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# The Baptist Ministers' Journal

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# Editorial

The possibility of some "pro-lifers" thinking again in the light of the indication that a particular gene may perhaps be responsible for homosexual orientation, highlights the current moral maelstrom, driven furiously by the breathtaking pace of scientific research. Even moral guidelines which seemed adequate ten years ago are now feeling the strain, as what is possible, technologically, increases by leaps and bounds. Basic to all this is the question: because something *can* be done, *should* it be done? It is at this point that the scientist and the moral philosopher dialogue, or increasingly do not.

There are a number of things which frustrate such dialogue. One is the highly secularised nature of our society, in which certain basic Christian values no longer command a consensus. Therefore the Christian ethicist comes to some issues with presuppositions which the scientific world at large may not hold. The result may be a "dialogue of the deaf" and a struggle to find any common ground at all on the basis of which to go forward. A second factor is the increasing attraction of a functional view of science, whereby governments put pressure upon the scientific community to engage only in that research which will make a felt difference in society. True, the scientists themselves resist such a utilitarian perception of research, but the effect is to throw up an increasing number of moral "hot potatoes". A third factor is the less than monolithic nature of present day Christian ethics. And if the trumpet issues an uncertain sound, can we blame science and technology for taking little heed?

What appears to be happening is that where there is dialogue it is rooted in preserving the dignity and integrity of the person. Here, it seems, the Christian ethical thinker and the scientist have a point of contact from which some moral context for future developments might be fashioned.

Homing in on this whole area is Simon Robinson, a guest writer, who addresses, specifically, Business Ethics and genetic research. He invites us to take into account the issues to be considered when framing moral judgments. This is followed by an insight into what it means to try to establish a Church for the unchurched: the heights and depths. Terry Peasley shares frankly the experience thus far at Southcourt. Arising out of a contribution he made in 1991 to a Baptist World Alliance Commission, Paul Beasley-Murray reflects critically upon our understanding of baptism in the light of the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) Lima Document.

Does the minister of a local church have any strategic significance when it comes to stimulating and promoting the cause of world mission? Fred Stainthorpe has no doubts and writes to win converts. Stephen Greasley then wrestles with the ultimately unanswerable issue of Theodicy; the "justification of God", in the light of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Only a God who shares the suffering makes sense. Next, we include a brief introduction to Narrative Theology, an area of increasing and compelling interest as we seek to understand our own story in the light of the biblical text. Lastly, this time, our Secretary, Vic Sumner, highlights some of the current issues engaging us within the BMF.

# Contemporary Challenges in Christian Social Ethics

In a world which is ever changing, the ethical goalposts seem to be constantly moving, and all too often Christian Social Ethics ends up not simply shooting wide but apparently playing on a different pitch. In both the areas I want to highlight in this paper the Church has been accused of doing just that - of making pronouncements which are strong on prophecy and weak on any understanding of the context of the ethical dilemmas involved. The first is Business Ethics and the second is the contemporary Western debate about genetic research.

## Business Ethics

Having started academic life in the USA, Business Ethics has now become established in Britain with interdisciplinary centres in London and Leeds Universities, amongst others. Though Christian Ethics played a big part in the founding of Business Ethics as an academic subject, there have been questions as to what part it can now play. Some writers have argued that Christian Social Ethics had nothing substantive to add to the contribution of philosophers. Others, including Peter Vardy, have questioned Church pronouncements such as the American Roman Catholic report *Economic Justice For All* (1986). Quite apart from any disagreements about concepts such as community and responsibility, Vardy argues that the Church cannot apply general principles directly to the world of business. Moreover, by implication, theologians are not qualified to pronounce on the world of business, speaking as they do from "a secure and problem free environment removed from business realities" (*Business Morality*, p.196ff) Underlying these questions is often a lack of trust, with business persons feeling the victims of negative judgments, and unaffirmed in their task. (see *The Corporation, A Theological Inquiry*, ed Michael Novak, p.203ff) Some affirmation has been attempted by writers such as Griffiths, Caldecote and Novak. They argue the importance of the market not simply as a means to efficiency, but also a means to greater freedom and creativity. This, in turn, demands protecting the freedom of the business person. In this context the business person becomes the servant who creates wealth for society and helps to handle and distribute resources in the most efficient way. Caldecote even argues that such work is "just as meritorious as in, for example, medicine and nursing, or social work for the disadvantaged, where direct benefits for the community can be more readily identified with the Christian duty to our neighbours" (*A Bias Against Business*, in *Industrial Christian Fellowship*, June 1990) The social responsibility of the business person is then precisely fulfilled in this service. All of this assumes the presence or the development of some ethical framework for the market.

There is no doubt that it is important to recognize the part that business plays in stewardship and allocation of resources. However, the attempt to tie "servanthood" in closely with the free market demands careful reflection.

Firstly, the concept of servanthood in Christian Ethics occurs within the context of the covenant community. As such the idea of servanthood cannot be restricted to the simple function of production without some responsibility for how the product is distributed, and what effect the production process might have upon the stakeholders i.e. parties which have some stake or interest in the work process.

Secondly, analysis of the stakeholders reveals three levels of responsibility in business: individual, corporate and intercorporate. The first of these refers to the

responsibility of the individual for the well being of the company and beyond. This is exemplified by the tragedy of the Herald of Free Enterprise. The Sheen Report noted that several individuals in the workforce could have prevented the disaster but that none saw it as their responsibility to go beyond their specified tasks. The second level refers to the responsibility of the company. In the case of the Herald of Free Enterprise there was a clear attempt to deny corporate responsibility. It is, of course, difficult to arrive at a definition of the company analogous to a responsible individual. Even with a legal definition of responsibility, the task of proving liability is virtually impossible. The third level of the responsibility refers to that shared by several stakeholders, including other companies. The classic case here is in terms of pollution of the environment where it requires several stakeholders working together to ensure the clean up, eg. in inner cities.

A Christian perspective demands that all these levels of responsibility be explored. The denial of responsibility or the attempt to restrict responsibility to narrow areas is precisely where individual and corporate sin is allowed to develop, not least because it can so easily lead to a denial of humanity and of the moral claims of any of the stakeholders. Such responsibility does not, of course, imply that the company or the individual should actually solve all problems for the different stakeholders. It does, however, involve a careful examination of all the claims, and careful consideration of how all the stakeholders might be encouraged to fulfil their responsibilities in any work situation and what might be constraining them from so doing. This introduces the idea of social creativity, rather than the creativity of the individual entrepreneur advocated by Novak and others. Such a view of social creativity sees all stakeholders as potentially a part of the creative activity of work. This might mean altering the legal position of some stakeholders eg. the shareholders, who, at present, are not encouraged to act in a responsive or responsible way. (See my *Serving Society*, Grove Ethical Studies, no 86, p.23) It may mean more creative responses from companies to ensure that they do not take on the roles and responsibilities best fulfilled by other stakeholders. A good case in point is the controversy over Nestlé and breast milk substitute. Nestlé, at one time in this long running controversy, supplied not only the product but also the nurses whose task was to educate mothers both in breast feeding and, where appropriate, in the use of breast milk substitute. This took away the responsibility of the local governments and health providers, who in any case, because of lack of finance, were unable to fulfil it. It also led to the great suspicion that the "Nestlé nurses" were simply being used to advertise the product. Had Nestlé used the money spent on the nurses to empower the other stakeholders (using eg. the World Health Organization), an important part of the problem would have been solved. In cases such as Nestlé the stress on shared responsibility and creativity is not utopian but rather makes for "good business" in every sense of the term.

Christian Social Ethics then has a lot to contribute to this area. It offers a profound and complex view of responsibility which demands that business be more aware, responsive and creative. It looks to moral decision-making as community based and not individualistic. In the light of this it argues for the development of the skills and personal qualities that are necessary for such decision-making. It also argues for the development of a moral ethos within particular companies, and the kind of company organization that would enable all its members to participate in this. (See Justin Welby, *Can Companies Sin?* Grove Ethical Studies no. 85)

This debate takes business with ultimate seriousness because it treats all who are involved in the process as responsible moral decision-makers. In so doing, it also acknowledges the invaluable prophetic role that business itself could fulfil within society.

## Genetic Research

With the world of genetics it is tempting to imagine that we have moved from the basic reality of work to the science fiction of Jurassic Park. Nothing could be further from the truth, as recent debates about the possibility of selecting the sex of future children and the discovery of a gene which may have some part in predisposing individuals to homosexuality demonstrate.

There are three broad areas which require attention: genetic engineering of microbes, plants and animals; the use of genetic techniques in human therapy; and the issues surrounding research and how the fruits of research are to be regulated. The first of these focuses on issues such as control, to ensure safety for the environment and humans, and distribution, eg. to ensure that the Third World is not manipulated.

The second area looks to the development of ways of combatting genetically linked diseases, such as haemophilia and Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Along with important strides in treatment there is the constant danger, expressed in the slippery slope argument, that such techniques as genetic screening may eventually lead to the development of eugenics. In a recent debate at a BMA conference some participants raised the argument that sex selection of future children should be allowed for second children on social grounds ie. to enable sex balanced families. The dangers of rights and consumer language filling out the meaning of "social grounds", such as in the Abortion Act, are evident. Ultimately, as Rahner notes, such activity takes away from the "givenness" of creation and begins to use persons as objects (*Theological Investigations* vol ( p.244ff)

It is precisely this, often imperceptible, shift to dehumanizing which could provide the foundation for any development of eugenics.

The issue becomes more difficult when examining two kinds of gene therapy: Somatic-Cell and Germ-Line. The first of these affects only the individual being treated and not the germ-line cells, which influence future generations. Germ-Line therapy, something still being developed, would produce changes passed on to future generations. As such it would be a very efficient use of resources and lead to the possibility of reducing the prevalence of harmful genes. Those who are against this, however, argue that we do not have a clear idea of what the long-term medical consequences might be, and that once again the use of utilitarian moral criteria might open the door to a climate of thought in which eugenics could develop.

Underlying most of these points is the third area: how such techniques can be controlled and who is involved in making the decisions about regulation. The central stake holders would seem to be the scientists, many of whom argue for the freedom of scientific enquiry and the right to self regulation. In an era of great financial restraints, however, the concept of freedom of enquiry is becoming rarer, with research funding increasingly dependant upon the business world. In the 1980's, for instance, the Hoescht company contributed \$50 million to molecular biology research at Harvard in return for exclusive licences on any products resulting from the research. This leads us back into the world of business and to some fundamental questions about rights, power and control. Is it acceptable for companies to patent living organisms, such as the famous Harvard mouse? How can the scientific world, with a stress on the tradition of open discussion, be reconciled to the world of business which demands that trade secrets be protected? How can acceptable distribution of the techniques be achieved in the context of competition?

Many of these questions are focused in the human genome project, a massive US enterprise which aims to map and sequence all the genetic information characteristics

of human beings. Once this is achieved there are questions about how the data would be used eg. in medical insurance, and which body would regulate the use.

This brings us once again to basic questions about responsibility and how the responsibilities of all the different stakeholders could be identified and worked through. This can be a complex activity, not least because, for example, "objective" scientists are often paid as consultants to major companies.

However, given the rapid pace of scientific progress, it is clear that the Church should be involved in trying to develop an open moral community in which all the stakeholders can share responsibility. Such responsibility should not simply involve setting up regulations and codes but also the development of social and spiritual awareness. In an ethical area which is ultimately about guarding against values and practices which could lead to dehumanizing behaviour, it is precisely at this level of the development of personal and spiritual qualities that the Church can contribute most effectively.

**Simon Robinson**

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# A Church for the Unchurched: The Southcourt Experiment

Southcourt Baptist Church is situated on a pre-war council estate in Aylesbury, Bucks. It started just over 60 years ago as a children's work led by Sister Bertha, a deaconess. I joined the Church in 1980 when it was growing, and the membership was about 120, with a Sunday School of 250.

The Church grew quite quickly, and I was joined by the Revd Michael Herbert in 1983. The building seated only 200, so in 1986 a new church was built to seat 450. Just after the opening of the church the Revd Chris Stoddard joined the pastoral team. Our membership is at present 310, with 200 children.

As one can surmise from the above, the Church has been very open to change, and has a deep desire to reach others for Jesus Christ. A family who came to believe in the Lord Jesus about ten years ago moved on to the estate, and began doing door to door outreach. Together with a team which developed around them, they visited every house on our estate of 7,000 people. A number of those visited are now in membership with us, but over the past two or three years the children are the ones who are responding. We had an influx of difficult children; one seven year old, for instance had been expelled from school. It did things to our Sunday School.

At Easter 1992, the elders asked me to do some future planning, with the hope of the whole Church being involved in some sort of outreach. I prepared a paper entitled, "By all means save some". Well, it was a good title. The Church had become somewhat inward looking; it was time to reach out; but we were unsure of the method to use.

In June 1992 Chris and I attended the Willowcreek Conference in Birmingham. It was a heartwarming experience, and spoke to our situation. We believed that this was the method we could use to break out of the boundaries that seemed to contain us, and prevent us from sharing the good news of Jesus; a method that could help us communicate in a meaningful way with folk in our area. The leadership was very positive and the Church very patient, as we worked out a mission statement. This put into words what we had always been about. We also adopted the strategy which has worked so well for Willowcreek Community Church. **Our Mission Statement:** To bring others to Jesus Christ and to grow in Him, Going and Growing.

## The Strategy

- 1. Bridge building**- Bringing the unchurched into the vital life of the Church will only be accomplished when believers, people who love Christ and are convinced that people matter to God, build relationships of integrity with unchurched believers.
- 2. Sharing a verbal witness** - Once a relationship of integrity has been established, believers have opportunities to share their testimony with unchurched Harry or Mary. These opportunities are directly linked to the believer seeking God for those moments, after establishing a credible friendship with the unchurched individual.
- 3. Provide a service for Seekers** - The typical response to hearing about Jesus Christ and the life-changing effect He has in an individual's life is minimal expression of interest. We are seeking to nurture this interest through the seeker-sensitive services. The services are designed for people who are in the process of making a decision for

Christ or evaluating Christianity, and for those who have recently committed their lives to Him.

**4. Attending our morning service** - Once someone has accepted Jesus as his or her Saviour and has been attending the evening service for a period of time, he or she is encouraged to become involved in the morning service. This service provides believers with an opportunity to participate in corporate worship and to listen to expository teaching designed to mature the believer. This service is imperative for those who are committed to becoming fully devoted followers of Christ.

**5. Participating in house group** - House Group involvement provides fellowship for the believer as well as a group for accountability, discipleship, encouragement and support.

**6. Involved in service** - Believers who consider Southcourt Baptist Church their home church are encouraged to discover their spiritual gifts, develop them and then use them in some form of Christian service within the body of Christ. Without the identification, development and use of their God-given gift, believers will not realise their spiritual potential.

**7. Stewardship** - As believers, we recognise our individual responsibility to manage all our resources in a way which honours God.

## **Realising of a Vision**

The summer of 1992 was spent planning how to communicate such a big package to the Church, and to prepare for the outreach beginning in January 1993. We had already talked about such an outreach, but it was now far more specific, and the strategy clear.

The teaching on Sundays and the Church Family Nights emphasised the truth that people matter to God. This struck a chord in many hearts. Because we believe it, we need to be serious about sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others. We talked about being normal and natural in sharing the truth of the Gospel. During this time we had three pilot evening services which were designed to reach the unchurched with some truth of the gospel. This service, which we called "Livelihood", was also designed in such a way that our own members would feel comfortable to bring their friends. These services were most encouraging.

We began holding such services every Sunday evening from the first Sunday in January. So we have been going for seven months, and have been encouraged. It is hard to gauge the real numbers of unchurched folk who have attended. But a conservative estimate would be something like a hundred, which is a lot more than we had in the whole of 1992. About five people who have ties with our Church became believers and two or three others who were brought by friends from another group. Since then it has been slow. We are holding a "Just Looking" course at present, which has five or six seekers; five of them have come through the Livelihood service. Yet one cannot say they have come just through the service, because it is the people asking them to come to church that is vital, and the relationship they have with them.

When we began teaching in the Autumn of 1992, a number of our members came and told me how their spiritual lives had been going downhill. Now they were beginning to "buzz" again. I can't define that, but it sounded good. It means that many in the Church are very aware of the needy people around, and that they have an answer in the Good News of Jesus Christ. They are willing to talk to them, and invite them to a service, which is non-threatening, and where they can remain anonymous.

The purpose of the bridgebuilding is to bring people to Jesus Christ, not the Livelink service. One of the means we use is the Livelink service. I understand from recent research, that over the past ten years, the place where most people come to faith in Christ, is in church. (*Finding Faith Today: How Does it Happen?*, Bible Society)

Any method of evangelism must depend on the believing community actually believing that the lost matter to God. Certainly, if we are going to be willing to develop relationships with our unchurched friends, and give them time, we have to believe it is worthwhile. However, the friendship has to be true, and not just an attempt to manipulate people into the Kingdom of God.

Each part of the strategy is important; it is part of a whole. However, the Livelink service is seen to have a big part in the Church's programme. We have our Livelink on a Sunday evening; I cannot remember how it got that title. Some of the themes we have worked with over these months are: the reliability of the Bible; Health, Wealth and Pleasure; Jesus: Who is He? These are usually over a period of three weeks. The issue that we deal with is of specific interest to a particular group of people. We have just finished a series on marriage, which has been very good indeed. It has dealt with issues which deeply affect a number of our own community, and gives them the cue to invite their friends who are asking similar questions. We are dealing very much with the wonderful truth that God has come into our human condition and has a lot to say to us and even more, to do with us.

## **Programming**

The planning ahead is vital. We have a team of about 50 people involved in the Livelink service. Therefore people need to know what is going to be expected of them in the weeks ahead. There are songs to find and to prepare: dramas to write and to rehearse. This has been taken over by Chris who has done a marvellous job. One of the first problems he discovered is that there is very little in the way of resources to present the gospel in this way. So it has meant a great deal of work for him, and other members of the team. A typical service will have two or three songs on the theme of the evening. These will include solo numbers and group numbers. Our small group of musicians does wonders. We have a keyboard player, a flautist, and trombonist. We almost always have a drama; which means some good creative writing. There are also about a dozen people who perform the drama sketches. These have proved to be quite powerful ways of opening up the subject we are studying. Often mime or dance, using sign language to a song, has proved very helpful.

Usually a short Bible reading, with an introduction from a life situation, helps those who have never read the Bible for themselves. Testimonies of God coming into people's lives at different critical periods have been very challenging. We have had a baptismal service, or one evening we taught about Jesus the healer and invited folk to come forward if they wanted us to pray with them. Any means we can use to convey the truth which builds up our theme is used. Slides, short clips from videos (someone gave us a video projector), any audiovisual aid that we can lay our hands on, is acceptable.

Finally, the theme is addressed from the teaching of the Bible. We believe this is what it is all about, and the rest is there to awaken people, or focus people's thoughts to a particular subject, but it always takes us to God. What is God saying in this situation? The whole service lasts an hour, and 20-25 minutes are allowed for the Bible teaching. It is not easy to do, especially when one is used to having more time to preach. It makes one focus on the essential points one wants to teach. The subject is being looked at usually over a period of two or three weeks, so one does not have to deal with everything on the one night. In fact, the idea is to get over one primary truth.

In the background there are the lighting, and sound technicians who work the video projector, and see that everyone has a mic. at the right time, and lots of other essential details. People are invited to stay behind for a chat with someone if they want some questions answered. Good free literature is available, including Bibles, for those who do not possess one. A group of friends also put on some refreshments: tea, coffee, passion cake, biscuits. Quite a number of visitors stay behind and chat about the service over a cup of coffee. Those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ were helped greatly through a "Just Looking" Course, or by the friends who brought them, leading them to respond to the Gospel. All this is very demanding, time consuming, hard work, which different members of the Church are doing and enjoying.

### **Something of the cost**

This method of evangelism is long term, so we are not looking for results every Sunday. Rather we see salvation - I think more realistically - as a process, and when people repent and come to faith, then they really know what they are doing.

There are parts of the strategy yet to be fully worked out, but we are on the way. There are negatives, and people have paid a price. Obviously those who are working so hard are paying a price, but there are also those like the Sunday School teachers, who have missed the worship and teaching of the old evening service.

There are some members who have also said how they have missed the evening service of worship and teaching, and some now worship elsewhere on Sunday Evening. While this is a very small number, nevertheless it shows how change is not easy in the life of our church community. There are genuine negatives, but over against them we had to ask how much time do we give in the week to reach the lost who matter to God? We have all eternity to worship and fellowship, but only now to tell others the Good News.

The other Sunday Morning the three to ten year olds came into the Morning Service. There were about 130-140 children joining with the adults. The Church was full and about 40 of the children who could not find seats became a choir on the platform. The same children who, two or three years ago, had been so difficult and disruptive. We began singing "Shine, Jesus, Shine...", and these boys and girls began to worship God; they knew the words, and it just came from within them. To me there was such a sense of the presence of God, and dare I say, the pleasure of God. I have been in the Church for just over 13 years, and we have had some good times, but to me, it was one of the best services I have attended. People have given so much of their lives for those children, and the fruit is now to be seen.

There is no cheap and easy way to bring people to God and to grow in Him. Somebody has to pay a price. In three years time we will be better placed to make an assessment of what God is doing among us, but in the meantime I believe we are going down the right road.

**Terry Peasley**

# Celebrating the Faith in Baptism

The brief given to me was to prepare a short paper on common Baptist distinctives in worship. I took the liberty of narrowing down the brief and focusing on the one distinctive form of worship common to every Baptist church: viz the service of believers' baptism. In so doing I raised the following questions: how do we celebrate the faith in baptism? How might we celebrate the faith in baptism?

I chose to seek to answer those questions in the light of the ecumenical Lima document, *Baptism, Eucharist and the Ministry* (BEM), which helpfully raises some of the salient issues. Thus BEM states:

“Within any comprehensive order of baptism at least the following elements should find a place:

- the proclamation of the scriptures referring to baptism
- an invocation of the Holy Spirit
- a profession of faith in Christ and the Holy Trinity
- the use of water
- a declaration that the persons baptized have acquired a new identity as sons and daughters of God, and as members of the church, called to be witnesses to the Gospel.

Some churches consider that Christian initiation is not complete without the sealing of the baptized with the gift of the Holy Spirit and participation in holy communion”.

From a Baptist perspective this statement is clearly not all-embracing. No reference, for instance, is made to the singing of hymns and songs, which for Baptists is almost unforfeitable! Certainly the praises of God's worshipping people form a wonderful sounding-board for the Gospel, as it is proclaimed in the sermon and enacted in baptism. Nonetheless the Lima statement does offer a useful structure for what inevitably has to be a limited paper.

## 1. The proclamation of the scriptures referring to baptism.

In Britain as in other parts of the world, it is customary to precede the baptisms with an explanation of what is involved. In many a published baptismal order a formal statement is found. My own preference, however, is to read three baptismal scriptures (Matthew 3:13-15; Romans 6: 3,4; and Matthew 28:18-20) as an explanation for the practice about to be followed, and in this way allow God's word - and not my words - to be heard.

However, BEM may have something more in mind than the reading of appropriate Scriptures prior to baptism. The word “proclamation”, to a Baptist at least, implies preaching. So is a baptismal service an occasion for the claims of believers' baptism to be presented? I am not convinced. In a British context at least, baptismal services are often the occasion when the church is at its fullest, with a good number of unbelievers present who normally would never darken the door of the church. To argue the case for believers' baptism as distinct from arguing the case for Christ would be to misuse the occasion and to miss out on a splendid opportunity for Gospel preaching. However, this does not mean that the scriptures referring to baptism are not then proclaimed. But the emphasis will be different, with the preaching focusing on the God who has come to us in Christ and who now demands a response - viz. faith expressed through baptism. Alternatively, if the occasion is not used for Gospel preaching and needs of the candidates as distinct from the onlookers are to the fore, then the baptismal Scriptures may be proclaimed in terms of the challenge of Christian discipleship. To preach in the

first place a rite rather than a Lord is to make a mockery of preaching.

Whatever, it does seem natural and right for the sermon to relate to the baptisms. From a European perspective, the practice of certain of our American sister churches, which appear to treat baptisms as a preliminary to the main service, is strange indeed. Baptism is a God-given Gospel ordinance. The Scriptures relating to it should surely be proclaimed.

## 2. An Invocation of the Holy Spirit

Traditionally, many Baptists have been suspicious of the Holy Spirit. In reaction to the claims of those who advocate baptismal regeneration, Baptists have sometimes gone to the opposite extreme and denied the presence of the Spirit in baptism. Baptism is then viewed as a mere symbol and nothing more.

However, during the 1960's in particular, Baptists began to take a fresh look at the Scriptures relating to baptism, and the upshot is that for a growing minority of Baptists, baptism is being viewed as a means of grace and thus sacramental in nature. For such Baptists it is only natural to invoke the Spirit and ask God to bless those being baptised. Thus in *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship*, recently published by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the baptisms are preceded by a prayer which includes the following words: "Send your Holy Spirit that this baptism may be for your servants a union with Christ in his death and resurrection that, as Christ was raised from death through the glory of the Father, they also might live new lives. Send your Holy Spirit anew upon them that they may be brought into the fellowship of the Body of Christ and may grow in Christ's likeness".

Clearly, there is nothing automatic or magical about the invocation of the Spirit. On the other hand, to refrain from seeking the blessing of God upon the candidates is surely tantamount to a denial of belief in the supernatural!

## 3. A renunciation of evil

Baptism, in so far as it declares a dying to self and a resolve to live for Christ, implies the renunciation of evil. However, as over against the liturgies of other mainline churches, Baptists have not generally highlighted this aspect of baptism. Thus, in Britain, baptismal candidates have traditionally been asked: "Do you profess repentance towards God and faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord". Although such repentance and faith implies renunciation of evil, the question arises whether this is fully clear in the candidate's mind. My own feeling is that because within many Western societies baptism is not seen through the biblical perspective as the great watershed between one life and another, but rather understood primarily in terms of confessing one's faith in Jesus, this negative aspect of renouncing evil is often lost.

The tide, however, may be beginning to turn. In Britain, for instance, the twin influences of charismatic renewal (which takes the demonic seriously) and liturgical renewal (caused by ecumenical involvement) are causing Baptists to think again. Thus in one of the baptismal orders in *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* the candidate is specifically asked: "Do you turn from sin, renounce evil, and intend to follow Christ?"

Theologically - and indeed practically - there is surely much in favour of an explicit renunciation of evil. For such a renunciation underlines the fact that faith is not to be confused with easy "believism", but rather involves turning one's back upon the world and all its (sinful) values. Baptism should never be understood as a simple expression of love for Jesus: it is rather an acknowledgement of the lordship of Jesus, come hell or highwater. (As an aside, when baptism is viewed in these terms, then the baptism of children who have not reached the age of discretion becomes more than questionable!)

#### **4. A profession of faith in Christ and the Holy Trinity**

Baptists have no difficulty in acknowledging baptism as “a profession of faith in Christ”. This is their most common understanding of the rite. Whatever the exact form of words, those baptized as believers confess Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Indeed, through the very drama of baptism by immersion they acknowledge that the Church who died, died for them, and that the Christ who rose, rose for them. The Gospel, as enshrined in the credal formula of 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, is at the very heart of our understanding of baptism.

But do Baptists view baptism as an opportunity to profess faith in the Holy Trinity? My suspicion is that in spite of all their claims to orthodoxy, many Baptists have been so much influenced by pietism that they are first and foremost “Jesus” people. Add to this the fact that most of us do not, Sunday-by-Sunday, recite the words of the historic creeds, and the result is that for many the concept of the Trinity is not to the fore in Christian believing.

True, probably most Baptists follow the pattern of Matthew 28:19 and baptize “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. BEM, however, challenges us to consider the candidates explicitly affirming the doctrine of the Trinity. In this respect it is of interest to note that in one of the baptismal orders in *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* there is the question: “Do you believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (but not in the same order which includes the renunciation of evil)

#### **5. The use of water**

For Baptists this is self-evident! We believe in the use of water - gallons of it! For without exception Baptists the world over practice “baptism by immersion”. The very word “baptize” implies “dipping”. Furthermore, the symbolism of baptism as a watery grave or as a bath has as its corollary, full immersion.

It is, however, important to remember that Baptists have not always practised baptism by immersion. One early group of Baptists practised baptism by affusion - and yet we still regard them as Baptists. For at the end of the day the distinctive aspect of the Baptist approach to baptism is not the quantity of water, but rather the quality of faith. If a choice has to be made, then the emphasis must be upon “**believer’s** baptism” rather than “baptism by **immersion**”. It is this understanding of baptism which has allowed some Baptists - although not all - to accept as believer’s baptism the baptism of those baptized as believers in a non-baptistic church, even although they have been sprinkled and not immersed.

#### **6. A declaration that the persons baptized have acquired a new identity as sons and daughters of God, and as members of the church, called to be witnesses of the Gospel.**

Of all the eight elements mentioned in BEM, this sixth element may cause Baptists the most difficulty. Certainly if the implication is that through baptism alone the persons baptized have “acquired a new identity as sons and daughters of God”, then such an implication is to be rejected. On the other hand, if following the Biblical model Baptists see baptism as the completion of the conversion process, then it is true that through repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ the persons baptized have acquired a new identity as sons and daughters of God. Such a declaration can sometimes prove pastorally useful for those who in future days and years are tempted to doubt their faith; with Martin Luther they can declare: “*baptisatus sum*” - I have been baptized”, and so I am the Lord’s and the Lord’s forever!

If some Baptists have difficulty with the first part of the declaration, surely all will welcome the second part: “and as members of the church, called to be witnesses of the

Gospel". Here we have a reminder that baptism is not just a witness in itself, but is also to be a spur to witness.

## **7. The sealing of the baptized with the gift of the Holy Spirit**

On historical grounds Baptists should have no difficulty with the sealing of the baptized with the gift of the Holy Spirit". What in other church traditions is linked to the rite of confirmation, has in Baptist life been part of the practice of laying on of hands following baptism. Furthermore, many Baptists still practice the laying on of hands.

Customs vary as to when this rite is carried out. It can take place in the waters of baptism, immediately after the baptism itself. This gives a sense of immediacy. The disadvantage is that the candidate is probably still recovering from having been dipped under the water. Hence candidates are often first given time to change, and then prayed for.

As with baptism, so too with prayer with the laying on of hands, some explanation needs to be given. The introduction of such Scriptures as Matthew 3:16-17 and Acts 1:8 is helpful, where the Spirit is linked with witness and service. In other words, the purpose of such prayer is to invoke the Spirit to come and fill the candidates with fresh power for witness and service.

Theologically, this ceremony may be viewed as a form of "lay ordination". Following baptism the candidates are set aside for ministry. Hence in *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* the laying on of hands is preceded with the following statement: "The New Testament records that those who were baptized often received the laying on of hands as a sign of commissioning for service. We are now to lay hands on....., who have been baptized, as a sign of blessing and an act of commissioning, and to ask that they may be fully equipped for their vocation as servants of Jesus Christ in the Church and in the world".

## **8. Participation in holy communion**

Most records of communion services left us from the early centuries of the church are of baptismal eucharists, a reminder that, traditionally, baptism leads to communion. Certainly, in New Testament terms, an unbaptised communicant is a theological nonsense. Indeed, one can argue from 1 Corinthians 11:28 that to break bread and not to be baptised is tantamount to not "recognising" or "discerning" the body, which in turn is to invite judgment on oneself.

Many Baptist churches still retain the link between baptism and communion. In Zaire, for instance, it is customary to baptise in the river and then to move back to the church building to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Theologically, I have no doubt that the two should take part within the same service. However, in the British context where large numbers of believers can often be present, there can be certain practical difficulties. Where, for instance, fifty or more unbelievers are present, it really does not seem right to follow baptism with a communion service which, by its very nature, will appear exclusive. In such a context I have therefore always preferred to celebrate the Lord's Supper the very next Sunday, and at that particular service welcome the candidates into membership.

## **In conclusion**

We conclude with the questions with which we began: how do we as Baptists celebrate the faith in baptism? How might we celebrate the faith in baptism? Hopefully, this paper can then be improved in the light of our discussion.

**Paul Beasley-Murray**

# The Local Minister: Catalyst for World Mission

If you want to produce oxygen, heat some potassium nitrate in a test tube. The gas will come off, albeit slowly. To accelerate the process add a little manganese dioxide. Things will then take off. The second chemical acts as a catalyst. It hastens the process without itself being changed or used up.

If we want our congregations to be world mission minded, someone has to set the pace. Most churches have missionary secretaries and / or missionary councils. We honour them for all they do but should not overlook the minister's part in this process. Books abound which tell us his/her role as student and scholar, intercessor and counsellor, social activist and so on. There are few which help us to see the ministers' role as catalyst for world mission.

Ministers are uniquely equipped to fulfil this role by virtue of their training and ordination. Earlier in life they and their home congregations have discerned God's call to devote their lives to particular work in the church. They test this by inviting them to preach. They give them opportunities in neighbouring churches and eventually send them away for further training, together with other men and women. In this way they have already lifted their horizons beyond their own immediate concerns. In training, students receive insights from many foreign theological scholars. Early British theologians are somewhat scarce! They learn something of the history of the Church in Asia, Africa and Europe as well as in Britain. They meet students and teachers from other countries. In short, they become world church people. While they may decide that the Lord wants them to begin or continue their ministry here, they cannot deny their inheritance. The world church has helped to form them. They owe it a debt.

In the 19th century J.G. Oncken, the pioneer Baptist European evangelist, coined the phrase "Every Baptist a missionary". In 1936 R. Wilson Black extended this thought in an address at Bristol by saying "Every church (should be) a missionary society". We can complete this trinitarian concept of God's wish for both individual and congregation by adding "every minister a catalyst for world mission".

The catalyst does not do all the work. Its role is to facilitate it. We can catalyse churches by preaching.

## Preaching

In the course of our preaching we gradually compile our own commentary on the Bible. This is a book on world mission. It begins with the whole world, as it then stood, and although for some time its compass contracts largely to that of one nation, it eventually returns to its original purpose. Jesus is the Saviour of the world and His Church is the means whereby the Gospel is to reach all people. After nineteen hundred years this task is, as yet, unfinished. The hundreds of millions of people in India, China and even Europe, who have never heard of Jesus, are silent witnesses to this. As individuals we may not be able to do much about this but we can teach our churches to get involved in world mission.

The Gospels and Acts show us that Jesus' life, death and resurrection form the message of the Church. The Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to preach this to all sorts and conditions of humanity. They held an inflexible message with great flexibility of approach, speaking to religious Jews, prepared God-fearers, semi-rural pagans and

sophisticated city-dwellers in the way which best suited their needs. The letters of the New Testament reveal how the Gospel then answers the problems which new converts meet. So Scripture not only gives us directions about how to evangelise our neighbours; it reminds us that they are "all who are far away - all whom the Lord our God calls to Himself" (Acts 2:39) We are part of the apostolic succession. Our job is not only to proclaim the gospel message; it is to urge our congregations to gain a wider vision.

When the late Dr Campbell Morgan became involved with the Evangelical Union of South America he preached every month at Westminster Chapel on the needs of a particular country of that continent, illustrating his points on a large map. In this way he acted as a catalyst, instructing, inspiring and challenging his hearers to go "world-wide". The BiCentenary of the BMS gave us a timely opportunity to open the eyes of our congregations to its fascinating history. They are not too well informed about it. Neither, if we are honest, are many of us. The only Baptist College, as far as I know, which teaches anything about the Society's history is Bristol. Fortunately Brian Stanley, Gwenda Bond and Missionary Herald inserts are coming to our rescue.<sup>1</sup>

## Visiting

Some of us can catalyse by visiting. In recent years a number of home-based ministers have travelled to Zaire and other countries to conduct retreats for both missionaries and national pastors. "Initiatives in Mission" has launched an interesting experiment recently.<sup>2</sup> Pastors from British churches have gone to other countries to teach other pastors. The latter are often full of enthusiasm but lack expertise in, for example, expository preaching. The visitors have held seminars in Greece, Indonesia, South-East Asia and elsewhere. Paul would have approved of this (2 Tim 2:2). Churches in Britain should release ministers with particular gifts for such work. They should also be willing to receive the ministry of people overseas whose zeal and spontaneity often put us to shame, and whose insights into the Gospel often complement our own. In such ways churches themselves can become involved in mission in a more personal way than the necessary, but sometimes remote, praying and giving which often sum up our overseas commitment.

## Writing

Other people have catalysed world mission in the past by their writing. Carey's *Enquiry*, recently re-printed, is a classic example of this. Yet he was not the first in the field. Jonathan Edwards of New England preceded him.<sup>3</sup> In 1749 he produced a "Life of David Brainerd", missionary to the Indians. This was the first biography printed in America to gain international recognition and the first full missionary biography ever to be published. Edwards was thinking about the coming era of world missions and saw in Brainerd a flesh and blood trail blazer of this future age. He put aside other work to tell others of the young missionary. The book, like his earlier "Humble Attempt", had great repercussions. The former led to increased intercession and the latter to action. It greatly influenced John Wesley at the time and A.J. Gordon of Boston a hundred years later. Yet Edwards was not writing so much to portray Brainerd as a missionary but to show the power of "godliness and vital religion" in a person's life. God overruled his intention to give the book a wider influence than he imagined. In 1789 the Midlands Baptists re-issued his "Humble Attempt" and four years later Carey sailed for India.

Here were seminal writings on world mission produced by a local minister: Oswald Smith of Toronto wrote "The Challenge of Missions" in the mid-1900's. Where are their successors?

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**To the Readers of the Baptist Ministers' Journal**

Over recent years there has been an increasing awareness that if people suffer injury, for example as a result of defect in the premises they are visiting, they are entitled to compensation. Naturally and rightly this awareness has been matched by concern on the part of those responsible for Church premises that legal liability for such accidents should be covered. In my letter in the October 1992 Journal I assured readers that the policy we issue to Churches covers such liability, but I pointed out that when "outside organisations" or private individuals are permitted to use Church premises for their own purposes, any legal liability arising from these activities should be covered by their own insurance arrangements.

This remains our view but it has been suggested that on occasion to insist on such cover being arranged before permission is given may hinder the use of the church premises as a resource for Christian outreach. With this in mind we have devised an extension for church liability policies. Subject to a number of reasonable limitations and for a modest additional annual premium this will extend the church policy to cover the legal liability of outside organisations/individuals when using the premises. Details will be supplied on request.

We must be informed if any activities are envisaged which could be described as unusual or dangerous. The cover will not apply when the users have their own insurance covering the risk, which is much to be preferred.

Yours sincerely,

M.E. Purver

We can all be catalysts in some way. Not everyone will be invited to travel overseas to hold seminars or gain prominence by writing books, but we all have the privilege and opportunity to inform and enthuse congregations.

The chemical analogy is, of course, not quite exact. The added ingredient remains unspent and unchanged. The same can hardly be said of us. At times we feel that virtue has gone out of us and may say, like the Servant of Isaiah 49, "I have worked, but how hopeless it is!" Yet with Paul we can also say that our inner man is renewed day by day. We have an enrichment unknown to manganese dioxide. And who knows where our influence may end through the grace of God?

**Fred Stainthorpe**

Footnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Official and popular histories of the BMS
- <sup>2</sup> "Evangelicals Now" January 1992
- <sup>3</sup> *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* by Ian H. Murray, Banner of Truth Trust, 1987.

# **FOR THE BRIGHTEST NEWS OF THE YEAR**

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# The Goodness of God

(The problem of a good God in a world of suffering)

“The king of love my shepherd is  
whose goodness faileth never..”

Some while ago I was taking a Communion service in an Old People's home in Gloucester. After the service I went round the home to meet some of the residents. In one room I visited, an elderly blind lady started a conversation, and during the course of this conversation she asked me a question. (I ought to add at this point that the home is a Christian one and that the lady herself was a Christian.)

“I am a lady who, not wishing to blow my own trumpet, has spent my life doing good works.” She then proceeded to name some of these activities which included playing the piano and organ at church, reciting and knitting. “Could you tell me, please” she continued, “Why did God take my eyes?”

All my attempts at providing the lady with an answer convinced neither her nor me. Whether God had caused her blindness, or had simply allowed it, God, it seemed, had been less than good.

On another occasion I was present at a Church New Year's Eve party. As part of the time together people were encouraged to come forward and give a testimony about how God had helped them in the year. One person told us how the Lord had provided him with a job after he had earnestly prayed for one; another person told us how God had brought her healing as a result of prayer. To each of these testimonies there was added rapturous applause by the congregation. In that congregation, however, was a man and his two daughters who seemed far from ecstatic. That year the man had seen his wife die with cancer in spite of all the prayers of the people of God. Why, the family no doubt wondered, had God not been good to them that year?

## The problem

We are dealing here with the perennial problem of suffering and evil. This is only a problem for those of us who believe that the world has been created and is sustained by a God who is good. But given our faith in the goodness of God, how then is it that so many bad things happen to good people? (to coin a phrase from Harold Kushner's book of the same title).

The traditional answer to this question is something to the effect that the Lord knows what he is doing. The Lord has his reasons for doing things. He has his plans and purposes. We may not understand what they are, but we can be assured that, “All things work together for good.” (Rom 8:28). This is a point of view which is widely and popularly held. Joni Eareckson puts it forward in her writings:

“Why GOD? Why did Kelly have to die? Why was I paralysed? Why was someone else alive and healthy? There was no reason apart from the overall purposes of God” (Joni, p. 118)

And on a more scholarly level, it is a point expressed by Dr John Wenham

“Though moral evil is contrary to God's will he permits both it and its consequences. Indeed he not only permits its consequences, he *sends* them - for wholly good and loving reasons, even when those reasons are hidden from us.” (**The Enigma of Evil**, pp 44-45)

But such thinking, far from helping to solve the problem of suffering and evil in God's world, simply makes the problem all the more acute. The view that is put forward is of

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a god who may be powerful, but who certainly couldn't be called good. A God who was able to prevent the suffering, pain and wickedness in the world but who for reasons best known to himself chose not to, hardly deserves the description of being good. Rather, such a God sounds more like the God who C.S. Lewis described as "The cosmic sadist" or "the eternal vivisector". (**A Grief Observed**, pp 33-34)

What I am saying, then, is that the traditional attempts to explain the enigma of evil are less than adequate. In attempting to present an alternative approach I am saying nothing that has not been said by others already. But I hope to present it in a credible fashion. There seems to me to be three indispensable stages in this process.

## **Towards a Solution**

### **1. Tragedy**

The essential point here to grasp is that not everything that happens in the world is caused by God. There are many things which occur in the world which grieve the heart of God every bit as much as they grieve us. In other words there is such a thing as tragedy in the world. When the wife of one of our Baptist ministers died some years ago the only appropriate text I could preach from on the Sunday morning was from John 11:35 "And Jesus wept". This seemed to be the only possible response to expect from God.

Harold Kushner, in the book already referred to, is most insistent on this point. His own training as an orthodox rabbi led him to assume views on the problem of suffering similar to those espoused by John Wenham and others. But when his son Aaron was dying in front of him from a rapid-ageing disease, it made him rethink his whole approach to suffering. He came to realise that a God who was remotely good could not have caused or purposed such a horror story. He entitled one of the chapters of his book, "Sometimes there is no reason". In the chapter he comments on the way in which religiously-minded people tried to explain the assassination of Martin Luther King as being part of God's inscrutable purpose:

"Why can't we acknowledge that the assassination was an affront to God, even as it was to us, and a sidetracking of his purposes, rather than strain our imaginations to find evidence of God's fingerprints on the murder weapon?" (p. 58)

In 1991 I read with interest an article in the **Baptist Times** by Peter Cotterell, Principal of the London Bible College. The article was entitled, "Waging war in a fallen world" (A comparison between Muslim and Christian thinking about war). He made the point there that while the Islamic view of the world was that everything that happens is the will of Allah, Christians have always acknowledged the existence of two Kingdoms - the Kingdom of God and the Satanic or Second Kingdom. The invasion of Kuwait was unmistakably the will of the Second Kingdom and should not be falsely attributed to the will of God. Peter Cotterell included in the article a wise and apposite warning:

"Let us be careful! Too often our theology has become Muslim theology, not Biblical, Christian theology." (BT, 7 Feb 1991)

### **2. The Suffering of God**

But as well as affirming that God is not responsible for much of the tragic suffering in the world, we also need to go a step further and affirm that God is also sharing in that suffering. It would not be enough to envisage God sitting passively by and watching all the dreadful happenings in the world like some spectator. Rather, if God really is good then we would expect to find him sharing in the pain of that suffering.

This is precisely what the Cross teaches us. In the Cross we see God identifying himself to the uttermost with his creation. The cry of forsakenness that came from the

lips of the incarnate God expressed most vividly the extent of his solidarity with all those who experience forsakenness themselves. It means that now there is "no hell where he is not present"<sup>1</sup>. God, far from inflicting suffering, actually receives suffering. He endures the pain of his world.

All this, of course, requires a revolution in the concept of God.<sup>2</sup> We now have to recognise with the Apostle Paul that a theology based seriously on the God revealed at Calvary is a theology which looks to the weakness of God for its inspiration. (1 Cor 1:25) But this is the only way in which God can remain credible in a world of suffering. Only by sharing in the agony and humiliation of the Holocaust can God be regarded as both relevant and good.

### **3. God's Victory over Evil**

But for God to be really good requires not only that he suffers with us, but also that he is actively engaged in overcoming evil. God can only ever be classed as good if he makes himself the implacable opponent of evil in this world and determines to defeat it. At present this may seem like a forlorn hope. Evil is endemic in our world and shows no sign of abating. The intensification of sectarian killings on Ulster; the incidence of child abuse and drug trafficking; the evidence of murderous regimes in Cambodia and Iraq would not lead one to assume that evil is on the wane. What we are faced with is a situation in which God's will is being repeatedly thwarted. But for all that we still need to be able to affirm God's relentless struggle against moral and 'natural' evil, otherwise he has surrendered his claim to be called good.

Biblically, this determination to overcome the forces of evil is seen in the ministry of Jesus himself and especially in his resurrection. It reaches its climax in the vision of a new heaven and a new earth where "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more..." (Rev. 21:4). It is this vision and hope which must sustain us, and which fuels our belief that even now, working behind the scenes, God is at work seeking to bring his influence to bear in redeeming creation. Martin Luther King put this well when he wrote:

"As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us. Evil dies on the seashore, not merely because of man's endless struggle against it, but because of God's power to defeat it."<sup>3</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As we proceed through the Decade of Evangelism, then, we must move away from the preoccupation with techniques and methods. Instead, we need to concentrate on our doctrine of God. People need to be presented with a credible God: a God who is good and who burns with a heart of love. Such a view of God is the one which reflects the real kernel of the Gospel. It is one which carries with it the correct evangelistic emphasis. It is also the one which allows people to grow, blossom and mature. But more than that it is the only one which can make sense of the moral issues raised by our attempts to think about God in a world where there is so much suffering. What the world needs to receive, and what the church must present, is a picture of God which can make sense of our experiences of life. And only a God who is good, through and through, provides us with such a picture.

**Stephen Greasley**

### **Footnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Michael Walker: *The God of Our Journey*, p.38

<sup>2</sup> Jurgen Moltmann: *The Crucified God*, p.4

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King in a collection of essays entitled, *Strength to Love*, p.83

# Colliding with the text:

## Narrative Theology

A range of methodologies is currently being developed for studying the biblical text whose *raison d'être* consists of a particular insight into the nature of literature qua literature. For this reason such methodologies apply equally to the whole field of secular literature, so that a fruitful dialogue is possible as investigations proceed. Among these methods *Narrative Theology* has become prominent, and for some investigators, represents, potentially, one of the most fruitful areas of research. As a young discipline, it is estimated modestly as complementing the more established critico-historical methods and, more radically, as a completely new way of doing theology, challenging the propositional and credal basis of Christianity in favour of a more individual, subjective and privatised approach.

### The Primacy of Narrative

Its very title conveys the fact that it is concerned solely with that biblical material which belongs to the genre of narrative, telling a story. Thus it is self-limiting. On the other hand, it is claimed that because narrative is absolutely foundational, giving birth to and making sense of all the other kinds of literature in the Bible, its importance cannot be over-estimated.

The Old Testament is predominantly narrative, and much that is not - laws, ordinances, statutes - gains validity and is sustained by the archetypal story, the Exodus, enshrined in the Shema (Deut 26:5-9), which every Jew is enjoined to remember and never forget. The nation's response to God and its very self-understanding and identity are defined by it and the grace to which it testifies. This story alone obligates obedience to the love command: a story which every succeeding generation is urged to bring to mind and re-actualize. The New Testament, similarly, is largely narrative in form with the so-called "argumentive texts" of the letters of Paul and others making up the balance. Here it is the story of Jesus of Nazareth which imparts meaning, identity, purpose and coherence to the community which bears his name. So in the Gospel of Mark, the issue of Jesus' identity is inextricably bound up with the question of what kind of individuals can legitimately claim to be disciples, focussed acutely at Caesarea Philippi, the Gospel's fulcrum. Indeed, the whole Gospel could be seen as endeavouring to draw the reader into the story of the crucified Jesus. So what Paul endeavours to achieve by christological statement and ethical argument is approached by way of an identity narrative in the Gospels. "The narrative mode is uniquely important to Christianity" (Amos Wilder)

### Issues in Evaluation

How do these two approaches to theology relate? Can narrative theology rival, or legitimately critique, that theological reflection which takes the form of doctrine and credal statements? Here there is wide disagreement, some arguing in the affirmative, because narrative is central to the whole issue of human identity, and others that narrative theology is, at best, a bridge between human experience and the expression of that experience in theological prepositions: the categories of story and discursive argument are quite different and should not be confused.

But even to talk of narrative is to acknowledge that there are diverse forms, serving different purposes in the Bible. The categories of myth and legend have a story-like form but are concerned with what is universally true, rather than historically so. Parables function similarly. Then there are those narratives which, while having an historical core, have been interpreted in the telling. This fusion of fact and fiction has

towards a concern for the “truth” of a story, quite apart from whether or not it really happened. Clearly, one of the central issues here is the delineating of criteria by which the truth of stories may be established.

Christian narrative claims to be fundamentally historical, making claims about the past (the personal history of Jesus Christ), which influence and shape the present and the future. Such a narrative bears the community’s shared memory and self-understanding. Further, the individual’s (Christian) story comes about from a collision with, or integration of, their identity narrative and that of the Christian community, its scripture and ethos, resulting in a process of personal reconstruction or conversion.

If this identity narrative defines the Christian community, it is itself subject to reinterpretation, as each generation seeks to make sense of its world. The narrative is inevitably contextualized by prevailing issues and concerns, so that a dynamic process is at work: the text is “open”. As a result, a narrative has at least two layers of meaning: that which is writer originally intended and that brought about by the interaction between text and reader, the creative encounter. This may be significantly different from the writer’s original intention, but it is nevertheless “truth” for the reader who is not merely seeking information from the past, but insight which will inform the present. Narrative theology, in this way, is simply making clear what, perennially, the Church has been engaged in, perhaps unconsciously. For this reason Gerhard Ebeling describes church history as essentially the history of the interpretation of the text.

For example, Matthew’s parable of the Sheep and Goats (25:31-46) is generally considered to relate originally to the support of Christian missionaries. However, in the context of today’s world, it is inevitably re-interpreted in term of the commission to the poor and marginalised. If such an interpretation is legitimate and true, is it not because the criterion here is what we understand to be the spirit of Jesus?

### **Limitations and Possibilities**

While it is true that biblical faith is conveyed largely through the telling of stories, rooted in the stuff of history, a significant volume of material does not fit into this category. Therefore, from the outset, narrative criticism cannot be applied in a blanket way. It may illuminate certain texts, but is not appropriate for others.

Since the method focusses upon the critical interaction between the text and the reader, the issue of subjectivity looms large. There is a tension here between freezing a text in its day and age and interpreting it so freely that it can be made to bear almost any meaning, to suit the interpreter. Some control, by means of truth criteria, is vital.

As an approach to scripture, narrative criticism promises to help “liberate” the text through bringing about a creative involvement between two stories, the biblical story and the interpreter’s own story, in this way addressing issues of identity and self-understanding.

Narrative theology offers the opportunity of taking into account non-biblical literature in the search for meaning and truth. Much of the Western literary tradition has been heavily influenced by Christian thought, and it is certainly not out of the question that in some secular literature “we can recognize nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot but name truth” (David Tracy)

**Michael V. Jackson**

### **Further Reading**

George W. Stroup

Mark A. Powell

ed. A. Richardson & J. Bowden: *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*: SCM, 1985. Article,

*Narrative Theology* by John Bowden

Christopher Tuckett

*The Promise of Narrative Theology* SCM, 1981

*What is Narrative Criticism?* SPCK, 1993

*Narrative Theology* by John Bowden

*Reading the New Testament*, SPCK, 1987

# Current BMF Issues

The current issues of the BMF were brought together neatly and poignantly by Stuart Jenkins when he instigated a working group on "The Theology of Pay, Housing and Conditions of Service". At the moment we are desperately trying to keep the Pastoral Session within the Baptist Assembly as a unique opportunity for theologians to share with ministers on concepts affecting pastoral work. The group began from the observation that the traditional model of ministerial support provided by the local church runs into difficulties when it is apparent that very few ministers can support a family without a second income. The preference is for ministers to be so paid that they can take responsibility for their families, including buying their own home. The Superintendents were very sympathetic in amending the "Terms of Settlement" in order to protect the spouse and orphans on the death of the minister, but that still leaves the agony and uncertainty of desertion etc. Rapid changes of ministry and patterns of worship are fuelling their own fall-out. As is shown in *Clergy Stress* by Mary Ann Coate (SPCK), although it is not necessary to be a traditionalist minister to grind to a breakdown nor a charismatic minister to achieve burn-out, there are life-threatening conflicts within ministry which are additional to those stresses which are endemic within other professions. Add to that the present maelstrom of opposite forces in which there is the aim of reducing the statistical superfluity of ministers and at the same time the greatly-stressed drive for church planting, and there promises to be even more than the present walking wounded amongst ministers and their families.

The BMF has always tried to be preventative in so far as its Committee of Ministers, with pastoral experience and commitments, can foresee problems arising. The intention has been to find answers or at least reduce the trauma. Talks with the Baptist Ministers' Pension Fund, in the past, have been encouraging with substantial results. On the Agenda now is "Early retirement", with George Neal (Chair) investigating what is involved. Your BMF Secretary is a member of the Committee of the Retired Baptist Ministers' Housing Society which, within its limited resources, provides answers for ministers in need when they retire. The BMF Committee is kept informed as to how this is progressing. Both on retirement and within the ministry there are important advantages in the minister having his/her own home. The BMJ magazine has published a booklet (now out of print) and in April 1990 an article on buying a home. Some foresee that the Inland Revenue may soon regard the provision of a Church-owned manse as part of income and to be taxed, which is tough if your church has grandiose ideas. In the past church planting has been achieved by a minister and family having their own house, with large lounge, in a new residential area.

The conditions and consequences for Baptist ministers who are women was brought to the Committee's attention by George Neal and the Chair-elect, Alison Fuller, who will be able to guide the endeavours to seek satisfactory answers. This could benefit all ministers who are single or are associate ministers.

Sooner or later, the condition of service of those appointed by special interest groups, or associations and similar, will be coming under discussion as the anomalies break surface. Another issue will be the effect of the Charities Act 1992. The minister of the Church is likely to be defined as a "trustee", and yet the Act forbids any personal benefit or gain from the "charity". The effect of the Act could be more centralisation with all its consequences.

**Vic Sumner**

# Book Reviews

## ***Road to Divorce: England 1530 - 1987* by Lawrence Stone (OUP, 1992, 460pp, £12.95)**

This detailed historical and sociological survey, generously illustrated with pictures, graphs and statistical tables, falls into two sections: the making and breaking of marriage.

The long, legal and social background to the institution have been scrupulously researched and engagingly detailed; parliamentary debates; customs of town, country and class; contract and clandestine marriages; and the tortuous history of divorce law reform are all handled with insight and scholarly expertise. At the same time it is frequently an entertaining read.

Clergy and ministers will find the material pertaining to the last generation or so of special interest. In the first half of this century the divorce rate in England and Wales increased twenty fold; between 1960 - 1987 divorce per annum increased from 24,000 to 151,000, giving England and Wales the highest divorce rate in the E.C.

Following on the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce (1956) and subsequent reports, the Divorce Reform Act (1969) made divorce dependent upon proof of the irreparable breakdown of marriage, rather than solely upon proof of matrimonial offence. Though the legislation has proved more humane and realistic, has the proportion of happy, stable marriage partnerships increased?

Professor Stone argues that "the metamorphosis from a non-separating, non-divorcing society which appertained in England from the Middle Ages to the mid-nineteenth century is perhaps the most profound and far-reaching social change to have occurred in the last five hundred years". All this poses searching questions for Church and society. For example, why so little spent on marriage guidance compared with that spent on litigation? Why so little time spent on preparation for marriage by the churches and community, and counselling within marriage before separation or divorce arrive? In addition, there is the new fashionable phenomenon of "singleness" and that of cohabitation. What is our response?

Professor Stone concludes his impressive study by stating "that the divorce reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries meant well is beyond dispute. But the results have clearly not altogether measured up to their expectations, and it is very uncertain whether the benefits of no-fault divorce on demand, as introduced in 1971, have outweighed its drawbacks".

Like all worthy students of society, Professor Stone sharpens concern, perspective and resolve.

**John Hough**

## ***The History of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792 - 1992* by Brian Stanley (T & T Clark, 1992, 564pp, £30)**

"What experience and history teach us is this - that people and governments never have learnt anything from history.." (Hegel).

I hope it isn't true. I realised in reading Brian Stanley's "History" that there was much in the experience of the BMS from which I, and other Baptists, should learn. I do not mean just facts, figures and stories.

I discovered the long term effects of policies dictated by financial shortage, where,  
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on occasions, work had to be cut back or opportunities not grasped. One fears for the future in the current financial situation.

A challenge was to be found in the occasional differences between the lack of vision of home committees, who dictated policy, and the opportunities witnessed by those in the field, seen from the early days of the conflict involving the "Serampore Three", to the vision for Brazil which Arthur Elder had difficulty in communicating to a cautious General Committee.

For me, the book put flesh on the bones of people who had been just names. Not only pioneers like Carey and Richard, but also visionary administrators like Underhill and Hayward. People and their problems became alive and relevant through Dr Stanley's writing, as he brought out their strengths and their weaknesses. We were reminded of the bravery of many who risked their lives in the early days through disease, or those who found themselves in danger due to civil unrest in China at the turn of the century, the Congo and Angola in the sixties, or Zaire in more recent times.

Brian Stanley has divided his book into convenient sections taking one field at a time over a relevant time span, and then covering other fields and domestic life of the Society in the same period before moving on. He deals with each section in a thorough and interesting manner, giving a clear picture of the total work as it develops over the years.

The style is easy, and it could be a book to read through or dipped into. It is good value for money and a book every Baptist minister should read, especially if you do as I did and persuaded the church to buy a copy so that your members can read it after you.

**Pat Ingle**

***Ultimate Choices* by Paul Mortimore (Bible Society, 1993, 24pp, £1.60:  
*Evangelicals and Ecumenism - When Baptists Disagree* ed. by Michael  
Bocheski (BUGB, 1993, 64pp, £2.50)**

*Ultimate Choices* is a series of six Bible studies each based upon a parable of Jesus. As the title suggests, they make us look at the decisions and choices we make, from the very way we approach God to the way we serve others in the world. Each study has six elements: the parable from the Good News Bible, some interpretive comments, an encouragement to identify with the story, questions, some suggestions for prayer and then other related passages.

Identifying with the story is a helpful first stage, especially appropriate in the study of the parables, and it was refreshing that from the parables we were led to worship as well as study. The questions raised are important, giving us a necessary challenge about our everyday choices and could act as a good resource, but its presentation is a little disappointing. The booklet looks wordy - open it on any page and you are confronted by solid blocks of words - and is a little wordy. Although it seems to assume little, explaining some words such as "grace", its general language and style does assume quite a level of competence. I wonder who was in mind as the reader. Unfortunately, it would require some modification for me to use.

*Evangelicals and Ecumenism* arise out of a conference at Fairmile Court between twelve Baptists, six supportive of the "yes" vote taken at the Leicester Assembly on the inter Church Process, and six who would broadly have preferred a "No" vote. Three from both groups write short and sometimes quite personal papers, all from a clear evangelical perspective. The symposium includes contributions from Robert Amess, John Balchin, Faith Bowers, Andrew Green and Douglas McBain.

It is important to say what this publication is not. It will not give **the** answer if you are

still somewhere in between a Yes and a No; neither will it give a comprehensive discussion of the issues involved. That perhaps needs to be written next. As a whole the booklet reads as a plea not to pretend that the debate ended at Leicester; it calls us to talk together more. The individual papers highlight those areas of particular concern to the respective authors. A number of papers try to put the debate in a historical perspective - from the Reformation to J.H. Shakespeare. One detects a defensive note in some, as the integrity of the Union leadership, both past and present, is upheld. The sensitive issue of baptist relations with Roman Catholics is explored and practical possibilities are suggested as to how the Union can hold together those with opposing views.

A major effect this book has is to show how much work there is still to be done. It demands more rigorous thinking about our definitions of familiar words and phrases, a process begun in an introductory article. Some of the papers use phrases such as the "Body of Christ", which are familiar and well used, but in this context seem to hold a useful vagueness. Who do we really mean by this?

This book ought to be widely read and thought upon. It ought to raise hard questions in our minds. I'm sure that the authors hope it will evoke much response and discussion.

**Anthony Clarke**

### ***Radical Believers* by Paul Beasley-Murray (BUGB, 1992, 128pp, £4.95)**

*Radical Believers* waves the Baptist flag enthusiastically in one hundred and twenty eight pages. It covers every Baptist thing: believer's baptism to church planting, ministry to history. There is a useful appendix on identity from European Baptists, and a good bibliography.

Each chapter is subdivided, with clear headings. There are shaded "to think about" boxes. Enjoyable, politically correct, cartoons by Linda Francis, abound. The large format, lively style, bright cover and pithy writing make it an excellent resource for house-groups and baptismal classes.

There are occasional inconsistencies, like ending with a Scriptural bang for women and against Bishops (pp.89, 97), while making passing reference to Scripture on the homogeneous growth principle, and ending with a whimper - or should it be wimpish - "the debate continues!" (p.106)

*Radical Believers* succeeds well in carving out a baptist niche in the wider church, complete with waving BU logo flags on the cover.

However, the book claims that "the Baptist way of being the church" will produce radical believers, rooted in Scripture. Now Baptists may be very intense believers, but what do they believe? I turned to the mission section. The nice train of activities runs on a track from Seoul to Derbyshire, the credal stations of our day. But what will inform this mission?

Radicalism requires thinking about the meaning of God, the nature of the human, using Scripture in critical dialogue with current intellectual, political and social developments. Unfortunately, the language of "roots" gives the impression that the Bible contains *all* truth. It does not, and an adequate doctrine of Scripture must take this into account. I wish the book had included more about the role of preaching, as a crucible in which Scripture *becomes* the Word, and inspires Christian thinking and living.

I commend this book for the purpose it will serve admirably - thinking about Baptist identity. Better to have avoided the misleading, though fashionable, title. Besides, is not radicalism a quality to be recognised in others, rather than claimed for ourselves?

**Michael Docker**

**One of Us by Steve Chilcraft (Word, 1993, 220pp, £3.99)**

How many single people do you have in your church? Your immediate response will no doubt be - "A few". It depends on how you define "single". It has been estimated that on average, 35 per cent of church congregations are made up of "single" people. I dismissed that figure until I reviewed my own membership and discovered that our figure was 38 per cent. It was that statistic plus the thoughts provoked by this book that made me realise that we have a lot of major thinking to do on how we cope with the issue. It has also made me realise how glibly we use such phrases as "family" in our church life without realising whom we might be excluding or hurting. Sexist and racist phrases are now anathema. Is this the next area?

Steve Chilcraft suggests that single people can be divided into several broad groups: young adults likely to marry; thirty and forty somethings less likely to marry; mature never-married singles; those separated and divorced; widows and widowers; single parents; and those he titles "church singles", i.e. those who come to church without their partner. Now consider your membership again.

The book is divided into two sections. In the first four chapters he analyses the situation in the church and society, providing some useful graphs and statistics. He concludes this part with a chapter called "A theology of singleness". In the second part five prominent Christian leaders, who have remained single, put the issue from their perspective. He concludes with a suggested policy.

It is a book to be read by all ministers who take their pastoral responsibility seriously. I guarantee it will add another item to your deacons' agenda (sorry), if it hasn't done so already. It is now on ours.

**Pat Ingle**

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