the baptist ministers'
journal

October 2023 volume 360

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October 2023, vol 360, ISSN 0968-2406



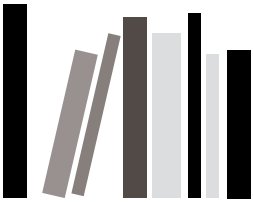
The baptist ministers' journal is the journal of the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship.
Useful contact details are listed inside the front and back covers.

*(all service to the Fellowship is honorary)*

***www.bmf-uk.org***



*bmj's design and layout is provided by Micky Munroe*
*Printed by Keenan Print (keenanprint@btconnect.com)*



# from the editor

## Liminal space

What is your most powerful memory of the Baptist college where you were formed for ministry?

Recently I've read, or become aware of, published memoires from several people who are now retired (not just Baptists)—indeed, David Coffey's book is reviewed in this issue. For most of us, ministry begins with college. Having seen these memoires, I've enjoyed reconsidering the people, tutors and experience of college from a chronological distance after (in my case) two pastorates, two chaplaincies, some leave of absence for family reasons, and working in a theological college with ministerial formation.

We spend three years (and it used to be four) in an intense liminal space with a group of others who often become our friends for life (ministry friendships being a bit unusual anyway, because of our geographical moves—if you see someone annually at Assembly, that is frequent!). At college we are constantly challenged and often profoundly changed; and after it we emerge to take up this very different vocational way of life. It's a very significant time.

One of the lovely things about being on the education-delivering side of college is seeing growth in the students who trust us with their formation. People arrive full of uncertainty and leave with a clear calling and a deeper passion for Christ. The same people later take up significant roles in our local and national Baptist life and knock the ball out of the park with all they do for Jesus. That's exciting!

In this issue of *bmj* I am delighted that three of the papers are by those in the early years of ministry, who are committing themselves to continued reflection and writing. I love the fact that *bmj* is a place where people can begin to explore publishing an article, a place where we can encourage one another by sharing what is on our hearts.

We love to showcase your work and thought. The *bmj* is proudly for ministers, by ministers, since ministers understand their calling best. Do get in touch if you'd like to publish something, maybe write about your college highlights, contribute reviews, or if you have ideas for our Fellowship in this new generation. Contact me on revsal96@aol.com. *SN*

# Pioneering, midwives and funeral directors
by Chris Friend

*Author: Chris Friend is co-minister at Alnwick Baptist Church.*

The role of a pioneer minister is to be both midwife and funeral director—in other words, birthing new ministry while at the same time ending an existing ministry well. How can this dichotomy be held in tension within the same role?

I was privileged to be present at the birth of both of my children. While the first was a drawn-out affair of nearly two days and the second barely two hours, both yielded new life in a way that brought joy, the wonder of creation and an acute sense of responsibility as a parent of a new-born and the steps needed to nurture and protect. At the same time as becoming a parent, I was fulfilling the role of funeral director in a career that would last for almost 20 years. The privilege this time was being able to 'hold the hand' of those on grief journeys, either anticipated after a long illness or sudden because of traumatic events.

For a period I assumed both roles; I lived the juxtaposition of new life at home and dealing with death at work. It gave me a sense of being deeply thankful for what I had and cherishing every day but also a fresh understanding that a fully lived life can lead to someone on a palliative pathway being determined to die well. My observation of those who did die well was the positive impact of loved ones left behind. They still grieved the loss keenly, but the grief cycle was an altogether more constructive experience after a good ending.

As a pioneer minister after a period that has been hugely impacted by the pandemic, I've seen new-birth ministry bringing joy and enthusiasm and which has galvanised people in a church family set against ministry that has needed to end—and all the introspection, wrestling, doubt but ultimately peace that has been involved in that process. My intention is to use the narrative of my own experience to demonstrate that as a pioneer minister I have had to hold the tension of both, and the learning that I need to take into future

ministry. I will also draw on resources from others with insight as well as looking to scripture.

**Pioneers model Jesus**

Dave Male observes that 'often pioneer leaders feel they are on the edge, pointing to a new reality that might come to pass...This might require some criticism of present systems, but it must also be energising for the church if it is viewed as an alternative reality of living out the kingdom in the locality.'[1] Male reviews Jesus' ministry and writes 'His pioneering work cannot be contained by the old structures; new wine requires new wineskins. It will not work simply to patch up what already exists and hope it will somehow work.'[2]

Yet it is Jesus himself who says 'I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives' (John 12:24, NLT). There is no paradox in this verse, rather an understanding of the synergy between dying and living, between laying to rest and rising again. Further evidence is found in John 15 where Jesus cites the work of His Father 'he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more' (John 15:1, NLT). Kingdom work is about efficiency. There is no room for sentimentality simply because something looks to be functioning well but in truth is crying out for remedial work to make it better. The oft-quoted verse from Eccelsiastes: 'a time to tear down and a time to build' is part of the 'everything has a season' passage and this is apt as we consider pioneering in ministry and the duality required. If Jesus, the Great Pioneer, can talk of dying and cutting back as a way to life, then this must also be applied by pioneer ministers. Enabling something to die well is just as important in being part of the embryonic process of new birth.

**The end is nigh**

Henry Cloud writes: 'Endings are part of every aspect of life. When done well, the seasons of life are negotiated, and the proper endings lead to the end of pain, greater growth...and better lives. Endings bring hope.'[3] The key word here is 'well.' How do we help something to die well?

The pandemic was a sea change for many people, who pressed 'reset' and re-prioritised their lives and responsibilities. In churches this has been evidenced as a drop in attendees and volunteers[4] and an unwillingness to commit to those areas of service that people had previously been only too happy to assist with. Inevitably, this meant that some ministries came under strain purely because of an absence of 'team' to sustain them.

This situation arose because the pandemic could not be anticipated. Romanuk & Roxburgh comment that: 'Discontinuous change is dominant in periods of history that transform a culture forever, tipping it over into something new. The Exodus stories are an example of a time when God tipped history in a new direction and in so doing transformed Israel from a divergent group of slaves into a new kind of people.'[5] But that change was not without conflict. Even though God had freed them from oppression, there were times when they would have thrown it back in Moses' face,

wandering in the wilderness and saying, 'oh that we were back in Egypt' (Exodus 16:3).

This desire to cling to the past and 'go back to normal' is something I have heard often of late. A need to hold onto ministries of a bygone era is like a comfort blanket. I spoke with a trusted friend who challenged me to look at this post-pandemic era as an opportunity for the church and not a problem. He went on to talk about areas of ministry that may need to die as part of new growth for God's kingdom.

One such area may seem small but was significant for many. A weekly notice sheet —which contained key information about church services and news—had been the mainstay of communicating church life for three decades. The older generation would clutch this pamphlet as if it were a gilt-edged scroll, knowing they were kept abreast of essential information.

The 'stay at home' restrictions in March 2020 immediately put paid to that. Both our website administrator and I recognised that we had to become inventive around communication. This meant asking, where possible, for people to access weekly emails, which most did. What became clear in a short space of time is that there was such a desire to be connected to the church family that octogenarians were asking grandchildren to get them onto WhatsApp and email. All this is key to understanding that in a period of discontinuous change, communication can evolve to cope with the new and ever-changing context. Further on, and almost all the church now operates with paperless communication.

Cloud would class this ministry adaptation as 'subcategory pruning'[6]—this nevertheless has been a valuable lesson in enabling something to die well particularly with the synergy of birthing something new. Rather than rush in and cut back, we allowed ourselves the time to see what could emerge and then we strategically took the secateurs to remove the branch no longer needed to help the plant grow.

**Is it time to die?**

This question I believe is an important one in the context of looking at all ministry areas.

In a local ecumenical ministry where free hot drinks have been served to the late-night community since 2011, the pandemic forced the team to mothball the coffee van for two years. The past 10 months has seen many discussions with the key question 'is it time for this ministry to end?'

The team prayed and felt that it wasn't the end, so they have continued to pray and wait for the right person to come forward to lead the ministry once more. As I write, the team are still waiting. Once more, the question has been asked, not in desperation but in a willingness to listen to what God wants and respond to that. What is clear is that the service will only continue if it's a 'God-thing' not just a 'Good-thing,' and that means both a pragmatism and an attentiveness to the Holy Spirit about purpose and seasons. Attentive missional listening is key in this.

It is demonstrated in Paul's ministry in Acts 16, where we read:

> *Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.* (Acts 16:6-10)

Paul could have sought to 'force the door' to Bithynia but didn't. Instead, he and the team recognised the need to 'hit pause', to listen; and that allowed time for a vision from God to Paul and an undisputable sense of God's call to Macedonia instead.

My friend Ali Birkett, who is the Northern Director for Rural Ministries,[7] said:

> *When we're giving grants we always encourage folks to set an end date for a particular ministry or project, this allows leaders to robustly critique effectiveness and fruitfulness of any ministry, and in turn shut it down if it's not cutting the mustard any more...we work with a few churches that should probably close the doors. We call them "legacy churches", and on occasion take a congregation through a kind of "how to die well" series of meetings. It's a bit like palliative care. So, I think the start, or midwife part ought in some ways to already have a funeral plan in place. Some ministries are for a season only and in the new seascape in which we find ourselves or what we're calling the great unravelling I really believe more fleet-footed Christian communities who can adapt and make changes quickly (especially without hierarchical, institutional interference) will emerge at the cost of slow moving, unwilling to die churches.*

**Emerging from the ashes**

To understand the 'great unravelling' is—I sense—critical for churches in this liminal space in Christendom. Remove rose-tinted spectacles. Insert pragmatic contact lenses. Carey Nieuwhof writes 'The death of an approach to church doesn't equal the death of the Church. Changing the approach is the best way to begin to see new growth.'[8]

Just because something needs to die does not mean that the church dies with it. As a pioneer minister I have sensed opportunities in the midst of the discontinuous change of the past two years. I'd argue that the pandemic has created the best possible chance for churches to re-evaluate and then be contextually fit for purpose, light on its feet with an enthusiastic and engaged church family.

One of our hopes when we started leading the church in late 2019 was to build missional communities; in other words, small groups of between 10-15 who meet together regularly outside of the Sunday congregation. Crucially these missional communities have as much validity to be part of church family for meeting in

this way and not some stepping stone to attending in church building on Sundays.

This has its basis in Acts and what the Greek would call *oikos* or household. In Acts 16 we find Paul down by the river (because there was no synagogue) and he started engaging with the women there which included a Christian called Lydia and we read: 'The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us' (Acts 16:14b-15).

Mike Breen writes of the significance of this 'with the public space removed, he [Paul] had to find another way. Now he had *oikos* as his principal place of mission.'[9] Though the church 'building' was absent, there was a new way that Paul could connect. Moynagh writes of this: 'Church happened in the midst of the everyday—in the home, which was the centre of day-to-day life.'[10] We evidenced this incarnational *oikos* directly because of the pandemic. We realised that a number were either housebound because of illness or were at high risk of infection to the virus through weak immunity. How could we get these people together in a way that was meaningful and gave a sense of *oikos*?

The answer was to be found in Zoom. The emergence of this platform alongside the likes of Microsoft Teams had enabled people to connect in a way that kept businesses turning and communities together. We immediately saw an individual with bona fide leadership skills who was willing to facilitate a weekly group accessing from all over the county. The response from those who gathered after the first week was immediate and positive. Those isolated now felt included. Those with questions found a forum to discuss and within a very short space of time, this group of disparate people became community. They had established their very own *oikos*.

That group has continued because the personal situations that were in place before Covid still remain and therefore the need for that Zoom group to keep meeting as they do is vital for each one. An authentic, organic and life-giving community has been birthed which feels Spirit-led with a clear understanding that this too may only be for a season.

## Conclusion

The premise of this essay puts the emphasis on the minister to take responsibility both for embryonic ministry and end of life care and to hold a necessary tension. The pandemic has accelerated conversations —perhaps by 5-10 years—that churches need to have around emerging contexts and the difficult conversations of which ministries need to end. What I have tried to convey is that far from being difficult, ending ministries well can be healthy, constructive and paradoxically life-giving for churches, and offer future kingdom-growing after essential pruning.

### Notes to Text

1. Dave Male, *Pioneering Leadership.* Cambridge: Grove Books, 2013, 17.
2. Male, *ibid*, 8.
3. Henry Cloud, *Necessary Endings*, NY: Harper Collins, 2010, 13.

4. Monthly churchgoing suits worshippers post-Covid (churchtimes.co.uk)—visited 28 June 2022
5. Alan J Roxburgh & Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006, 7.
6. Cloud, *Necessary Endings*, 30.
7. www.ruralministries.org.uk – in conversation March 2023
8. *12 Disruptive Church Trends That Will Rule 2022* (And The Post-Pandemic Era)—CareyNieuwhof.com—visited 29 June 2022
9. Mike Breen, *Leading Kingdom Movements*, Pawleys Island: 3DM, 2013, 130.
10. Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, London: SCM, 2012, 6.

# *bmj* Essay Prize 2024

The *bmj* invites entries for our Essay Prize from those serving in, or in formation for, the leadership and ministry of Baptist churches or in other contexts. We would like an essay of 2500 words on a topic and title of the entrant's choice that fits into one of the following categories:

**Baptist History and Principles, Biblical Studies, Theology or Practical Theology, Mission**

We are looking for clear writing and argument, and preferably a creative engagement with our Baptist life. The prize will be £250.00 and the winning essay (and any highly commended contributions) will be published in *bmj*.

We particularly encourage entries from those in the early years of their (Baptist) ministries, which includes MiTs and those who are not in accredited or recognised leadership roles.

**Closing date: 31 March 2024**

Entries should be submitted **electronically, double spaced and fully referenced, using endnotes not footnotes,** to the editor at revsal96@aol.com, including details of your name, address, church, role, and stage of ministry.

Judges will be drawn from the Editorial Board of *bmj* and experienced academic Baptist colleagues. We reserve the right not to award a prize if the entries are unsuitable, of an inadequate standard for *bmj*, or do not meet the criteria.

Please share this competition with colleagues to whom it might be of interest.

*Contact the editor at revsal96@aol.com if you have any queries.*

# Ways and Means to Authenticity
## by Michael Jackson

*Author: Michael Jackson is now retired from Baptist ministry and lives in Yorkshire. He continues to write and research.*

The pursuit of the historical Jesus continues apace. It began in the late 19th century with the emergence of biblical criticism, initially in Germany, throwing up such names as Weiss, Kähler, Bultmann and Dibelius. It was crystallised in Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (ET 1910) and continued in the *New Quest* from the 1950s, via the work of Ernst Käsemann, Günther Bornkamm and James Robinson. Latterly the Jesus Seminar, in the US, has been prominent in this area. A significant amount of research has resulted in varied responses. At one end is pessimism which concludes there is painfully little that we can glean of the historical Jesus because of the theological input by the gospel writers;[1] at the other is the optimism of those who maintain that, even given such input, we can know a significant amount about him, his life, work and mission.[2]

When it comes to establishing authenticity we may start from the assumption that the overriding volume of gospel accounts is historically reliable, therefore it behoves the sceptic to prove otherwise.[3] But because of the long and winding road that the oral tradition has travelled, such certainty cannot go unquestioned: hence the critical approach becomes necessary.[4]

One starting point is language. The original tongue of Jesus was Aramaic, so where this can be linguistically identified it may point to an authentic utterance. However, it is now proposed that he may well also have communicated in Greek, since Galilee was a centre of Graeco-Roman influence.[5]

In the search for authenticity scholars have also turned to the literary tool of form criticism, which seeks to identify the *Sitzen im Leben* (situation in life) which characterised the time of Jesus, such as miracles, parables, exorcisms and the vocalised forms, illustrated by prayers, laments and pronouncements. Within this discipline, certain criteria testing authenticity have been developed, notably (a) dissimilarity (b) multiple attestation and (3) coherence. These criteria can be used to attempt to identify the *ipsissima verba* (very words) of Jesus, as opposed to those which may be assigned to the interpretation of the gospel writers. As can be imagined, this is an exacting task, influenced by subjectivity and the theological stance of the interpreter. Schweitzer related it to a person who looked down a deep well and saw their own reflection staring back!

Of the three criteria, the first, dissimilarity, is the most contentious. At its core it attempts to evaluate the words of Jesus in terms of their context. If it can be demonstrated that they are at variance both from the Judaism of the day and the concerns of the early church, this points to possible authenticity. In many cases such dissimilarity is not clear cut—not least because in communicating to his audiences Jesus would use language and concepts with which they were familiar; bridges to understanding.

However, there are examples where dissimilarity suggests a direct Jesus utterance. For example, statements of Jesus which confess his limitations, as when he declares that the Son does not know when the day of judgement will fall (Mark 13:30-32; Matthew 24:34-36). These utterances are most unlikely to have originates in the church, which would be more inclined to suppress it. In fact, in the Matthean version, some ancient versions omit reference to the 'Son,' as it was unthinkable that he should not be omniscient.

Another example concerns the forbidding of fasting (Mark 2:18-19 and par). This was alien both to Judaism, in which it was a central discipline (Jeremiah 36:9), and early church practice (Didache 8:1). We could add to this Jesus' attitude to family responsibilities, sacred in Judaism, when he stresses that commitment to him overrides all else, as in the early Q saying (Matthew 8:21-22; Luke 9; 59-60). Such uncompromising teaching would have been equally hard for the early church to stomach; therefore we may well have here the echo of authenticity.

One of the cautions aimed at this criterion is that since we do not have sufficient knowledge of either 1st century Judaism or the early church and its various theologies, we cannot be sure how much the reported words of Jesus reflect or contradict the ethos of either.[6] Another hesitation concerns the relationship between the authentic Jesus and the early church in that the two cannot be neatly separated. Although the gospels may reflect the work of the writers in reinterpretation of traditions, their supreme motivation was the phenomenon of Jesus of Nazareth, his words and actions, albeit shaped in transmission to address post-Easter situations. There is continuity here.[7]

Possibly because the criterion of dissimilarity has proved contentious, a second criterion was proposed in the search for authenticity, namely multiple attestation. This focuses on particular themes which are replicated in different gospel sources, pointing to historical reliability. It is unlikely that a Jesus saying or action would have been independently created in different communities. So, for example, Jesus' relationship with tax gathers and his acceptance of them is recorded in Mark (2:13-17), Q (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:33-34) and special Luke (15:1-2).[8] Such multiple attestation is positive evidence that this was, indeed, characteristic of Jesus' behaviour.

A second example concerns the anointing described in Mark (14:3-9), Luke (7:36-50) and John (12:1-8). Here the Johannine evidence is particularly important since it stands outside the synoptic tradition, unlike the first two examples. The teaching of Jesus concerning blasphemy against the Spirit also reflects multiple

attestation, cited in Mark (3:28-30) and Q (Matthew 12:31-32; Luke 12:10).[9] A further example is the teaching on the nature of the kingdom of God in Mark (4:30-32) and Q (Matthew 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19): the 'mustard seed' analogy. Again, the independent witness of Q points to an authentic saying of Jesus.[10]

An obvious criticism of this particular criterion is that although a tradition may be attested in a number of independent sources, there is the possibility that in the life of the different communities it was 'in the air', so that it was appended by one source, though originating in another. A particularly memorable saying or action by Jesus could be embedded in the tradition at an early stage and so become the root source for various other sources to use. [11]

A third criterion in this brief survey is coherence. This approach seeks to identify the authentic Jesus based upon identifying material which coheres or is consistent with that already determined to be historically reliable by a different criterion. Unlike the previous two it does not stand alone; rather it depends upon them in a supplementary capacity. As an example, if it is established by using the dissimilarity criteria that Jesus admitted his limitations on the basis of Mark 13:32, thus pointing to authenticity, then the similar confession that he was powerless to grant James and John prime seats in the kingdom (Mark 10:39-40) reinforces that authenticity on the basis of coherence. Similarly, Jesus' unorthodox attitude to the family, pointing to authenticity on the basis of dissimilarity (Matthew 8:21-22; Luke 9:59-60), is strengthened by the demoting the prized nuclear family (Exodus 20:12; Tobit 6:13-15)[12] in favour of the family of faith who do God's will (Mark 3:31-35), so there is clearly coherence here.

However, this criterion, like those above, has been subject to critique. One observation is that if the early church did incorporate its own material into the New Testament, it would do so to cohere with the Jesus material it already possessed, so undermining what at first appears to be authentically historical material.[13] Other concerns include the possibility of introducing circularity when comparing texts.[14]

**Conclusion**

It is clearly of the utmost importance that we get as close to the authentic voice of Jesus as we possibly can, and to that extent the above exegetical tools are valuable and potentially fruitful. However, a common criticism is that too often material that has not passed a criterion of authenticity has been assumed to be less historically important. In other words, moderate critics maintain, the filter is too fine - allowing all too little of the authentic Jesus to pass through.[15]

The basis of such a conclusion is that the writers of the New Testament have provided the lion's share of its content by their creative theological activity. This, in turn, assumes that the memory of the character and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth did not materially influence the formation of the gospels, so that the Jesus tradition is unrecoverable behind the faith and preaching of the church, as Bultmann and others maintain.[16] Such

an assumption seems unwarranted by many scholars who would highlight the aspects of deliberate memorisation and eye-witness testimony, concluding that most gospel material originates from Jesus, though shaped by the pastoral and missional needs of the earliest communities.[17]

Secondly, the attempt to identify the authentic Jesus can serve to isolate him from the very Jewish culture which shaped and formed him, providing his thought processes and means of expressing them.[18] To overlook this is to limit the actions and utterances of the authentic Jesus because his Jewishness masks them.[19] At the same time an undue determination to major on his distinctiveness, risks lifting him above and beyond his own culture, so limiting his impact upon that culture.[20]

Thus, while criteria of authenticity are necessary if we are to identify as close as possible the very words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth and avoid arbitrary judgements, the application should not be uncompromisingly rigid, but allow for factors which might sway judgement in one direction or another. To sum up, as one commentator expressed it: 'this research can affirm certain points: it does not claim at all to deny those which it cannot affirm in the same way.' [21]

**Notes to text**

1 Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (London and Glasgow: Fontana Books, 1958) 14.

2 E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: The Penguin Press, 1993) 280.

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5 Stanley E. Porter, *Reading the Gospels and the Quest for the Historical Jesus* in Reading the Gospels Today ed. Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William Eerdmans, 2004) 44-49

6 Graham N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 161

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9 David R. Catchpole, *Tradition History* in New Testament Interpretation ed. I. Howard Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979) 176

10 Christopher Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament: Methods of Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1987) 106 – 107

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12 James G. Crossley, *Reading the New Testament: Contemporary Approaches* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) 56-57

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14 Raymond F. Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1996) 182

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17 Craig A. Evans, *Source, Form and Redaction Criticism: The 'Traditional' Methods of Synoptic Interpretation* in Approaches to New Testament Study ed. Stanley E. Porter and David Tombs (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 30

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20 Coggins and Houlden 152 -53

21 Etienne Charpentier, *How to Read the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1988) 116

# Anne Steele's Spirituality: From her Hymns

## By Gustavo Gubiani

*Author: Gustavo Gubiani ministers at Bishop's Stortford and has been studying at Spurgeon's College.*

**Introduction**

Doubts are part of life and by acknowledging and wrestling with them we may experience growth, and even answers, when the time is right. Anne Steele's spirituality seems to display this: honest about the fact that she might have more questions than assertions. In her hymns and poems, she evidences a spirituality that is secure enough to doubt, which can potentially encourage others to develop an honest spirituality that is not afraid of doubting and still trust.

I will first outline Steele's family context and personal sufferings and reflect on how her experiences might have shaped her spirituality. Second, I will explore the paradox of being spiritually secure enough to doubt as a sign of certainty. Third, in contrasting some of Isaac Watts' and John Wesley's works with some of Steele's, we will notice that her spirituality is honest, personal and introspective, and less assertive than the others, bringing a unique contribution to the 18th century Christian compositions. Fourth, I will argue that Steele's spirituality might be a rich way to resonate with life itself, as life is unpredictable and sometimes uncertain.

**Lessons of life**

Our lives can be seen as results of our contexts and Steele's life was no exception. She lived in a family of Particular Baptist ministers in 18th century England.[1] Her family were Dissenters, non-conformists who were oppressed by not sharing the practices of the established church; although relative freedom to worship had been experienced from the Toleration Act of 1689 when William and Mary acceded to the throne.[2] Steele's work can be seen with 'fundamental identification with the Disserting church, which was characterised by a common sense of oppression',[3] an oppression that might have taught her that life was unstable and mixed with a degree of uncertainty. Questions then become an essential part of life, even in the presence of God.

During Steele's life (1717-78), with the rise of evangelicalism, there was a measure of cautious expectation in Baptist life.[4] Worship services could be held in assigned buildings[5] and hymns could be produced and distributed more freely. Steele's hymns, even though originally written for personal devotion,[6] became part of hymnbooks used for public worship; for instance, the *Rippon's Selection of Hymns* had 53 of her hymns

among 588.[7] Steele's work played a 'significant theological and spiritual role in Baptist faith and life in Britain from the 1780s to the 1830s.'[8] Hymns can serve as a powerful tool to shape doctrine and devotion.

Steele is the only woman 'among giants in hymnology'[9] in a period when writers like Isaac Watts, Charles and John Wesley were active.[10] Perhaps this is an outcome of her pioneering approach, expressing a spirituality that was honest enough to doubt and feel. Louis Benson comments on Steele's honesty towards her feelings in her writings and her subsequent success: 'it is easy to understand that the depth and sincerity of feelings of Miss Steele's hymns made [...] even Watts seem cold.'[11] It is not that Watts or the Wesleys were not honest in their compositions, but Steele was displaying a sincerity arising from the context of personal struggle and suffering, expressing to God a natural human response to vicissitudes in life: doubts, bringing a 'unique expression of devotion'[12] to her literature.

Some misleading details of Steele's personal life, for instance, the drowning incident of her alleged fiancé,[13] or, as a teenager, becoming disabled from falling from a horse,[14] led some to think of her as a mere victim of tragedies.[15] However, neither incident is supported by the diary of her stepmother, Anne Cator Steele.[16] Even though there is evidence that Steele had severe health problems, suffering from a persistent form of malaria, which would afflict her with continuous harsh pain, and evidence of the death of close family members like her mother,[17] she was 'a faithful woman who committed her life and talents to the purpose of glorifying her Creator.'[18] Intelligent and independent, she was part of a sophisticated circle of intellectual friends.[19] Indeed, she suffered and saw life as a painful journey—as written in the poem *To a Friend in Trouble:*

*Through wild and thorny paths, our journey lies,*
*And darkness terrifies, and dangers rise.*
*O may our heav'nly Father's guardian care,*
*Preserve our steps from ev'ry fatal snare:*
*Be his almighty arm our guide, our stay,*
*Through all the toils and terrors of the way.*[20]

She wrestled with her losses in her writing, articulating her suffering perhaps as her own way to deal with the pressures of pain and loss - someone who would feel released through the expression of writing and not a 'melancholic woman of extreme piety.'[21] Even though navigating life in a weak body as illustrated in her poem, *A Thought in Sickness:* 'when I shall leave this tenement of clay, with all its frailties, all its pains below,'[22] Steele did not see herself as a victim, but as someone who could make choices in life, as 'she deliberately remained single in an age that assumed that the ideal for women was marriage and motherhood'[23] to use her God-given gift of writing freely.[24]

**Secure enough to doubt**

Steele indeed suffered, but she did not use her pain 'as an excuse to neglect God.'[25] On the contrary, she made the choice, while benefiting herself from writing, to encourage others to seek God regardless of how painful life can be.

It can be said she was secure, because perhaps only the confident ones would have the courage to question the Beloved without fearing being rejected.

Hence, it seems that Steele's secure spirituality might leave us with a paradox: the paradox of being secure enough to doubt. We tend to seek for certainties. As children of the Enlightenment, we like facts, reasoning our assurances on them and based on them, we feel secure. We want to know things for sure, so that we can start to *trust*. However, is always life certain? In reality we might have more questions than assurances in life, and Steele might be modelling a spirituality that is honest enough to realise and vocalise that—she is secure enough to doubt and still trust in God and His ways despite how incomprehensible He might be.[26]

It will be seen that her statements lack confidence—her literary work seems to present an open-ended look that shows doubt and hesitation,[27] creating 'a sense of spiritual hesitancy on her part.'[28] However, this might not be a problem, but a solution, even though we are not comfortable with it as those who like being certain, especially regarding matters of faith. By contrasting Steele with her better known contemporaries such as John Wesley and Watts, it is possible to see their different approaches and Steele's 'powerful and unique contribution to 18th century hymnody'[29] becomes clearer. Her work resonates with Christians today as, after all, life is full of questions.

**Comparing Watts, Wesley and Steele**

Watts' and Wesley's works are filled with confidence, expressing certainties and a hope based on robust faith experiences,[30] which have the power to encourage others to rely on God. However, Steele's compositions 'introduce an expression of faith that is personal and introspective, and that reveals a compelling depth of honesty regarding the common human experiences of suffering and doubt.'[31] She is secure to express her thoughts to God in her distress; and this is the pattern that seems to be present in her works.

For instance, in Steele's hymn *Desiring the Presence of God*, 'her approach to God is uncertain'[32] and hesitantly calls God her father and friend—'O could I make the claim.'[33] Her heart is doubtful, perhaps due to her sufferings: 'When will the mournful night be gone'?[34] However, while displaying questions which confirm that she is confused by her sadness, she holds fast to the hope that some day, as she treasures God's word, the Lord will 'change these deep complaining sighs, for songs of sacred praise.'[35] It is a unshakeable hope, even though not fully confident on how and when it will come to fruition. Hence, she displays a spirituality that is secure but also realistic. This security is not evidenced by confidence, but by her honest approach to God in doubt; in other words, doubting with God.

Considering another of her hymns, called *God the Only Refuge of the Trouble Mind,* Steele, troubled by her distress, is again not completely sure of God's presence: 'But oh, when gloomy doubts prevail, I fear to call thee mine.'[36] However, at the same time, she knows there is no place to hide

even in her uncertainty: 'But still my soul would cleave to thee, though prostrate in the dust.'[37] This confidence, hence, is mixed with sensitivity and hesitation, which leads her to question: 'And can the ear of sovereign grace be deaf when I complain'?[38] Nonetheless, her belief is secure: 'Thy mercy-seat is open still; here let my soul retreat, with humble hope attend thy will, and wait beneath thy feet.'[39] She has more questions than answers, but knows enough to not diminish her trust. She is emotionally attached to her writing, personally intimate to the point of showing the thoughts of her heart. There is no better place to doubt than in the presence of God.

Two further examples of her secure but honestly doubting spirituality can be seen in the form of poems. For instance, in the poem *Encouragement to trust in God*, Steele begins with a 'humble confidence,'[40] and continues by questioning whether she could actually have such hope: 'But can a vile, a guilty creature, dare; aspire to hope for favours so divine? Aspire to claim an interest in thy care, or boldly call the glorious blessing mine'?[41] In *The Humble Claim,* she continues to display her lack of confidence, hesitant to the point of not knowing for sure if she could say that God was hers. She is not afraid though to express her doubts, which are mixed with her unshakable faith: 'My God —important, glorious, blissful name! Can I without a fear, assert my claim? I fear, yet hope, I doubt, and yet desire, now tremble low on earth, and now aspire.'[42] Her circumstances seem to oppose her belief, but deep inside her there is a trust that cannot be taken. Her faith seems not to be circumstantial, as life is not always certain in its disclosure, even more when pain and suffering are consistently present.

Steele's spiritual voice might be even more noticeable if contrasting with, for instance, Watts and Wesley's compositions. Watts, in his hymn *Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ*, writes: 'When I survey the wond'rous cross, on which the Prince of glory dy'd; My richest gain, I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.'[43] His words are written from a humble but yet confident perspective. Aalders suggests that Watts is surveying the scene with assurance, and is confident to even propose a possible response to what he is seeing—'his language is personal, but it is neither emotional nor dramatic, and so even the image of Christ on the cross is considered with reserve and sobriety.'[44] Unemotional analysis is what the word survey might evoke. Watts seems not to be emotionally or intimately connected to what is being seen, even though acknowledging who he is and what Christ did for him. Furthermore, there is no doubt or hesitation in his language, which is marked with confident faith in the outcome of the cross.

John Wesley seems to operate in a similar fashion. In his works he boldly exalts his confidence in the salvation of his soul by the blood of Christ and calls others to also experience it, by faith: 'Believe, and all your sin's forgiven; only believe, and yours is heaven.'[45] He is confident, secure in his new identity as a child of God: 'that I, a child of wrath and hell, I should be called a child of God, should know, should feel my sins forgiven, blest with this antepast of heaven'![46] Wesley knows and feels in

his heart the forgiveness of his sins and is certain of his new status, therefore he asserts rather than questions. Aalders finds in Wesley's language 'an abundance of exclamation points [...], making frequent moments of spiritual assurance and enthusiasm.'[47]

It is important to point out that there is nothing wrong with positive assertions and confidence of faith that both Watts and Wesley display in their hymns. Indeed, there is a place for certainty and having assurance in the salvific work of God is crucial. However, life and faith cannot be fully understood from this perspective alone. Steele shows that it is also important to express the doubts of our hearts to God, suggesting that spiritual security can also be enhanced by the experience of doubting.

**A spirituality that resonates with life**

Steele's spirituality of being secure to the point of doubting might encourage us: it is a spirituality that can be sustained in the uncertainty and fragility of life. It is not a rigid spirituality, but a flexible one. Although recognising the place of positive assertions, we might not always have an answer to the things that happen to us, such as in Steele's context of suffering and pain. An insecure spirituality might rely on certainty, but being honest like Steele, we are content to live with questions. By being open and not afraid to face the questions we might hold, we might find our way to the answers when the time is right, thus developing a source of personal growth in wrestling with them.

For instance, Steele's approach seems to resonate with the philosophy of Rainer Maria Rilke who, reflecting on life and writing to a friend, suggests: 'have patience with everything that is unsolved in your heart and try to cherish the questions themselves. [...] Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, one day live right into the answer.'48 Perhaps Steele knew that while pondering her questions to God, she would eventually make her way to answers, even if God's way of answering would be through prompting Steele to write hymns.

**Conclusion**

Steele's spirituality can be seen through her literary work, which reflects her life experiences. Her life and ours are uncertain, especially when confronted with suffering. Steele turned to God with her questions, secure enough to doubt. In contrast to the works of other 18th century writers, it is clear that Steele's intimate and personal approach to God brings a unique expression of devotion that is not afraid of doubt. Doubts have a role in our development. God is not afraid of our questions: neither should we be.

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# Learning from the SBC
## By Moises Mendoza

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Can the Baptist Union (BUGB) learn anything from the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)? In this article I will compare the BU's *Declaration of Principle* (DoP)[1] and the SBC's *Baptist Faith and Message* (BF&M) (2000)[2] and ask what they can teach us about our identity as British Baptists. First I will offer an historical analysis and comparison of the development of the DoP and BF&M; and then a critical comparison of the notions of authority and baptism. Because of the amount of material, not all the nuances within the controversies will be addressed, and the focus will be on the clauses regarding authority and baptism in the DoP and BF&M. For an in-depth analysis of the remaining themes within the DoP see the work of Paul Fiddes *et al*,[3] and for the BF&M see the works of Timothy Seal.[4]

The uncertain times in which we live, including Covid 19 pressures on church life, have caused many within the BU to question their identity.[5] Similarly, debates regarding the future of the SBC have arisen because of criticisms of losing their 'Baptist way' in favour of 'white Christian identity politics', post-Trump.[6] A comparative analysis of the DoP and the BF&M could aid the identification and rediscovery of BU and SBC core convictions, and could assist us in recognising when amendments and revisions are appropriate for us to function as a contemporary Baptist community.[7]

**The development of constitutions—DoP**

The fragmentation within Protestantism after the Reformation led to a multiplicity of denominations. New churches and communities created their own confessions, while existing Protestant denominations often revised theirs.[8] Theological and social disagreements were often the primary causes for creating and amending confessions.[9]

The DoP and BF&M were also developed in different times and contexts. The DoP is fascinating not simply because of its content, but because of its purpose, philosophy, and impact. In 1813, the first constitution among a Union of Particular Baptist churches was created.[10] Its content included reformed doctrinal statements in line with the *1689 Confession of Faith*.[11] It highlighted who could and could not be part of the Union, and the rejection of these doctrines by General Baptists resulted in their exclusion. In 1835, the amalgamation of Particular and General Baptists, alongside a decline in Baptist churches

(1820-30), resulted in amendments to the Union's constitution. The reformed doctrinal statements were replaced with a simple adherence to 'sentiments usually denominated Evangelical.' [12] This inclusive approach to the Basis of Union attracted more Baptist churches, enabling growth in fellowship and mission.[13]

In 1873, discussions regarding a possible confession of faith resulted in further amendments to the constitution.[14] The assembly rejected a confession, and instead produced the first DoP and a separate Objects of the Union. The constitution was even more inclusive than the last, contained no confessional commitments,[15] and further enabled the formal union between Particular and General Baptists in 1891.[16] These amendments were opposed by many including Spurgeon.[17]

Significant amendments were then made to the constitution in 1904. The most prominent included the expansion of the DoP with a call to mission, and four revisions to the Objects of the Union. From that point onwards, the notions of authority, baptism and mission became 'a clear hallmark of Baptist identity.' [18] In 1906 and 1938 slight amendments were made to the wording of the DoP. The Holy Spirit was also added into the first clause as the standard by which churches should seek to interpret and administer 'His law', and changes were made to the description of Christ.[19] The DoP has remained unchanged since then with a few amendments being made to the Basis of Union in subsequent years.

**Baptist Faith and Message**

The BF&M has also gone through a process of revision and amendment since it was first established in 1925. Its purpose, philosophy, and content, however, differ significantly from the DoP. The modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the early 20th century saw greater divisions between Northern and Southern Baptists; a conflict not too dissimilar to the tension between the BU and reformed Baptists.[20] Southern Baptists grew increasingly concerned with liberalism in education and mission in the North.[21] In an attempt to return to conservative orthodoxy the SBC presented their BF&M in 1925. It was a restatement of the New Hampshire Confession (1833) with a few amendments;[22] it addressed concerns about the controversy, clarified Southern Baptist doctrinal positions, and expounded upon matters of importance including education, mission, and stewardship.[23]

The conflict between conservative fundamentalists and liberal moderates continued into the 1960s with the publication of Ralph Elliott's *The Message of Genesis*.[24] The book raised doubts regarding theological 'soundness' in educational institutions.[25] This was 'one of the most heated controversies in the history of the SBC', [26] and was vital for the revision of the 1925 BF&M.[27] The revision included the consolidation of its 25 articles into 17, and a primary affirmation of biblical inspiration.[28] In 1979, the presidential appointment of Adrian Rogers began a 10-year effort to seize control of the convention by conservatives.[29] This period is known as the 'conservative resurgence.'[30]

The resurgence began with a meticulous plan to secure a conservative president at the next election; a plan which succeeded and would see the SBC take a conservative preference in the coming decades.[31] Much of the concern was once again on what was being taught in seminaries and colleges; teachings that were perceived to threaten biblical authority.[32] This became a public battle for the support of ordinary Southern Baptists. Once Rogers was appointed and 'motions and resolutions' were in place, many moderates began to leave the SBC and form their own networks.[33] In the year 2000, the SBC made substantial conservative revisions to the BF&M, re-affirming key doctrinal beliefs and practices: this '[signalled] the completion of the conservative resurgence.' [34]

**Comparative analysis**

It is interesting to note the similarities between the development of the DoP and the BF&M (2000). Both adopted revised versions of existing confessions, illustrating their comparative infancy and highlighting their reformed inclinations. Additionally, the conflict between the conservative/reformed and liberal/moderates was a driving force for the development of the first constitutions: the BU from reformed Baptists, and the SBC from liberal Northern Baptists. Furthermore, revisions were continuously made to address the situations of their time; both recognising the importance of having statements that clearly expressed who they were and what they believed.

On the other hand, there are stark distinctions. First, though both began with the adoption of confessions, the BU decided early on to not proceed in that direction. Instead, the BU developed a general constitution resulting in the DoP, which is now referred to as a 'covenant.' [35] In contrast, the SBC pursued confessions and recognised them as the means to define themselves and explicitly detail their core beliefs. Secondly, whereas the BU decided to remove specific doctrinal statements to allow for greater inclusion among Baptist churches, the SBC added and developed them into the BF&M, naturally causing separation and exclusion.

Finally, the purpose and philosophy of the DoP and BF&M are significantly different. The BU recognised that its task was to unite Baptist churches from around the UK and hold their differences in tension. This resulted in the development of a 'covenantal' DOP with few barriers; its lack of specific doctrinal 'requirements' enabled Baptists to unite as a Baptist family in a covenantal relationship, regardless of their doctrinal differences.[36] The BF&M however, presented and clarified specific theological commitments held by the SBC. Each revision to the BF&M was made to counter opposing views and restore a conservative orthodoxy. This peaked with the 2000 revision where the doctrinal beliefs of conservative-fundamentalists made their way to the BF&M; this saw the departure of many Southern Baptists from the SBC. The BF&M, in attempting to protect and restore what they deemed as orthodoxy, naturally resulted in the exclusion of others.

**Analysing the constitutions—authority**

Both constitutions begin with a declaration of their pre-eminent concern, their ultimate source of authority. The source of authority dictates what they believe and how they are to live, and in both cases Jesus Christ and the Bible play a significant role. For the BU, Jesus Christ is the source of their sole authority.[37] He is the one, 'as revealed in the Holy Scriptures,' who directs all spheres of the Baptist's faith and practice.[38] The SBC, however, views the Bible as 'the supreme standard by which all human conduct…should be tried'; [39] it is the final and only authority on all matters pertaining to life.[40] It is important to recognise the nuance here: both constitutions highly regard Jesus and the Bible, but have a different approach in determining ultimate authority.

The BU affirms biblical inspiration and reliability but argues in the DoP that Jesus Christ takes precedence, with the Bible as a *witness to Jesus*.[41] Jesus Christ is seen as the incarnate Word of God, as the revelation of God himself, and the Bible is a witness to that Word.[42] Therefore, the BU, as highlighted in the DoP, sees not a book, a creed, or a confession as having sole authority, but a person.[43] Similarly, the SBC also believes in the inspiration and reliability of the Bible, and acknowledges that ultimate authority begins with God.[44] However, as highlighted in the BF&M, the SBC affirms *sola scriptura*;[45] that is, that scripture is given by God; in God, it has its origin, mediation, and delivery. Thus, since it originates with God and is delivered through a God-guided process, it is inerrant, sufficient and the only authority for Baptist life.[46] For the BU, the Bible serves the 'authority of Christ,'[47] for the SBC, scripture is the revelation of Christ's authority.

**Baptism**

Believers' baptism is one of the key distinguishing factors between Baptists and other Christian traditions,[48] and is, therefore, rightly included in both constitutions. Besides the Baptist notions of 'immersion' and 'a believer,'[49] there are additional similarities between the DoP and BF&M. First, both statements are rooted in the Bible. The command in Matthew 28:18-20 to baptise in the 'name of' the Father, Son, and Holy Spirt appears prominently in the DoP and BF&M, emphasising its importance. Secondly, both statements have been used as a prerequisite to church membership. This is clearly stated in the BF&M[50] and is largely seen within Baptist congregations, which encourage believers' baptism before membership.[51]

However, the use of Matthew 28:18-20 is where the similarity among the biblical passages ends. The DoP refers to 1 Corinthians 15:3 and Acts 2:38 in addition to the Matthew passage,[52] while the BF&M refers to an additional 15 passages. This difference is an example of the DoP's more open position whereas the BF&M expresses a particular theological understanding. The biggest difference, however, is noted in the DoP's use of the word 'into' rather than 'in,' and in the capitalising of 'Name.' Whereas BF&M quotes Matthew 28:19-20, the DoP uses this opportunity to expand upon its theology.[53] The use of 'into' and 'Name' indicates coming into a deep and personal relationship with the triune God's entire being; it highlights 'a participation in

life in God, a sharing in divine life where water in baptism, and baptism in the Spirit clearly interweave.'[54]

**Conclusion**

Despite some similarities, the BU and the SBC pursued very different paths, and the DoP and BF&M (2000) are indicative of those decisions. The BU acknowledges its role of bringing together Baptist churches into a covenantal relationship with one another irrespective of differences, and the DoP illustrates an attempt to remove unnecessary barriers while upholding Baptist tradition. The SBC, on the other hand, pursued the task of maintaining what it believed to be Christian orthodoxy. Continuous revisions of the BF&M were made to protect and preserve conservative theological convictions. However, there is little doubt that the conservative resurgence overstepped ethical boundaries and as highlighted in the BF&M (2000), solidified conservative-*fundamentalism* within the denomination.

Putting aside the BF&M's (2000) fundamentalism for a moment, it could be argued that at times one needs to establish firm doctrinal criteria within a denomination; such criteria would naturally result in the exclusion of some but would protect theological convictions and provide unity and identity for those within. Additionally, one may argue, as some did, that the BU, for the sake of inclusion, diluted the constitution, resulting in the loss of its historical theological position. Reflecting upon such notions, I believe, can help highlight the balance that must be struck in advocating the BU's open and welcoming philosophy while simultaneously recognising the need to remain faithful to theological convictions. Which theological convictions these are, however, must be the topic of discussion among British Baptists today.

Recognising and understanding history can impact the present. The DoP has developed over time; it demonstrates what the BU is, and what it stands for is significant for the BU today. Understanding why the notions within the DoP were so important to its original writers, can help us to rediscover and reshape Baptist identity in the contemporary world. A glance at the past and an analysis of the present allows the BU to recognise its failures, purpose, and core convictions. These can be used to form a stronger and more united Union that effectively indwells its societal context.

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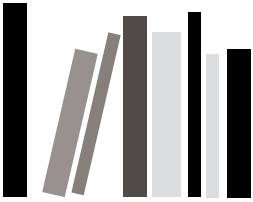
## Research into Baptist life

**Did you know that there is a free-access archive of all available past *bmj* issues, including its predecessor, *The Fraternal*?**

These journals provide a lens into the life of Baptist ministers and their churches back to 1907, and could help you in your research. Our friend Rob Bradshaw, librarian at Spurgeon's College, scanned all the back issues that we have been able to locate and hosts them for us on Theology on the Web, which itself is an amazing resource and worth a look. The bmj archive does not include the most recent year or two, but is updated periodically.

You can find the archive here:

https://theologyontheweb.org.uk/journals_baptist.html



# reviews

edited by Michael Peat

***An Advent Manifesto: Daily Readings and Reflections from Isaiah and Luke***
*by Martyn Percy*
*BRF, 2023*
***Reviewer: Michael Peat***

This book is a welcome addition to the genre of devotional texts offered for daily reading. The 'Advent Manifesto' of the title is shorthand for the paradoxical politics of the Kingdom of God, rooted in God's impartial love for the world which we are invited to return to others as we wait for Jesus' return in glory. But the chapters themselves cover Advent through to Candlemas, with a daily pattern which consciously echoes the spiritual practice of *lectio divina* (sacred reading). This encourages the reader slowly to savour short passages of scripture, absorbing them as a locus where God may be heard today, rather than consuming them as a resource for information.

To this end, a four-fold pattern shapes each day's offering: an invitation to chew over a few verses from Luke's gospel taken from the focal passage for each week (eg annunciation, magnificat, beatitudes) is aided by a thoughtful meditation from the author, which leads into a prayer and, finally, contemplation in the form of questions and actions that allow readers to extend their rumination throughout the day. Readings from Isaiah are offered for reflection at weekends. The choice of scripture passages is deliberately selective: Percy intends that the discipline of limiting the breadth of scriptural reading will enable a greater depth of savouring and, in my experience, this desired effect is achieved.

As you would expect, the selected biblical texts are familiar territory for the season. However, Percy's wise counsel, channelled through engaging illustrations and memorable turns of phrase, brings surprising and helpfully provocative insights to this familiarity. Two quotes will have to suffice here to give a flavour of the food for thought offered to those who will journey through this season of the Christian year accompanied by An Advent Manifesto:

> *God comes among us, not as an articulate adult with some ideas and a plan, but in a form that is utterly defenceless and vulnerable. Yet it is precisely in this most unexpected incarnation that the wisdom of God is revealed. Here, we come face to face with God, who has come among us as a tiny child. And so we will have to put time and energy into that relationship if we are ever to hear him speak his first words. God's wisdom is this: he comes to us in a way that draws us into the mystery of creation and the surprise of the unexpected miracle.* (p40)

*Mary is not the only one to say 'yes'; there are in fact dozens who surround the annunciation and birth of Jesus… The salvation story itself is far richer in depth and meaning than one person's sacrifice. Grace should really be seen as something that is as expansive as it is expensive…You are not just in debt, needing to be 'bought' out of bondage. You are also a partner in this extraordinary business of saying 'yes' to God, in which everyone can receive a full and equal share of God's riches. This is generosity defined.* (p124)

I read this book out of season so that a review could bring it to others' attention in time for Advent. But I look forward to returning to *An Advent Manifesto* in December, confident that it will continue to enrich me, and help me to listen for a word in due season from God.

***Around the World in 80 Ways: A Life of Ministry***
*by David Coffey*
*Malcolm Down Publishing, 2023*
***Reviewer: Michael Bochenski***

Among the many impressive commendations for this book is this from Derek Tidball: '…David has put together a collection of sermons, addresses and reflections which express his convictions. Rooted in the gospel, expressed in his engaging and arresting style, and with disarming honesty, they reveal what has motivated him throughout his life.' They do indeed. After a moving family biography section, 13 sermons, five addresses—some of which I recall hearing when first spoken—and five articles follow. These form the body of this book. A final section, 'Growing Old with God' is, to adopt a cliché, worth the price of the book itself. 'I know how to die but no-one ever taught me how to grow old' (Billy Graham).

In June 2022 David spoke for us at an EMBA Retired Baptist Ministers Network gathering. It was wonderful to hear his familiar voice again as he shared something of his life and ministry journey with us all. Some of the anecdotes he told us are to be found in this book. Travel journeys, his love of classical music and church history. Conversations with royalty, politicians and religious leaders at very high levels. A moving visit to the Holy Land and his sadness viewing Bethlehem as she now is: 'Palestinian believers aren't asking for much—just a little room in your hearts. Don't stop loving Israel but love us as well. Isn't there room in our hearts for both?' Those who have heard DC speak—and there are hundreds of thousands of us now—will also recall that distinctive voice, his mastery of what Sangster called 'the craft of sermon illustration', and his jokes—some better than others! All return vividly to mind as you read.

His sermons on 'antidotes for not losing heart' and the deeply poignant 'Tribute to a Friend" are particularly powerful. There are some fine examples of narrative preaching to be found here too. Mature self-searching and honest personal reflection feature. As do some truly remarkable stories. The girlfriend of Jesus. A miracle at Colesburg in May 1998, and accounts of some human rights deputations stand out. A recollection of what one of Queen Elizabeth II's stewards had searched out for him—a handwritten Queen Victoria note to Gladstone—is fascinating '…be kind

to the nonconformists among us for they do us good.' His accounts of a mistakenly misdirected text which caused, well, some consternation, and what I will simply call 'the Admiral story' still raise a smile several days after reading them! As does a call to bless some bingo pens—what would Jesus do?!

Many *bmj* readers will have, in ways large or small, been part of the living church history that marked David's leadership of our Union and then the BWA. Ian Randall captured something of this period, with characteristic attention to detail, in the final chapters of his *English Baptists of the 20th Century*. Clive Burnard has also reflected on the 'Coffey years' exploring, in doctoral studies, what he terms Transformational Servant Leadership. More recently, Andy Goodliff has asked some searching questions of those years in his *Renewing a Modern Denomination*. My judgement is that this kind of research work has really only just begun. This period in recent Baptist history, bucking for a time so many denominational decline trends, will continue to be of interest to future historians, church leaders and mission practitioners alike. *Around the World in 80 Ways* will, in which case, prove to be an invaluable resource for many.

Why did David Coffey's leadership prove so effective and inspirational to so many all over the world? One passage from the book offers I suggest a vital clue. He is describing a conviction that grew upon him during a Billy Graham rally. At it he heard the Lord say this to him: 'David, I need you as a participator in My mission, not as a spectator.' How much gospel good has flowed from that 'still small voice.'

***Mission not Impossible: Baptist Missionaries' Experiences and Reflections***
*by Ian Randall*
*BHS &BMS World Mission, 2023*
***Reviewer: John Dyer***

This book taps into the hearts and minds of the storytellers. The title would suggest that these are stories of those who have served overseas because God has called them to do so but did not necessarily feel they were equal to the task. As such, they follow in the steps of Moses and Jeremiah of Old Testament fame. This book traces the background, calling, preparation, sending, and engagement of a wide spectrum of people in varied tasks, within different cultures from Asia to Africa and Europe to the Americas.

Though based on a sample of those who worked in each individual country, the stories are revealing in many ways. What goes through the minds of people who realise that God is calling them to tasks that are both challenging and exciting, daunting, and yet irresistible? For the love of Christ constrains us. Some of the stories in this book follow a more traditional route to missionary service, beginning with a Christian home and upbringing. But not all are like this. There are stories here which reflect every situation in life and reveal that God by no means calls a particular kind of person from a particular kind of background to go for him.

There are those for whom a sense of call to be a missionary had long been there. For others, the thought had never occurred to them, until the call came. Though they all served with BMS World Mission, there is a

sense in every story that this is about the work of the kingdom. Here in this book, there are stories of triumph and tragedy, of hope fulfilled and hope deferred, of joy and pain, of gain and loss.

This book follows a set pattern and structure in which each contributor describes his or her own experience of the different stages leading to missionary service overseas. After some initial reservations, I found that this approach made the stories more impactful, as one can compare the experiences of different people facing a complexity of situations and their dealings with these situations. These stories are told not only for posterity and to enable research but also to glorify God. This book is the vehicle by which we can have access to the amazing things that God has done through ordinary lives touched by his love and compassion and sent to those to whom he himself would go.

There is a final section in which reflection takes place concerning the legacy of BMS and its influence on the local communities it served. The general pattern is one of transition from external leadership to locally led communities. Also, of strategic importance, is how first-hand experience of the frontline has shaped missiological thinking regarding the challenges of mission in the UK and around the world in the 21st century.

This book should be mandatory reading for those researching the contribution to mission made by BMS World Mission, but also for those who are contemplating serving God crossculturally. It will inform regarding elements of the history of the work of BMS, but also it will inspire the hearts and minds of those whom God is calling to engage in mission beyond the British Isles, today.

A further reason for acquiring Ian's book is that Kang-San Tan, the General Director of BMS World Mission, has written an excellent foreword, which is most enlightening as to the 'rear-view mirror' relationship between past, present and future mission activity.

***The Disabled God Revisited: Trinity, Christology and Liberation***
*by Lisa Powell*
*Bloomsbury, 2023*
***Reviewer: Martin Hobgen***

Thirty years after the after Nancy Eiesland's seminal book *The Disabled God* was published it is easy to forget its impact. Lisa Powell's recently published book reminds us that Eiesland's work is foundational for contemporary disability theology. Powell evaluates its significance and surveys the critiques that have emerged since its publication, particularly those by John Swinton. In conversation with Karl Barth and Bruce McCormack, she sets out a doctrine that provides a foundation for the concept of the disabled God that Eiesland proposed. Like the original book, this is a slim volume; however, it delves into the complexities of trinitarian theology to successfully achieve its aim: to lay a firm trinitarian foundation for the concept of the disabled God rather than rely on the retention of crucifixion marks in Jesus' post-resurrection body.

Powell proposes that 'the triune life of God [is] shaped for covenant relationship,

such that the very nature of God as triune may be considered a result of God's self-determination to be a God of covenant relationship outside Godself' (p5). From this, she argues that 'we identify no Son other than the one eternally determined to be incarnate in broken flesh.' To further break the link between disability and suffering that Eiesland initiates, Powell considers how we understand God as interdependent or in need.

A kenotic Christology emphasises the addition of humanity rather than the divestment of divine attributes. Powell critiques Barth's hierarchical understanding of the Son's obedience to the Father and its links to women's passive 'receptivity' of male authority, which leads to the subordination of women and subsequently to the disempowerment of disabled people.

Drawing on feminist and queer theology, Powell argues that 'receptivity [of God] has traditionally been associated with female physiology, subordinated to an assumed male initiative and agency' while recognising that feminist theology counters this with an insistence on independence. Feminist disability studies criticise this as being counterproductive for some disabled women and men, who are interdependent on others to assist them to live an 'ordinary life in an unconventional body' (Eiesland, 39). The intersectionality of disability, gender and sexuality is a way of challenging the theology's dominant 'heteroableist constructions of normativity' (Powell, 96ff).

Finally, Powell explores Eiesland's claim that 'disabilities will be retained in the resurrected life because Jesus was resurrected with his wounds' (Eiesland, 107f). While this might seem like an esoteric or irrelevant argument, she makes the point that we often live our lives according to our eschatological view. Here the pastoral implications of this book are clearest: the task of encouraging participatory inclusion of disabled people is assisted by holding out the genuine hope of God's acceptance of and desire for all people to participate in God's purposes, now and eternally.

Eiesland works within a minority group model, identifying disability as the discrimination experienced by the minority by the majority (non-disabled) group due to individuals' characteristics. After a discussion of whether 'disabilities' are retained in the resurrected life, Powell argues that such discrimination, understood in terms of disability as a social construct, will not exist in the resurrected life. It is debateable, then, that all characteristics of individuals, often seen as 'impairments', will not be retained.

Powell's use of 'receptivity' lies at the heart of my main criticism. Within churches, disabled people have previously been perceived as 'passive recipients of pastoral care'; Powell's use of the term 'receptivity' may have the unfortunate effect of perpetuating this attitude. An emphasis on enabling mutuality between disabled and non-disabled people would challenge such exclusion.

the baptist ministers'
# journal
October 2023 volume 360

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