

biblical faith:
FOR A CHANGING
WORLD



lion & lamb



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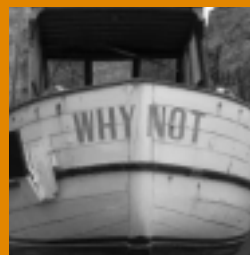
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BIBLICAL FAITH FOR A CHANGING WORLD is the strapline for the Centre for Contemporary Christianity. And, in a nutshell, this is what we are all about.

The challenge: to live biblical faith which is both prophetically robust and context sensitive – for the sake of a world changing, both locally and globally, more than we can sometimes fully take in.

In this issue of the magazine we explore three priority areas of concern for the Centre: Conflict, Community and Citizenship. Dr David Stevens, Ben Walker and Brighde Vallely each examine one of these three key areas, considering questions such as where is our society now and where do we go from here? How might we seek to faithfully live together and fully participate in the civic realm for the good of all?

Professor David Livingstone considers some of the pitfalls of uncritical engagement with contemporary culture threatening beliefs, values and spirituality. He looks to our Christian heritage as a rich and often neglected resource. Derek Keefe reflects on the relationship between contemporary culture and the mission of the church and suggests that Christ must be central to our engagement with culture.

We revisit missionaries in Dungannon whose motto might well also be 'Biblical faith for a changing world'. Jose Carlos and Marizete Lara and their family moved there in 2002 to live, work and minister to the Portuguese-speaking community. I caught up with them to find out how they have been getting on in the town which now comprises over 30 different nationalities.

There are also two new resources to draw your attention to: *Power and Providence*, the booklet of four Bible studies on the Book of Esther and *p.s.* the fortnightly reflection now being produced by the Centre and available by email. Plenty to provoke and refresh your thinking over the summer months!

Anna Rankin

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CENTRE FOR
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comment: Stat crux dum volvitur orbis



'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.'

Colossians 1:19-20

THERE WAS an excellent programme on television on Good Friday morning, entitled 'Nailing the Cross'. In it, writer Rhidian Brook, went in search of the meaning of the cross in the 21st century.

He began at a place very familiar to me – Peterborough Cathedral. For him, it was where, 14 years ago, he was particularly moved by a vision of the cross. For me, it was the high house of lofty worship that summoned us for the beginning and end of school terms.

Until recently, a striking crucifix — a red cross holding the gaunt, gilt image of Christ — hung from the ceiling of the cathedral. At its foot were some words in Latin which I often read and yet never took in.

On Good Friday morning I discovered what they were and what they meant: *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*. 'The cross stands while the world revolves.'

A little research (after all, it is my job) has shown me that this, in fact, was the motto of the Carthusian monks back in the 11th century and that it might also be rendered: The cross stands in a changing world. It amused me to think that, in a world which has changed so much, some hermits a millennium past used pretty much the same strap-line as we have adopted at the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland.

But I was also encouraged and challenged that we stood in a great tradition, indeed the greatest. For whether it be the time of Paul, writing 2000 years ago, the Carthusians, living 1000 years ago, or us, alive now, the cross and its powerful message of the reconciliation of all things to God through Christ has stood unchanged in a changing world. And it has always been the job of Christ's followers, from whichever section or cycle of this revolving orb, to point to the

eternal message of the cross, the heart of our biblical faith.

The cross in Peterborough Cathedral was taken down in 1999 in order for the roof to be repaired. To date, it is still not back up. Instead of rising above all-comers, it currently lies in a side aisle, awaiting a decision on its future. Rhidian Brook pertinently suggested how symbolic this was for our society. Where many once looked up to the cross, however much or little they understood its message, it now finds itself sidelined, with no one quite sure what to do with it.

We have work to do. As ever, we need to hold high the message of the cross, demonstrating how it stands in and for our time and place, as it ever has. This is the task of the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland – Biblical faith for a changing world.

BEN WALKER IS Research Co-ordinator at the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland.

'Where many once looked up to the cross, however much or little they understood its message, it now finds itself sidelined, with no one quite sure what to do with it.'

p.s. seeing red and feeling blue

Once, when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, 'Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?' He replied, 'Neither; but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.' And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped, and he said to him, 'What do you command your servant, my lord?'

Joshua 5:13-14 (NRSV)

Recently, it has been striking how much of life has been a competition between the reds and the blues. Labour or Conservative in the UK election; Chelsea or Liverpool in European Championship football; Leinster or Munster in the Celtic Cup; Gary Rhodes or Jean-Christophe Novelli in *Hell's Kitchen*.

We humans seem to see most matters as a contest between two sides. Such battles can completely capture our imagination and emotion. The result can leave us feeling wholly vindicated or woefully abandoned – seeing red and feeling blue. We can invest so much in them that they define our worldview or steal it from us. We end up seeing everything in terms of red's victory over blue, or are left feeling life is empty now that blue has beaten red.

The thing is, we get so caught up in understanding things as a matter of either one side or the other, and so consumed by the importance of our side coming out on top that we fail to see the bigger picture.

Joshua, leading the Israelites into a forthcoming battle at Jericho, saw everything in terms of his side against their adversaries, even the commander of the Lord's army. It took God's commander-in-chief to point out to him that there was more to the situation than the either/or, than the reds and the blues. What counted most was that God was present and to be honoured by Joshua. The two sides would somehow fit into his scheme of things. God did not fit into theirs.

There are many pitfalls when we put so much weight on our red/blue dichotomies. We can become triumphalistic about our side, little realising that their victory may be insignificant in the grander scheme of things; we can falsely interpret temporal success as an indicator of divine approval; we can

be blinkered to the flaws in our heroes and their inevitable demise.

We can become pessimistic, thinking that all is lost, or that everything now depends on us; we can grow bitter and obsessed with redressing the situation; we can end up haplessly resigned and apathetic, as though nothing we do could matter any longer.

But no battle of ours is the be all and end all. The great victory has been and was always going to be won by God, the God who is in no way limited to our imagination in how he should do things through us.

So we need to hold on to the bigger picture at all times. This is not to say that there should be no emotional engagement or interaction with our reds and blues; happiness and disappointment, anger and joy are all essential elements of our human condition. It is inconceivable for Joshua not to have been thinking about the battle and with a vested interest in its outcome.

But whatever the outcome, God is in command of proceedings – his bigger picture includes some red and blue, green and orange, black, white, grey and more. We must hold this picture in tension with our life experiences, that it may foster in us both humility and hope.

p.s. is the new fortnightly e-mail from the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, which comes out on the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month. In line with the Centre's aims, it seeks to 'provide informed, credible and practical comment and analysis, rooted in biblical reflection and theological thought' on contemporary matters of broad public concern in Ireland.

The first editions have been written by members of the Centre's research team and this reflection was originally published on 11th May. To read other p.s. reflections, sign up to receive them by e-mail or participate in the web discussion forum, visit our website: www.contemporarychristianity.org/ps

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BIBLICAL FAITH
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As we review our ongoing work we are changing our policy in relation to the way the Centre distributes *lion&lamb* magazine. In the past the magazine has been sent to all who have requested it free of charge.

In line with our new policy those giving £15 or more per year towards the work of the Centre for Contemporary Christianity will continue to receive the magazine by post three times a year.

If you have received a letter with this copy of the magazine please return the enclosed gift form to ensure you continue to receive your copy of *lion&lamb*.



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What I have found really refreshing about Greenbelt is that people are just doing what they do. They're not trying to condemn you for being who you are - I'm very grateful about that!
Kurt Wagner, Lambchop, 2004

I had no idea how big Greenbelt was. I had no idea how organised it was; how free it was; how joyful it was. And I had no idea that there was such a strong activist, trade justice plank in its platform.
Dame Anita Roddick, 2004



MAKE POVERTY HISTORY



the elusiveness of trust on the ethnic frontier

IN REFLECTING on the current political situation I want to draw on the work of the political scientist Frank Wright, who died tragically young in 1994. In 30 years of analysis of the Northern Ireland situation Frank seems to me to have had the only original idea. He developed the idea of the 'ethnic frontier zone' and applied it not only to Northern Ireland but also to parts of Central Europe and further afield.

An ethnic frontier zone is where two groups with different national allegiances share the same territory. Obviously Northern Ireland is just such an ethnic frontier zone.

There are three aspects in relation to ethnic frontier zones which I want to highlight:

- The first is their relationship to the metropolitan power or powers; in Northern Ireland these are London and Dublin.
- The second is how the law and justice system operates in ethnic frontier zones.
- The third is how democracy operates in ethnic frontier zones.

Frank Wright argued that an ethnic frontier zone enables us to understand what a nation state is. He says that a nation state is where internal disturbers of the state can be effectively isolated, i.e. criminalised. Reciprocal violence and vengeance attacks can be controlled by the legal system. The legal system monopolises punishment and no one has a legitimate reason for taking the law into their own hands. In such a situation people more or less routinely trust each other; there is freedom from fear. The legal system is 'above' its citizens, it is a 'transcendent'.

The second mark of a nation state is that the rules of democracy allow power to shift from one group to another, because all are part of the one nation-state – a state which is 'above' its citizens and where the 'non-nationals' are outside the state.

In ethnic frontier zones, by contrast, 'the law relates differently to one community than to the other' and 'democratic rules are mere procedures in a battle whose results are never accepted' because the context is always being argued about. Crucially, there is also little trust in ethnic frontier zones.

Frank Wright's statement that in ethnic frontier zones 'the law relates differently to one community than to the other' is crucially important. And the reason is that the metropolitan power finds itself in a position of having to support one community over against the other. Thus, in Ireland, Britain has historically found itself supporting the position of Ulster Protestants over against Irish Nationalists. Wright has gone into great detail as to how this increasingly happened in 19th century Ulster, particularly over Orange marches.

What I want to highlight is this: when the law loses its transcendence, its 'aboveness', beyond all its citizens; it becomes aligned with one section of its citizens. Thus, it is no accident that issues of policing, decommissioning and criminal justice are some of the most intractable in Northern Ireland today.

Frank Wright says:

'In national conflicts, law, order and justice are not just some of the issues that happen to arise from other causes. National conflicts, once they are fully developed, revolve round these matters.'

Wright has also highlighted the importance of deterrence relationships in ethnic frontier zones, i.e. a community has the power or seeks to have the power to deter the weaker community from doing something about the situation. What 'peace' there is is really a truce based on the power of deterrence, and thus force. A change in the balance of power, or whatever, can end the truce and set off a new cycle of conflict (eg 1969 in Northern Ireland). So the conflict can easily regenerate itself.

Once conflict starts again reciprocal violence becomes very difficult to suppress. Violence can spread from one incident in a chain reaction. For this process to work it is not necessary for people to agree with the violence done by their own community. They only have to understand what is happening and be frightened by it. Then, however much they dislike the violence done by their own people to others, the other side's violence is seen to be more dangerous. This process can develop until communities end up accepting the protection of violent people in their own group, even if they know that they have played a big part in starting the situation in the first place. Thus we see how difficult it is to remove paramilitary and confrontationalist groups from conflict situations; people fear them but they also need them for protection.

Wright reaches the bleak conclusion that,

'National conflicts [i.e. conflicts in ethnic frontier zones] do not, by and large, end up with reconciliation of antagonists. More commonly they are concluded by victories or mutual separation.'

He might also have added: ethnic cleansing. And we can instance all sorts of places in Europe where this has happened. It suggests why progress in Northern Ireland is very difficult, and why reconciliation remains elusive.

Is there any possibility of escape then?

Wright argued that the British and Irish governments must work together to provide a transcendence under which the two



‘Ambiguous greyness
has triumphed.’

communities can come together. He saw the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 as moving in this direction and it can be argued that the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brings this sort of approach to fruition.

What has happened in the Good Friday Agreement is that the nationalist community and the unionist community have become equal in Northern Ireland and that both communities are upheld by British and Irish guarantees, and by the two governments working together (a sort of joint authority). The big new fact in Northern Irish politics is that since the early 1980s the two governments work together closely. What normally happens in ethnic frontier conflicts is that the metropolitan powers get drawn into supporting ‘their own’ community (eg Cyprus).

The new arrangements of the Good Friday Agreement were much more painful for unionists (at least at the beginning). These arrangements assumed communal equality and they provided confirmation that a British government would no longer support them over and against the nationalist community, although without abandoning them. Northern nationalists lost the ‘support’ of Articles II and III of the Irish Constitution but gained a closer involvement of the Irish government in Northern Ireland. (One of the difficulties, and forces for instability, here is the asymmetry between the Britain/Unionist relationship and the Northern Nationalist/rest of Ireland relationship). The Good Friday Agreement was an ambitious attempt to re-balance relationships between the two main communities where the two governments provide a context for unionists and nationalists to work together. It is not surprising, in retrospect, that it ran into difficulties.

There were big implications for policing brought about by the Good Friday Agreement. Remember I said that law and order is one of the key issues in ethnic frontier zones. Implicit in the Patton Commission Proposals was that the police no longer supported one community, i.e. the majority, over and against the other, i.e. the minority, nor would members of one community police another. Policing somehow became neutral as between the two main communities. At least that is the theory. And the minority were required to take responsibility for policing – and this may bring a lot of pain for it is an historic shift. It is not, therefore, surprising that Sinn Fein up to now has been unable to join the Policing Board.

A society which has been governed by a history of antagonism and which has had a law and order system that has supported one community is not easily going to move into a situation of trust. And so it has proven. Unionist failure to work

the Good Friday Agreement institutions has symbolised distrust for nationalists and republicans. Republican failure to decommission and consign the IRA to history symbolises distrust for unionists. In a situation of distrust people still feel they need protection. Unionists increasingly vote for the DUP to protect their interests and to stand up to Sinn Fein. Nationalists increasingly vote Sinn Fein to protect their interests and to stand up to the DUP.

Another way to see it is in the terms of the depressing ‘bigots and bastards’ scenario: given a choice between your bigots and our bastards we vote for our bastards (nationalists). And given a choice between our bigots and your bastards we vote for our bigots (unionists). The positive in the situation is that protection no longer requires the overt threat (or actuality) of physical violence (but, of course, they have not gone away you know). At the same time the diminishing threat (and use) of physical violence has allowed large sections of the middle classes to opt out of politics and any civic responsibility. The conflict has mutated into less violent forms: cultural wars and fights about victims. And the nationalist and unionist middle classes can ignore each other: ‘benign’ apartheid, the peace of the suburbs.

A second positive is that the DUP and Sinn Fein have become more moderate – they have moved into the middle ground of unionism and nationalism respectively.

The issues now become: Can the DUP and Sinn Fein construct a deal? Or does the present limbo situation continue for a long period? Does thirst for power beat deep antagonism? What would a deal between the DUP and Sinn Fein look like? And what would this mean for the rest of us? Is it institutionalised sectarianism forevermore? One thing is clear: the two governments will not easily give up on the peace process.

The present situation is still sort of desperate but less serious. Visions of positive relationships have failed to be translated into political reality but we are unlikely to see large scale violence again. Ambiguous greyness has triumphed. We must – sometime – be able to do better than this limping along present, with our patches and our moans and our deformities.

The references to Frank Wright are from two articles: ‘Reconciling the History of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland’ and ‘Northern Ireland and the British-Irish Relationship’ in Eds Alan D Falconer and Joseph Leichty *Reconciling Memories*, Columba Press (2nd Edition 1998).

DAVID STEVENS is Leader of the Corrymeela Community.

beliefs, values and spirituality



I WANT TO EXPLORE what I think of as the two great opponents of Christian beliefs, values and spirituality that face us today. It seems to me that authentic Christian experience always walks a tightrope between the *secular syndrome* and the *idolatry impulse*. Here in Northern Ireland, I believe the preoccupations with political order and the seductions of ethnic identity have obscured the degree to which these two forces have bitten into the fabric of our society.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche saw himself as the destroyer of idols as he addressed the task of unmasking morality and exposing it as nothing more than a human impulse to exercise power over others. We may find the vehemence of Nietzsche's language offensive but his critique of Christianity powerfully reminds us that religion can be a *work of the flesh*. If we are serious about Christian beliefs, values and spirituality, I believe we will have to take seriously the challenge that Nietzsche inaugurated.

The Secular Syndrome

If I read him correctly, Nietzsche's project is to strip away any idea that beliefs, values and morality are eternal. Instead they are mere masks for something else – rancour, hatred or malice and are usually a covert attempt to exercise power over others. Morals and values are entirely of this world – they are human productions, not eternal truths. There is nothing transcendent, eternal or supernatural about them – they are the product of historical circumstances not divine command. They are just secular forces given a religious gloss, entirely human prejudices dressed up in religious vocabulary.

Now this is a profoundly secularising move, and one that is widespread today. Let me mention two ways in which this mood surfaces: first, in science and, second, in society. The first I call reductionism, the second, preferentialism.

When Nietzsche described Christian faith as a neurosis, a sort of psychological disorder, he anticipated what Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist at Oxford University, would say more than a century later when he described faith as 'a kind of mental illness'.¹

Fundamentally, this is the idea that everything about us – from love for our children to personal loyalty to a feeling of wonder or a sense of God's presence – is just the activity of our genes or some kind of neural twitching or electrical flickering. This view is gaining currency these days as science progressively breaks down the distinction between human and machine, and maps the very material substance of life. The suspicion is widespread that everything about us – including our beliefs, values, and inclinations – is somehow or other packed into bits of DNA. We are just organised chunks of recycled star stuff and nothing more.

Where this view does not prevail, another equally sinister – though more socially fashionable – idea has taken hold. This is the notion that moral values and principles are simply a matter of personal preference, there is nothing *compelling* about them, at least in any general sense. You do your thing and I'll do mine. So as long as you are true to yourself,

as long as you get in touch with your feelings, as long as you feel good – no problem.

This radical individualism – often presented in the guise of human rights – afflicts modern society. It mistakenly supposes that moral principles and ethical virtues are mere matters of opinion, of personal choice, of individual taste. We pick and choose our morality, just like we pick and choose our after-shave or hairstyle. It's just a question of which flavour you prefer. Religion and morality boil down to taste or disposition.

What has tended to reinforce this trend is a whole series of social changes that are often sloppily referred to as 'postmodernism'. People used to see themselves as part of a larger order locked into a specific place, role and station in life. But these have all broken down or been discredited. People now live out their lives in a variety of fragmented spaces, and this has led to an absorption with the self and personal identity. Identities are no longer fixed or rooted; rather, they are dispersed. We are told that answering the question 'Who am I?' is just the same as asking 'What space am I occupying at the moment, and which persona am I adopting?' So it is no surprise that ours has been characterised as the 'me generation'.

This has led directly to moral relativism and the fragmentation of the self. Human beings see themselves less and less as bound to fellow citizens in common projects and allegiances, instead they are social atoms. This atomization is most clearly marked in our use of language. We all resort to different linguistic codes, different modes of expression, depending on the space we currently occupy – home, church, work, sports field and so on. In these arenas, we are told, we are really different people, and it is for this reason that Frederic Jameson uses the metaphor of schizophrenia to capture the modern spirit of the self.²

These assaults on Christian morality are clear enough. But we ought not to leave the challenge there. It seems to me that Nietzsche is on to something profound when he begins to uncover what really goes on behind religious language. Here we need to sit up and listen. For we indeed have an inclination to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are being virtuous when really we are trying to look good, or to impress somebody else, or to exercise power over somebody, or simply engaging in spiritual one-upmanship.

Neal Plantinga calls this species of thing *self-swindling*. Evil, he says, does its best to look good.³ Evil spends a lot on make-up. In order to survive, vices have to masquerade as virtues: lust pretends it is love, sadism disguises itself as military discipline, envy poses as righteous indignation, domestic tyranny presents itself as parental concern. To this we might surely add many more: talk of God's blessing can become a cover for material greed, offering help to a colleague might be nothing more than a subtle means of undermining their confidence, concern for doctrinal purity might be just a way of dressing up deep-seated prejudice, hatred can pose as standing up against falling standards.

Because evil masquerades as good, because vice poses as virtue, because pride disguises itself as piety, we've got to be on the alert.

‘There is a great dilemma facing Christians today. On one side there is the sense that Christian beliefs, values and spirituality are *nothing but* human constructions – that they are the mere product of natural forces. On the other side, we find an idolatrous impulse to spiritualise everything and to worship the gods of our culture. How are we to creatively negotiate this tightrope?’



Photo by Pat Swan

Lewis Smedes is surely on the mark when he notes, ‘First we deceive ourselves, and then we convince ourselves that we are not deceiving ourselves.’⁴

It’s a common practice. Nazi leaders could do unspeakable things to other people by telling themselves that their actions were in the best interests of society. Parents who batter their children can convince themselves that it’s really in the kids’ best interests. Activists for justice can commit outrages against others. Haven’t orthodox believers torched heretics? When you dig below the surface of those who are most enthusiastic for capital punishment, for example, it is usually easy to detect a message like, ‘Let the scum fry.’ Let’s face it, people bring dirty weapons to holy wars.

So, when Nietzsche tells us that moral language is only a mask for more sinister things, we’ve got to honestly ask ourselves if he’s right. And when he is, as Westphal insists, Nietzsche turns out to be one of the great secular theologians of original sin. Why? Because in exposing self-deception, he is revealing to us the real depths of human fallenness. Of course, this doesn’t mean Christian faith is never anything other than the lust for power dressed up in Sunday gear. It doesn’t mean that there is no such thing as genuine love of God or neighbour. But it *does* mean that every act of piety is human – all too human, and that when we look closely enough at it we just might find it serving the very sins it is meant to strangle. Piety, morality, spirituality – these are *not* exempt from scrutiny just because they go on in church. Sin doesn’t stop and turn away at the church door. When Heaven sorts out sheep and goats, virtue and vice, its knife slices through human society at an unexpected angle.

The Idolatry Impulse

On one level, then, this is a profoundly secular world. We live in a post-Christian age. Fewer people than ever come to church in the West, there is a massive ethical revolt against conventional morality, even in the Church, and even among believers prayer is often a final resort rather than a first option. Yet I believe it was G.K. Chesterton who judged that when people stop believing in God they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in everything. Nietzsche hoped that he had inaugurated the decline of idols. Surely he was mistaken. For ours is a secular, yet profoundly idolatrous age. It is a society seeking for the sacred in everything but God. And Christians, I fear, are as likely to worship these icons of modernity as are unbelievers. Calvin was surely right: the human heart

is a perpetual forge of idols.

We’ve got idols thick on the ground: sleek cars, sure-shot diet formulas, mobile telephones, sex kittens, gilt-edged mutual funds, the lust for new culinary delights. The crass materialism of these is obvious enough. But the trouble with idols is that they are usually things that are not just all right in themselves, but actually good. Let me give a few examples.

Ours is a profoundly *health-conscious world*. The body is big business these days and is adored, pampered, petted, revered, venerated. It’s an idol worshipped in the suburbs, that modern paradise where cleanliness, prosperity, safe suntans and brimming animal vigour are what life is all about. For many Christians the mirror is their only daily shrine.

Ours is also a *sex-obsessed society*. The goddess of sexuality has many worshippers. Some years ago Theodore Roszak presented a telling critique of this modern sexual revolution, ‘In the affluent society, we have sex and sex galore... [This *Playboy*] sexuality is, ideally, casual, frolicsome, and vastly promiscuous. It is the anonymous sex of the harem. It creates no binding loyalties, no personal attachments... Finally, as a neat little dividend, the ideal of the swinging life... gives us a conception of femininity which is indistinguishable from social idiocy. The woman becomes a mere playmate, a submissive bunny, a mindless decoration.’⁵ This was written thirty years ago but we can see just how prophetic its author was – things have come a long way since then. I don’t think the church has remained unaffected.

Ours is also a profoundly *home-dominated age*. On one level, of course, the home is under profound attack these days. Many forces are disrupting an institution that under-girds much of the stability of social life. But it has become an idol. Take a look at the magazines of the glossy, country, ideal-home variety. There’s a market for them somewhere, for they are the temples of the middle-class. What is more in many of our modern western cities, the middle classes have become so obsessed with preserving their domestic shrines that they literally fence off their neighbourhoods from other social groups.

It’s not just in the material realm that we find home-worship. We find it in the tendency to pour all our thought and love and time into our own family relationships. I’ve heard it said that the way to be sure of selling a product is to convince people that their family will suffer without it. When people tell us that the home is a haven in a heartless world, we can be pretty sure that they are substituting personal cosiness *away* from the world for Christian engagement *with* it.



‘Calvin was surely right:
the human heart is a perpetual
forge of idols.’

The body and health, sexuality, the home and family – these are all good gifts from God. But they can too easily become idols from which we need to be liberated. But further, amongst churchgoers we can find the most insidious idol of all – *religion itself*. Of course we have a whole herd of new spiritualities buying for our loyalty today: New Age hocus pocus, eco-magic, what’s called the new Paganism, civic religion, ethnic obsessions, manic holy nationalisms of one stripe or another.

The forms of Christian spirituality, feelings of devotion, abandonment in worship, can all be mistaken for signs of grace. The great American theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards grasped the profound difference between enjoying religion and loving God. It’s like the difference between reading romantic novels and being in love. To mistake sentimental spirituality for encounter with God is to be engaged in idolatry.

Now I don’t know what your idol is. For some of us, it might be mundane, like money, or fast cars, or Humphrey Bogart, or a golf handicap, or 1952 die-cast model Fords. Maybe it’s more grandiose like culture, or haute cuisine, or Russian literature. Maybe it’s just work. Maybe it’s even church life or experiments in spirituality. Maybe it’s more subtle, like projecting an image of Christian zeal, or enjoying a sense of spiritual superiority, or the self-conscious piety that is really furtive self-glory. Whatever it is, it needs to be unmasked, brought out from behind sanctified language and exposed for what it is. And then, we can really begin the job of personal liberation.

Facing in Two Directions

There is a great dilemma facing Christians today. On one side there is the sense that Christian beliefs, values and spirituality are *nothing but* human constructions – that they are the mere product of natural forces. On the other side, we find an idolatrous impulse to spiritualise everything and to worship the gods of our culture. How are we to creatively negotiate this tightrope?

The answer, at least in part, is to get back to a *radical* agenda. To be radical, of course, means going to the roots, getting to the bottom of things. And to be radical today will mean getting back to basics.

We need to face in two directions. We must engage with the future but in order to do this with integrity we have to dialogue with the past. This, of course, is deeply unfashionable. Modern society, as Tom Oden once put it, is ‘xenophobic toward [the] past... It adores today, worships tomorrow, disavows yesterday, and loathes antiquity.’⁶

My own sense is that we need to retrieve Christian roots, or – to put it another way – to recover tradition. Now don’t misunderstand me, I’m not calling for traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan’s distinction is valuable here. Traditionalism, he says, is the dead faith of the living; tradition is the living faith of the dead.⁷ The idea is that if we are to confront modern society, if we are to speak to it, if we are to live authentically in it as Christians, then we need to call upon the entire resources of our Christian heritage.

We need to engage in a massive retrieval. Many of us, I suspect, know

what team is at the top of the Premier League, many could tell me what Britney Spears’ latest song is and what’s been happening in recent episodes of *ER*. It’s important to be in touch with our culture. But, suppose I asked you. What is the thrust of the book of Amos? How is it different from Ezekiel? What is the main difference between the First and Second letters of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians? How did Augustine transpose classical culture into a new Christian culture? How did Jonathan Edwards transform Christian thinking in America? What was distinctive about Hudson Taylor’s missionary endeavours? How would we do? We’re in touch with contemporary culture. Are we in touch with our Christian heritage?

I don’t think we are, but I think we have to be. We have to attend seriously to the catechising of the Church in our own time. We owe Church members something more than pop psychology and alterations of consciousness by music or chemistry. We need to listen to Paul speaking to the Romans, to Cyprian on martyrdom, to Wesley writing journal entries at the end of interminable days on horseback. Because without a strong sense of the biblical tradition, we will easily mistake woosy sentimentality, super-spiritual mush and evangelical muzak for transcendental encounter with God.

If we aren’t rooted in biblical values, we will confuse ‘getting in touch with my feelings’ with appreciating that our identity is to be found in our relationship with God. To achieve this is to be genuinely radical. According to Tom Oden, ‘We have blithely proceeded on the skewed assumption’ that in Christian things, ‘just as in electric toothbrushes or automobile exhaust systems – new is good, newer is better, and newest is best.’⁸

It seems to me that the great danger in not facing in both directions is that Christians will be so mesmerised by modernity’s seductions, its shallow sentimentality and its secular spiritualities, that the faith will be reduced to mere entertainment. Christian worship will be reduced to the worst of tele-evangelism. When that happens, as Neil Postman puts it, ‘everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and, above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence.’ In this environment, a flashy entertainment-preacher, or a sleek worship leader, are tops; and ‘God comes out as second banana.’⁹

Is it mistaken to suppose that an unbeliever, having accidentally stumbled into a church service, might walk away thinking, ‘Well now, I must say I got it wrong. I thought Christianity had a dark side. I thought it was about confession, self-denial, sin, about taking up the cross, about being willing to lose one’s life for the sake of Jesus Christ. But now I see that I had the wrong end of the stick. Christianity isn’t about struggling to preserve the truth; it’s not about discipline or mortifying the flesh. It’s mostly about celebration, and fun, and personal growth, and how to boost my self-esteem. It’s about entertainment. But, to be honest, it doesn’t do it half as well as *The Fly*, *The Boom-Boom Room*, or *Paradise Lost*.’ Whether this diagnosis is fanciful or perceptive, I leave for you to judge.

NOTES

- 1 Cited in Alister McGrath, *Science and Religion: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 191-192
- 2 See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992)
- 3 Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995)
- 4 Cited in Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 107
- 5 Theodore Rozak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970) 15
- 6 Thomas C Oden, *After Modernity... What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 65
- 7 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 65
- 8 Oden, *After Modernity*, 32
- 9 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourses in the Age of Showbusiness* (New York: Penguin, 1986) 126

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www.contemporarychristianity.org/resources

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BRIGHDE VALLELY

citizenship

‘The just society is one that is structured in such a way as to promote these right relationships so that human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is cared for and respected. This is an unavoidable implication of discipleship.’

DID YOU KNOW that education for citizenship is being taught in many of the schools in Northern Ireland? Are you aware that from 2007 statutory requirement will oblige all schools to include citizenship as an explicit part of the school curriculum? The function of citizenship education is to assist young people in developing an understanding of democratic processes and their practical application in political, civil and social life. The theory is that young people will discover that the outcome of democratic processes should be a political commitment to equality and justice for all members of society; to respect for diversity; and to the principles of human rights.

Whence this interest in citizenship education? The process of devolution, the establishment of Local Assemblies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the current debate in the UK on issues of nationality, identity and citizenship have all played their part. Its specific development in Northern Ireland has emerged in the context of the rocky history of the peace process and attempts to establish new structures of governance.

The pilot programme focuses on three core areas: diversity and social exclusion, equality and justice, democracy and active participation in civil society. Given that questions of nationality are divisive, schools will have to tread a fine line in separating the concept of citizenship from issues of identity and nationality. There is a danger that citizenship education, like so much else ‘across the divide’, will travel along traditional parallel lines. It is possible that a strong and inclusive Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland to which all give consent might help prevent this development.

The re-emergence of the ancient concept of citizenship raises many questions: What is citizenship? Is it a legal status which can be defined objectively or could it be seen as referring to an identity, a sense of belonging, a loyalty given? What are the implications for membership? How does this relate to rights and obligations? What are its possibilities/limitations in the 21st century? Who is included/excluded from without or within the boundaries of the nation state? Can it accommodate national and ethnic difference? How do the expansion of the EU and the development of global awareness impinge on a concept commonly associated with the nation state? How will the tensions between ideals of equality and universality, difference and diversity be dealt with? Are there ways in which citizenship may help to conceal or perpetuate disadvantage and unequal participation? Is there any basis for special rights for women, for persons with physical and mental disability, for the elderly, for minority ethnic groups, for children? Will it give a privileged position to the wage-earner over the carer-citizen?

The changing nature of democracy and the difficulties surrounding the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement have raised many questions for policy makers and others concerned about the issue citizenship participation. Voter

apathy suggests that many people have little confidence in the political process. Real participation by all is essential if society is to develop and maintain principles guaranteeing satisfaction of basic needs, respect for others as equals, economic equality and religious, social, sexual and ethnic equality. It is possible to operate out of a two-tier or multi-tier society while deriding it in principle. Dualism of values will allow the continuation of a status quo which means that it is acceptable to exclude large sections of the population from the mainstream life of the society, while substantial resources and opportunities are channelled toward other groups in society. Such dualism may operate at the level of individual people, communities, sectors or ethnic groupings.

How will Church theology and praxis relate and respond to the contested concept of citizenship? It would be easy for the Church to opt out, to claim that 'here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come' (Heb.13:14). It might be argued that discipleship precludes preoccupation with secular citizenship; that the role of the Church is to call its members to discipleship. However, Scripture points to a relationship between the 'now' and 'not yet' of God's heavenly city and participation in the life of the earthly city. This challenges the Church to find ways of making a theological and relevant contribution to the debate on citizenship.

As citizens and members of society, as Christians and as Church, we need to explore ways of living out the Gospel call to love the neighbour in a rapidly developing multi-cultural society, where the 'two main communities' are struggling to agree on a common understanding of citizenship. This cannot be left to individual morality or personal response. Behind the structures and practices that ordain how we live in society there lie deep-seated, often unexamined, values – good and bad – that are reflected in legislation, policy, procedures and accepted priorities. Personal reflection and initiative are insufficient: together the Christian community must engage with civil society in new conversations about policy, about attitudes, about the kind of civic living that we want. The context for such conversations will be the hammering out of some common understanding of citizenship.

Undertaken in faith, such discourse may well reveal one of those moments when some partial manifestation of the kingdom of God is made manifest. As someone pointed out recently the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Mt. 25) calls the nations, not individuals, to judgment for their failure to feed and clothe the poor, to visit the sick and prisoners etc. Are the nations today asking with the Ethiopian, 'How can I understand, unless someone guides me?' (Acts 8:31) Is there a way in which to engage with secular society so that the Church is heard when it recommends to the public important ideals and foundational values which will have implications for behaviour, for policy

making and for community building. In this process may not the Churches be enriched by secular wisdom?

Within Protestantism the prevalent form of church democracy tends to be representative rather than collective or participatory. This, together with an individualism in doctrine, suggests that the concept of citizenship, as the relationship between individuals mediated by an agreed allocation of rights and obligations to each, could find a home here. The Catholic parish, on the other hand, has a well-developed grass-roots social and cultural community life. Social and economic rights and active, collective politics are seen as the essence of citizenship. This view stresses the participative aspect of citizenship with citizens involved in determining the affairs of the community. Traditional church teaching on the common good and the principle of subsidiarity offer insight here.

There is an urgency for some Christian dialogue and critique of these two approaches, their strengths and weakness, and their implications for local communities – particularly in interface and other vulnerable areas. Issues such as selfish, sectional interest, the needs of disadvantages/oppressed groups, the possible emergence of new inequalities that permit some sector/interest to dominate, need to be addressed. There is a wealth of Biblical and theological understanding to assist this endeavour. Only the good will and the interest need to be harnessed.

The whole Christian tradition subscribes to the values of both human dignity and the centrality of the community. The human person is seen as growing and developing in a context that includes other people and the environment. Scripture speaks of justice in terms of a relationship – as a harmony that comes from fidelity to right relationships with God, people and the environment. The just society is one that is structured in such a way as to promote these right relationships so that human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is cared for and respected. This is an unavoidable implication of discipleship.

Walter Brueggemann writes that 'our lives are lodged between the risky intervention that God has wrought and the end of the world's disproportion that God has promised'. Is the Church 'that we are' ready, in this in-between place and time, for the risk-taking and the long haul that participation in the transformation that God is working in the world will demand?

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creating community

DEBATE is currently raging across Europe concerning the future of the European Union given the recent veto of the constitution by the French and the Dutch. A constitution marks out the foundation of a community, its shared laws and its united purpose. It seems that many are questioning whether this potential community of people actually has shared history and roots to speak of, whether they want such mutual laws or can agree to a joint purpose. Whatever else they may be, it is hard at this stage to see the people living in Europe as a community.

Contrast this with Exodus 19, where we see the Israelites, on their journey from slavery in Egypt, now camping in front of Mount Sinai. In verses 4-6 these wanderers are given a constitution which marks them out as a particular community, a treasured community, God's community. And it is in using these words that Peter, in his first letter to the Christians dispersed throughout much of the known world indicates that we, through Christ, are 'God's own people' – his community.

There can be few buzz-words more bandied around in our times than 'community'. It is one of those words that everybody uses, everyone has a feeling about or vague picture of, but for which no-one seems to have a clear and agreeable definition of what it actually means.

These passages help us to understand at least something of what God understands by community:

Exodus 19:4-6: *You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.*

1 Peter 2:9-10: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*

Once you were not a people, ...but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, ...but now you have received mercy.

God's community: Founded on grace

Communities look back to a shared history or foundation. Perhaps a place or an event or an achievement gives them a collective sense of identity. God's community is no different,

while at the same time being wholly different. For its members are called to identify themselves as a community based on a shared history. But it is not a history that they have brought about or achieved. It is not something that they have done together, but something that has been done for them.

The constitution of these Israelite people spells out a foundation that is based not on their initiative, nor even on their shared ethnicity and the activities of their forefathers. God tells them they are here, now, together as a people, because 'I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself'. They are a community solely because of the saving action of God, delivering them from Egypt. This is the one thing they share in their history (even though they are predominantly of the same ethnic origin, others were with them – cf. Exodus 12:38). It is not even the sharing of the same laws and customs which makes them a community. The covenant law is given to them as this community. That's why the following chapter containing the Ten Commandments begins not immediately with the first law but with a reminder that they are a people saved by God.

Peter understands this as he applies it to those who are in Christ. Once they were not a people, but now they are God's people. How is this? What makes them God's people? Because once they had not received mercy, but now they have received mercy. The community of God and membership of it is based on one thing alone – receiving the grace of God. This marks it out from ethnic communities, legal communities, geographical communities or cultural communities. And it also allows for a wide range of diversity. For if it is founded on grace, then such things as colour, culture

and citizenship must be irrelevant markers of membership.

Of course, there are limits to diversity. Every community, however diverse, has certain limits, and liberal secularism, dare I say, is a hypocritical liar if it tells us that there need be none. But, I suggest, the only limits on the diversity of God's community concern misconceptions about the Giver and the giving of grace.

God's community: Called to holiness

Having established the foundation, the constitution of God's community deals with its shared laws: 'Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant... you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.' Peter reiterates this labelling of a 'royal priesthood and holy nation'. The call of



Photo: Roger Hall

‘Only by healthily acknowledging issues, problems and sin; by communally assessing our holiness and faithfulness and by dealing with them from a foundation of grace and forgiveness can we proclaim God’s grace in our life as a community.’

the constitution is for the community to be faithful and holy in keeping with the founder of the community. I recommend the ECONI publication *The Politics of Holiness* by Alwyn Thomson as an excellent exploration of what it means to be a holy community. Nevertheless, I shall say something about holiness.

Holiness is all-encompassing. In Leviticus 19, Moses begins his address to the community on behalf of God: ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’ (v2) Of what does this holiness consist? It is much more than personal morality or propriety in corporate worship. It includes concern for the poor and marginalised (v9-10, 14) concern for justice (v11, 15-16, 35-36) and concern for the alien/outsider (v33-34). In fact, the alien shall be ‘as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself’. Why is this? ‘For you were aliens in the Land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God’ (v34).

Not for the only time in that chapter are the community of God reminded that their principles for community living come on the basis of their salvation experience; that they are to treat others, even the outsider, remembering their own treatment and the gracious foundation of their community.

So part of being a holy community, of being the community the Holy One has called them to be, is remembering. To be a holy, faithful, distinctive community, God’s community needs to remember its constitutional foundation.

This is the habit of lasting communities the world over. They take time to remember their foundational events and occasions. This is why there are so many mechanisms for communal remembering in scripture e.g. Passover, Purim, Communion. They are all there to enable the community to remember the grace on which it is founded that it may be the holy, distinctive, faithful, loving community which it is called to be.

God’s community: Purposed for proclamation

The purpose of the holy community is to proclaim the God of grace. Exodus 19 sets the community in the context of all peoples: ‘You shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation’. The community has a relationship with the nations and between God and the peoples. As Peter explicitly puts it, ‘You are... God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.’

Being a holy community is not an end in itself. It is for the purpose of proclamation. Community is not just belonging *to*, but belonging *for*. Holiness is not being separate *from*, but being set apart *for*. Jesus’ holiness was not set by boundaries that kept him *from* sinners, but was centred on the gospel of grace that he took *to* sinners. Thus his community is distinctive

from other communities in order that it might faithfully proclaim Christ *in* other communities.

We are a community of grace. As such we have something to proclaim within what Jonathan Sacks identifies as the culture of shame that prevails in society today.¹ In a community of shame, people are judged by the honour in which they are held. If they do something wrong and are found out, the stain of shame is permanent, and in one way or another they are excluded or disappear from the community. So to remain acceptable to others and part of the community, you have to keep up appearances and cover up all wrong-doing. The law of the community is public image and the three new rules: ‘Thou shalt not be found out, thou shalt not admit, thou shalt not apologise’. What it is lacking is any sense of forgiveness or grace.

So how does God’s community react in order to proclaim grace? The temptation is to understand that we should not take wrong-doing seriously; that we should deal with issues lightly; that ‘love covers up (not just covers or covers over?) a multitude of sins’ (cf. 1 Peter 4:8). But this is not being community founded on grace, it is community formed merely on acceptable appearances; a community where we falsely claim: ‘I’m fine’ and joke our way through small talk. This too is a community of shame where we find it uncomfortable to admit to any sin or acknowledge the problem or issue for fear of disgrace, embarrassment or offence. But if there is no sin, where is the grace?

Only by healthily acknowledging issues, problems and sin; by communally assessing our holiness and faithfulness and by dealing with them from a foundation of grace and forgiveness can we proclaim God’s grace in our life as a community. Paul’s point in Romans 5:20-21, is that where sin is recognised, grace abounds. The focus and proclamation, then, of this holy community is the grace of God, rather than the unhealthy obsession with or denial of sin which operates in a community of shame. Such a proclamation draws the ‘outsider’ to inclusion rather than pushing the ‘insider’ to exclusion.

God’s community continues, not because of our shared preferences or a false harmony which papers over cracks, but through a foundational, covenantal commitment which honestly, seriously and gloriously deals with difference and in doing so proclaims the grace of God.

¹ See www.chief Rabbi.org/articles/credo/december03.htm



Jose Carlos Lara, a Baptist Pastor from São Paulo in Brazil, his wife Marizete and their three daughters came to live and work in Northern Ireland in February 2004. The whole family is engaged in mission work among the Portuguese-speaking community in the Dungannon area where many businesses rely on the labour of migrant workers. Having first met them in July 2004 I went back in January 2005 to catch up with them.

LABORATORY FOR MISSION

WHEN I FIRST MET Jose Carlos and Marizete in July 2004 they were getting to grips with the situation in Dungannon. Jose Carlos was working in Dungannon Meats, Marizete in Menary's department store, the two eldest girls in McDonalds with the youngest a pupil at Dungannon Royal School. I wrote an article in *lion&lamb* about the rising number of migrant workers in the area and the emerging challenges and opportunities in this, their mission field.

The model of mission which they have developed differs from more traditional approaches. This, in part, is due to the fact that they have to be financially self-supporting. Since a big devaluation in the Brazilian currency, the *Real*, six or seven years ago, their sending church in Brazil can no longer financially support missionaries coming to the UK.

Their daily work brings them into contact with people. They are conscious of trying to follow the model of Jesus. 'He didn't just send a message – he lived, worked, ate the same food, lived a normal life alongside people,' Jose Carlos says. 'It is not the picture of the traditional pastor I want to show – wearing a nice suit and carrying a Bible and teaching. It is the model of one who is part of the community and does a job like anybody else.'

Clearly they had already made many friends in the community, both among 'locals' and the Portuguese-speaking community. As we chatted people greeted them as they came by our table in the busy café.

They set up a Bible-study group in their home. In the first two weeks five people came to faith, which they saw as an encouragement from God as they embarked on their work, rather than a precedent that they would have to live up to. They soon relocated to the Youth For Christ Drop-In Centre where people can play snooker, table tennis or Playstation, attend English classes and Bible studies. At the time of our first meeting around 20 people came regularly on a Saturday.

For many migrants, they were already the first point of call, rather than the Portuguese Centre or other public information services. As Marizete pointed out, 'The Portuguese Centre here is doing a great job but, for example, they have to charge for translation services, we do it for free. Plus people are coming to us with very personal issues; they are confidential problems. They think if they tell others, everyone will know their business. We are their friends – they come first to us.'

Initially, they found church life in Northern Ireland very different. 'That was a real shock to us. Everything was strange, the buildings, the hymns – you look at the date and see how old some of them are – and there is a very formal order of service. People here say the young people aren't interested in church – it's not just the young people – and I can see why. If we were in Brazil we would say ok, so let's change it.'

In Brazil relations between the Protestants and Catholics are much easier than they found them to be here. They were shocked by the sectarianism they encountered. 'I need to take time to reflect and to think about Northern Ireland. In the whole planet Christians are supposed to love and forgive and live in unity – I'm not talking about ecumenism – but why is there conflict? Both Catholics and Protestants serve the same Master and we are called to love our enemy. But then I think back to Brazil. We have our own conflicts there too with the street children, the drug addicts and gangs,' Jose Carlos reflected at the time.

'Half of my family is Catholic. The first thing we have to be before God is ourselves – there is no other option. I don't understand why people want to hate Catholics – that doesn't make you a good Christian – it might make you a 'good protestant' but it doesn't make you a good Christian. There are plenty of things we should be against – be against sin, against the powers of the world, there is so much happening in this world we should be against – but we are called to love one another and to follow the Prince of Peace.'

So far our first conversation. How would things seem a further six months down the line?

LABORATORY FOR MISSION

What brought you to Northern Ireland?

JC: We had a clear sense of call. We felt that there was a specific task for us here that God was calling us to. In the past few years God has been showing us something about a wise way of doing mission.

We saw that many people come to Europe or the United States or other countries for a job, medical treatment, school or for other reasons. If the church is able to communicate the gospel in a relevant and meaningful way in this context and these people become Christians and grow in maturity, if they decide to go back to their country they would be much more effective missionaries than me and you, or anyone else. They already know the language and culture, they don't have to adapt to the food or the weather and they know when they can speak in a safe way and who they can trust – many of the things that, as foreigners, we don't know even after many years of missionary training.

We prayed about finding somewhere in Europe. I met the director of Latin Link in Birmingham two years ago and she told me there was a town in Northern Ireland with lots of foreigners – most of them Portuguese speakers. For me it was an answer from God. We discussed it as a family and prayed about it together and here we are.

How has your concept of mission developed?

JC: I think we have come a long way from the 18th and 19th century model of mission when missionaries built a village and stayed away from the people. It was thought, in an arrogant way, that the missionary brings God to people. God was already there!

When I was studying at the Centro Evangelico de Missoes (CEM) a Brazilian evangelical school of mission, about 14 years ago, I began to build this concept of working with foreigners. Every day it got stronger and stronger in my mind. Now I am absolutely sure that this is a fantastic strategy for the 21st century.

We were influenced by literature and teachers who were much more concerned about social issues than people usually were. Contextualisation is a key word in that school. Rene Padilla, a theologian from South America, said something like, 'God did not shout his message from heaven – he became a man and lived among men and he became flesh in the context of a Jew of the first century.' That is what I am trying to do here in Dungannon. To be among the Portuguese, work among the Portuguese and share the same things, the joy and everything. I believe we have to try to live like the incarnation, that is what we are supposed to do as Christians.

Foreigners are much more sensitive because the links with family, culture and the home country are broken. I met an Irish missionary who had lived in Portugal for more than 10 years.

He told me that in two months here in Portadown he saw more people accepting Christ than in 10 years in Portugal. In their own country they are self-confident and they have relationships to families and friends and the wider society. Here they are alone and they suffer a lot. Their life is changing all the time. The only thing they know is go to work, go to the pub and come back home and sleep – that's their life.

In the beginning, I used to work in a meat factory as well. The work was very physical – I had never worked on a factory production line before. I have worked since I was 14, but always in offices or schools, using my brain rather than my muscles. Carrying boxes containing 20 or 25 kilos of meat, was tough work. It was good because in the six months I worked there I made friends. Some of them came to the church or to the Bible study. I made really good connections and I think the ministry was only recognised because I was among them. If I came only with a religious label I wouldn't have been accepted, but now I am one of them. That sowed the seeds of acceptance. I had to be there to see, to feel in the flesh how hard the work is, feel their pain.

M: He had to give up because he developed serious health problems. He was going to the factory then in the afternoon coming back to the house really tired and people would be there waiting to talk to him about serious problems, or some needed lifts. It was too much. So he gave up the factory work and left the rest in God's hands.

JC: Now I am a full-time Pastor and am studying for a Masters Degree at the Irish Baptist College.

You found church life in Northern Ireland quite different at first, how does it compare with Brazil?

JC: People here tend to like tradition more and Brazilians like more informality. 'Be yourself' is a key sentence in Brazilian churches.

M: We are free to worship God in the way we like.

JC: I don't want to judge the way church is in Northern Ireland, but sometimes it seems to me that people are more concerned with what other people will think of them rather than what God is thinking about them.

Most of the churches growing up in Brazil have 70–80% young people in the church. Here you see children and teenagers and then old people, in between there is a gap. You don't find young people here, young couples from 18 to 35 or 40 years old – where are these people? They are supposed to be the strength of the church, they bring joy and are the lifeblood of the church. I can't find a good explanation for that. This is something different for us. I am not saying that Brazilian churches are better than Irish churches; we have had lots of problems too.

In terms of theology you are much better than us. Without

‘I believe we have to try to live like the incarnation, that is what we are supposed to do as Christians.’



a strong biblical knowledge base you are much more open to weird things or extreme positions which could be avoided.

M: In Brazil in some churches you can be a pastor without any kind of study. It is easy – just rent a room, open a church and in two weeks the church is huge. People go to these churches because they are seeking something: to be healed, they need a miracle or want blessings from God. They want, want, want – but there is no biblical or theological way of doing things.

JC: My former pastor used to say, ‘We have lots of churches full of people, but full of empty people.’ Also you can see a lot of division in the church, so you have problems here, there, everywhere.

Many of our churches and buildings have been around for a long time. What difference do you think that makes?

JC: In Brazil we have the idea that the Catholic Church represents the old, dark old buildings with candles. A typical evangelical church will be a new building, modern, colourful, and light, clear in every sense.

Most of us come from a Catholic background originally and when you become a Christian, you break with everything that reminds you of the old. The churches preach much more about new life in Christ. Becoming a Christian means the past is gone, and with new life goes new buildings, new songs and new worship styles, new everything.

It is impossible to be totally without tradition, because we build our own tradition. But tradition cannot be more important than meaning. We need to think about the meaning of the things we do. The question I bring to my mind and I share with the people of my church all the time is, ‘Why are we doing this?’ Is

it because it always was that way or because it means something? If it means something and we keep the meaning in our mind then let’s keep doing it.

What about the Portuguese-speaking congregation?

JC: There are 30–35 in the group meeting in the Baptist church in Dungannon on Sundays at 5.00pm. How many turn up depends on the weather because they don’t have cars and they all have to walk. Sometimes we can give lifts, but not to all of them.

On Saturdays we are based in the Youth for Christ Drop-In Centre in Dungannon and we also started a new Bible study group in Molesworth Presbyterian Church, Cookstown on Fridays. We have English classes followed by Bible study and we offer Portuguese classes as well. They don’t have to pay for their lessons and I told them that they don’t have to stay for the Bible study just to please me, just come and learn – it’s for free. Amazingly all of them wanted to stay – some of them didn’t even come for the classes they just came for the Bible study, which was really nice.

We have started this Bible study and we intend to take them with the Dungannon group to our Sunday service in the Baptist church but we will need a bus. Transport is a big problem on a Sunday evening, there is no public transport. We are counsellors, social workers, and taxi drivers. Life is quite busy sometimes but it is worth it.

Do the foreigners integrate with the locals or do they remain separate? Are there any points of conflict?

JC: A few Portuguese will get married to Irish people or they will bring their families to live with them and they are here to

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stay. But most, 80–85% of them, are here for just a short time. They work as hard as they can to get money and go back to their home or go to another country. So they don't mix and there is no integration at all.

M: In Dungannon we have two Portuguese shops where they can get the food they have at home.

JC: We try to encourage them to mix. Once a month, instead of having our own service in Portuguese, we have a joint service with the Baptists. We have translation and we sing in Portuguese and in English. It is good for everybody, the church and for our community, to mix. Some of them have no problem mixing but some are scared and don't want to and you have to respect that. But day-by-day we can make it easier for them.

M: The ladies here wear hats and really nice clothes to church. At first the Portuguese and Brazilian ladies didn't want to go to a mixed service because they didn't have a nice dress to wear. I said, 'Oh that's not a problem, don't worry about how you look.' They said 'Oh no, they are very well dressed, we are not.' It seems a small thing but it is really important for them. It is hard to convince someone that they can go to the church and the way they are dressed is not important. That's the kind of thing that we are dealing with and we try to support them. At the second joint service there were no hats! We hadn't said anything, but someone must have realised it was a problem. You have to talk about these things, I think both sides have things to learn.

What other practical things are important?

JC: You have to have a balance always. If we sing three songs in English we have to sing three in Portuguese. If you don't translate everything they will get angry. The Irish are much more patient. If they come to our service, and very often they do, we don't have to translate everything for them they are more flexible. But the Portuguese are not. They speak up when something is wrong and don't just keep it to themselves the way the Irish might do. That is one of the differences between the two cultures. People here are quiet. It is hard for them to express themselves but for Latin people they come and tell you straight out.

Is worship different here?

M: Definitely, it is very different. Brazilians are the noisiest people in the world, we sing more. Churches here tend to be much more silent.

JC: We would normally clap and feel relaxed but when they are together with the Irish they cross their arms and behave like Irish people. Together they are different. They know that people are watching them and it intimidates them sometimes. We have to break down the barriers day by day. It is a slow process.

Unity of the church is something worth striving for. Though

it is going to take a long time to break down the prejudice on both sides, integration is going to happen naturally I hope.

Have you as a couple become integrated into the local community?

JC: We have many friends here and the Baptist and Presbyterian churches here in Dungannon have been very supportive – we have a very good relationship. We don't think of citizenship in terms of being Brazilian or Irish or Portuguese but much more in terms of we are citizens of heaven, so we don't care about these barriers. The prejudice, the things that separate us must be broken down. We have to try to build a really integrated community.

In the wider society it is more complex because they [the migrant workers] have no social life at all, they have no contact. I know lots of people who don't speak English, who don't want to learn English. They don't have to because in the factory they can use Portuguese. They can learn just a few basic words or phrases to order a taxi or to ask for simple things and that's it. So there is no contact.

Language is a big problem. Just a couple of hours ago I had to take a Portuguese man to the post office because he didn't know how to send a letter, basic things. Translation is a major thing.

M: We are mother and father sometimes. The links in a church of foreigners are much stronger because we are the only people they know here. Christmas time is terrible for foreigners because they are sad and homesick for their families. We try to support them as a sort of stepfamily and to offer love. We understand because we are feeling the same.

You now have a team working with you. Who are they and what are they doing?

JC: We have a team of seven volunteers from our home church: four boys and two girls aged between 19 and 26. They have each come for a one-year period but we would keep them longer if they could get visas. It is something we have to pray about. They all work full-time in factories and are very integrated in the community.

All of them are involved with drama, three are musicians and two play soccer. That is a valuable skill from an evangelistic point of view because they use football as a way of building bridges. Three or four boys who accepted Christ as their Saviour over the last few months came through football.

At Christmas we put on a play – not an old-fashioned nativity play, we had rock music and dance. It was a public event – 70 people came. We invited mainly the Portuguese-speakers because the play was in Portuguese and then some Irish friends wanted to come too so we translated the play on PowerPoint. It was the first time I have seen a play with subtitles! And it

‘There are now over 30 different nationalities in this small town. That is quite a challenge.’



worked. It was fantastic!

The play was set in a meat factory and told the story of two migrant workers who came from Brazil to work here. After many deceptions and difficulties and problems with drugs and drink the guy eventually accepts Christ. The good thing is that many of the guys we invited recognised themselves in the story. Even the owner of the meat factory was in the audience! And he enjoyed it too.

M: I was operating the PowerPoint and I could hear the audience in the middle of the play saying, ‘That’s me – that’s what it was like for me when I got here’. I thought that was wonderful. That is our goal – to identify with their experience’.

Is racism still a problem in Dungannon?

JC: Racism is still a problem in Dungannon. The local newspaper reported that there were 50 racist attacks in Dungannon in 2004 – four times as many as in 2003. That’s a high number in a small town like this. It is something that we still have to deal with. Last month we heard for the first time of a racist attack by a Portuguese man who attacked an Irish couple. They used to be the victims but now they are starting to attack back. And that is very dangerous.

M: We tell them not to go out late in the evening, stay at home, or avoid particular streets. After 10.00 or 11.00 at night the town centre is really, really dangerous so if you don’t have to be there, don’t go. It’s just awareness. And we tell them not to fight back.

One evening two of our boys left the Drop-In Centre at about 11.00 or 11.30 – sometimes people are enjoying themselves and get talking and they forget the time: the problem is getting

home – they hadn’t got far when they were attacked by a couple, right in the town centre. The woman hit one of them in the face with her handbag, injuring him. There was no provocation. They had been phoning Brazil on their mobiles, talking in Portuguese and one of them was black. It was very frightening for them. They won’t walk any more so they call a taxi or we give them lifts.

JC: If people are drunk they will do this. That is what happens here. So, to be fair, not all of these are ‘racist’ attacks. Some people just go to the pub, get drunk and get into fights – they are just looking for trouble. In a sense these are ‘normal’ fights, normal incidents. The only difference is that the victims are foreigners.

There are now over 30 different nationalities in this small town. That is quite a challenge. Sometimes groups of people trying to defend their own interests can get very angry or even violent. They can react in ways we don’t expect. If some of them have to fight for something, they will – for us this is kind of new.

M: Communication is difficult. We try to give them the message of the Bible, we say that the Bible says to offer the other cheek, but they fight back. So we have to start again. It is hard. We heard there were problems but we didn’t have any idea how serious the problems were between the different ethnic groups.

JC: There are many Portuguese who do not like Africans there are many Africans who don’t like Timorese and they all don’t like Eastern Europeans.

I remember some months ago I was evangelising an African who was black and he was very angry. I was talking about the Bible, about Jesus and the gospel, and about forgiveness and he just said, ‘You know man, I got to tell you something: I hate white people.’

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Do you often find yourselves working as peacemakers?

JC: Some of these people come from a violent background – especially those coming from Timor and some African countries that have gone through civil war. Here they have a chance of starting a new life and that means forgiveness – leaving the past in the hands of God and making sure that it doesn't hurt any more [people]. You cannot erase the past from your memory, it's part of your history and nothing can change it. But we can change the future and do something different from now on. People who come to this country as migrant workers come with this in mind, 'This is my chance of starting a new life'. This is what they could contribute to this country. Somehow I think people in Northern Ireland have to learn to start a new life too. All of us have to learn it. I think the only way of overcoming the conflict here is forgiveness.

Love, compassion, forgiveness – they are concepts that are easy to preach about, but on Monday morning when they go to the factory it is hard to live them.

What are the other challenges for mission here?

JC: Dungannon is a kind of laboratory for mission. I call it the missiologist lab, because you have people from every continent, literally. We have some illegal immigrants here as well, so there are lots of issues in this town.

Most of the immigrants do not speak English. Language is a huge problem. There are over 1,000 Portuguese-speakers in the Dungannon area and now Eastern Europeans outnumber them. Some of them come to the English classes but, as they don't speak Portuguese, they can't take part in the Bible study.

We are looking for someone who has a heart for evangelism and speaks Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian or Russian to join our team here in Dungannon. That is our prayer. I wrote to Bible colleges, mission organisations and churches and they could not find anyone. There are people who speak those languages but they are not willing to come because the project is self-supported. We are tentmakers, that means that they would have to work in the factories and live among them and many people are not interested in this.*

People know that your door is always open. Are you still the first port of call when people have problems?

M: We know some people come to our house because they need help and we help them. They may never go to the Bible study or the Sunday service, but we don't judge them. We help without asking for anything in return.

JC: We are here not only to preach but also to live with love. It is hard sometimes, we know some people use us, but you just pray for them. We cannot interpret mission as a trade: I did something for you and now you have to give me something back.

M: The beautiful thing is seeing how people's lives are changing.

The work is God's, not ours, it is amazing. It is one thing in theory, but we are seeing in practice that it works... I am very, very happy being here.

JOSE CARLOS & MARIZETE LARA were interviewed by Anna Rankin in January 2005.

* Since this interview took place contact has been established with a Lithuanian, who also speaks English and Russian and has a degree in theology, who wants to come and work with the team in Dungannon. He currently lacks the financial support necessary to move from Lithuania with his family to Northern Ireland. They are praying that the means will soon become available.

transforming culture

‘The converted church is free simply to *be church* — and not something else — for the sake of the world.’

MANY DISCUSSIONS of church and culture during the last fifty years have begun with the categories laid out in American historian H. Richard Niebuhr’s 1951 book *Christ and Culture*. In it Niebuhr proposes a typology of positions that Christians throughout history have taken with respect to the surrounding culture: Christ against culture; Christ of culture; Christ above culture; Christ and culture in paradox; and Christ transforming culture. Though much has been debated about the adequacy of this typology,¹ for my purpose here I am most interested in the fact that the last option or ‘conversionist’ position, understood in one form or another, seems by far to be the preference of choice among many Christians, especially ‘progressives’ and ‘activist evangelicals.’ While the appeal of this option is understandable — even at first glance it seems to be the most positive option — I think the church must be smart about how understand and appropriate a ‘conversionist’ paradigm.

In our haste to develop strategies by which we might transform culture, Christians often miss a more primary consideration — the *incarnational* reality that church and culture are in a mutually conditioning relationship, with cultural forces influencing the church in significant and sometimes undesirable ways. Lest we doubt the power of the particular cultural milieu churches inhabit, we need only take a cursory glance at history, our local scene, or across the Atlantic to see that churches all-too-often mirror some of the worst aspects of the surrounding culture, appearing at times as nothing more than its reflection.²

But how and why does this happen? How is it that those so intent on shaping the culture end up being shaped *by* the culture in undesirable ways? What is it that makes churches susceptible to cultural forces? As a way of probing these questions I will discuss, in turn, two realities the church must accept and reckon with, as well as the inadequate response of some churches to these realities, failures that increase our likelihood of being co-opted or generally ineffective in our mission to the world.

First, as I’ve alluded to already, I think cultural interaction is simply an incarnational reality. Local churches are just that — located in a particular place at a particular time in history and share a complex relationship with the attitudes, beliefs, and sensibilities of the surrounding culture. Before they are against, above, or for the culture they are simply *in* it. Churches cannot reasonably expect — nor need they desire — to be completely free from the influence of the culture.

Sadly, as I have already noted, some churches ignore this reality and fail as students of the particular cultural environments they inhabit.³ Either they ignore it altogether or are fixed on past cultural battles, often against extra-biblical social taboos. However, ignoring the broader culture does not make it go away; such naiveté only makes churches vulnerable to the pervasive cultural ethos. And anachronistic cultural crusaders may possess a robust sense of mission, but are woefully out of touch, delivering strong blows to straw men while the truly menacing gods of the age slip by unnoticed.⁴ Their flurry of activity is little more than a holy harrumph.

Second, I think cultural influence is also a missional reality of being the church. Ironically, the urgency and orientation of Christian mission — ‘I have become all things to all men, that by all means I might save some’ (1 Cor. 9:22b) — opens the church to cultural trends. All groups with a message to convey — whether religious or secular — rely on points of contact with their culture in order to gain a hearing. In practice, however, these points of contact, whether stylistic or substantive, sometimes overtake or distort the original message and become a defining feature of the communication. Here we see the law of unintended consequences at work. This is common in churches that put great emphasis on relevance, the sovereignty of the audience (give the people what they want) and success as measured in raw numbers — people and pounds.⁵ Hence we see, especially in America, churches that look more like attempts at niche marketing: church as entertainment complex, church as therapy center, church as coffeehouse, church as leisure center, etc. Often churches that claim to be ‘meeting people where they are’ decide to ‘stay’ when they see just how many people are ‘there’.

Therefore churches with a weak or undefined ecclesiology — churches that do not have a strong sense of identity or mission — are most prone to mirror or chase after culture. The first questions, then, in the discussion of church and culture are ‘what is the church,’ and ‘what is its mission in the world?’ The task of cultural engagement makes little sense unless churches have the question of identity and mission answered. There is no question of church and culture if there is no church.

But many churches do not know who they are or how to be church and are looking to the world to tell them. They are currently taking on many manifestations in a desperate search for meaning and an appreciative public, looking to the same institutions and groups as others — party, state, business culture, Hollywood, academics, success gurus, therapists, pollsters — for answers.⁶ If you don’t think there is an identity crisis in many churches, you haven’t been paying attention.⁷

Christ transforming church

With this backdrop in mind, I would like to suggest that ‘conversionist’ churches back off the throttle and broach the logically prior ecclesiological question about identity and mission. I would also like to suggest a starting point that is anything but novel. At a Community Relations Council meeting last autumn a devoted member of the church suggested in group discussion that the church needed to be ‘converted to the community.’ Most at the table, including myself, received this assertion favorably and just nodded. However, when this well-intentioned comment was brought the attention of David Porter, who was leading the session, he unhesitatingly answered in the negative. No, he said, the church must first be ‘converted to Christ’ if it is to serve a redemptive purpose in the community. What may have seemed a quibble to some was for me an important reminder about first things. The identity of the Christ-ian church,

‘The task of cultural engagement makes little sense unless churches have the question of identity and mission answered.’

if it is to bear the name in any meaningful sense at all, is centred in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are those called by God to be the church of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

I will be the first to admit that this assertion of identity raises as many questions as it answers – most notably, what exactly does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ?! But the point I wish to make is not that such a confession answers all our questions, but that beginning the question of church and culture from this starting point reorients our conversation and changes its tenor in crucial ways, freeing us from a host of misguided concerns. The church that confesses Jesus as Lord is a church freed for culture.

Church freed for culture

A church freed from fear

The converted church neither despises nor fears the culture. Yes, cultural forms and institutions are fallen. But like humanity they too were created good and are an object of redemption. It is part of God’s creative intent to communicate his salvific will in and through cultural forms. Culture is an arena of divine activity and transformation.

Yes, cultural spells and illusions can be powerfully misleading. But Jesus Christ has unmasked, triumphed over, and made a public spectacle of the enchanters in his death and resurrection (Col. 2:15). There is no cosmic dualism, no equally powerful anti-God, just rebellious creatures dealing in artifice, those who, as N.T. Wright has quipped, ‘can shriek, but without authority.’⁸ The sovereignty of ‘the powers of the air’ has been broken. We need not live under their spell. Jesus is Lord.⁹

A church freed from idols and ideologies

Not living under the culture’s spell means freedom from its misconstrued values. Relevance, success, privilege, respectability, power, and affluence; the converted church need not chase after any of these as ‘first things,’ and will reject or redefine some altogether in pursuit of life in the Spirit according to the pattern of Jesus – untiring obedience to the mission of God. C.S. Lewis’s observation about Jesus in *The Four Loves* has import for the church that bears his name: ‘You can’t really be very well “adjusted” to your world if it says you “have a devil” and ends by nailing you up naked to a stake of wood.’ How does the church understand successful mission in light of the cross?

Similarly, a converted church is also freed to deny the prevailing isms and ideologies of the day the sort of ultimacy they presume, if not demand, whether they be social (consumerism, individualism), political (nationalism, liberalism, socialism, conservatism, democracy), or philosophical (i.e. scientism, materialism).¹⁰ Ideologies and isms are often built upon important, but limited or incomplete goods or insights, whether it is the value of the individual, personal freedom, social equality,

or the scientific method as a means of discovery. These are worthy commitments, a good of significant value worth pursuing, but they are not *the* good, not the church’s reason for being. When churches exalt these values and ideologies to ultimate status, confusing their ‘salvation’ narratives for that of the gospel they become idols, and we their servants.

A church freed to ‘be church’ for the sake of the world

Finally, the converted church is free simply to *be church* – and not something else – for the sake of the world. This is simultaneously both less than what many ‘conversionists’ want and more than they imagine. It is *less* because there are those who want to launch a ‘culture war’ in an attempt to take the kingdom by force. They want to ‘win the culture,’ ‘take it back,’ or ‘restore it to former glory.’ Yet they forget that the kingdom of God is as much about means as ends. There is no such thing as a kingdom of God established in ways not in keeping with its king – Jesus.

With this in mind, theologian Miroslav Volf has argued not for inaction, but rhetoric and action that is ‘more modest so that it can they can be more effective.’¹¹ He looks to 1 Peter – words to Christian communities living in exile amidst hostility – which nudges us to drop the pen that scripts master narratives and instead give account of the living hope in God and God’s future (3:15; 1:5), to abandon the project of reshaping society from the ground up and instead do as much good as we can from where we are at the time we are there (2:11), to suffer injustice and bless the unjust rather than perpetrating violence by repaying ‘evil for evil or abuse for abuse’ (3:9), and to replace the anger of frustration with the joy of expectation (4:13). We are freed then, to communicate our hope to others with ‘gentleness and reverence’ (3:16), which is the ‘open life-stance of the strong, who feel no need to support their uncertainty by aggression toward others’. The church can operate with a ‘fearlessness borne of a people who are ‘secure in their God...who have no need either to subordinate or damn others...but seek to win others without pressure or manipulation, sometimes even “without a word”’ (1 Peter 3:1).

Volf’s words point us toward the *more than* involved in ‘being church’ that some conversionists miss. We cannot forget that this Jesus – yes, this crucified one! – is also Lord, the King of kings. As the church, we have the great privilege of testifying to our ‘living hope’ by taking the radically *strong* position of walking in the ways of crucified Jesus, whose resurrection by God was the vindication of his life and ways and verification that He is the one. Volf is quick to dismiss claims that the way of suffering and gentleness is only an accommodation to the ‘rulers of the age’:

‘[This is] a call to struggle against the politics of violence in the name of the politics of a crucified Messiah. How blinded must one be by the prejudices of one’s own liberal culture to see in this demanding way



Photo by Jim DeLillo

of suffering only accommodation to the dominant norms of the Hellenistic world!¹²

The converted church is free, then, to walk in the demanding way of her king, to live on his terms.

But what exactly does being church *for the sake of the world* look like? Even if we've settled the ecclesiological question – we will be the church of Jesus Christ – the incarnational reality remains.¹³ We are back to the first question. We must be church in our particular places. This means we must listen as well as proclaim. We must participate in conversation with the culture. I think Volf is right to ask 'whether our urge for consistency does not skew our perception of social reality.' The desire for a predictable, uniform, stable social world is understandable, for it would certainly make discipleship easier. But no such worlds exist. Cultures are not monolithic, but themselves a 'complex pattern of symbols, beliefs, values, practices and organizations that are partly congruent with one another and partly contradictory.' Because of the diversity within each culture and differences between cultures, we simply cannot decide *the* question of church and culture 'up front' on theoretical grounds. A church's relationship to a given culture must be as diverse and complex as the culture itself and will therefore involve accepting, rejecting, subverting and transforming certain aspects of culture – all at the same time.

Being church in the world cannot be reduced to a list of rules or a simple formula. It is an incarnational practice, a new way of life, what we might call the art of learning to live redemptively in the pattern of Jesus. It is the converted church feeling its way around in a world made strange. It is word made flesh. Our Lord is the one whose name we bear, who knew the world's strangeness (John 1:10). Our discipleship in all things – including cultural engagement – begins here: 'follow me.'

NOTES

- 1 Several commentators have argued that Niebuhr's reading of the particular sympathies of groups and persons throughout church history is flawed, that his notions of 'Christ' and 'culture' are vague and problematic, and/or that his categories themselves are insufficient, confused, or too wooden to describe the complex relationship between 'Christ' and 'culture.'
- 2 Of the many readily available examples, I'll note just one – the mid 19th century split of both the Methodist and Presbyterian churches in the United States over the issue of slavery, with the Southern bodies offering biblical justifications for the institution.
- 3 This seems to be borne out by the Church in the Public Square research project conducted by the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in 2004.
- 4 Both of these positions are particularly lamentable given the fact that there are many insightful cultural exegetes at our disposal, several of

whom identify as Christians. See, for example the work of Jacques Ellul, Marshall McLuhan, Marva Dawn, Albert Borgmann, Christine Rosen, Neil Postman, and Stephen Toulmin, and Ken Myers just to name a few.

- 5 This understanding of success is itself borrowed from the surrounding (market capitalist) culture. The notion of the sovereignty of the audience is taken from Nathan Hatch's book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*.
- 6 Hence, we could add to the previously mentioned mish-mash of ecclesiological models church as political action committee or lobby, church as corporation or brand, and countless others.
- 7 The enthusiastic evangelical response to Rick Warren's 1995 book *Purpose-Driven Church*, first in America, and now elsewhere across the globe (available in 17 languages), is indicative of this ecclesiological uncertainty. What is ironic, however, is that the most pointed and consistent criticism leveled against the book is that its understanding of church and mission is detrimentally influenced by the predominant values of its cultural location, i.e. California (!), U.S.A. In other words, Warren's book may be more symptom than tonic.
- 8 From an interview with Dick Staub. Audio and transcript available at http://www.dickstaub.com/culturewatch.php?record_id=693
- 9 This is not to imply the life in the world is easy for the church or that the 'powers of the air' are weak and feigning. But it is to say, echoing Paul's discourse on the 'armour of God' in Ephesians 6, that provision has been made for us to withstand the powers by 'being strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.'
- 10 Per George Marsden's *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* we could add Marxism, subjectivism, objectivism, romanticism, feminism, ethnocentrism, relativism, intellectualism, anti-intellectualism, populism, and elitism.
- 11 From "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditu: Journal of the North Park Symposium on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*. Available on-line at <http://campus.northpark.edu/sem/exauditu/papers/volf.html> Much of what follows is informed by Volf's exposition in this paper. All quotes from the same.
- 12 Volf, 9. Volf is certainly not the only, or first one to see something substantive and potent in the presence of such alternative communities (i.e. churches) within a given culture. Over the last forty years a rich body of biblical and theological reflection has grown from seed planted by Hendrikus Berkhof, and subsequently tended and nurtured by other gardeners such as John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas and, more recently, Marva Dawn.

DEREK KEEFE is Research Assistant at the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland.

DREW GIBSON

that's not fair!

IN THE SECOND BIBLE STUDY in a series of three Rev Drew Gibson, Associate Minister at Bloomfield Presbyterian Church, challenges our attitudes towards the alien, the poor, the social misfit.

• **Pause for a minute and think about a time when you felt that you had been unfairly treated.**

Let's take a look together at Deuteronomy 10:10 – 22

At the heart of the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people, Israel, was the demand that God's people should act with a type of justice, or fairness, that reflected God's actions towards them. Strangely, some theologians have called this divine fairness God's bias towards the poor. It sounds odd to have the word 'bias' alongside the word 'fairness' but in Deuteronomy 10:10 – 22 we have one example of how this is exactly the way in which the Lord acts and exactly how he expects his people to act.

Verses 14 – 16 tell us three things: something about what God is like – he is supremely powerful; something about what God has done – he has graciously shown love to helpless people and something about what God expects from his people as a response to what he has done.

'Circumcise your hearts' means to make a clear, unambiguous commitment to God, a heart commitment, not just a commitment in words only. We find these three elements again in verses 17 – 19 and in verses 20 – 22 (but not in the same order). Therefore three times God looks for his people to commit themselves to him and to show that commitment by acting in the same way that he acts.

Notice that, while there are a number of general expectations that God has for his people (12, 13, 16, 20), there are only two concrete, identifiable things that the people are told to do; these are: 'Love those who are aliens' and 'Take oaths in [the Lord's] name'. The first of these gives a distinctive activity that would mark the people of Israel out as different from their neighbours. The second command is to verbally identify themselves with their God, as the one in whom they trust. I think Christians in Ireland are probably fairly good at the second, so let's concentrate on the first.

An 'alien' is a foreigner. The term carries within it the idea of vulnerability. The foreigner has no support from friends or family; he or she is easy to abuse or oppress. He may not know the local language and customs so that he may stumble into all sorts of confusion and foolishness. More familiar terms might be refugee, migrant worker or asylum seeker. In contemporary terms we can include, as aliens, any people whom society pushes to the margins and does not allow to enjoy the good things that other people enjoy; people whom society rejects. Along with widows and orphans, aliens were to be treated well by Israel because they were the weakest members of society, who could not defend themselves.

• **Can you think of six groups of people in your locality who might be described as 'aliens'?**

People in Israel who could not share in the benefits the community were often called simply 'the poor'. This obviously included those who were economically poor but it also included anyone who was an 'outsider'. It is most interesting that in this and other similar passages there is no moral qualification demanded of those who are to be well treated. They are not to be treated fairly because they are good or because they are faithful to Yahweh, in fact the alien probably worshipped another god entirely; a god whose worshippers might well have been involved in cult prostitution, human sacrifice or even playing football on a Sunday.

This looks disturbingly like injustice; not the injustice of the guilty remaining unpunished but the injustice of the undeserving being well treated. There's something about this that looks unfair; unfair to those hard-working, law abiding, tax-paying Israelites who tend their farms well, who care for their families and are regular in their worship. Why should they subsidise the Johnny Foreigners, the failures, the social misfits? Why? Simple really, 'for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt' (19). And it was while you were aliens that the Lord rescued you, fed you, led you, protected you and found you a place to live. (In fact in chapter nine the people have already been sharply reminded about just how undeserving they were when God chose them.) God expects you to act as he acted and only then to look for a positive response.



Photo by Luke Ewing

• **How might Christians in Ireland set about obeying the command of verse 19 to ‘love those who are aliens’?**

Actually, there is another reason why Israel should treat aliens well, it's in verse thirteen, ‘... and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today *for your own good*.’ Now, there's a thought, it's actually in our own interests to treat the outsider well, to care for the poor, to look after the social misfit.

• **How might our gratuitously fair treatment of aliens in Ireland work out for our own good?**

The sharp-sighted reader might have noticed a wee problem with my claim that God has a bias towards the poor. It's in verse seventeen, where we read that God ‘shows no partiality’. In other words, God is unbiased. Oops!

Well maybe not quite oops, look at it like this; all societies have inbuilt unfairness: the rich have money to spare that the poor don't have, the strong have ‘muscle’ that the weak don't have, men don't have the physical vulnerabilities of childbearing that women do have, the clever have opportunities for self improvement that the simple don't have.

• **Can you think of half a dozen more examples of inbuilt unfairness or inequality?**

All of these inequities lead to power imbalances and, being sinful people, the powerful inevitably use their power for their own benefit first and then, if there's any left over, they might help the powerless. It is precisely because God will have nothing to do with unfairness like this that his bias towards the poor is in fact an expression of his impartiality.

• **How might we encourage a bias towards the poor in Ireland in order to show impartiality?**

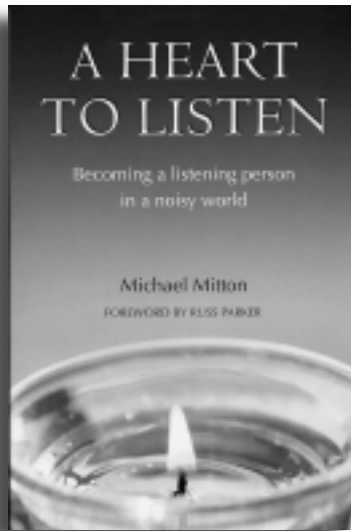
‘In this and other similar passages there is no moral qualification demanded of those who are to be well treated.’

review:

A Heart to Listen:

Becoming a listening person in a noisy world

REVIEWED BY LYNNE LIVINGSTONE



THE AUTHOR of this book was previously Deputy Director of the Acorn Christian Foundation which heads up Christian Listeners. As a boss and as a friend, he encapsulated all the qualities of a listener that are rarely found in a noisy and superficial world.

In this captivating book he invites you to take a journey of discovery about what lies at the heart of listening. In doing so you will realise how difficult and how rewarding becoming a good listener is.

The clever use of a narrative tale, running through the book, serves as a parable to convey the main theme of each chapter. It is entirely fictional and based in Africa where what he experienced had a profound effect on him.

It explores how with God's help we can relearn the art of listening and develop a heart that naturally listens. In doing so we can become a source of help and healing for others and for ourselves.

Despite the fact that it is really not difficult to learn to listen well, most of us find all kinds of 'Ivory Towers' to retreat to, and fail to give the level of listening that is so badly needed. Chapter 3 helps us to identify what our 'Ivory Towers' are and how we can come down from them. We will all recognise ourselves here!

In our society, encountering difference is something we are all familiar with. When we meet someone who is different, we are given a choice, to retreat to safety or to encounter the unknown. Michael explores how listening is a true expression of 'agape' love – that if we are disciples of Jesus we are required to listen to 'our enemy', the one who is different to us, whose values we don't share, who annoys us. You know, the one who just has to open his mouth for us to know that what he says is wrong! He shows that by listening to someone we can actually start to meet the person rather than the argument. Perhaps then the mechanism for reconciliation can be put into place?

It helps us to think about our wounded planet and open our ears to those in the particularly troubled areas of our world.

I think, above all, this book will surprise many, as it uncovers the enormous depths and profound impact that something so simple as 'listening' can have on each one of us and the people we encounter. They will also discover, as many have done, that listening is one of the most healing and precious gifts that anyone can possess. That we can each be the ears of the body of Christ so that people know they are not alone!

This book is an easy read, in short chapters that you can absorb, a bit at a time. But I doubt that you will be able to put it down. It will inspire and challenge. But it will also remind us that listening is a ministry committed to us by Him who is Himself the great listener and whose work we should all share.

LYNNE LIVINGSTONE is Co-ordinator of Christian Listeners Ireland.

A HEART TO LISTEN

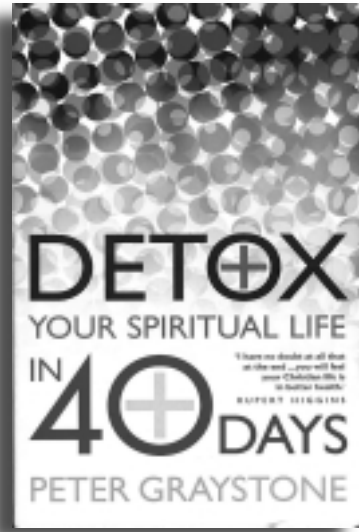
Michael Mitton

Published by
Bible Reading Fellowship, 2004
£7.99

review:

How to Detox Your Spiritual Life in 40 Days

REVIEWED BY CLAIRE MARTIN



FIFTY DAYS AGO I began working through Peter Graystone's book *Detox your spiritual life in 40 days*. 'Choose 40 consecutive days and treat them as a preparation for a new turning on the path that you and God are treading side by side' suggests Graystone in the introduction. I'm currently on Day 21!

Yes, there is something wrong with my calculations. Let me explain.

Rupert Higgins says of this book, 'I have no doubt at all that at the end... you will feel your Christian life is in better health.' Excited by this comment I delved into the book, determined to be disciplined and follow through the detox plan each day. Rather like detoxing your body for your physical well-being, this book follows a day-by-day detox strategy for detoxing your spiritual health.

Things were great for the first few days which look at detoxing your body – examining your eating (check), your health (check), your rest and relaxation times (check), your sleep... ay, there's the rub!

Day 4: Get some sleep... Anyone who knows me will realise immediately that, as one of the world's worst sleepers, following through on this particular part of the detox could pose a few problems. It did. I had also noticed that the following day's detox topic was 'Shake yourself awake'. How could I possibly do that until I'd got some decent sleep? So, I decided to stick at the 'Get some sleep' chapter until I was satisfactorily detoxed and I could move on. Three weeks later I realised that I might never get to the next chapter and, more importantly, I was never going to get my book review done in time unless I did!

And so I realised that instead of being a cure-all leading to great spiritual health, this book was going to take the role of a highlighter pen which marked all those things in my life I'd need to take a long hard look at.

As I've read on, and detoxed on, I've come to think that is also what Peter Graystone had in mind for this book. He certainly openly confesses to the parts of the detox that stump

him and cause him to have to rethink. And through its 40 days, there are bound to be areas that will trip everyone up. It's unlikely that anyone will manage to detox their body, standards, past, expectations, relationships and spiritual life (the book is divided into these six sections) without a few hiccups along the way.

A day per topic was not long enough for me to really give time to each particular area covered – maybe I'm just slow. But I don't think you are meant to use this book to concentrate on one issue a day and then set it aside with a 'well, that's that bit done!' The book reminds you that there are areas of life that you maybe need to re-look at and perhaps return to again and again to detox.

However, Peter Graystone doesn't leave us stranded with a big magic marker through parts of our lives. There are suggestions for what to do to move forward and how to clean up each 'toxic' area. Don't expect these suggestions to be easy though – this is a book that requires you to work if you're to get the most out of it. It's very easy to read, humorous, thoughtful, entertaining and interesting. However, to do it justice you need to put it down after each chapter (something I found difficult, due to its readability) and go away and do some hard graft.

So, is my spiritual life in better health having read this book? Well, I could dodge that question by saying I haven't quite finished yet and I'll get back to you, but I can already say that Peter Graystone has provided me with a lot to think about, pray about, work with and act on – it has definitely been a helpful process and one that I hope has started the ball rolling and will keep me detoxing for a lifetime!

But now, it's time for me to get some sleep...

CLAIRE MARTIN is Programme Co-ordinator at the Centre for Contemporary Christianity.

DETOX YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE IN 40 DAYS

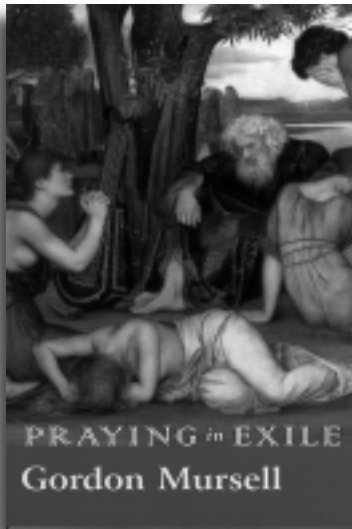
Peter Graystone

Published by
SCM-Canterbury Press, 2004
£8.99

review:

Praying in Exile

REVIEWED BY KAREN CAMPBELL



PRAYING IN EXILE

Gordon Mursell

Published by
Darton Longman and Todd, 2005
£9.95

THIS IS NOT a book about the theology of the exile which is good since there are so many important books already published on this subject. Instead, Mursell claims that his 'book is written out of the discovery that exile is something all of us have to face and out of the conviction that there exist... priceless spiritual resources...'.

The main thrust of the book is the idea of praying in exile and this comes about in Mursell's mind from the role of the torah in Psalm 119. Here the refusal to separate prayer from justice; spiritual life from ethical and moral behaviour sets up a powerful model of prayer which is food for the journey of anyone in exile.

Mursell uses the work of Edward Said to support the use of memory and imagination in the stories of exile. Precisely because the Exile is uprooted and forced into a different world, they are capable of envisaging other worlds and able to dream of paradise. Therefore Mursell sees the Exile as being a redemptive figure bringing new creation to birth.

Another refreshing concept was viewing the Sabbath as one of the most important resources to the Exile. All Exiles had to learn to seek the welfare of the city which they were in and yet not be conformed to it. The keeping of the Sabbath exhibited this stance. He cites the Babylonian exile as being critical to the development of the Sabbath since the idea of holy place is replaced with the idea of holy time. Images of the sabbatical year and the year of jubilee given in Leviticus help God's people to anticipate being in the heavenly city which is the ultimate Sabbath. His final analogy is John as an Exile on Patmos choosing to praise instead of allowing evil to triumph over him. Revelation demonstrates the extraordinary capacity of those in exile to subvert the iron bars of their condition and invite others to join them in dreaming of how things could be... 'without such visions to animate and direct them, the world's

religion will become dull or even dangerous, more interested in perpetuating their own institutions than in making the city of God a reality on earth'.

Perhaps one of the weaknesses to Mursell's work is that there is not a thorough theological undergirding of the concept of the Exile. A point that he continually refers to is that God is a God who created order out of chaos and being in exile is a reversal of that process. Therefore the task of prayer and lament is to wrest hope and new life from chaos in a manner similar to God's work in creation. Whilst this may be so, there are so many other stronger biblical pictures of the Exile that Mursell has neglected in order to give this one attention. For example, at the very end of his book, he talks of how our faith is centred on the conviction that God embraced exile in the life of Jesus in order to rescue us from ours. It seems a shame this is a final observation rather than a central theological point. Also, more could be made of the rich material in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy dealing with the Exile.

However, Mursell's treatment of praying in exile is creative and imaginative and well worth glancing at to fuel one's own imagination and prayer life.

KAREN CAMPBELL is Assistant Minister of Harmony Hill Presbyterian church and is currently compiling a CD of stories from the stranger in Northern Ireland as a prayer resource for churches.



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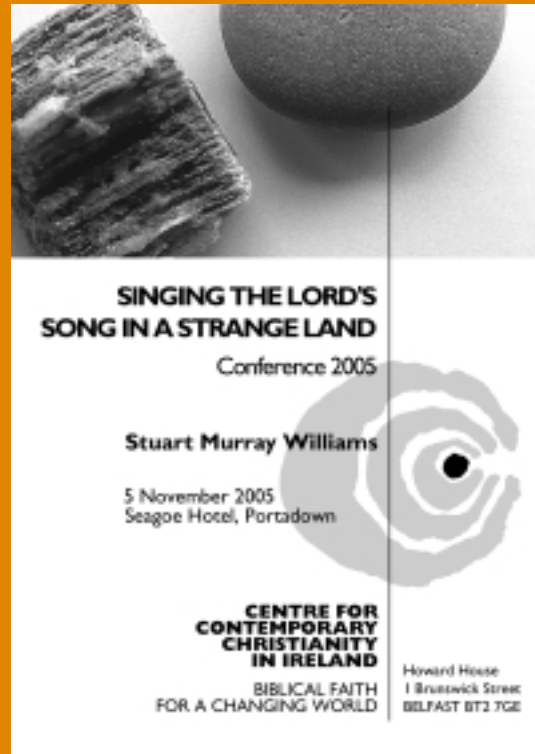
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