

Commentary

SUMMER 2016

The key for developing great preaching is in the relationship between preacher and people, says Mike Ovey
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Oak Hill
College

Changing times, changing me



Mike Ovey introduces this edition of *Commentary* by tracing the impact of change, good and bad, on our times, our society and institutions, and on ourselves

What do you make of the catchphrase ‘The times are changed and we ourselves are changed in them’? Its Latin form – if you want a little class – is *tempora mutantur nos et mutamur in illis*.

It’s associated with the Roman poet Ovid, partly because one of his great works was *Metamorphoses*, in which humans have their forms changed in different Greek and Roman myths. The huge and none-too-subtle lurking question is whether I am still me after I have been changed by the gods into a hunting-dog or whatever. And the point of the catchphrase gets sharper still when I ask if I am still me when everything around me has changed.

The reason why this matters so much is that our modern, culturally western, late capitalist world doesn’t just change fast – although that is true – but the changes are so varied in type.

Change can be in some senses quite predictable. I cannot run 100 meters as fast as I could when I was 14 (12.6 seconds, if you’re interested). And some of those ‘stage of life’ changes are predictable but also painful and demanding – as witness

Fiona Gibson’s thoughts in this edition of *Commentary* (page 8), on changing from being a daughter to no longer being a daughter after her mother’s death.

Some changes are highly unpredictable and (by most) unforeseen. The current hot topic of whether we have changed to a post-gender culture has surfaced extraordinarily quickly in some respects. Kirsty Birkett’s piece (page 4) on the claim there is an end to gender highlights how some such cultural changes are ambiguous and dangerous. They are dangerous because of the changes made to deep-rooted institutions given by God, and ambiguous because one has to ask whether such change is not just deceptive change, where underlying realities in fact cannot be changed but we pretend they are.

Some changes are much more positive and we are active agents in them. We want to make ourselves and alter ourselves by those changes, as David Shaw reflects on in his article, ‘Raising our game’ (page 11) – changing ourselves and each other to be better equipped as Christ’s servants. Michael Baughen similarly looks back to some of the great figures and principles of his time at Oak Hill (page 32) and how they instilled positive change in preaching.

Some change may be important, but turns out to be less important than we might think in eternal terms. I had a painful moment of recognition reading Ray Porter’s article, ‘Dictatorship or democracy?’ (page 13) as he described the

fall of the dictatorial Suharto in Indonesia and the hopes that accompanied it. That welcome political change did not change the underlying realities of human sin and the need for Christ, nor the reality that God's people can suffer in more liberal and democratic regimes as well as autocratic ones.

So, all kinds of changes, and as the catchphrase puts it, you and I will be changed ourselves along with the changes. I admire the humility of admitting that changing times are likely to change me too. It recognises my limitations and my frailties as a human creature. But it also makes me ask what I am in the process of becoming. And here is one of the

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challenges of change: I cannot assume all change is for the worse; of course I can improve my knowledge or amend my behaviour. That is one of the points of David Shaw's article and in part Matthew Barrett's, too (page 35). But equally I cannot assume that all change is for the better, which is a peculiar temptation for a technologically innovative society.

Perhaps I need to keep on asking not just what am I becoming, but who is changing me. Are the changes I see in myself, my opinion, my faith, my life, really little more than the result of response to changes the world wants to make and is itself undergoing? Or are the changes in my life more the result of heeding the word of a God who does not himself change but who wants to change me? Who is changing me?

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The end of gender?

In western culture, the differences between male and female have been declared to be fluid and unstable. Gender is starting to be seen as a matter of choice and a matter of change. Kirsty Birkett surveys the unfamiliar gender world we now live in and asks: How did we get here?



In the year 2000 I started giving talks on gender issues, based on research I had been doing in feminism. At the time I would speak of the 'the end' of feminism, meaning, the logical conclusion of feminist thinking. For a long time, I had thought that the end of feminism, given the trajectory of the feminist movement, was lesbianism. After all, this is what feminists themselves had argued from the seventies onwards.

In 1979 the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group released a statement entitled 'Political Lesbianism: the Case against Heterosexuality'. It argued that all feminists should be lesbians, because 'it is specifically through sexuality that fundamental oppression, that of men over women, is maintained'. The statement caused huge controversy at the time, but for many made sense: how can women ever be free if they maintain these fundamental ties to their oppressors?

By the end of the 20th century, however, it had become clear that this was not where the mainstream feminist debate was going. By then, the big debate was over the even more fundamental question of 'what is woman?' Essentialists argued that there is an 'essential' nature to being woman, and that essential nature is the thing that feminism should recover – womanhood without the repression of patriarchy. It was the philosophy that drove the search for woman's voice, in the literature and art of women, in women's studies.

However, essentialism was challenged by constructivism, which argued that the concept of essence itself is a social construction. 'Woman' is a social category that has been created. It does not reflect a fixed reality. Harvard scholar Jane Flax famously wrote in 1987 that 'gender can no longer be treated as a single, natural fact,' describing it as 'the single most important advance in feminist theory.' She argued instead that gender is a 'social relation'. To speak of 'woman' as a real category is to miss the point. 'None of us can speak for "woman" because no such person exists except within a specific set of (already gendered) relations'.

At the time, as I spoke to audiences largely unfamiliar with academic feminism, such statements were met with incredulity. How could anyone doubt that there are basic,

essential differences between male and female? The fact that there are boy-types and girl-types is one of the first things that humans identify about themselves.

However, the constructivists had a logical point. If you don't have privileged information from an outside source, if you only have the brute existence of human beings, how can you say that there is some essential difference between women and men? It can't rest on physicality. After all, we

TRANSGENDER

There are certainly those who feel that their inner, perceived gender is different from their body's gender, and that this is not a choice, but essential to them. It might be thought that the new acceptance of gender fluidity is therefore a liberation for them – and indeed, in the new accessibility of surgery and social acceptance, it is.

But there is a deeper problem. Transgender people are usually those to whom gender matters enormously (as indeed, it does to most people). How sympathetic, then, is a philosophy which says that gender does not matter?

don't say that there is an essential difference between tall people and short people, or red-haired and black-haired people. We specifically *reject* that there is any essential difference between people of different skin colour. Why pick reproductive organs as an absolutely, essential, defining characteristic?

Without an external authority, it is, strictly speaking, impossible to define 'man' and 'woman'; and this is what (for instance) Jane Flax rejects: "There is no force or reality "outside" our social relations and activity... that will rescue us from partiality and differences'. If all we can point to in



Above: Gay pride parade in Portland, Oregon, 2009.
Photo: Zervas <http://flic.kr/p/6wwf3q>

order to assert some essential difference between men and women is reproductive role, then this is not good enough. It is just another physical difference, and it can be treated as non-essential and trivial, just as hair colour can. Who knows, sooner or later it might be as easy to change as hair colour. We may have a 'gut feeling' that the difference between men and women is something more profound than this – but that 'gut feeling' could just be social conditioning.

So, I predicted, the end of feminism – its logical outcome – was not likely to be lesbianism, which after all still asserts that there is a difference between men and women, and that women are to be preferred. Rather, the end of feminism was likely to be the disappearance of gender altogether. But I did not expect to be proved so right, so soon.

We find ourselves now in a world where gender is declared to be fluid and unstable; a matter of choice, a matter of

The loss of gender won't solve the problem of oppression. The solution to gender-based oppression is not to remove gender; those who wish to be oppressive will simply find some other category to stigmatise as 'other'. The solution is genuine acceptance of the good differences between us

change, and nothing that can be declared one way or the other by an outside authority, including physicality. It is a world in which, increasingly, gender does not matter. It does not define anything essential about a person; it is not necessarily binary, and it is not a given. People are not bound to a specific gender, even by their own bodies.

How did this happen? How could it be that something, seen as basic to humanity for the whole of human history, could be overturned so thoroughly, in a few decades? It is certainly not just the influence of feminism, although feminist theory in its strong constructivist arguments has had its effects; the academic never stays within the ivory tower.

Queer theory and postmodernism have also contributed. The general enlightenment tendency to deny any outside authority the right to define us has culminated in humans claiming the absolute right to define themselves. This, however, can only come at a concurrent price; the loss of what we might have learned from a true outside source of information. We claim the ability to know all things for ourselves, but that does not mean we will achieve it.

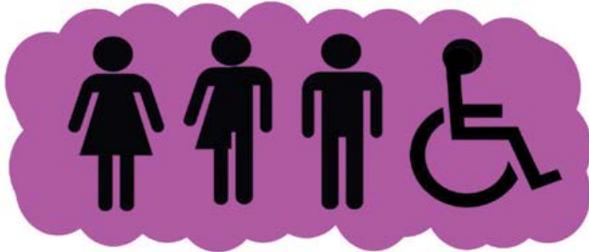
I predicted that the logical end of feminism was to reach the point of saying that there is no difference between men

★ RESTROOM ★



“EVERYBODY DO YOUR THING”

★ RESTROOM ★



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*Above: Gender neutral bathroom sign in Washington DC.
Image: tedeytan <http://flic.kr/p/BiKkQU>*

and women. We are all autonomous individuals who declare for ourselves who we are. I did not really want to be right. However, I was not all right.

When I made my prediction, I must admit it was for shock value as much as anything. I gave my predictions as a warning. I assumed, naively, I suppose, that the loss of gender, of our being as man and woman, would be recognised as a *bad* thing. As losing something basic to our

identities as human beings. I hoped, perhaps even expected, that people would not go there. Not that it would be embraced wholeheartedly; not within my lifetime, anyway.

The loss of gender is bad; what a confusing, unsatisfying and bland world, without what constitutes so much of the drama and joy of being human. Moreover, it will not solve the problem of oppression. The solution to gender-based oppression is not to remove gender; those who wish to be oppressive will simply find some other category to stigmatise as 'other'. The solution is genuine acceptance of the good differences between us.

There is so much to be lost if gender no longer exists. This, indeed, is the 'end' of feminism. It is the end not just in the logical sense, but in the sense of goal and perhaps even existence. What is the place of arguing for women's rights if women no longer exist? If we cannot actually identify anyone as 'woman'? Where is girlpower, sisterhood, the woman's voice?

Nonetheless, men and women will still exist. These actually are categories that are built into creation itself, even if in our fallen state we confuse them with other, more trivial, differences between people. God has made us male and female, and he has declared that this is a basic pattern of humanity from his earliest words to us.

There is a reason why human society has always recognised this basic division. It is not just another trivial physical difference, no more important than hair colour. It is something fundamental to human being, and it is not just because our survival as reproductive beings depends upon it. We know it is fundamental, because there *is* an outside authority, who has declared it.

Because this is something fundamental to humanity, it will not disappear. However, we will no doubt do a very good job of making people extremely insecure about their reality. Without understanding who we are and how we are to relate to one another, we are likely to experience social chaos. We need to keep providing the alternative.

Kirsty Birkett lectures in doctrine, philosophy and ethics at Oak Hill

Mourning in the midst of ministry



When Fiona Gibson's mother died recently, she had to learn how to mourn in the midst of a busy public ministry. She shares here the lessons she learned

'Right up until the end your Mum knew what was what, and she loved Jesus. This is good.' I smiled and nodded as one of my mother's carers came and gave me her condolences.

A few moments before, I had been into my mother's room. She had died that morning, and I'd rushed down by train from my family holiday in Northumberland in answer to the tearful but professional phone call of the nurse in charge. I stood there in that tiny room, the place that been her whole world for the past few months as her physical health and strength failed, and her world shrunk, and I looked down at her body.

'Well done, good and faithful servant. You fought the good fight. You finished the race. You kept the faith. Now there is in store for you the crown of righteousness.'

I wasn't talking to her. I knew she was already, consciously, in the presence of the Lord who had been the touchstone of her whole life, more fully alive than she'd ever been. It was more a need in me to make a final declaration of some sort. To acknowledge the rupture that had just happened in the

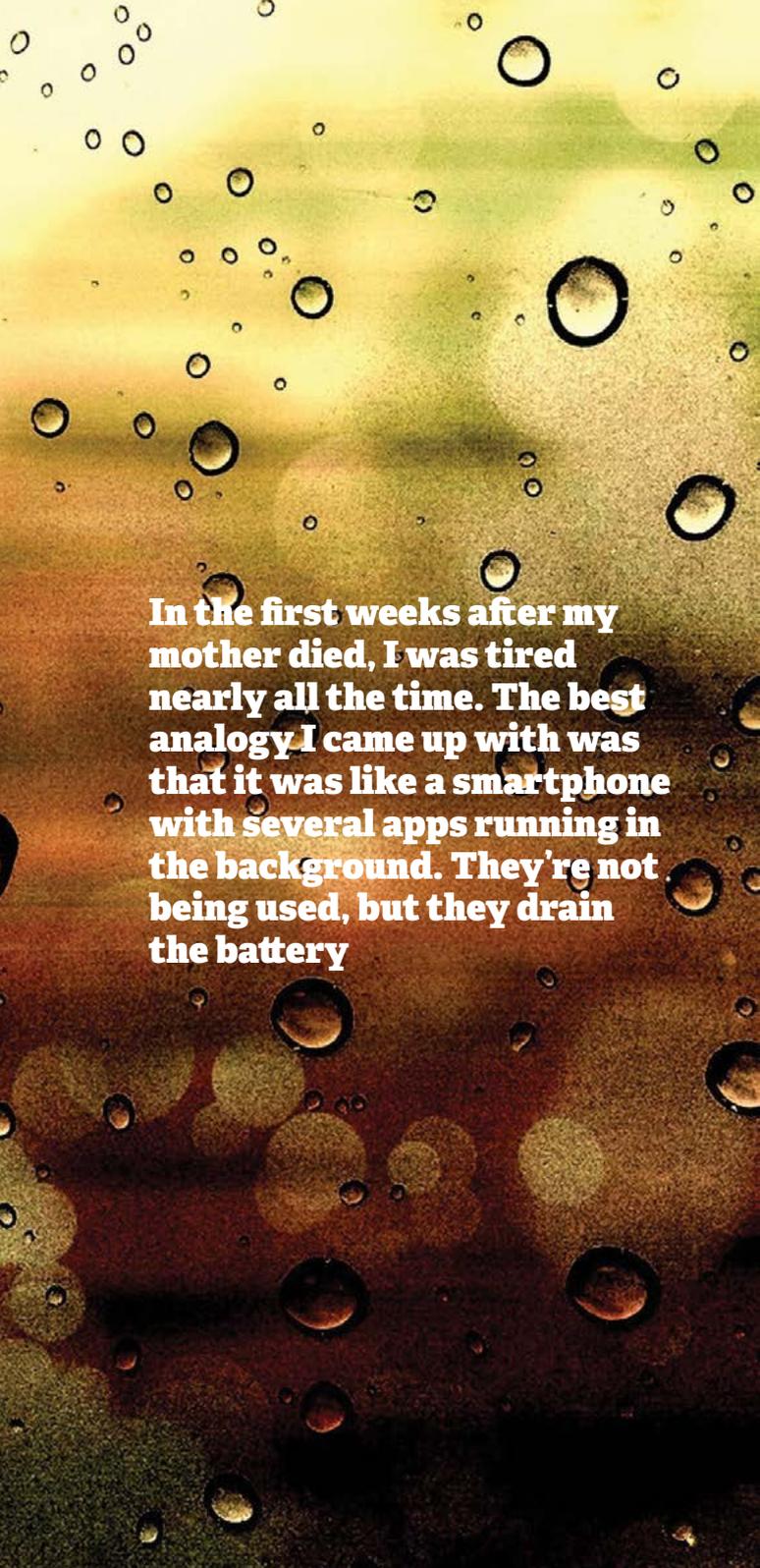
fabric of my life. To honour her life and faith.

Mum and I had always been very close. My father had died when I was a toddler, and I was their only child, so it was just the two of us. And now she was gone, and I had to learn to make a whole series of adjustments, and make them while being vicar of three busy parishes. That added an extra dimension, because somehow my private grief was public property.

For her, all I felt was joy, and relief that the physical suffering she'd known since a massive stroke two years previously was over, and she was with God. Her life since the stroke had been so hard in so many ways. And true to her brave and godly character, refined through the suffering of young widowhood, while she mourned her old life, she never complained about the new one. She carried on trusting her Lord.

So how could I be anything but joyful for her? But for me? Ah, that was different.

I had to learn to re-adjust. In our language, we don't have a word for an adult orphan. One evening a few weeks after my mother died, I looked across at my husband and said, 'I don't have any parents.' He looked back at me, carefully (it's not easy being the spouse of someone who's just been bereaved). 'I'm not about to burst into tears,' I said. 'It's just odd. I'm not a daughter any more. That's strange.'



In the first weeks after my mother died, I was tired nearly all the time. The best analogy I came up with was that it was like a smartphone with several apps running in the background. They're not being used, but they drain the battery

That's one thing about bereavement. You feel disjointed sometimes. You have to work out how the pieces of your life, which have just been thrown up in the air and haven't formed their new pattern yet, will come together. I'm not a daughter any more. Some people who are bereaved are not a husband any more, or not a mother or father whose child is with them any more. That's odd, and it takes time to work out what that means.

It's a bit like a hole in a tooth. You probe it occasionally with your tongue to work out what's missing, or how jagged it is, or how much it hurts. You know you will heal. You know you are still you, and God is still God, but something has changed fundamentally, even though only for a 'little while', and you need to work out what that means.

One person commented that when you lose your last surviving parent, even if you're an adult, even if you have children of your own, even if you didn't get on with them, even if they'd become so frail and dependent that you were more of the 'parent' than they were, somehow, when your last surviving parent dies, you will have moments of feeling like an abandoned child. Yes. And at those moments I've wept again for a moment, and metaphorically run to my heavenly Father again to be comforted.

So there's the re-adjusting.

Then there's the exhaustion. Not just because there's so much to organise (though there is). Not just because there are so many people to tell (though there are). Just because grief is tiring.

In the first weeks after my mother died, I was tired nearly all the time. The best analogy I came up with was that it was like a smartphone with several apps running in the background. They're not being used, but they drain the battery. Grief's a bit like that; at least it was for me. I wasn't consciously thinking about my mother all the time. I was doing all the things I normally did, but I was so much

Photo: DeeAshley <http://flic.kr/p/aAvBve>

more tired, because the 'Grief App' was running in the background, draining energy.

Once I recognised that, I was able – with the help of my excellent churchwardens – to make a few adjustments to my diary. I didn't stop working altogether (although I was offered as much time as I needed by my Bishop and Archdeacon), but I did rearrange a few things. For example, a potentially contentious meeting or two were postponed for a few weeks, because I didn't have the extra energy required to do them. The 'normal' business of running three parishes carried on, but the more demanding things were postponed.

Then there was the question of taking funerals. This is something that bereaved people in other walks of life don't have to face. A week after my mother died I was called to the bedside of a dying parishioner, to pray with him and comfort his family. I went. I didn't tell them my mother had just died, because that moment was about them and their story, not me and mine. God gave me the strength to minister to them. But afterwards I went for a walk, to process it all, before I went back to my desk and the emails.

I was nervous about the first funeral after she died, but thankfully it was fine – probably because it was in a different place and, again, this was their story, not mine. But I couldn't help thinking back to her funeral and remembering. I think that's normal for bereaved clergy.

There are still moments of sadness, and there probably will be until resurrection and reunion day. Each time you say another 'goodbye', each time you deal with some more paperwork, or sort out some belongings, the jab of grief can stab again. But bereavement doesn't become your defining reality.

My mother's death, though sad for me, wasn't tragic. She had lived a long life, full of faith and love, and slipped away quietly in her bed in her room in the nursing home to go home to her Father. The Puritans would have called it a 'good death'.

But may I tentatively, recognising that each bereavement is different, offer some things I've learnt as I've grieved, and grieved in public ministry?

First, expect it to take a while to re-adjust. Yes, our primary identity is first and always adopted and redeemed child of God. No bereavement changes that. But learning to live with our 'new normal' still takes time.

Second, expect to be tired a lot of the time. The Grief App can drain our batteries. Rearrange more challenging things if you can.

Third, when helping other bereaved families, remember that this is their story, not ours, and we're there to help them at that moment. But don't be afraid to ask another minister to take the funeral if you can't face it. Allow time for 're-entry' after the funeral before you do something else.

Fourth, take any bereavement leave when it works best for you. I carried on working up until the day of my mother's funeral, but took a few days off after that, because that's when I knew I'd feel it more keenly, and need the space.

Finally, make some moments in your diary for remembrance. I was invited back to my curacy church for their annual bereavement service, because the vicar knew I'd need one I could go to as a daughter, not as a vicar. A friend from another culture told me about their tradition of marking the fortieth day after the person's death as a way of remembering, and acknowledging the end of a formal mourning period. So I chose that as the day I took down all the sympathy cards, and went through old photo albums with my children. Those moments help.

I'm living with my new normal, and I'm full of hope as I look forward to resurrection and reunion. God was so very kind in the way he took my mother home, gently taking down her earthly tent and leading her to her eternal house in the heavens.* For that, and for every memory of her, I give him thanks.

*Fiona Gibson is the vicar of the parishes of Willington, Moggerhanger and Cople, Bedfordshire. * William Romaine, quoted in Sharon James, The Dawn of Heaven Breaks (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2007), p. 42*

Raising our game

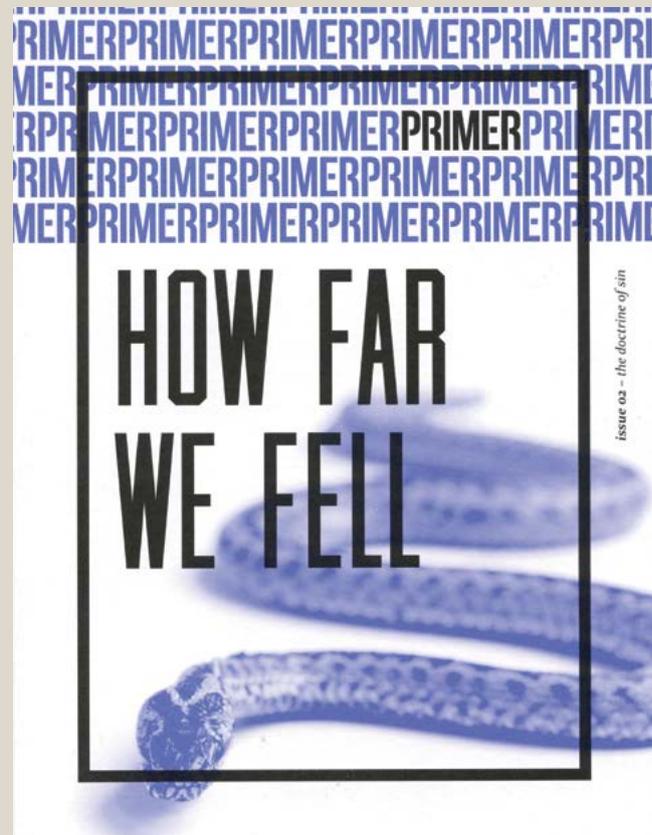


Some issues can't be explored adequately in a tweet of 140 characters, or even in a blog post. That's why the FIEC is publishing Primer, which provides good theological resources for church leaders. David Shaw, its editor, explains

In the last issue of *Commentary*, I reviewed a couple of books about pastor-theologians. One of the authors, Gerald Hiestand, wrote a line in an article elsewhere that has stayed with me: 'The theological, gospel integrity of the Christian community will never rise above the level of her pastors.'

For that reason, Hiestand makes the case that the church, and especially its leadership, needs theological resources produced by and for the church, with the realities and complexities of pastoral ministry in view.

These kinds of resources are not always easy to come by. On the one side, academic theology is often disconnected from the church and its mission. On the other, church leaders are under immense pressure



to cope with all the managerial and administrative demands of their work and struggle to carve out time to find – let alone to read – materials that will equip them to give theological leadership to their churches.

In light of all this, I'd love to introduce you to a new resource called *Primer*. In each issue of *Primer*, we take one pressing topic and over the course of 80 pages or so we offer a kind of theological digest; summarising contemporary debate, highlighting the best contemporary resources, and showing how a better appreciation of the topic shapes pastoral ministry.

One particular feature is that in every issue we re-publish a classic historical text from church history on the topic. We want to help pastors draw down the treasures of church history, but we also know those texts can be intimidating. For that reason, we ask someone to annotate each historical text, putting it in context, explaining tricky bits, and reflecting on its significance for today.

To give one example of how *Primer* looks in practice, the second issue (May 2016) is called, 'How Far We Fell', and tackles the doctrine of sin:

- We gave Graham Beynon a pile of books recently published on the topic and asked him to juice them for us, discussing the various ways in which they define the essence of sin.
- Then we asked Tim Ward to reflect on how we customarily preach sin. He considers the dominant models we use

to explain sin to unbelievers (idolatry and rebellion), as well as asking how well our preaching to believers compares to the New Testament's understanding of their ongoing relationship to sin.

■ Next we reprint a classic passage from Calvin's *Institutes* on the extent of human sinfulness. It's a fantastic passage that takes us into the depths of the human condition in a way that leads us to God's grace as the only possible remedy. To help that medicine go down, Mark Troughton, a serving pastor, annotates the text for us.

Beyond that, three articles have a more practical focus:

- Kirsten Birkett explores addiction and its relationship to sin from both a medical and theological perspective (looking at it through the lens of Augustine's account of sin).
- Next, John Frame gives short, sharp answers to some FAQs about sin in the Christian life. For example: Why do we confess sin if we're forgiven? How does God feel about us when we sin?
- And finally, I've written on how we can communicate sin in a culture of entitlement and victimhood.

David Shaw is the editor of Primer and lectures part-time at Oak Hill in New Testament and Greek

MORE ON PRIMER

Primer is published by FIEC twice a year in May and November.

Issue 01 True to His Word (Nov 2015)

Covers the doctrine of scripture, with contributions from John Stevens, Fred Zaspel, and BB Warfield

Issue 03 (Nov 2016)

Will address the issue of gender and sexuality with contributions from Sam Allberry, Sharon James, Ed Shaw, and Alastair Roberts

Primer is available from The Good Book Company (thegoodbook.co.uk) and costs £4.99. You can follow *Primer* @PrimerHQ on Twitter and find discussion resources at PrimerHQ.com.

Dictatorship or democracy?



What is the relationship between the gospel, democracy and dictatorship? Ray Porter, who witnessed at first hand the fall of the military dictatorship in Indonesia in 1998, explores the issues of church and state

Michael Wilcock, in his commentary on Revelation 13, has the following sentences: 'Even the liberal democracies – perhaps they most of all – lead men to put their faith in the beast by the miracle of his resurrection. Every true liberal knows that John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in its grave, but his soul goes marching on. Fear no apparent death-wound, for good sense and democracy and the human spirit can never finally be put down.'

Photo: Steven Vance <http://flic.kr/p/9wv1Ux>



The forces of President Assad are beginning to push back the advances of Daesh (ISIS) and hopes of any rise of democracy in Syria seems to be dashed for the immediate future. In America, the nature of democracy is being displayed as they move through the primaries and the rest of the world waits to see whether a President Trump will emerge by the end of the year. In Britain, too, democracy has affected our futures for good or ill as we voted on whether to remain in or to leave the EU. Should we believe that democracy is the will of God for every nation?

Winston Churchill had some interesting remarks about democracy. Speaking in 1947, he remarked, 'It has been said

Today, many Christians do not live in a democracy, and historically this has also been the case. Robert Jewett relates his meeting with students in Beijing where he had been lecturing on the Book of Romans. They were not happy living under the current dictatorship, but they said that all the alternatives appeared to be worse. It was the lesser of evils. Jewett says that this made him realise that in writing on Romans chapter 13 in his Fortress Press commentary of 2007, he had overlooked the question of what practical alternatives there were for Paul to the hegemony of the Roman Emperor. He remedied this in his later *Short Commentary* (of 2013), where he suggests that for Paul the

Since Saddam's fall, only the planting of churches among the Kurds in the north of the country has advanced. In much of the Middle East, the attempts to bring in democracy has meant the decline, destruction and departure of Christian communities that could trace their origins back almost to the apostles

that democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' Another remark often attributed to him, but for which there seems to be no source, is, 'The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter'.

Despite such views, since the defeat of Nazi Germany, Western nations have based much of their foreign policy on the concept that democracy is the best form of government and that all nations should embrace it. It is broadly accepted that democracy is congenial to Christianity, but as the Wilcock quote points out, a belief in democracy can become the worship of the beast when we put it above or level with our belief in Jesus Christ.

only alternative to an acceptance of Roman rule would have been to follow Jewish zealots in their attempt to overthrow Rome and establish a theocracy.

He notes how in various quotations from Isaiah, Paul leaves out terms that could be interpreted as advancing Zion's rule over the nations. Paul's counter-cultural reaction to those imperial claims is to be seen in his assertion that the establishment of the *Pax Romana* was to be attributed to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, rather than to any Roman deities or prowess.

We lived for 14 years under a military dictatorship in Indonesia. Like many, we rejoiced when on Ascension Day in 1998, a public holiday, President Suharto fell from power.

The oppression of tight controls that had permeated every aspect of life, and the corruption that accompanied it, might now end. The designating of the new era as a time of reformation seemed promising. But then, with controls removed, the pressures of sectarianism, coupled with the rise of Al Qaeda, led to the active persecution of the church. Thousands of Christians died. Areas where Christians and Muslims had lived peacefully side-by-side for generations were now hostile to each other.

Few would want to go back to the Suharto era, but that was a period when the churches could operate and preach the gospel in relative peace. At the beginning of the period, thousands of conversions took place. Christians in Syria have generally been supportive of the Assad regime, just as their neighbours in Iraq saw Saddam's rule as a time when the churches were protected.

Since Saddam's fall, only the planting of churches among the Kurds in the north of the country has advanced. In much of the Middle East, the attempts to bring in democracy has meant the decline, destruction and departure of Christian communities that could trace their origins back almost to the apostles.

Within the Old Testament, we meet prophets who interpret events in terms of God's purposes. We have no such leader writers in today's media. We do, however, have a clear statement that Jesus, the risen and ascended Saviour, has been given all authority in heaven and earth. It is on that basis that he instructs the Twelve to make disciples of all nations. We have the promise that he will build his church, but no promise that he will establish democracy.

The assertion of Romans 13 that rulers are appointed by God was written at a time when Nero was Emperor of Rome. It is a clear indication that God's sovereign establishment of governments and our desire for democratic or benevolent governance do not always coincide. Even when the state becomes a persecutor of the church, it is not an indication that God has abrogated his controlling rule over the nations. I once chaired a meeting at which Bishop Mouneer Anis was speaker. He was questioned about the persecution of Christians in Egypt. He responded that at that time

persecution was slight and then added: 'I do not see that in England, where there is no persecution, the church is any more healthy as a result.'

God does not have one pattern of dealing with the nations. No one would choose to live under a harsh dictatorship rather than the freedoms of democracy. We should not draw a false conclusion that we should look at the setting up of a dictatorship in the UK for the advancement of the church. Our brothers and sisters elsewhere face the task of witnessing under such circumstances, but we have the different challenge – of consistent Christian discipleship and witness in liberty. Paul establishes (in 1 Corinthians 7:20-22) the principle that we should live in the situation in which we were converted.

The dilemma of the Chinese students mentioned above has no easy solution. Rebellion against the powers that be has no guarantee of producing a better situation. In fact, the instability and chaos that might result may produce a popular tyranny that has worse effects than any dictatorship.

We have a duty to pray for God to establish justice on the earth. We can cry out to him for changes of regime, but there is no biblical mandate to change it ourselves. David was very careful not to seize the throne from King Saul. The weapons of our warfare are not those of the world. The kingdom that we look for is not one that will be brought in by political power, but by the Spirit of God transforming the hearts and lives of the nations by the gospel. The kingdom of Jesus is still not of this world.

We go back to the mandate that Jesus left with his disciples. The authority to change national rulers is in his hands. To us has been given the task of making the nations into disciples, not democrats. The awful condition of the nations of the world, whether dictatorships or democracies, calls us to dedicate our lives to that task wherever God gives us the opportunity to live and serve.

Ray Porter is tutor in World Mission Studies at Oak Hill

Three easy pieces



Mike Ovey has been writing widely in the past 18 months, with articles commenting on theology, ethics, news stories and the wider culture.

We're reproducing three of these pieces over the next few pages, and they're characteristically wide-ranging. The first (on the opposite page) is theological, and is followed by a short piece on the secret trial in the case of Malala Yousafzai (page 20), and finally an article on the relationship between preachers and their congregations (page 22).

'They come out of a conviction that the Word of God addresses every area of life,' says Mike. 'They're about the sufficiency of God's word in a complex world.'



The Compulsory Ignorance Act

Mike Ovey examines modern claims that today's hot-issue biblical passages are unclear, and therefore we must be content not to know. Do these claims constitute a 'Compulsory Ignorance Act'?

Earlier this year, I found myself lured from the secure theological fastnesses of north London to a consultation on one of the hot topics of our day. One delegate listened to the contributions about what relevant biblical passages meant and then commented that s/he still did not know what the passages meant and the explanations offered just didn't do it for him/her. The passages were unclear.

I was surprised in one way, because I thought the explanations had been nothing if not clear. Unwelcome, very possibly, but not unclear. The response, though, was not a disagreement in the sense of offering an alternative explanation which should be preferred for better reasons. This was not direct disagreement, but something much more oblique. It was a disagreement that took the form of declaring that the passages were not clear.

Left: St Hilary depicted in a stained glass window in St Maurice in Fribourg, Switzerland. Photo: Lawrence OP <http://flic.kr/p/C9KKTr>

Of course, in another way this is no longer a surprising response to attempts to explain passages from the Bible, or to synthesise them. Over the years one has heard it in regard to God's knowledge of the future, predestination, God changing his mind, same-sex marriage, the role of women, etc. The Bible is unclear, it is said, and so we must be content not to know. We must be ignorant. In that sense, I think we are observing an argumentative move that is perhaps increasingly common.

In this article, I want to argue that the claim to be ignorant on the grounds that something is unclear is actually quite ambitious. More than that, it can be an imperious claim that exercises power over others without, at times, the inconvenience of reasoned argument. No wonder it is so popular.

Please note, I am not suggesting this is always the case and that every claim of unclarity is manipulative and power-driven, but it is worth thinking through how such claims can be exactly that.

By way of illustration, take the pro-Arian creed announced at Sirmium in AD 357, which marked a new phase in the Arian controversy, as Arian opposition to Nicene trinitarian theology became more overt. For our purposes, the relevant part of the creed comes just after it outlines a prohibition on using the terms *homoousios* (one and the same substance) or *homoiousios* (of a similar substance). The creed states:

Nor ought any exposition to be made of them [the terms homoousios and homoiousios] for the reason and consideration that they are not contained in the divine Scriptures, and that they are above man's understanding, nor can any man declare the birth of the Son, of whom it is written, Who shall declare His generation? For it is plain that only the Father knows how He begot the Son, and the Son how He was begotten of the Father.

Does this not sound very pious and indeed very evangelical, to avoid using terms that are not in the Bible, and to remember that since the generation of the Son is too wonderful to declare (*enarrare*), no one should declare (*enarrare*) it? In other words, it is not clear and we do not know, so we should not speak of the generation of the Son. How would you have reacted to this if I had not already primed you that Sirmium 357 was 'pro-Arian'? I suspect that many of us would be struck by what could be a humble, pious caution in speaking of God.

Yet Hilary of Poitiers, Athanasius of Alexandria, and other supporters of the view that the Son is truly a son hit the roof over Sirmium 357. Hilary describes it as *blasphemia*, blasphemy. Why does a profession of ignorance generate such an extreme reaction? Among other reasons, in Hilary's case, precisely because of the claim of ignorance.

Hilary decodes the claims of Sirmium 357 for us. First, there was the element of compulsion. For him this was an *ignorantiae decretum* – a law of ignorance, aptly translated, 'Compulsory Ignorance Act'. The language repays attention: *decretum* implies serious binding decision, that is to say, not just a confession of one's own lack of knowledge, but a decision that others do not know either. The term has legislative connotations. To that extent, the framers of Sirmium 357 were not just saying they did not know about the Son's generation, they were saying no other human being could either. What initially sounds like a pious caution emerges as coercive.

Secondly, Hilary notes an absurdity in the idea that one tries to compel people not to know something. He comments scathingly of the *decretum*: 'Just as if it could

be commanded or decreed that a man should know what in future he is to be ignorant of, or be ignorant of what he already knows.' The absurdity here is in attempting to legislate the internal knowledge of others. It is one thing to demand silence, but quite another to demand ignorance.

Thirdly, Hilary sees that the law of ignorance actually stops a particular proposition being made. Because we are bound to be ignorant about the Son's generation, we cannot declare that the Son is 'of God', and if we cannot speak at all of the Son's generation, then how do we say the Son really and truly is a son, since generation is inherent to the relation of fathers and sons. At root, by preventing us speaking of the Son's generation, the framers of Sirmium are preventing us from speaking of the Son as truly son.

Coercive ignorance masks a positive theological position, that one does not have to say the Son is truly a son. This, of course, opens the door to admitting that Arianism, with its view that the second person of the trinity is a creature rather than truly Son, is just as orthodox as Nicene theology, which insists the Son is truly son. A little ignorance can go a long way.

Two things emerge quite painfully from Hilary's observations on the Compulsory Ignorance Act of Sirmium 357. First, the coercive nature of the claims to ignorance or unclarity. There is something strongly unilateral about these claims: why should something that is (allegedly) subjectively unclear to me be judged by me as unclear for you too? Secondly, there is the way these coercive claims were far from value-neutral, but actually carried strong agendas of their own.

However, there are other elements in play in the declaration of ignorance or unclarity that make it an extraordinarily attractive move in today's debates. Naturally, it plays well with a postmodern mood that tends to value scepticism, but more than that, it offers the attraction of not needing to have a reason for my position. At its worst, I can declare something unclear and then pursue my own line without needing to provide reasons for it – after all, the issue is unclear. Declaring something unclear can maximise my

There are other elements in play in the declaration of ignorance that make it an extraordinarily attractive move in today's debates. It offers the attraction of not needing to have a reason for my position

freedom of action because it tends to remove an issue from the field of common debate. In its way, it is strongly individualist.

More than that, some of the claims about unclarity or ignorance leave unspecified what counts as being clear enough for actions to proceed or decisions to be made. It is sometimes quite revealing to ask, 'How clear do things need to be?' or, 'What would make things clearer for you?' But without knowing what counts as 'clear enough' or what considerations would clarify, the task of discussing something with someone claiming ignorance or lack of clarity becomes remarkably thankless. Again, the tendency here is to remove an issue from discussion.

Yet most attractive of all is that the claim of lack of clarity or ignorance allows one to pursue one's own position quite dogmatically, while appearing to be very undogmatic. After all, the claim of ignorance looks as though it advances no position, but vitally it tacitly asserts that one's opponent's position cannot be decisively asserted. It is forever only a possibility, not a certainty on which one could base action or decision. There is something very rewarding in being a closet dogmatist while appearing to be the reverse.

This raises two questions, one more philosophical, the other more theological. Philosophically, how do I move

from my observation about my own understanding that I find something unclear (fundamentally subjective) to the proposition that something is unclear for everyone else too (something universal)? After all, I frequently have the experience that a text from my children is subjectively unclear to me, but laughably clear to others versed in the texting *argot* of today's youth. Of course it can be a mark of genuine epistemic humility to recognise one does not know something or that something is unclear to one. But it can also be an important mark of epistemic humility to concede that others may have understood something that I have not, rather than insist that if I do not see something, no one else has, or even could, either.

Theologically, however, even more is at stake. The claim of John 1:18 is that God has been made known by the incarnate Son and Word. This looks very like a claim that God has actually made himself known and at least at the objective level revealed himself. Given this, what should I make of the claim that knowledge of God is unclear and uncertain? After all, for the uncertainty claim to work here, I have to tread very close to the proposition that God did not successfully reveal himself. Do I think God tried to reveal himself and failed? Or do I think God never revealed himself?

Here again, the claims of ignorance seem extraordinarily imperious. After all, the kind of knowledge I would need to support the claim that God has failed to reveal himself, or that God never revealed himself, seems to be that I have an independent, non-revealed knowledge of God, and therefore can weigh the claims of revelation. This was one reason why Hilary and Athanasius thought the Arian claims of 'ignorance' they encountered were in fact simply arrogant.

Perhaps I should be more ready to adapt another of Hilary's thoughts, that when faced with God's revelation in the Bible, I should point less to a defect in the text (lack of clarity) but more to a defect in my understanding (subjective limits). Perhaps we should be less certain that parts of scripture are 'uncertain'.

This article was first published in Themelios. Read Themelios online here: themelios.thegospelcoalition.org



Malala

& Magna Carta

A year ago, it was revealed that eight out of the 10 men suspected of attempting to murder Malala Yousafzai had been secretly acquitted by a Pakistan court. Mike Ovey reflected at the time on the issues of justice and secrecy surrounding the case

Photo: DFID <http://flic.kr/p/Aa8g9P>

Of the 10 charged with the attempted murder of schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai back in 2012, eight go free and two are convicted. The police are quoted as saying that there was not enough evidence to convict.

So why do I still find this so profoundly disturbing? Is it my none-too-subtle religious prejudice as a Christian against Islam? Is it my nurturing in a liberal western democracy that has encouraged a cultural disdain? Does it touch a raw nerve because the original murder attempt smacked of depriving women of education? How do I weigh the release of the eight without practicing cultural and religious discrimination myself?

We could go a number of ways with this, but let me pick one. I find this so disturbing because this was a secret trial and back in April, as the news agency Al Jazeera notes, the police said that all had been convicted with sentences of 25 years. Al Jazeera also notes that all the accused, allegedly, confessed.

It's a long time since I practised criminal law, but my recollection is that on the whole the police are well aware of when they have secured a conviction with a 25 year tag and when a case has been dismissed for lack of evidence. They aren't easily confused on that one. And when a trial is held in secret, any reassurance about 'lack of evidence' wears pretty thin. We cannot check it.

That, of course, is the thing about secret trials – there is by definition no outside scrutiny. The reason why we want trials held in public is because we want to protect defendants against oppression, hence the emphasis on *habeas corpus* in old, Magna Carta style law. Hence too the emphasis on speedy trial in Magna Carta: 'To no one will we deny or delay justice.'

The argument for secret trials is that they prevent intimidation of witnesses and protect national security. Such trials ensure the powerful and the ruthless cannot get away with it by threats or by making a prosecuting state pay too high a price. What is so horrifying here is that a mechanism which should prevent the powerful and ruthless defendant being able to get away with it has been used in a way that makes some of us wonder whether the powerful and ruthless have not precisely gotten away with it. We often say that secret trials risk denying justice to the accused. Here, secret trial risks denying justice to the victim.

In fact, secret trials present an awful temptation to those in power: the temptation to condemn, despite their innocence, those one dislikes or disapproves, and the temptation to acquit, despite their guilt, those one likes or approves. I do not think I should be given the power of secret trial because I am not sure I would always resist those temptations. I fear I would not. Certainly, others would

have perfectly legitimate doubts about my ability to do so, and that in itself undermines the administration of justice, which is tricky enough at the best of times.

There again, I do not think I am so much worse than the rest of you. I think the power of secret trial is too much of a temptation for you too. And there, I think, is the heart of the issue about the secret trial which now turns out to have acquitted the eight. It is not simply about whether this was a trial in Pakistan rather than the UK. Nor simply about whether this was a trial involving men with a woman victim. Nor about western expectations of the state. It is also about whether the ordinary human heart, Christian, Muslim or atheist, can be trusted with the kind of power that is present in a secret trial.

This certainly is a case about the human rights of a young woman to see her attackers convicted. It is also about what we think a human being is, what human frailty is, and even more importantly, how human fallenness affects us as we seek to do righteousness to one another. It is about how denying our fallenness can become a means of denying others justice.

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The preaching relationship

The key relationship for developing great preaching is the dynamic relationship between the preacher and their congregation, says Mike Ovey. Here, he reflects honestly on the temptations and encouragements of preaching the word of God to the people of God



‘There are no great preachers in England now.’ So stated one visiting North American celebrity preacher a few years back. I preach from time to time, but I’m fairly sure he’s never heard me, so I didn’t take offence. But I winced for my friends who preach week in, week out. Is it that they are not great preachers? Or that their congregations do not respond by forking out for the pastor’s limousine? Or is it something else?

I think the observation was honestly meant (if tactlessly expressed), so I want to think how we can encourage our preachers to be great preachers. Should we send them on conferences, workshops, fund study leaves and safeguard their reading time? Ideally, yes. But looking back to my own time as a curate/assistant minister, and thinking about my own reactions right now, those who encourage me most and who discourage me most are those I preach to. The key relationship for developing a great preacher is the relationship with those the preacher preaches to.

Biblically, that’s no surprise: think of the opening verses of 2 Timothy chapter 4, and Paul’s instruction to preach in season and out of season. It is joined with his remark that some preachers preach what the itching ears of the congregation want to hear – a pattern of collusion in which the preacher is rewarded with approval when he or she preaches what the congregation wants, rather than what the Bible says.

Yes, it still works like that. I vividly remember receiving approval and warmth when I preached a sermon on divorce, which divorced members of the congregation thought more liberal than my boss’s position. It was very hard to say later over coffee that they had misunderstood me and to see that approval drain away like water in the sand.

The temptation for a preacher to bask in the congregation’s approval is very real, and it does not go away after one Sunday. If you’re having a hard time with the congregation, of course you sometimes feel like pulling your punches. The relationship with the congregation really matters for a preacher. It makes or mars you, not necessarily as a celebrity preacher, but as a faithful one (the two are not always the same).

So let me explore this relationship between preacher and congregation a little more. The first thing is that a local church is not a mausoleum for saints, it is a hospital for sinners. It’s where Christ’s people, still bearing the marks of sin-sickness, even if forgiven for those sins, minister and are ministered to. That means preacher and congregation alike are redeemed yet sinful: the local church is a meeting of those who aren’t perfect. This sounds really obvious but it is fundamental. It means I as I preach am redeemed yet still sinful, and you as you listen are redeemed yet still sinful. Huge problems follow when the preacher forgets the congregation is redeemed but still sinful. Huge problems follow when the congregation forgets the preacher is redeemed yet still sinful.

People change their minds in the light of God’s word, and that incentivises any preacher. Helping the preacher know when and how all this happens means that we don’t have collusion between preacher and congregation in which each tacitly silences the word of God

Let’s take the preacher first. When you’re in the pulpit or you’ve got the microphone, pride is on your shoulder. That pride takes different forms: the thrill of being six feet above contradiction (in an old-style pulpit) and at long last being able to lay down the law without interruption; the thrill of enlisting the congregation in mocking and demonising those outside the church or those in a different fellowship; the joy

GREAT PREACHERS

Let me mention just three of many:



Tim Keller – because he works so hard to understand my world on the Bible's terms



Dick Lucas – because he stops me assuming I already know what a passage means



J John – because some of his big points are so well driven home they turn the world upside down

of playing to the gallery and telling your congregation what they want to hear.

I must confess to all those temptations of pride and I think others would too in moments of honesty. Please note, this pride does not always take you to false teaching, although it can. Sometimes the thrill is the savage pride of knowing you are being completely orthodox and having licence to despise those who are not. The pulpit is a dangerous place for a human being to be.

Things change a little when you leave the pulpit or microphone: the temptation to pride is still there. But for most of us, it is now tinged with anxiety. The anxiety comes in two forms: one form is despair at not doing justice to the passage you've been speaking on. As you've listened to yourself, the words which seemed so penetrating in the study now seem insipid, selling short the truths of the passage.

Personally, I tend to bounce from the temptation of pride to the despondent feeling of inadequacy, that I have let down both the God who spoke the word, and also the congregation to whom he spoke it. One of the most gifted preachers I know would spend Sunday evenings staring emptily at the wall in despair at his shortcomings.

And that opens you up to the second anxiety: did people like it? If I did sell the text short, maybe people did not spot it and it'll be all right. And you crave reassurance – reassurance on almost any terms.

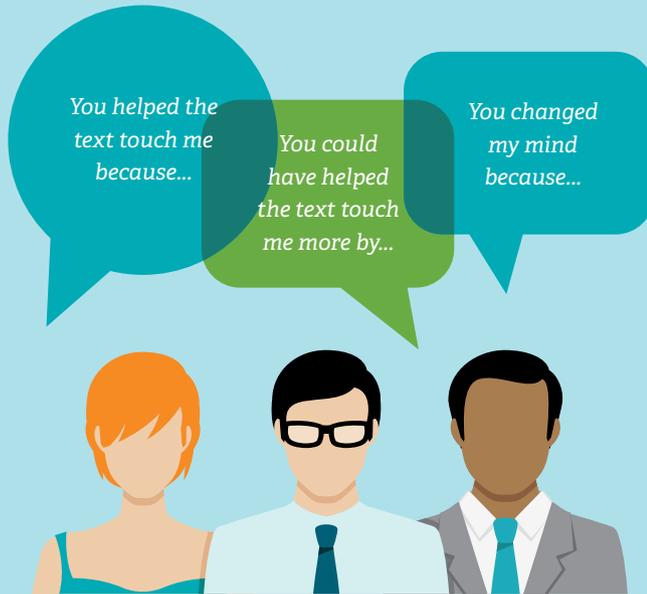
This has a very practical consequence. Many services end like this: sermon, quick prayer, final hymn, closing prayer and then if you're the preacher you often stand by the door as people go out. And you stand in a very vulnerable emotional condition. A word can push you towards pride and complacency. Equally, a word can push you to frustration and despair. The interaction at the door

If you're the preacher you often stand by the door as people go out. And you stand in a very vulnerable emotional condition. A word can push you towards pride and complacency. Equally, a word can push you to frustration and despair

or over the coffee can puff up or pull down, give godly encouragement or ungodly discouragement – and that will affect how the preacher preaches next week. How could it not?

Speaking frankly, I am amazed at some of the things that get said over the perfunctory handshake, and the short-

sightedness that does not see this will discourage and diminish the preaching ministry. So let me sketch out listening that helps and listening that hinders. Let's take three examples of comments that help and encourage:



All of these go beyond the kindly meant, 'Lovely sermon, vicar', because they give specific feedback. They help me know what worked and what didn't. It is great to be kind, but better still to be kind and specific. This specific sort of comment also encourages me because I realise that this person at least has not simply let the sermon wash over them. If I do get that feeling, it's profoundly demotivating.

For most of us, sermon preparation takes hours – it should. But if you feel people don't listen to the fruit of your careful slogging away with the text, then of course you'll be tempted to go for gimmicks and the funniest clips off the web. It's less work, to be honest. Entertaining is easier than instructing. What's more, this kind of comment doesn't pander to my pride as a preacher because the reference point is the word of God – did I understand this part of

the Bible or not? This takes me away from the wit of my illustrations and my cleverness as a communicator towards what I am meant to communicate. The spotlight is where it should be – on what God says, rather than on me as his suave and smart spokesman.

You'll also see that the examples I've set out don't just say whether I understood the Bible's text. We want God's word to move us, touch us, shake us, change us. In that respect, the last comment above is profoundly important: it shows that people change their minds in the light of God's word, and that incentivises any preacher. Helping the preacher know when and how all this happens means that we don't have collusion between preacher and congregation in which each tacitly silences the word of God, but rather co-operation in which each tries to ensure the word of God shapes and builds up the people of God.

On the other hand, can you see why the following kinds of comments show an unhelpful kind of listening?

The irrelevant comment – one congregation member greeted me at the church door asking if I had been on the local steam railway. It was difficult to see how this related to Mark's Gospel and left me wondering what the point was of preparing. It was not meant harshly – it just transmitted that he could not be bothered to listen.

For most of us, sermon preparation takes hours – it should. But if you feel people don't listen to the fruit of your careful slogging away with the text, then of course you'll be tempted to go for gimmicks and the funniest clips off the web

Other irrelevant comments can be more barbed. One parishioner asked me how I could possibly preach on the feeding of the 5,000 when I had refused to take her divorced daughter's wedding (our church had a policy not to do weddings in those circumstances). It was enormously frustrating. There was, to be honest, no humble listening to God's word in this case, merely someone coming to church with her own self-focused agenda.

'That's just your opinion' – Sometimes, of course, preachers do give their opinion. But one of the most common ways of dismissing what we hear in sermons is to claim that this was not the word of God, but simply the preacher 'making the text say something'.

Don't get me wrong – we do want congregations to listen with a rightly discerning spirit. So if you do feel that the

As a listener, I find myself driven to prayer that as I listen to a preacher, my heart is warm and open. Most of us, perhaps, find that a hard prayer since it means asking ourselves whether we are unteachable

preacher has just given his or her opinion dressed up as the Word of God, then try saying something more like this: 'I think you gave us what you think rather than what the passage said because...' That means the preacher has to engage with what you say. And it lessens the risk that we're covering up our disagreement with God by characterising it as a disagreement with the preacher.

The outraged comment – 'I cannot believe you said something so insulting to me...' Again, we can hide behind

our outrage. In some ways, English culture does not much like public quarrels. We find them embarrassing, especially at the church door. So it can be quite a powerful card to let yourself be outraged and leave the other person to apologise.

My favourite here is the reaction to a talk I gave on the way everyone except Jesus sins, where one person said she was deeply insulted on her mother's behalf because her mother was 'faultless'. Was she really insulted? No. She was covering up for her own self-righteousness. The footballing equivalent for taking unnecessary offence like this is diving in the penalty area.

The unteachable comment – Last but not least is the comment that shows unteachability. I say this cautiously. Sometimes (most of the time, probably) when someone does not understand, it is because we as preachers have not been clear. Sometimes, though, it is just plain refusal. I think the clearest example I heard of this was a congregation member who heard the gospel of free forgiveness for Christ's sake as a call to be good and earn his salvation. This problem is one of the most disturbing. As a listener, I find myself driven to prayer that as I listen to a preacher, my heart is warm and open. Most of us, perhaps, find that a hard prayer since it means asking ourselves whether we are unteachable.

At the moment, I fear this is one of our biggest problems. We have explicit statements on the Bible as God's word and we construct services and conferences around it and we support our preaching with all kinds of techno-wizardry. But whether we are in pulpit or pew we also have to be teachable. And that leads to two practical questions: when last as a preacher did my proclamation of God's word actually change my own mind? And when last as a hearer did I so listen that God's word preached changed my mind? My fear is that for too many of us, we can no longer remember the answer.

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The mission field of the Middle East



A Christian satellite network is bringing the good news of Jesus into millions of homes across the North Africa and the Middle East. Rachel Fadipe explains its work

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is one of the hardest places on earth to be and to remain a Christian. In Syria, for example, Christians are not only caught in the violence of the ongoing war, but are specifically targeted by Islamic extremists for attack, abduction and murder. It is impossible to be a Christian in areas controlled by so-called Islamic State, and even in places still controlled by the Syrian government, evangelism and conversion from Islam are illegal.

But even in the midst of such hardship, not only has the gospel not been extinguished, but thousands of people are hearing the good news of Jesus Christ and are coming to faith. One of the most remarkable ways

in which Christ is making himself known is through the ministry of SAT-7, the Christian TV network which broadcasts across MENA from Morocco to Afghanistan, from Turkey to the Sudan. SAT-7 is a Christian satellite service which began life 20 years ago. In those two decades, its output has grown from just a couple of hours a week to five top-quality TV channels, broadcasting 24 hours a day in Arabic, Farsi (Persian) and Turkish, to an audience of over 15 million.

Its diverse programming – from Bible teaching to music, worship, drama and current affairs – has made both the good news and witness of Christians available in corners of the region, many of whose viewers are unlikely ever to have met a Christian in person.

Its strategic importance is beyond doubt, but it arose from the humblest of beginnings. Founder Terry Ascott met a family living in abject poverty on a street in Cairo. They had few possessions, but they did have their own TV. In a region where half the population cannot read or write, TV in their own language, Arabic, was the obvious way to reach them and many millions of others.

But just as obvious were the problems that had to be overcome: it would be impossible to fund; governments would not permit it to broadcast; local church leaders distrusted previous (often American) programme models. It would also be very difficult for Arab Christians to risk showing their faces on camera.

SAT-7 began in a tiny rented studio, airing just two hours of Arabic programmes, which included teaching on the foundational truths of Christianity. The response was immediate as letters poured in from Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Morocco and elsewhere. Rita El Mounayer, the first presenter and now SAT-7 chief channels and communications officer, says, 'At last the local church had the opportunity to go out from behind the walls and share the faith.'

Since then, its growth has, by God's grace, been extraordinary. The latest channel, SAT-7 TURK, was launched in Turkey in 2015. It is the only Christian broadcaster on the Turkish national satellite, Turksat, which has a potential audience of up to 50 million people. In a nation where less than 1 per cent call themselves Christians, and where the church has for years suffered great hostility and marginalisation, SAT-7's positive reception may indicate a softening of attitudes and better prospects for fruitful gospel ministry.

One country where the church is making a big impact is Iran, where it is believed to be the fastest-growing in the world, according to Operation World. Every day, SAT-7's PARS channel (which broadcasts in the Iranian Farsi language) receives 2,000 encrypted messages via the social media platform, Telegram. Its viewers are asking questions, requesting prayer, sharing their testimonies and seeking Christian resources – especially Bibles.

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Upwards of 60 people a month are telling SAT-7 that they have accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour, having seen one of its programmes.

As those in the West are now realising the scale of the refugee crisis in the Middle East is simply staggering. According to UNICEF, over 13 million children in the region cannot attend school because they have been displaced or are trapped in war zones. Without education, their chances of finding a job will be minimal, leaving them open to exploitation, radicalisation – or both.

SAT-7 recognises it has a responsibility and an opportunity here. It has therefore launched an 'on-air school' for those who cannot get to a physical classroom, reaching into refugee communities and potentially teaching an almost unlimited number of children, on a scale that NGOs and aid agencies can only dream about. 'My School' broadcasts one 90-minute programme a day, in Arabic, to children aged five to seven. Qualified teachers conduct engaging lessons in English, maths, science and Arabic, based on the Syrian and Lebanese curricula.

SAT-7 does not neglect its responsibility to introduce and teach the Bible to its viewers, either. So it has, together with indigenous theologians, developed curriculum-based Bible teaching programmes for church leaders across the Middle East and North Africa, or for those who want to learn more about the scriptures but have no access to formal Bible training.

One example is TEACH, a partnership with Arab theological centres, which translates the Bible curriculum into compelling television as a first stage of equipping Christians for ministry and leadership. Another is SAT-7 PARS' link up with the Pars Theological Centre, which produces a range of on-air theological output known as 'The Seminary of the Air' (SOTA).

All SAT-7's channels also allocate significant airtime to children's programmes. They show that each child is precious and loved by God. They nurture the faith of Christian children and point non-Christian children – and their parents and older siblings – to Jesus and a God of love and peace. Programmes mix fun and creativity, songs and games with Christian teaching and Bible stories.



MIRYAM AND ISLAMIC STATE

SAT-7 has been privileged to broadcast a number of remarkable stories about how Christians in the MENA region live out their lives and express and share their faith, often in the most difficult circumstances imaginable.

Ten year-old Miryam, whose family was driven from northern Iraq by so-called Islamic State in summer 2014 and forced to live in a refugee camp in Erbil,

was interviewed on SAT-7. With childlike yet mature faith, she affirmed God's love for everyone, including the Islamic State militants who had made her family's life such a misery.

When the presenter asked how she felt about those who had made her family homeless, she replied, 'I won't do anything to them. I will only ask God to forgive them.'

Terry Ascott believes this trend is especially noticeable in places such as Algeria and Iran, where political Islam and religious extremism have led people to reject a religion that is imposed upon them. Instead, many are thinking anew about faith and increasing numbers are being drawn to consider the Christian faith, with its messages of grace, love for neighbour and forgiveness for enemies..

To mark its 20th anniversary, SAT-7 is inviting churches and individuals in the UK to help it address the heartfelt needs of the viewers of all of its channels. Under the title, 'Answer the Cry', it is highlighting the cries from the heart that we hear Middle East people making.

These range from the cry of young men for meaning (in a region where 50 per cent are under 25 and 24 per cent of young adults are unemployed), the cry of women for worth in societies where the glass ceiling is often set at ground level, and the cry of children for peace and security when all the talk – and often the reality – is of war.

SAT-7 has produced powerful 'Answer the Cry' resources, including a DVD, with inspiring stories of how God is changing lives in the Middle East and how you can be part of this exciting movement. Visit www.answerthecry.org to learn more.

Rachel Fadipe is the executive director of SAT-7 UK

What might the Middle East – and its church – look like in another 20 years? Clearly many military, political and economic challenges lie ahead as so-called Islamic State is defeated, national borders are possibly redrawn and many countries' infrastructures

are rebuilt. Despite these issues, and the fact that so many Christians have been forced to flee the region since the crisis began, the 'convert church', as some are calling it, springs to life and shows remarkable signs of new spiritual life, particularly in Shia areas.

INTO ALL THE WORLD

In the past few weeks, Oak Hill has taken to the road to capture on video the life and work of several former students, now in ministry.

From the right, and clockwise:

Robin Ham with Boys' Brigade boys in Barrow in Furness; **Jon Putt** giving debt counselling in Grace Community Church, Kempson; **Reuben Hunter**, leading new church Trinity West in Shepherd's Bush; **Athole Rennie** at the docks in Leith, where he pastors Grace Church; **Stuart Silk** and **Hugh Bourne** at All Saints Lindfield; **Andy Prime**, preparing to plant a church on the Gracemount Estate in Edinburgh; and **Jason Roach**, who runs Westminster@1 for people working in Whitehall.

The videos will be on the college website from later in the summer.





60 years as an Oak Hill preacher



Michael Baughen, the former rector of All Souls Langham Place and Bishop of Chester, was shaped as a preacher by those who taught him as a young student at Oak Hill in the 1950s. In six memorable points, he outlines the essentials of good preaching

PREACH with PASSION

He was small of stature. His face was almost obscured by the lectern in the upper lecture room. He began to open up 2 Corinthians to us and our hearts were stirred from the first sentences. Then he came round the side of the lectern and, with his whole body trembling, said 'Don't you feel the power of it?' We did. 2 Corinthians has burnt in my heart and in much preaching and teaching ever since.

This small-statured New Zealander, HR Minn, packed a punch for Christ!

Passionless preaching is really inexcusable. To have someone in a pulpit reading a script as if it was an essay is not preaching. It is 'giving a paper', which may be all right if the audience is schooled in the subject, but it is not what Peter did on the Day of Pentecost or what Paul did on Mars Hill.

So I learnt about passion in preaching at Oak Hill. I learnt that you need to have the sermon burning in your heart so that when the time comes to preach the word, worked on and prayed over, it will be alive in your

heart. I learnt that it is not a matter of teaching a passage but of asking the Lord what he wants emphasised from this passage, what his word is for this day. It means starting early in the week and proceeding in stages so that the sermon theme can brew and marinate in your heart: so that its focus sharpens; so that your heart begins to glow with the sermon.

PREACH with RIGOUR

Anyone can knock three points out for a sermon. One clergyman I knew did it over breakfast on Sunday morning. In my time at Oak Hill, we had Alan Stibbs as vice principal. The detailed thoroughness of his preparation to preach or teach was obvious. He handled the word of God with the consummate skills of a faithful workman. He inspired us like Paul

to Timothy: 'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.'

Alongside his example, there was encouragement to get the tools for the job. Popular at the time was a list of recommended commentaries on every book of the Bible, compiled by Jim Packer and with many marked as 'sell your shirt to get this'. We tramped round second-hand bookshops and built up our library. In all the moves

PREACH with EXPLANATION

After a year of doctrine at Oak Hill, my faith was invigorated, my confidence in scripture fortified. It thrilled my heart and mind. I wished that all my friends back home could have a year of doctrine too. In those days, taking a London BD course involved going for some lectures to London Bible College.

That was fine, but when you are not residential you do not get opportunity to follow up a lecture or to get difficulties explained. So back at Oak Hill I would go to Alan Stibbs and he would give me a lot of time explaining things. Philosophy was a subject that needed the same sort of care. Ron Herniman gave us an extra teach-in back at Oak Hill – some two hours at a time – brilliant! We went to bed for an hour afterwards to recover.

since, the untouchable part of my library has been all the commentaries. They are our tools of trade. We need several on each book of the Bible.

It was John Stott who said that if you do not research what others have written on a passage, the limit of the sermon will be the limit of your knowledge. So a true worker will take notes from every commentary on their bookshelf and/or website relevant to the passage being preached on. The early stages of preparing to preach require rigour!

The advantages of being full-time residentially were considerable, not least as we would meet for discussion groups, worked with and helped one another at meals, and had access at all times to the library. Living under the same roof as tutors and fellow students has huge advantages for thorough training. But all this leads to the point that explanation is then required in preaching.

The use of theological terms or theories that mean much to us but little to our congregation is going to turn people off unless we have the care and skill to explain and make them real at most people's level. So Timothy is told to 'preach the word; be prepared... to correct, rebuke and encourage – with

great patience and careful instruction.' It saddens me that in too many churches, preaching is a mere item in the service, the sermons are varied and the effect is like washing a sieve.

At All Souls, we met as a team every four months to think and pray over what was needed. We tried to cover the exposition of a book, or part of it, a doctrinal series, sermons tackling issues facing Christians today, and a series on the personal spiritual life and growth. I longed that there would be an expectation, an eagerness to learn, and a desire to respond. It was up to the preachers then to give their all to explain clearly what they were teaching, with recordings to enable anyone absent to keep up with a series.

'Not only was the teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true' (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10).

PREACH with APPLICATION

My colleagues across the years know that I often challenged them with: 'Earth it!' Whatever may be produced by us with hours of preparation and prayer is coming raw to a congregation. People will be living with the daily demands of work, family and health. Faith in God needs to relate to their

lives and not be a separate bubble for Sundays.

This relevance of application comes from getting alongside, visiting people in their work environment, talking face to face over a coffee or lunch. Confirming a girl one Sunday, I learnt that the previous day she had driven 300 sheep to market. It would have made a difference to preaching if I had known that beforehand and understood what it was like. In my first curacy, I went down a coal mine with

PREACH with COMMUNICATION

LFE Wilkinson ('Wilkie') was the principal of Oak Hill in my day. He communicated Christ by his character as well as by the word. On missions he would often start his address as he climbed the pulpit stairs, and then his beaming face would appear and everyone was drawn to what he was saying. He communicated!

Compare that with the preacher who is tied to a script or full notes, who gives the occasional look at the congregation. Interest lags and other thoughts occupy the mind. The preacher is not communicating, however scholarly the preparation. One such lecture-sermon was the first delivered by a new colleague when I was rector of All Souls. He reminds me today that I took him aside afterwards and said, 'There were no windows.'

one of our coal miner choir members; it was an unforgettable experience and a challenge to applied preaching.

How can we apply? By listening, by reading. For instance, if you are in a rural community, take the *Farmers Weekly*. If you are in a business world setting, keep abreast of the moral challenges in business. Preaching is not six feet over people's heads, but mentally sitting alongside them in the pews, in homes, in places of work.

Today he is a superb communicator. Sometimes thinking how to illustrate or make a truth plain takes as long as preparing the content of a sermon. But if we start early enough in the week and get the theme running in our mind, then ideas, examples, quotes and illustrations will come to mind – and by Sunday we will communicate!

PREACH with HOLINESS

If ever preaching becomes something you just like or dislike doing, then stop. The new preacher who exclaimed, 'It is such fun, preaching!' made my last hairs stand on end. It is an awesome task to speak in the name of the

Living God. It is an awesome task to be entrusted with the faithful opening of God's word to others. It is a holy task for a Holy God. I lost my fear of speaking to great crowds a long time ago; but I increase in my longing to be a faithful messenger for my Lord.

This is why preparation needs to be mingled with prayer. It is why we pray before preaching that Jesus will stand in the midst and help us speak for him. It is why we pray with Spurgeon, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit' as we mount the pulpit. Oak Hill should produce fine, faithful, preachers. Just the other day someone commented to me after a sermon: 'You are obviously an Oak Hill man!'

I am thankful for my full-time residential training at Oak Hill. I am thankful to the teaching staff. Today, training has advanced in thoroughness, with resources undreamed of in my student days and in the way the word of God is effectively the main fibre of every subject. With all the thoroughness and fellowship of residential training, may Oak Hill continue to produce servants of God who preach the word in season and out of season.

Michael Baughen graduated from Oak Hill in 1956, was Rector of All Souls Langham Place and Bishop of Chester. He is still active in preaching and teaching

Calling all theologians! Seriously, anyone?



Since arriving in the UK to teach systematic theology at Oak Hill, Matthew Barrett has been surprised to find a suspicion towards theology among British evangelical congregations. He makes the case here for persuading them about the value of good, biblical theology

It's been seven months. Seven months, that is, since my family jumped on a airplane and moved from California to London. Since arriving, British evangelicals have been very curious as to the differences between churches in the United States and the UK. My response is usually the same: churches in the UK give healthy attention to liturgy, expository sermons have priority over churchy gimmicks, and there is far less obsession with celebrity pastors and megachurches. Churches in the US could learn a thing or two from British brothers and sisters.

And yet, there is one glaring hole smack-dab in the middle of an otherwise seamless fabric: a suspicion

toward theology. To be honest, I found this, well... strange. Apparently I'm not alone in noticing either. As Kevin DeYoung pointed out back in 2014, after returning from a prolonged stay in England: 'More full-time church workers and pastors could benefit from a seminary education... I sensed that young men and women in England were Bible people (which is most important), but less in tune with old books and any particular theological tradition.'

This past March, after another extended speaking tour in London, DeYoung drew a similar conclusion: 'Reformedish evangelicals in the UK are Bible people,' he said, but they are 'less conversant with systematic theology.' DeYoung is on to something.

DON'T WE ALL LOVE THE BIBLE?

The allergy to theology we are staring in the face tends to reincarnate itself in various forms. 'I just read the Bible, brother.' Or: 'Why can't we just stick with the Bible?' Such a mindset has a long history. While statements such as these slide off the lips of evangelicals today, yesterday they were sung proudly by Protestant liberals in biblical studies.

The many 'quests' for the historical Jesus are a case in point. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Jesus scholars claimed to 'just be reading the Bible'. Yet the Bible they read did not present the historical Jesus, but the Christ of faith. The apostles and early church creeds, some claimed, had imposed onto Jesus concepts such as deity. Not to worry, biblical scholars were able to read the Bible with neutrality. Such neutrality meant Jesus could now be rescued from the scriptures. Layer after layer of gospel narrative could be peeled back in order to exhume the real, historical Jesus.

By 1991, the *Los Angeles Times* could confidently announce that the group of biblical scholars known as the Jesus Seminar now 'rules out 80% of words attributed to Jesus.'

Of course, nothing is new under the sun. If we travel back in time to the 4th century, we discover that Arius also believed he was just reading and preaching the Bible. Denying the full deity and pre-existence of the Son, Arius loved just sticking to Bible verses like Colossians 1:15. I can hear him now: 'Don't tell me about the need to put all of the Bible together; let's just stick to the text, please. This text says Jesus is the firstborn!'

A similar hermeneutic was put on display at the start of the 21st century as open theism fell like a bomb on the evangelical playground. Claiming to take the Bible seriously, advocates turned to specific texts in isolation from the rest of the Bible and concluded that God changes his mind after realizing he has made a mistake. After all, Genesis 6:6 literally says the Lord 'regretted' that he had made man. Case settled.

Or consider an example closer to home. London pastor Steve Chalke, founder of the Oasis movement, just announced that his church will start performing gay marriages. Don't miss Chalke's key line of justification: This is not because we're liberal, it's not because we're light on the Bible, it's because we take the Bible very seriously. We want to move away from an over simplistic, over literalistic, immature understanding over biblical texts that dumps many but keeps the ones we want. According to Chalke, he's a Bible kind of guy.

HERMENEUTICS? YES PLEASE!

By now you get the point: claiming to 'just stick to the Bible' doesn't quite work for obvious reasons. But consider a few more reasons. First, such a mind-set misunderstands who we are as readers. We do not approach the Bible neutral – this is a hermeneutical myth that is a remnant of the Enlightenment. For all its shortcomings, postmodernism has at least taught us that there is no such thing as neutrality. We come to the Bible with built-in presuppositions about God and the world around us.

The real question is not whether we approach the Bible with presuppositions, but whether or not our presuppositions are faithful to what the Bible itself says and teaches. In other words, the issue is not whether we come to the Bible with a system of doctrine, but whether that system is true to scripture.

Second, such a mind-set misunderstands what the Bible is exactly. It is not a dictionary or encyclopaedia, as if we turn to a specific verse and, *voilà*, we have a scripted answer. No, the Bible is a story, God's story in fact. It's not a storehouse of facts (though facts are not precluded), but a storehouse of narrative. And this narrative unfolds within a particular storyline, a redemptive, covenantal storyline to be specific.

But it's not enough merely to read and retell the storyline of the Bible. 'There is a time for storytelling, and a time for interpreting the story; there is a time for recounting history, and a time for saying what its events mean,' Kevin Vanhoozer and Daniel Treier explain in their new book, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture*. 'Systematic theology is the time for interpreting the biblical story, and saying what it means.'

Certainly, the apostles didn't restrict themselves to regurgitating the biblical narrative. Rather, they strategically shifted gears from biblical theology to systematic theology, from drama to doctrine. This much is apparent in Acts 17:22-34 as Paul apologetically confronts the philosophers of his day. Here, Paul assumes the flow of redemptive history in his speech, but he does not limit himself to the biblical story. Instead, he builds upon it,

erecting a theological framework that confronts the doctrinal ignorance of his listeners.

Paul may start in Genesis, asserting God as Creator, but he quickly darts to divine aseity as the natural outcome of the Creator-creature distinction. From divine aseity Paul is then able to distinguish the one true God from man-made idols. Yet Paul does not leave his listeners with merely a transcendent God, but a God who is also immanent, so immanent that this God will judge the world in righteousness by his incarnate, resurrected Son, a fact that should drive every hearer to repentance.

purposes as his redemptive story progresses to a climax. It's precisely because of divine authorship that scripture can (and should) interpret scripture, the clear passages interpreting those that appear less clear. But let's be honest, if scripture interprets scripture, then theology is alive and kicking!

For instance, it's not enough to read Genesis 2 and reach a conclusion as to whether Adam is a historical person. One must also think through what implications rejecting a historical Adam might have for the entire Christian worldview, including one's understanding of original sin,

The real question is not whether we approach the Bible with presuppositions, but whether or not our presuppositions are faithful to what the Bible itself says and teaches. In other words, the issue is not whether we come to the Bible with a system of doctrine, but whether that system is true to scripture

It is therefore not enough to restate the Bible's story; that story must be interpreted, and once interpreted it must be applied. Certainly this was Paul's agenda (and method), as his interpretation of the biblical story led him to theological conclusions which in turn were meant to drive his listeners to a dogmatic understanding of God's being in relation to the world. Apparently, Paul was a theologian.

Third, such a mind-set forgets who is behind the biblical text. The Bible not only is written by diverse human authors, but by a divine author, which means that the Bible is a unified book, breathed out by God. Yes, we must pay attention to the intentions of each individual author, but we also must keep in mind the divine author's intent and

union with the second Adam, and the trustworthiness of the New Testament – since authors such as Luke and Paul assume Adam's historicity.

Paul exemplifies this transition from text to doctrine in Romans 5, as he puts the whole Bible together to convey what the entire counsel of God says about our condemnation in the first Adam and our righteous status in the last Adam. Paul does not stop with the drama of the biblical storyline, but this drama leads to doctrine, and, if you keep reading Romans, you will discover that doctrine results in doxology (Romans 11:13) as well as discipleship (Romans 12:1-8). If we take notes from Paul, then 'doing theology' is inevitable and necessary. An expositional

preaching series through James, for example, will be faced with the shocking statement that a person is 'justified by works and not by faith alone' (James 2:24). The second the pastor begins reconciling James with Paul, he is 'doing theology.'

Likewise, the stay-at-home mother will undoubtedly hear a knock at the door, only to have two JWs remind her that the word 'trinity' is not in the Bible, nor is there any Bible verse that explicitly teaches the doctrine of the trinity. Should she put on her theologian's hat and start putting all of the Bible together in order to explain how extra-biblical concepts such as 'one in essence' and 'three in person' are actually essential tools that safeguard the Bible's own teaching, then she, too, has rightly stepped into the sphere of theology. Indeed, she must if she is to give a reason for the hope within her (1 Peter 3:15). In other words, whether you realize it or not, you are a theologian.

THE PASTOR IS A THEOLOGIAN

Last year at the Shepherds' Conference in Sun Valley, California, Ligon Duncan and Albert Mohler were asked how important it is for the pastor to be a theologian. Duncan, reflecting on his decades of pastoral ministry, explained how graduates of theological college must be committed to being life-long learners, which means not only studying the Bible expositionally, but topically as well. This is hard for the pastor, since he is focused on a particular text each week, yet it is healthy and fruitful for his sermons for several reasons.

While you should be thinking weeks in advance about the specific text to be preached, you should also be thinking about how that text connects to other texts in God's one, unified canon. One of the keys to good preaching, Duncan explains, is exposing how the text in focus intersects with the rest of the Bible. Yet, this is not only key to good preaching, but it's key to good systematic theology. The preacher must be concerned not only with 'how the Bible relates to a specific topic, but how that topic relates to other topics the Bible talks about,' Duncan explains. A failure to draw out the connections between one text and other

texts is a failure to think theologically, which is an essential component to good preaching.

Practically speaking, Duncan advises pastors to always be reading 'good, faithful, biblical, orthodox systematic theology'. Admittedly, Bavinck, Berkhof or Calvin may not be the most scintillating reading; nevertheless, this type of reading is 'fruitful for connections.' Preaching commentaries may be 'more immediately edifying,' but reading systematic theology will 'enrich your preaching in a profound way.'

Mohler's response was even more pointed. He sometimes hears pastors say, 'Well, I'm not a theologian, but...'. To which Mohler responds: 'If you're not a theologian, you're not really a pastor.' Mohler captures the weight of pastoral ministry: 'The pastor is the theologian most believers in the Lord Jesus Christ will ever know. So if you're not a theologian [to your church], then they don't have one! And that means you're not fulfilling the role of a pastor.' This doesn't mean one must have a PhD in systematic theology, but it does mean that as a pastor you have to operate and think, and even teach and preach, as a theologian.

BE A THEOLOGIAN

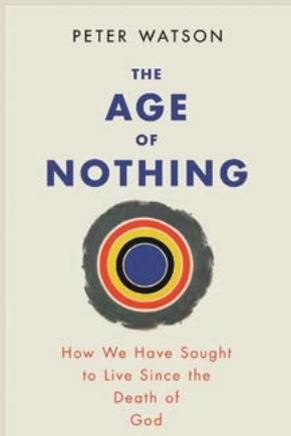
Just the other day I was relishing the British sunshine while talking with a group of students. As exhilarating as the sunshine was, a dark metaphorical cloud suddenly hovered above when these students said that they have never attended a church where their pastor led the people through core doctrines of the faith in a midweek service or Sunday afternoon class.

I may be new to the UK, but I know an old demon when I see one, and a neglect or worse, an antagonism to theology, is one old demon. Call me naïve, but I'm one theologian on mission to turn theological palookas into theological extraordinaires. Why exactly? Because, in the end, everyone is a theologian, it's just a matter of whether you're a good one, or not.

Matthew Barrett is Tutor of Systematic Theology and Church History at Oak Hill

Books

Can we talk about the contemporary arts? Chris Green believes we should, given that the arts are widely discussed and are a fruitful area for apologetics. He shares his reading in this creative area



The Age of Nothing

Peter Watson
W&N, 2014

In June, Tate Modern will open its magnificent new set of galleries, an extension to its Bankside presence. Already the sixth most visited art gallery in the world, this will expand its visitor capacity by 70%, and double its exhibition space. Modern art, contemporary art, is on a roll.

The BBC employs Will Gompertz as its arts ambassador, and he has published a little book on art and creativity. Grayson Perry, the flamboyant cross-dressing potter, delivered some blisteringly brilliant Reith lectures for the BBC and he has put those in book form too. Contemporary art has passionate, stimulating, and very mischievous, advocates.

This is a problem for evangelicals, because we struggle with making sense of the visual. We are people of the word, who have been taught to distrust images and idols, and who are probably some of the few people left who understand the attraction

of iconoclasm. Beauty was planned by God to grab our attention, and our hearts incline towards any of God's gifts, and we've learnt to our cost that it does so even when sin distorts them. We know to distrust that inclination.

When Christianity was dominant, or at least a visible opposition, believers could make sense of most of what was painted or crafted. Traditional religious art either expressed something ultimate about God, or our response to that ultimate; objectively, or subjectively, the gospel was the frame around the picture, and even when egotistic plutocrats like the Medici splashed their cash, they built chapels and employed religious painters. The Magi chapel in Florence is a good example, as various members of the Medici family are visibly and gloriously portrayed as part of the procession to worship the baby Jesus.

But as Francis Schaeffer pointed out, there was a decisive shift in the wake of the self-styled Enlightenment.

Reading list

Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (Vintage, 2009)

Will Gompertz, *Think Like an Artist* (Penguin, 2016)

Grayson Perry, *Playing to the Gallery* (Penguin, 2016)

Peter Watson, *The Age of Nothing* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2016)

Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There and Escape from Reason*

The gospel connects the heavenly with the earthly, through historic truth (what he called 'true truth'), and pivotally in the incarnation. But abandon that, and the universal and particular are untethered and float apart, the universals into an unknowable Kantian abstraction, the particulars into discrete existential elements. Schaeffer talks about living in a house with two storeys and no connecting staircase. You live upstairs or downstairs. But you have to choose. There is no coherence left.

If that sounds pretentious, I'm sorry. It probably is, but it's also a risk you take whenever you talk about art. And the evangelical ambivalence about the arts is only compounded when we worry about putting our pretentiousness on display. Bear with me.

By and large, the last 150 years has shown artists working with one or other of those two: universals, or particulars, but rarely both. For my money, the last artist to devote his work to trying to reconcile the two was Cézanne. And the number of artists who have chosen to live upstairs has been diminishing too. Paul Klee's vast, colour-soaked paintings belong there, but they are lonely. Most have chosen to go with the cultural norm, which is that there is no upper storey at all. No universals. No big meta-narrative. Just the subjective experiences of mammals on a small planet, who evolved by chance and without any meaning.

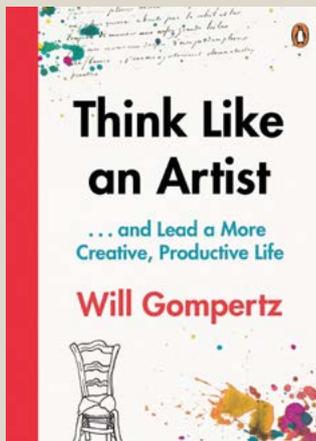
If that sounds gloomy, I think it is.

There's a big book doing the rounds called *The Age of Nothing*, by Peter Watson, and if you're someone who takes the reading of culture seriously, you need to get your head around it. Watson is a convinced atheist, for whom truth lies somewhere between Freud and Darwin, and he's trying to make sense of art, beauty, poetry,

Most artists have chosen to go with the cultural norm. No universals. No big meta-narrative. Just the subjective experiences of mammals on a small planet, who evolved by chance and without any meaning

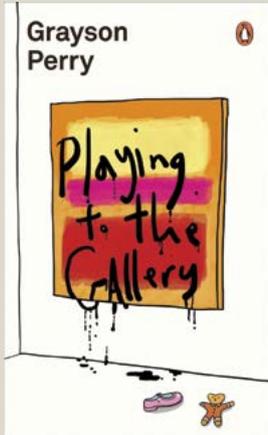
and myth, from within that empty landscape. In his mind we are as a race, and as individuals, an evolutionary fluke, and the best we can do with that is explore the wonder of our empty universe, and enjoy it while we are here.

Will Gompertz and Grayson Perry have both produced much shorter and enjoyable books, but they are still worth taking on board because not only are they literate, but they are also



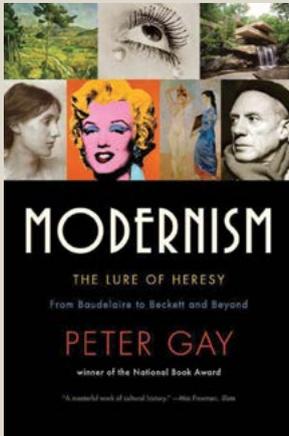
Think Like an Artist

Will Gompertz
Penguin, 2015



Playing to the Gallery

Grayson Perry
Penguin, 2016



Modernism: the Lure of Heresy

Peter Gay
WW Norton & Co, 2010

such culturally visible people. Even if you couldn't recognise one of Grayson Perry's pots, if you've got any cultural awareness at all, you'd be able to recognise him. Or her.

I think they both make three things abundantly clear. One is, our culture lives firmly downstairs. Gone are the days when an artist would paint a universal and expect us to respond to it as a work of truth. From the mosaics of Constantinople to Holman Hunt, Christians have created work designed to encourage us to pray as we look. When the Dutch painted their domestic landscapes, it was in the knowledge that God made this world, so it is real and good. When Rembrandt painted a crucifixion, and put himself in the picture, it wasn't to draw attention to his skill as an artist, but to his need of a saviour (Google it, and see).

There was a revolutionary season when the artists worked with their peers to dethrone the Christian narrative: the final book I want to plug is by the brilliant Peter Gay, *Modernism: the lure of heresy*, which charts that move. Now, in the wake of that rebellion, the world is WYSIWYG – there is nothing beyond. And the creative arts are therefore only capable of reflecting that world back at ourselves.

That means, secondly, they can only be about the subjectivity of the artist. Think about that for the moment: in a world without the gospel, there is only one narrative left. It is an impersonal

one that runs from the Big Bang to the Big Crunch, and we only find our place in it by finding our perch on an utterly impersonal evolutionary tree. There are only three storytellers left: Stephen Hawking, David Attenborough, and Richard Dawkins, who points out that there are only those three.

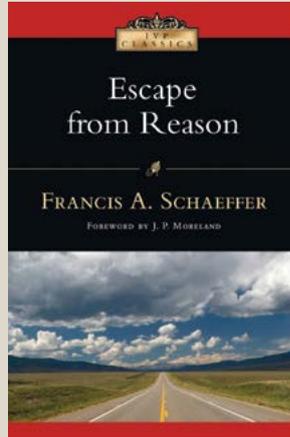
Now, Schaeffer again, no one can actually live with the logic of that position. Not really. So our more sensitive contemporaries reach for their brushes and chisels, and try to express something which they feel, but cannot put into words, which is that we are more than this story tells us. A Hawking/Dawkins cosmos can give us a gorgeous sunrise but cannot begin to articulate why it is so gorgeous, and why we perceive it

Attenborough can show us beauty, but he cannot properly account for it, nor for our response to it. And exactly the same is true in reverse, of the harrowing awfulness of experiencing the consequences of sin in oneself, and others

Historically, art can never live long as mere entertainment. Like a war horse, art is bred for battle, and it becomes restless when it's used to give rides to children

as gorgeous; when they do try, and talk of our evolutionary adaptation to find – I don't know, daylight more attractive than dark – our sense is that they haven't begun to grapple with the issue. Attenborough can show us beauty, but he cannot properly account for it, nor for our response to it. And exactly the same is true in reverse, of the harrowing awfulness of experiencing the consequences of sin in oneself, and others.

Which gives contemporary artists their dilemma. They want to describe that experience of feeling part of a bigger picture that they can't account for. They know what it feels like, both grand and desperate, but they don't have the Christian narrative to make sense of it. So because painting the world isn't enough – but there is no longer an upper storey to access, nor even the trace of the Christian worldview to echo – they paint the



Escape from Reason

Francis Schaeffer
IVP Books, 2014

only thing left: their responses to their experiences. They paint themselves.

Third (and I don't think Watson gets this), the arts now embrace playfulness. That has always been an element of the visual arts, of course, but now it is centre stage, because one of things we pay artists to do is to distract us from the awfulness of our lower storey plight. That has produced the curious hybrid of an 'entertainment industry', which is as valid an expression of sell-out art exhibition as it is of a blockbuster movie.

Put those last two points (subjectivity and playfulness) together and we can see why Grayson Perry is one of his own most flamboyant creations, and he stands in that company of artists who have made themselves works of

art, such as Dali, Warhol, and Gilbert and George. And we can see, too, why such creations are always disturbing, both by design and by accident. They are putting out in public what it means to be a ruined image of God.

We also need to be ready for the mask of playfulness to slip. Historically, art can never live long as mere entertainment, and Perry's anger at the commercialisation of art shows that he knows this. Like a war horse, art is bred for battle, and it becomes restless when it's used to give rides to children. At some stage, contemporary artists will get serious, and they will give us an immense opportunity, either because of their deep longing for an upper storey, or being the despairing voice of the lower storey prisoner.

Can we talk about contemporary art, among ourselves and in public? It is difficult and runs the risk of being pompous, but if we are interested in apologetics, this is one of the most popular modes of current intellectual discussion. We can't guarantee that everyone will read the latest Julian Barnes, but they will at least have a visual recognition of the potter in a frock.

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