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**the baptist ministers'  
journal**

October 2021 volume 352

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# the baptist ministers' journal

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the baptist ministers' journal is the journal of the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship

useful contact details are listed inside the  
front and back covers

*(all service to the Fellowship is honorary)*

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# ***From the editor***

## ***Health warning: imago dei at large!***

Have you ever asked yourself whether being in Baptist ministry is bad for your health? That is the question posed by Rob Beamish in his account of being in ministry and having high-functioning autism. Rob explores how his (recent) diagnosis made sense of things that have happened throughout his ministry and how the knowledge has been liberating, allowing him to develop useful strategies.

Looking at things through the lens of any disability is helpful for all of us, since it prompts important questions about what it really means to be a human being, made in the image of God. In particular, to what extent is our concept of the *imago dei* shaped by the expectations and assumptions of others? Exploring the image raises a whole host of interesting theological and biblical questions (and a good summary of this contested material can be found in Cortez's *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*). It is a question for us all, but life in ministry can be something of a goldfish bowl and has its own dynamic.

The corporate expectations of a congregation can be both challenging and limiting if a minister does not conform. This must raise questions about the minister/congregation relationship. To what extent can we minister from our deepest selves if those selves are not fully acceptable? This has been a question faced by ministers of different colour, gender and sexuality, ministers with impairments and mental health issues, and so on. Ingrid Shelley touches on some related issues in her fascinating essay on female sexuality. Yet God has called all these ministers to service, and we know that all are made in God's image.

What is your story in ministry? If you would like to share something of it, please contact me—and if it helps, it can be anonymised. We thank those ministers who have previously named the realities they face. Several years ago, two ministers shared their experiences of mental health breakdown and these articles triggered many responses from readers who felt they had been recognised.

Meanwhile, may Advent and Christmas reassure us that the *imago dei* is within reach of our imaginations, in the form of a child who conformed only to his divine calling and never to the brokenness of human culture. SN

# Diagnosed Autistic: Is Being a Baptist Minister Bad for my Health?

by Robert Beamish

*Author: Rev Dr Robert Beamish is Minister at Prince's Drive Baptist Church, Colwyn Bay and Northern Baptist College's Hub Tutor for the Light College.*

In February 2020 I was diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which is also known, I think preferably, as Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC). Adult diagnoses of autism are now increasingly common as awareness and understanding of the condition has increased and diagnostic tools and processes are more accessible.<sup>1</sup>

The stand-out moment in my final session with the diagnosing psychologist was when he stated that, in his estimation, pastoral ministry was simply not compatible with my diagnosis. He concluded that I needed to find ways to develop my self-care and a change of career should be considered, effectively going on to argue that pastoral ministry was bad for my health and general wellbeing. On the one hand this was an unexpected statement, on the other it immediately resonated with some of my experiences in nearly 20 years of pastoral ministry.

The intention of this essay is to begin to explore that suggestion: can it really be true that being on the autistic spectrum is not compatible with being a Baptist minister in pastoral charge of a church? This is fundamentally a

make-or-break question for me, but it also has importance for the wider Baptist family as we seek to take into account both visible and invisible additional needs.

At first it may seem that the only satisfactory choice available is a straightforward *yes* or *no* answer, but I want to contend that answering *maybe* is also a legitimate way ahead. It is certainly true that *maybe* having ASC can be at odds with the practice of Baptist pastoral ministry. The task here is to begin exploring the *maybe* and raise awareness of the potential areas of tension between ASC and the practice of pastoral ministry with the aim of stimulating further reflection and conversation.

As I approach this question I must establish three things.

First, I need to state clearly that autism is most definitely a spectrum and in this essay I am focusing on those, including myself, who would be considered 'high-functioning'. This is contrasted with those on the other end of the spectrum who present what can be seen as classic autism including lack of speech, mental disability and

severe learning difficulties.<sup>2</sup> High-functioning autism, formerly named as Asperger's syndrome, is often not immediately obvious, and can be hidden by coping strategies.<sup>3</sup> It is the potential emotional and mental cost of these strategies, sometimes defined as masking behaviours, which is a motivating factor in this piece. It is also true that everyone with ASC is unique and it is not desirable to seek to categorise people too neatly.

Secondly, I recognise that Baptist ministry is itself a vocation which also cannot be neatly categorised. Even though a majority of ministers serve in local churches, those spaces can differ greatly, and formal ministry is also exercised in a wide variety of roles. A result of the developing reflection on ASC and ministry may be that certain traits of pastoral ministry found to be problematic are mitigated by a shift to other ministry roles, such as forms of chaplaincy, teaching or regional and national leadership.

Thirdly, taking into account both of the previous points, it is important to declare that any conclusions brought in this piece are necessarily tentative and will not apply without qualification to all ministers with ASC. With that said I move on to outline my methodology for this initial attempt to address the question of whether the practice of Baptist pastoral ministry is compatible with ASC.

### **An Autoethnographic Approach**

The question in this essay of whether the practice of Baptist pastoral

ministry is compatible with ASC is very much a personal one for me. With that in mind it is appropriate to employ a research method known as autoethnography. This approach, which can be located within practical theology, is outlined by Heather Walton in her *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*.<sup>4</sup> She quotes from Ellis, Adams and Bochner who define it as 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand experience (*ethno*)'.<sup>5</sup> This means that 'emphasis upon both "analysis" and "cultural experience" places autoethnography alongside other forms of social research that seek to observe and interpret cultural life'.<sup>6</sup> Walton outlines three forms of autoethnography: telling evocative stories, analytic autoethnography and performance ethnography.<sup>7</sup>

It is the first form which is potentially the most familiar as the writer looks to generate a response to:

*a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context. In personal narrative texts authors become 'I', readers become 'you',...[and] take more active roles as they are invited into the author's world [and e]voked to a feeling level about the events described...The goal is to write meaningfully and evocatively about things that matter and may make a difference...and to write from an ethic of care and concern.*<sup>8</sup>

This desire for the writing to generate a transformative response is also seen in the form of performance

ethnography, where for theological reflection this approach *encourages us to think beyond the personal and therapeutic aspects of autoethnography and to embrace its prophetic and disclosive potential. It also encourages us to see our sacred places as theatres in which worship and ritual may be 'performed' as political acts.*<sup>9</sup>

The intention of both these approaches goes some way to enabling this reflection to bridge the inevitable distance between the neurotypical and atypical (ASC) interpretations of the world around us.

Ministry is of course a path with many joys and sorrows regardless of whether you are neurotypical or atypical. Discussions at ministers' fellowships and conferences are testimonies to the ups and downs of the pastoral calling, as are all the books which assure us that we can indeed thrive as well as survive in ministry.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that simply surviving ministry can be a measure of some kind of success can seem an alien concept to those in our congregations who have limited knowledge of the potential stresses and strains of a pastoral calling. It would therefore be naive of me to try to claim that ministers with ASC have it somehow tougher than those who are classed as neurotypical. However, the singular aim of this piece remains to raise awareness of those aspects of everyday ministry which may be particularly problematic from

an ASC perspective and could be addressed if identified.

My writing here follows the basic form of autoethnography, of telling stories to evoke response, with the hope that we can begin to grasp how this can develop into being both disclosive and prophetic in line with performance ethnography. A significant part of pastoral ministry is performative, as ministers lead services and interact with both individuals and groups in different ways. Over time we seek to achieve some level of competence in those performative moments which can, in turn, serve to mask any insecurities or anxiety.

The most difficult part of any diagnosis of ASC can be the concern around how it will be received. I had the opportunity to write about my diagnosis for an online blog for a national Christian magazine. Its publication led to considerable encouragement, but also indifference from those who could not see where the reality of ASC was evident in my life and ministry, and what, if any, difference it would make.<sup>11</sup> This response reveals the practice of masking, where coping strategies enable the autistic individual to navigate the world around them.

That my discharging of ministry responsibilities may outwardly look no different to those who are neurotypical does not mean that there is not an emotional, physical and even spiritual cost that is not immediately apparent.



This potential cost is what prompted the psychologist to question whether ministry was in fact harmful to my wellbeing. I now turn to outline some of the wider presenting issues of ASC and highlight two areas where my autism has created tension in my practice of ministry.

### **Social Difficulties: The Triad of Impairments**

Having established the central aim of this essay and set out the methodology I now turn to a consideration of what is known as the triad of impairments. Autism, regardless of where you are on the spectrum, encompasses 'a range of symptoms, particularly difficulties with communicating, socialising and understanding emotions'.<sup>12</sup> This is narrowed to a triad of impairments: social communication, social interaction and social imagination.<sup>13</sup>

First, difficulties with social communication can be found in problems in dealing with non-verbal language as well as an overly literal interpretation of language. Secondly, issues with social interaction can often be seen in the struggle to understand unwritten social rules and even in knowing how to make and manage friendships. Thirdly, problems with social imagination manifest in failing to see things from another's point of view and struggling to understand another's emotional needs. Other characteristics which can manifest in addition to this triad can include a love of routines, difficulties coping with

change, obsessions and sensory issues such as avoiding touch and being troubled by loud noise.<sup>14</sup>

The emphasis in the triad on difficulties with forms of socialisation and certain limits on ease of interaction are obvious potentially negative factors for the interaction of Baptist ministry and ASC, given the relational and often social dimension of pastoral ministry. What must be avoided in considering ASC and ministry is the desire to generalise, presuming that all autists demonstrate this triad of impairments to the same degree or even at all. However, it is important to acknowledge that there is much commonality even if some of the problems indicated here are not debilitating for all to the same extent. I now highlight two areas which I can now see in the light of my diagnosis as having been personally problematic for me in my practice of ministry.

### **Misjudging Perceptions**

That the autistic individual is socially awkward is very much a stereotype, but it has been the reality for me, that even as I outwardly appear socially aware there is a struggle correctly to read social situations. A story from my first members' meeting at my current church serves to illustrate this. Such a meeting is a significant moment for setting the tone of future ministry and I took the opportunity to explain that pastoral visiting is not a form of prostitution. What I meant was that the pastor is not a rent-a-friend who is bought in to simply provide amiable

companionship, but that pastoral care is a form of discipleship which can look quite different to socially sharing tea and cake.

Now, that is what I meant, but that is not what was heard! That may not surprise you, but it did surprise me as I had thought carefully about how memorably to articulate an approach to pastoral visiting. My illustration was indeed memorable, but not in the way I had hoped! After nearly 14 years I remain the minister of what is a loving, dynamic and growing church, but I still misjudge social cues and have not always had the language to explain why.

My diagnosis of ASC has begun to give me that language, aiding me in my social development, but significantly also enabling my congregation in understanding some of my behaviours. This is where I see the storytelling of autoethnography becomes performative. My position, which gives space for me to name my condition and the struggles that result from it, allows that declaration to be both disclosive and prophetic as the hidden becomes visible.

This naming creates a space which I believe is truer to the gospel of Christ, than spaces where we lack the courage to speak plainly and to listen with understanding. The benefits of naming what we face without ambiguity lead us to the second area I have found problematic: people not saying what they mean.

### **People Need to Mean What They Say**

During my multiple consultations with the psychologist I spoke often of my experience that church members do not speak plainly and can come across as speaking in riddles which I find hard to decipher. I recognise that this struggle is not unique to those with ASC but need to name the fact that congregational government can be marked by power plays and unclear speech which are unhelpful to me, as I will not always pick up on hidden meanings. Part of the diagnostic process was the production of a communication passport, which outlines how best to communicate with me. The first point in the passport concerns plain speech: 'Clear, direct assumption free communication—please say what you mean/mean what you say—please check things through with me'.

While the reality that church members do not always mean what they say has been problematic for me, it also now presents an opportunity, albeit one which will be difficult to action. My hope is that over time the congregation can work with my communication passport, which will help me, but also potentially continue a culture shift to plain speaking. In a previous church I was informed, following a church weekend away, that a certain individual had been unhappy but that they did not want me to know who they were and what they were unhappy about! On one level that statement was ridiculous, but the person remained unhappy and the situation was unresolved. A

commitment to openness and plain, truthful speech reflects the gospel of Christ more than the unhelpful language and power games that can mar our churches.

### Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been a simple one, to address whether Baptist pastoral ministry is incompatible with being on the autistic spectrum. In the mode of autoethnography I have highlighted two areas where I have, following my diagnosis, noted areas of ministry tension. My difficulties in noticing social cues, and in dealing with unclear speech serve to illustrate some of the issues an autistic minister can face, while also demonstrating where the process of addressing those issues may actually bring benefits for not just the minister but also the congregation.

Is being a minister and being autistic damaging to my health? Maybe, but this autoethnographic reflection shows the necessity of bringing this hidden area into the light of the gospel.

### Notes to Text

1. See for example: Barry M. Prizant and Thomas Fields-Meyer, *Uniquely Human : A Different Way of Seeing Autism*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015; Steve Silberman, *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter About People Who Think Differently*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2015.
2. Gillan Drew, *An Adult with an Autism Diagnosis: A Guide for the Newly Diagnosed*. London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2017, pp17-30.

3. Simon Baron-Cohen, *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, 1st edn: *The Facts*. Oxford, New York: OUP, 2008.
4. Heather Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*. Norwich: SCM, 2014.
5. *Ibid*, p3.
6. *Ibid*.
7. *Ibid*, pp4-7.
8. *Ibid*, p4.
9. *Ibid*, p9.
10. See for example: Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2013.
11. 'I Was Diagnosed with Autism in My 40s' in *Premier Christianity*, <https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/i-was-diagnosed-with-autism-in-my-40s/3542.article>.
12. Drew, *An Adult with an Autism Diagnosis: A Guide for the Newly Diagnosed*, p17.
13. *Ibid*, p19.
14. *Ibid*, pp19-23.

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The *bmj* is always glad to hear of reflections on ministry experience, resources that may help others in ministry, and thoughtful analytical and biblical articles related to Baptist ministry.

If you have an experience or want to share something for discussion in some way, contact the editor on [revsal96@aol.com](mailto:revsal96@aol.com) to discuss your idea and to find out about length, format etc.

# Theology on the Web: The Basics

an interview with Rob Bradshaw

*Rob Bradshaw imagined and has developed the online resource for researchers, Theology on the Web. He is also the librarian at Spurgeon's College. Here he talks to bmj about this valuable project.*

## **Q1. Rob, can you briefly introduce yourself and tell us what you do?**

My name is Rob Bradshaw and since January 2020 my day job has been that of librarian at Spurgeon's College in South London. Before that I worked in Nepal with TEAR Fund, in a Christian bookshop, and more recently as administrator of an evangelistic ministry's Christian follow-up service. I have a degree in forestry and three years of Bible College training.

## **Q2. Tell us about Theology on the Web, and how you came up with the idea for this resource in the first place?**

Theology on the Web (TOTW) began in 2000 with the launch of [biblicalstudies.org.uk](http://biblicalstudies.org.uk). Its aim is to provide a free internet library that will give students of theology around the world access to thousands of theological books and articles. Effectively, an online theological library, complete with bibliographies and cross-references. While at Bible College I had enjoyed helping other students find the resources they needed to complete their assignments. In a sense TOTW is an expression of the same desire, just on an international scale. There are currently eight websites, with more planned:

[TheologyontheWeb.org.uk](http://TheologyontheWeb.org.uk) (hub site)

[BiblicalStudies.org.uk](http://BiblicalStudies.org.uk)

[BiblicalArchaeology.org.uk](http://BiblicalArchaeology.org.uk)

[TheologicalStudies.org.uk](http://TheologicalStudies.org.uk)

[EarlyChurch.org.uk](http://EarlyChurch.org.uk)

[MedievalChurch.org.uk](http://MedievalChurch.org.uk)

[ReformationChurch.org.uk](http://ReformationChurch.org.uk)

[Missiology.org.uk](http://Missiology.org.uk)

## **Q3. It's now 20 years of TOTW: how has it developed and what next?**

Looking back, I can see how the websites have developed in response to feedback and the availability of material to digitise. Originally, I had in mind creating something like a Bible-Wiki, creating the articles myself. Very soon, however, it became obvious that it would be much better to make available the large amount of superb material that was only available in print. With that in mind, I started writing to authors and journal editors and asked them for permission to place selected articles online. As the websites grew and become better known I began to receive requests to digitise entire journals, such as the *Baptist Quarterly*. Others required more work on my part to obtain copyright permission: the digitisation of *The Evangelical Quarterly*, for example, required me to contact every contributor individually.

Since commercial databases have begun to include theological journals, it is now increasingly difficult to find a new journal to scan. In fact, it would be impossible to create a site like TOTW today. However,

there are still many historic journals, particularly those dealing with Christian missions, and many Baptist journals that are still to be digitised. In addition to these, there are many out-of-print, but not out of copyright book titles where the rights have reverted to the author's estate. Tracking down the current copyright holder requires a good deal of detective work, but it is not impossible. The recent uploading of most of the works for Dr Norman H. Snaith bear testimony to this [[https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/theo\\_snaith\\_norman-h.php](https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/theo_snaith_norman-h.php)].

The subjects covered by the websites are vast and there are still large gaps that need to be filled. All the sites require work to update their bibliographies, so the work is ongoing.

#### **Q4. How have technological changes affected you?**

When I first started to scan articles, I scanned them to MS Word format and then converted them to PDF. Although this made the resulting files very small—important for those on dial-up connections—it meant that I could only upload two or three articles a week, and the fact that they needed proofreading meant that typos could easily occur. As scanning and pdf creation software developed, I was able to scan straight to PDF and then OCR the PDF. Although the resulting files were larger, they were more accurate and easily indexed by search engines. It is now possible to scan over 100 articles a week, enabling me to tackle much larger scanning projects, including the entire runs of journals.

#### **Q5. What happened during Covid—for you and for users?**

I had been working at Spurgeon's College

for just three months when Covid struck, and I was asked to work from home. By that time, I had been able to explore the library's archive and so was able to take a large amount of useful material home with me to digitise. I have to say that for me, having to find online resources for students was like Brer Rabbit's experience in the briar patch—something with which I was already comfortable. I felt a real confirmation that I was in the right place at the right time to assist the students at the College. I also found that worldwide visitor numbers on TOTW increased sharply as more and more people made use of the resources there, now augmented by public domain material from the library.

#### **Q6. Who are your users, and do you get feedback from them?**

Around 2 million people use the websites each year, downloading over 8 terabytes of material. As the material on the sites is almost exclusively in English it is no surprise that the top user countries are usually the US, UK, Australia and Canada. What I find most encouraging are the large numbers from France, Germany, Brazil, India, Philippines, and China, as well as English-speaking countries in Africa, such as Nigeria. The feedback I get confirms that TOTW is fulfilling its purpose of providing access to a substantial theological library in places where physical books and theological articles are hard to find.

#### **Q7. If you had unlimited time, money and access to material, what would you love to do?**

What I would really like to do is to develop the sites that are 'spin-offs' from the main websites. For example, the material on [biblicalarchaeology.org.uk](http://biblicalarchaeology.org.uk) started from a few pages within [biblicalstudies.org.uk](http://biblicalstudies.org.uk). Likewise, [missiology.org.uk](http://missiology.org.uk) started as a

single page within theologicalstudies.org.uk. I would also love to develop websites to cover in more detail modern church history, hermeneutics and the gospels. I have a large collection of Victorian magazines that include first-hand accounts from missionaries—I would really like to do something more with these, as they contain information that is probably not available elsewhere. There are also lots of 19th century Baptist journals that have never been digitised!

**Q8. You kindly scanned multiple issues of *The Fraternal* and old *bmj* copies, and now upload all issues to the web after a couple of years to create a free archive for users. Tell us how you think *bmj* could be of value to researchers and students.**

The requests I have received over the years

to digitise and host denominational material at first caught me by surprise, but this material, available as it is in one place, has certainly met a need in the church. Journals like *The Fraternal* and the *bmj* provide an important record of how UK Baptist churches are wrestling with contemporary issues as they preach the gospel. Such a record needs to be made available and because TOTW hosts similar journals from other denominations it provides a wealth of resources from a range of Christian perspectives.

**Ed: Thank you, Rob, for your work on this important resource.**

**For readers: the archive of *bmj* and *Fraternal* material is at [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bmj-o6.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bmj-o6.php)**

## ***bmj* Essay Prize 2022**

The *bmj* invites entries for our Essay Prize from those serving in, or in formation for, the leadership and ministry of Baptist churches or in other contexts, and we encourage those in the early years to apply. You do not have to be formally accredited.

We would like an essay of 2500 words on a topic and title of the entrant's choice that fits into one of the following categories: Baptist History and Principles; Biblical Studies; Theology or Practical Theology. We are looking for clear writing and argument, and preferably a creative engagement with our Baptist life. The prize will be £250.00 and the winning essay (and any highly commended contributions) will be published in *bmj*.

**Closing date: 31 March 2022**

Entries should be submitted electronically, double spaced and fully referenced, using endnotes not footnotes, to the editor at [revsal96@aol.com](mailto:revsal96@aol.com), including details of your name, address, church, role, and stage of ministry. Judges will be drawn from the Editorial Board of *bmj* and experienced academic Baptist colleagues. We reserve the right not to award a prize if the entries are unsuitable, of an inadequate standard for *bmj*, or do not meet the criteria.

Please share this competition with colleagues to whom it might be of interest. Contact the editor if you have any queries on [revsal96@aol.com](mailto:revsal96@aol.com).

# A Critical Exploration of Female Sexuality in the Christian Tradition

by Ingrid Shelley

*Author: Ingrid Shelley is a former prison chaplain and is currently working as a hospice chaplain while completing an MA.*

At Greenbelt two years ago I heard Nadia Bolz-Weber talk about her book *Shameless*, which explores the way Christians understand sex and whether we need to radically rethink our theology.<sup>1</sup> Her talks came at a time for me when my marriage of 30 years had ended, and I was in the process of leaving my role as Managing Chaplain at a prison for people with sexual convictions. She highlighted many of the concerns I had about the tradition that had been handed to me, a tradition that had caused me (and many friends) personal damage. Following the sexual rules had not worked well for me, and not following them gave rise to delight and intensely beautiful intimacy. My personal experiences sat alongside my work, where I listened to prisoners talk about their fantasies, masturbation, crimes, the abuse perpetrated on them, shame, their attempts at not taking responsibility, and their efforts to create change.

As a prison chaplain, I had become more aware of the fact that Christians do not even begin to scratch the surface of discussing and

understanding sex. The tradition had little robustness or usefulness when faced with the kinds of conversations I had with prisoners. This essay is part of the process of thinking about how I can, with integrity, talk about sex as a minister or chaplain and understand myself as a sexual being in the church today. I do not want to collude with teaching that has the potential to cause harm and am interested in discovering more helpful understandings of sex. I decided to explore Christian convictions about female sexuality in the Western church, as this topic spans both my personal experience and professional life. I think that understanding how the Christian tradition has thought about women and sex can help us to forge a truly progressive way forward.

Exploring every facet of the Christian tradition and female sexuality in this essay would not be possible, so I will focus on a survey of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and very early Christian tradition. A follow-up essay will look further into Christian tradition and explore some of the implications for today's context. The teaching I

heard as a young person, and still hear today, is that the Bible makes it clear what sexual relationships should look like. Much of this teaching is particularly rooted in the Hebrew tradition, where we see the beginnings of how Christianity came to define female sexuality.

### **The Hebrew Scriptures**

Women's sexuality in the Hebrew scriptures is defined via beliefs rooted in particular interpretations of the Genesis creation stories. They include the idea of male dominance, female inferiority, the male as normative, and procreation being the aim of sexual relationships. Tribble also adds the notion of women being 'responsible for sin in the world'.<sup>2</sup> This theme of male dominance over the female and women's second-class status is supported by Ruether in her exploration of Jewish and early Christian readings of Genesis. She tells us that no matter how we would like to see these stories as presenting egalitarianism, they would not have been read that way. She notes that the intention of the original writers was to reflect 'an androcentric, patriarchal culture and social system' where 'the male head of the household exercised dominion over both the dependent persons of the family (women, children, slaves) and over his non-human property'.<sup>3</sup>

Both Tribble and Ruether are critiquing this understanding of male dominance, but even today, hierarchy in male/female relationships is an

interpretation that persists. The idea of 'headship' is prevalent in many Christian communities and is rooted in the Genesis stories. Ortlund tells us that headship is part of our 'pre-fall perfection'<sup>4</sup> and that 'God created male and female in His image equally, but He also made the male the head and the female the helper'.<sup>5</sup> The argument here is that men and women are both created in God's image, therefore equal, but with different roles, therefore complementary. Ortlund maintains that dominance is a result of the fall and that headship is different and should be loving. However, any system that puts one person or group in a place of submissiveness in everyday life creates the potential for abuse and harm. I would suggest that, for women, it is sentimental and infantilising to insist on a kind of 'love patriarchy' as many Christians do (Ruether, quoting Gerd Theissen).<sup>6</sup> By their own definition, men are 'fallen', so how can they live out flawless loving headship? This reasoning creates a context where women are encouraged to distrust themselves and their instincts, desires, and wishes. Why would God put anyone in such a vulnerable position?

Isherwood and Stuart highlight another interpretive theme from the Genesis creation stories: that of 'otherness' of women. Here, women are defined as not normative for human beings—they are the afterthought, the rib, derivative. The authors suggest that Eve is named by



Adam at God's behest and therefore 'he will dictate how she is to see herself and the world'<sup>7</sup> From the beginning of the Hebrew/Christian story, men have been invited to name and define women, including their sexuality.

Genesis also reflects an understanding amongst the early Hebrew people that sex is primarily for procreation. As Van Wolde says, "in the Jewish marriage law procreation has a central place, and this is supported by referring back to the creation story".<sup>8</sup> As a result of this interpretation, the Hebrew people practised polygyny, men could divorce women if they did not conceive, and the laws allowed men to have sex with a dead brother's wife to produce a child that could bear the dead man's name.<sup>9</sup> The aim was to facilitate men having as many children as they could afford, and sexual/marriage laws and customs were accordingly supported or forbidden. Therefore, men having sex with female slaves was legal, and male same-sex intercourse was prohibited, as was having sex with a woman while she was menstruating.

The threads of interpretation of male dominance, female otherness, and the command to procreate, create the framework within the Hebrew scriptures in which women's desire and sexual expression is controlled. As Farley summarises: 'The regulation of women's sexuality was considered necessary to the stability and continuity of the family. Premarital and extramarital sex, even rape, were legally different for women and for men'.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that

even though Genesis was (and still is) used as a framework for marriage and sexual relationships, the Hebrew people themselves did not conform to the idea of one man, one woman; the laws and customs insisted on women being monogamous, but not men. As Knust notes: 'Marriage does not unite one man and one woman in one flesh for the purposes of procreation and sexual enjoyment. Instead, marriage unites free Israelite men with as many women and slaves as they can reasonably support'.<sup>11</sup>

This disparity between the rights of women and men led to women's bodies being used for the requirements of men. For example, Hagar, the Egyptian woman enslaved by Abraham and Sarah, was given to Abraham as a wife and then cast out into the desert when Isaac was born (Genesis 16–17), and Lot offered up his child-daughters for rape when the men of Sodom demanded that the visiting angels be handed over to them (Genesis 19:8). These and many other women in the Hebrew scriptures are used as little more than walking wombs, political pawns, or objects of lust. The responses of these women—their wants, desires, and wishes—are not accounted. They appear to have no autonomy and are certainly not seen as sexual beings in their own right.

However, this is not the only story in the Hebrew scriptures. If we are not careful, we can create a scenario where women are seen as nothing but victims, denying their autonomy even further. Kraemer points out that exploring the

everyday lives of Jewish women in the ancient world is difficult because of a lack of sources.<sup>12</sup> He also suggests that much of current Christian writing about Jewish women's lives is rooted in a wish to portray Christianity as a religion of increasing freedoms for women, therefore 'painting a particularly gloomy portrait' of their lives and experiences.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that insights into the lives of women gained from the Hebrew scriptures are partial and do not provide a complete picture. Farley, highlights that although men and women were treated differently in the ancient Jewish world, the 'laws of onah, of marital rights and duties, aimed to make sex a nurturant of love'.<sup>14</sup> These laws recognised that women had sexual needs and that the man had obligations to respond to them and fulfil them.<sup>15</sup> This hints at the probability that people in sexual relationships found intimacy, pleasure, and closeness, even within such a seemingly tightly controlled environment.

It is also interesting to note the times that sexual transgressions were overlooked, which indicate that real lives were probably much more complex than the laws suggest. For example, Ruth, the non-Israelite, along with her mother-in-law Naomi, is left impoverished and vulnerable when her close male relatives die. Naomi encourages Ruth to seduce

Boaz, a near kinsman, who responds with praise for Ruth (Ruth 3:10) and arranges to marry her. Ruth subsequently becomes great-grandmother to King David. Here, Ruth and Naomi used 'the existing structures in surprising, bold ways, taking the initiative and working out their own destiny'.<sup>16</sup> The story does not challenge the structures, but these women used them to create some security for themselves. Ruth broke the rules and was praised and vindicated. This and similar stories, such as David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12) and Tamar and Judah (Genesis 38), may challenge given rules around sex, but they are not instances of liberal attitudes. All of the babies born of these unions were sons and therefore strengthened the Hebrew tribe and nation; procreation was the justification for this lack of condemnation. Even so, the book of Ruth assumes 'that extraordinary circumstances...[justify] extraordinary measures, including sexual assertiveness on the part of women'.<sup>17</sup> These stories hint that real life could be complex and sexual relationships did not always follow the rules.

The place where patriarchal definitions of women's sexuality seem to be challenged the most is in the Song of Songs. In the midst of stories of abuse, control, and law after law that take no account of the feelings and desires of women, there suddenly appears an erotic poem. At its heart is a woman who delights in

herself. She gives no hint of body-hatred or disgust: 'I am black and beautiful', she declares, and likens herself to a rose and a lily. This woman is aware of her longings and desires. She and her lover speak with words of sensuality and eroticism; they revel in the sight, touch, taste, and smell of each other. The language uses nature to celebrate the lush vibrancy of their intimacy. It is no wonder that commentators in the past have tried to tame this book.

One of the ways that attention has been deflected from the main female voice is to attribute the book to King Solomon. As Knust notes, it is highly unlikely that he was the author of the book; she points out that it 'was probably written much later, after the Babylonian exile'.<sup>18</sup> Weems tells us that the 'attribution to Solomon in 1:1 is in all likelihood an editorial gloss'.<sup>19</sup> The language in the poem 'recalls the great love poetry of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia'.<sup>20</sup>

However, rather than enjoy the poetry and delight prevalent in the text, both Jewish and Christian commentators have interpreted the Song as an allegory. First, it was seen as a description 'of the love affair between God and Israel' and then for Christian writers as a portrayal of marriage between 'Christ and the Church or Christ and the believer's soul'. Although these interpretations have been mostly dropped in current Christian understandings, the wish to deflect from female desire still lingers.

MacLean notes that although most evangelical commentators understand the text as being about married sex, some still defend 'a largely Christological understanding of the Song of Solomon', and he particularly cites Hugh Blair and Iain Campbell.<sup>22</sup> Apart from the fact that the Song does not mention marriage, those such as Blair and Campbell who continue to 'spiritualise' the text are perhaps not giving enough account to the depth of spirituality and theology to be found in the erotic. Blair suggests that there is not enough to preach on if it is 'only' about sex (cited in MacLean), and Campbell proposes that there is not enough theological significance.<sup>23</sup>

Campbell's interpretation makes Solomon the centre, therefore relegating the main voice—the woman's—to the side. It is rather jarring that evangelical and conservative commentators still name it the Song of Solomon. This operates as a reminder that legitimacy is seen to reside with the male experience, not the female. These interpretations shore up male power and importance and seem to completely ignore the possibility of an erotic woman being able to teach us anything about God.

Feminist commentators have understood the Song differently. Trible (1978) suggests that it acts as a counterpoint to the Garden of Eden story, and that where Eros was broken in those stories—leading to domination by the man over the woman—Eros in this book is restored

leading to mutuality, as was originally intended.<sup>24</sup> In a detailed exploration, she builds a compelling case and cites playful instances of how the two are linked. For example, in 1:2b–3 the woman names the man by using a play on the word for Eve, so ‘for her, naming is ecstasy, not dominion’. Although Tribble has been criticised for trying to force feminist understandings onto Scripture (eg Miller<sup>25</sup>), I wonder whether her exploration of Eros broken and Eros restored makes an important point for women of faith, that if we owned and relished our desires and longings it could lead to a kind of radical challenge to the interpretive themes that have rendered us infantilised and invisible.

Another aspect of the Song that feminist commentators have pointed to is the lack of the usual trappings of patriarchy. There is no control or dominance here, nor marriage, nor procreation, suggesting that in the lostness of sexual arousal and anticipation, in true intimacy and love, all is equal. Knust tells us that ‘once awakened, desire—not marriage or childbearing—remains the focus...and social norms appear to be irrelevant to the delight they intend to pursue’.<sup>26</sup> However, there is violence in the book, which is usually seen as an attempt from the outside to disrupt the lovers and the mutuality that they have with one another.<sup>27</sup>

Brenner, in her exploration of the Song, highlights its humorous quality.

Writing with the voice of the woman in the poem, she says ‘I would claim that “my” poem’s tone is ribald and the humour sexual’. She suggests that humour ‘functions as a subversive agent’, and challenges ‘our conscious ideological stands’.<sup>28</sup> The Song therefore operates provocatively to challenge our accepted ways of viewing things. Brenner proposes that the Song may have been written by a woman, to be performed amongst women, and was intended as a kind of parody of the way men talk about women. As such, 7:1–5 presents a humorous description of a woman with a large nose, voluptuous figure, bouncing breasts, and a rather long neck.

The reclamation of the Song of Songs has been challenged by suggestions that those who see it as a testimony to female desire have been duped because it is a male fantasy, not a female voice that we are observing. Moore and Burrus cite Goulder, who concluded that the Song was just ‘a piece of high-class pornography’<sup>29</sup>—Clines suggests that it is a ‘male text’ where ‘the woman is everywhere constructed as the object of the male gaze’. He goes on to say that the violence against the woman is intended to invite the male readers into witnessing her humiliation, which ‘is the very stuff of pornography’.<sup>30</sup> But what if both of these positions are missing something? Why does it have to be one or the other? Is it possible that the female voice is capable of lewd, explicit, and violent fantasies?

What makes the Song erotic and not pornographic? I would suggest that the Song is more complex than the dualism that has settled on it. Looking at it as pornography might help free us from some of the sense of righteousness that can accompany interpretations of it, whether those are 'it is talking about Christ and the church' or 'it is a woman's voice free from patriarchy declaring equality and sensuality'. Both of these understandings can come across as somewhat pompous and worthy.

Moore and Burrus also highlight a connection between the feminist reclaiming of the Song and those commentators, such as Clines, who see it as a pornographic depiction for men. They suggest that they share 'an unstated yet palpable set of assumptions about what constitutes "good sex" on the one hand, and "bad sex" on the other'. They cut across the dualism of both feminist commentators and views like Clines and propose that "a feminist age" might actually have uses for the pornographic, even positive uses'.<sup>31</sup> They ask us to consider that:

*By taking female fantasies of erotic violence seriously, we may come less to fear their potential for passively shoring up an oppressive sexual status quo than to acknowledge their capacity to subvert it actively from within. The patriarchal sexual order is, arguably, already disrupted when a woman constructs herself as an actively desiring subject, even if—perhaps especially if—what she desires is a good beating.*<sup>32</sup>

Maybe the Song invites us to embrace sex that is lusting, weird (why so many animals?), fetishist, and violent, because sex itself is so complex. In our sexual desires, there can be both the energy of Eros and Thanatos. Our desires and fantasies are places to discover our limits, our shadows, and our fetishes, and they may be places of liberation for women.

It can be difficult for us to acknowledge that the world of sex and desire can be strange. I remember my reactions to discovering that one of the prisoners I worked with had a fetish for aquatic creatures. My first instinct was to laugh (a classic deflection of discomfort), and the second was to try and imagine, which just made me feel revulsed. Embracing the weird and the dark may be a way for Christian women to reject the 'good-girl' sexuality they have been given.

There is no doubt that the Song has problems; it is not a straightforward exploration of female desire. There are questions to ask about who the narrator is, who the poem was written for, into whose gaze we are invited, and how we view violence against the woman. But these questions help us wrestle with the more complicated aspects of sex. We all live in a world shaped by patriarchy; I cannot rip myself out of that to try to create a 'pure' feminist ideal, and I am not going to find liberation by rejecting what I enjoy.

Maybe a way to approach the Song is to recognise that as readers we can do

what we want with it. Exum (2000) proposes that we 'do not have to deny ourselves the pleasure of the text. All we need to do is misread it'.<sup>33</sup> Recognising that we can, like commentators of the past who saw it as an allegory, read it how we want, is liberating and empowering. I personally love this Song. I choose to see a woman at the centre of it who is not defined by the role of mother/wife: she is feisty, sensual, luscious, vulnerable, lusty, and kinky. And I like her.

### **Christian Scriptures**

Constraints of space mean that it is not possible to explore in detail what the Christian scriptures have to say about female sexuality, and because much of Christian thought about sex and marriage is rooted in the Hebrew texts, it would not necessarily add anything. The aspects I might have explored would have been the 'sexually suspect' women in Jesus's genealogy (Matthew 1:1-17); how Mary Magdalen become understood as a prostitute even though this is not stated in the gospels; the woman caught in adultery; that Jesus did not talk about sex at all and only mentioned marriage in connection with divorce; and what sexual immorality might refer to in Paul's writings.

It is interesting to note that, no matter how women are portrayed in the gospels, whether challenging Jesus (Mark 7), discussing faith (John 4), caught in adultery (John 8), or crying over Jesus' feet (Luke 7), he always

responds with respect and accords them dignity and individuality. Jesus was probably a man of his culture and time: it is unlikely that he understood the need for women's liberation, but in his treatment of individuals he displays an acceptance of people and recognises their humanity, whoever they are.

Although by the time the Christian scriptures were written there had not been significant changes in the understanding of women and their role in the family, there is one slight shift I want to highlight. Marriage had moved increasingly towards one man and one woman, and polygyny had decreased by the first century.<sup>34</sup> Paul, however, starts to introduce the notion that marriage (for men) is not just about procreation but is necessary to 'protect men from their illicit desires'.<sup>35</sup> This notion reflects Paul's belief that the end of times is imminent, and that believers will receive 'renewed bodies and minds' that will 'no longer be subject to the desires of the flesh'.<sup>36</sup> This then results in Paul advocating celibacy, because there is no point in family life if everything is about to end. Although this early Christian thinking took the focus away from procreation, it still did not free women to know and express their own desires. His instructions to men in 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 to marry their fiancées if they cannot control themselves takes no account of how the woman may feel nor recognises that men are perfectly capable of controlling themselves.

So, although we have Jesus treating women with respect in the Christian scriptures, we still have an understanding that women should be available to men for sexual needs, and there is no recognition of the sexual needs and desires of the women themselves.

### **Christianity Established**

As Christianity became established, it was not only influenced by the Hebrew tradition but increasingly by the Greco-Roman world of which it was a part. Referencing Michel Foucault's work on sexuality, Farley describes the sexual mores of Christians and Greco-Romans as more similar than is usually understood. Both had

*prohibitions against incest, a preference for marital fidelity, a model of male superiority, caution regarding same-sex relations, respect for austerity, a positive regard for sexual abstinence, fears of male loss of strength through sexual activity, and hopes to access to special truths through sexual discipline.*<sup>37</sup>

Hence there was not a promiscuous Roman world and a morally upright Christian world, but understandings that were significant to both. However, Foucault suggests that the motives for their moral intention were based on different beliefs: 'the ancients were concerned with health, beauty, and freedom, while Christians sought purity of heart before God'.<sup>38</sup> Two aspects of these beliefs about sex and marriage are worth highlighting: first, the notion of women's inferiority is

central and her desires are not considered; secondly, men are prone to seek as much sex as possible, that this weakens them, and that channelling sexual energy into more 'moral' pursuits is desirable.

The notion that men need to find an outlet for sexual desire links in with Paul's discussions about men marrying only if they must. Although Paul's motive for this teaching was a concern about the return of Jesus, it seems that, as Christianity grew, these ideas morphed into an understanding that sex itself is problematic. Armstrong calls this a 'Christian neurosis' that has infected Christianity for 2000 years.<sup>39</sup> She suggests that it arises from a context of remembering Paul's preference for celibacy, and a Roman world being dismantled by the internal excesses of the Nero regime and the external violence of the pagan tribes. This fear of unbridled passion, whether in sex or violence, led to a disconnect between official doctrine that says sex within marriage is good and a sense that 'sex is shameful in some way'.<sup>40</sup> This thinking was possibly strengthened by Hellenistic Christians reading the Hebrew purity laws and seeing actual impurity of bodies that menstruate and ejaculate, rather than ritual impurity connected to the presence of God in the Temple.

Another feature of this world that feeds into understandings of women's sexuality is the body/spirit split in Greco-Roman philosophical thought. Isherwood and Stuart describe this as

'a hierarchy with God and spirit presiding and the various manifestations of the flesh in descending order'. It is well documented that men 'claimed for [themselves] rationality and spirituality', leaving women connected with the lower orders of nature and flesh.<sup>41</sup> However, we should be cautious of caricaturing this dualism; it is not as simple as men deciding that female was bad, and male was good, and there is a more subtle process happening in these developments.

Farley (2006) helpfully summarises the complexities of thought that contributed to these understandings, which led to a Christian tradition that 'developed a consistently negative pessimistic view of sex, and a view of women as not equal to men'.<sup>42</sup> However, she qualifies this by noting that 'there is little evidence that Christians in general were influenced by the more severe sexual attitudes of their leaders'.<sup>43</sup> It would therefore be correct to say that women and their sexuality were understood as inferior and even unholy, but we should not fall into the trap of thinking that the sex lives of ordinary women were all degrading and non-consensual as a result.

To summarise, in early Christian thinking, the threads of belief around female inferiority, otherness, and sinfulness merge with beliefs around male sexual cravings, equating the female with the body, and a view that

God requires sexual purity, to create a framework for defining female sexuality. This framework generates a hostile approach to women's sexuality that leads to some horrendous declarations from church leaders.

I will explore some of their views in a follow-up essay, but at this stage I want to note that it is important that Christians today take seriously the influences that contributed to early Christian thought, because it still holds much sway. Much of the teaching given in the purity-type movements/evangelical churches about sex is presented as scriptural, and the champions of these views do not acknowledge (or know) that much of their thought is also influenced by a pagan Greco-Roman society and that a re-evaluation of these understandings is long overdue. As Isherwood and Stuart point out, we do not believe in a created order of heavens/earth/underworld anymore, so why do we hold onto a body/spirit dualism?<sup>44</sup>

It is important to recognise that if we want to use scripture to create rules for sexual living then we are dealing with a context that is so very different from our own and includes contradictory material. This is not to say that scripture cannot give us a framework for good sexual behaviour but maybe we have been looking in the wrong places for that. Paul, in his explorations of marriage and sexual behaviour took his context and



understanding of faith seriously. What does our context have to teach us? How do we understand our faith today? Jesus didn't return as soon as Paul thought he would, this has implications for the way we understand marriage and sex.

The rules have worked for some people, but it would be wrong of us to assume that when they have not worked it is because those involved haven't been following them properly. We need to listen to the voices that are articulating their struggle, bewilderment, and unhappiness. In doing so we may be able to move away from notions of purity rooted in the control of women to secure procreation and forge a liberating but safe and caring framework for sexual intimacy.

## Notes to Text

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# What is Truth?

by Michael Humphreys

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A teacher in Ethiopia told her class this story:

*A greedy Hyena was walking along a path and smelled food. He began to follow the scent. After a while he came to a fork in the path. The food smell was on both paths. He was so greedy he walked down both paths at the same time. The wider the paths separated the wider he stretched his legs, until he split in two and died.*

'Do you think it's a true story?'

'No, it can't be true. Hyenas can't split themselves in two'.

'Yes, it is true—greedy people do come to harm'.

If the topic is biology the story is false. If the topic is morality, it is perhaps true. There may be no straightforward answer to the question 'Is it true?' In this example a decision about the kind of literature we are reading must be answered before the question of its truth can be discussed.

In daily life this is not usually a problem. If someone begins: 'Once upon a time...', we do not expect the subsequent story to be factual, nor necessarily true in any sense. Yet we would not accuse the storyteller of lying. If someone begins: 'A man walks into a pub...', we expect a joke. Truth

and falsehood hardly apply, though the joke could shed light on some aspect of life, and in that regard could be true. We don't look for the same rigorous factual truth in everyday conversation as we would in a mathematical proof or a scientific paper. We make allowances for exaggeration, for understatement, for sarcasm and for irony, and for metaphor. We don't accuse our friends of lying to us because all they say may not be sober fact. We expect political statements to be partisan, the point of view of that politician or of their party. To arrive at a more complete grasp of the truth, we know we would be wise to listen to other voices, and then reflect on the matter for ourselves in the light of the various opinions and convictions expressed.

We have different expectations of poetry. We do not expect a poem to correspond to the truth of physics and mathematics: When Keats writes 'close bosom-friend of the maturing sun',<sup>1</sup> we don't ask 'How can the sun possibly be friends with a season?' Nor do we object that vines, having no legs, can't run round thatch-eaves. The truth of a poem is of a quite different kind.

While it is often easy enough in daily

life and in our own language to know what criteria to apply, it is more difficult across a language barrier, over a lapse of time, or across a culture gap. Here misunderstandings are not only possible—they are likely to occur. My daughters once asked an American student what she had worn for her high-school graduation ball. She replied (truthfully) 'Black pants and red suspenders'. They were astonished at her daring, not knowing that in US English 'pants' were trousers, and 'suspenders' were braces.

### **Variety of Genre in the Scriptures**

In the scriptures, the apocryphal writings, and the writings of the early church fathers we have a variety of genres, written in other languages and set in cultures different from our own. There is poetry (with conventions different from those of classical or modern English poetry), historical writing (with conventions that differ from those of modern history), religious polemic, stories about saints and sinners, moral instruction, tales and parables, letters, and apocalyptic—a genre often misunderstood because it has no close modern equivalent. Indeed, the genres of ancient literature do not 'map' exactly on those we are familiar with in modern writings. Modern apocalyptic literature or film needs to be understood differently from ancient apocalyptic.

When someone asks of the scripture 'Is it all true?' and insists on a yes/no reply, there is no straightforward answer. We must reply something like

this: 'Yes, I believe Christianity is true, but please tell me more exactly what you mean by your question'. And if we encounter doubts in ourselves, as most Christians do from time to time, we must make the same patient enquiry of ourselves.

### **Some Meanings of 'Truth'**

Let's consider some of the meanings of 'truth' in current English usage, and then go on to think about the practical problem of deciding what is true, when many factors need to be taken notice of. I pick out a few ways we think about truth.

When nowadays we say something is true, we are often thinking of truth in the scientific or mathematical sense. Does what is said conform to material or mathematical reality? Two plus two is four. Water flows downhill. The earth goes round the sun. This kind of truth is in principle open to empirical enquiry. We can perhaps establish whether what has been asserted is indeed so. The yes/no might have an answer. Two honest witnesses would probably agree on such matters, except in regions of knowledge that are still growing and where conflicting hypotheses are still being tested. Of course, all scientific knowledge is provisional and subject to updating in the light of new findings, but disagreements usually occur only in areas of current advance, where the evidence may still be sparse or its interpretation uncertain. The scientific aspect of truth has become dominant because of the spectacular advances in the sciences over the past three or

four centuries. But it is not the only kind of truth. It is rarely applicable in matters of faith.

We also speak of historical truth: the bales fell off the trailer because he drove the tractor too fast round the corner; this hotel has reopened after refurbishment; this historian has given us a true account of the British Civil War (or, as Isaac Walton called it, 'the late rebellion'). Historical truth is much more difficult to establish, because so much happened that the historian cannot know about, and because the historian's account doesn't help us unless he or she chooses well what pieces of information to set before us, and suggests how they should be understood. No two historians would choose as significant all the same records or interpret them in just the same way. In this sphere 'telling the truth' entails selection and interpretation. Two honest historians might differ—and often do differ. However, we do believe that there was a stream of events that conformed to reality, though many of these events will be mental events—for example, what Tony Blair believed about weapons of mass destruction before the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Ancient historians used greater freedom than do modern historians. They filled in gaps in the record with other material, such as by putting a speech into the mouth of an orator, believing that this was what he might well have said on that occasion. They needed to tell a story. And the historiography in the scriptures is

ancient in its conventions, so it is unwise to assume that it was ever intended to conform to the truth-criteria used by modern historians.

We also use 'true' in related but different senses: a wheel runs true; a bell rings true. We mean that it conforms to a good pattern. It spins as a wheel ought to spin, or sounds as a bell ought to sound. There may also be the idea of loyalty, genuineness, and reliability. We speak of love being true ('Love me tender, love me true/All my dreams fulfill/For my darling I love you/And I always will'). Jesus is 'the true vine'. He is 'the way, the truth, the life'. We speak of God as true—genuine and trustworthy, conforming to a good pattern or standard. That truth and goodness are closely related was characteristic of ancient wisdom, as can be seen in the debates and enquiries of the ancient Greek philosophers.

These senses of truth are all present in the common word for truth in New Testament Greek, and also (I am told) in the words for truth used in Old Testament Hebrew. This eases the work of the translators. For not all words translate readily from one language to another, and the pattern of words in a language may to some extent affect or reflect the way of thinking of the speakers of that language.

### **Some Implications**

In the modern world truth-as-fact so dominates our thinking that other meanings are easily overlooked. It is

one of the factors that lies behind the recent surge of militant atheism. If scientific or mathematical truth is the only kind that exists, or the only kind that matters, and it can be shown that the scriptures do not conform to this kind of truth, faith may be undermined. Or if it is shown that the history portrayed in scripture does not conform to the factual stance of the modern historian, the foundation documents of our faith may seem deficient, and so faith may be undermined. And if this kind of truth is the only kind there is, then 'God' must be material and therefore subject to scientific investigation. Indeed, on this view God is probably unnecessary, lacking any explanatory power. This is not what Christianity means by God.

It is wise to address these matters in churches, otherwise members will feel they are taught one thing at church, and another at school and university. They are forced to choose, as they see it, between faith and truth. A church that denies sound scientific and mathematical knowledge in the attempt to vindicate scripture, misunderstands the scriptures, and places its more educated members—and especially intelligent teenagers—under an unbearable tension.

An extreme statement that shows this tension was seen in the blog of the author Anne Rice, as reported in the *Guardian* some years ago (31/7/2010). She said: 'In the name of Christ, I quit being a Christian'. This was her response to the teaching of some very

conservative churches, both Catholic and Protestant, in the US. 'I remain committed to Christ, as always, but not to being Christian, or part of Christianity'. 'I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life'. She had found the tension between the kind of faith taught by these churches and her understanding of truth too great for her to bear.

Nor is such tension entirely modern. Something of it can be seen in John Bunyan (late 17th century). In reviewing the stresses experienced along his Christian path he wrote:

*Of all the temptations I ever met with in my life, to question the being of God, and the truth of his gospel, is the worst to be borne; when this temptation comes, it takes away my girdle from me, and removeth the foundation from under me: O, I have often thought of that word..."When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"*

The end of one such period of confusion came when: 'the temptation was removed, and I was put into my right mind again, as other Christians were'.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that he saw this as a temptation rather than as an intellectual problem, and its resolution was for him experiential rather than rational.

The Victorian 'crisis of faith' among the intelligentsia arose from the joint effects of historical criticism of the Bible and the advances of science,

particularly in geology and in evolution. Some educated Christians were able to accommodate these ideas in their faith, but others found that these ideas forced them to choose between faith and truth. What is less well-known is that many who lost their faith later returned to it. There are well-documented examples of some who became virulently anti-church and anti-Christianity, and who led the secularist movement, but later and on deeper reflection returned to the faith and became eminent Christian ministers.<sup>3</sup> Among the reasons they gave for their reconversion was that the strictly rational and logical view of truth typical of those who found inaccuracies and contradictions in the scripture did not go to the heart of the faith. Christianity was in a deeper sense profoundly true. The Bible was complex and apparently contradictory because life itself was also complex and paradoxical. The story unfolding in the scriptures included development of ideas and convictions. They also found that the scientific/logical understanding of truth gave no moral guidance. It was inadequate for living. So they moved from honest disbelief to honest faith—but a faith reshaped by their intellectual journey. Scientific truth is excellent in matters of science, but of limited use in other areas of thinking and living.

### **Truth in a Complex World**

How then might we move towards truth when matters are complex, and there are competing and varied ideas? In particular, how can we do this in

matters of faith? It seems to me that we require our faith to be anchored in fact, and to have a good degree of internal consistency. Susan Haack used the crossword puzzle as an illustration of this 'double-check' procedure.<sup>4</sup> The clues are anchored in the world beyond the puzzle, and support is obtained by the way the words interlock (I should mention she believes that faith and science are incompatible). Thus, to carry conviction, our faith should have a basis in our experience and in the experience of others, and a good measure of internal coherence, so that we can arrive at some overall pattern of understanding.

It is illuminating to see how some have done this. Again, an example from Bunyan: he is trying to resolve a dilemma. For a long time, he had been plagued by the conviction that he had sinned himself beyond the reach of the grace of God. He felt he had 'sold' Christ and that only hell awaited him. He didn't wish to live but didn't dare to die. The passage from Hebrews would come into his mind and condemn him. 'For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened...if they shall fall away...to renew them again unto repentance'. At other times, the assurance from John's gospel 'Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out' would enter his mind and overcome his fear and he would begin to hope. His state of mind depended entirely on which scripture came to mind. One had power to condemn him, the other to relieve him. Then he wondered what would happen if both scriptures came

into his mind at the same time. A few days later they did. The two scriptures strove together, and as he watched, that from Hebrews grew weaker, and that from John grew stronger. Then another scripture came to his mind: 'mercy triumphs over judgment'. For Bunyan the resolution was experiential. He came to see God's judgement as part of the process of growing into Christ, rather than as God's final word. He was not an educated man, but he had stumbled across the theological process of 'sublation', accommodating apparent contradictions.<sup>5</sup>

We might contrast this with William Huntington's<sup>6</sup> resolution of a similar scriptural problem. He was a gardener to an aristocratic lady (18th century), and while he was up a ladder pruning, the solution to the problem popped into his mind. He saw that all the verses of condemnation in the Bible applied only to the damned, while all those of mercy applied only to the elect, an interpretation that we may feel to be arbitrary. Bunyan's resolution, it seems to me, has greater spiritual and intellectual depth—it was more truthful—though he would have seen it not as a solution to an intellectual puzzle, but as a fact of experience: 'Mercy triumphs over judgment'.

But how does one bring in the convictions of others, so that one is not reliant only on one's own conscience and understanding? We bring in the convictions of others informally by conversation with other believers.

In the days of the Reformation in Europe the question of how to resolve doctrinal disputes became urgent. Erasmus was a Christian humanist scholar who remained in the Catholic church, despite his severe criticisms of it. In response to Luther, he advocated a practical procedure.<sup>7</sup> He called for a two-step method: the first step was to assemble the evidence from scripture on both sides of the dispute, so bringing in the experience of other people of faith. Then by analysis and comparison it may become evident where the truth lay. If it remained uncertain, the matter should be left as optional, or decided by the authority of the church—but by then Luther had lost all confidence in the authority of the contemporary church, preferring to follow his own experience and conviction. 'Here I stand. I can do no other' as he (might have) said.

### Notes to Text

1. John Keats, *Ode to Autumn*.
2. John Bunyan, *Grace abounding to the chief of sinners*. Various publishers.
3. Timothy Larsen. *Crisis of doubt*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
4. Alan Padgett & Patrick Keifert (eds), *But is it all true? Eerdmans*, 2006
5. Susan Haack, *Evidence and enquiry*. Blackwell, 1993.
6. Keith Ward, *What the Bible really teaches*. SPCK, 2004. (In this book Keith Ward considers the process of understanding some important aspects of Christian doctrine.)
7. William Huntington SS (Saved Sinner) was uneducated. He could read and write, but had no formal education.
8. Erika Rummel, *Erasmus*. Continuum, 2004.

# Reviews

Edited by Michael Peat

## *Preaching Women—Gender, Power and the Pulpit*

by Liz Shercliff

SCM, 2019

### **Reviewer: Jenny Few**

This is an excellent book, though at first I did not expect to find anything I'd not heard, wrestled with and discerned in the 1990s and ever since. But it is a sad truth that each generation has to learn afresh what I was privileged to experience in the early '90s when my time as a student at Northern Baptist College coincided with Heather Walton and Susan Durbar on the teaching staff. They demonstrated that as women we could learn to preach differently, and approach the Bible, faith and the church in ways that reflected our own experience. Liz Shercliff, 25 years later, has done the same superbly in this book, making me want to cheer and to echo the conclusion of Elaine Storkey that this is 'the book we may all have been waiting for'.

Shercliff goes further than other women writers in explaining and analysing women's 'difference', though her background and starting point are all too familiar: an Anglican discouraged from preaching, who nevertheless persisted, becoming a lay reader, a youth leader, an adult educator and eventually an ordained priest. In 2014 she was asked by the

College of Preachers to write an article for their journal on women's preaching—'Do Women Preach with a Different Voice?' The extensive research she undertook revealed a familiar story—of discouragement, of a lack of good female role models and a lack of women tutors in colleges so that preaching classes tended to be unquestioningly 'traditional' and male orientated (thank you Heather and Susan). Having written the article, she then began to write and speak and to encourage more widely and this book is the result (as is an annual conference for Anglican women, Women Voices).

She writes uncompromisingly about why this is still an uphill task for each generation by describing the way patriarchy has been embedded in the life and thinking of the West for many centuries, prevailing through the Enlightenment, the development of modern science, and the arts; through the cultural norm that still assumes women's skills and ambitions are subordinate to those of men. She writes about the media where print and broadcast journalists still objectify and trivialise leading women in all walks of life, powerfully making the point that this is the culture we all inhabit and the media we absorb, as ministers and also as congregations, and thus how hard it is to challenge and shift the balance of power. She distinguishes between invisible patriarchy and more overt sexism, in society and in the church, and gives chilling examples, ranging from patronising comments, 'mansplaining'



to over familiar gestures and inappropriate touching.

This unchallenged patriarchy also finds its way into hermeneutics, and theological teaching which is still predominately male, in spite of increasing numbers of women priests and biblical scholars. It also dominates church history, much of which has been written and commented on down the centuries by men. Her analysis of how women see themselves, and of how much of church life seems designed to reinforce a sense of inadequacy would make uncomfortable reading for anyone not already acknowledging its truth. All too often it is men who decide what women need to hear, and to solve women's problems for them. She wants women to be heard and understood, so that preaching is relevant to them and how they live. In a revealing analysis of several years of Old Testament passages included in the Common Worship Lectionary, she concludes that in almost all cases the women biblical characters are presented as problematic in some way or as adjuncts of men.

Against this background and against all the odds, Shercliff issues a rallying cry to women to dare to be different, dare to be themselves and dare to persist in developing their own approach to the Bible, and to preaching. In other words to find their own voice, and tell their stories. In more than one chapter, she challenges women to re-think how they perceive

biblical women by asking where the power resides within the story, and to really read what is on the page. These chapters not only encourage how to preach as a woman but contain examples from Shercliff's own sermons, sometimes snippets and sometimes the whole text. These are invaluable because they give practical expression to the points she is making. The whole book becomes a 'how to' handbook, but never does it make the reader feel constrained to be other than herself. Shercliff has the gift of encouraging confidence in the validity of each reader's experience and testimony of the grace of God, and she provides the tools and language to be able to make use of both in sermons which are thus authentic, powerful and personal. I am glad to have read this book, even at this stage in my career (10 years into retirement) and I thoroughly recommend its.

***A Burning in my Bones: The Authorized Biography of Eugene H Peterson***

by Winn Collier

Authentic Media, 2021

***Reviewer: Michael Bochenski***

Winn Collier was given access by the Peterson family to some eight decades worth of papers and journals, photographs, manuscripts and letters. These he has woven into a fine biography of, perhaps, the greatest pastoral theologian of recent decades: Eugene Hoiland Peterson (EHP). These are some of the jigsaw pieces he assembles.

Peterson's father Don's butcher shop was where he was introduced not only to meat, but also to the wide range of human characters and personalities he would come to know so well in the pastorate. His mother's deep, Pentecostal faith which helped to form him spiritually. His struggles over glossolalia—a badge of honour among the Pentecostals of his youth. A teacher, Elva McAllister, who first helped him really to read and appreciate good literature—beginning with *The Canterbury Tales*. The broadening of his faith and mind as increasingly he encountered godly scholars from other traditions and felt increasingly drawn away from 'stifling sectarianism'. His decision to enter the Presbyterian ministry. His love of Karl Barth and his regular re-reading of *Church Dogmatics*. Three theological heroes—the preaching skills of Alexander Whyte, the bias to God's poor of J.H. Newman and the spiritual writings of von Hügel. The influence of a Polish poet and political pragmatist Czeslaw Milosz who, during Poland's Communist years, developed a stance of what is known as *ketman*—'outer compliance but inner dissent'. In the many bitter divisions of American Christianity, Peterson found this a sometimes helpful stance.

Other pieces? Peterson's marriage to Jan is beautifully captured. The joys and strains of their relationship, and the mutual love and support that undergirded it, are movingly and honestly treated. As too is the account here of his relationship with his children. Interestingly we learn that it

was Jan who helped Eugene realise that he could either be a professor or a church pastor but probably never both. That said, after a 30-year pastorate at Christ our King Presbyterian Church (in Bel Air, Maryland) his five 'pre-retirement' years at Regent College Vancouver were deeply fulfilling.

EHP knew the niggles of the local church pastorate too: 'He spends too much time writing books, is away too often, only wants a sabbatical while he plans to leave us'. Nor were some over-impressed by his preaching it seems: '...his books are great but not so much in person'. Peterson's courage—a 2011 letter of his (reproduced in the book) contains the wisest words I have read anywhere on the human sexuality debates dividing and destroying churches still in 2021. His distaste for trolling also emerges strongly. Early in his ministry we learn how Peterson came to appreciate the grace and courage of Harry Fosdick—the focus of much bile in an early 20th century fundamentalism versus liberalism controversy: 'I think Fosdick was quite wrong in some of his conclusions, but I think we were even worse in our vilification'. Or consider this on the divisions of 21st century US Christianity: 'The schismatics cancel out any truth that they are contending for by the hate they commit in the sanctuary'.

Over 20 million copies of EHP's books have travelled into hearts and minds across the world, including those of many *bmj* readers. Here we find

helpful context on them. This is especially true of *The Message*, his remarkable whole Bible translation. *Koiné American* is a very apt description of its approach. As Collier notes of *The Message*, 'Every verse, every sentence and chapter would have been impossible without his parish ministry'. Its publication led to national and international fame, and even to becoming the supergroup U2's mentor! It is helpful to read too Peterson's usually gracious rebuttals of those either criticising his translations or, more often, asking how he dares to cheapen holy scripture with the ugliness of some Americanisms! In his final years, before his death in November 2018, EHP lived through several nightmares. These included prostate cancer, dementia, doubts 'nibbling at the edges' of faith, and an interview on single-sex marriage—Collier likens its aftermath on Peterson to 'explosive whiplash'—that went badly wrong.

There are some books that you really want to work, and read, well! This was one such for me. As Collier notes in his moving final reflections, it was the way Peterson knew God that stayed with him. That has been true for me when reading his pastoral theology for over three decades now. In the words of Timothy Dalrymple: 'If you want to remind yourself in this distressing time what it means to be wise, generous and good I cannot recommend a better book'. Agreed.

***Building On A Common Foundation; The Baptist Union of Scotland 1869-2019***

by Brian Talbot

Pickwick Publications, 2021

**Reviewer: Ruth Gouldbourne**

In this carefully structured and well researched book, Talbot gives us a detailed and comprehensive account of the story of Baptists in Scotland from the middle of the 19th century until today. He places the story in a wide context by bringing in parallel stories, so that we are never left to feel that Baptists are somehow unique or existing in a separate universe from their neighbours.

He carefully traces themes, both of joy and of struggle; the conflicts among Baptists over issues of ecumenism, for example, or the role and place of women, as well as stories of healthy and developing congregations and the common features that unite them. He explores the contacts that Baptists in Scotland—a fairly small community—develop with Baptists in other parts of the world; the links with the Scottish Baptist College and the resources that have been accessed that way, as well as the ways in which Baptists in Scotland have shared their resources with others, both in mission and mutual aid, in Europe and in other parts of the world. He highlights individuals, and rightly shows the impact of several key people. But he is also concerned to reflect on the life of the local congregations and their day to day service and witness—and explores much of this by using the

resources of the *Scottish Baptist Magazine*, and very fruitfully reflects on the ways in which Scottish Baptists talked to and among themselves, while the role of the Scottish Baptist College in helping to shape an identity, and the resistance to the college and its work, are well explored.

This is the account of a denomination in its strengths and its weaknesses, its joys and its frustrations presented accessibly and with very carefully researched detail. We can be grateful to Talbot for giving us this updated account, and helping a community to know itself and its story better.

### ***The Mission and Death of Jesus in Islam and Christianity***

by H. Mathias Zahniser  
Wipf & Stock, 2017

#### **Reviewer: Andrew Scott**

As a student minister I was asked to speak about my understanding of the life of Jesus to a group of Muslim men. After my short talk they quoted various passages from the Qur'ān and questioned me. It wasn't quite an interrogation but it was said afterwards that it was like being Daniel in the lion's den. It is now 15 years on, and local ministry has not created for me the opportunity for much interfaith dialogue. However, I set myself the ambitious challenge of reading the Qur'ān during Ramadan last year on the basis that we were in a lockdown and 4 chapters/sūras per day seemed achievable. I failed, but did eventually finish reading it by late 2020. Also, a visit to Israel two years ago (my first

taste of Arabic life), reading Kenneth Bailey's brilliant *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, and becoming friends to a Muslim family nearby has now had the combined effect of prompting me to further research why Islam cannot imagine God abandoning his messenger to the fate of a shame-laden death and why it teaches that Jesus did not die and someone else was substituted for him on the cross. What should a Christian response be?

Bailey endorses Zahniser's book by describing it as 'a mature discussion of one of the major critical issues on which Muslims and Christians differ... A book for all Christians and Muslims who seek truth and peace'. I would definitely agree. In a spirit of mutual understanding, Zahniser (Greenville College, Illinois) skilfully takes the reader on a journey through the final days of Jesus' life. The perspective of the Qur'ān is that Jesus' mission ended in divine rescue from the plot of those who would have destroyed him. Most Muslims believe he was spared crucifixion and was taken up to God. According to Christian scripture Jesus' mission ended in crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

The author stresses the common belief in the one transcendent and sovereign God as creator, merciful and eternal. Furthermore, in this book he is clearly not unaware of the distinct differences in Islamic and Christian scriptures. He believes the sonship of Jesus does not violate God's oneness. It was helpful to be reminded that the gospels were not sent down but raised up: they are not

'the very words of God', but 'documents composed by inspired humans' and it is heartening to read Zahniser comment that 'the fact that more than one scriptural story of Jesus has been preserved—and in many ancient manuscripts—supports the authenticity of their stories of Jesus...as authoritative and reliable guides for Christian faith and life'.

The author quotes extensively from both the Qur'ān and the Hebrew Bible/ New Testament. He makes the point that Muslims and Christians both hold Jesus in high regard as guidance, light, servant, prophet, strengthened with the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, astonishingly powerful, sinless, God's messenger and Messiah. Of particular interest is Zahniser's view that the Qur'ān can be 'read in a way that does not flatly contradict the Christian view of the end of Jesus' mission'.

Not being a scholar I found the first half of this 260-page book heavygoing because of its detailing of Qur'ānic verses and commentary, the traditions of Muhammad and the extensive footnoting of a breadth of classical and modern scholarly comment. Overall, the four standout moments for me were: first, learning about the unusual Gospel of Barnabas (earliest manuscripts are as late as the 16th century) which claims that Jesus was taken out of the world by God so that Judas be so changed in speech and in face to be like Jesus and crucified in Jesus' place. Zahniser describes it as 'a medieval forgery' due to its geographical anomalies, historical

anachronisms, contradictions with the Qur'ān, and concludes it was not the work of the apostle Barnabas of the New Testament but came from the medieval West. Second, being reminded of the post-resurrection and pre-Pauline spread of Christianity, as evidenced in the book of Acts and the early church in Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Rome. Third, Zahniser's firm conviction that 'the central self-revelation of God is in Jesus the Messiah, not in a book or set of documents—indispensable though they are' and his resolute insistence, based on the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (especially in the passion narratives), that Jesus explicitly predicted and embraced his death and resurrection as connected with the coming of God's kingdom and in submission to His will. He would not have taught that he must suffer and die, go through the ordeal of his betrayal, resisted resisting arrest, only then to have finally requested rescue from his destiny '...his messianic vocation included dying for others'. Fourthly, Zahniser's clear conclusion that a Christian theology of atonement differs from the Islamic belief that sin does not affect everyone and someone cannot die for the sins of others.

What part of the book caused me to underline it the most and to elicit a jubilant 'Yes!?' It was in his penultimate paragraph, when Zahniser, having made a credible case for the historicity of Jesus' death rather than it having being a 'Jesus look-alike' that was crucified, asks the rhetorical question: 'how could a person with the integrity

both Muslims and Christians believe Jesus exhibited allow someone else to die for him—to die in his place—when he had made it clear that his death was certain and would be vindicated?’ Indeed!

In conclusion, this book (written as part of a Faith Meets Faith Series) would be a challenging and helpful read for anyone who is interested and involved in interfaith dialogue. It recognises that conversations can be done in such a way as to be respectful, yet not fudge the ‘hard talk’ of the fundamental differences between Islam and Christianity about the kind of Messiah Jesus was and is.

***Renewing a modern denomination: a study of Baptist institutional life in the 1990s***

by Andy Goodliff  
Pickwick, 2020

***Reviewer: Stephen Copson***

Andy Goodliff’s thesis is that in the 1980s and into the 1990s, two strands of thinking can be observed that addressed invigoration of Baptist life in the face of concerns about numerical decline and the challenge to Baptist identity. One tended to champion innovation: new songs, new worship styles, new churches, new leadership and new networks. This ‘Stream A’ approximates to the Mainstream group. Andy Goodliff uses Nigel Wright as a representative conversation partner.

‘Stream B’ sought primarily for a fresh recovery and exploration of Baptist

thinking, and for this he identifies Paul Fiddes. This stream held among others to a ‘high Baptist churchmanship’, emphasised collaborative endeavour as an outworking of the nature of the trinitarian God, and engaged in dialogue as one denomination among other denominations and world communions—the ecclesial dimension. Both streams drew upon a history of evangelical commitment. Both drew upon aspects of Baptist life that had been overlooked—for Stream A, mission; and for Stream B, covenant. The trajectory led A to identify with a broader evangelicalism and B to explore Baptist engagement with the catholic nature of Christian witness. Covenant became different things to different people. To one it became the unifying catchphrase for a people joined in mission; to the other a theological reality that shapes basic thinking about the nature and purpose of the gathered community.

Goodliff outlines how one stream argued the case to shake things up and wished to see ‘their people’ in positions of significance in the Union structures, as indeed happened. The other stream probed what it meant to be Baptist, and how the Union—including Council and Assembly—could be more than functional. But their appeal was neither so well circulated, supported nor widely discussed. With the emphasis on mission and the importance of the local, the author notes that it was easier to ask what one could do for the missionary God rather than ask who is

this missionary God. A strategy of activism outweighed a commitment to explore. If B seemed academic talk, Stream A would be constantly open to the lure of the Next Big Idea. Goodliff is sensitive to the desire of both streams to seek renewal, but in showing how Stream A became embedded in the structures, he illustrates how the Union came to be more a vehicle simply for delivering support for the mission of local churches, with less emphasis on its corporate significance.

In 2021 the balance between local, regional and national is still unsettled and at times unsettling. Indeed, the Mainstream pioneers might be surprised that 40 years later their questions about change and relevance are addressed to the current structures of the Union, ones that have largely developed along the lines advocated by Mainstream. *Semper reformanda?*

Andy Goodliff suggests that in choosing not to engage with Stream B, an opportunity has been missed (lost?) to see a different sort of renewal in the Baptist Union. The 1990s laid the foundation for the shift towards associations and the relative downplaying of the Union, where there can be a disconnect of relationship between the national body, associations and local churches. Hence the need for the rallying cry to be a covenant people—even if in title the strong bond of Union has been passed over for the rather anodyne Baptists Together. Has too little been

consciously invested in encouraging people with the abilities to reflect theologically and ecclesialogically? Probably. Baptists have always been better pragmatists than thinkers.

There is a hint that Stream A was not always impervious to the temptation to equate effectiveness with numerical growth (not a new feature of Baptist life nor broader evangelicalism) and that the Union's purpose was to enable churches to deliver more 'bums on seats'. Ministers of the period may recall the 'how many baptisms have you had?' conversations at ministers' meetings.

This is not a tale of decline, although Andy Goodliff notes, by the end of the period in question, numerically the best that could be said was that the denomination had not slimmed to the same extent as others. Could it have been otherwise?

This is an admirable book that should be read. It identifies the faultlines that still beguile us today: 'What is the Union?', 'Union and Association' and 'Theology versus Pragmatism'.

***The Joyful Environmentalist: How to Practice Without Preaching***

by Isabel Losada

London: Watkins, 2020

***Reviewer: Sally Nelson***

When I was about 11 I had to initiate a school science project on pollution. I asked my dad to start the car while I held some kitchen towel over the exhaust for 30 seconds. I wrote

triumphantly in my project report that the paper turned black in a circle over the exhaust because of the car's emissions. My science teacher annoyingly (and rightly!) asked whether it got blacker if I held the paper for longer—and of course, I hadn't thought of that. However, none of us (the teacher, my dad, or me) asked the more important question: would we use the car less now we knew how dirty it was? I suppose we felt one family's emissions were just that—minimal in the face of the problem.

This book by Isabel Losada was seriously good to read over the summer, because it is all about doing something with our environmental anxieties, not just knowing about them and then qualifying our responses because by ourselves we cannot make much difference. Losada writes persuasively and offers examples of multiple small actions we can take: 'Don't be discouraged by people saying your actions are just a drop in the ocean. What's an ocean except millions upon millions of drops?...We are many. We are millions.' I loved this. It is the first environmental book I have read that doesn't make me feel pathetic. I am allowed to enjoy my life and do small 'right' things that will not, on their own, change the world. Except they do: I am doing something, taking action, and maybe others will, too.

The book could be read in bits and even in any order (how amazing is that?). Some chapters are longer

narratives about Losada's experiences of tree planting in Scotland, plastic forks in cafes, joining a protest, or discussing smart meters and insulation. Others are short and tell you useful stuff about how to make vegan fat balls for your garden birds—when, asks Losada, did birds start eating sheep and cows (suet)? Good point.

I love the way, in the narrative material, that she includes the people around her so they become allies (a truly missional strategy!), and challenges those who cannot 'see'. Principles matter. Not everything is about the bottom line, even if it seems silly—and how (and by whom) is silliness evaluated, anyway? Too often it is on the basis of pragmatism and not joy, exuberance, and sheer gratitude to God for this wonderful Earth.

If you want a feel-good book that will change your life for the greener, read this. Some of it is annoying, but most of it makes me say: Hallelujah!

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**Writing reviews: if you would like to review for bmj, please contact Mike Peat on [mike.peat@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:mike.peat@bristol.ac.uk) and let him know your areas of interest.**