings attached to the idea of transcendence, he argues, have become far too vague in modern time, often reducing transcendence to little more than a generalised 'feel-good' factor associated with an indefinable 'somewhat' at the limits of everyday experience of the world. The Christian idea of transcendence, he claims, is far more radical in its particularity, rooted in a unique Christian testimony to the being and activity of the trinitarian God, made fully concrete in the life and death of Jesus Christ, the man from Nazareth.

The argument is structured around four themes that run the length of this book. In an opening section these themes are first introduced in order to demonstrate the weakness of merely generalised concepts of transcendence. Each theme is then developed and sharpened, enabling Begbie to offer his own understanding of a distinctively Christian interpretation. The four are: transcendence based on an interpretation of human limitations; transcendence based on a broadly defined theology of divine agency; transcendence understood as an innate human capacity; and transcendence based on a concept of God that fails to take seriously Christianity's unique doctrine of the Trinity. By the end of the

book Begbie has, he claims, redeemed these four themes as the basis of a clearly Christian understanding of transcendence. Taking them in turn:

• while Begbie does not deny that there are clear limits to human knowledge, he does not find the fact of limitation to be an adequate basis on which to base a concept of transcendence; that, he argues, assumes God's otherness to be far more remote from the reality of the world than a properly Christian understanding implies. In the Christian heritage, he suggests, there has always been an understanding of the deep connectedness between God's transcendence and God's immanence. The Christian God is known, not only as 'beyond', but also in the material particularity of the world of God's making;

• concerning God's agency, Begbie presses for a clearly focused Christian understanding of the particularity of God's active presence in the world, and especially in the life of Jesus. This is the only firm basis for the kind of connectedness between immanence and transcendence that he seeks to define;

• Begbie does not find the idea of an innate human capacity to be aware of transcendence anywhere near sharp enough to give proper attention to the distinctive Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Such capacities as we possess to become aware of the transcendent are dependent on the immanent presence of God's Spirit at the core of all human life;

• Begbie seeks to root any truly Christian understanding of transcendence firmly in its distinctive doctrine of God as Trinity. 'Otherness', he suggests, is already present, deep in the trinitarian life of God, and surfaces quite naturally as an integral motif in the Christian doctrine of creation.

I am especially grateful to Jeremy Begbie for highlighting so clearly the excessive generality of much recent writing about transcendence. As ever, he is respectful in his accounts of those who do not share his particular approach, while at the same time providing a valuable challenge from his own solidly Christian perspective.

Anabaptist essentials: ten signs of a unique Christian faith

by Palmer Becker

Herald Press, 2017

Reviewer: Michael Bochenski

In Baptist ministry we often find ourselves re-inventing the wheel, or reading about those who are also re-inventing it. Just occasionally a book, a person, or a movement helps us significantly in that process. Rediscovering the Anabaptist movement, in the early years of the 21st century, was just such an experience for me. Encouraged by the then Principal of Spurgeon's College, Nigel Wright, and the College's (new) focus on Anabaptist Studies, I rediscovered what had been hitherto, for me, but a footnote in Reformation studies: the 16th-century Anabaptists. Here was a movement deeply rooted in the Free Church heritage, and yet

one with deeply helpful contemporary insights into making that wheel. The books of (for example) Stuart Murray, Alan and Ellie Kreider, George Hunston Williams and C. Arnold Snyder opened up for me a treasure trove of writings and faith stories, lived theology and courageous mission practice. These excited me then...and continue to. It was then, with some trepidation, and fearing something of a bandwagon, that I turned to this slim volume with its cover claim to remind us '...what Christianity is all about.' I need not have worried. It did. By using three core themes—Jesus, community and reconciliation—Palmer draws out much of what the Anabaptist movement, past and present, has to say to the body of Christ as this new century unfolds.

Jesus. Anabaptism's core principles—freedom of conscience, independence of state control and the power of voluntarism—speak loudly into the horrors and challenges of the world we now know. The worship of the Bible, instead of the Christ of the Bible, was not a trap Anabaptists often fell into. As Palmer notes, this was because of an ethical Jesus-centred approach to biblical interpretation in contrast to what he terms flat (literal), dispensational, or spiritualised ways. In practice this means that Christians will develop a healthily critical attitude to leaders, secular or religious, judging them by the Christ of scripture, and not their office: 'There will be times when faithful followers of Christ need to disobey commands that go contrary to their ultimate Lord'.

Community. It also means that we will re-open ourselves to some of life's most painful lessons: learning to accept forgiveness and to forgive—both vertically and horizontally. Palmer's is a far from predictable treatment of this delicate subject. Instead he takes us through a variety of approaches—'...we are open to multiple understandings of forgiveness and atonement'—while arguing that, without it, little of true Christianity is left. He quotes a sign in an Amish shop here: 'If you break it tell us so that we can forgive you'. Another emphasis in this section is some creative writing on the power of small groups. Palmer quotes a Japanese scholar (Takashi Yamada) in this context: '...the uniqueness of both the early church and the early Anabaptists was that they met in small groups where they confronted each other and made each other strong enough to confront the world'.

Reconciliation. Another example of contemporary resonances—not least for Christians in Europe and the US as Brexit and/or Trump divide—is how to disagree without seeing community/ ies disintegrate. The poison that has entered the political bloodstream and social media worlds through such divisions is frankly terrifying. Ways of disagreeing without being disagreeable are desperately needed. Palmer's book offers some very helpful pointers here. A section on the different approaches to conflict (terrorist, militarist, pacifist, peace-building, spiritual warfare) is especially helpful. Palmer concludes with a reminder of the importance of the Holy Spirit to a church and faith that too often forgets its trinitarian core. 'Perhaps in our zeal to be Christocentric, we have minimized the Holy Spirit. Embracing the work of the

Spirit, who was sent by Christ himself, will not make Anabaptists less Christocentric, but more so'.

My preference for small group study in church life has long been to concentrate on books or themes from the Bible. Others, I know, value greatly working through a good study book. If that is you, this would be one such, not least because Palmer ends each of his chapters with a number of questions for reflection and discussion. The best introduction to all that contemporary Anabaptism has to offer the body of Christ and the world is, in my view, Murray's *The Naked Anabaptist.* Palmer's book, however, comes a close second.

Could YOU review?

Contact Michael Peat on

mike.peat@bristol.ac.uk

Of interest to you

edited by Arderne Gillies

NEW PASTORATES AND PASTORAL APPOINTMENTS

Leroy (Tony) ASHLEY	From Aldersbrook to Stoke Newington, July 2019
Doug ATHERTON	From Missioner, Cynon Valley to Moriah, Abercynon and Providence, Mountain Ash, May 2019
Sally BATES	To Frinton Free (Associate), May 2019
Ali BOULTON	From The Stowe, Winchelstowe & Regional Minister, SCBA to The Stowe, Wichelstowe and Fresh Expressions/New Housing Development Hub, August 2019
Danny BROWN	From Orpington to Minchinhampton (Associate)
Steve CALDER	From Brandon, Camberwell to Woodside, August 2019
Matt CARTER	From Halton, Hastings to Pantygwydyr, Swansea, September 2019

Graham CRIDDLE	From Tamworth to West Street Christian Fellowship, Crewe, June 2019
Phil DRAGE	From Earl Shilton to Newbold Verdon, June 2019
Freddy FARIAS-PALACIOS	From Penralt, Bangor to Zion, Tenterden, June 2019
Carl GIDNEY	From Regional Minister, SWaBA to Tredegarville, Cardiff (p/t), April 2019
John GLEGHORN	From Bingley to Teddington, September 2019
Mark GODBEER	From Counterslip, Bristol to Bovey Tracey, August 2019
Ruth GOOKEY	From Harefield to Christ the King, Milton Keynes, August 2019
Mark HIRST	From Battle to Willesborough, July 2019
Michael HOGG	From Wollaston to Brighton Road, Horsham (Leader of Community Evangelism), Summer 2019
Charmaine HOWARD	From Missional House of Prayer, Milton Keynes to Christ the Vine, Woughton Ecumenical Partnership, Milton Keynes, June 2019
Jeff JACOBSON	From Okehmpton to West Leigh, Leigh on Sea (Associate), August 2019
Mark JANES	From Memorial Community Church, Plaistow to New North Road, Huddersfield, July 2019
Alistair JONES	From Billingham to Broughton, August 2019
Jonathan KEYWORTH	From Heywood to New Road, Oxford, July 2019
Malcolm MARTIN	To Brockley (Interim Minister), April 2019
Reuben MARTIN	From West Croydon to Poynton, September 2019
Chris MATTHEWMAN	To Kislingbury and Upton, March 2019
Russ MAYNARD	From Mutley (Associate) to South Street, Exeter (Community Pastor), May 2019
Emmanuel NTUSI	From Underhill, Barnet to Coldharbour Lane, Hayes, July 2019
Hilary NYIKA	From Borehamwood to Ayr, Summer 2019
Guy PARTRIDGE	From New Life Church, Blackboys to Sidley, Bexhill, July 2019
Amanda RHODES	From Dorchester to Stratford-upon-Avon, September 2019
Paul RHODES	From Barnabas Fund to Shirehampton, July 2019
Vincent SACCO	From Coulby Newham, Middlesborough (Assoc) to Middlesborough, October 2019
Rob SAUNDERS	From Coleford to Welshpool, July 2019
Mandy SMITH	From Parish Nurse, Burgh to Pastor, Alford Community Church, February 2019
Rachel SPENCE	From Rainbow Hill, Worcester to Pioneer Minister for Bath & Wells Diocese, July 2019
Dave SUNMAN	From Hertford to Ramridge Road, Luton, May 2019
Marcus THOMAS	To North Teignmouth

Carolyn UNWIN	From Wraysbury to Latchford, Warrington, August 2019
Jack WALKER	From Newport Pagnell to Whitchurch, June 2019
Amy WEARING	From St. Peter's, Worcester to Upton-upon-Severn, July 2019
David WISE	From Greenford to Spiritual Formation Programme Leader, Waverley Abbey, September 2019
Ruth WOOD	From Delves, Walsall to Dewsbury, June 2019
Matt WRIGHT	From Lister Hill, Leeds to South Parade, Leeds, July 2019

MINISTERS IN TRAINING

Dave BARTRAM	Northern to Trinity, Bacup, Summer 2019
Robin BRENCHLEY	Spurgeon's to Ferring, August 2019
Christopher BROWN	Regent's Park to Market Harborough, September 2019
John COOPER	Northern to Morpeth, Summer 2019
Samuel DUNN	Regent's Park to Melton Mowbray, September 2019
Joe FORSON	Regent's Park to Anderson, Reading (Outreach Pastor), April 2019
Caroline FRIEND	Northern to Alnwick, July 2019
Chris FRIEND	Northern to Alnwick, July 2019
Adam GRAY	Northern to Community Missioner for Newcastle Diocese, July 2019
Rachel JEFFREYS	Spurgeon's to The Church in Binley Woods (LEP), October 2019
Afi KIRK	Spurgeon's to Blackheath and Charlton, September 2019
Tim PARSONS	Spurgeon's to Borstal (MIT placement), September 2019
Jack SYKES	Spurgeon's to Toxteth Tabernacle, Summer 2019
Emmanuel TEKYI-ANSAH	Spurgeon's to Trinity, Slough, Summer 2019

RESIGNATIONS

Ian FIELD	From Sutcliffe, Olney, April 2019
Ian SPENCE	From Rainbow Hill, Worcester

CHAPLAINCIES, EDUCATIONAL APPOINTMENTS, MISSION & OTHER SECTOR MINISTRIES

Kwame ADZAM	From Trinity, West Norwood to Evangelist, BMS (SCBA)
Peter DUNN tries	From Director of Mission, BMS to European Director, Biglife Minis- YBA, September 2019
Tim FERGUSSON	From Olton to Ministries Advisor, BUGB, August 2019

Matt JEFFREY	From Lenton Lane, Coventry to Development Officer, Workcare, Coventry, July 2019
Dave PARRY	To Chaplain, Southampton Hospital, May 2019
John ROE	From Bradbury Park Church Plant to Chaplain, Railway Mission, London North B Division, September 2019

RETIREMENTS

Ron DAVIS	The Green, Stafford, March 2019
John SMITH	Godmanchester, March 2019
Paul WALKER	Highgate, Birmingham, September 2019
Chris WINTERS	Marston Green, August 2019

DEATHS

Peter DWYER	Retired (Exeter), February 2019
Eric LAING	Retired (Stockton on Tees), February 2019
Patience MENSAH	Joy Christian Centre International, March 2019
Jack RAMSBOTTOM	Retired (Chesham), April 2019
Geoff RICHARDS	Retired (Nottingham), February 2019
Peter WHITING	Retired (Havant), March 2019
Leonard WILKIE	Retired (Shanklin), February 2019

ANNIVERSARIES

Jenny & Robert FEW	Golden Wedding 5th April 2019
Jim and Pauline HAMILTON	Golden Wedding 16th August 2019
Brian & Sylvia PEMBERTON	Diamond Wedding 19th Sept. 2019

Of Interest To You

To include matters for prayer or interest such as special wedding anniversaries (50+), bereavements, illness etc, please contact Rev Arderne Gillies at Greenhill, 39 South Road, Chorleywood, Herts. WD3 5AS , or email her at rev.arderne@btinternet.com .Please note that Arderne's sources include the Ministry Department and the Baptist Times, as well as direct communications. Because of this, the descriptions of posts published may not always match the locally identified roles.