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Baptist Ministers' Journal

# The Baptist Ministers' Journal

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The Baptist Ministers' Journal is the journal of  
The Baptist Ministers' Fellowship.

Details of the Fellowship can be found  
on the inside back cover.

'The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily  
Reflect those of the Editor or the Editorial Board'

## Editorial

Dear Colleagues,

I have been asked to write a foreword for BMJ on this occasion because a number of things are in a process of change - too many for me to list them all.

The Editor of the BMJ is changing. Hazel Sherman brought her own distinctive gifts to the editorship, but following a very difficult year has felt it right to step down. The Editorial Committee and the BMF Committee accept that this is right for Hazel, so reluctantly have accepted her decision. We believe the editorship of the BMJ is a very important part of the BMF's work, and we give thanks for what Hazel has given to the task. We are equally grateful that John Houseago has agreed to act as Editor for this one edition of the journal before Sally Nelson takes over on a permanent basis. Both have considerable, relevant experience and we are blessed by their willingness to be of service.

The BMF Committee is itself changing. Geoff Colmer has completed his term of office as ex-Chair, and Catriona Gorton is coming in as the new deputy chair (sincere thanks to Geoff and Catriona!). At least half of the Associations are appointing, or need to appoint new representatives to serve on the Committee, and already very few committee members have served on the committee for more than 5 years. However you picture the BMF committee, you've probably got it wrong!

The work of the committee is always changing as we respond to the concerns of BMF members, and to the agenda of the Baptist Union as it

affects Baptist ministers. If you are a minister still "in harness", you will have had an invitation to complete *The Manse Life Questionnaire*. We expect the results of this grass roots feedback to significantly affect the BMF agenda. The Ministry Department is involved in matters such as HM Government immigration guidelines as they affect overseas pastors and church workers seeking to work in the UK, reviewing the categories of the current BUGB register of accredited ministries, responding to HMG's Independent Safeguarding regulations. In these and other matters BMF aims to represent the views and needs of those working at the sharp end of ministry. If you would like to get involved, and

your Association does not already have a representative on the BMF committee, have a word with your regional minister. I am sure he/she will be delighted.

The economic world is changing. Churches and ministers are not immune from this; and it is directly impacting the lives of some of our colleagues. BMF's Sunday Morning Prayer Tryst, in which we are committed to pray every Sunday for one another as we exercise our common yet particular ministry, is one example of what BMF is for: but our entire business is about prayerfully, and as much as we can practically, supporting one another. Surely this is at the heart of "Fellowship".

We give thanks at all times for the people God has given to us to love, to serve, and to be our co-workers. We give thanks for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth in which we are all called to minister. We give thanks for BMF and the role it has played in serving and encouraging ministers. It is a privilege to be part of it.

*Through all the changing scenes of life; in trouble and in joy, the praises of my God shall still my heart and tongue employ.* (Nahum Tate 17<sup>th</sup> C.)

Ted Hale, BMF Chair.

## BOURNEMOUTH ASSEMBLY 2009

Afternoon of Saturday May 2<sup>nd</sup>

Baptist Ministers' Fellowship AGM

followed by

John Rackley

**The Acceptable Outsider:**

*A minister's experience of isolation  
and marginalisation is inevitable  
and necessary for the well-being of  
the church*

All welcome

See Assembly programme for details  
of time and venue

## HUMAN SPIRITUALITY: Seeking an approach

By David Warrington

### Introduction

I was originally attracted to the Christian faith by its sense of spirituality and not by its belief system. Connecting with the divine for me came first, and in one sense the beliefs came later. Last year I spent two months of my sabbatical period looking at human spirituality in its wider context. In some way I was trying to see if there was a way of understanding spirituality that connected with what it is to be human, as that is perceived in the world of today. I tried to read as widely as I could within the time limits, looking at different approaches to spirituality; feminine spirituality, spirituality across the faiths, secular and new age spirituality as well as the more traditional contemplative traditions within the Christian framework. It is some of the reflections that came out of that reading that I hope to share in this article.

### A Traditional Christian Understanding

For centuries the Church's teaching on spirituality was rooted in the idea that human beings are specially created and possess immortal souls or spirits which enable them to connect to the realm of Spirit. A realm that is parallel but different to the physical reality which all human beings experience in common.

It has been questioned whether the idea of the immortality of the soul is a thoroughly biblical one. The Hebrew Scriptures either ignore the question of life after death or, in some of the later books, hint at a shadowy

afterlife. The New Testament generally ascribes immortality to God alone (1 Timothy 6:16) and, according to the Johannine and the Pauline texts, the experience and hope of eternal life is dependent on the union of the individual with Christ. This would mean that some of the traditional approaches to spirituality are themselves spiritually suspect.

Traditional approaches are also suspect from other perspectives. The prevalent view of human awareness rooted in the scientific theory of evolution sees us as part of a process, and that even the emergence of intelligence and the human capacity to observe our own existence is part of this and not in any way separate

from it. Traditional Christian doctrines have been largely rooted in the thinking of Augustine who was strongly influenced by gnosticism. This has resulted in a dualistic approach that saw the flesh as bad and the spirit as good, therefore the traditional approach is also philosophically and psychologically suspect.

Can we start to define or understand human spirituality in a way that is integrative of the best of current understandings of what it is to be human?

### Some Modern Ideas

The overall trend in thinking about what it is to be human seems to move us towards the view that we are rooted in the physical environment of which we are a part and that we are best understood as whole beings. Our spiritual side is then in some way to be seen as connected to our physical, emotional and intellectual aspects. The following ideas reflect my journey of seeking a more integrative model.

The last three to four hundred years have been dominated by enlightenment thinking and in particular by the premise of Renee Descartes; 'I think therefore I am'. It is our capacity to be rational, to think

logically, that enables us to give meaning to our own existence and to extend that to the wider reality of which we are a part. But there is a subtle danger in Descartes' statement – there is the possibility of elevating 'thinking' to the same position as the idea of the 'immortal soul' thus separating the mind from the emotions and the body. This could be just as dualist as the traditional approach, and if followed too far could lead to an individualism that would isolate rather than integrate.

In 1994 Anthony Damasio produced some studies into the functioning of the human brain. In particular he looked at cases of accident victims where the right hand side of the brain (the side that controls our emotions) was severed from the left hand side (the side that controls our capacity to think rationally and logically). Despite popular science fiction images of humans being able to transcend their 'clogging emotions' (e.g. Spock from Star Trek) the studies showed that the separation of the rational side of the brain from the emotional resulted in dysfunctionality. The conclusion was that the body is the genesis of both human emotions and thought, and that our so-called higher functions are deeply rooted in our biological make-up.

In his book *Being and Nothingness* (1943) Jean Paul Sartre, the French Philosopher, wrote 'All knowing is consciousness of knowing.' Here there is a suggestion that the 'think' of Descartes' original statement should be interpreted as a 'conscious awareness' of being that encompasses the whole of who we are – body, emotions and mind, and not be restricted simply to our capacity to think rationally. This experience of the conscious awareness of being would be something that embraces the whole and therefore tends to unite rather than divide us. In his book *A New Earth* Eckhart Tolle, an exponent of a non religious spirituality, suggests that when you experience this consciousness of 'being' (primarily through an openness to the 'now' moment) you discover an awareness of your life as but a part of that wider thing that is LIFE, that your experience of being is grounded in Being (which he hesitates to call God due to a belief that this word has been profoundly misused).

In their study *The Spirit of the Child* Psychologist Rebecca Nye and Zoologist David Hay looked at the emerging sense of spirituality in children of primary school age. Their foray into the world of values, meaning and religious awareness led them to conclude that human

spirituality could be defined most simply as 'relational consciousness', the consciousness of an inner integrity, of connection with the communal and the environmental as well as a more intuitive sense of oneness with the vastness of the universe and the underlying presence of life that pervades it. They concluded that it was conducive to both the psychological wholeness of the individual and the well-being of society that we rediscover the pathways of a shared human spirituality that crossed over religious and non-religious boundaries.

In many ways these different approaches seem to have a great similarity to what the mystical traditions of all the world religions have been saying down through the ages: the mystical union of the individual with the reality that most religions refer to as God and the experience of oneness with all creation engendered by such mystical experiences.

### A Way Forward

If, as Hay & Nye suggest, human spirituality is seen as 'relational consciousness', then its future lies in nurturing and developing the growth of human consciousness of relationality at all levels of our being. A new approach to spirituality would

seek to discover or rediscover ways of connecting with :

- the self and its capacity for self observation (the inner journey of awareness through such things as focused attention, bodily sensation, and aesthetics)
- the world around us, both in the form of the landscape and things, and the love that draws people together and forms community (the outward journey of awareness of shared values: justice, the search for ecological sustainability, community peace, ultimate goodness, meaning & purpose.)
- the vastness of the universe, God/Life, whatever we may call it, that which is beyond us and bigger than we can ever

imagine – the presence that pervades it all (the encounter with wonder, awe, and mystery)

Such an approach may mean challenging some of the supernaturalist ideas inherited from a previous world view and perhaps reinterpreting the terms we use to describe spiritual experience, but it may also mean challenging some of the thinking that has prevailed through the enlightenment period. Without undermining the rationality on which our common perceptions of reality are based we may need to re-imagine our world view so as to engage our emotions and our bodies as well as our minds. Perhaps only such an integrative approach to human spirituality offers the hope of making spirituality accessible to women and men in a modern context.

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“Order the parsons to be silent on Sundays. What is there left? The essential things remain: their lives, the daily life with which the parsons preach. Would you, then, get the impression by watching them, that it was Christianity they were preaching?”

Søren Kierkegaard.

From *The Minister's Prayer Book*.  
Ed. John Doberstein. 1986. p. 262

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## Augustine, Wesley and Me?

By Catriona Gorton

### Thoughts of a Baptist Blogger

According to the Baptist Union 'Top Tips' leaflet, 'Blogging is a phenomenon that has really taken off in the last couple of years'<sup>1</sup> and certainly there are many Baptists who blog. Some churches and colleges have moved from a 'traditional' website to a blog format, and many individuals – ministers and college tutors among them – have their own blogs. It is not my aim in this brief paper to explain what blogging is – plenty of others have done so – nor to explain any of the technicalities of html, RSS feeds or host providers, instead I will note one way in which the concept is being considered theologically and offer some thoughts of my own. Since you may be generous enough to read this paper and not be familiar with blogs here is a working definition: 'the word blog is simply an abbreviation of "weblog" a term used to describe a web sites (*sic*) that is updated frequently, rather like an online journal... [it] allows anybody to tell a story and start a conversation.'<sup>2</sup>

This article is a little unusual – the way it is written is a hybrid between a journal article and a blog post: footnotes and formal citations lie amidst a linguistic style more at home online. I hope that having read it you will have found something to interest you and that you may be inspired to visit one or more of the numerous Baptist blogs<sup>3</sup> or even to start your own. If nothing else, you'll at least have a clue what is meant next time you hear the word!

### Theology by Heart – A Theology for Blogging?

A recent publication on methods of theological reflection<sup>4</sup> includes a chapter entitled 'Theology by Heart', the essence of which summarised thus:

God is experienced as immanent, personal and intimate, speaking

through the interiority of human experience. Records of such experience – journaling, autobiography, psychotherapeutic accounts of self – are vehicles of theological reflection and construction.<sup>5</sup>

Hints of this approach are seen in some of the Hebrew psalms (Psalm 139 is employed by the authors as an example) and it finds expression most

frequently in journals (private and public) and the verbatim accounts that underpin some forms of pastoral care and theological reflection. A companion publication<sup>6</sup> provides primary sources that exemplify the method in historical and contemporary realisation. Texts from Augustine and Wesley (among others) are set alongside a blog post written by an Anglican minister involved in an emerging church project in Manchester<sup>7, 8</sup>. As a fairly regular blogger, I find myself somewhat bewildered – if flattered – at the idea that my work might be considered in the same sentence as these 'heroes' (or not!) of a bygone age.

By definition, the written accounts which form the basis of this approach to theological reflection are always dialogical. They do not only contain the perspectives of their authors but also witness to their conversational encounters with other people, world-views and with God<sup>9</sup>.

There is much in this that resonates with the idea of blogging – which is usually (though not always) conversational *both* in style *and* in its invitation to readers to add their comments or responses to what has been said. My own blog is largely, but by no means exclusively, a form of pastoral narrative reflecting the everyday adventures of a Baptist

minister in a small church in semi-rural Leicestershire; it also includes odds and ends that I have found funny or thought provoking, thoughts on my research and requests for information and resources. Other blogs I read vary quite considerably in style, aim and content – some function largely as notice boards, disseminating information on lectures and publications, some focus very clearly on specific areas such as Biblical studies or emerging church, some set out to entertain and still others share recipes and craft ideas. Whilst it is reasonable to assert that blogs *can* be a vehicle for theological reflection, it is not the case that all Christians or theologians who blog consciously use them in this way. However, irrespective of their aims, it is fair to say that almost all blogs share many common characteristics, and it is to these that attention now turns.

## Welcome to Blogland!

When someone begins to blog she or he will usually email a few friends to let them know. Once the message begins to spread - via emails and other bloggers announcing the new 'arrival' - many a 'new' blogger will find comments left on their first post (article) welcoming them to blogland (other terms used are blogosphere or blogworld). There seems to be a

general feeling that blogland is a community of which we become a part as these Baptist bloggers observe.

Geoff Colmer, marking the first anniversary of his blog observed, "One aspect that has surprised me is the sense of community of which I feel a part."<sup>10</sup> Revmusings<sup>11</sup> speaking in a similar vein notes: "I read blogs because it keeps me in touch with friends in a deeper way than Facebook. Its helps me think through a huge variety of topics, it makes me laugh, think and cry. Its keeps me up to date with books that others read and conferences etc."<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, Andy Goodliff commenting on the question 'why do we blog?' says,

I think I blog for a number of reasons. Here are some. Firstly, there is something about being happy to share thoughts in public for all to read. Secondly, i (*sic*) like writing and thought it was a good way to record thoughts. Thirdly, I've found its (*sic*) a good way to get free books. Fourthly, its (*sic*) a good way to network with others. Fourthly, (*sic*) its (*sic*) a good way to keep to date with stuff happening outside of the local and to engage with conversation with others on stuff.<sup>13</sup>

One of the community aspects of blogging I especially value – and one

that transcends any claim that this is a journal or a vehicle for theological reflection – is the sharing and helping it engenders. Several times after fruitless searches for suitable resources I have posted bits of liturgy (granted the product of prior theological reflection) in the hope they will be useful for others<sup>14</sup>; I have also been able to put out pleas for resources and have received generous responses - including permission to premier a brand new Baptismal hymn!<sup>15</sup> Andy Goodliff manages to get books for free and many others benefit from the information he then shares.

Each person will build up their own list of blogs they visit (usually termed a 'blogroll') based on shared interests and will find their name appears on the blogrolls of others. Bloggers often discover that they attract a regular readership of several hundred different people – many or most of whose identities they will never know and who they may never meet in real life. Of these regular readers, there will be some – often a fairly small number – who leave comments on a fairly regular basis and this tends to promote the sense of belonging. I never cease to be amazed how many Baptists I meet who have read my blog – a simultaneously sobering and encouraging experience. The public

nature of blogging, of being part of a cyber-community meeting in a very public space, gives it the potential to become a conversation and this inevitably shapes the style and content of what it posted.

### Chatting over Coffee or Chess by Post?

Any student of Baptist history will know that once upon a time General and Particular Baptist ministers would meet (often with each other) in Coffee Houses to discuss matters of theology. Whilst, for the purposes of this paper, I would like to claim that this was the inspiration for the title of my blog (A Skinny Fairtrade Latte in the Food Court of Life) it wasn't. The logic, stated on the 'about me' page of my blog, is this:

... I enjoy the odd fairtrade latte, and the skinny milk is meant to help control my expanding waistline. Food courts everywhere are pretty similar (a Post Modern phenomenon apparently) but are also great places to pause a while, watch the world go by and spend a bit of time thinking about all manner of stuff before rushing on with life. Some of my best undergraduate essays started life as notes written on paper serviettes whilst I supped my weekly latte - it seemed only fitting that this oversized virtual paper serviette should be

named to reflect a very happy and formative period in my life<sup>16, 17</sup>.

If my blog is a bit like a paper serviette where I play with ideas, it is also like meeting friends for coffee, or even eavesdropping adjacent conversations, in Starbucks, Sainsbury's coffee shop or on a train journey! The very public, conversational nature of blogs is one of the things that distinguishes them from *both* private journals *and* the published works of the likes of Augustine and Wesley. The vast majority of bloggers welcome comments on their posts – seeing the resultant 'conversation' as an important part of the exercise. It isn't always possible to find conversation partners close at hand with whom to think through the issues/questions that exercise our minds, and blogland is a place where we just might find someone to 'chat' to at a level not suited to social networking sites, albeit in an extended time frame. Bob Almond, reflecting on this aspect of blogging observes,

...it's a discussion – potentially at least. Bizarre, isn't it, that the easiest way to have a relaxed, unhurried conversation with friends should be to have it in public – but it's true. Rather like playing chess by post, a blog lets people respond to me at their own pace. And other people's

comments – or posts on their own blogs – genuinely help me.<sup>18</sup>

An important aspect of the conversational nature of blogging is the style and content of what is posted – posts are often quite playful and ideas are usually expressed with honest provisionality – blogging can be a form of ‘thinking out loud.’ The informality of language and style, the permission not to proofread every word nor to double check the format of every reference reflect the nature of the exercise; whilst there are some excellent and thought provoking blogs to be read, this is not (usually) where people seek to disseminate their final thinking but a safe-enough space in which to develop or test it. As such, it is valued by jobbing ministers and professional theologians alike as a place to try things out. Craig Muir, a URC minister, says “I write blogs because I want to explore my thinking and see how others respond.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Glen Marshall, in answering the question ‘why do you blog’ says “cos I want to promote stuff and ideas I think matter; cos I want to test out ideas; cos I like thinking out loud; (*sic*) cos I enjoy having an audience”.<sup>20</sup>

Alongside the inevitable criticisms of bad spelling and poor grammar associated with blogging, there are the risks associated with public sharing of

provisional thoughts, which may, at least sometimes, be posted hastily and occasionally need to be retracted or offensive posts deleted. The suitability of the medium for usefully exploring complex or ‘hot’ topics in anything other than a knee-jerk fashion is regularly questioned, as this extract from a post on beliefnet<sup>21</sup>, which juxtaposes two different viewpoints, illustrates:

.... the "architecture" of blogs makes it impossible to honestly converse about important and weighty matters...

[a post by ] Jacobs:

Blog posts are just too short to deal with the Big Issues, and too likely to be fired off in short order, with minimal reflection and no pre-post feedback from wiser and cooler heads.

[contra a post by] Sullivan:

No one's going to resolve these questions today any more than at any previous point in human history. But I worry about these questions being relegated to professional theologians or free-for-all comments section spats. A little dorm room conversation in one's later years is worth doing - and blogs, if they're edited and curated well, can help.<sup>22</sup>

There is merit in what each of the writers cited observes and the

metaphor of 'dorm room conversation' chimes well with those chats over coffee and postal chess which place theological reflection firmly where it is needed – namely among the grass roots practitioners and not as the exclusive preserve of academics in ivory towers. That said, concerns over the potential for damage caused by angry, aggressive or ill-informed posting are certainly justified and bloggers need to balance their freedom with responsibility. Some thoughts on ethics and etiquette are worth considering.

### Minding Your Manners

Regular readers of my blog know that in Blogland I am the minister of Dibley Baptist Church – the metaphor of the fictional Oxfordshire village and equally fictional Revd Geraldine Grainger (who likes chocolate even more than I do) provides a layer of anonymity for those among whom I serve. Whenever people are mentioned their names are changed (and usually only forenames used) in a further attempt to protect both innocent and guilty. Sometimes I think long and hard before I post an item, and some things I deem must be held out of the public sphere. Confidentiality is something to be taken very seriously and nothing sensitive or private is ever put on-line.

Many ministers are aware of the tensions between blogging and pastoral life. David Lewis notes

I do get frustrated occasionally by my main blog because I know that a number of people in the church read my blog, and there are things that I would love to say, not specifically about individuals but in general, that I don't feel able to say - I'd love to be able share the occasional frustration, or humorous story, but that's not possible!<sup>23</sup>

A view shared by revmusings who observes

I wanted to be anonymous so I could reflect on the joys of ministry (*sic*) but that has proved impossible as others work out who I am and then name me on the links on their blogs!<sup>24</sup>

Craig Muir observes that he would say 'nothing personal about other people, nothing I wouldn't say in person'<sup>25</sup> and Glen Marshall aims to 'respect the anonymity of those who have given me permission to spout about them... [and] only slag stuff off that really deserves [it]'.<sup>26</sup>

Alongside ethics considerations – what is said – there are issues of etiquette – how it is said. As a general rule, most bloggers consider it polite for those who comment to identify themselves - even if

pseudonymously - rather than anonymously (whilst many blog platforms require a valid email address (not shown publicly) there are others where anonymous comments can be left). Choice of language is important - informality and use of slang is widespread but some care is needed to promote a sense of respectful engagement with others whose circumstances or backgrounds we cannot possibly imagine; we may have a perceived 'ideal reader' for our ideas but cannot dictate who will actually stumble across them from Google or some other internet search engine. Whilst it is true that there are some foul-mouthed and aggressive blogs to be found, those I visit are generally fine examples of responsible blogging and there are far more people of peace than otherwise. Every now and then people may say something they later regret - but my experience of blogland is of a place where grace outweighs grudges and people are allowed to make honest mistakes.

### Augustine, Wesley and Me?

So, finally, I return to where I began and this strange idea that a blog is some sort of post-modern equivalent to the works of Augustine and Wesley. Insofar as these people - and countless others - maintained some

sort of autobiographical journal then I can see there is a parallel. What I can't know, is what motivated these people to write what they did, and what would have been deemed acceptable or otherwise in their day. Blogging seems to me to raise a lot of ethical issues that a private, paper-based journal kept in a locked drawer may not. At the same time, its public nature means it is potentially far more conversational than anything I might do in the privacy of my own office. For me, blogging is more than a journal and more than an overtly theological exercise - it is something I do for fun, something that I don't take too seriously, even though I might explore serious topics through it. The sense of community - of being part of something wider - and the generosity with which other bloggers share their resources (I have been lent and given 'real' books and music by people who I know only in blogland) and themselves is incredibly special.

On balance, whilst it is nice to be bracketed with the great and good of times past, and with apologies to Augustine and Wesley, I count it a greater privilege to be on the blogrolls of my blog-friends Baptist and otherwise. Among my regular readers, so I am told are friends of friends who are 'not yet Christians'

and my blog is evidently a 'safer' thing for them to read than much published literature. Using the internet as a medium for evangelism is a whole topic of its own on which I am not qualified to comment, but if my stuff helps people think about faith then so much the better.

I can't somehow imagine my name being recalled in awed tones several centuries from now, not least as the whole internet thing is far more ethereal and provisional than the publishing of books. Does it matter? I think not. In the end, those of us who blog do so because we enjoy it - for me that's reason enough.

## Bibliography

Graham, E., Walton, H., and Ward, F. *Theological Reflection: Methods*. London: SCM Press, 2005.

Graham, E., Walton, H., and Ward, F. *Theological Reflection: Sources*. London: SCM Press, 2007.

## Notes

1. Baptist Union Top Tips Blogging Your Church Tim Hyde available from [http://www.baptist.org.uk/resources/resource\\_downloads/326.pdf](http://www.baptist.org.uk/resources/resource_downloads/326.pdf)
2. Op cit
3. Andy Goodliff maintains an extensive, though not exhaustive, list at <http://andygoodliff.typepad.com/>

[my\\_weblog/2007/03/az\\_of\\_uk\\_baptis.html](http://my_weblog/2007/03/az_of_uk_baptis.html)

4. E. Graham, Walton H., and Ward F., *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005).
5. Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*. p13
6. E. Graham, Walton H., and Ward F., *Theological Reflection: Sources* (London: SCM Press, 2007).
7. [http://benedson.blogs.com/benedson/2006/08/whats\\_in\\_a\\_name.html](http://benedson.blogs.com/benedson/2006/08/whats_in_a_name.html)
8. See <http://benedson.blogs.com/about.html> for how Ben Edson describes himself.
9. Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*. p19
10. <http://geoffcolmer.blogspot.com/2009/02/wonder-and-wondering-is-won-oops-one.html>
11. Note: in this paper I have cited other bloggers either with their direct permission or to the extent that could be readily deduced from the information they provided in publicly readable comments.
12. Comment by revmusings on <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2009/02/12/why-do-we-blog.html>
13. Comment by Andy Goodliff on <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2009/02/12/why-do-we-blog.html>
14. For example, a liturgy for a deacons meeting, a liturgy for a funeral with no mourners, and a 'covenant for troubled times' [http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/files/DM\\_Liturgy.pdf](http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/files/DM_Liturgy.pdf)

<http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2008/09/18/funeral-rites-for-eleanor-rigby.html>

<http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2009/01/15/a-covenant-for-troubled-times.html>

15. Martin Leckebusch 'This is the Sign, Revealing God's intention' see also <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2008/10/14/hymns-songs-for-baptisms.html>

16. <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/about.html>

17. The first post I ever published also explains the logic of the nomenclature: <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2005/10/30/the-first-coffee-cup.html>

18. <http://revbobuk.blogspot.com/2009/02/sorry.html>

19. Comment by Craig Muir on <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2009/02/12/why-do-we-blog.html>

20. Comment by Glen on <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2009/02/12/why-do-we-blog.html>

21. Essentially a multi-user multi-faith

commercial website with a stated aim 'to help people like you find, and walk, a spiritual path that will bring comfort, hope, clarity, strength, and happiness.' It hosts a number of blogs <http://www.beliefnet.com/>

22. <http://blog.beliefnet.com/tonyjones/2009/02/the-limits-of-blogging.html> which in turn has links to Andrew Sullivan [http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the\\_daily\\_dish/2009/02/what-can-bloggi.html](http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2009/02/what-can-bloggi.html) and Alan Jacobs <http://theamericanscene.com/2009/02/09/what-blogs-can-and-can-t-do>.

23. Comment by David on <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2009/02/12/why-do-we-blog.html>

24. Comment by revmusings on <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2009/02/12/why-do-we-blog.html>

25. Comment by Craig Muir on <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2009/02/12/why-do-we-blog.html>

26. Comment by Glen on <http://skinnyfairtradelatte.blogspot.com/archive/2009/02/12/why-do-we-blog.html>

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"One part of our work, and that most excellent, because it tendeth to work on many, is the public preaching of the Word. A work that requireth greater skill, and especially greater life and zeal than any of us bring to it."

Richard Baxter

From *The Minister's Prayer Book*. Ed. John Doberstein. 1986. p. 416

## Aims, Objectives and Image of the BMF

By Alison Mackay

I reckon it says something about a person when they can look at their bookshelves and see a whole row of books with titles like "The road less travelled"; "I'm ok, you're OK"; "Self-discovery the Jungian Way"; etc. It's good to do some reflective work into who we are from time to time. That famous quote about seeing ourselves as other see us, is something that as ministers we are often curious about. I suppose it depends who the others are, for that can be as broad as it is long. Recently at the Baptist Ministers Fellowship Committee Meeting we were asking this kind of question about the BMF. Who are we? Who do people say that we are? Does our image need a makeover for a new generation?

There was frankness and honesty in the room as we identified that to some, the BMF Committee is perceived as a group of boring, usually white male ministers wearing grey suits, who sit around and have no real power, but like a day out to Didcot every now and again! To others we identified that there is quite a radical, even militant feel to the BMF, as a group of ministers who are not afraid to go out on a limb and ask the difficult questions, being the voice that speaks against the stream if necessary; an unofficial Trade Union, "comrades against the system". Having the ear of the Senior Management Team of the BU equips the BMF to build relationships on behalf of local ministers, even holding the Baptist Union accountable if the needs arise. In the past the BMF has

seen its work and ideas adopted by the Union in such areas as the Pre-retirement Course and at present the "Life in Ministry" Survey which will enable the Ministry Department to gain insights in this whole area of day to day living.

It was with some real disappointment that we had to agree that to many ministers we are simply seen as the faceless people who produce the Journal, that the majority of us start to read from the back and some of us don't ever go beyond the people pages, which of course means that many people will never read this article on the image of the BMF and will remain with their established perceptions. Oh dear!!

The BMF website states:

*The BMF was established in 1939, and is primarily involved in the support of those in Baptist ministry. We're involved in looking at subjects like:*

- *Superannuation*
- *Ministerial Housing*
- *"Ministers who are women"*
- *Bereavement and the care of Widows/Widowers of Ministers,*
- *Stress and settlements*
- *Trends in ministry*
- *Pre-retirement courses*
- *Ministerial Appraisal.*

*As well as these things, we support ministers by representing the interests of the members in denominational affairs and projects*

- *by helping the work of Ministers' meetings and by listening to comments and suggestions from them.*
- *by asking that members pray for one another each Sunday morning.*
- *by gifts from the Benevolent Fund, which in recent years has grown considerably and has been used to help members and their families in times of need.*

- *by trying to keep in touch with retired Ministers, especially those living away from local Baptist churches, and with members at times of change*

The question we are pondering is whether the BMF needs a makeover for a new generation of Baptist Ministers? The BMF Committee meeting three times a year is made up of a representative from every Association, and yet the plain truth is that often it is difficult to find someone who would take on this responsibility and promote the BMF at a local association level. Is this because of lack of understanding on the work of BMF? Or is the work of BMF simply not valued or now deemed as unnecessary in our Associations? What can we do to change these perceptions and raise our profile?

At the commencement of Baptist Ministry, when leaving one of our Theological Colleges, all students are encouraged to join the Baptist Ministers Fellowship. At the Newly Accredited Ministers' Conference three years into Ministry the push is on again to link with the BMF and be part of this unique fellowship. We also seek to encourage other ministers to join who come to accreditation through other ways, endeavouring to be as inclusive as possible, whether

they serve in the pastorate, in sector ministries, Lay Ministry, Bi-vocational Ministry, leaders of Emerging Church and representatives of Fresh Expressions of Church - whatever language you use. We aim to be as inclusive as possible allowing the BMF to have a broad insight into Baptist Ministry right across the spectrum as we consider the many and varied issues that arise.

Bearing all this in mind the question remains, should the BMF do a "Madonna" and seriously reinvent ourselves with sexy Web Blogs and trendy chat forums? With a new bold all singing, all dancing website and a more 'in yer face' approach to ministerial matters? If we did, would it make even the slightest difference when it comes down to recruiting Association Reps and new members? I have recently taken on the role of Publicity Rep for BMF which allows us a chance to do this work of self discovery and see what we find. Any thoughts you wish to share on these musings would be gratefully received and considered as we begin this reflective process.

## WANTED

A volunteer is sought to act as a co-ordinator for pastoral exchanges between Baptist ministers in the United Kingdom and overseas pastors wishing to spend some time in this country.

The job entails taking information from potential exchange ministers, advertising the opportunities in Baptist Ministers Journal and putting any contacts in touch. It is not a time-consuming or onerous task.

This is unpaid position but all necessary phone and post expenses will be met.

If this small task interests you, please get in touch with Paul Goodliff on 01235 517702 or [pgoodliff@baptist.org.uk](mailto:pgoodliff@baptist.org.uk)

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"No man preaches his sermon well to others  
if he doth not first preach it to his own heart."

John Owen

From *The Minister's Prayer Book*. Ed. John Doberstein. 1986. p. 430

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## The Problem of John 9.1-4

It seems to me we labour under the grip of the Authorised Version of King James:

"Jesus answered. Neither "this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him." (verse 3)

Tasker, in the Tyndale Commentary, writes "the man's condition is what it is, because in the divine providence what is to happen to him is to be a permanent revelation of divine truth." This is to present God as a monster condemning a human being to a life of misery for His own purpose.

Westcott in his commentary has a bet both ways! "The man is not treated as an instrument merely, but as a representative of the mercy of God, this suffering is the occasion and not the appointed preparation for the miracle, though when we regard things from the divine side we are constrained to see them in their dependence on the will of God."

I have looked at translations from Moffat to NEB and NIV; at paraphrases from Phillips to the Living Bible, and they all remain in the bondage of the AV and of those who, in later times, added the punctuation! The only variations I can find are one

in Peterson's very free paraphrase, *The Message*, where he translates "Jesus said, "you are asking the wrong question, you're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause - effect here, look instead for what God can do".

And the only one I can find who really faces the question is Campbell Morgan in his commentary, *The Four Gospels*. He says of the AV: "If that punctuation is to be accepted, then Jesus meant that this man was not born blind because of his own sin or of his parents, but in order to give God an opportunity to show what He could do with a blind man. I absolutely refuse to accept that interpretation." And so must I. He changes the punctuation thus, "Neither did this man sin, nor his parents. But that the works of God should be made manifest in him, we must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day".

He sent this to "an eminent Greek scholar" whose reply ended, "If one reading would be more in Spirit with the tenor of Christ's teachings, as seems quite probable that would be quite naturally preferable".

I submit this for your consideration.

Don.C. MacDonald

## Eighteen years on. Memories of training for ministry

By R Mark Janes

I remember crossing the Pennines by train, passing 'dark satanic mills', standing empty and ghost like in valleys of narrow terraced housing, clinging to the side of the hills. As the city drew near the landscape changed and there was nothing but a bleak urban wilderness, acres of redundant land with the occasional high rise standing lonely and isolated like a giant stack far out at sea. Over twenty years ago in the mid eighties; I was on the way to meet the principal of the college where I was later to spend four years training for accredited ministry in the Baptist Union.

My college years gave me enduring friendships and new experiences both welcome and unwelcome through which I grew and changed. In this article I want to revisit the question that has occurred to me more than once before. What value was there in the four years that I spent studying in that great Northern city for the practise of ministry? What has endured that continues to inform the way I approach the challenges of a demanding London pastorate?

I don't think I had a clear sense of what I was expecting when I began the first term or what the college would be like. I discovered an institution that was still in transition from days when nearly all the students were young men in their early twenties, living unmarried in hall, although this had not been the case for many years. In my time this

was reflected in the struggle to create a sense of community for a disparate group of students, some of whom called the college home because they lived in and some of whom with one or more careers behind them lived with their families at some distance away.

At that time the college was developing what it described as a new integrated pattern of training, which sought to fuse the academic stream we shared in at the University with the practical hands on experience of demanding urban environments and of reflection on what we encountered in the light of scripture, faith and theology. We began by walking about the streets of Moss Side and were encouraged to describe what we could see and what we thought that it told us. That's one thing that has stayed with me and before I accepted the call to my current pastorate I walked the

streets of my inner London borough using the same kind of 'seeing' skills.

The urban environment of that great northern city was a rude shock for many of us and the college made no apology for deliberately immersing us in it. The rioting of the early eighties was still a very recent memory and I vividly remember the ex- deputy chair of a police authority describing the night young men from local streets were bundled into the backs of police vans and later returned to the same streets with bruises from beatings they had received. This kind of thing didn't happen in the sleepy suburbs I grew up in.

We were also encouraged to go on placements with the intention of broadening our experience of the Christian church and the urban environment. I never had the courage to take up the suggestion that I should volunteer to serve behind the bar of a Catholic social club in Moss Side. Sometimes I am not sure the college really knew what they expected us to learn through these experiences, not all of them were well supervised but the patchwork of different experiences continues to live with me. I met evangelical Anglicans and wondered why they weren't Baptists, visited schools with a Friar Tuck like Catholic priest who cheerfully walked about the most dangerous

neighbourhoods, shared in campaigning with Church Action on Poverty and heard Trevor Huddleston speak, signed children with ashes in a Catholic school playground, walked roads where sex workers stood seeking trade on the street corners and crossed the Mersey with a ferry full of holiday club children, the wind blowing in our hair.

The late eighties were a time when it seemed Conservative government would go on forever, yet it was also a time of great change; the Berlin Wall fell and newly perceived dangers emerged such as the public panic about AIDS. The college was good at focussing on some of these topical issues. They arranged an excellent course there on human sexuality after some of us made a request to explore this. Even so, I sometimes find myself thinking why ever didn't the college teach us about something or another.

Many of the things that cause me to ask that kind of question are to do with the business of management that seems to consume a much greater share of my time than I ever expected and which were not so likely to be addressed when nearly all of the students were preaching and serving small churches. Equally some of the things that are now essential to the practise of ministry hardly registered with us, for example child protection

was only beginning to be a real concern.

The kind of training I have sought and found training for since then offers some indication of the things that with hindsight I would have valued more of. I would have valued more about human personality, group dynamics, conflict transformation, about Christian spirituality, about charitable law, policies and procedures and managing people. Reflecting on this little list, it strikes me that it would be possible to argue that a theological college should seek to play to its strengths as the practical demands of ministry will leave little time for a minister to explore the theological and biblical riches in the kind of depth that is possible when you are a student. I suppose that if the student builds a foundation during their college years then it can be built on later.

The college seemed to trust that the University would take care of some of the more traditional elements of biblical and theological learning. While I was a long way from being a model student and certainly caused academics to gnash their teeth again and again, I still think that the quality of teaching we experienced at that great bastion of learning just up the road was very mixed. I remember one rambling professor, for whom you

knew there was no point in preparing more than the first five minutes of a seminar, because he would always interrupt and then hijack the hour with his own considerable knowledge. On the other hand, I also remember the vigorous and thoughtful New Testament teaching of Barnabas Lindars who continued to wear the long Brown cassock of his monastic order and wrote on my first essay that 'he liked this essay and the obvious signs of hard work that had gone into it, though it is a pity it is marred by medieval spelling'.

While the college introduced us to new ways of reading scripture and encouraged us to explore challenging theological themes, inviting us to explore much more carefully what we actually thought and believed it also placed great emphasis on personal development. In addition to regular tutorials there were two annual reviews when a combination of our peers and our tutors were invited to reflect on our individual growth and our perceived strengths and weaknesses. In the first year these occasions were very affirming but they became more demanding as year succeeded year. The reviews caused some of my peers to have sleepless nights but they were carefully contained in a way that I thought made them safe. They were also much

less severe or unkind than some of the criticism I have encountered of ministers in churches.

In describing the college I have resisted the urge to describe any of the tutors because it seems invidious. In their different ways these remarkable individuals demonstrated integrity and a real commitment to our development and well being. However the picture would not be complete without mentioning one thing about the principal of the college. If you needed him to listen, his study door stood literally open. If you walked through it he would simply stop what he was doing, shut the door and give you his undivided attention. I have never forgotten that.

### In conclusion

My experience of training and the process they liked to call 'ministerial formation' was individual to me. Occasionally I meet an old friend from those days and we reminisce and I know they would tell it differently.

Of course there are things I wish the college had given more time to and things that I wish it had anticipated about the world of policies and procedures regulation and law that seem common place for many people in pastoral ministry now. On the other hand for nurturing a spirit of enquiry,

which isn't afraid to ask questions I think the college scored well.

In my last year at college, when my name 'went on the list' I imagined I was likely to remain in the north of England, close to the hills. It wasn't to be and while there were places I found it hard to imagine serving, I have never understood some colleagues who Jonah like seem or seemed very certain about the kind of places God would never call them to. If there is one thing I am indebted to the college for, it was giving me the confidence to believe that an urban pastorate could be a positive, fruitful and great experience.

Perhaps, the thing they really taught me; was not to be afraid. For that I am grateful.

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"In May 1849 Kierkegaard wrote of Bishop Mynster: 'He is now 73 years old. Soon he will go in to judgement ... His sermons are all right—but in eternity he is not to preach, there he is to be judged.'"

Søren Kierkegaard.

From *The Minister's Prayer Book*.  
Ed. John Doberstein. 1986. p. 244

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## Review Section

### *The Shack.*

William Paul Young. Windblown Media, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd. £7.99

Reviewer: Brenda Morton

This book has had an extraordinary journey, having been published privately in the US, sold over a million copies, and now available here. It is a novel, but contains much easily absorbed theology. It is also one of those rare novels that is written in such a way that you suspect it is a true story. If you have ever asked questions about evil and free-will, why God doesn't prevent tragedy, why God felt the Incarnation and the Cross were necessary, the nature of the Trinity, forgiveness, or just looking for comfort and consolation after tragedy, then this book is for you.

It tells the story of Mack, a man who, although damaged by his childhood, loves his wife and five children dearly. When appalling tragedy strikes the family (involving *The Shack*), he enters a period of depression lasting 4 years. Then he receives a suspicious note, purporting to come from God, inviting him to the Shack for a weekend. Against his better judgement, Mack goes. 'Papa', his

wife's name for the Father, turns out to be a big black woman! That is just one of the surprises in store for him over the weekend, as he learns the nature of God and gets a glimpse at the answers to some of life's big questions. Mack gets some of the answers poor Job never got, and really falls in love with God (all three) in the process.

There is a great deal of theology in the book, wrapped up in an easily digestible story, that keeps you turning the pages. One of the thoughts that was new to me is the idea that God prefers verbs to nouns. The latter are dead, the former alive. God is a verb "I am that I am, I will be what I will be". Consider two words – responsibility and expectation, the basis of guilt and shame and judgement. Papa says that He/She gave us the ability to Respond, not responsibility. The latter would be an obligation, the former needs God to be present in us. In friendship, expectations lead to rules and requirements, whereas Expectancy is alive and dynamic.

This is a book that may just change your whole view of, and your relationship with, God. If you only read one book this year, read this one.

*A Sceptic's Guide to Atheism*

Peter S. Williams, Paternoster Press  
2009 pp312,  
ISBN 978-1-84227-617-4, £12.99

Reviewer: Rob Little

In a reference to Nietzsche's famous 'God is dead' quote (from 'The Gay Science' and 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra'), Peter Williams militantly asserts that 'God is not dead'. His book is a philosophical repost to what he calls the 'popular mass media evangelists' of atheism, headed by Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett.

Encouragingly, Williams – who works for the Damaris Trust, UK - weighs the arguments of the atheist apologists and, unsurprisingly, finds them wanting. In particular, he explores the claims that:

- Belief in God causes more harm than good.
- Religion is about blind faith and science is the only way to know things.
- Science can explain away religion.
- There is not enough evidence for the existence of God.
- The arguments for the existence of God 'do not work'.

First, Williams uses the 'vox populi, vox dei' argument to say that some 90 per cent of the world's population disagree with the view that God does not exist. He goes on to discuss the view that God does not exist because of the immoral things done by his human supporters over the centuries. Next, he concludes that, if a sociologist argues that religion exists to hold society together or a psychologist holds that religious belief is connected with guilt, that doesn't mean that religious belief is necessarily false. Dismissing the 'science versus religion' argument as an illusion, Williams moves on to assert that there is not a 'significant lack of evidence for theism'. His parting shot is that Richard Dawkins only reviews *some* of the arguments for God, pronounces them 'vacuous' and leaps to an atheistic conclusion.

While this is a brave and scholarly attempt to fight fire with fire to refute the arguments of atheism, Williams gives in too often to the temptation to score points by attacking his opponents' personalities. This side of the grave at least, there can be no absolute winner in this argument; so, at best, Williams merely fights a good battle. However, the value of this book lies in providing useful insights into the classic arguments of both atheism and Christianity – for