

lion & lamb



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The Bible and Contemporary Society

The ancient and contemporary methods of reading and studying the Bible are a witness to the Church's perpetual attempt to discern the 'revelation' of God to the world. This is why the Scriptures remain authoritative in the Christian tradition and the unique touchstone for all matters of faith and practice. The reading of the Bible continues as an essential discipline in the lives of Christian disciples and its authentic use is the primary concern of this issue of **Lion & Lamb**.

Historically, for Christians **how** we read the Bible is as important as **that** we read it. The faith community has rarely assumed that by just placing a Bible in a person's hand they will know how to read it or will automatically know what they are reading. As Eugene Peterson warns, "Just having print on the page and knowing how to distinguish nouns from verbs is not enough. Reading the Bible can get you into a lot of trouble. Few things are more important in the Christian community than reading the Scriptures **rightly**. The holy Scriptures carry immense authority. Read wrongly, they can ignite war, legitimise abuse, sanction hate, and cultivate arrogance." This of course has an uncanny resonance with the use and abuse of Scripture in the churches, homes and gable walls of Northern Ireland.

Peterson's emphasis on a right reading of the Bible does not mean an absolute understanding or flawless interpretation. A right reading of the text implies a right attitude - what the Apostle Paul describes as 'rightly handling the word of truth' (2 Tim 2:15). In other words, a commitment to integrity is the integration of disciplined minds, devout hearts and obedient living. Also, a right reading of the Scriptures transcends the privatised interpretations of the individual. The Church is a **hermeneutical** community whose collective wisdom and experience informs the meaning of the text in every time and place. Again, as Paul proclaims, the 'breadth and length and height and depth' of the knowledge and love of God is comprehended 'with all the saints' (Eph 3: 18 -19).

In this edition of our magazine we explore the use of the Bible in contemporary society, conscious of the challenges that Christians face in an age that has devastated the notion that any objective truth can be found in any form of literature. We are concerned to show practically how the many genres found in the Bible, which reflect different cultural and sociological frameworks, all embody the essence of the gospel. And how the pluralist context in which the Bible is now interpreted is not just a threat to Biblical authority but an opportunity to explore the full range and richness of Biblical revelation. The theme is also our small attempt to contribute to the faith affirmation, that God continues to speak in history through holy Scripture, interpreted with integrity and lived incarnationally in the life of the Church.

Derek Poole
Editor



A Moving Experience

Ruth Hutchinson

Moving house is the most stressful thing you will ever do. Everyone says so.

Just who is this 'everyone' who speaks so glibly on such matters? If he had taken copyright on the 'moving house' dictum, he would have made a fortune on my house move alone. Maybe it wouldn't have been so stressful if 'everyone' hadn't kept telling me it was. The move certainly didn't happen in a day or two. It required months of planning and preparation, meticulous organisation and a large reserve of patience and stamina. It cost money, more than I anticipated. There have been both disappointments and delights, and many moments of sheer panic.

Now that it is over I find myself reflecting on similarities to the present situation in Northern Ireland. We have been living in one 'house' for many years now. It has its drawbacks. The paintwork is shabby and the furniture is showing its age. It has become too small, too confining. But it is full of memories - it is home. The idea of a fresh start appeals, but the prospect of making the move daunts. Perhaps my recent experiences will enlighten us.

Preparations began many months ago. I considered what I wanted in a new house, where it should be and what it would cost. I discovered that there are people who specialise in advice on such matters - estate agents, solicitors, removal men, friends with a collection of sturdy boxes and family who gave time to pack them. The people of Ulster have already decided to 'move' and they are working through the same process. They too have friends who are willing to advise and support them. It would be foolhardy to spurn their help.

The house move presented me with other choices too. What should I do with all the 'stuff' I had accumulated? Much of it was not even mine. The roof space was packed with family photographs, suitcases full of old curtains, childhood toys, obsolete equipment which wasn't quite useless enough to throw away. And the garage ... it took a couple of weeks alone! In the end I made the decisions. Some has come with me to the new house. Much has been given to charity. Still more was thrown into a skip for dumping. Perhaps the greatest joy was to find friends and family who could benefit from my surpluses. An important lesson was learnt. My life was full of things I didn't need. I hadn't used them for many years, but I was reluctant to get rid of them - just in case ...

Here again is a parallel. So many Ulster people are hoarding 'stuff' they have long since ceased using. Life has changed. The familiar things they depended on in the past are out-dated and obsolete. They don't work, haven't worked for many years. It will be hard to throw them in the skip, but they won't be missed in the new house. Other possessions will be retained, things of true value that will, in the future, be useful or instructive. It takes courage to choose and determination to act.

There is a cost. Not everything in the new house is perfect. Some things need work. Some will require me to amend my expectations. I must allow myself time to acclimatise, find the best shops, get to know the neighbours, work out the best way to drive to work. Our province can expect similar adjustments. If we want everything to be perfect we may as well give up now. It's a challenging but exciting prospect. Our hand is on the plough. Looking back will make a dreadful mess of the field.

Ruth Hutchinson
Assistant Editor



As always in Northern Ireland the recent elections revolved around one issue - constitutional politics and the direction of the peace process. There was never any doubt that the results would be significant for the future of the Belfast Agreement. The arguments now continue as to precisely what the results should mean for how political life progresses in the coming months.

Personally I think the elections were a good result. At Westminster we now have a fairer representation of the reality that we all knew existed on the ground. Combined with the local election results the political landscape is more accurately reflected in the 21% to 26 % share of the vote allocated across the four major parties. This is a picture of us as we really are.

But not quite! Around 30% of us didn't bother to vote - up to twice as many as voted for any one of the main parties with their 15% to 18% share of those entitled to vote. This is a disturbing trend in democracies. More so in a society where the division of political spoils can have serious impact on the stability that benefits voters and non-voters alike.

In political terms the reality is that there are four clearly established parties and none of them has an immediate prospect of securing sufficient support to dictate the terms of progress. They need each other to secure even a part of what they want. Many, including some politicians, have recognised this for a long time. It's a scenario that means no one can be excluded if stability is to be secured. But if dialogue is to take place across this spectrum of our community then two obstacles have to be addressed.

Decommissioning must stop being used as an extension of the armed struggle - the threat and possession of arms, rather than their use, to gain political advantage. This may not be the stated aim of the republican movement but it is increasingly the felt experience of those who observe the constant failure to act on promises given.

Such benign use of the culture of violence is as morally bankrupt as the campaigns of the 1970s to 1990s. It has no place in a society where freely given consent is the principle of democratic change. It has no place in a political strategy that professes to want to reach out to Protestants and Unionists to make peace, never mind convincing sufficient numbers that they may want to share in a political process that would unite Ireland!

The war needs to be seen to be over - political violence, in all its guises, a thing of the past. This remains a reasonable expectation of those who supported the Belfast Agreement, with all its flaws, as a way to work for a better future for all.

To share equal rights in government means an equal responsibility for the moral framework of the society that is being governed. And that means that the violence that disfigures all our communities must be vigorously opposed.

Sectarianism must be challenged as a basis for political organisation - the claim that God is on my side and the implication that true Christians consequently share my political aspirations. All Christians rejoice that there is a God in heaven - but this is a God whose sovereign rule extends to election results in West Tyrone, South Antrim and North Down as much as in East Londonderry.

The use of Old Testament religious language and imagery to claim territory or divine vindication of any human political philosophy, people or culture cannot be sustained from biblical teaching. Of course God desires righteousness among the nations, but God's chosen is Christ and God's people the church. God's overwhelming passion is the embrace into his kingdom of grace of people from every nation, tribe, territory and political conviction.

Religious nationalism has no place in the legitimate engagement between faith and politics. It has no place in a political strategy that professes to make Northern Ireland a place where Catholics and Nationalists can feel at home, the only path to the stability within the UK that its loudest proponents aspire to. And it certainly has no place in the life of any church that desires to bring the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ to all.

There are real and legitimate concerns with the Agreement and its outworking. But in the complex moral maze of generations of communal hatred and violence no one is truly vindicated - clear of blame or suspicion.

Political violence and sectarianism may be our legacy from the past. But it is our choice as to whether they remain the burden of our future.

David Porter

In his *Journals*, the Danish philosopher and theologian of last century, Soren Kierkegaard called for a second reformation. "Christendom," he wrote, "has long been in need of a hero who, in fear and trembling, had the courage to forbid people to read the Bible."¹

Such a call seems no less radical in today's post-Christendom environment than it was in Kierkegaard's day, when there was a proliferation of Bible Societies dedicated to the task of translating and distributing the Bible to all corners of the globe. Kierkegaard was fiercely critical of these Societies, describing them as 'vapid caricatures of mission . . . which like all companies only work with money and are just as mundanely interested in spreading the Bible as other companies in their enterprises'.²

While this criticism summarily dismisses the constructive role the Bible Societies have played in the spread of the Gospel to so many cultures and parts of the world, it compels us to ponder some of our deeply held assumptions about the Bible, especially in relation to the way it functions as Holy Scripture in Western culture, which has its roots in European Christendom.

In a paper delivered in 1993 to the British and Foreign Bible Society, Dan Beeby cited God's famous smuggler to the Soviet Union and China, Brother Andrew, who observed that in the West 'too many Christians today do not want the Bible to interfere with their Christianity'.³ This observation suggests two things. First, it states what we all probably know to be the case: In the West Bibles are plentiful but are seldom read. Chances are, most homes still have at least one Bible in them, but they're seldom referred to, far less read on any kind of regular basis. This fact renders meaningless the oft-quoted statistic that the Bible is the most published book ever.

Following on from this, Brother Andrew's comment suggests that the Bible is marginalized. A Bible gathering dust on the shelf cannot shape one's mind, move one to pray, command obedience, or deepen one's faith, far less cultivate holy living. As Dan Beeby puts it, 'the Western Church possesses a Bible but not a Scripture'. Implicit in this distinction is a recognition as Christians that 'for most of our lives our minds have been trained and nourished by the assumptions of a non-scriptural culture'.⁴

Beeby's argument is supported by George Hunter III, who says the modern mind is not so much informed by the Bible as 'anaesthetised by the junk food of the mind, served up by an endless diet of (women's and) men's magazines, formula novels, game shows, situation comedies, soap operas, shallow movies and synthetic friends'.⁵

One of the most subtle yet profound effects of a non-scriptural culture on the Christian mind is the tendency to privatise one's understanding and application of the Christian faith, including one's reading of the Bible. Descartes' famous dictum, and the battle cry of the Enlightenment, 'I think therefore I am', not only located the ultimate source of knowledge in the power of human thought rather than divine revelation. It also placed the individual human subject at the centre of reality, thereby giving rise to a non-relational view of the human person as an autonomous individual

whose being is defined solely by one's capacity to think. The slogan 'I think therefore I am' not only ignored totally the place that relationships have in defining one's humanity — including one's relationship with God. It also carried with it a profound scepticism toward all institutions, including the Church, which make truth-claims that cannot be verified or proved by the freestanding, freethinking individual.

The corollary of this was a view of religion as something that deals with private, unverifiable myths and beliefs, as opposed to hard, scientific facts. And that, by and large, is still the predominant view today. The Church is marginalised, and the book by which it lives and derives its view of truth - the Bible - is marginalised and silenced. Scepticism persists towards the institutional Church, and people prefer to pursue or develop their own spirituality without being tied to traditional doctrinal beliefs and church structures. Hence the popularity of the New Age movement, the Sea of Faith network and the like.

In his book, *Habits of the Heart*, American sociologist Robert Bellah cites a 1978 Gallup Poll, which found that 80% of Americans believe that ... 'an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues'.⁶ Noting the percentage gap in this country between those who, on their census form, still declare a denominational allegiance, and those who actually attend church, I suspect the American situation, which Bellah describes, is very close to our own, and is probably indicative of western culture as a whole.

Interestingly, the roots of today's religious individualism are not to be found in the Enlightenment alone. Indeed, the Enlightenment's emphasis upon the individual did not arise in a vacuum. In his seminal work of 1941, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr drew attention to the impact of the Renaissance and the Reformation on modernity's emphasis upon the individual.⁷ The Renaissance's concern to emancipate learning from the medieval tyranny of religious dogmatism, through the rediscovery of ancient Greek philosophy, science and literature, was accompanied by an emphasis upon the uniqueness and potential of each human being, and upon the freedom of the will.

At the same time, the Reformation principle of the 'priesthood of all believers' brought about a heightened emphasis upon the faith and responsibility of the individual before God, in direct defiance of the mediating role assumed by the medieval church. Personal faith rather than reliance upon the Church's priesthood and system of sacraments became a distinguishing mark of Protestantism. Luther, said Niebuhr, put the matter in a typically robust illustration: "When you lie upon your deathbed you cannot console yourself by saying, 'The pope said thus and so'. The devil can drill a hole through that assurance. Suppose the pope were wrong? Then you will be defeated. Therefore you must be able to say at all times, 'This is the word of God'."⁸

Luther's exhortation for individual Christians to know for themselves the word of God coincided with the advent of the printing press in sixteenth century Europe, which took the Bible out of the churches and placed it in the hands of ordinary people. Luther was rather visionary in his appreciation of the power of the printing press in advancing the Protestant cause, describing printing as 'God's highest act of grace, whereby the business of

the Gospel is driven forward'.⁹ As Neil Postman comments, Luther understood 'that the mass-produced book, by placing the Word of God on every kitchen table, makes each Christian his own theologian—one might even say his own priest, or, better, from Luther's point of view, his own pope'.¹⁰

If the Reformation was instrumental in sowing the seed of religious individualism on the continent, the seed was successfully transplanted on to British soil by the English Puritans in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Puritanism was a complex and diverse phenomenon, but at its heart was a concern for purity of doctrine and Christian life at a time of enormous political and religious upheaval. I would identify two aspects of Puritanism that encouraged religious individualism.

First, as those of Puritan leaning resisted the repeated attempts of the monarchy to impose religious and liturgical uniformity upon the nation, there was a reaction against the use of set liturgies in public worship. Driven by a conviction that God should be worshipped and obeyed according to the 'purity' of the Bible, many Puritans desired freedom in worship, with an emphasis on 'free prayer' and the 'freedom of the Spirit'. In many congregations the Spirit-led extempore prayer of individuals was preferred over the 'stinted forms' of the Establishment.

Second, as the doctrine of predestination grew in prominence in Puritan doctrine, there was an increasing introspection on the part of individual Christians: "Am I one of the elect? How do I know that I am one of the elect?" This was the concern that dominated the writing of William Perkins, the most widely read Puritan of the first half of the seventeenth century, who, by the end of that century, had replaced the combined names of John Calvin and Theodore Beza as one of most popular authors of religious works in England. His famous *Golden Chaine Concerning the Order of the Causes of Salvation and Damnation, According to God's Word* constitutes an exposition of God's double-decree, whereby some people have been ordained to salvation and others to eternal damnation.

As individual Christians sought assurance that they were among the elect, not the reprobate, Perkins directed their attention ultimately not to the contemplation of the person and work of Christ, as Calvin had sought to do, but to an examination of their conscience which, he maintained, is unaffected by the Fall,¹¹ is bound by the Word of God, and leads to the performance of good works.¹² Not that Perkins encouraged an individualistic piety, nor did he exalt the importance of the individual, for he emphasised the need to listen to the counsel of the wise and godly and to belong to, and be accountable to, the visible church.¹³ But his central interest in the knowledge of election, the special role he gave to religious experience and the conscience, and his zeal for individual souls, did take Reformed theology and piety one step further down the track of religious individualism.

This was reflected in the Puritan approach to the interpretation of Scripture. As with Calvin and Reformed teaching in general, Puritan teaching emphasised the role of the Holy Spirit over against Tradition.¹⁴ However, as Brooks Holifield notes, it also 'elaborated far more carefully than Calvin the internal spiritual qualities of the (individual) believer that were necessary for

understanding the written Word. Within Puritanism generally, humility, inward purity of heart, and spiritual piety became prerequisites for understanding'.¹⁵

The subtle transfer of cognitive authority from the Church to the individual in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was further advanced by the Enlightenment. Even though the Church resisted many of the secularist aspects of the Enlightenment, it was nevertheless influenced by the general confidence in the basic intelligence or common sense of the individual person, the legacy of which is still felt today. As Stanley Hauerwas sums it up, 'the reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura*, joined to the invention of the printing press and underwritten by the democratic trust in the intelligence of the common person, has created the situation that now makes people believe that they can read the Bible on their own,'¹⁶ without the necessary mediation of the Church.

This perception is reflected in the situation of universities, in many instances, presuming to teach theology and biblical studies either in a non-confessional manner, or in a confessional manner that is not anchored in the life and praxis of the Church. We now know, in this post-Enlightenment era, that there is no such thing as detached, neutral, scholarship. The atheistic lecturer in biblical studies brings just as many assumptions and implicit beliefs to his or her task as a card-carrying Baptist.

In my view, there is a threefold danger in the pretence of academic neutrality, when it comes to biblical studies. First, in setting up a biblical studies programme that exists independently of the life and praxis of the Church, it tends to treat the Bible as something that can be mastered and controlled by the individual through an academic process, rather than something to which one must submit with others in faith and prayer. The tools of textual criticism that define the academic process are deemed to be of greater importance than the mediating function of the Church as a living, interpretative community of faith.

Second, it drives a wedge between one's study of the Bible and one's faith, between theory and praxis. What we learn about the Bible in the classroom may or may not impact upon our lives outside the classroom, even to the extent that we develop, in Kierkegaard's words, 'a religion of learning and law' that constitutes a 'distraction' from the real task of Christian living. In this regard, Kierkegaard observed that the downside to the pursuit of biblical knowledge is that no one reads the Bible 'humanly'. By this, he meant that the Christian life so easily becomes a 'fortification of excuses and escapes; for there is always something one has to look into first of all', the result of which is that 'one never begins'.¹⁷

Third, the vacuum generated by the absence of the Church's mediating function in theology and biblical studies tends to get filled up with a whole host of substitute assumptions and ideologies, the dangers of which are evident in the troubled histories of Northern Ireland, South Africa and Nazi Germany - and we might add Serbia to that list - all deeply Christian countries, yet each one captured by a nationalistic or sectarian ideology that is profoundly anti-Christian. The term 'cultural Protestantism' has come to refer to the situation wherein Christianity is identified with its surrounding culture to the extent that the ideologies and intellectual forces that shape and

drive one's culture also dominate the Church, so that the lives of Christians are no longer shaped by the distinctive promise and demand of the Gospel.

Stanley Hauerwas notes precisely this tendency in relation to his own country, the United States of America, a country whose imagination and self-understanding have been shaped profoundly by stories of Roy Rogers and countless other wild west heroes who rise to the occasion to combat evil, blazing six-gun in hand. In this culture, notes Hauerwas, few Christians see any inherent incompatibility between the use of violence and what Jesus was about. Indeed, as we have seen in relation to Iraq and Serbia in recent years, righteous violence, in which the forces of good combat the forces of evil, often accompanied by the image of the President leading the nation in prayer, seems to have become a distinguishing feature of American foreign policy.

Drawing attention to the biblical account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Hauerwas argues that 'to claim that if Jesus had joined us on the Emmaus road, we would have recognised him is not unlike claiming that in order to understand the Scripture all we have to do is pick it up and read it. Both claims assume that 'the facts are just there' and that reasonable people are able to see the facts if their minds are not clouded. Yet . . . the story of Emmaus road makes clear that knowing the Scripture does little good unless we know it is part of a people constituted by the practices of a resurrected Lord. So Scripture will not be self-interpreting or plain in its meaning unless we have been transformed in order to be capable of reading it'.¹⁸

While many Christian leaders today talk about influencing Western culture through the propagation of Christian values and biblical principles which, allegedly, are self-evident, such talk tends to bypass the biblical emphasis upon *metanoia*, which is variously translated as repentance, conversion and transformation. The fact is the Bible does not impart a readily discernible set of universal principles or values. It narrates a history - the history of a triune God's relation to the world, in, through and with a first century Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. To understand this history, to become part of it, and to follow and abide with the One who stands at the centre of it, requires *metanoia*. Thus, when the Bible exhorts us to love one another, it does not do so on the basis that love is a universal value that can be applied through an act of the will. It does so on the basis that God in Christ has first loved us. In other words, we can only truly love once we have been, and are continually being, transformed by God's love.

Who is the agent of this transformation? It is the Holy Spirit, certainly. But, as we know from the New Testament, and in particular the story of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit does not merely transform one individual after another. The Spirit creates a new community, a resurrection community, a new humanity. Transformation is both corporate and personal, the two being interwoven.

Too often, especially in the Reformed tradition, the community dimension has been neglected, leading well known Old Testament scholar G. Ernest Wright to observe 45 years ago that in practice congregations tend to be 'a gathering of individuals who know little of Christian community in the biblical sense and expect little from it. Like secular clubs they meet in the various groups to hear speakers on a variety of topics that are usually unrelated,

undigested, and unilluminated by the Christian faith. The worship of the Church has been heavily influenced by individualistic pietism, concerned largely, not with the social organism, but with the individual's need for peace, rest and joy in the midst of the storms and billows of life. The self-centredness of the pietistic search for salvation tends to exclude vigorous concern with community. Hence the modern Christian searches his Bible in a manner not unlike the pagan's search of his sacred literature, the purpose being to find inspirational, devotional, and moral enlightenment for personal living, and nothing more. The sectarianism of the Churches, and their racial and national cleavages, are further expressions of an individualism which distorts the nature of Christian society and provides excuse for the world's individualism'.¹⁹

To the extent that Wright's observation is still valid today - and I think it is - there is a pressing need for the Church to rediscover what it means to be the Church, and it is this more than anything else, I believe, that will be the key to letting the Bible speak in today's world. The mere distribution of more Bibles will not do it, nor will exhortations for more people to read their Bibles. It will require a community which, in standing under the authority of its Scriptures, is cultivating a way of being in the world that reflects the distinctiveness of its life in, through and with Christ.

Within this room there will be a variety of opinions as to what this means in practice. For the Apostle Paul, the reality of being in Christ or - as he sometimes described it - being clothed with Christ through baptism, meant being part of a radically new life-in-community, a new humanity, in which the traditional divisions and consequent inequalities that existed in wider society between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, were abolished.²⁰ It meant being charged with a ministry of reconciliation that flows from the reconciliation of the world to the One in whom there is a new creation.²¹ It meant being called to a new life of faith and freedom in the Spirit rather than being enslaved either to the Law²² or to the desires of the flesh.²³ We know from reading the rest of the New Testament that it also meant a whole lot of other things on both a personal and community level, but the bottom line was, the Church was being called to truly be a counter-cultural community, an agent of renewal and hope in a world caught in the grip of sin and death.

At the centre of this community stood the person of Christ, not merely as a role model - a fine example who lived 2000 years ago - but as the One whose resurrection life continually indwells his Church - his body - in a dynamic way, releasing people to live in the Spirit. In this context, central to Paul's understanding of the Christian life was the reality of being, or living, 'in Christ', a phrase he uses over 160 times in his letters. In the same way, John's Gospel uses the language of 'abiding in Christ', just as a branch abides in the vine.

It was this reality of being in union with Christ, and not merely following his example, that led John Calvin to give such priority to the Eucharist. For him, the Lord's Supper was not just a meal of remembrance. It was a visible expression of the present and enduring union with Christ, a union that is in his body, the Church. The bread and wine are signs of a reality that our life before God flows from the flesh and blood of Christ, that we are fed on his human nature in virtue of the 'wondrous exchange' by which Christ has taken our unrighteousness upon himself and clothed us with the righteousness that is his.

I mention this because, it seems to me, the less eucharistic Reformed worship has become since the time of Calvin, the more the Church has fallen away from this sense of being in union with Christ, and the more individualistic and Pelagian it has become. The sermon is the main feature of many Reformed worship services, but without the Eucharist we tend to regard the sermon primarily as something that is intended for individual Christians rather than something that leads us into eucharistic community with one another. As James B. Torrance puts it, 'we sit in the pew watching the minister "doing his thing", exhorting us "to do our thing", until we go home thinking we have done our duty for another week!'²⁴

The issue here is not one of two competing authorities, Scripture and tradition. Rather, as Vigen Guroian argues, 'it is about truth and how that truth comes to life, how it is hypostasized (or enfleshed) in the communion of believers. . . From the standpoint of this eucharistic and communal hermeneutic, the prevalent Western model - namely, that two authorities, Scripture and tradition, are subject to interpretation by the autonomous intellect - is very questionable'.²⁵

In conclusion, I am not convinced that the Bible can speak directly to our western culture, any more than it can speak in an unmediated fashion to any culture. Just as a book on quantum physics is dependent upon and requires the mediating function of the community of scholarship of which it is part, so the Bible is dependent upon and requires the mediating function of the community of interpretation which the Spirit has called into being and which we call the Church. Biblical interpretation is a community process grounded in the unique world-view, the distinct memories, and the particular set of practices that constitute life in the Kingdom of God. The clue to letting the Bible speak to the West, therefore, is to be found in the area of ecclesiology.

¹ *The Journal of Kierkegaard* trans. A. Dru (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p.150, cited by Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scriptures: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p.17

² *Journal*, cited *ibid.* p.17

³ Dan Beeby, "Scripture: From Rumour to Recovery?" unpublished paper, 1993, p.1

⁴ *Ibid.* p.2

⁵ George G. Hunter III, *How to Reach a Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) p.23

⁶ Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (California: University of California Press, 1985), p.228

⁷ Cf. Niebuhr, "Individuality in Modern Culture", from *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1, 1941, reprinted in *Individualism Reconsidered: Readings Bearing on the Endangered Self in Modern Society*, eds. D.Capps & R.K. Fenn (Center for Religion, Self & Society, Princeton Theological Seminary, Monograph Series No. 1), pp.33-9

⁸ *Ibid.* p.34

⁹ Cited by Neil Postman, in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p.15

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.15

¹¹ Perkins taught that the soul consists of two faculties, understanding and will, the former being the realm of reason and conscience, the latter being the realm of affections. The

conscience, in which the image of God resides, he alleged, is part of the understanding of all human beings, whether elect or reprobate, and is determining of their actions.

¹² The emphasis Perkins gave to the role of the conscience is evident in Ian Breward's comment that he "spent Sabbath afternoons resolving cases of conscience and from the outset his books displayed a keen interest in the subject. His book *A Resolution to the Countriman* dealt with the issues raised by the use of almanacs, *A Case of Conscience—the Greatest that Ever was* appeared in 1592, *A Discourse on Conscience* in 1595, while he was working on a synthesis of his earlier work when he died in 1602, so that *Cases of Conscience* was published posthumously" (*William Perkins*, ed. Ian Breward, (Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970), p.62).

¹³ The accountability of the individual Christian to the Church for purity of life became evident in the Puritan devotion to exercising ecclesiastical discipline. Censures covered all manner of sins from the display of 'strong and violent passions' to 'idleness, tattling, and being busie-bodies in other men's matters'. "Even such peccadilloes as gossiping or occasional laziness were actually punishable by excommunication" (Cf. Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England (Volume 2): From Andrewes to Baxter and Fox, 1603-1690* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p.234).

¹⁴ The Church was regarded as the keeper of Scripture, not its lord. As William Perkins put it, "The Church is not to challenge to herself authority over the scriptures, but only a ministry or ministerial service, whereby she is appointed of God to publish and preach them and to give testimony of them". Cf., Ian Breward's Introduction to *William Perkins*, p.46.

¹⁵ E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1974), p.50

¹⁶ *Unleashing the Scriptures*, p.17

¹⁷ Cited by Hauerwas, *ibid.* pp.16-7

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.49

¹⁹ G. Ernest Wright, *The Biblical Doctrine of Man in Society* (London: SCM, 1954), p.21, cited by Hauerwas, *ibid.*, p.26

²⁰ Cf. Galatians 3:27-28

²¹ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:16-20

²² Cf. Galatians 2:16f

²³ Cf. Ephesians 4:17f

²⁴ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996), p.20

²⁵ Vigen Guroian, *Ethics After Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) p.59

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HAGAR AND THE GOD WHO SEES

Fran Porter

Sometimes I am asked to talk about gender and the church, the Bible or theology. In terms of our reading and use of the Scriptures, part of what considering gender means is realising that the stories of women in the Bible tend to be neglected.¹ On one occasion, rather than talking about this omission and the importance of correcting it, I chose instead to illustrate the value of paying attention to overlooked women in the biblical narrative by focusing on one such story. I chose the story of Hagar in Genesis 16.

In the church service in which this look at Hagar's story was first presented, I had originally intended to make use of the Dramatised Bible² for the Scripture reading. This is the majority of the biblical text set out in dramatised form to help when reading scripture out loud; it is useful for handling long pieces of narrative and for choral and responsive readings. However and to my surprise, the events of Genesis 16 were not included, in spite of the dust jacket claiming that all the Bible narrative is dramatised. The further incident with Hagar in Genesis 21 is included, although I suspect that is because of the place of Abraham in that part of the story. For our purposes in the church service we did a DIY dramatic reading of the passage in Genesis 16.

This neglect of Hagar is all the more strange given the importance placed on her story by Paul in Galatians (4:21-5:1) when he uses her slavery to illustrate people's spiritual enslavement. In focusing on her story my intention was to unearth a treasure not so much hidden in Scripture as hidden by our selective use of the Bible. And of course, part of the reason for disregarding Hagar is because she is a woman. As a careful look at her story shows, this prejudice has kept many of us from an understanding of God which her life experience reveals. Against this background, I introduced the story of Hagar as, to a large extent, one of the Bible's forgotten women.

To a large extent Hagar is one of the Bible's forgotten women. While people may know of her existence, her story rarely receives detailed attention, suggesting that she is not considered a key character in the biblical narrative. Ironically, Hagar is overlooked now just as she was in her own time.

We meet Hagar because of her connection with Abram and Sarai. While we are concerned here with Hagar's story, it is irretrievably intertwined with the fortunes of these far better known characters. While not dwelling too much on their perspectives and experiences, it is important to understand something of the dynamics in their lives in order to understand more fully Hagar's own story.

When Abram was 75 years old and Sarai about 65, Abram was called by God to leave his home in Haran and go where God would take him (Genesis 12:1). So Abram and his entire household went to Canaan, which at the time was inhabited by the Canaanites. Here God specifically promised that Abram's offspring would be given the land (Genesis 12:7). The well-known complication to this plan was that Abram and Sarai had no children for Sarai, we are told in Genesis 11:30, was barren. And it is this context that has to be encountered when we come to story of Hagar.

Of course, we all know what happens, how the story unfolds. The events around the birth of Isaac are extraordinary. Indeed, 'virtually no hero worth his salt in Genesis is born under circumstances that are ordinary for his mother'.³ But Sarai and Abram, when we meet them in Genesis 16, did not have the benefit of our hindsight and fuller record of events. Sarai had lived all her married life hoping to have a child. She had lived through the waiting, the hoping, the disappointment, and the guilt at not providing Abram with children. In the Old Testament, where a woman's status is very much defined by her children, the lot of the childless woman is cruel and harsh. This is seen also in the lives of Rebekah and Rachel, Rachel saying it all when she remonstrates with Jacob and cries those haunting words, 'Give me children, or I shall die!' (Genesis 30:1-2). And it is to me a staggering thought that after all that Sarai must have endured, and surely towards a time when she had given up expectations of her own pregnancy, that God gives the promise to Abram of a child, and that she (and indeed Abram) actually have to wait a further 25 years before that promise is fulfilled in the birth of Isaac. I don't know what you think a long time to wait is. For different people one day seems unbearable, for others a matter of months or years. I think Sarai had the kind of waiting that is almost unendurable and her actions surely must be viewed in the light of this very specific traumatised situation.

Were it not for this situation, of course, Hagar would remain anonymous to us, lost under the designation of one of Sarai's maidservants. Our story occurs some 10 years after Abram was initially called by God to leave Haran and about 15 years before Isaac was born.

So who was Hagar? She was a slave girl, and an Egyptian. Very possibly she has been given to Abram by the King of Egypt after the King had taken Sarai for his wife. In escaping famine Abram travelled to Egypt and, because he feared the Egyptians would kill him in order to have Sarai, who was very beautiful, he claimed Sarai was his sister. The Pharaoh's officials set their sights on Sarai, and hence she was taken to the king and became his wife, for which Abram was bestowed favours of 'sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys and camels' (Genesis 12:10-20). When the Pharaoh eventually realised Sarai was already married she was returned to Abram. So what we have here really are two women sold into slavery and used as objects - Sarai because of her beauty and Hagar because of her youth and potential fertility.

There was a difference between these two, of course, for Sarai at this point has access to wealth and some power and Hagar has neither of these. She is a foreigner, a slave girl, owns nothing, not even her own freedom and is given by Sarai to Abram as his wife in order to bear children for her. The custom of having children by another woman is seen also in the story of Rachel (Genesis 30:3) and 'it is probably safe to assume that surrogate motherhood was an actual custom in the ancient Near East ... and would have been eminently possible in a world in which slavery was practiced and persons' sexual services could be donated by their masters or mistresses.'⁴ So Hagar is subjected to enforced sexual intercourse for the purpose of becoming pregnant with a child who will be given over to her mistress and will not be her own. These are not nice little bedtime stories for children in the pages of the Old Testament. They are the kind of things not talked about in polite company. And while it may be that we have to make these stories accessible to children, I think that as adults we should not run away from the traumatic events they describe.

Hagar does conceive - things are going according to Sarai's plan. But the result of this as far as Hagar is concerned is that 'she looked with contempt on her mistress' (Genesis 16:4) or more literally, 'her mistress was slight in her eyes'. I don't know how you react to Hagar's contempt, what you feel towards her at this point. Do your sympathies lie with Hagar or with Sarai? Megan McKenna has used this story in numerous Bible study groups and she has observed: 'Whenever this passage is read, reactions are split diametrically, depending on the audience. There is indignation and interpretations of jealousy and pettiness against Hagar among women who are educated and economically stable; there is laughter and delight among poor women.'⁵ Megan McKenna tells that in using this story among immigrant women in North America she learnt how some of them who were working as maids in wealthy households had been made pregnant by the man of the house and had been thrown out as a result. Others had run away, others been treated like old clothes the rich get tired of and then thrown out with the rubbish. Therefore, their identification with Hagar is very strong.

It is not possible to know for sure what was going through Hagar's mind and heart at this time. Perhaps it could be that Hagar had for the first time in her life found herself in a position that gave her some feeling of empowerment, which was very much a previously unknown experience to her. For all

her status as a nobody, a nothing, a vessel to be used at someone else's bidding, whether it be for sexual or other purposes, she now knows that she has achieved what her wealthy and relatively powerful mistress has been unable to do, has indeed failed to do all her life. Alternatively, it could be that Sarai becomes slight in Hagar's eyes because of the way that her mistress has used her as an object, as a means to an end and that she can no longer have any respect for someone who treats her that way. Or it could be simply that the hierarchy of power between these two women has been broken down by Hagar's pregnancy, that Hagar now views her mistress more like another woman than she does a mistress. What is clear is that the plan that Hagar's pregnancy should elevate Sarai's status is not working out - rather the reverse happens, Sarai finds her esteem lowered. For Hagar is not just an object to be used. She is a human being and here acts as a person in her own right.

All of this is too much for Sarai. In the end she treats Hagar so harshly that Hagar runs away, this flight in and of itself a risky thing for a slave to do. It is probable, due to the location of the well of water mentioned in the narrative, which was enroute to a region on the Egyptian border, that she was trying to make her way back to her homeland.

It is in the desert, in this desperate situation, that Hagar encounters God. In looking at the story of Hagar it can be difficult for us to find a direct connection with Hagar's story and our own lives. Her circumstances seem so far removed from our reality. But what we can do is learn about God through the very different experiences of other people. If three people were to describe a mutual friend it is likely that they would say some similar things about this person. It is also true that each of them would highlight some aspect of the person's character that the others had not thought about or that certainly was not uppermost in their minds. This is because in our relationships our various needs, abilities, experiences, and situations create different dynamics between us. I think the same can be true of our relationship with God. And Hagar's situation reveals something of God to us that, certainly up to this point in Genesis, we had not known about before. We see this particularly in her response to her encounter with God. To me Hagar's response is the most remarkable part in this whole episode. We are told that Hagar named the Lord who spoke to her. It is not that she called on God's name. Hagar actually named God. The slave girl names the deity! It almost seems audacious of her! So powerful is her encounter with God who up to this point had been largely if not totally unknown to her that she needs a name for the One she has now met so personally. In fact this is the only occasion in the Bible where a human being uses the formal naming formula in ascribing a name to God.

Names are very interesting things. They convey meaning. Today most of the names that we have have meanings although many of these are not commonly known any more. The Old Testament is full of names for people and for God that have meanings and connections and even explanations. The 1990 film 'Dances with Wolves' has as its title the name given by a Sioux Indian tribe to the soldier John Dunbar because they see him interacting with wolves. In that film the

names of other individuals were 'Stands with a fist' and 'Smiles a Lot' – names which described something of their character. And what Hagar does here is give a name to God that describes who God is for her at this moment, El-Roi - God who sees or a God of seeing.

Why did she give God that name? If you read this story and were asked to make up a name for God that represented this encounter with Hagar would you have come up with 'God who sees'? Or would you have thought in terms of rescue, or saving, or maybe justice? Hagar doesn't use any of these terms. God is a God who sees. And I think the reason for this was that in all of Hagar's existence to date she was someone who was unseen. She was virtually invisible. Certainly in this passage, while we are told her name, Abram and Sarai do not use it of her - she is always called just 'the slave-girl' - with no name. It is not until the angel of the Lord finds her that she is addressed by her name, 'Hagar'.

Perhaps the idea of 'the God who sees' is a negative trigger for some people. The idea of seeing can have connotations of exposure: I can see what you are doing - God can see what you are doing - you going to be found out; and also the idea of not being good enough. But the God who sees here is not this kind of severe judge seeking out imperfections. Rather we are talking of God seeing what others do not care to see, and what is more, knowing the full import of what is seen. The slave girl who is nameless, unseen, and of no account becomes, through the intervention of God, Hagar, seen and valued. This, I think, is why Hagar chooses the name 'God who sees'. Hagar does not know God as the God of Abram, but as the God who sees.

Hagar introduces us, therefore, to the God who cares for the oppressed, whoever the oppressed in a society may be. We are overseen by a God who sees those who are more usually overlooked. This is both a comfort and a challenge to us. It is a comfort in that we are included in this seeing of God. Whenever we find ourselves and our situations neglected or excluded by others, we do not go unnoticed by the God who sees. It is a challenge to us to learn how to see as God sees, valuing those who are not valued either in our society or by us as individuals - those without wealth, power, possessions, ability, social skills, or social standing. We can be sure that those who are marginalised by our society or ourselves as individuals are seen by the God who sees. We need to learn to see as God sees even as we are ourselves so seen.

It is a difficult reality in this story to face up to that, in fact, in Hagar's encounter with God she is not liberated out of her situation. The first thing she is told is that she is to return to her mistress so in many respects, in the immediacy, there is no change for her. In fact she continues to know affliction - that this is not condoned by God is evident in the name God gives for her son, 'Ishmael', which means 'the Lord hears' - this hearing relating specifically to Hagar's suffering. But Hagar is to return to the same position from which she has run away. She returns to the same people, but with no change in the power relations between them. We also know that with these same dynamics operating some 13 or so years later she will return to the desert, with her son, having been sent away

by Abram. Here she is given a promise by God that exactly parallels the one given to Abram - that her offspring would be so numerous that they would be countless.

She is also given the divine prediction about Ishmael's future. This sounds somewhat strange to us: that he would be a wild ass of a man. In Job 39:5-8 the wild ass is described as a free, unrestrained creature going where it will. In other words, Ishmael would be untameable as the wild ass is untameable - he would be his own master, not somebody's slave. This is a wonderful promise for the son of a slave-girl, but Hagar's own path remains a difficult and isolated one. And at this particular point in her life she is not liberated out of her situation. She does not flourish - she only survives. And it can be that as part of today's difficult reality sometimes all people can do is survive. There are some occasions and some situations when it is not possible to change circumstances which we wish were different, not possible to make progress and move forward as we would want to, and not possible in any sense of the word to flourish, but only to survive.

The psalms bear ample witness to the difficulty of the experience of survival - be it physical or emotional. Many of the first 50 psalms contain evidence of great soul searching, anguish and pain. Hagar's story tells us that such experiences do not go unseen by God even if they are unacknowledged by other people. Maybe at these times to survive is actually to achieve a great deal.

So Hagar survives. And Hagar is seen by God. And Hagar gives God a name that tells us what she has come to know about God through her experiences. And it seems to me that if we can learn about God from Hagar, we can also learn about God from each other and our many and varied experiences of God. So a final thought is this: if out of your experience of God you were to give God a name, what would it be?

¹ I addressed this in a previous article in **Lion and Lamb: 'Understanding Scripture: What about Gender?'** Winter 1998/1999.

² Michael Perry (ed) (1989) **The Dramatised Bible**, London: Marshall Pickering and Swindon: Bible Society.

³ Susan Niditch, (1992) 'Genesis' in Carol A Newsom and Sharon H Ringe (eds) **The Women's Bible Commentary**, London: SPCK, p. 17.

⁴ Susan Niditch, (1992) 'Genesis' in Carol A Newsom and Sharon H Ringe (eds) **The Women's Bible Commentary**, London, SPCK, p. 17.

⁵ Megan McKenna, (1994) **Not Counting Women and Children Neglected Stories from the Bible**, Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, p. 175.

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FAITH and PRACTICE

FAITH and PRACTICE ... David McClurg (Secretary - Police Federation)

David McClurg is Secretary of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland. This is the fifth interview in a series exploring the connection between faith and practice in the workplace.

David McClurg has been a full-time serving officer in the RUC since 1977. He has held the post of Secretary of the Federation for 10 years, having previously been sergeants' representative and Vice Chairman. The Police Federation for Northern Ireland's remit is welfare and efficiency. Essentially it is a trade union for members of the RUC, without many of the powers of a trade union. Police officers can't strike or take industrial action. His job includes negotiations on pay, pensions and severance. We began by asking David how he became involved in the work of the Federation.

When I joined the Federation in 1979 I had no desire to hold office. All I wanted to do was to represent the sergeants in the division where I was then. That meant dealing with welfare issues that came their way, whether it was a discipline hearing, dealing with their pension issues, making sure that they got their entitlements, or that they were looked after when they were off sick. In 1987 when I was vice-chairman I walked behind twelve RUC funerals as I represented the Federation. That also entailed going to the homes, trying to help the families, trying to ensure that financially they were looked after, and if they needed something that it was there for them. Obviously everything's restricted – we couldn't do all that we would have liked to do for the widows, the children or the injured, but certainly we tried. Some of the highlights included taking children away. We went with widows and their children across to Scotland or to England. Some of the forces across there were hosting, and we accompanied them as couriers. Just to have got to know the children and be there for them was, to me, the highlight of my Federation career.

It seemed clear that welfare work among policemen in Northern Ireland was not the same as a similar position in other parts of the United Kingdom. Did the fact that the welfare work was taking place against the backdrop of the troubles bring a unique dimension to the role?

There's so much good that has been done, I hate going into the negative side of things. But it was a time of great pain, insecurity and fear. It wasn't just about welfare or a person's economic future. It was emotional. I think the story will be written sometime, as to what police officers had to endure. Those who are involved in policing at the coalface, not like myself who have sat in an office for the past ten years, are actually out there delivering the service. The difficulties that they have encountered, the horrific scenes that they have had to attend, the problems that they have endured in all of that are enormous. We're currently taking a case against the government post traumatic stress disorder, and we're pursuing the case on behalf of three and a half thousand police officers. Now some say, "But surely police officers would have expected to deal with those things," and certainly you expect, when you join the police, that you will have to deal with road traffic accidents, even with murders. But nothing could prepare people for what they actually have witnessed in Northern Ireland. I recall one night when I was stationed in Andersonstown, going to the scenes of five murders in one night during the provisional IRA and the official IRA feud. Those things remain with you.

I've always said that I, as a Christian, have coping mechanisms that other officers don't have. I have always found that being able to talk your problems through helps, and certainly when you've got God to talk to that's the best thing. I wouldn't want to be pompous on that point, because I have other Christian friends who have suffered greatly through Post Traumatic Stress. They have the same coping mechanisms, they're probably stronger on prayer, and read their Bibles a lot more than I have ever done. But it must be recognised that this is an illness. We've had a lot of officers who have found coping mechanisms in drink, and alcoholism became a difficulty. I was involved in the early days in forming an Alcoholics Anonymous group within the police service. They meet in the Federation offices. Probably no one in a Trade Union position would ever have had to deal with issues like that. We've set up a private health scheme which is the third largest in the United Kingdom. We employ twenty-six staff on all the schemes that we run, and so while some may have the idea that we simply negotiate pay, would that that was all we had to do. Life would be an awful lot simpler, but it's so diverse – and that's part of the great thing about the job as well. Every time you lift the phone, it's something different, and that's what really attracts me.

David McClurg Secretary - Police Federation

We asked David to talk about the values that have sustained him. Did he feel he has a sense of vocation?

Well I've always felt that Christian values underpin everything that I do. I'm always reminded that the verse in James about pure religion is 'to visit the fatherless and the widows in their distress', and that's been a great thing that I've been able to tie that in to my work. It's certainly been a cornerstone of the work, just being there for others. I love to be able to share with people what God has done for me. You know, the actual value of Christianity is that we're called to serve. That has certainly been what's driven me.

I've had a sense of vocation in everything that I have done since I left school, whether it was in engineering, or in the police service. I went into the police service because I saw it as a vocation. I come from North Belfast, from the Shore Road. I went to Dunlambert School. A lot of the guys in the BB Company I belonged to were convicted of terrorist offences. That was the scene that I grew up in, so I could certainly relate to the other guys who were getting involved in terrorism. But God took me out of all of that when I became a Christian at sixteen. I felt that, as a Christian, I wanted to contribute to Northern Ireland. I wanted to be part of the solution and not part of the problem. I believe that was the motivation.

When I was a part time officer, the first case that I was involved with was in Carrickfergus. I was called to a home where the parents had gone out to the pub and had tied their child into the cot. So we had to break down the door, get the children and bring them to a place of safety. I reckoned that of all the bits of metal that I had produced, and all the machines that I had installed, nothing had ever given me the satisfaction of just dealing with that one incident. In everything that I've done I've had this sense of being where God wanted me to be.

David has always been active in local church life. He has belonged to the same congregation since his marriage, and has fulfilled every role offered to him. We wondered if he, who had been at the cutting edge of sectarian violence, thought the local church has a role in addressing sectarianism in the community.

Yes I do. I think the church has a role to play. It would be wrong to say that we have not fulfilled our responsibility, because some churches have. There are some churches who have been absolutely tremendous in trying to influence the society in which they are, and to act as salt and light within their community. And there are some who have said," Well we've got our church building here, now it is up to the people to come to us, and then we will help them." Certainly that is not what God intended. We haven't got out into the community in the main, and I think that's where we would need to be.

At church meetings we look at things that we would like to do I'm always saying to people, "Yes wouldn't it be lovely if we could do that." But how many of us now, given your commitments to work, are able to devote much time to it? Now so many of the women in the church, students too, are all working. And they all have such busy lives. Finding time is so difficult, and yet there are so many things that need done, that we want to do. It's just getting that balance right. I have been thinking back to when I first came into the church. All our deacons and elders seemed to be holding down nine to five jobs. And a nine to five job then was just that. You did your eight hours, you went home, and you had the rest of the time to do whatever you wanted. But now people are expected to take work home, they're being expected to work from home. How we cope with that is the challenge for the church in the future. How do we embrace the busy, responsible lives that people now live, and still get out and work with the community, be part of the community we serve? As a church we've tried over the years – we've now got our crèche facility, we have parent and toddler groups, we've started up a youth club, and it's the youth club that brings in children from the local housing estate. It's important to get Christian values across to the children in the society that we live in.

What about the church's role in reconciliation? Does the church have any responsibility in this area? Is the church there to reconcile people to God or to have a social role in helping to heal the divisions of the troubles in our community?

I think the church has a very important role to play in reconciling. I don't want to be over-spiritual with this but I see our role in the main as reconciling men and women



FAITH and PRACTICE

to God. And if that happens, then Northern Ireland will be transformed. People have said about religion being responsible for a lot of the problems in Northern Ireland, and I certainly do not see that. I have always tried to defend the fact that it is not religion. If people were practising religion as laid down in scripture then there wouldn't be the conflict within our society that there is. There's certainly a need for people to be reconciled to God, but equally I think the church have a responsibility beyond that as well. I hate doing it but I'm going to quote a verse in James which says, 'Where do wars come from? ... You desire to have and you can't have it.' And that attitude is a big problem in Northern Ireland. There are people who want and want. But the verse also goes on to say about the need to guard your tongue, and the need to be careful in what you say, and I think the church needs to learn from that as well. As Christians we need to be careful about what we say, that we don't incite, or we don't compound the difficulties within our society. Certainly we need to work within both communities in Northern Ireland. When you say both communities, are there more than two communities? That brings about a whole debate in itself within Northern Ireland. We've got to cross the barriers. We've got to reach people. Christ's example was to meet with publicans and sinners, and I think we as Christians have got to reach out and be seen as befriending people. I think that's something we've missed.

We next asked David to comment on the current change facing the police force. Had it created insecurity? How is this affecting morale? Would it be fair to say there's an acceptance by and large in the police force of the need for change? Perhaps some insecurities are as a result of the methods by which the changes are coming about.

Part of the problem within the police service at the moment is the total uncertainty about the future. Take the plight of the full time reserve constables who are being told that their jobs will go, but it depends on the security and policing situation. We're seeing more and more terrorist attacks, the likes of the real IRA planting the bomb in London just the other day. So there's the conflict of moving towards the new future in policing, and yet the legacy of the past is not gone. The people of Northern Ireland cannot be left defenceless in all of that. We cannot

simply remove police officers to comply with the future changes and leave police stations open for attack. Police officers have to be able to function and provide a policing role for all the people of Northern Ireland. We've seen in recent days the attacks on Catholic people in their homes, pipe bomb attacks and other things coming from loyalist terrorists. That needs to be stamped out. Now you can't do that unless you have sufficient numbers of police officers to deal with it, and so it's not a question of simply keeping the numbers in the police service big. In reality things can change but it's got to be gradual and it's got to move forward. As the situation changes, so does policing.

About eighty percent of the Patten proposals on policing came from the chief constable's fundamental review of policing that was published in 1995. That has been a goal, to move into new procedures of policing. But it was predicated upon certain scenarios; when society changed then policing changed too. We've recognised the fact that we need to downsize the regular force. It's happening. We're now recruiting; you've seen the new adverts. The job I took in 1977 bears no comparison to the job today. Things have changed over the years.

I think what hurt police officers in particular was the loss of emblems. People within the police service, from whatever political or religious viewpoint, over the years have become attached to those emblems. The name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the badge with the harp and crown on it and the shamrocks, to us reflected all society in Northern Ireland. Certainly I was extremely proud of the Irishness and Britishness that the badge represented. The harsh way in which the Patten report proposed their removal just simply showed no recognition of how much the emblems meant to widows and their children, and to those who had suffered and been injured and disabled. It said: 'The Royal Ulster Constabulary will not be disbanded but...' And so the focus was on those changes and not the eighty percent that the Chief Constable recommended. That's where the focus should have been. They have made us a political football. For twenty-five years to thirty years police officers got it in the neck from both sides. No matter what the police could do, given the polarised nature of the society in Northern Ireland they

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were going to be in the middle. But they could take solace that the government, the authorities, the vast majority of the people in Northern Ireland recognised what they were doing and supported them. When that support was gone the morale took a big dip. The force will continue to serve the people of Northern Ireland, dealing with whatever comes their way as police officers. They are still committed to that, you know, they're not turning a blind eye to crime. They're still dealing with the policing issues as they arise. But there's the feeling that their commitment has not been recognised.

With all these changes, with accusations of sectarianism, injustice and cover-ups within the police, is there is a story in the police force of hurt and pain and loss that has not been heard, and that particularly Nationalists and Republicans have not heard, or not been willing to hear? What does that story look like?

I agree absolutely with what you've said. It is a personal view but I am happy to share it. You've got to accept that Republicanism is not going to think that the Royal Ulster Constabulary was a tremendous police service. We were arresting these people for terrorist offences; we were bringing them before the courts. But certainly I feel that Nationalism in the form of the SDLP has abrogated their responsibility in not coming onto the policing board or to the police authority when they could have done so twenty, twenty-five years ago. Now I do understand the difficulties that they had at that time, and I understand how they felt the need to remain out of policing, but in doing that over twenty-five years they have lost out – they never got a true feeling of what it was like to police in Northern Ireland.

I've always believed that you don't change things by sitting outside. If things need changed then you've got to be in there, you've got try, because to sit on the outside and just carp all the time is useless. I was disappointed that both the SDLP and the trade unions didn't take up their seats on the police authority. They could have brought an influence. They could have realised the difficulties of policing. I don't want to get into controversy about plastic baton rounds, but we have pleaded, "Come up with an alternative, give us something that could be used to stop people throwing lethal petrol and blast

bombs that will kill police officers. Give us an alternative." Nobody has. Even Patten couldn't come up with an alternative. When you think that three hundred and two officers have been murdered over the past thirty years, eight and a half thousand injured, the RUC has paid a tremendous price to provide impartial policing.

Finally, how does he see the future?

I believe the book of Habakkuk is relevant to our situation in Northern Ireland. Habakkuk begins by complaining to the Lord about the state of the land – war, violence and injustice. He says he will watch to see what the Lord answers. When the answer comes he does not like it. In the end he acknowledges that, no matter what the situation, he can still rejoice in the Lord and joy in the God of his salvation. The past may have been barren for us - the fig tree may not have blossomed, but God is still the Lord and he is still in control.

ECONI thanks David for his willing co-operation in this interview and wishes him success as he continues to work with the Police Federation.

Ruth Hutchinson
Assistant Editor

wilson

Grace - essential for handling suffering Alan Wilson

In a recent conversation a friend, who was trying to help others through a harrowing tragedy, said, "If only they understood grace they would be able to cope better." I found that a very interesting comment. How does our understanding of grace affect how we respond to suffering? Why is it essential if we are going to cope with unavoidable tragedies in a spiritual and productive way? How does it prevent us from becoming bitter and resentful? Why is grace an indispensable rudiment for a correct reaction to suffering?

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John1:14).

Some people who see grace and truth separately, say, "We can be too soft, that's grace. At other times we can be too hard, that's truth. We need to have both like Jesus, who was full of grace and truth." This is erroneous thinking. Because grace is an expression of God's nature it will always be truthful, and because truth is an expression of God's nature it will always be gracious. Grace and truth are indissoluble. Grace without truth ceases to be grace; truth without grace ceases to be truth.

We need to begin by making sure that we understand what grace is. Grace is the sharing of unmerited love. Grace is an unconditional and expressed acceptance of someone else - despite their national identity, ethnic grouping, cultural traditions, family background, religious preference, social standing, personality eccentricity or sinful behaviour. Some will read this and think, "How can we accept or condone sinful behaviour?" We need to remember that grace and truth are not two sides of the same coin. Only one who understands grace is qualified to confront other people about their sinful behaviour.

The second thing we need to note is that it defines how God deals with us. He always deals with us on the basis of his grace. He fully accepts us despite our background and baggage. When we sin he will love us no less, and when we live righteous lives and try to serve him he will love us no more. Nothing we do, bad or good, can affect God's love for us. He does not dispense grace in

suffering

the same way a pharmacist dispenses medicine over the counter. His grace towards us in our suffering is a practical and intimate expression of his compassionate understanding. Speaking to Moses at the burning bush God said, *“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them.”* Grace is God coming down in compassionate understanding to the arena of our sorrow.

What has all that to do with how we mishandle suffering? If we, as Christians, do not understand God’s grace in all its truth (Col 1:7b) then our mindset towards suffering is likely to be wrong. If we feel we need to earn God’s love, when tragedy comes we may assume it is a kind of punishment. It’s payback time. If we have not grasped the glorious truth that God has accepted us by his grace unconditionally and unreservedly, when sorrows come we will be more inclined to doubt and question his love.

The Bible records that grace is promised to those who are going through the mill. It doesn’t promise answers, solutions or easy remedies but grace to meet the trouble. Paul found the grace to endure his thorn in the flesh (2Cor 12:9) and the Hebrew Christians were encouraged to find grace to help in the time of need (Heb 4:16). I am not suggesting that knowledge of grace will make life’s difficulties less painful, or that grace is an easy solution to the horrors of life. However I believe that if we have no confidence in the God who is gracious, our suffering is going to distort our perception of God, and in turn may cause bitterness.

As you read this, you may be facing very painful and difficult circumstances. Life may feel like hell on earth. I would encourage you to think about the God of all grace, whose love for you will never change, even though it may feel as if he has abandoned and forgotten you. Ask God to help you experience his grace.

Alan Wilson is a regular contributor to Lion and Lamb.

GOD'S PREJUDICE REDUCTION TRAINING

In 1993 I began working with Belfast YMCA on their cross community programme. As part of my induction I took part in prejudice reduction training workshops with both the National YMCA and Community Relations Council. These workshops were integral to a series of community relations training courses and confronted me with hard questions and real issues rarely explored or matched in years of involvement in the small group in the context of a local church.

Around the same time I met Michael Cassidy for the first time. Central to his message was the challenge to confront our own Cornelius, the other who held the key to our own transformation. This also was a theme I heard reinforced by John Dunlop in his ever-prescient commentary on our belonging in this divided community.

Stimulated by these encounters I returned to the text in Acts and began to explore the biblical context and content of the story, with a new openness to let the Spirit unveil what had remained hidden, bringing the world to the word through the questions raised by the contemporary context of living in a sectarian society, and finding that God as always is relevant, radical and renewing in dealing with the fallenness of human relationships.

This article is the fuller version from which I have drawn on numerous occasions to engage with the realities of prejudice and God's desire to deal with it in our lives. Rereading it now it betrays the context in which I rediscovered the story which in these post Belfast Agreement times appears at first to be dated. However the ongoing rise in sectarian tension and the increasing polarisation of

many of our debates call us all to reflect again on the role of identity, whether cultural or religious, in determining our attitudes, even in regard to the sharing of the good news of Jesus.

In the story of the early church, told by Luke in the book of Acts, chapters 9 and 10 are pivotal. Chapter 9 tells us of the conversion of Saul, the apostle to the Gentiles, to whose extra-ordinary ministry much of the latter part of Acts is dedicated. However, before Paul's story is told Luke focuses on Peter, who had acted as the human agent for Paul's new beginning.

These chapters show the fulfilment of God's purpose in bringing salvation to the Gentiles. The Christian message, which up to this point has been directed almost entirely to the Jews, now breaks through the barriers of religious nationalism. Both Jews and Gentiles have a place within the new covenant.

While the focus of chapter 10 is on Cornelius and his significance as the first Gentile follower of Jesus, the role of Peter is also important. Especially significant is the way in which God prepares him for his encounter with Cornelius.

Peter In The Early Church

Who was this man, this Peter the missionary? He preached at Pentecost and 3000 believed (Acts 2.1-41); he healed the sick (Acts 3:1-10; 8:32-43); he was imprisoned and flogged but stood before the authorities and refused to compromise his message (Acts 5:17-42).

Peter, as John Stott highlights, was following the example of Jesus, working in the power of Jesus, bringing the salvation of Jesus to the glory of Jesus. And, in the same way, his ministry

brought him opposition and persecution. Peter was the successful servant of God, a leading apostle, a spirit filled, miracle working preacher.

It should come as no surprise that such a character played a vital role in the early church. He was a forceful and dominant figure among the twelve. Together with John and James he was particularly close to Jesus. Peter dominates the early chapters of Acts (1:15; 2:14; 5:3,29). Sometimes on his own, sometimes with John, he proclaims the good news about Jesus.

Yet for all this there was something wrong in Peter's life. Not just something minor, insignificant, but something that stood in the way of God's purpose for Peter and for his church, something that stood in the way of the salvation of men and women. It was this flaw that God was going to deal with through the encounter with Cornelius. Not only would salvation come to Cornelius but renewal and transformation would come to Peter.

God had dealt with Peter once before. One of the most touching passages in the whole of the Bible is John 21:15-19, which tells of Peter's restoration by Jesus. At the heart of Peter's christian experience was the tragedy of betrayal, of his denial of Jesus. John 21 tells us how the risen Jesus dealt with the aftermath of that betrayal by asking the question, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" On that occasion Jesus restored Peter and brought him back into fellowship.

In the encounter recorded in Acts 10 God was once more going to deal with Peter. At issue was not so much the question of Peter's relationship with Jesus but Peter's attitude as he carried out Jesus' commission in his ministry. Here God was dealing with the very basic question of what kind of person Peter was. God had once restored Peter, now he was going to transform him.

His ministry brings him to the port of Joppa (9:43). It was from here that the reluctant missionary of the Old Testament, Jonah, fled from his call to the Ninevites. God brings Peter to the same place in order to present him with the challenge of his call to the Gentiles.

Cornelius – Open to God (Acts 10:1-8)

The first eight verses of chapter 10 introduce Cornelius. He is a centurion, a Roman soldier, living in Caesarea. He is a Gentile serving in a garrison city, part of the Roman force that occupied Judea (10:1). We are also told that Cornelius was a man who was open to God, devout and God-fearing. His devout nature showed itself in regular prayer and in practical assistance, through almsgiving, to those in need (10:2).

This Gentile, this centurion, this Roman occupier of Judea was open to God. And God was not indifferent to Cornelius. To this open and devout man God spoke in a vision (10:3). It was a frightening and disturbing thing for Cornelius (10:4) but Cornelius obeyed God (10:7-8).

In the vision Cornelius was told to fetch Peter (10:5). For Cornelius this was a great risk. The gulf between Jew and Gentile in the world of the early church was vast. While Cornelius may have been respected in the local Jewish community for his alms giving and his piety, the fact that he was a Gentile was never forgotten. Religious Jews did not mix with Gentiles, even God-fearing Gentiles.

Even if Cornelius did not know who Peter was, even if he did not know of the movement Peter represented, he would have known that he was a Jew. And, as a God-fearer, he would have known better than most the limits of Gentile - Jewish relationships.

Cornelius was surely not unaware that he was taking a risk in obeying this vision. Nevertheless, he was willing to do so because he was open to God.

Peter – Closed To God (Acts 10:9-16)

As Cornelius' servants set out on their journey the spotlight turns to Peter. He is resting in Joppa after an intensive time of ministry (Acts 9:32-43). He is renewing his physical and spiritual energy (10:9-10). But God is about to renew him spiritually in a way he is not expecting.

Peter, like Cornelius, receives a vision from God (10:10-13). But unlike Cornelius, Peter is closed to God. Cornelius obeyed the message from God; Peter said "Surely not, Lord!" (10:14).

This spirit filled miracle worker may have been used greatly by God but in his heart he was still burdened down by the prejudices of his past. The thought of breaking the cords that tied him to the Jewish people, to his Jewish heritage, to his Jewish religious identity was too much. And if Peter was not able to break through the barrier of dietary regulations, what hope was there of him breaking through the barrier of Jew and Gentile? How could God use him to proclaim the truth to Cornelius, the Gentile, if he remained closed to the message in this vision? Yet, while Peter still had his blind spots, we should remember just how far he had already come. Acts 9:43 tells us that Peter was staying in the house of Simon the Tanner. Religious Jews would not have done such a thing. A tanner dealt with the corpses of dead animals. Contact with them would have resulted in a state of ritual uncleanness.

Acts 8:14-17, 25 tells us that Peter had already broken through the barrier separating Jews and Samaritans. He had laid hands on them, seen the Spirit come on them and preached the Christian message in their villages.

Peter had also broken through the barrier of attitudes of superiority towards women. The role of women in Palestinian Judaism was usually a marginal one. Yet Peter had seen Jesus accept and welcome women as his followers. When Jesus was raised it was women who found the empty tomb and women to whom Jesus appeared, sending them to the disciples to be witnesses to his resurrection. Though Peter seems to have had his doubts about their testimony (Luke 24:11-12), ultimately he had to accept the truth of what they said (John 20:1-18). After the resurrection women were an integral part of the new Christian community the Spirit had created (Acts 1:12-14) and clearly accepted as such by Peter.

Peter had also learned to accept the importance and value of children, a group often excluded in ancient societies. In these societies children were often at best ignored, at worst abused. Jesus, over the protestations of Peter and the other disciples, had welcomed a child and used that child to teach spiritual lessons to the adults (Mark 10:13-16).

So in many areas Peter had made a great deal of progress. His attitudes in a wide range of areas had been transformed by the teaching and example of Jesus and by the work of the Spirit in the early church. Yet Peter still had one major blind spot. When it came to crossing the barrier separating Jews and Gentiles, for Peter this was a bridge too far. He had crossed many cultural barriers but this one was too much for him. "Surely not, Lord!" summed up his progress on this question.

In fact Peter's resistance to the vision was so great that even after the message had been given three times he was still 'wondering about the meaning of the vision' (10:17). Peter still had not understood. It seems his prejudice was so deeply ingrained that even a heavenly vision could not overcome it. However, before Peter had time to reflect on the vision, before he had time to accommodate it to his existing beliefs, he received God's summons to action. If the challenge of the vision was the first part of God's prejudice reduction training, the challenge of the summons to action was the second.

Journey To The Other Side (Acts 10:17-29)

Three Gentile servants arrive at the house. They stop by the gate, keeping their distance, perhaps fearing they would not be welcome in a Jewish household. Perhaps Peter could have ignored the voice of the Gentiles but at the same time he heard the voice of the Spirit: 'While Peter was still thinking about the vision the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."' (10:19-20). While Peter was still thinking God was acting. No hesitation was permitted - there is no time for theological reflection, no time to worry what others will think, no time to ponder the implications. Is there a sense of exasperation in the Spirit's voice? "Look Peter they are here, stop prevaricating, get on with it. Come on, Peter." Peter responds. He makes contact, invites them in, hears their story and obeys.

The next morning he accompanies them to Caesarea - he enters their territory. There he meets Cornelius and establishes a relationship. He discovers, not a Gentile, but a fellow human being. These are the three steps of God's practical prejudice reduction training for Peter:

Invites them in – contacts the Gentiles on his own territory;

Goes with them – enters their territory;

Meets Cornelius - establishes a relationship.

At the point of encounter the vision that had previously bemused him now made sense. God's message became real and potent in the challenge of his meeting with Cornelius the Gentile, the occupier: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for I came without raising any objection." (10:28-29). Peter has got the message. Peter has worked it out.

God At Work (Acts 10:30-48)

Both Cornelius and Peter had responded to God. Neither fully understood what God was doing, but as each related his story they realised that God has been at work behind the scenes (10:30-35). Clearly, God had prepared both of them for this encounter. Cornelius had been open to God and had been willing to obey the vision. Peter had been closed to God but had been transformed by this new experience. At one time Peter would have dismissed Cornelius as unclean, now he saw in Cornelius a man who feared God and did what was right, a man whom God had accepted.

Even though Cornelius did not yet know Christ, God was already at work in his life. Peter's responsibility was to complete that work by bringing him the message of Jesus. The opportunity for the good news was unseen to Peter blinded by prejudice. As the good news is proclaimed Cornelius is given his opportunity to respond. The result is seen in 10:44. The Spirit came upon those who heard the message. Peter had responded to the voice of the Spirit. He had gone to the Gentiles and proclaimed the gospel to them. Now God had vindicated his message and his messenger by sending

the Spirit on Cornelius. And not only Cornelius, but also his relatives and close friends - a large gathering - heard the message and experienced the coming of the Spirit (10:24, 27). There were no decision cards; there was no chance to make sure they were the right sort of people. The Spirit came - God had made his decision.

Cornelius was not alone but neither was Peter (10:45). Other Jewish believers had accompanied him to Cornelius' house. What had happened had stunned them. They were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. God was the God of Israel, the God of the Jews. God was their God. Jesus was their Messiah. Yet here was God clearly reaching out beyond the boundaries they had set and saving others - those they perhaps still considered unclean, beyond God's interest. Yet there was nothing they could do about it. There was no way out, there was no way back, there was no time to organise a theological conference or consultation. God had acted and the barriers had been broken down.

Peter - A Man Transformed

Once again God had dealt with Peter. Yes, his was a great and effective ministry but there was also a great barrier to that ministry, a barrier that held back the Jews who had received the good news from reaching out with the same news to the Gentiles.

To break this barrier down God had to revisit Peter. Peter had once been restored (John 21), now he had to be renewed. This renewal touched the deepest recesses of his heart, touched the very core of Peter's being. He had to be renewed in a way that shattered the prejudices of his upbringing, his culture and his religious values - prejudices that ultimately were rooted in the values of the world, not those of the Kingdom of God.

It is all too easy for us to focus on Peter's mistakes and failures. But we need to recognise that Peter was willing to be taught, willing to confess his failures, willing to be transformed by God. In this respect Peter, far from being weak, was a strong character. Far from being a warning, his life is an example. In this respect Peter is the great example of what a disciple should be - a follower who is also a learner.

Peter may have been closed to the message God gave him at first, but he was also the first to insist that the Gentiles should be baptised. He also faced his critics in Jerusalem who still held the prejudices that Peter had cast off, and honestly but forcefully told of his own experience and of the work of God in bringing salvation to the Gentiles (11:1-18). Peter himself became the bridge.

Peter's Big God

What can we learn from the story of Peter? How does Peter's experience help us to understand our own situation in a society riven with prejudice? What can we learn as God's people ministering in such a society? Essentially this is a story about God - it is God who embarks on the work of prejudice reduction in Peter. It is Peter who acknowledges this work of God in his life: 'I truly understand that GOD...' (10:34). Peter is now able to say God is the God of all the world and all the people of the world. We forget that at our peril. Unfortunately, like the people of Israel, we do forget that. We speak and act as though God were our God only. In effect we try to put God in a box, we try to put him under house arrest.

Have evangelicals in Northern Ireland made God into a tribal God? Have we made him into an idol created in our own image - a God who validates our beliefs, our convictions, our identity, our status?

But God does not belong to any one ethnic or cultural group. God is not our God alone. He is the God of all the world - the God of the 'other' we reject. He is the Lord God. Since God is the God of the whole world it follows that he is at work in the whole world - even in those places where we least expect it.

God is also at work in the lives of his people - in the deepest recesses of our hearts. God is often working in areas of our lives where we least expect it or feel we have little need of it. He deals with the vital matters, those things that make us the people we are: our values, our convictions, our fears, our prejudices. And in this he 'does not show favouritism', as Peter was forced to acknowledge (10:34). God deals with us all the same way.

Through this whole encounter Peter learned something about God. He came to a deeper understanding of who God was. He came to a fuller understanding of God's purposes. When we are tempted to limit or 'tame' God, when we inherit a tradition which assumes that God is on 'our' side, we too need to remind ourselves, or to be reminded, who our God is ... 'God has shown me...' (10:28)

Not only did Peter learn something about God, he also learned a great deal about himself, about his attitudes. "God has shown me," said Peter, recognising his previous blindness (10:28). What had Peter learned? He had learned that his prejudice was deep-seated. He had learned that something good - the sense of communal identity and a shared culture and heritage - had been twisted and distorted by the sinful attitudes and false values of the world into the evils of ethnic nationalism, bigotry and sectarianism.

This is what sin has done in our world. Such problems do not afflict only Northern Ireland, for they are the common lot of humanity. Wherever we look in this world we see the manifestation of xenophobia, prejudice, bigotry, sectarianism, racism. Human beings are constantly defining themselves in ways that exclude others. Often, the 'others' are defined in very negative ways. Nor do these attitudes only affect the rabid minority, the fanatics. None of us is immune. The roots of prejudice go deep into all of us. No matter how open we are, no matter how great our desire to overcome prejudice, sin still shapes both us as individuals and the world in which we live. Divisiveness and prejudice are rampant. Christians are under pressure to conform to these values. Christians should resist these pressures and instead aspire to be "transformed by the renewing of [their] minds" (Romans 12:1). If we are to be true to the God's command we dare not allow prejudice to become a barrier between God and us.

Our deep-seated prejudices can blind us to what God is doing in the world. God was at work where Peter thought he was not working. More than that, God was working where Peter thought he could not be working. It went against all of his most deeply held beliefs. God couldn't be working among the Gentiles. But he was wrong. God was at work in ways that left Peter shocked and surprised. God's actions were not constrained by Peter's expectations - nor by ours. God says to his people: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways...As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55.8-9)

While we acknowledge this in our sermons and our prayers, we are still shocked when God does not act in accordance with our expectations. We may be prisoners of our own culture and our own tradition and heritage but God is not. God is truly multi-cultural. His love and saving power reach out to all people everywhere. Men and women from every tribe and nation bring him praise and glory (Revelation 7:9-12). Our attitudes can be barriers to what God is doing. God's desire may be to transform our attitudes and to break down the barriers: '...I should not call

any man impure or unclean' (10:28). In our society Christians too easily dismiss other Christians of different traditions. They are also quick to dismiss those who are 'out there'. They judge them to be profane and unclean. Yet these are people, the Bible tells us, made in the image of God.

How often do we speak of those who have done appalling acts, whether terrorists or violent criminals, as 'animals', 'savages' and so on? Terrorists and others, no matter how detestable their crimes, are not animals, but human beings made in the image of God. Only human beings can be called to account; only human beings can be made answerable to the demands of justice - only human beings are amenable to God's grace.

In dismissing others we attempt to distance ourselves from them. Peter's whole life had been lived with as little contact as possible with the other community - the Gentiles. He stayed with his own sort and that reinforced his stereotypes and his prejudices. Yet while Peter distanced himself and remained closed to God, God himself was acting in grace. God himself took Peter to Cornelius to teach him that the grace of God was not Peter's to dispense and withhold. Cornelius and his friends were not to be denied fellowship because of Peter's prejudices. No more should our prejudices set the boundaries for fellowship where God has been at work by his grace. In Christ we have an obligation towards others - those who are believers and those who are not. If they are in Christ we have an obligation to accept them. If they are not believers we have an obligation to share the grace of God in Jesus - no matter how different they are to us, no matter how obnoxious we may find them.

Crossing The Gap

Peter learned three lessons, about God, about attitudes and about people - GAP. There is a gap in our Christianity. As Christians we disengage with the world and often each other. Sometimes this gap is justified as a necessary separation to preserve the holiness of the people of God. However, in truth the gap more often arises from a distorted fear of God, from twisted attitudes within ourselves, from our dismissive attitudes towards people made in the image of God. If we are to heal this land's hurts we need to bridge that gap. It is not a bridge too far. It is a bridge that God himself has crossed. And if we are to cross it we need to meet our Cornelius, whomever that may be, wherever that may be. Such an encounter may not result in anyone coming to faith but it will result in God doing a renewing work in us, a work that will better equip us to help heal the wounds of our community.

It was no easy task for Peter to live out the implications of this new experience in his own life and ministry. He faced pressure from the world and sometimes from other Christians. Sometimes he stood firm (Acts 11: 1-18; 15:1-21). Other times he gave in to the pressure (Galatians 2:11-14). Clearly Peter's experience was not once for all and irreversible. These were lessons he had to learn many times. However, throughout the New Testament Peter comes across as a true learner. It was his willingness to learn - even if reluctantly at times - that made him the man he was: a true disciple and a true minister.

Is there any hope for the healing of this land's hurts? In the words of Peter himself: "Let us continue to praise and serve God who gives the repentance that leads to life to all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 11:18).

David Porter is Director of ECONI.

HOW WILL WE VOTE?

In days running up to the referendum on the Belfast Agreement many Christian leaders were asked for guidance on how to vote! Folk in my own congregation mentioned to me that they hoped I would be able to tell them what was best. In my attempt to deal with the situation I looked at the issue of allegiance and used several key Bible passages to draw out some principles that I felt were important for Christians in knowing how to vote.

Sometimes Christian leaders find themselves in the position where they wish there was an eleventh commandment to help with problem solving! The referendum on the Agreement was one such issue and it would have been so much easier if somewhere it said, "You shall vote this way." It was one of the most important issues in living memory and Christians found themselves, at best, unsure and, at worst, divided. No doubt political bigotry played a part for some but many Christians were genuinely unsure; what should the Christian response be?

Despite the fact that some people came to church actually expecting to be told what way to vote I was not able to oblige. Of course I knew what I would do and was happy enough with the stance I would take, but I could not say authoritatively what was right or wrong. It was not my place to tell my congregation how they must vote. I made clear that each of us must follow our conscience and vote for what we decided to be best. But we should vote as Christians, not as Unionists or Nationalists. I also warned them against listening to anyone who said there was only one possible Christian response. An 'X' on a ballot paper cannot decide our fellowship as Christians.

However, there are biblical principles and truths that do come into play as regards the Northern Ireland situation and I felt my responsibility was to teach those principles and encourage Christians to obey them. Over the course of one Sunday we looked at some of those principles, seeking to weigh up the Scripture and then be determined to act accordingly by voting righteously, taking part in the referendum and not abdicating responsibility to others. Our local MP had been criticised for his stance but we could not really complain since

almost 50% of the constituency electorate had not bothered to vote in the previous general election, thereby abdicating responsibility. So, I urged Christians to vote, but in a sanctified manner, having considered God's ways in Scripture. If we do so genuinely nothing more can be asked of us and furthermore, if we follow those principles we should be able to respect each other's decisions, even if we disagree. The major issue we considered on the Sunday morning was allegiance – just where does our loyalty lie? We covered it under three headings. (Alliteration was not my normal practice! Honest!!)

The Principle and the Promise

Surely the guiding principle for our loyalty comes from the Sermon on the Mount, specifically *'Seek first the Kingdom of God'* (Mt.6:33). For the Christian, the supreme concern must be ... *'Your kingdom come, your will be done'*. God comes first. He has first and only claim on our allegiance. God's will is all that matters. He must be honoured above all. Our first consideration must be God.

That has been the earliest of principles for his people ... *'You shall have no other gods before me'* (Ex 20:3). Nothing must come between God and us; he must hold sway. Israel's laws reflect that. God was to be given the first of the harvest, the best of the flock, perfect sacrifices. The firstborn belonged specifically to God. He was to come first and get the best whatever the cost.

All Scripture teaches that the glory of God must be the Christian's sole aim and we are to reflect that in every aspect of our lives. Nothing of the world should hold a higher allegiance; nothing else must count for Christians than God's ways and will. New Testament teaching should leave us in no doubt that issues of national identity should not be much of a consideration. *'Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all'* (Col.3:11). National identity just does not count. The good news that is Jesus breaks through the boundaries of nations, and his people are drawn from all lands. So land and nationality should not be causes of conflict for those who claim the title 'Christian'.

Further, God is neither Unionist nor Nationalist, so it has to be wrong to claim that if you follow one as opposed to the other you betray your Christian faith. Earthly kingdoms count for nothing in the eyes of the Lord. Worldly labels and national identity count for zero. If nation was important why did the early church not fight for Jerusalem and Israel? Surely the answer is from the lips of the Master. *'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were my servants would fight to prevent my arrest... but my kingdom is from another place'* (John 18:36).

Priorities are changed in the kingdom Jesus promotes. When church and state became mixed, the church reverted to more earthly notions, leading to debacles like the crusades – in many cases nothing more than religious murders as they tried to re-take Jerusalem.

Look at 1Peter 2:11-16 where we are reminded that we are aliens and strangers, pilgrims passing through. We have no stake here; it is not our homeland. We might be stopping off here for a while but we will be moving on any time now. There is no settling here and there ought to be nothing here to hold us back.

This truth has gone by the wayside for centuries in the church. It has been a huge problem here in Northern Ireland, so much time wasted, hurt caused, lives lost or destroyed, and energy expended in allegiance to earthly causes. And very often it has been to the detriment of our Kingdom cause. But, like it or not, neither Northern Ireland nor the United Kingdom is 'God's own country'. This is not the land of the eternal covenant; and so it is not to this land, or to any other, that we owe our allegiance. Obedience to the authorities – yes. Respect for rulers – yes. Prayer for them – yes. But allegiance – no! That must be given only to God and his kingdom. That is the principle by which we ought to live.

There is a promise in Matthew 6:33: *'Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'* The day-to-day things will be looked after. Get the allegiance right and leave the rest with God; he will look after it and he will do a much better job than we could! That does not mean we will understand or even agree with all he does – but that is not the issue. His ways are much higher than ours and we are called to trust our Father. Abraham got it right. *'The Judge of all the earth will do right'* (Gen 18:25). Go God's way and there is no need to worry. He will do what is right, he will watch over his people. We are free to go ahead and cast our vote as long as we do it in what we believe to be a God-honouring way. If we are honest and genuine in our desire to honour him he will honour us. Of course there is a danger that many 'christians' will not even try to do it God's way. They say it is, but they dishonour his name, using it as a front to cover the fact that they will be voting for a much lower allegiance, either green, white and gold or red, white and blue. Both mean nothing. Only one allegiance counts – seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.

People who have lived by the Principle

We get no better illustration of those who lived by the principle than the so-called 'heroes of the faith' covered in Hebrews 11. They have become known as heroes precisely because they lived by that principle of seeking first the kingdom of God. They refused to be sidetracked into building their own kingdoms, refused to have their eyes taken off eternal priorities.

Verse 13 sums up what they were all about: *'All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.'* They never received earth's glory and they did not mind for they were not looking for it! *'Instead they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one'* (v.16).

Abraham was told he would be blessed in an amazing way but for what did he search? *'He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God'* (Heb.11:10). Take Moses. Verses 24-26 show us how he could have had the very best the world had to offer but he was not interested. He had set his sights higher - and not just to the Promised Land of Canaan! The rest of the chapter gives a run

down of many others, and again they all lived for higher goals. They were after God's kingdom and that is what drove them on.

Sadly we are all too often driven by earthly considerations. It might be wealth and might be power; and it can just as easily be national identity. But that should not be our driving force. It ought to be 'Ulster for God' and not 'God for Ulster'.

That is also the example of Jesus himself. He could have had all the earthly glory and prestige he wanted but that is not what drove him. He came to do the will of his Father and was driven by the hope of setting up God's kingdom. Hebrews 12 points us to him and reminds us why he was prepared to go through what he did; verse 2 shows us how he was prepared to suffer on earth for a higher loyalty. And verse 1 points us back to the previous chapter, and those heroes, and challenges us to jettison all that might hinder us, might hold us back from seeking God's kingdom above all. And if that means national loyalties and aspirations then so be it.

The writer of Hebrews comes back to it again in 13:11-14 and leaves us with another challenge from Jesus himself. We get the picture of him despised, cursed as he was sacrificed outside the city, a place of rejection. But he was prepared to go through with it to bring reconciliation between God and man. Maybe we too are called to go outside our camps, outside the tribal camps, the camps marked out by earthly allegiance – to pursue the higher goal. It is fair to say that, if we choose that path, some will also reject us, abuse and verbally 'crucify' us, but we will be serving a higher authority. Like those who have gone before we must be looking for the city that is to come and ought not to get caught up with building an empire here.

The Pilgrimage goes on

If God's kingdom did not stop with Canaan then it certainly does not stop with Northern Ireland. Thankfully this is not the place God has chosen as the eternal resting-place for himself and his people. It is a beautiful country – of that there is no doubt. But it is not heaven. It is still spoiled by sin, as a quick glance in my garden will prove! And that being so, this piece of land is something over which it is not worth fighting. For, along with everything else, Northern Ireland is destined for the fire.

The truth of 1Peter 2:11-16 still stands today; we are pilgrims, strangers, aliens in a land that is not our own. We have not arrived yet. Northern Ireland is not our final destination. The kingdom of God is not fulfilled here; there are still spiritual battles to fight and spiritual 'lands' to claim. There is still a long way to go on the journey. And as any traveller knows, the easiest way to travel is to travel light! The more baggage you have the more you are weighed down and the slower the journey. It just means a whole lot more trouble.

If ever there was a country where the pilgrims were held back with baggage it has to be Northern Ireland. False doctrine has been drummed into us since birth – to be a Christian in NI you have to be Unionist; you have to adopt a Protestant ethos before you can be saved; you have to support the British way of life. Of course it is not quite so overt but that is what it amounts to and so living for the Kingdom is made so much more difficult, just like the Pharisees made it. The result is that many Christians are caught up in a political fight for the land that has stunted their kingdom growth. Priorities have become

confused and clear biblical truth gets twisted or distorted to suit political ends. An advert in the News Letter publicised a church which claimed to preach 'the unadulterated Word of God – old time gospel hour, the fight for Ulster and no surrender'. Surely that has to be a contradiction in terms since the 'unadulterated Word of God' makes no mention of Ulster.

Lies have been used to justify political extremism and from there the road to violence is a short one. The threatening language of the 'road to Rome' is resurrected from time to time but what a lie! The truth for many is that people south of the border are in many instances much more open to the truth of Jesus; the 'Jesus' video is more readily accepted there than in the north. Many of the laws in the Republic are much closer to biblical standards than what emanates from Westminster. We ought to question the establishment to whom many of us wish to claim loyalty when we consider those laws. Some respond by saying their loyalty is to the Queen, the royal line; can we honestly say royalty upholds Christian standards of living and provides a fine example?

We need to be much clearer in our minds that as Christians we are on a journey that will end in God's glory when his kingdom is fulfilled. Until then we must not settle for anything less and should not waste so much time and effort on earthly loyalty. We must show a different, a better way. We are new creatures, saved from all those lesser loyalties and it is a shame when we slip back into them. The priorities of the world should not be our priorities and we should not be pressed into its mould. As Paul wrote, '*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*' (Romans 12:2). Show the world that there is a better way, a better kingdom for which to fight, that will not pass away.

We are in a struggle, a war, but it is not the kind of war some would have us believe. It is a much more subtle and devious war. '*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood*' (Eph. 6:12). The enemy is much stronger than a political movement and the stakes are far higher than a piece of land. We cannot afford to be distracted by things that, from an eternal perspective, are so unimportant. Paul advised Timothy: '*No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer*' (2Tim. 2:4). The soldier's mind must be focused on the battle and so must ours; but too many Christians are ignoring the real battle and fighting earthly ones.

It is time we got our minds back on the job, time we remembered that the priority is to please the commanding officer, not to run off and fight for what is insignificant. Are we up to it? Are we prepared to live for the right principle, the principle of allegiance to the King of kings? Are we prepared to seek first the kingdom of God? Or is a flag more important to us than the cross? We must think very carefully before we vote and make sure we do it for God and his glory alone. It is the only allegiance that matters.

Stephen Cave has recently been appointed General Secretary of Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland. Before taking up this post he was pastor of Ballycrochan Baptist Church.

bookreview

Stanley J Grenz *Renewing the Centre: Evangelical Theology in a Post Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: BridgePoint Books, 2000) £12.00

John G Stackhouse Jr. (ed.) *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Leicester: IVP, 2000) £12.99

Not another bout of evangelical navel gazing? Is there no end in view to the stream, the flood, of books analysing the past, the future, the hopes, the fears, the triumphs – and the compromises – of evangelicalism. Well, no – there isn't. However, amidst the dross there are some good books out there. And these are two of them.

Stanley Grenz is nothing if not prolific. However, what is significant about Grenz's work is that the different volumes hold together as a project. This volume is in Grenz's own words, 'a distillation of my work in recent years in several areas of theological reflection'.

The initial chapters chart the development of 'classical evangelicalism' with its roots in the reformation, Puritanism and Pietism. This form of evangelicalism, associated with the revivals of the eighteenth century, was marked by convertive piety'. Alongside this emphasis was an emphasis on Scripture. This emphasis, however, had its origins in the Protestant scholasticism 'which transformed the doctrine of Scripture from an article of faith into the foundation for systematic theology'. It is the interplay of these two that sets the framework for understanding the shape of nineteenth century evangelicalism, fundamentalism and neo-evangelicalism.

Grenz traces the fifty-year history of the neo-evangelical movement through three sets of thinkers representing differing perspectives on the theology and history of the movement. Recognising the concerns of some contemporary theologians that evangelicalism is in crisis, Grenz argues that 'the emerging task of evangelical theology is that of coming to grips with the postmodern condition'.

Grenz identifies the two key challenges of postmodernism to theology as being the move away from realist ideas of knowledge and truth and a corresponding emphasis on the social construction of these, and the move away from metanarratives with an increasing focus on local stories.

Having elucidated the framework, Grenz's constructive proposals follow. In these he addresses the question of theological method, bringing into relationship Scripture, tradition and culture; the question of the relationship between theology and science; and the question of the relationship between Christian truth claims and pluralism.

Following this Grenz focuses on the need for a strong evangelical ecclesiology in order to create the context in which the evangelical traditions claims and convictions can be made operative as worship and witness. The work concludes with a call for the renewal of the evangelical centre, marked by 'generous orthodoxy'.

This is a major theological work by a creative and gifted evangelical theologian. His own convictions are clearly expressed but, where he differs, those differences are generally expressed in an irenic way. The book raises as many questions as it answers. Some will find it a breath of fresh air; others will see in it evidence of their concerns for evangelicalism. I confess that I belong to the former group.

Particularly welcome is Grenz's strong emphasis on the church. Evangelicalism's greatest failing has always been its inability to construct a coherent doctrine of the church. Instead, we have formed para-church movements that have functioned for too many of us as our alternative to the church. This is the evangelical heresy. Grenz wants evangelicals to rediscover the body of Christ in all its ontological and local reality in order to do better theology, to worship and to witness to our world.

Some knowledge of evangelical history and theology is necessary to get the best from this book. But for those who have that, the book is worth serious attention.

Grenz also contributes to *Evangelical Futures* – a series of essays which address the question of theological method for doing evangelical theology in a postmodern world. An initial paper from Alister McGrath sets out some of the issues and some of the contemporary debates within evangelicalism. McGrath appears again later locating evangelical theology in the context of the great tradition of Christian theology. An excellent essay by John Stackhouse identifies the characteristics of good evangelical theology and warns against some of the temptations to abandon the tradition, ending with a robust appeal to evangelical theologians 'to engage unapologetically in theology from this perspective and to maintain this historic balancing of evangelical convictions as they do'.

Other contributors include Grenz, Stephen Williams, Kevin Vanhoozer, JI Packer, Roger Olson and Trevor Hart. Again, for those interested in the future of evangelical theology this is a good collection to have. The article by Grenz might provide a taster to encourage a fuller engagement with his more substantial works such as *Renewing the Centre*.

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ECONI Sunday 4th November 2001

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