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"The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Editorial Board"

Editorial

It is hard to be objective about the Church. For it all depends upon where you are standing and the set of value judgments you bring with you. This is why, of course, there are so many partisans and so few dispassionate observers: we all know what we like. And the parameters change. Not so long ago in our denomination the lines were drawn between liberal churches and conservative ones, concentrating the mind of leaving students! Nowadays, the lines have been re-drawn in terms of charismatic and non-charismatic churches, subsuming everything else.

Historically, the issue of *enthusiasm* has often been the yardstick, as Ronald Knox, in his 1950 book of that name, discussed. From second century Montanism onwards, the Church has had its fair share of some very "non-liturgical" expressions. And whenever the Church has majored on the rational as the royal road to God, anything that cannot be contained within the ordered realm of the cerebral has been marginalised, even consigned to the realm of heresy. "We don't want any excitement in this church", as one prospective pastor, in no uncertain terms, was informed.

But the Church moves forward in its understanding of the Christ-like God when its theology has something to gnaw at. In the absence of a living experience, theology becomes incestuous and feeds on itself to no purpose. Yes, safeguards and critique there must be, for licence is always around the corner, but who will presume to quench the Spirit?

Within this realm, the so-called *Toronto Blessing* has received extensive publicity. Its external manifestations have been the main focus, which is a pity. We thought it important, then, that we should hear from a local church in which, over a period of time, the *Blessing* had been experienced. Norman Moss provides just that insight, helping us to evaluate what we have read about or even experienced ourselves. Then, David Coffey identifies the key areas which will influence the shape and form of our common life, as Baptists, post 2000. He pleads that we make the best setting possible in which the Holy Spirit can work.

In 1994, as part of a Sabbatical, Neil Hall researched the role of women in Association life. There's cause for joy and room for tears. To see ourselves as others see us would radically change attitudes and relationships. Chandu Christian, from long exposure to British Church life, turns Asian eyes upon us. "Those with ears to hear..." Then Faith Bowers, in a triumphalist age, begs us to face, honestly, the dark side of life in *The Saving Cry of Dereliction*. Keith Riglin's article on *Homosexuality* has, not surprisingly, generated a reaction. We are grateful to those who have made a considered response to an important debate, Robin Giles among them. Finally, movement in patterns of exegesis is reflected in two books of John Goldingay, reviewed by John Nicholson.

Living With The Toronto Blessing: One Church's Experience

Queen's Road Church, Wimbledon, is a Baptist Church associated with New Frontiers International and is a member of the Evangelical Alliance. Margaret and I began our ministry in 1957, and have spent the last 30 years leading the Church at Wimbledon. As a Church we moved into "renewal" in the early 1970's, and during the 1980s the Church doubled in membership. Towards the end of the eighties we moved into new premises, and growth has continued. During this decade two churches have been planted out. Our present membership stands at 375 excluding the church plants. Each of these has a healthy attendance of between 50 - 80 people.

As a Church, we hold firmly to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the centrality of His Cross, as we seek to live under the authority of the Word of God, and in the power of the Spirit. We seek nothing less than classic evangelicalism on fire: the proclamation of Christ crucified, with a demonstration of the Spirit's power. His name and His renown is the desire of our hearts. We abhor élitism. We feel at one with all believers who are hungry and thirsty for more of God in their lives and are longing for a revival to bring glory to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Seeds of the Story

After an evening service, two weeks before Pentecost 1994, a young, married woman in our fellowship saw a vision of us as a Church on our knees saying "sorry" to God. We responded to what she saw. This was not a novel departure for us; we have grown accustomed to the use of spiritual gifts in worship. We believe that people may prophesy today. However, we recognise that we prophesy in part, and we would never set prophecy on the same level of authority as Scripture. We also hold that true prophecy will never contradict Scripture. On that night we had a precious time of public repentance, praise, prayer and communion. The service did not finish until nearly midnight, so great was the sense of the Lord's presence.

That week three of our team travelled to Toronto. We are deeply grateful to the faithful Christians there, but any blessing we received came from Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. It is not a "Toronto" blessing. It is the blessing of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is important to emphasise that we had already seen and experienced phenomena such as falling, shaking, tears and laughter. We did not encounter something "different" or "alien". What we saw conformed to a recognised and acceptable paradigm. However, there was a startling difference in the intensity of the phenomena and the number of people affected. Within the sovereignty of God, we feel that we can account for this. The people in Toronto have stumbled upon a simple truth. We should go on hungering and thirsting after righteousness. There is an increase in blessing as we continue to wait upon God. Far from being new and divisive teaching, the message is one with which all Christians should agree: "Go on being filled with the Spirit". This does not mean that those who do not experience outward manifestations are less spiritually hungry, or less open to the influence of the Holy Spirit. Our physical bodies express emotion in different ways, and it would be inappropriate to measure spirituality by outward signs. However, many would testify to important internal changes as they have persevered in this pathway.

Two years have elapsed and most church leaders are now familiar with the outward phenomena. It needs to be emphasised that it is unfair to judge on the basis of seeing

something on video. Also, the pastoral handling of what goes on does make a difference. There are predilections of culture, of style, of taste, which make what occurs more or less acceptable to a particular observer.

As was to be anticipated, there was questioning of the work. We knew, when we returned from Toronto, that it would be necessary to assess the fruit. After 18 months, and in response to a negative article, we produced a booklet entitled "Good Fruit". It tells of evangelism, emotional healing, blessings on old, young and children. It quotes instances of physical healing, encounters with the holiness of God, and release in prayer and prophecy. The booklet is available free of charge on application to QRC. However, the booklet is only a selection from the many other testimonies we have heard during this two year period. Looking back over 40 years of ministry and more than fifty years experience of Baptist Church membership, I can honestly say that the last two years have been totally amazing to me, and that if we have not seen revival we have certainly walked close to it.

Theology

The experience has not raised theological questions within our fellowship. We are aware of some of the issues raised on the wider scene. The separation between John Wimber and John Arnott would seem to be more a matter of methodology than theology. The suggestion that this is "occult" or "new age" seems to require the concept that heresy can be "caught" like measles. Nor can we explain what happens in terms of hypnotism. Mike Wood, of Lewin Road, Streatham, brought a converted stage hypnotist to one of our meetings. He said that what was happening had no relationship to the kind of things that he did in his stage act. The influence of music can also be discounted. Over a period of months we saw literally hundreds of pastors and leaders receive a blessing at our Tuesday morning meeting without the aid of any music.

J.I. Packer in his book, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, suggests that the most radical question that gets asked about the Charismatic Movement is whether it is inspired by the Spirit of God at any point at all. He says that there are two basic tests, one credal and one moral. These tests still apply, and we believe the present work at QRC to be of God. It would seem difficult to take great exception to blessing people in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christians have been laying hands on one another and praying for one another long before this present move of the Spirit. This is a benediction - an uttered blessing and for many an experienced blessing as well.

Priorities

Our priorities remain body worship, teaching and preaching the word of God, prayer and evangelism. However, there have been two additional aspects to our services. We have invited testimony from people at almost every service, and almost invariably there have been those eager to respond. In our morning services we also give an invitation to those seeking personal prayer to come forward at the close. Some avail themselves of that opportunity. In the evening services where there is little time restraint; we move the chairs at the close of the service and invite the congregation to remain for prayer ministry. Many people remain waiting upon God until past 10.30pm. Our House Groups are an important part of Church life, and although we still run a pastors' and leaders' meeting every Tuesday morning and an open meeting every Wednesday night, we have been able to keep the House Groups going as well. We have introduced Alpha courses and find them of great value in the current context.

Relationships

Many testify that their relationship with Jesus Himself has been deepened in an extraordinary way. Not surprisingly those who share great enthusiasm for what is going on, and there are many of these, have been drawn together in an even closer bond. Others, mainly those who for whatever reason have experienced very little, have found the last two years more difficult. Some have pressed through and come into release and blessing. A few have left us, though not more than would be expected in a normal year. The congregation has grown and in a crowded Church it is not always easy to create the "family" atmosphere and welcome that is so precious to us all. This all calls for pastoral wisdom, and we are blessed with a large team of workers and leaders who have relationships deeply rooted over many years. There is no doubt from the letters, testimonies and vibrant services that the vast majority enjoy what is going on and are blessed together as they delight in Jesus.

Mission

We continue to reach out evangelistically. A very significant event was the drama *Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames*. Over four nights, 139 people responded to the appeal, and at least 87 made first time commitments. More recently, the evangelist Ian McCormack spoke to a capacity crowd, and there were more than a score of commitments. However, the most significant development has been the Alpha courses referred to previously. There is also plenty of anecdotal evidence that the witness of individual Christians is becoming much more confident and free.

Counselling

We already had a well established counselling programme. In some respects the Blessing has actually eased the counselling burden because many people have found direct help through revelation they have received whilst caught up in God's presence. However, there have been new people arrive to share their burdens with us, so there will always be the need of on going counselling within the life of the Church. An innovation for us has been the establishment of "prayer clinics". Here the emphasis is less on counselling and more on protracted waiting upon God in prayer. The clinics are by appointment, and have proved to be very popular.

Is It a Blessing?

Wayne Grudem suggests certain factors which, in his view, make a church "more pure" rather than "less pure". He lists: Biblical doctrine; proper use of the ordinances; right use of Church discipline; genuine worship; effective prayer; effective witness; effective fellowship; spiritual power in ministry; personal holiness of life among members; care for the poor; love for Christ. Where people are seeking to be filled with the Holy Spirit in an on going way, it is to be hoped that churches will advance on the purity scale as defined by Grudem. Michael Green says that the prime purpose of the coming of the Spirit is to equip for mission. Just as iron becomes malleable in the blacksmith's fire, so people are more readily changed when exposed to the Spirit's fire.

Practical Observations

How can I introduce this to my Church? First, experience it for yourself. Next, encourage key people to visit places where the move of the Spirit is being handled in an acceptable way. Once you have gained the understanding and support of the core people within the fellowship, it is important to provide ongoing opportunity for prayer ministry. You will need a group of people to help you pray for people, and these should be people who are willing to receive prayer themselves. Encourage people to

share their experiences with you, and where appropriate to bear testimony in Church. Preach to create an appetite for deeper intimacy with the Lord.

Two cries echo down to us from the 1904 revival. "Bend the Church" and "Honour the Spirit". We need to be utterly convinced that this is a work of God not the latest gimmick. Once convinced, we need to take the risk of surrendering our Church as well as our lives to God. If we are willing to allow Jesus Christ absolute liberty to move as Lord of His Church, then the Holy Spirit will respond to our prayers.

Norman Moss

U.S.A. Exchange Ministries Opportunity

Two American pastors are seeking an exchange of churches in 1997:

A New Hampshire pastor with a church of some 100 members, wishes to exchange for a month or more.

A Massachusetts's pastor would also like to exchange churches for the same period.

If you are interested, please contact the BMF USA Exchange Representative, Vic Sumner: 6 Middle Onslow Close, Ferring, Worthing, BN12 5RT



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Clifford Challinor, Kingsley, Pontesbury, Shrewsbury, Shropshire SY5 0QH
(Telephone or Fax: 01743 790377)

Post 2000 - What Kind of Union?

I believe we are facing a critical turning point in the history of the Union and all of us need to address the radical nature of the changes God expects from His people. Such is the nature of these changes, I do not expect clarity about where God is leading us for, maybe, a generation. When people ask me, what kind of Baptist Union I envisage for the 21st century, I decline by saying this is the purpose of the Denominational Consultation in September.

In the January 1996 edition of "Baptist Leader", ministers and churches were invited to submit their thoughts on the future of the Union, and Keith and I are grateful for the many letters which have been received at Didcot reflecting the praying, writing, dreaming that is taking place in the local churches. The booklet published by the four English college principals, *Something to Declare* (an exposition of the Declaration of Principle), symbolises the kind of debate we want to encourage.

The Consultation is basically an extraordinary meeting of the Baptist Union Council with invited guests. We asked Associations to submit names of suggested guests who might be included and whilst we realise the impossibility of including everyone who wishes to attend, we hope that churches will support the weekend with their prayers. We share this missionary pilgrimage of the Church with other Christians in these islands and it is important to develop a strategy for hearing what the Spirit is saying to the whole Church as well as to this Union of churches, associations and colleges, so we have invited guests representing the diversity of the Church in these islands.

We will be publishing in the Baptist Times a prayer and study guide which can be used in the two weeks leading up to the Swanwick weekend.

We need a deeper understanding regarding change. I see more clearly that the ferment in Baptist life not only reflects what is happening in other parts of the Christian family, but the changing paradigms of the Church mirror the changing paradigms of the world. God is using the massive changes in society as an irritant, to provoke His Church into a deeper understanding of the mission of God. Edmund Hulmes, uses the grain of sand in an oyster which produces a pearl to illustrate how the worst features of a society in change can lead to despair or they can become "irritants" used by God to generate a richer mission ministry.¹ I propose five clarifying questions as a contribution to the debate on the life of the Union beyond 2000.

1. What Kind of God?

There are times in the past five years when I have felt overwhelmed with the enormity of God's vision for His Church and exercised in my spirit as to how this can be translated into a renewal of Baptist life and structures. As I have prayed and reflected on the task with faces us, I realise we should be using the language of new birth to describe our futures. We should be anticipating a creative act of God to bring into being the missionary churches which will best serve the world of the new millennium. We can organise and activate, but, much more, we should be praying for a sovereign visitation of God's power. Our first priority must be the deepening of our spiritual relationship with the Lord. For only in a living and vital relationship with the Head of the Church will those seeds of those forms and structures be conceived which will give birth to the new missionary Church of the 21st century.

I have been re-reading the Festschrift which was presented to one of my predecessors, Ernest Payne. In a tribute at the beginning of *Outlook for Christianity, Baptist Ministers' Journal July 1996*

Robert L Child refers to the post war challenges which faced Ernest Payne in 1951. The destruction wrought by bombs, the movement of population to new areas, the decline in church attendance, the corresponding lowering of moral standards in public life, "all constituted a challenge to the Christian faith on a nation-wide scale such as no Christian group could hope to meet alone". He then pays tribute to the determination and zeal of Ernest Payne (and his predecessors) in tackling this challenging situation by facing the churches with particular emphasis on training and supporting the ministry and evangelizing the new housing areas springing up all over Britain.

If it be said that none of these efforts succeeded in arresting the decline in numerical strength which has marked the life of British Baptists for many years past, the answer must be that they were never intended to do so. God alone is the giver of new life and it is not in man's power to create it. But he may prepare for it.²

Questions of Ministry, Mission and Finance remain high on our agenda. We, like our predecessors, bring prayer and imagination to the great issues of the day. We do well to heed the counsel: "God alone is the giver of new life and it is not in man's power to create it".

2. What Kind of Church?

Too often our thinking regarding the Church begins with organisational change to the structures rather than our covenant relationship with God. I think it is Thomas Oden who expresses his aversion to superficial change in the church as "a long parade of novelties which promise the moon and deliver green cheese" and after the dust of debates and experiments are over, we are left with a church "strewn with the wreckage of such fantasies". Personally, I welcome most of the tributaries of renewal flowing into the local church - Alpha courses, Iona pilgrimages, spiritual retreats, times of refreshing conferences, radical community projects, Willow Creek services. But I am wary of blessing and refreshing without true change of heart and mind.

We all have stories and experiences of traditions which shackle and constrain the Church. They often concern tea-urns, pianos and pews. We need to pay more attention to the thought patterns of the Church we have inherited. We can be blind to their constricting power. We need to be praying that the mission consciousness of the Church is more highly developed.

The starting point in developing what Wilbert Shenk calls this "vital ecclesial consciousness" is the renewal of the Church in its covenant relationship with the Triune God:

Genuine renewal will engage all dimensions of life; spiritual, theological, intellectual, practical. It will ignite the devotion of God's people to serve God by bearing witness in the world.

3. What Kind of World?

The deep nature of the changes we are experiencing in society need to be interpreted. Why does Alvin Toffler describe the period 1950 - 2025 as "the hinge of history" and as a "new civilization spreading across the planet"? In the opening chapter of their book on biblical faith in a postmodern age, Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh draw together a range of authors to illustrate the crisis of the times. They speak of "the depths of a cultural winter", "the gravest sort of anxiety", "the edge of an abyss", "O sweet fantasia of the safe home".³ David Wells offers a similar analysis when he suggests that the changes we are experiencing are in the profoundest sense "spiritual".

It is not just the outer fabric of our life that has been assaulted by change but its inner sanctum as well. Change has intruded on the core of our being, the place where values are wrought, appetites emerge, expectations arise, and meaning is constructed.⁴

God's people need to realise that he is speaking to his world through the upheavals of our generation. Howard Snyder's influential book *EarthCurrents* is a sophisticated evaluation of the incredible changes we may expect to see in the next forty years. I have found one of his phrases thought provoking: "EarthCurrents have a power that prods the spirit not just the mind".⁵

The reference of David Wells to change in the **inner sanctum** and Howard Snyder's earthCurrents which **prod the spirit**, are a clue to the way we are to develop the art of double listening as preachers. Listening to the voice of God in scripture, listening to the voices of the cultures which surround us, and then exploring in our preaching how these two horizons meet.

I discern a prodding of the spirit when Andrew Neil confesses to be perplexed about the "ticking bomb of the poor underclass in our society"; when Matthew Parris writes his series of articles in *The Times* challenging the Church concerning its true identity;⁶ when Julie Burchill defines the nature of sin in response to the Church of England's report on Marriage and Cohabitation; when Melvyn Bragg debates the nature of Easter with Claire Rayner on Radio 4; when Dustin Hoffman at the Cannes Film Festival challenges the contemporary level of screen violence; when Tony Blair declares, in an Easter Day article, 'Why I am a Christian?' and political columnist Ian Aitken responds with: "Never mind what Tony Blair thinks, the truth is that, after greed, religion is probably the second most evil influence on human behaviour".⁷

Take note of the earthcurrents which 'prod the spirit' and engage with them in preaching.

4. What Kind of Message?

I sense that the people in our local churches often feel helpless and overwhelmed in the midst of all the turbulence of uncertainty. They need to be reminded that we are the vulnerable flock of God sent out as lambs amongst wolves; we are given a foolish message to proclaim which will always be a stumbling block; and the life style of the Kingdom will always be confrontational to the powers and principalities. But in spite of our built-in spiritual frailty and weakness, we must develop a greater confidence in the message of the gospel. We must see ourselves as the 'big story' people. I am increasingly alarmed at the 'small story' mentality which is still perpetuated and leaves people helpless in interpreting the world at large.

We need to take note of what happened in Rwanda, a country in East Africa which in post-war years experienced a mighty outpouring of revival power, yet church leaders have been found wanting in teaching a deficient gospel which took scant notice of tribal divisions and social and political anarchy. There are extreme dangers in a privatised faith which is merely concerned with 'churchy' matters and fails to address the turning tides of human history. The forthcoming millennium celebrations will spawn a plethora of earth stories and worldviews as a variety of groupings (not all religious) will put forward their vision for a new society and take advantage of the millennium debate by focusing on a new vision for our society which reflects Gospel values and presents the timeless message of the Good News of Jesus in creative thought forms.

Howard Snyder is most imaginative in his approach to this task. He suggests that

everyone loves a good story and offers a sevenfold criterion for a credible worldstory. he says a worldstory must be comprehensive, ecological, personal, historical, public, ethical and transforming. The only worldstory to satisfy this kind of criterion is the Jesus worldstory with its "remarkable cogency, energy and inspiration".

The Jesus worldstory is friendly to all that is positive and humanizing..but is deadly hostile to all that is destructive, dehumanizing or pathological.

It is friendly towards information access for all but hostile to any manipulative use of information.

It encourages global economic well being, but it warns of economic injustice.

It affirms the full worth and freedom of women, but it negates any shattering of gender partnership and complementarity.

It cherishes earth as good and worth caring for but opposes reducing humankind to nothing but one more species in the ecosystem.⁸

5. What Kind of People?

I began by saying that we need a stronger understanding of God's sovereign work in bringing new things to birth, but we have a part to play in God's unfolding vision. If we are to be part of God's new Church in the 21st century then the quality of our discipleship must count. We owe an incalculable debt to the 18th century pastor-theologian, Andrew Fuller, with his searching and enquiring mind. Fuller was influenced by that generation of God's giants who have been characterised as great thinkers, great worshippers, great hoppers and great warriors.⁹ We need all these virtues if we are to be God's obedient people. Martin Luther's dictum that the three things that make the theologian are prayer, thinking in God's presence and conflict, could be a motto for today's pastor-theologian.

We need a new generation of thinkers. For all the renewal that has come to aspects of worship, notably hymnody, we remain untravelled in vast territories of knowing and obeying the living God.

We need a new generation of worshippers. Too often we have joined our voices with the doom and gloom brigade and judged the world in its desperate plight instead of witnessing with joy to the alternative lifestyle of the Kingdom of God and enabling others to have an alternative vision. We have forecast the thunderstorms and failed to mention the rising of the sun.

We need a new generation of hoppers. But most of all we need the heroic element. There is no such thing as vision without conflict. I confess that sometimes I have succumbed to the pressure of allowing a sphere of ministry to become a playground for my personal ambitions. We have to lament for all such views of ministry. We have to lay our personal ambitions down in the safest place for all Christians - under the shadow of the cross. Without this searching self-sacrifice we will never make anything count.

We need a new generation of warriors. Such a generation will be in the business of expecting great things from God and attempting great things for God.

Yes, that God.

David Coffey

Footnotes:

¹ Edward Hulmes *The Irritant of Agnosticism* Princeton Seminary Bulletin 6 (1985)

² R.L. Child *Outlook for Christianity* edited by L.G. Champion (Lutterworth 1967)

³ J Richard Middleton and Brian J Walsh *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be* (SPCK 1995)

⁴ David F Wells *God in the Wasteland* (IVP 1994)

⁵ Howard A Snyder *Earth Currents* (Abingdon Press 1995)

⁶ See especially *Why do people debate the future of the church when they have not made up their minds about the existence of God?* The Times, Monday April 12 1993

⁷ Ian Aitken *Is Tony promising pie in the sky?* New Statesman and Society 12 April 1996

⁸ Howard Snyder: *Earth Currents* (Abingdon, 1995)

⁹ Jim Packer: *Among God's Giants. The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Kingsway, 1991)

Association Life and Women: Reflections on an Enquiry

Recognition

It is one thing to hold office. It is another to be recognised and accepted. One of my contacts who has held office within an Association had previously served in her local church as secretary. While she is full of praise for the encouragement and support of the men, at all levels, in the Association, she was far from happy with the treatment she received in the otherwise male diaconate within her own church. There was strong opposition to her appointment, which was recorded in the minutes, and a general lack of cooperation and respect until she had proved to the men that she could do the job. She was in post but was neither recognised nor accepted. In that atmosphere she needed all the courage and determination she could muster to keep going.

Some of those who completed questionnaires wrote about being patronised or tolerated. One had to contend with various comments about physical appearance and dress. One commented on the frustration of not being taken seriously; another that the negative attitude of many male church leaders and some ministers was extremely difficult to deal with and often very hurtful; another that her leadership from the chair was totally ignored by two men in a meeting, whose fierce exchange almost came to blows.

And then there is the issue of worship and preaching. There is no doubt that women find it offensive and hurtful when they are prevented from leading worship and preaching in some of our churches. I admire the graciousness and willingness of those who, when making Presidential or Association visits, are willing to sit in the congregation knowing that there is no place for them in the leadership of the service.

I am afraid it is not just the men who are reluctant to recognise women in leadership. There are women who have a similar attitude. When asked whether she had discovered why the post she held had not been previously filled by a woman, one of my correspondents replied that the women in the county prefer not to take leadership roles. This is surely another way of saying that women prefer men to lead.

Without recognition and acceptance, women who are elected as Presidents, Secretaries, Treasurers or chairpersons of Association committees face an unremitting struggle to keep going, let alone to introduce new ideas and initiate change; and it

is understandable if some were unwilling to expose themselves to these pressures. Speaking about her frustration, one of my correspondents added, "Life can be wearying in a male-dominated setting".

Maybe we need to look at background and preparation, qualifications and training, for these are key areas in establishing women in leadership on equal terms with men. Recently, I was given an article from the magazine *Training and Development*, which tackled the subject of sexual differences in the workplace. Under the heading 'Equal Opportunities' comes this paragraph: "In 1990, Prime Minister John Major, launched a business-led campaign called 'Opportunity 2000' to increase the quality and quantity of women's participation in the workforce. This programme provides a manual of 'how-to's' to assist organisations in planning how to utilise women more effectively in organisations. A key factor in maximising women in the workplace is the development of training that helps them not only to prepare for business and the workplace, but also helps them to **optimise** the unique skills that women can bring to a male-orientated work environment".

Re-writing the last sentence of that quotation to put it in a Baptist context we might say: "A key factor in maximising women's involvement in the life of the denomination is the development of training that not only helps them prepare for the tasks waiting to be done, but also helps them optimise their gifts and the unique skills that women can bring to a male-orientated organisation". If such training opportunities were available at Association or Area level, more willing might be willing to come forward to take their rightful and necessary place alongside men.

Affirmation is a further aspect of recognition and plays a valuable part in bringing out the best in people. Women in leadership need this, and have a right to expect it, as they give a lead and call others to follow. I was glad to note that two of my correspondents, one who served as an Association Secretary and the other as a president, paid tribute to their Area Superintendent who had encouraged them to accept the posts and then affirmed them openly.

One woman serving as Association Secretary, writing additional comments at the end of the questionnaire, stressed the need for an in-depth look at encouraging women into leadership: "Men need to create space for women to prove their worth". Or as Elisabeth Moltmann puts it in *His God and Hers*, "Men need to listen to and sit at the feet of women". The Secretary added that the pressures on women needed to be taken seriously and that younger women in particular need to be targeted.

A Woman's Insight

The loss in partnership of half of the human race is an obvious deprivation to its community life. Less clear is the question whether that missing half would bring a special contribution of its own: what, in everyday terms, is frequently labelled a "woman's insight" or "feminine intuition": Ruth Barnhouse, writing on a woman's identity, points out that this entire question is far from being simple and straightforward. She states that, "when we speak of masculine or feminine personality characteristics or behaviour, we are talking about something which has many different variations, something which results from the exceedingly complex interaction between an archetypal predisposition and the total environment of particular individuals, including the rest of their own personality, both conscious and unconscious". The concept of the "archetypal predisposition", to which she refers, comes from Jung's conclusion, following research into history, mythology and the customs of many different cultures, that there are two basic principles forming "part of the given structure of the human psyche - perhaps of the universe". Eastern philosophy agrees with this

observation, going further than Jung in its statement that everything which exists can be divided into 'yang' (masculine) and 'yin' (feminine), and that these two should always be kept in balance supporting and complementing each other.

Despite the complexity of which Professor Barnhouse writes - the variations in feminine personality characteristics and behaviour produced by environmental and other personality influences - it is sense to argue that what is distinctively feminine in this archetypal sense will make its most obvious contribution to community via the women within it. This is true even though within men can be found varying degrees of femininity and within women the corresponding varying degrees of masculinity. Such complexity of individual make-up should certainly warn us all against sexual stereotyping.

In contrast, a simpler starting point to choose is an attempt to define the particular contribution of women to community life taken by many research scholars in recent years. They begin, as Elisabeth and Jurgen Moltmann do, from the "historical experiences....as they can be found today in analyses by social psychologists and personal statement." Similarly, Kathleen Fischer, social worker, therapist and theologian, author of a number of books on these issues, bases her research upon her work experiences with many women and also uses their responses to a questionnaire on the subject of their feminine spirituality. She argues, in particular, that women's experience is "important for understanding God's revelation" - a vital point in the argument of this paper raised under the following section.

Partnership

Community is at the heart of our understanding of the Christian faith. God as Trinity is our model - perfect mutuality. In the beginning God created humanity in his image. Together in mutuality male and female reflect God. In the creation stories of Genesis chapters 1-3, where the writer quotes God as saying "Let us make man" (1:26), the reference here is to humanity, not to a specific male, ie humankind in the sense of all human beings.

In the Gospels we see the beginning of an inclusive community. In talking to the Samaritan woman, Jesus acts against exclusive community. In dealing with a Roman centurion and a Canaanite woman, he makes the same point. His mission embraces all outsiders. The Holy Spirit calls us from all forms of exclusivism to all-inclusive attitudes and actions to "a spirituality which refuses to rule out whole areas of human experience and whole groups of human persons". (K Fischer *Women at the Well*) This inclusiveness draws us naturally into partnership.

Paul's picture of the Church as the Body of Christ tells us that we all need each other. We all belong together, women and men in partnership, with gifts ready to be used, in any and every sphere of Christian service.

Partnership means power: not power as expressed in a hierarchical structure with dominant and subordinate relationships, but power as relation and mutuality. Everyone is included in this exercise of power - in receiving as well as giving, in listening as well as speaking. In describing the Church as a body, Paul makes the point that, while Christ is the Head, all the other parts of the body are of equal value and all need each other. This kind of relational power leads to collaboration rather than competition. No one is side-lined; no one is left out. K Fischer suggests that this type of power could well be part of women's contribution to leadership.

When, in my questionnaire, I asked for 'Hopes for the Future', these were some of the comments I received: "That men and women will work together in love,

accepting each other in Christian leadership"; "that we can see women and men firstly as people and avoid aggressive and defensive behaviour"; "that men and women could work together without women being aggressive or men patronising"; "that churches and male leaders will become more open to accepting women in leadership"; "that the denomination will recognise that women have equal but different contributions to make". on this issue, the onus is particularly on men to give way, make room, stand aside, welcome the women alongside.

A final word from Dave Tomlinson, a leader of the British House Church movement for a number of years and Director of Teamwork: "if we men can purge ourselves of our fears and self-centredness and if our women friends can forgive us and break free from their resentment and hurt, together we can once more reflect the image of God in our homes, fellowships and the world in which we live." (From 'Fear and Forgiveness - a Masculine Confession' in *Men, Women and God*)

Neil Hall

The document from which the above is taken, is available from the author. It is called "Waiting in the Wings". This article first appeared in the *Baptist Times*, permission from which has been obtained.

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No Curry Please, They Are Welsh

My first awareness that I was a "different" kind of a Christian came to me the very first Sunday I went to a church service in Britain. I was a new arrival in this country, a young student, and was taking in the sights (inevitably, with my camera) and sounds, the smells and the tastes, many of them quite strange to me. At the entrance of the church, I received the following welcome from the steward: "No photographs". Somewhat surprised, I replied: "I know".

Thirty years on, the incident is as fresh in my mind as if it happened yesterday. I can still remember the friendly smile and a handshake that the person before me, a white Briton, had got. I did not merit either. What was humiliating though was the feeling that although I had assumed myself to be the same as all other Christians coming to worship the Lord, the steward had obviously seen me as a stranger. The colour of my skin and the camera in my hand were enough signals for him to treat me differently. He, of course, was not to know the shock and humiliation I felt. In a few seconds, he had altered my mental map quite significantly. Until my encounter with him, I had firmly, though naively, believed that Christians treat each other the same way, (at least in the Church!) regardless of the differences. It was the secular world that I should be wary of because of my colour or my accent, but Christians would embrace me as a brother. That experience has repeated itself thousands of times although in very different guises and forms. It varies from the stranger being treated as an inferior species to the stranger being an 'all right' species with a slight element of disbelief. (One comment to me after I took a church service: "Your service went surprisingly well"). Here is another example, with almost a double dose of strangeness - against Asians and, surprisingly to me, the Welsh. Our church in London was planning to entertain a group of visitors from a sister church in Wales and the organiser for the Sunday afternoon hospitality made an open appeal for the congregation to take the Welsh guests home for Sunday dinner. We signed up as potential hosts. The Sunday before the arrival of the guests, our organiser took my wife and I aside and began to explain to us what families in Britain 'normally' had for dinner on a Sunday! He apologised for having to induct us this way he said. The family coming to us were not English but Welsh and they would be very surprised if they were offered a non-traditional meal. As it happens, we had already planned for a roast dinner anyway, but since that episode, we have never been able to offer our hospitality again, not because we got an induction, but because of the tone of that induction, and the way we were made to feel surplus to requirement. We realised that in the first place, the appeal for help did not include our 'strange' and only ethnic family, even if it boasted a deacon and no less than a member of the Baptist Union Council! It was aimed at the 'normal' members of the congregation, not strangers like us.

Different From Us

Once you realise that you are not treated as normal, it is difficult to feel normal. You begin to feel and act like strangers, and I have been struggling to find a way of understanding - and even explaining - this phenomenon. After all, the Bible tells us that it was perfectly possible to walk and talk with Jesus on the road to Emmaus and not recognise him until it was too late. I am anxious that I recognise the God within the people with whom I, metaphorically speaking, walk in my church, and equally, to let the God in me reach out to them. I see no other way of removing the strangeness.

First of all, why this strangeness? Eugin Pusic¹ offers an interesting insight into *Baptist Ministers' Journal July 1996*

why our social relations go wrong or, for the purposes of this article, why we end up treating each other as strangers. His basic premise is succinctly summed up in the very first sentence of his article. He says that 'throughout the history of man it is clear that he needs his fellows for survival and, at the same time, competes with them for survival'. He goes on to argue that this deeply contradictory relationship has determined the basic patterns of human behaviour. According to him, an individual learns to seek relief from tension by two basically incompatible methods: through defence, ie, aggression in competitive affirmation of his or her interests - and through conformity ie acceptance of the protective security of his or her group. Citing another authority² in the same article, he wonders whether, in development of the whole society, there is wastefulness, an 'unjustified expenditure in human suffering, in misfortune, in physical and moral pain, in every generation sacrificing individuals to functioning of society as a whole'.

I have made only the slightest of alteration to Pusic's text, and then only with the aim of applying his insights to the phenomenon of the tragic waste of human capital available within our churches, and particularly the human capital that looks or talks differently. Even though we are churchgoers, in Pusic's terms, we are in competition with other fellow churchgoers about the scarce resources; jobs, promotion, houses, television time and so on, but the presence of people with a different colour actually enables us to identify the competition a little more easily. Paradoxically, the same phenomenon of competition and survival then enables us, in the nicest possible way; without a hint of discrimination, to 'gang up' with the folk of 'our own kind' simply because it eases tension. How else can you explain the white missionaries establishing their own enclaves with other white missionaries? How else can one explain the tension felt by black Christians which they resolve by establishing separate black churches, by demanding separate black representation, by asking for 'black churches led' worship?

It seems to me that 'strangeness' should not be a strange concept to Christians. After all, Jesus did very strange things and made out as if they were perfectly normal things to do. He worked on a Sabbath, he mingled with strange people like prostitutes and untouchables like the Samaritans. He even healed the children of the white colonial rulers of Palestine. At the same time, he took the familiar and made it look quite strange. He made the Pharisees look utterly ridiculous. He looked at a Roman coin, an easily understood and familiar symbol of the repressive colonial regime of Rome and said some strange things about what belonged to God and what belonged to Caesar. Even the most easily understood event of death became a strange phenomenon in his hands, so much so that Thomas had to cry out to examine his palms. Two thousand years later, sociologists were to explain their discipline in the following terms: 'Our job is to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar'. Had they paid attention to the scriptures they would have known that this was already most skilfully done!

Living with Strangeness

Our job, as ordinary mortals, is how to take that sacred tradition of making the strange familiar and vice versa, so beloved of the sociologists, to the heart of our being. We not only have to embrace camera clad people with different colour skin as if it were our own, but we also have to develop the capacity to look at our own beloved roast dinner as the strangest thing on earth. (Take my word for it, there is nothing more strange than a piece of meat, served without even a hint of chilli, served with boiled, smelly cabbage and potatoes, again without a hint of chilli! It is an acquired taste that defies common sense and imagination!)

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To Readers of the Baptist Ministers' Journal

I am always pleased to hear about Baptisms taking place in various churches throughout the country. Such events are not only in obedience to Our Lord's command but also present a wonderful opportunity for witness. Usually on such occasions the Church is crowded with members of the immediate family, congregation and visitors wishing to witness the event.

In view of the fact that the Baptistry is uncovered and there are likely to be a number of people present who are not familiar with the layout of the sanctuary, it is essential that some form of barrier is placed around the Baptistry to avoid accidents of people falling in. Unfortunately there have been one or two accidents recently where a member of the congregation has fallen into the Baptistry and sustained fairly serious injuries which could have been avoided had the Church Leadership erected a cordon around the Baptistry whilst it was uncovered. All that is needed is a fairly simple cordon of metal or timber "stands" with rope or cord between each "stand" similar to the type used in banks, Building Societies and Departmental Stores. Obviously the cordon will be removed whilst the Baptisms are taking place but then replaced after the event and until the Baptistry is closed.

The Church Leadership are obliged to provide a safe environment for the congregation and by utilising a fairly simple system in connection with the use of the Baptistry one very real risk can be minimised.

Yours in His Service

T E Mattholie

Titmuss³, a pioneering thinker in social welfare, made famous the phrase 'gift relationship'. Christians will have no difficulty in understanding the very core of this phrase. After all, we believe that the greatest gift God gave us was, like the father of the prodigal son, an unbroken relationship with him (at least from his side) even at the cost of his earthly life. Knowingly or unknowingly, Titmuss develops his thinking on 'gift relationship' based on the model of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. He asserts that in a gift relationship to strangers, the gift carries 'no explicit right, moral enforcement or a return gift'. And by definition, the first gift could not be an obligatory gift but an act of choice. An obligatory gift is not a gift, it is a chore (which we so dutifully carry out at Christmas). Perhaps it is the lack of this understanding when we in the host churches are placed in a position to offer gifts, freely, of a smile, of a handshake and of acceptance of strange things like cameras that makes us unwitting contributors to the tragic human waste that Pusic talks about. More devastatingly, it is our inability to **accept** gifts, freely given, of strange food, of strange rituals and even strange ways of looking at things (rather like Jesus did), that betrays our commitment to God. St Peter did the same under duress. Three times he claimed that his God was a total stranger to him. He finally had the grace, same as the prodigal son, to come to his senses. Would we, could we, do the same?

Chandu Christian

Footnotes:

¹ Pusic, Eugin *A New Concept of Responsibility in Social Responsibilities* in Katherine A Kendall (ed) (1970) *Social Work Values in an Age of Dissent* New York: Council on Social Work Education, pp 62-75

² Bruhl, Levy, *ibid*, p64

³ Titmuss, R.M. (1970) *The Gift Relationship*, London, Allen and Unwin, p212

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Every Thursday

The Saving Cry of Dereliction

At the end of his article on 'Preaching the Descensus' (July 1995) Ronald Armstrong suggested a need to 'wrestle afresh' with the 'soteriological significance' of Christ's descent into hell. It may be unusual for a lay Baptist to write to the *Baptist Ministers' Journal*, but this passage rang chords for me on first reading and recent conversations prompt me to urge that these are indeed matters with which it is worth wrestling.

I cannot *remember* any sermon on the Descensus: that is not to say I have never heard one, only that none sticks in my memory. I have, however, often remembered my headmistress teaching us to wonder at the omnipresent God of Psalm 139. She had a great love of the Old Testament and the ability to communicate her enthusiasm within the constraints of the state school RE curriculum. In turning up the passage from which I have drawn much comfort at dark times, I find confirmation that I got this from school, not church, because it is the Revised Version, rather than the Authorized, that rings in my ears: 'If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there'.

I have certainly heard plenty of Baptist sermons on salvation from sin and paid enthusiastic lip service to this in many a hymn, but for me the stronger message from Christ's incarnation and passion is that God in Christ plumbed the depths of human experience and knows about human anguish. In human terms, those who have 'been through the mill' themselves are often the best comforters: it is surely not fanciful to attribute some of the strong power of the Comforter to Christ's experience of suffering.

Dark Soul Night

Two days before I was baptized, my father lost his sight with dramatic suddenness. I was then thirteen and throughout my teenage years both our parents were ill - MS gradually destroyed my father, and continual lifting caused my mother serious spinal damage. It was against that context that I encountered Psalm 139. No wonder I remember it.

BUild (The Baptist Union Initiative with People who have Learning Difficulties) has just held one of its occasional 'theological consultations' - does that sound 'a right put off?' Forty-five people, with and without theological training, were prepared to come to Central London on a Saturday, some from as far as Darlington, and wrestle with deep questions! Some of the parents who came, especially those whose children were born with profound and multiple disabilities, have lived for many years in their own private hell. Their presence at such a day is a testimony to Christ having been found there with them. Whatever the nature of our troubles, when in the depths we want that assurance that 'all the sorrow, all the aching wrings with pain the heart of God'.

Surely the Gethsemane and Calvary demonstration of this divine experience of human suffering is part of the specialness of the Christian gospel? When we pray for a particular, difficult cup to be taken from us and the answer is 'no', and when we feel that God has forsaken us, we know that Jesus knew what that felt like. There are times when it is the Cry of Dereliction that helps us to cling to faith.

Last year my friend was desperately ill with cancer. The local vicar, himself just out of hospital after cancer surgery, went to see this Baptist parishioner. 'Where is

God in this?', he asked, 'Very close or remote?' 'Remote', she replied. The fact that he accepted this and did not press the point was one of the things she remembers as positively helpful at that time.

Her most difficult evening followed a phone call insisting that she must be finding it easier to cope with cancer because of her faith. Easier than what was never specified, and the caller seemed unable to hear the protest that she could not comment on that since she had never tried coping with cancer *without* her faith, and that she did not see faith as a magic wand to be waved to make it easier.

Some months of chemotherapy later, when the whole family took a weekend break together and visited a village chapel, a sermon in which they were urged to rejoice in whatever God sends, including specifically 'Thank God for cancer', infuriated them. Her daughter's father-in-law was near to death, her own disease in tenuous remission, her granddaughter getting back to normal life - between scans: that family could thank God for being in it with all of them, and for preserving their faith through it all, but not for the disease itself.

At a theological college (not Baptist, as it happens, but doubtless it could happen in ours too) two new students and their wives seemed to be settling into close friendship - until a three-year old child developed cancer. The other couple promptly 'dropped' the parents - their friendship was going to prove too demanding, too harrowing. Three years on they were heard to rejoice that their time at college had not changed them at all - they were still the same enthusiastic, triumphalist Christians. How very sad!

When my mother developed a terminal illness, as an old lady with several long-term troublesome conditions, although still of lively mind, she and we were able to accept her coming death as right. Unfortunately, her church could not. In earlier years she had on more than one occasion made remarkable recoveries, more obviously related to prayer than to medical treatment. This time a combination of treatment that seemed to us inappropriate and the church's equally inappropriate prayers kept dragging her back from the brink - but only to prolong the increasing agony and indignity, not to give hope of recovery.

She came to dread visits from her church friends. She seemed to be losing the faith that had carried her through the early weeks of illness and had brought Bible phrases to her lips when apparently at the point of death and beyond conscious conversation with us. In despair my sister told me, 'I will tackle the doctors but ministers are your pigeon - please persuade hers that it is time to help her die, not to fight against it'. Not easy, but I tried, and he faced up to her real need to be allowed to go - something of the comfort of faith returned and the relief of death followed swiftly.

Just Being There

I do not know much about those various theological understandings of the Descensus outlined in Armstrong's paper. I do know that there are times when there are no easy answers but there is comfort in knowing that the Lord is there with us, even when *our* eyes cannot pierce the gloom. I beg our preachers to recognize the gospel power of Christ's dereliction and descensus.

Faith Bowers

Homosexuality: A Christian View: A Flawed Appraisal?

Keith Riglin's view about the nature of homosexuality (BMJ, 254, April 1996) cannot be claimed to be Christian because it is not founded on the available evidence.¹ He over-relies on 'contemporary scientific evidence' so-called.

He asserts that what may be regarded as normal or abnormal with respect to sexual orientation is a matter of statistics. In other words, the statistical distribution of orientations in a population simply reports how the land lies (so to speak). The folly underlying the conclusion which is then drawn, that homosexual orientation cannot therefore be regarded as abnormal in a moral sense, is to apply statistics prescriptively when all they can properly be is descriptive. That is not to deny the predictive use of statistics, however. The abuse occurs when predictions are made determinatively, as though what has been must always be. When causative factors in a particular scenario are understood, and particularly if they can be manipulated, then forecasting based on the *status quo* is inappropriate. However, Riglin accepts without question that five to ten percent of the population 'will be gay'. That may turn out to be the case, but it need not be so.

Genetics or Development?

He also assumes that people with homosexual orientation are made the way they are. Whether gays are born or made is, of course, the issue at the heart of the debate. It is the one question which governs other conclusions. The genetic evidence is highly specious. It seems these days that geneticists are finding hereditary causes for a wide range of behavioural aberrations. Research which identifies genes causative or contributing to physical or metabolic abnormalities is to be welcomed and applauded. Behavioural traits, however, must be treated differently since other factors from earliest days in the development of a child, many of which cannot be identified, let alone quantified, need also to enter the equation. The possibility that certain inherited deficiencies affect adult behaviour cannot be ruled out, but we must guard against the spirit of an age which tends to excuse aberrant behaviour and thus remove individual culpability for sin. Simply because we are christianly compassionate towards a homosexual person should not cloud our discriminatory faculties when it comes to the cause of their orientation.

Elizabeth Moberley's *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (James Clarke & Co, Cambridge, 1983) is basic reading. It is a summary of research over a number of years in which the author makes a cogent case for the cause of homosexual orientation in both men and women to be an arrest in their psychological development influenced by a deficiency in the relationship with the parent of the same sex. Her conclusion is that 'in all instances, the homosexual condition is one of same-sex ambivalence...not just same-sex love' (pp 12,17). She develops the view that homosexuality is not normal, in the sense that it is not what the Creator intended, and that it can be treated and cured with appropriate therapy.

Whether homosexual orientation is expressed practically or not is important, but Moberley's thesis diverts attention from its expression to the more important issue of its nature. Christians who still take seriously the biblical condemnation of homosexuality, which by its nature addresses the practice of genital relations, as opposed to merely orientation, will still be forced to acknowledge the sinfulness of such 'unnatural' couplings. However, they will acknowledge that the orientation of

itself is not sinful; rather that it is a curable condition. Moberley suggests that the gay person is to be regarded as homosexual whether or not their orientation is expressed in relationships. The book is not condemnatory, rather, it is compassionate, and if she is right, indicates a way out for all homosexuals, irrespective of their lifestyle.

The strength of Elizabeth Moberley's thesis is that it seems to work in practice. Various Christian counsellors and practitioners of therapy for sexual deviancy have reported that a faulty relationship with the same sex parent is often a factor found in the psychological make-up of homosexual people who seek their help. The prognosis is positive. There are cured ex-gays with 'normal' heterosexual orientation.

Toleration and Lifestyle

To return briefly to the issue of the use of statistics with which I began, we have no way of knowing whether the proportion of the population which has expressed deficient relationships with the same-sex parent has always been comparable with the present day level. Society's attitude to homosexual practice has not always been the same, so the evidence cannot be complete. What is certain, however, is that the modern toleration and affirmation of homosexuality as a valid expression of an individual's humanity will tend to affirm and encourage homosexuality more and more, and by the same token, will discourage those trapped in a gay lifestyle from seeking help towards normality.

One visible effect of society's toleration has been an increase in overt homosexual lifestyle and thereby a lessening of the likelihood that homosexuals will produce offspring. In the past, to avoid censure, a gay person would have had to maintain at least the appearance of a heterosexual lifestyle. Thus if homosexuality has a genetic basis, the disposing genes would have been distributed throughout the population without selective pressure. What we see in the present day, however, is an increasing tendency towards exclusion of such genes from the breeding gene pool. They will be reduced in incidence, simply because homosexuals increasingly avoid passing on their genes through natural progeny. The considerations of population genetics are complex, particularly since the behaviour of the putative genes is purely speculative, but the question arises: if there are now fewer homosexually-inclining genes around in the breeding population, should we not expect to see a decline in their expression and a commensurate reduction in the size of the identifiable gay community? It is too soon to see, but the gay community seems to be rather flourishing. Perhaps the cause is not genetic after all.

If gays are made rather than born, we do not need to apologise for a perceived biblical stance in opposition to homosexuality. The words of Paul and the Pentateuch writers no longer need to be sifted in order to find loop holes permitting homosexual actions. They are like any other signs for which there is forgiveness and healing in the atonement.

For any Christian who would reach out to a homosexual person with the message of wholeness, there is a real cost to be counted. If the arrest in psychological development of the homosexual is to be addressed and moved on to normality, he or she must be helped to develop 'normal' relationships with those of the same sex, as well as with the opposite sex. To develop a deep friendship with a homosexual person of one's own sex while avoiding compromise of one's heterosexuality will be a profound challenge but a challenge with infinite rewards.

Robin J Giles

Footnotes:

¹ The exegetical aspects of the paper are not my present concern. Doubtless, they will be the subject of debate for much time to come. Helpful contributions in this respect I have seen recently are, J Glen Taylor, 'The Bible and Homosexuality', *Themelios* 21:1, October 1995, p11 and a review by David Wright in *Evangelicals Now*, January 1996, of Michael Vasey's pro-gay *Can Gay Be Godly?*

An Essay Review: Scripture Interpretation

Models for Scripture by John Goldingay (Paternoster Press, 1994, 420pp £15.99)

Models for Interpretation of Scripture by John Goldingay (Paternoster Press, 1995, 328pp £15.99)

In successive years the Principal of St John's College, Nottingham, has written a major book on the Bible. The first (referred to in this article as volume I) includes material originally given as the Day-Higginbotham lectures at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth. The second (called volume II in this review) includes material from seminars with the students of the Evangelical Theological House of Studies (ETHOS) in the University of Natal at Pietermaritzburg. The author makes clear his reason for writing both books: "*The central tragedy of the history of biblical study over the past two centuries is that the objective, distancing, critical approach to scripture, and the obedient, trusting, experiential approach have proceeded in substantial independence of each other. The one is appropriate to the scholarly game and the exam treadmill, the other to believers on their knees praying or on their feet preaching. People are brought up on the second approach, struggle with the first approach to get a degree, and then revert with relief to the second when they escape from their tutor's eye...In fact, however, our contemporary application of scripture will be shallow or predetermined by the insights and experience we bring to scripture or both if we concentrate exclusively on the question of contemporary application.*" (II p264)

John Goldingay believes that the main reason for this is that we have struggled to find one word or phrase to define our doctrine of scripture - such as revelation, authority, inspiration, the word of God, infallibility, inerrancy; and then have applied it to the whole of the Bible. This is a fruitless task because scripture is so varied in its genres. He therefore offers four models for understanding it. Whilst each applies particularly to certain parts of the Bible, each also throws light on the whole.

His first model is **Witnessing Tradition**, which he applies to the narrative parts of the First Testament (He prefers to use the terms First and Second rather than Old and New), and to the Gospels and Acts. He points out, however, that "*the whole of scripture is witness to the Gospel. It passes on good news about God*". (I p77) In this section, in both volumes, he expounds literary criticism and has much to say about stories. Here, as in the other sections, he maintains a high view of scripture whilst criticising traditional approaches from both the conservative and liberal sides. For instance he writes: "*It is precisely the serious theological concern of scripture that makes it find that midrash, legend and saga serve its purpose alongside the more prosaic form of historiography*" (I, p69) On the other hand, he gives a fourfold criticism of the purely historical approach to scripture, including the remark: "*The form of objectivity it seeks is not only unattainable but also not worth attaining..it ignores the actual text*" (II,p20)

The second model is **Authoritative Canon**. The author applies this category not only to the Torah, but also to the teaching material in the Gospels and Epistles. He gives a very detailed and helpful account of the forming of the canon of both Testaments, commenting: "*everything is affected by ideology, including the shaping of scripture into its final canonical form*" (I p107). He also provides a fascinating

discussion on the relationship between scripture, tradition, reason and experience: *"As reason replaced tradition as scripture's chief theological rival, so experience has now replaced reason"* (I p190). In this section in the second volume he wrestles with the diversity of standards in different parts of scripture, and he expounds in some detail the way in which Jesus handled the Torah, for instance on the subject of divorce: *"In analyzing the tensions between what was intended 'from the beginning' and what was written 'because of the hardness of your hearts', Jesus points out how easily people settle for the latter and have to face the challenge of the former"* (II p96). Later he points out that Paul bases his moral teaching, not on the Torah, but *"on the nature of the Gospel, the guidance of the Spirit and the practice of the churches."* (II p103)

His third model is **Inspired Word**, illustrated primarily by the prophets. In Volume I he deals with the difference between inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy: *"It is as promise that the word of God is infallible"* (I p212) and *"to say that scripture is inerrant is to say that it does not wander, go astray or lose the path, it is undeviating"* (I p213). He emphasizes that prophecies are significant beyond their immediate context, and in volume II he treats the use of quotations from the First Testament in the Second. He points out that much contemporary Christian use of scripture resembles the Second Testament's use of the First in allegorical and figurative ways. I found this illuminating; his next point challenging: *"interpretation often involves a move from fusion through distancing to communion"*; (II p185), and his final comment comforting *"The Holy Spirit is behind both the mental labour and the intuitive insight"* (II p188)

The last model is **Experienced Revelation**. This is perhaps the most difficult part of his argument to follow, because he has to include in this section all the rest of scripture - the Psalms, the Wisdom literature, Job, Song of Songs, the Epistles and the Revelation. He links these disparate books by a Venn diagram of three overlapping circles representing Revelation, Experience and Reflection. He claims that the Psalms, Job and Paul's writings fall within that section where all three circles overlap, whereas the Wisdom literature falls only within the last two and the apocalypses within the first two. He shows how the whole of scripture in some sense is theological reflection upon experience - the epistles one kind, the narratives another, the dreams and nightmares of Daniel and Revelation a third, the policies of the Torah a fourth, and the Psalms perhaps the most important category of all, reflection in worship. Two of the chapters in volume II are specifically addressed to preachers - chapter 5 "how stories preach" and chapter 17 "reflective expository preaching".

These are not easy books to read, but it is worth persevering, because the subjects they cover are so important for the work of ministry today. You really need both of them. If your book allowance doesn't stretch to buying them, order them from your local library.

John Nicholson

Book Reviews

***Dark Night Spirituality* by Peter King (SPCK) ISBN 0-281-04884-3**

Through an imaginative juxtaposition of the thought of the Trappist Thomas Merton, the German pastor, theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Dutch Jewish diarist and victim of Auschwitz, Etty Hillesum, Peter King leads his reader to where, he argues, a contemplative perspective brought each of them - to the "dark night of the soul, - a landscape traced out by the sixteenth century mystic St John of the Cross in his theology of prayer. In developing this argument, King acknowledges that in the accepted sense, the term "contemplative" is an ill-fitting label for all but Merton, but by understanding the contemplative perspective phenomenologically, as a way of seeing reality which embodies connectedness, wholeness, and integration, he is able to describe a measure of common ground amidst the considerable differences of outlook. The common ground comprises "dark night spirituality", a spirituality of emptiness and renunciation, where words, concepts, and images fall away and God alone is reality.

King's argument is clearly presented with chapters devoted to Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum respectively. These are followed by an analysis of correspondence between the contemplative perspective they exemplify and the perspective described within the so-called "New Paradigm" of modern theology, represented by writers like Larry Rasmussen, Rebecca Chopp, and Chung Hyun-Kyung. King's straightforward, uncomplicated style makes for easy reading.

The value of the book lies in two distinct areas. First, as a contribution to academic debate, it opens and begins to develop a perspective upon the spirituality of Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum which is largely unexplored and potentially productive. Second, the book has a value for all who, in leading the people of God, are brought to their own "dark night"; it encourages a recognition that darkness is not where theology ends, but where it is launched into an ever more challenging and creative future.

J P Elliston

***Is God Helpless?* by Peter Cotterell. (Triangle SPCK 96 pp £5.99)**

The commonly-heard complaints 'It isn't fair!' and 'Why does God allow it?' provide the framework of this book on suffering and the sovereignty of God, in which the philosophical approach of Richard Swinburne is dismissed early as 'a sign of a corrupt mind.' (p. 3)

Cotterell rejects the distinction between God willing and permitting suffering, for either way God is responsible. Suffering and death are the result of some kind of cosmic fall (though Genesis 1-3 is not interpreted literally) and the human fall is the consequence of an already fallen spirit world (Genesis 3 interpreted by Revelation 12). No mention is made of the Irenaean alternative to this Fall theology expounded by Hick.

The discussion covers difficult Old Testament passages, unanswered prayer, other religions' responses to suffering, heaven and hell, eight principles for understanding the Bible and Macquarrie's 'polarities' of human existence (though the reference is not given.)

Jesus shows us that death is not something to be feared. He 'confronted death

with ... a prayer of tranquillity (Luke 23:46)' (p. 75), a selective use of scripture in view of the cry of dereliction in Matthew and Mark. The crux of the Christian response to suffering is the incarnation. Jesus 'showed that God was not helpless' (p. 92) by healing the sick and raising the dead.

The style is readable and some good points are made but the quality of the discussion is uneven and the argument at times appears confused; God is not omnipotent (p. 16) but a mere word spoken from his omnipotence would end all suffering (p. 29). God is not on the throne because his will is not done (p. 21), but whilst his will is flouted 'those actions do not actually dethrone him' (p. 20).

For those seeking breadth rather than depth this book may serve some purpose.

John V Matthews.

***The Lion CD of the Bible and Christianity.* Lion Publishing plc.**

Cost about £70.

I expect most church go-ers have at some time or another used a copy of Lion's famous "Handbook to the Bible". Now, with the right computer hardware, you can access material in the "Handbook to the Bible" as well as "The Lion Encyclopaedia of the Bible", "An Introduction to the Christian Faith", "The Quiet Revolution", "The Lion History of Christianity", "Treasures from Bible Times", and discoveries from the Time of Jesus". The full text (including Apocryphal and Deuterocanonical Books) of the Good News Bible is also included!

All of this material has been reworked to form a seamless whole on the CD. Therefore ease of access (using telescopic menus) is considerable and the scope truly panoramic! Introductions to each section are in both text and audio. Photographs, maps, and time charts are but a "mouse click" away.

Copyright allows output from any section to a notepad or clipboard provided the source is acknowledged. System requirements are: 486 or higher IBM compatible PC running Windows 3.1 or above, with CD-ROM drive and Windows compatible sound card, and 4 MB RAM (8 MB recommended) and 8 MB of hard disk space. For best visual results a 1 MB graphics card and SVGA monitor as an absolute minimum is required.

The value of the CD lies in its scope. For the hard working minister in need of good quality material for e.g. a housegroup, or the Sunday School teacher looking for background information for a lesson, or for the church member wanting to gain a deeper appreciation of Christianity and the bible, then this resource is excellent. Otherwise, nice if you want to illustrate sermons or talks, inappropriate as a replacement for solid exegesis or study.

Like all Lion material the contents are written by scholars from the evangelical wing of the church.

Callum Jones.

***Celtic Night Prayer, compiled by members of the Northumbria Community.* Marshall Pickering, (available March 1996)**

Celtic Night Prayer is a companion volume to Celtic Daily Prayer, both being written by the Northumbria Community. It contains a wealth of material helpful for personal devotions, retreats or in times of corporate worship.

It begins with liturgies for use at the end of the day, written using material from the Celtic Christian tradition. The community never intended to be Celtic but as they followed the call of God in their hearts they discovered that much of the teaching of the Celtic church made sense of their own journey in God. Those familiar with Compline late night prayer will find these liturgies provide a new and helpful way of bringing the day to a close.

Life is not only dark at night! This book gives us material to use when our own praying is difficult, when God seems absent, when life is painful, when we have more questions than answers and yet we still long to seek God.

There are stories, in meditational form, of some of the Celtic saints which are both inspirational and challenging. Also there are prayers for the main festivals of the Christian Year and other important times such as birth, marriage and death.

Finally the book contains daily readings, for each month of the year, designed to be used with the liturgy for either morning or evening prayer (liturgies available in Celtic Daily Prayer).

The material in the book is rich because it has evolved out of the spiritual life of the Northumbria community before being made accessible to others. It is not merely a collection of thought provoking words, although it is well written, but it reveals the heartbeat of those whose primary vocation is to seek God for Himself.

I have, personally, found that using both of these volumes has enabled the expression of my own heart cry to God and enriched my devotional life; I commend them both to you.

Jacqui Triggs

***To Win the West* by Martin Robinson. (Monarch Publications: £7.99.)**

A 300 word review cannot do justice to this excellent book. I confess to an initial reluctance to read it on the basis that at present our church, and maybe yours too, are finding it hard to win our street to Jesus let alone thinking of winning the West! Many of us would admit to the narrow focus we have on the work of our own church, especially if our gifting is pastoral, and to a neglect of how it fits into the wider scheme of things. Robinson's book shakes us free of any such insularity and once I started it I couldn't put it down.

Giving a concise overview of the development of the church he interprets the significance of each stage of its growth or decline. He examines how well the church has adapted its mission approach to the changing needs of society including discussing the importance of the church responding wisely to the presence of other faiths; not ignoring them and expecting them to disappear. His analysis enables us to appreciate the contributions of various branches of the church to world mission at different times in her history.

While this is a factual book and therefore it records the decline of the Church in recent years, it is also a book of hope that the trend can be reversed. Robinson records that hostility to religion is declining and that there is a change evident in society now as a new generation of people search for the answers to spiritual questions. There are definite signs, he believes, that the decline in church attendance is at an end - whether churches start to grow depends on whether they seize the opportunities presented to them.

This book will both inform you and make you think. Finally, what impressed me

was Robinson's ability to make an analysis which clearly honours God for what has been accomplished and did not limit what he may want to do in the future.

Jacqui Triggs

***How to Understand the History of Christian Mission.* by Jean Comby.**

(SCM Press Ltd. 1996. £12.95.)

Jean Comby is a Professor in the Catholic Faculty of the University of Lyons. The original title of his book, "Deus Mille ans d'évangélisation", describes more accurately the book's content than the title of the English translation. Comby seeks to provide an account of the different ways in which the gospel has been proclaimed against a changing historical and geographical backdrop.

From its beginning in the Ancient World the history of Christian expansion is traced through the birth of Christian Europe (Fifth to eleventh centuries), to evangelisation in the Period of Christendom (Eleventh to fourteen centuries), followed by an upsurge and then decline in missionary activity in the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. An account of missionary renewal in the nineteenth century leads into an overview of the prodigious development of missionary endeavour in the period of colonial imperialism and finally to the ways in which decolonisation has influenced the manner in which the world-wide church now seeks to obey the Great Commission.

In the concluding chapter the question is discussed as to whether, in the light of history, all peoples are capable of becoming Christians. More than 80 percent of present-day Christians live in either Europe or America. In Africa, almost all of the countries with a predominantly Christian population were formerly European colonies. In Asia, only the Philippines, the sole Asian country to have become a European colony, are Christians in the majority. It is suggested that such statistics might indicate that Christianity has a real chance of becoming a majority religion only when it addresses cultures in the process of change under the pressure of outside events.

This book contains a wealth of illustrative material in the form of maps, diagrams and, not least, a host of carefully selected extracts from contemporary sources.

Comby gives an excellent in-depth appraisal of the milieu, motivations and methodologies of Catholic missions world-wide. By contrast, his survey of the contribution of the non-Catholic confessions is much more superficial. As a result, his book is more valuable as an aid to understanding the history of Catholic missions than to understanding Christian mission as a whole.

H Fred Drake.

Baptist Ministers' Fellowship Mission Statement

The BMF exists to express pastoral care and exhibit proactive concern

The BMF is independent of the Baptist Union or Association structures.

The BMF seeks to:

Express pastoral care

- by encouraging prayer for each other
- by being alert to pastoral needs with which it may be able to help
- by giving financial gifts from its Benevolent Fund
- by maintaining links through correspondence with both retired ministers and those active overseas
- by helping to inform and encourage members through the *Journal* and Pastoral Session

Exhibit pro-active concern

- by raising, considering and organising appropriate responses to current issues as they apply to members and ministry
- by representing the views and concerns of members to the officers of the Baptist Union and other bodies as appropriate.

The BMF is open to those in pastoral charge of Baptist Churches, whether or not accredited, and to Baptist ministers in other forms of work. Those in training for the Baptist Ministry are welcomed as student members.

The business of the BMF is conducted through a committee composed of officers, correspondents, members of the editorial board and area representatives (names listed on front and back inside covers of *Journal* who:

- attend twice yearly committee meetings
- are active in promoting the work of BMF in their areas
- feed into committee issues and concerns raised by individuals and ministers' groups in each area.
- by encouraging prayer for each other
- by being alert to pastoral needs with report back to individuals, ministers' groups and retreats the fruit of discussions and action taken.
- are alert to pastoral needs with which the BMF may be able to help, including the use of the Benevolent Fund.
- report ministerial moves and news for the "Of Interest to You" column to the editor of the *Journal*.

This Mission Statement was agreed by the Fellowship AGM meeting in Blackpool on 1st May 1996. Written comments are welcomed - by 31st July please: addressed to the Secretary, Jonathan Edwards. These will be considered at the September committee meeting.