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The Baptist Ministers' Journal is the journal of
the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship.

Details of the Fellowship can be found
on the inside back cover

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

Editorial

A number of significant changes are taking place in our Fellowship and in the production of this Journal. John Kemmett is retiring after fifteen years of careful and reliable work in the layout, printing and production line. Successive Editors have every reason to be grateful for his good humoured skill and patience. The production of the next edition will involve a shift to 'camera ready copy', so please bear with the Editor as she develops new skills and we commence a new printing relationship with the Keenan brothers in Liverpool. And so that no-one can accuse us of simply maintaining the status quo, from the January issue there will also be a change in those responsible for distribution and postage.

We will also soon be marking Jim Clarke's retirement from the role of Treasurer, which he has fulfilled so ably. More of that at another time, but simply to say here that we are looking forward with anticipation to his successor emerging!

Speaking of finances: for the first time in seven years we have to bring news of a Subscription increase. From January 2007 the charges will be £15 for ministers in employment, and £8 for those retired (aged 65 and over). Life Membership will be £190 for the youngsters (up to age 55) and £100 for those aged 55 and over.

Ted Hale has agreed to serve as Vice Chair and we welcome him warmly to that role, looking forward to benefiting from his warm mix of considered experience and critical wisdom.

So much for the housekeeping – what about the content of this Journal?

It is often difficult to find the best balance for such a range of readership as we represent. Some look for essay and analysis, some for story. In the practice of ministry we need both to stretch our intellect and enlarge our spirit. In this issue you will find a movement between both, as two stories with their roots in the Gospel according to Luke are placed between articles which some may find more academic. All repay careful reading, and even a return after a first reading to discern further creative connections – each uses a different tool to communicate the gospel truth that meeting Jesus draws us into deeper ways of believing, further consequences in behaving, new ways of becoming identified with God's mission and liberating love. bmj

> The trouble with many sermons is not so much that the preachers are out of touch with what is going on in the world or in books or in theology but that they are out of touch with what is going on their own lives and in the lives of the people they are preaching to. Whether their subject is hope or faith or charity or anything else, let them speak out of the living truth of their own experience of those high matters. Let them have the courage to be themselves.
>
> Frederick Buechner
> *Preaching on Hope* The Living Pulpit April-June 2006 Issue

Prodigal Son 2: The Far-off Land Encroaches

Anthony Thacker, Oadby, Leics, follows trajectories and asks about consequences

Jesus did not live in the age of the blockbuster film, with its demand for sequels and even prequels of its most successful stories. But his parables reveal him as a storyteller of the first order. These evocative pictures have proved extraordinarily durable. Few other ancient short stories (Aesop's fables give one example) still continue 2,000 years on to be printed and read. Their value is not only as arresting entertainment, of course, but their ability to challenge and change the way we think about life, and as a result act in life. So, the Good Samaritan is a parable still widely known beyond the immediate constituency of committed Christians. But far more significantly, its picture has reshaped the way our culture thinks about people in need. It is so instinctive to us now, and has been for so long, that people in our culture aren't aware that cultures can be, have been, and are based on different attitudes.

In the fourth century BC, the philosopher Anaxarchus fell, and was stuck, in a ditch. As his famous sceptic student, Pyrrho, passed by, Anaxarchus called out for help, but Pyrrho *left him there*, reasoning, sceptically, that he could not be sure his teacher would be better off outside the ditch. Eventually Anaxarchus hauled himself out of his difficulty. When the next philosophy lecture came, the tutor commended his student for his indifference. He believed it was vital for spiritual well-being and perfection that a person should ignore suffering and rise above it. Another contrasting approach is seen in those cultures which have, rather, fostered a more pessimistic and fatalistic attitude to suffering. The concept of *karma* veers in this direction for example; and so the development in recent years in India of Hindu agencies for the relief of suffering is a sign of how the idea of the Good Samaritan is continuing to influence people well beyond the overtly Christian community. The idea that someone could say he or she was being virtuous by *ignoring* a person in need would strike us today as incredible. The teaching of the Good Samaritan has run very deep in our culture and beyond.

But what if Jesus lived today, and did indeed provide us with sequels and prequels to his great parables?

Gospel Sequels? Seeds and Rich Men

Of course it can be argued that in a loose way Jesus did write sequels – especially for the Sower. It is of course true that Jesus returned frequently to parables involving the fate of the seed, and the implication of this as a picture for what happens, as the word of the Kingdom is sown into the world. So we have the question of what would happen in a context where the problem of the seed among thorns was exacerbated, with an enemy deliberately sowing weeds. In a way this could be seen as a sequel. But it is not strictly a story of what happens afterwards to the seed that grew and multiplied 30, 60 or 100 times, or even a story of what might be done to help plough the bad soil, softening the path and removing stones and thorns to enhance harvest. It is an independent picture in the same context. Meanwhile, the story of the seed growing secretly all by itself might be seen as a prequel, but again, the point of the story is not to tell us what happens to the seed *before* the multiplication up to 100 times, but to

make a very different point indeed – that growth is not dependent on the sower, but on God.

Many of Jesus' parables do not really invite sequels, as they picture aspects of the day of judgment – those of Matthew 25, for example. But there is an exception. For we can see something of a sequel to the rich fool (Luke 12[16-21]) in the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16[19-31]). The start of this later parable invites us first to look earlier in the life of just such a rich man, with his living for luxury and wealth, disregarding eternity and humanity. Then it moves to the situation *after* that earlier parable, after the judgment. The rich man's torment is pictured in pathetic terms, with his inability to escape it. But this is not the point of the parable, which only elaborates the implications of the earlier story. It is the plea to Abraham from Hades to raise Lazarus from the dead to warn the rich man's brothers so they can repent and avoid his fate. But Abraham declares they will not even believe a miraculously raised Lazarus. Incidentally, it is too coincidental to imagine there is no connexion with the raising of John 11, with the refusal of the authorities to believe the risen Lazarus (John 11[46ff.]), especially when we recognise that Lazarus is the only person ever named in the parables (and to take another parallel, Old Testament interpreters mostly accept that the *naming* of Gomer in Hosea means we should reject seeing her as a fictional character). But this suggests that the story of the actual raising of Lazarus *precedes* the parable.[1] So this parable is not merely a sequel to the earlier parable, but also to the miracle. If this counter-intuitive analysis is correct, then the rich man of the later parable caricatures not just a secular capitalist (first-century-style), but also pillories the religious establishment for its complacent rejection of both Jesus and the poor.

The Vineyard Trilogy

In a way, Jesus' many parables of the vineyard do provide deliberate sequels to the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5, where the vineyard is explicitly stated to symbolise "the house of Israel, and the men of Judah". In Isaiah's picture, the owner of the vineyard, "my beloved," (symbolising God) had cared for the vineyard diligently, but found useless wild grapes, despite his care. (In Isaiah, this meant a harvest of justice failed; instead, the fruit was bloodshed.) So its protective hedge would go, allowing the intrusion of all manner of chaos – a trampled down wasteland with briers and thorns.[2] One sequel comes in Luke 13: here in reply to the suggestion that an unfruitful vineyard should be cut down (following the implication of Isaiah 5), Jesus' new version has the farmer deciding to work it even harder with helpful digging and manure. Here the moral becomes God's extraordinary patience with his undeserving people. Jesus gave two more sequels to the vineyard in Matthew 21. The first tells of two sons working or failing to work in the vineyard. Here the moral becomes that the true members of God's vineyard (i.e., the true Israel) are not those who talk and promise, but those who truly repent, and act on it. The second parable, also found in Mark 12 and Luke 20 clearly evokes Isaiah, with its description of a hedge around the vineyard. But again the focus is on the *workers* in that vineyard of Israel, who grotesquely failed. Here the familiar context of the vineyard becomes the scene for a stinging judgment on the way Israel's leaders have attacked God's prophets, and will shortly kill his Son.

But now, let us take a flight of fancy, and imagine some new sequels for the greatest of Jesus' stories that could receive them.

Good Samaritan 2: The Road to Jericho

A Samaritan on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was an uncommon sight. But this Samaritan was an uncommon one, too. He took this road which was doubly dangerous for him from time to time, in danger not only from robbers, but the more so as no Jew would stop to help him, a Samaritan. But he was a businessman, and needed to trade with traders in Jericho and Jerusalem. So like the Levite and the priest he continued to travel the road, and as before, if they passed any victim on the road, they passed him by, but he always took care, using his donkey to take these men to the safety and care of the inn, where we was now a familiar face. He continued to be a good neighbour to those he found in need, whatever their race.

A long time passed, and the Samaritan prospered, and he thought, "What shall I do? I could retire, to patrol this road more often, and care for any I find in need. I can also pay for even better care for those victims I find." But then he reasoned that he could only help a small number of those in trouble, so he said, "I know what I will do. I will *buy* this road, and then pay for guards to protect people on it. Then I will not only help the few I discover in need, but the many I could never reach."[3]

Prodigal Son 2: The Whore's Return

There was a man and he had two sons. The younger one had squandered his living on prostitutes and wild living, but on coming to his senses returned to live as a servant, only to be welcomed back not as a servant but as a son, for he who was lost was now found, he who has dead was now alive. His older brother meanwhile protested. It was unreasonable to welcome this profligate prodigal back, especially with such a celebration when the older son hadn't even had a small celebration with his friends.

But the father's love for the repentant young man prevailed.

But after a while, the famine in the far off land intensified, and some of the short term friends of the young man also began to be in need. One of them, a prostitute he had spent lavishly on began to think, "I'm too proud to beg, and I'm too weak to work the land. I know what I'll do: I'll go to that far-off land, where my one-time rich lover said he would go. Who knows, that servant job may have paid him well, and he can keep me again!" So she set off to that place her lover had described to her.

While she was still a long way off, the father saw her – and so did his older son. And he said to his father, "Didn't I tell you that this son of yours squandered his money with prostitutes, and that if you welcome him back it will all go badly? Now look! These whores are coming here to bring their wretched lot into your house. Tell her to go! And while you're about it, tell him to go with her. That's where he belongs!"

But the father went off to her and said...

Well, now, how might *Jesus* finish that sequel? Some people might assume the father's answer *should* follow that of the older son – at least the bit about saying that she and her ways have no place in this righteous house. She must leave at once. Others might presume that the same compassion of the father to the prodigal son would have him similarly rushing to this stranger welcoming her, as if she were a prodigal daughter. I work on the assumption that Jesus would be consistent with what he said and did in John 8^{1-11} or again in Luke 7^{36-50}; indeed, the example of Hosea's response to his wayward wife Gomer in Hosea 3 provides an even closer model, which I take to provide a conclusion to this imaginary sequel in tune with the spirit of Jesus.

But the father went off to her and greeted her. And she said, "Your son, whom I knew in a far-off land, spoke on how his father's hired servants have more food than they can eat. So he came, and I hear you welcomed him back. Please make me also one of your hired servants." And he said, "You may live in this house a long time, and serve here, and you will not lead an immoral life. You must have relations with no one else, not even him, but must wait."

Of course this resolution could lead to a further sequel, exploring the genuineness – or lack of it – of her repentance, and/or the difficulty of the prodigal son staying true to his repentance with the temptations of the far-off land too close for comfort! As ever, the reactions of the older son can reflect *our* human responses at the shocking recklessness of (divine) love – or the naïvety, as he might call it – of the father, towards the potential fickleness of the repenting sinner. bmj

[1] Readers who accept historical criticism of the gospels should therefore think in terms of the development of the miracle as occurring earlier than the parable (with or without a historical miracle first of all). Those committed to a more 'conservative' view of Scripture, will need to think in terms of Jesus first telling the parable (in this form) some time after the event of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Personally, I think in terms of a miracle, with a parable incorporating features of this event developed later, with somewhat satirical effect.

[2] Isaiah 27^{2-6} already provides a sequel, or as Brevard Childs puts it "a reinterpretation of the song of the vineyard", in which parable has become allegory, and a prophetic hope is expressed: "Instead of the garden being filled with cries of oppression and bloodshed, now it is the focus of God's peace." Brevard Childs: *Isaiah* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press 2001), p.197.

[3] See G. A. Studdert Kennedy *The New Man in Christ* (Hodder 1932) for the inspiration for this particular idea. I lent my copy of this book long ago, and it has not returned! So I cannot give the page number. Studdert Kennedy's point is that in our society we can do more than simply help those in need that we bump into; we can act to set up police forces (for example), and in many other ways act both to prevent needs arising, and to help meet people's needs more effectively.

Baptist Ministers' Pension Fund

Sometime in July/August, members of the Fund will be receiving a statement from the Fund's Trustees on the Fund's financial position. This statement is required by law, and its contents need to be read and understood in the context of current events in the pension industry and prevailing financial practice.

At the last triennial valuation of the Fund at the end of 2004 there was an apparent shortfall, but members need to be reassured that this situation is not new, it will resolve over a period of time, it does not affect members' funds or their interests in their accruing pensions, and the Trustees have absolutely no need or intention at present to do anything else than to continue to administer the fund to the benefit of all its members.

Anyone who has any disquiet over the situation should contact the Pensions Office at Didcot, or speak to one of the Fund's Trustees, the "worker directors" being:

Martin Poole - revmartinpoole@btopenworld.com
Paul Rosier – revpaulrosier@virgin.net
Neal Smith – 01473 250814

Mission as Ontology: a question of theological grammar

John Colwell, Spurgeons College

Following a series of discussions at Church Meetings, the local church of which I am a member determined that it should be doing more mission. Turning away from the introversion (and introspection) into which churches all too easily slip, we are now committed to be more involved, more open, more active within the local community. Now I must confess that I am not the best of church members. I am frequently absent. It's quite possible (indeed, probable) that I have missed crucial and formative aspects of these discussions and that my grasp of these conclusions is flawed and distorted. Nonetheless, one outcome of these discussions and commitments, some while ago, was my receiving of an e-mail from another member inviting me (rather strongly 'inviting' me) to participate in a community survey one Saturday morning. The general idea was that I and others would stand all morning in our local High Street with a clipboard and a questionnaire. And the underlying idea was that this was just one aspect of 'doing mission'.

Now I must also confess to being able to think of quite a number of things I would rather be doing on a Saturday morning (in fact, I can't readily think of very many things I'd rather not be doing). I must confess to inertia. I must confess to being easily embarrassed (not least by such well-meaning public ventures). All that follows, therefore, might be no more than a thin veneer of theological reflection disguising an underlying indolence, an elaborate attempt at self-justification which proves, in the end, to be a form of self-deception. But I have deep misgivings about this now common talk of 'doing' mission. I want to argue that it is grammatically flawed.

I could argue that the word 'mission' comes from the Latin verb *missio*, a word that generally signifies a sending away or a dispatching. I could similarly argue that this English (and Latin) word translates the Greek verb *pempw*, a word that also signifies a sending or a commissioning. Thus derived, the term 'mission' could be taken as signifying the 'being-sentness' of someone or something—and it is difficult to conceive of how one 'does' a 'being-sentness'; to 'be sent' is a passive verb and not an active verb; it is something done to someone rather than something someone does. It is plainly ungrammatical.

But I hope I am not linguistically naïve. I teach a course in hermeneutics. I know that the signification of words cannot be determined simply by the derivation of words. I know that language is a living dynamic, that words are slippery, that words change their significance, that words only signify within a community of communication, that a community's use of words changes over a period of time. I realise, therefore, that the local church community of which I am a part—together with the wider community of the contemporary Church—uses this term 'mission' in a manner that admits the meaningfulness of talk of 'doing' mission; that, in common usage, a previously passive idea has taken on active connotations. I realise it but, in this particular instance, I cannot accept it. Any change in the use of a word implies a change of signification. Therefore any change in the use of a theological word

implies a change of theological signification; that is to say, to use the term 'mission' in a manner that admits the meaningfulness of talk of 'doing' mission is indicative of an underlying change of theology. My concern is not primarily with grammar but with theological grammar, with what our speaking signifies with respect to our understanding of God. Or, to put the matter the other way round: the proper grammar of theological terms (such as 'mission') derives from our understanding of the Triune God and, in this context of understanding, talk of 'doing' mission is profoundly ungrammatical simply because it is theologically flawed.

At the very beginning of his definitive study of Mission, David Bosch notes that '[u]ntil the sixteenth century the term was used exclusively with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, of the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son'.[1] Within the relatedness of the Trinity there is a sending and a being sent, though, as with all works of God with respect to creation (with respect to that which is other than God) these actions are distinctly appropriate to the persons of the Trinity: the Father sends but is not sent; the Son is sent and, at least instrumentally, also sends (assuming for the sake of argument that the Spirit is sent by the Father through the Son); the Spirit is sent but, it would appear, does not send (unless we conceive of the incarnation of the Son through the Spirit also as an instrumental form of sending). Elsewhere David Bosch speaks of mission as an 'attribute' of God,[2] and this may be a helpful beginning though, unless we are to render creation as necessary to God, we surely must insist on distinguishing mission as an 'economic' rather than an 'essential' attribute (in accordance with one convention of the Christian tradition). God is 'simple' and, in some respects, the entire tradition of attribution can be misconstrued and misappropriated: God is not divided. And God is 'a *se*', utterly sufficient in eternal Triune relatedness: divine mission like divine mercy is a form God's single and self-sufficient nature takes in relation to that which is other than God.[3]

There is, then, within God's Triune relatedness in relation to creation, a sending and a being sent, an active and a passive. The Son is sent into the world by the Father through the Spirit. This is his 'mission', his 'being-sentness'. There is that which the Son does which expresses this mission, which is the outcome and outworking of this mission, but the Son's mission is not constituted or defined by such expressions, outcomes, and outworkings. The Son's mission consists in his 'being-sentness': it is a passive rather than an active; it is that which is done to him rather than that which he does in coherence with that which is done to him; it is ontological rather than functional; it defines his being. Sometimes we rather loosely speak of the baptism of Jesus as the beginning of his mission. This simply cannot be the case. The baptism of Jesus may mark the beginning of his public ministry, it may mark the beginning of the public outworking of his mission (though even this could be disputed), but it does not mark the beginning of his mission: the mission of Jesus begins with the sending of the Son into the world by the Father and through the Spirit. Similarly the Spirit is sent into the world by the Father through the Son as witness to the Son—and whether we relate this sending of the Spirit to Pentecost or to the act of creation (itself an interesting and crucial debate but without prejudice to this present discussion) it is the 'being-sentness' of the Spirit that constitutes the Spirit's mission rather than that which the Spirit does in coherence with this 'being-sentness'. And

the mission of the Church is similarly and derivatively constituted:

> As the Father has sent me, I am sending you (John 20 21).

The mission of the Church consists in its being sent by the Son in the power of the Spirit as witness to the Son within the world.[4] The mission of the Church corresponds (at least in this respect) to the sending of the Spirit and is a response to the sending of the Son. It is not a continuation of the sending of the Son (and again loose talk of the Church as a simple continuation of the Incarnation is unhelpful and distorting at this point). The sending of the Church into the world is as witness to the Son, just as the Spirit also is sent into the world as witness to the Son (John 15 26f.). Neither the Church nor the Spirit *is* the Son. Neither the Church nor the Spirit is simply an extension of the Son's being sent into the world. But the sending of the Church and of the Spirit into the world are in relation to the Son's being sent into the world, as witness to the Son's being sent into the world. The existence of the Church as that which is sent into the world in the power of the Spirit is itself a sign and sacrament of the sending of the Son into the world: it is the means and promise of his presence and action through the Spirit.

> Its sending is not a repetition, extension or continuation. His own sending does not cease as He sends its. It does not disappear in its sending. It remains it free and independent presupposition. Its sending is simply ordered on its own lower level in relation to His. The power with which it is invested is comparable with His, as is necessarily the case since He Himself gave it, but neither quantitatively nor qualitatively is it equal. He is sent to precede it on the way into the world. It is sent to follow on the same way. These are two things. But the two sendings are comparable because they have the same origin. The one God who sends Him as the Father also sends them through Him the Son. Again, they are comparable because they have the same goal. He and they are both sent into the world, which means very generally that they are directed to the world and exist for it.[5]

The mission of the Church, therefore, like the mission of the Son and the mission of the Spirit, consists in its 'being-sentness': it is a passive rather than an active; it is that which is done to the Church rather than that which the Church does in coherence with that which is done to it; it is ontological rather than functional; it defines the being of the Church. Again we sometimes loosely speak of the so-called 'Great Commission' as constitutive of the Church's mission—and again this simply cannot be the case. Christ calls his Church to make disciples, to baptise, to teach: such is the outworking and outcome of the Church's mission but the Church's mission is not constituted or defined by these outworkings and outcomes; the Church's mission is constituted simply and solely by its being sent into the world. Certainly the Church is sent into the world to 'do' things, but its failure to 'do' those things does not disestablish its 'being-sentness'. There is certainly a goal to the mission of the Church, the Church is sent into the world with purpose, but the Church's failure here and now to attain that goal does not undo its calling and 'being-sentness'. The mission of the Church certainly should issue in action but it is not constituted by such action; the witness of the Church is the consequence of its mission, the matter cannot be reversed.[6] Consequently, though it is entirely appropriate to speak of the Church doing things that are coherent

with its mission, outworking its mission, expressing its mission, it really is not appropriate to speak of the Church 'doing mission'; it is theologically ungrammatical.

While hoping that I am not linguistically naïve I hope similarly that I am not ecclesiologically naïve. It is not difficult to speculate concerning the origins of this language of 'doing mission'. The International Congress on World Evangelisation, held in Lausanne in 1974, stands as a defining moment in evangelical identity and thinking. In response and reaction to a perceived disjunction (and even opposition) between evangelism and social action Lausanne affirms a more holistic understanding of the evangelistic task and calling.[7] And one outcome and expression of this more holistic approach to evangelism (as witnessed by the titles of various modules in any number of theological seminaries) is the tendency to speak of mission where previously we would have spoken of evangelism. To 'do mission', it is assumed, is to act more holistically, with greater social and political responsibility, than merely to 'do evangelism'. To 'do mission', it is assumed, is to imply both evangelistic action and socio-political action. To 'do mission' is all embracing. To 'do mission' better expresses the wholeness of the Church's calling. But, for this writer at least, this is a form of political correctness that is simply theologically incorrect, unhelpful, confusing, and counter-productive.

But is all this no more than theological pedantry? Why make such a fuss about the use of a word (we all know what we mean after all)? Surely a more holistic approach to evangelism and social action should be affirmed and encouraged rather than disputed by a pompous and pernickety grammarian?

Well, in the first place (and perhaps most superficially) I find myself embarrassed by any embarrassment with the term 'evangelism' and if this recent speaking of 'doing mission' in any respect implies an unease with the language of 'doing evangelism' it should be repudiated. I have no wish to defend the crass or the arrogant, the simplistic or the belittling, but I hope I will never be ashamed of the gospel and never be reluctant to retell the gospel story. The retelling of this story is a necessary and irreducible consequence of the Church's mission.

But neither evangelism nor any other action or activity of the Church constitutes the Church's mission. The Church's mission is constituted simply and solely by its being sent into the world: it is a matter of identity before ever it is a matter of activity. And it is in this far more profound respect that I maintain this language of 'doing mission' to be confusing and counter-productive. To put the matter simply, to express something I am called to be (a matter of identity) as if it were merely something I am called to do (a matter of function), far from promoting a more holistic understanding of the Church's mission actually militates against it. As soon as I begin to identify mission as something I 'do' I have effectively compartmentalised my life; I have implied the separation of all those other things I am and I do as other than mission (or, at least, as lesser expressions of that mission). As soon as the Church identifies some activities as 'doing mission' it has similarly implied that all other activities occur irrespective of mission (or, at least, are lesser expressions of that mission). And as soon as a local church identifies some activities as 'doing mission' it too has relegated all other activities and aspects of life as other than mission; it has yet again accorded precedence to institutionally organised activities and implicitly belittled the day-to-day life and identity of its members.

The Church's mission is constituted by its being sent into the world. It is a matter of identity before it is a matter of function. It is a matter of 'being' in the world rather than 'doing' within churches. We *are* a missionary people.[8] The outworking of that 'being sent into the world' is every bit as much a matter of integrity in the workplace, of fidelity to friends and family, of neighbourliness, as it is a matter of institutionally organised activities. Indeed, our being the Church does not consist in a series of (increasingly encroaching) institutionally organised activities, it does not consist in our 'doing' anything: our being the Church is simply a matter of identity through Baptism and the Lord's Supper as a worshipping people, as a people being formed and transformed by the story we indwell, as a people whose very existence within the world is a witness to Christ.

> We call this new creation, church. It is constituted by word and sacrament as the story we tell, the story we embody, must not only be told but enacted. In the telling we are challenged to be a people capable of hearing God's good news such that we can be a witness to others. In the enactment, in Baptism and Eucharist, we are made part of a common history which requires continuous celebration to be rightly remembered. It is through Baptism and Eucharist that our lives are engrafted onto the life of the one what makes our unity possible. Through this telling and enactment we, like Israel, become peculiarly a people who live by our remembering the history of God's redemption of the world.[9]

It is not that the Church is called to 'do mission', it is rather that the Church is constituted as the Church by virtue of its mission, by virtue of its being sent into the world. It is a matter of identity. The mere existence of the Church as this 'being-sent' community is a sign and a sacrament, a witness and a means of grace.[10]

Several years ago, while I was pastor of a church in Lewisham, our then local Member of Parliament came to visit me. I had written to him and, following the advice of a friend, had avoided any lobbying tone and had simply assured him of support and prayer. At the end of a surprisingly long conversation he asked me what I considered to be the deepest pastoral need that I encountered. I am sure he expected me to say something about social deprivation, unemployment, or family breakdown. My reply was that the most profound pastoral problem, a problem underlying quite a lot of other pastoral problems, was Christians who didn't really know their own identity. Our identity is that of those sent into the world in the power of the Spirit. My contention is that talk of 'doing mission' compounds this crisis of identity.

> ...mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus... wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.[11] bmj

1 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), p. 1.

2 'In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God.' David J. Bosch, , p. 390.

3 In this respect I must disagree with Andrew Kirk when he states that '...God is in himself mission through and through. Sending and being sent are integral to his nature...'. Divine sending implies that which is other than God as the indirect object of this sending. Therefore, to conceive of divine sending as 'integral' to

the divine nature is to imply that that which is other than God shares God's eternity. J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: DLT, 1999), p. 29.

4 'If the church sees itself to be sent in the same framework as the Father's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit, then it also sees itself in the framework of God's history with the world and discovers its place and function within this history.' Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1977), p. 11.

5 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962), p. 768.

6 Here again I find myself in radical disagreement with Andrew Kirk when he asserts that '[m]ission is quite simply, though profoundly, what the Christian community is sent to do...' J. Andrew Kirk, p. 24.

7 For an outline and discussion of these deliberations and their outcomes see David J. Bosch, pp. 405ff.

8 'The Christian faith... is intrinsically missionary... The entire Christian existence is to be characterized as missionary existence...' David J. Bosch, pp. 8f.

9 Stanley M. Hauerwas, 'The Church as God's New Language' in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living In Between* (Durham: Labyrinth, 1988), 47-65, p. 53.

10 David J. Bosch, p. 11 *et passim*

11 David J. Bosch, p. 519.

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Martha's story – our story.

Ruth Gouldbourne, Bloomsbury, London.

A sermon preached at IBTS, Prague, May 2006

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10.38-42. NRSV

I love this story – I love the image of this socially radical woman, a strong woman, somebody who says I don't care what the conventional expectations are, I'm going to do what may seem scandalous, but I believe to be right. Here is somebody who sees in Jesus, hears in Jesus the permission to be a person in her own right, to take her own decisions, not those dictated by society, who finds in Jesus an encounter with God that affirms her humanity, and gives her a place and a worth. I think Martha and Martha's story is wonderful. Look at how Luke tells it.

Jesus and his disciples are on the way to Jerusalem, and Martha welcomes them into her home. There's something very odd going on here – a woman with her own home is probably in a pretty socially anomalous position. Is she a widow, an orphan, an abandoned wife? Whatever, she isn't fitting the norms of her community. She's on the edge, and people on the edge really ought to behave properly, or there will be trouble. So what does this woman who really can't afford any more scandal do? She invites an unmarried man – perhaps a whole group of unmarried men – into her house. What's more, he's a wandering teacher who has already begun to raise official eyebrows, and is turning out not to be entirely the sort of person that respectable people want to be seen with. He's begun to challenge the authorities, and there is some question about whether he is altogether safe.

Martha takes this enormous risk, puts herself outside the social norms and invites Jesus in, regardless of what it will do to her reputation – and that of her sister, for whom she appears to have some sort of responsibility, if she is the head of the household.

And Jesus comes. He accepts the offer she makes, not just of the hospitality, but of who she is. This is not a straightforward invitation to a meal with no consequences. This costs. People will notice. There will be talk. Jesus honours this, and accepts the gift that Martha offers. He comes in, and he treats the occasion seriously. He doesn't just sit back, and allow everything to be half-hearted and safe. He comes in and he teaches. He is himself, and speaks of the things that are in his heart. He doesn't try to protect Martha from the consequences of her decision, but takes what she offers seriously and gives her what she asks for. There is in this such a gentleness, such a generosity, such an honouring of the individual that it is profoundly moving. In this encounter, we see an individual,

refusing the limits put on her by her social normality because she senses in the invitation of Jesus the possibility of something new, and determines to receive it. And in Jesus, we see a receiving of that which is offered, an honouring of the person and recognition of dignity that is so much of the way in which God deals with us – with courtesy, gentleness and seriousness; in this meeting, Jesus is reaffirming that when we offer something of ourselves to God and to the mission of God, it is received and used and honoured.

Of course, it does go rather wrong. This courageous and socially radical woman gets in a bit of a muddle once Jesus accepts her offer. And I have to confess this is the reason why I really warm to Martha. She can see new possibilities. She catches a glimpse of the kind of person she might be in relation to Jesus, and that will give her a new place in the world. And she wants it. She wants to be the person she sees she can be in Jesus presence, or she wouldn't have invited him in the first place.

But then something happens – her nerve fails, the inner voices of what is right and proper get too strong. She invites Jesus in – but then she gets lost in the business of "serving" – cooking the meal, preparing the sleeping arrangements, whatever it was – and she can't actually spend time with Jesus. She gets frustrated, irritated, angry – and we have the record of the argument she starts to have. Who is she angry with? – Mary, for not helping? herself for getting all worked up? Jesus for not noticing? Luke doesn't give us that detail, but we can hear that she is unhappy, she is flustered and distracted – and so she goes to Jesus, this man she has defied convention to invite in, this man she wants to know better and spend time with – and she tells him what he ought to be doing in her home. "Don't you care what is happening to me. Tell her to help."

She has invited Jesus in to listen to him. She has invited Jesus in because somewhere, somehow, she has recognised that there is a different possibility for who and how she might be – and here she is accusing him of not relating to her, not recognising her, and telling him what he ought to say.

How did she get here? How did she get to the point where, having defied all sorts of social convention to invite Jesus in, she is trapped by her own expectations and patterns of behaviour into missing the opportunity she has been taking risks to gain? Again, Luke doesn't tell us. And it would be unwarranted to try and read too much in. But Jesus does tell her – very gently and lovingly- that she is distracted. She certainly seems to have her mind and attention on several things – on the presence of Jesus, because it is to him that she speaks; on the things that need to be done, because it of them that she speaks; on her sister, and her sister's lack of proper behaviour, because that is at the heart of her complaint. And Jesus points out to her that this scattering of attention, scattering of energy is not what is needed. And then there is the difficult bit of the story – Mary is praised.

Mary is a pretty unconventional woman too. She sits, according to Luke, at Jesus' feet listening to him teach. This is the technical description of the behaviour of a disciple. And it is not the sort of thing that a decent woman did – nor indeed, that a decent rabbi allowed. Mary too is defying expectation – not by not helping with the housework, or at least only indirectly, but by taking the invitation of Jesus seriously to be a disciple. And she is recognised for that – and praised for it.

But the story isn't really about her. It is about Martha, Martha's choices and Martha's dilemma. Having made the

choice to invite Jesus in, she appears to want to carry on with her life the way she thinks it ought to be. And who can blame her? If you invite somebody into your home, it is proper to care for them. It would surely not simply be a breach of social norms but of hospitality to have invited him in, and then not to have taken the responsibility of being a host seriously. So Martha makes the choice to invite Jesus in – but then assumes that her old patterns of behaviour and thinking are going to be appropriate to the situation. And they are not. That is what we hear in the words about Mary. Mary has spotted something new, and is prepared to go with it, to let go of her expectations and assumptions and see what happens – even in the face of disapproval of the one who is perhaps closer to her than anybody else. Is that what she is being praised for? Certainly, there seems to be approval for her willingness to let Jesus set the agenda rather than trying to make things fit according to her own preconceptions. Whereas Martha – well, Martha has invited Jesus in, but perhaps has not realised the implications of that. If she invited him in, and then spends all the time trying to care for him, what is the agenda she has – that Jesus can come on her terms; that she will remain in control; that Jesus will keep her rules.

Which of course is the other reason why I love the story. Here is this marvellous, strong, unconventional woman, who is a fantastic role model –and who gets it wrong! She does this amazing thing of inviting Jesus in, breaking the rules and challenging assumptions – and then she gets cross when her sister does the same thing. It's as if having invited Jesus in, she can't cope with the consequences of it, can't manage the reality of it. Because when Jesus is there, the rules change, and what she had thought life ought to be about turns out not to be the case. By taking the risk that she has, she has stepped into a new world, and it doesn't work the same way. And that's true not just for her, but for everybody else as well, because relating to Jesus is about being part of the community, and it means all the rules are rewritten and the roles challenged. And while that might be OK in theory, what Martha discovers is that it is not always easy in practice.

It turns out that the real risk she has taken is not to her reputation, by inviting this man into her house. It's not in the end even to her sister's reputation, despite the scandalous behaviour she shows of sitting at Jesus' feet. It is actually to the way the world is constructed and works. Because, by inviting Jesus in, she is having to let go of the belief that she can make her own rules and sort things out to suit herself. And that really is a risk. And of course it is not just Martha's. Mary is taking it too. Sitting at Jesus' feet and learning means learning what Jesus is teaching, and so she cannot go as if nothing has happened. She cannot get to the end of the evening and say "very interesting" and go back to her previous way of life. Both of them have taken very obvious risks – but both of them have taken a deeper risk – the risk of meeting Jesus, and finding that life cannot be the same again.

We see it most clearly with Martha, since the story is about her. She cannot order her life according to her expectations of who she is, and what she wants to happen. She cannot invite Jesus in and then tell him what to do. She cannot make others behave in a way she considers appropriate. She cannot be who she was, live how she lived, before she took this risk. And that's the problem with meeting Jesus, with inviting him in – we can't be quite sure how it's going to turn out. We can't control what he's going to do or ask of us. We can't tell him so far and no further. We

can't allow him to be part of our experience and then expect our experience to be unchanged. And we can't meet him in isolation from our other relationships and how they function.

Meeting Jesus is important for most of us – that is something about why we are here. We might speak of it in a variety of ways, and have different language to describe what we mean. But there is something about this man which draws us to him – the way he is, the way he teaches, the sense that in him we are in touch with that which is the heart of reality. And for many of us, meeting him in whatever way is doing something socially odd and strange and might mean that people talk, and judge us. After all, the very act of coming to church is, in our society, not normal behaviour, even if it is acceptable. It is strange. It may not entail the kind of risk that Martha is taking - though sometimes it does – but it does challenge the norms of our wider community.

But the real risk doesn't lie in this, any more than it did for Martha. It lies in the consequences of the action. If we take seriously the opportunity to be with Jesus – to invite him into our lives, whatever we mean by that; to live according to his teaching, to open ourselves to the encounter with the reality that he brings to us; to offer ourselves to the work that he does – any or all of that – then we take the risk that we cannot go on ordering our world, our experiences, our way of being according to our own decisions and assumptions. We take a risk in relating to this man because he doesn't behave in ways we expect. He calls us into new relationships, based on values and choices that we might not have chosen for ourselves. He calls us into new ways of behaving that challenge many of the assumptions we have about who we are, and what it means to be successful. He calls us into new ways of relating to God, because we meet God with a different face. If we take the risk that Martha knew she was taking, we too will find that who we are, who others are, how we live and think and act – all of that will be challenged and reordered. It may be strange, it may make us uneasy, even angry. But the promise of the story is that it is about life and fulfilment and freedom. Which suggests that it is a risk worth taking. bmj

"A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth."

Martin Luther King Jr., in his speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence"

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BE AWARE – THE WRITING IS ON THE WALL

Are you annoyed, upset, exasperated or frustrated at the number of times your church has been subjected to damage by vandals? If so, then I am afraid that I need to impress further upon any worries that you may have. Sadly, it is a fact that vandalism is often the prelude to greater damage and particular care is necessary to keep your church safe from a disaster. Arson has become the fastest growing crime and is now the single main cause of fires in the U.K., mostly associated with vandalism and burglaries.

Some churches are quite vulnerable, particularly in places where an open and deserted church can offer protection from wind and rain, well away from the supervision of responsible adults. It is often the case that graffiti followed by window breakage and other acts of vandalism are caused by people – often children – 'messing about' in the building. The fire may be started deliberately, perhaps as a prank, usually without any real intention to cause significant damage. Nevertheless the results can be disastrous.

Space here does not permit a full analysis of the arson problem but I can suggest just a few simple steps you can take to protect your church:

- **Remove Signs of Vandalism**. Cleaning up graffiti or repairing damage from previous vandalism quickly and thoroughly can help prevent future vandalism. Vandals see property that's already been vandalised as an easy target.
- **Turn on the Spotlight**. Like burglars, arsonists fear light. One of easiest, most effective means of protecting your property is to install adequate lighting near doors, in car parks, and at the rear of buildings. Using a timer or a light-sensitive switch to activate lights will ensure that you don't forget to turn them on.
- **Immobilise wheelie bins** and keep at least 6m away from your building. Rubbish is often highly combustible, and any fire set in a bin could quickly spread to nearby buildings.
- **Don't store flammable liquids** at your church.
- **Secure your Church** by making sure all windows, doors and gates, are locked when it is unoccupied.
- **Limit Access to Keys** Many churches are trusting places that will give a key to anyone who needs to use the building. Often, there's no system for making sure the building is secure when that person leaves, or for guaranteeing that the key is returned. Your church should have a strictly enforced key monitoring system.
- **Remove hiding places** about your church to give passersby an unobstructed view of entrances and windows.
- **Be alert to and monitor people** who may be disgruntled and likely to retaliate by damaging church property.

Further help is available from our team of Surveyor Consultants who will happily discuss with you steps which may be taken to minimise the Arson risk at your church. They can be contacted on **0845 0702223.**

Yours Sincerely

Alf Green ACII
ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER

After Hampson: The Trinity lives on

Neil Brighton, Keyworth (en route to Poynton), urges us to revisit the challenges posed by Feminist Theologian Daphne Hampson because they help us think more clearly and raise some important questions about our faith and practice. The first of a two-part exploration in faith and practice.

Like me you probably meet many people who have a broadly theistic worldview but who see the church as upholding a faith that is no longer intellectually credible. If you have ever wondered what to say in these circumstances then Daphne Hampson's book *After Christianity* is for you[1]. Not because it gives any answers but because in thinking through our response we may be better able to understand peoples questions and explain our own faith.

Hampson argues, having rejected the Christian faith, that Christianity as articulated in the great creedal affirmations of the church is unbelievable and that the Christian conception of God is unethical because it derives from a masculinist mindset[2]. In its place she posits a conception of God that incorporates a generalised spiritual awareness together with perceptions of beauty and order that are developed into an experiential spirituality. In this article I want to explore her objections to Christianity and to argue that, in the light of a Trinitarian understanding of God, the reasons for her rejection are unfounded. In a subsequent article I will, in conversation with one of the young people in my congregation, consider the implications of Hampson's critique for worship and other aspects of church life.

Hampson's objections

Hampson's first specific charge is that Christianity is unbelievable because it requires one to believe events to have taken place that break the causal nexus of activity within the universe[3]. She defines a Christian as someone who claims Jesus is in someway unique because of either the incarnation or resurrection. However, since the enlightenment we have been clear that there is a regularity to both history and nature and, therefore, neither could have happened. There is no class of thing such as resurrection. Commenting on the wedding at Cana she remarks that turning water into wine is impossible because wine has carbon atoms, water doesn't and carbon atoms don't appear from nowhere. Therefore Christianity is simply unbelievable.

By way of an initial response we may wish to note her profoundly modernist assumptions. Her basic paradigm is one of knowledge based on observation; what we can't observe we can't accept. For her the human mind is exalted over everything it surveys and everything has to be subjected to its control. The result is that, following Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* truth is polarised either into things that are true always and everywhere and can be discovered or 'truth' that is not intrinsic in the nature of things but is something that is revealed to humankind. But from a Christian perspective all truth is in fact God's truth, the universe is both created and maintained by God; without this the universe would cease to exist. That the universe is both ordered and regular reflects something of the nature and character of Godself and that, in some

sense, all human knowledge is mediated by the Spirit. This doesn't mean that there is no distinction between God and creation but does suggest that not everything we need to know can be deduced from our experience of observation.

From the starting point that Christianity is unbelievable Hampson moves on to argue that it cannot be considered moral either. Because Christianity is based on the claim that there has been a particular revelation in history it is necessarily bound to history in a different way from other intellectual disciplines like history and philosophy. Furthermore this history is patriarchal and biased against women. Consequently Christianity is paradigmatically and presuppositionally oppressive to women and thereby offends against the moral imperative of human equality. Hampson's belief is that fundamental to Christianity is a bi-polar construal of reality and that this basic axis is gendered with God as male and humanity as female; the hierarchical and patriarchal result has both crushed and demeaned women.

While disputing Hampson's reasoning, she has a persuasive case in regard to the conduct of the church. Even a cursory reading of Church history suggests that women have been denied the opportunity to play a full role in the life of the church. That many of the church's 'better' theologians have been misogynists has also contributed to the oppressive nature of church life. Even more inexcusable is the current situation where, in spite of our awareness of these issues, the church continues to use language and thought forms that are profoundly sexist: not least in the language of its songs of worship. Within an English Baptist context our failure to grapple with the low numbers of women called as ministers to the local pastorate is, in this writer's opinion, scandalous and an example of the sub-conscious masculinist mindset of our churches.

Were this to be the whole story it would not only be depressing, but might suggest that Hampson is right in seeking to move beyond Christianity. However, there is more that needs to be said concerning the nature of God before we can draw such a conclusion[4].

Understanding who God is

Hampson would probably reject any response to her that lies in a re-examination of the Christian understanding of the nature of God on the basis that it is based on a faith presupposition. Yet to do otherwise is to accept that the entire debate needed to be conducted from Hampson's post-Christian faith position, which is predicated on the belief that one cannot accept a religion whose basic symbol is that of a male Christ.

The first aspect of the nature of God to examine is that of the relations of the persons of the Godhead. Janet Martin Soskice advocates a renewal of Trinitarian theology as the main source of hope and issues a "clarion call for its renewal"[5]. She notes that it is the Trinitarian understanding that preserves the otherness of God and thereby frees us from gross anthropocentrism and defeats covert monarchianism. It endorses the fundamental goodness and beauty of the human being and challenges all philosophies of the One which militate against any genuine otherness that is not another of the same. This understanding, grounded in the contribution of the Cappadocians, is in contrast to Hampson's own focus on the Trinity in which the one God exists in three ways, as Father, as Son and as Spirit which thereby removes any

potential to conceptualise both particularity and unity in a manner that enriches plurality[6]. This is in contrast to a number of Christian Feminist theologians who have drawn attention to the significance of relationality and mutuality within the Godhead. This is important because one of Hampson's contentions is that the doctrine of the Trinity provides a basis for the hierarchical ordering of society in which one party owes suzerainty to another. In contrast an understanding of mutual submission and perichoretic relations suggests that a fully Trinitarian understanding might undermine the hierarchical and heteronomous views that she dislikes.

Hampson's charge is not simply that the Trinity creates hierarchy, but that the Trinity is also masculine (albeit with occasional token feminine elements) in both language and symbolism. For her, the feminine motifs can never hold an equivalent place to male ones because Christianity is deeply masculine. In response we might agree that in discussing the names 'Father' 'Son' 'Spirit' we need to exercise care in determining what these names might mean or signify. The words are used to name the 'persons' of the Godhead. They are explicitly not used to ascribe gender but rather to name God in the terms of God's self revelation. To call God 'Father' is not to conceive of divine Fatherhood analogically from human fatherhood but to derive the meaning of the word 'father' wholly from Godself. To fail to do so is to recreate a modern arianism that is based on a biological or procreative father-son relationship. To suggest that 'Father' includes gender is to read back into the nature of God partial aspects of humanity who were created in the image of God as male and female. That male theologians have sometimes projected their maleness onto their understanding of God is correctly recognised as a distortion that is wholly regrettable, but it is not inevitable and the work done by Coakley, LaCugna, Martin Soskice, Tanner and others is to be welcomed as progress towards some sort of balance. The Biblical picture is of a God who creates freely out of God's own abundant love and who continues to be fully present with all creation – hardly an image that conforms to stereotypical masculine behaviour!

This is not to suggest that names are unimportant. Alternatives such as creator, redeemer and sustainer fail both because they depersonalise God and because they confuse the economic and immanent. Likewise feminine terms are not without difficulty as they too are often used in ways that imply gender in God. However, a range of images helps to remind us of the scope of God's character and a number of writers have helpfully made use of feminine language for God (eg: Julian of Norwich who described Christ as Mother).

As noted above **Christology is problematic for Hampson**. At its crudest her objection is that because at the incarnation Jesus (as uniquely symbolic of God) was born as a man he therefore has nothing to say to women. Framing the argument this way suggests that gender is a distinction pre-eminent above all others and that the particularity of Jesus means that he has nothing to say to anyone who is not a first century, single, male Jewish carpenter. This, of course, has never been the common understanding of the faith; humanity is understood as being both male and female in the image of God. Salvation is understood to come to us from Christ because he shared our humanity, not because he shared our gender or ethnicity. As Gregory Nazianzus famously asserted, what is not assumed is not redeemed. The question that Hampson raises about particularity is one of the need to

distinguish between differing aspects of particularity and their significance.

Hampson's concerns are not shared by all feminist theologians; as Mercy Amba Oduyoye notes, for many women from an African context Jesus is the liberator because he counters the misogynist culture. She quotes Rosemary Edet's saying that "'Jesus' humanity is the humanity of a woman; no human father has contributed"[7]. Hampson's desire to bring gender to the fore is entirely understandable yet, without wishing in anyway to downplay the negative impact of patriarchy on women, to make gender primary fails to do justice to who we are as persons who are made for God and for each other.

Hampson's **treatment of the Holy Spirit** is also important at this point. Hampson dismisses attempts to incorporate the feminine within the Spirit as failing to give an equal place to women and as something vague in contrast to the two 'male' persons of the trinity who are anthropomorphically conceived entities. In this her criticisms are shared by a number of feminist theologians; for example Elizabeth Johnson writes that such an understanding 'remains andocentric, with the male principle still dominant and sovereign' and Sarah Coakely notes that the result of feminising the Spirit is often an 'idealised, mawkish or sentimentalised version of the "feminine" one that is still covertly negative'[8].

A more adequate pneumatology is both sensitive to the issues raised by feminist theology and provides a theological framework in which to explore them. Traditionally understood the Spirit's role has been that of the creator of *koinonia* between believers and Christ and as the perfecter of the saints and of creation as it moved towards its God given completion. Pertinent to our understanding will be Paul's affirmation that in Christ we are "no longer male and female" but one in Christ. While the language deliberately echoes that of Genesis it may well be taken as pointing to a more integrated understanding of human personhood for those who are recreated in Christ as well as positing that sexuality and gender are provisional aspects of this created order; not necessarily to be continued in a recreated heaven and earth. Likewise the Spirit's perfecting awakens us to notions of salvation in terms of wholeness and not simply the eradication of sin, understood as actions that offend against God's holy law. It is because of this that the Spirit may be understood in terms of liberation and justice; reflecting God's bias towards the poor and marginalized. The Spirit's role in creating and maintaining *koinonia* is another aspect of this. It is by the Spirit's actions that we are able to participate in the life of God and that we are joined to one another in the church as the community of Christ: an action that points to the role of the Spirit in maintaining our distinctive persons within an integrated church community. As Nicola Slee notes, an emphasis on relationality, connectedness and community is a feature of feminist spirituality[9].

Conclusion

Hampson has been an effective challenger of the Christian tradition, drawing attention to its male bias and the effect this has had on women. She raises important questions for the way the church does theology. Regrettably women have not been the only group who have found the church oppressive. Nevertheless her contention that it is neither believable nor ethical is to be rejected. By taking up a position that is "post-Christian" and using that as the location from which to argue her case she fatally undermines her own claim to objectivity; her objections cease

to be *a priori* but *a posteriori*, an outcome of the position she has now adopted. Christian theology is an attempt to offer a coherent reflection on the implications of believing in the Christian God. Once one ceases to believe then previously held positions become unsustainable, not because they have ceased to be reasonable or persuasive but because one has adopted a different starting point. The solution is not to be found in an illusionary modernist certainty but an openness to the complexities of life and a genuine attempt to rearticulate the tradition in a way that is faithful to the God who reveals himself as Father, Son and Spirit. bmj

1 Daphne Hampson *After Christianity* London: SCM 1996

2 Hampson's own synopsis of the book is at www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~dh1/synopsisac.html

3 #### In order to reduce the number of footnotes I have not cited references in *After Christianity*.

4 In what follows I have restricted quotes to articles in Susan Frank Parsons (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* Cambridge University Press 2002. This is to enable a reader with little time to follow up some of the issues with reference to one collection of essays. I have also restricted comments to those by Female Theologians.

5 J Martin Soskice *Trinity and Feminism* in *Cambridge Companion* p139

6 Hampson's understanding seems based on a distorted enlightenment notion of individualism.

7 Mercy Amba Oduyoye *Jesus Christ* in *Cambridge Companion* p158

8 Both quoted by Nicola Slee *The Holy Spirit and Spirituality* in *Cambridge Companion* p183

9 Nicola Slee *The Holy Spirit and Spirituality* in *Cambridge Companion* p180

Reading Groups

By all accounts, reading groups are flourishing around the country. In libraries, living rooms and pubs people are gathering to talk about a novel, or perhaps a biography, that they have all read prior to the discussion. Probably, there are more than a few Baptists involved in such groups. In WEBA there is a theological reading group; Baptist ministers have the opportunity to meet several times a year to discuss a book selected in a fairly informal way at the previous meeting.

Such a group provides the kind of 'safe space' for discussion that is not always easy to find these days. Do ministers' groups (formerly fraternals) still work well in many places, or are they becoming victim to increasingly busy workloads – or, as seems to be the case in some parts, are they being superseded by 'cluster groups', and smaller, probably less inclusive get-togethers for ministers?

In any case, a reading group may offer a more focussed, yet still very supportive and open forum for sharing concerns, providing mutual support and a chance to explore ideas than may be possible when other meetings for ministers have, often, to follow business agendas.

Granted, they will not be for everyone, but experience of this particular group suggests that, with a reasonable amount of honesty, it's possible both to find material that is accessible and useful to a wide range of ministries and contexts, and to engage with it at different levels. Of course, as often happens in discussion, the theme of a particular book may well open

up a wide-ranging discussion that goes into territory that may be quite unrelated to the book itself.

The important thing is that all taking part should feel able to speak openly and freely, and that full respect is given by each to the insights and experience of each other. Our group has been nurtured and guided by the incoming Principal of Bristol Baptist College, Rev Dr Steve Finamore, who has ensured that the basic arrangements are in place, and then 'led from within' the discussions to great effect: each time one member will introduce a book, perhaps with a brief précis, one or two personal reflections, and maybe a question or two to get things going.

At a recent group meeting we discussed *'Atonement for a sinless society'* by Alan Mann, part of the 'Faith in an emerging culture' series (Paternoster/AuthenticMedia ISBN1-84227-355-8). Alan Mann's thesis (the book emerged from a thesis undertaken for an MA) is that, as we are now living in a post-modern, post-industrialised world in which people are no longer familiar with traditional concepts such as sin, the Church must be prepared to rethink, and perhaps re-imagine and restate some of its traditional doctrines – particularly the atonement – and express them in forms that do make sense to post-moderns.

This 'opening gambit' in Mann's work gave our group much to think about, and discuss. Sharing ideas with each other helped, for instance, to clarify some of the ideas in what is, actually, quite a complex presentation of an argument. As a former engineer involved in design and development in a mass-production environment, I found myself reacting against Mann's use of the term 'post-industrial'. A month or so before our group met, the new Airbus A380 passenger plane paid a courtesy visit to Bristol, flying low over the amassed workforce of the Filton Airbus factory, where parts of the plane are manufactured. Industry is alive, if not exactly very well(!) in many parts of this country. Arguably the world grows more dependent, not less, on manufacturing industry with every passing year.

The discussion helped to focus my thinking away from such considerations however, towards what Mann really means by the phrase 'post-industrial'. In the modern, as opposed to the post-modern, world, whole communities functioned and flourished around the activities of an industry, or a process – coal mining in South Wales, or Yorkshire, textile and clothing manufacture in the East Midlands, steel production in South Yorkshire, ship-building in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Tyneside. Mann is pointing to the existence of a human world, and culture, after those communities have to all intents and purposes disappeared. Arguably the hey-day of the Protestant Free Churches coincided with the hey-day of these 'industrial communities'. Now, industry has gone global, and as far as Western Europe is concerned the culture that sustained its communities, formed in no small part by Free Church activities, mores and morals, has gone: not so much global, as altogether.

The central part of Mann's book is an investigation of the use of the language in which Christian faith has been couched, and the way in which that language, often, no longer mirrors lived experience – particularly in regard to sin. He seeks to uncover another aspect of the human experience of the condition of sin that, he thinks, offers rich possibilities for reconnecting doctrine and experience, namely, shame. He argues that shame is both a personal feeling, and a real condition – ontological incoherence – that means that human beings are divided

within themselves. The atonement (at-one-ment) precisely deals with this condition, and so it should be possible to use 'shame language' to replace 'sin language' as we seek to make the Church relevant again.

This was, perhaps, the aspect of the book that gave rise to the most passionate part of our discussion. There was a widespread feeling that whilst this might offer useful ways forward for talking about individual experience, salvation and knowledge of God, it had nothing to say about the 'cosmic' dimension of the atonement: God's reconciliation of all things; a new creation; and the notion of sin as a condition affecting not just individuals but the whole created order.

Ministers, of course, know lots about sin. Here the discussion opened out into the sharing of personal experience in pastoral ministry, in both church and chaplaincy contexts: people's struggles, institutional failings, church division – you name it.

And, if we were right in identifying a significant weakness in Mann's argument at this point, then it's easy to understand why we concluded that, in the end, Mann finishes on a rather weak note. Jesus' death on the cross and rising again is a demonstration of 'ontological coherence': a human being *has* lived coherently, and thus it is possible for others to do so as well. So, a post-modern, discovering this 're-worked atonement', should be able to come to the point of saying 'I accept myself'. This self-acceptance will provide grounds for accepting others, and being reconciled to God. Salvation, it seemed to the group, in this way, comes dangerously close to self-fulfilment.

The experience of discussing all this in a group of ministers has been refreshing, because, even allowing for theological differences between us, we discovered that we had much in common in terms of the experience of ministry, of coming alongside people, and of struggling to find ways of making our language, our pastoral practice, our worship, relevant to the lives of (Post-modern?) people living around us.

My final reflection on the book is, as they say, 'all my own work' – that is: the reading group didn't get time to hear it, and can't be blamed for its content.

My initial irritation with Mann's thesis remains. He does not engage with the centuries old theological work of restating Christian doctrine at all. Fifty years ago figures such as John Robinson, Alec Vidler, and Maurice Wiles were 'shaking the foundations' and 'restating Christian doctrine' and upsetting traditionalists left, right, and centre. They were building on earlier efforts by the likes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, T R Glover, who were in turn following in the tradition of great European theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Søren Kierkegaard.

All of those figures belong in their various ways to the much maligned world of liberal theology. I am left wondering if, on the one hand, Mann is unaware of any of it (and is thus reinventing the wheel!), or, on the other, if mainstream evangelicalism is coming, rather late to the feast, to a realisation that you can't just make the Church relevant by changing the style of music; you have to ask questions of, and may even have to remake, the *doctrines* of the faith we have received.

Michael Docker
WEBA Reading Group

Book Reviews

Edited by Michael Docker

Bonhoeffer and Britain

Keith W Clements, Churches Together in Britain & Ireland 2006; ISBN 0-85169-307-5; 154 pp; £14.99

As the author acknowledges in his Preface, this book serves as a fitting introduction to the forthcoming English translation of Bonhoeffer's writings from his period in London from 1933 - 1935. But *Bonhoeffer and Britain* is much more than that. It is a fascinating study of Bonhoeffer's time in, and continuing links with Britain throughout his short life.

In itself this is of considerable historic interest. However, *Bonhoeffer and Britain* will be of interest to more than the academic historian or Bonhoeffer enthusiast, for here is a concise and readable introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, focusing on (but not limited to) his time as pastor to two German churches in London. Within the space of less than 150 pages, attractively illustrated with well-chosen photographs of many of the people and places referred to in the text, Keith Clements offers us a particularly British angle on the life of this German pastor and conspirator against Hitler.

Ranging from Platform 1 at London's Paddington Station, where Bonhoeffer first met the Dutch ecumenist Visser't Hooft, to my own hometown of Bexhill on Sea, where he met Reinhold Niebuhr in April 1939, via various Anglican theological colleges and even (quite possibly) our own Spurgeon's College, *Bonhoeffer and Britain* is a veritable travelogue of Bonhoeffer-related sites in Britain. It even recalls an evening sermon Bonhoeffer preached at the nearby Perry Rise Baptist Church. But is is the glimpses of personalities from the British and pan-European ecumenical scene of the 1930s, such as J. H. ("Joe") Oldham, Bishop George Bell, and Leonard Hodgson, as well as many lesser-known figures, which leap out of the pages in an engaging and inspiring way.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is the window it offers into Bonhoeffer's ministry as a pastor, as in these (familiar) remarks of his from the annual report of his Sydenham church for 1934:

"It makes little difference whether the attendance at a worship service is large or small. The so-called 'success' of a pastor is really concerned least of all with the number of worshipers. But I would like to ask: does the average attendance of 40 during the last few months really correspond to the 140 names listed in the directory ... ?" (p. 66)

The author acknowledges in his Preface the danger of losing sight of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "real humanity and the earthy context in which he lived and worked" (p. ix). This book serves to remind us of Bonhoeffer as pastor, living and ministering in a place (if not a time) very similar to our own, and seemingly a world away from his later life as conspirator and prisoner. Yet it was here in the context of pastoral ministry to two small congregations that the later Bonhoeffer was formed. And again we come across words that would not be out of place in many pulpits today. Preaching on Luke 13: 1- 5 a few days after Hitler's purge of suspected Nazi dissidents in July 1934, Bonhoeffer caught and addressed what must have been the mood of many in his congregation and many before and since:

"Perhaps this text frightens you, and you think it sounds too much like the news of the day - too dangerous for a worship service." (p. 69)

As I have indicated, there are various reasons for reading this book. Whether you are relatively new to Bonhoeffer or have been travelling with him for some time, Keith Clements has again opened up his life and ministry for British readers. Despite its deceptively garish cover this book is well worth reading for novice and seasoned traveller alike.

Peter C. King
Bexhill on Sea

Becoming More Human: Exploring the Interface of Spirituality, Discipleship and Therapeutic Faith Community

Peter R Holmes Paternoster 2005; ISBN 1-84227-388-4 Paperback: 322 pp; £16.99

This book is based on a PhD thesis - and it shows! There are footnotes galore (sometimes three or four to a single sentence) and other paraphernalia of scholarship. But that as such is no criticism. A prodigious amount of study has clearly gone into it and I found it a fascinating and challenging read. The bibliography alone is a gold-mine.

In 1998 Peter Holmes helped found Christ Church, Deal (CCD) in Kent. Though a "church", he prefers to think of it as a "therapeutic community". Stressing that all of us are to a greater or lesser extent sick, he envisaged a church in which every member was viewed as being on a journey to wholeness, wholeness being defined as likeness to Christ. The mentally ill are especially welcome. Therapy takes place in small groups, and those who reach a measure of wholeness become part of the healing process themselves.

Emotional expression is encouraged. People are expected to be completely honest about themselves, never covering or repressing negative aspects of their lives or personalities. They are expected to take responsibility for their progress.

"Becoming" matters more than "being": God is not the static god of Greek philosophy, but the dynamic God of the Old Testament. The theology of the Cappadocian Fathers, with their emphasis on God in Trinity, is taken as a model for relationships. A commitment to change, however painful, is key, with Exodus 15:26 a bedrock text introducing the "Rapha" discipleship journey. Holmes' book is an amalgam of psychological theorising, biblical exposition, and theological exploration.

There is good stuff here! - bracing, stimulating, probing. All of us who have tried to minister to the mentally ill, and felt that we were making a pretty poor fist of it, are bound to sit up and take notice. I am glad to have read this book, tough going though it sometimes was.

And yet... A sense of unease grew on me. A number of reservations poked their way into my mind - and one fairly major gripe.

In general, I felt that the biblical sections didn't have quite the same sure touch as others. Can that Exodus text really bear the weight that is placed upon it? Is "refusal to change" really an adequate definition of sin? Could the "therapeutic community" model of church engender unhealthy introspection? Is not the best therapy sometimes to roll up our sleeves and just get on with living the Christian life? Can "belonging", another major emphasis, also become unhealthy? There were times I

was bewildered about the nature of CCD: is it a charismatic congregation? a psychiatric clinic? a quasi-monastic community? even (forgive me, Lord!) an embryonic cult? I seemed to hear distant warning bells ringing.

And the gripe? A faintly disagreeable vein of self-congratulation runs through the book. Testimony snippets from members are scattered throughout, and while they are often illuminating and refreshingly down-to-earth, they also tend to give the impression that CCD is just about the only real church on the planet (so unlike "normal churches"!).

Quite possibly I am being unfair. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. This book is, on one level, the story of a church community. If in twenty or thirty years' time it has indeed proved itself to be the revolutionary healing community it claims to be, I will (assuming I'm still around!) very happily swallow my misgivings. But for the moment they remain. Time will be the test.

Colin Sedgwick
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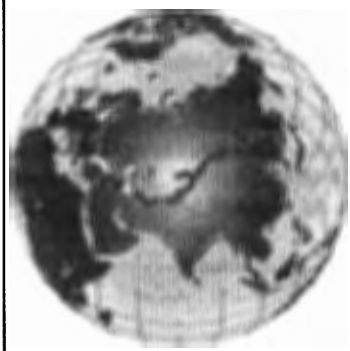
Baptist Men's Movement

a catalyst for change in a hurting world



www.baptistmen.org.uk
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