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From the editor

Between the waves

As collectively we take a breath after the first wave of Covid-19 and brace ourselves for the possibility of a second, we are also aware of the unprecedented 'sabbatical' opportunities that the national lockdown has delivered. In what other circumstances could we have pressed 'pause' on ALL our church activities, and taken the chance to review? I think we can be encouraged by the creativity combined with realism shown in many of our churches, and perhaps one positive outcome of this challenging episode in our corporate life may be that we see churches going forward with a new purpose and a fresh cultural engagement. This issue features the thoughts of two Baptist ministers on the subject.

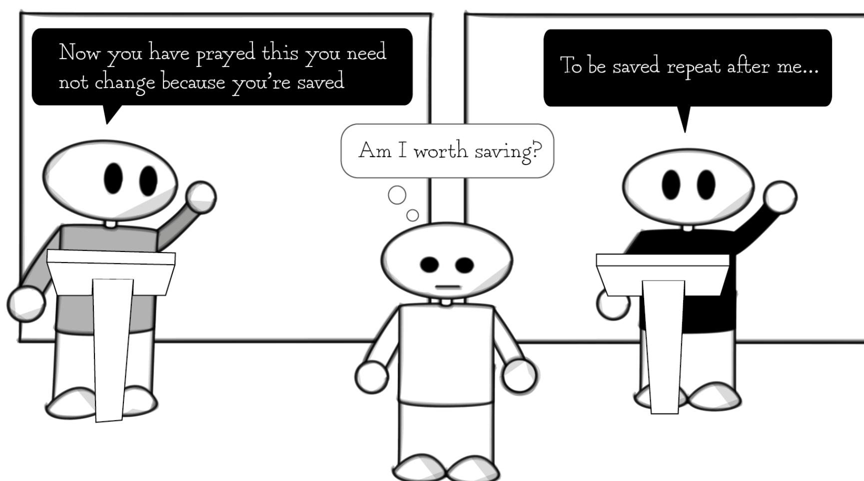
This situation provides material for interesting contemplation, and I would love to hear your thoughts and reflections on ministry from the Covid-19 period in its entirety—not just from the lockdown phase. How does your church hope to recover? What will you do differently? The *bmj* is a snapshot of Baptist ministry at any time, and provides a place to share your passions, questions and conversations with others. Future generations may find it a source of encouragement and interest too.

I am delighted that we have a new Essay Prize winner: Anthony Luxton, whose article on the 'sinner's prayer' appears in this issue. Our competition began four years ago with the aim of encouraging those newer in ministry to have a go at writing for *bmj* (though of course it does not exclude experienced Baptist leaders from entering). We congratulate Anthony on his success, and note that he is our first winner from the Baptist Union of Scotland. The 2021 competition is advertised on p40 of this issue—do share it with anyone you know, or have a go yourself!

Meanwhile, let us be faithful in prayer for brothers and sisters in ministry on Sundays: the pattern of prayer to which members of the BMF have traditionally committed themselves. For some among us, coronavirus has been a costly time—indicated in the news of moves and losses in Of Interest To You, faithfully compiled by Arderne Gillies (thank you, Arderne). May our strength be in Jesus, the same yesterday, today and forever. *SN*

The 'sinner's prayer' or the 'prayer of discipleship'?

by Anthony Luxton



The 'sinner's prayer' is a widely popular structure, with deep Protestant roots, that is often used as an encouragement to, and a mark of, a person becoming a follower of Christ.[1] Robert Glen Howard remarks that the implicit goal of the prayer is to save individuals by inviting them to perform their own prayer of repentance.[2] Howard comments that:

The prayer itself is an explicit admission of human sinfulness by the individual, and then a request for the divine to begin to act in that individual's life...The enactment of the prayer should follow a general format while also reflecting the earnest desire on the part of the sinner performing the prayer.[3]

For many, the prayer may be a source of comfort, meaning and assurance of their salvation. At its heart the sinner's prayer provokes the question: what must one do to be saved? This is not a trivial question, any understanding of this question has a major impact on approaches to evangelism and pastoral care. In many respects the sinner's prayer represents something far bigger than itself, in its simplistic formula there are myriad ways of understanding what constitutes repentance and the assurance of salvation. This essay aims to highlight several potential dangers lurking beneath the

sinner's prayer, specifically: antinomianism, legalism and the problem of shame.

Antinomian: Now you have prayed this you need not change because you're saved. The first concern with the sinner's prayer is that it may be seen as the equivalent of the minimum, or even only, requirement of salvation. In 2012, concern over the authenticity of the sinner's prayer provoked considerable debate at the US Southern Baptist Convention.[4] The debate was sparked by David Platt's observations, originally expressed in a sermon but later clarified on the website *Christianity Today*:

As I pastor a local church and serve alongside pastors of other local churches, I sense reasonably serious concern about the relatively large number of baptisms in our churches that are 're-baptisms'—often representing people who thought they were saved because they prayed a certain prayer, but they lacked a biblical understanding of salvation and were in reality not saved.[5]

Repentance is a recurring and important theme throughout the Bible that involves a radical transformation of worldview (such as in Matthew 4:17, Acts 2:38, Luke 24:46-47). In the Hebrew scriptures, the verb 'repent' (*niham*) is used primarily of God to describe a 'change' to love and mercy.[6] In the New Testament, repentance is most often expressed through the verb *metanoeō*, which means literally 'a change of mind'.[7] Closely connected to *metanoeō* are the verbs *sub* (Hebrew) and *epistrepho* (Greek), both meaning to 'turn around', or to (re)turn to God.[8] Biblical repentance demands a fundamental change of heart and change of living. In its most basic form, repentance is receiving Jesus' invitation to 'take up their cross daily and follow me' (Luke 9:23). Repentance is the continuous experience of following Jesus in the 'narrow way' (Matthew 7:14). It is a reorientation to Christ which enables a radical transformation into a life of discipleship.[9]

Performing the sinner's prayer as a nominal requirement of salvation, without it manifesting into a life of discipleship, may be a form of antinomianism, meaning 'against (*anti*) the law (*nomos*)'.[10] A key doctrine in Protestant theology is that people are saved by faith alone and not by works of the law.[11] A common accusation against this doctrine is that there is no motivation to follow God's law, or even to strive to be a disciple of Christ.[12] By this reason it is possible to have the benefits of salvation without the cost, however, simply ascribing to the general truth of the love of God, intellectually and verbally, is not sufficient in itself for salvation.[13] Repentance is a continuous experience of recognising and receiving Jesus' call to 'follow me'. Repentance is costly, because it demands that a person takes up his/her cross and submit to a life of discipleship, to the yoke of Christ (Matthew 11:28-30):[14] *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me* (Luke 9:23).

Pastorally, church leaders ought to be careful that their teaching does not unintentionally lean into antinomianism otherwise they risk shepherding a flock of stray sheep. Eliciting the sinner's prayer without first teaching the cost of repentance, of discipleship, is arguably

irresponsible.

Legalist: To be saved, repeat after me…The second opposite, but equal, concern with the sinner's prayer is that it may unintentionally set a precedent that living the life of a Christian is about meeting conditions. An early 18th century debate within the Church of Scotland, known as *The Marrow Controversy*, exemplifies the timelessness of these two opposite dangers. The controversy centred around the relatively unknown book by Edward Fischer, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity,* which became the topic of a fierce debate at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland between 1717 and 1720.[15] At the centre of the debate were concerns over the overall teaching of the book, particularly its concept of a free gospel: consequently it was banned by the assembly.[16] Unsurprisingly, this act only drew national attention to the relatively unknown book, prompting its supporters to promote vigorously its teaching, which we shall now turn to.

At the heart of the book was a deeply relevant pastoral reality, that the free offer of the gospel is essential due to its liberating nature. One of the key proponents of the *Marrow*, John Boston, was deeply concerned at the prevalent preaching of a subtle legalistic approach to salvation and the pastoral implications of this.[17] Boston believed that those supporting the banishment of the *Marrow* were guilty of a legalistic interpretation of the relationship, or covenant, between God and his people.[18] Their covenant is ultimately based on the meeting of conditions that starts with repentance. It was crucial to Boston that the offer of the gospel should stress the nature and character of God without exception or qualification.[19]

The *Marrow* was influential to Boston as it helped him wrestle with and develop an understanding of repentance and the free offer of the gospel. The book illustrates the dangers of legalism and antinomianism through a fictitious dialogue between several characters: *Neophytus*, a young Christian struggling with the basics of the gospel message and the conviction of sin; *Evangelista*, a minister of the gospel who counsels the young Christian; *Nomista*, a legalist who represents the danger of distilling the Christian life primarily into a list of rules; and *Antinomista*, an antinomian representing the dangerous belief that the law is not relevant in the life of the believer.[20] Ultimately, Evangelista presents 'the free offer of the gospel and assurance in Christ as the essence of faith' as an answer to the perennial opposite dangers of legalism and antinomianism.[21] Evangelista counsels that the only pathway to salvation is in Jesus (John 14:6), received by faith (John 1:12) and walked by holiness of heart and life (Colossians 2:6). Boston notes:

The Antinomian's faith is but pretended, and not true faith, since he walks not in Christ answerably. The legalist's holiness is but pretended, and not true holiness, since he hath not 'received Christ' truly, and therefore is incapable of walking in Christ.[22]

The sinner's prayer of repentance may be helpful in so much that it is an articulation of

the reality of turning to Christ in faith and the transformation in their life that it demands. However, the prayer is not the qualification of that transformation, which would put the cart before the horse. Sinclair Fergusson explains:

Repentance, turning from sin, and degrees of conviction of sin do not constitute the grounds on which Christ is offered to us. They may constitute ways in which the Spirit works as the gospel makes its impact on us. But they never form the warrant for repentance and faith.[23]

Fundamentally, the warrant for the gospel is not conviction or the forsaking of sin, it is Christ himself. Pastorally church leaders ought to be careful that their teaching of salvation does not betray a subtle legalism that suggests a prayer constitutes the start of a relationship based on meeting conditions. If ever there is a situation where the Sinner's Prayer is appropriate, it is in giving somebody the vocabulary to express their commitment to accept Christ's liberating work in their life; It is in helping a person to understand and express the stirrings of their heart in accepting the free offer of the gospel.

Shame: am I worth saving?

The final difficulty with many sinner's prayer formats is that in its explicit focus on the admission of sin (guilt) it seemingly ignores those suffering with shame. The inevitable consequence of reducing such a large topic down to a simplistic formula is oversimplification. The risk is that the simplistic prayer fails to address other essential aspects of repentance. Robert Glenn Howard notes that the 'primary definitive trait [of the prayer] is the direct confession of personal sin to a deity in an effort to attain Grace'.[24] Perhaps it could be argued that shame is an aspect of guilt as a person often feels shame when they have done something contrary to God's moral standard.[25] However, shame can be instigated by many things other than guilt or admission of sin. For example, victims of violence by other people, usually people they trust, are often deeply shamed.[26] It is these other varieties of shame that create a real stumbling block for people trying to internalise the sinner's prayer.

Behind shame lies a deep sense of worthlessness that leads to alienation from themselves, from others and from God.[27] Shame's sense of worthlessness can be painfully debilitating. Victims often see themselves as inferior and worthy of rejection having unwittingly adopted the attitudes of their abusers.[28] In so many cases, individuals who are victims of great abuses endure such a deep sense of shame that they do not believe that they are worthy of saving. Sandra Roberts Rhoads, in her role as a prison chaplain, experienced a cesspool of shame: 'Most of those I met who had committed crimes had also had horrible things done to them'.[29] Rhoads, prepared to deal with the guilt of the prisoners, discovered the complexity of shame and that the promise of forgiveness was not the right tool to deal with it.[30] Unsurprisingly, she found a response to shame in Christ.

Rhoad's discovered that God deals with shame by offering unconditional acceptance and a new story of dignity and hope in Christ.[31] It is the free offer of the gospel and a new life of discipleship that address shame. Jesus in his ministry, in a dominant honour and shame culture, offered divine healing and deliverance to the deeply shamed, as seen in the story of the bleeding woman in Mark 5:24-34. Rather than shunning the woman as an outcast, depriving her of her human identity, Jesus healed her of her physical affliction and her shame. In an intimate familiarity Jesus said to the woman 'daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace' (Mark 5:34). Jesus not only healed the woman he also adopted her as a child of God, as he does with all his disciples (John 1:12-13). In every situation Jesus represents both the guilty and the innocent:

When, voluntarily, out of love for humankind, Christ died by torture naked on the cross, in the view of his helpless family, friends, and disciples, he himself participated in the shame of humanity.[32]

Jesus endured the shame of the cross and defeated it by desiring to bring all those afflicted by guilt and shame into himself (Hebrews 12:1-2; 1 Peter 2:6). Jesus, by his very life, turned his face towards humanity in an act of self-offering, expressing his complete commitment to create a new relationship in him, to shape a new identity in him and to constitute a new way of life to anyone who repents. That is, Christ offers a new life, that defeats shame, to anyone who turns to him and consequently away from sin.[33]

Summary

The sinner's prayer is a prayer of repentance that is used as a tool to help individuals to articulate their desire to be disciples of Christ. When encouraging individuals to perform the prayer, ministers of the gospel take on a responsibility to shepherd that individual to help them understand the truths that the prayer points to. Repentance is the reorientation of the heart (*metanoeō*) to accept the free offer of the gospel (without legalism) which is Christ; it is the continuous experience of flourishing (*epistrepho*) in Christ as his disciple forsaking sin (without antinomianism). This experience is being adopted as a child of God, constituting a new identity of dignity and hope (without shame). Perhaps the prayer would be more fittingly described as the 'prayer of discipleship'.

Anthony Luxton is the minister of Dunfermline West Baptist Church and is the bmj Essay Prize winner for 2020—and our first winner from the BUS. Contact Anthony on anthony.luxton@dunfermlinewest.org.

Notes to text

1. In 2003 Robert Glen Howard identified over 5000 websites that deployed a sinner's prayer, often with the explicit goal to call the visitors to enact their own converting prayer. Howard, R. G., 'A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric: The Case of the "Sinner's Prayer" Online', *Folklore* 2/116 (2005), pp173,178.

2. Howard, *ibid*, p173.

3. Howard, *ibid,* p178.

4. T. Olsen, 'Southern Baptists Debate the Sinner's Prayer' (2012) https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/juneweb-only/baptists-sinners-prayer.html [accessed 23 Mar, 2020].

5. D. Platt, 'David Platt: What I Really Think About the "Sinner's Prayer"' Conversion, Mission, and Deception' (2012) https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/juneweb-only/david-platt-sinners-prayer.html [accessed 30 Mar, 2020].

6. C. John, *Dictionary of Mission Theology.* Nottingham: IVP Academic, 2007, p336; M. Davie *et al, New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic.* Illinois: IVP Academic, 2016, p764.

7. M. J. Boda & G. T. Smith, *Repentance in Christian Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2006, p89.

8. Davie *et al, New Dictionary of Theology*, p764; Boda & Smith, *Repentance in Christian Theology*, p38.

9. M. Lodahl, *The Story of God: A Narrative Theology* (2nd edn). Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2008, p186.

10. Davie *et al, New Dictionary of Theology*, p44.

11. G. R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Kindle edn). Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016, loc241.

12. Allison, *ibid*, loc241.

13. D. Bonhoeffer, '1. Costly Grace' in *The Cost of Discipleship* (Kindle edn). London: SCM, 2001, loc584.

14. Bonhoeffer, *ibid,* loc620.

15. E. Fisher, *The Marrow of the Modern Divinity (Annotated)* (Kindle edn). Tain, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2009; '1. How a Marrow Grew' in *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters.* Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016.

16. S. B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Kindle edn). Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016, p32; Fisher, *ibid,* loc380.

17. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, pp34-41.

18. Davie *et al, New Dictionary of Theology*, pp130.

19. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, p39.

20. Fisher, *The Marrow of the Modern Divinity*, loc173.

21. Fisher, *ibid*, loc173.

22. An extract from John Boston's notes alongside his publication of the Marrow. Fisher, *ibid*, loc636.

23. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, p58.

24. Howard, *The case of the "Sinner's Prayer" online*, p178.

25. E. Stump, *Atonement.* Oxford: OUP, 2018, p49.

26. Stump, *ibid*, p50.

27. Stump, *ibid*, p52.

28. Stump, *ibid*, p52; M. Clough, 'Atoning Shame', *Feminist Theology,* 1/23, 2014.

29. D. M. Rhoads & S. R. Rhoads, 'Justification by Grace: Shame and Acceptance in a County Jail' in *The Shame Factor: How Shame Shapes Society.* Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011, p90.

30. Rhoads & Rhoads, *The Shame Factor*, p89.

31. Rhoads & Rhoads, *ibid,* p91.

32. Stump, *Atonement*, p353.

33. R. Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame.* Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012, p112.

Pilgrims and companions

by Geoff Colmer

The Order for Baptist Ministry has its roots in a remarkable meeting which took place on 19 October 2009, when four friends, myself, Paul Goodliff, Colin Norris, Martin Taylor—Baptist ministers who had been meeting regularly for over 15 years—gathered together in Oxford for a conversation with another friend, John Colwell. Paul and John had already begun a conversation around the question posed by some Spurgeon's students, 'Why do we not have an Order of Preachers?' Subsequently, John wrote a paper and on that occasion an exploration began as to the possibility of some kind of Order that was distinctively Baptist. Over a meal at Brown's, the Oxford bistro, a glass of red wine was raised to what we felt might be an extraordinary venture, and the Order for Baptist Ministry was seeded. A key aspiration was the desire for Baptist ministers to be in accountable, reflective relationships that enable them to flourish in, sustain, and remain true to their calling. During the course of the next year, three foundations were established: first, a commitment to prayer, with a structured rhythm of Daily Office sustained by spiritual direction and regular retreat; second, a commitment to gather in accountable relationships; third, a commitment to ministry.

Later in 2009, the four met with John Colwell to continue the conversation. The outcome was a decision for each to invite another person who would be interested to join the conversation and invite another to facilitate our discernment. On 11-12 March 2010, eleven gathered at Ivy House Retreat Centre, in Warminster. Over 24 hours the group shared together and sought to discern what God might be saying. Out of this emerged a strong conviction that has taken expression in a statement called 'The Dream'. This was refined and the group began to think more deeply about how it might be expressed. Also, a decision was reached to hold a wider conversation at the beginning of 2011, followed by a three-day Convocation in the Autumn of 2011.

The larger Consultation took place on 24 January 2011 in Milton Keynes and was attended by 52 people. Within a rhythm of prayer there was an opportunity to hear the story so far, to share in small groups, and in the larger group. Later that year, in October 2011, 25 people came together for the first Convocation at All Saints Conference Centre, Hertfordshire, to explore further. Again, this had at its heart a rhythm of prayer—morning, midday, evening and night—drawing upon a variety of liturgies, mostly those written specifically by the group for personal and cell group use. There was the opportunity to share 'The Dream', to hear from a number of 'Holy Dreamers', and to

hold some discussion about the various aspects of the Order. Of special significance were the conversations with Brother John Hennings, once a Baptist minister and now a Franciscan friar, who was invited as a guest and listener. Brother John was of enormous help, listening and offering wisdom for the way forward.

In January 2012, a small group made their vows with a strong sense that this was God's time to make this commitment. This felt not so much like an arrival as a beginning. Eight years on and there are 30 ministers who have similarly committed themselves to the Order as a way of deepening their faithfulness to baptismal and ordination vows. We do not advertise, nor actively seek to 'recruit', although this 10th Anniversary is an opportunity to tell the story more widely, but those who seek a place for attentiveness to God and fellowship in a more contemplative spirituality seem to find the Order, 'the best kept secret in the Baptist Union' as one person put it.

Since then, Convocation has been held annually at retreat and conference centres. At present there are 13 cells meeting together, with interest expressed by some individuals who are unable to join one because of geographical limitations. The meeting of the cell is sustained by the Daily Office together with a process of cell reflection, called examen. Cells are currently operating in London, the North West, the East Midlands, three in the South West, the South East, Dorset, the Oxford area, Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes.

What I value

Having been involved since its inception there are a number of things that I have come to value and which give life and sustenance to my own spirituality and ministry.

The first of these is the **Daily Office**. Over the past 10 years we have put together a suite of offices. The Daily Office is the main prayer of the day and has a standard, alternative and shorter form. Additionally, there are Offices for Midday, Day's Ending and Communion.

The Daily Office provides a structure for encounter with God by using a number of movements. The movements of each Office are:

becoming present to God
celebrating the presence of God
acknowledging our humanity
listening for the Word
reflecting on our roots
bringing our concerns
and going to love and serve

These movements serve as a way of becoming attentive and responsive to God.

The guiding theme of the Daily Office differs according to the day of the week. These themes also correspond to seasons in the church year. This means that during Ordinary Time (the liturgical time when a festival, like Christmas, or special season, such as Lent, is not being followed) a different office is said depending on the day of the week, whereas during a particular season, that office is used every day for the duration. So, on Sunday the focus is on Easter, and this is said during Ordinary Time on a Sunday, but during the season of Easter it is said every day.

For me, the rhythm of prayer, within the day, week and season offers a sense of stability, based not on my internal feelings or external circumstances, and in this sense it holds me. It provides a structure within which I can become still and attentive to God. It is a means of connection with others who share a calling as ministers of word and sacrament and hold to a commitment as 'pilgrims and companions', when we are gathered together, but most often alone and scattered. The phrase 'pilgrims and companions' is taken from 'reflecting on our roots' and this part of the Office is the one constant. It is taken directly from The Dream, and for me has become an immensely significant part of my prayer.

Living God, enable us this day
to be pilgrims and companions:
committed to the way of Christ,
faithful to the call of Christ,
discerning the mind of Christ,
offering the welcome of Christ,
growing in the likeness of Christ,
engaging in the mission of Christ,
in the world that belongs to Christ.

The Daily Office is the foundation of our practice as an Order.

The second thing I appreciate is **The Dream**. As has already been said, this originated at our first gathering and 10 years on I am amazed at the freshness and substance that these words continue to have—when we read it I repeatedly experience a tingle! It can be found on our website here https://www.orderforbaptistministry.co.uk/the-dream/ but it begins:

We dream of an Order, a community of equals

Where we are gathered and dispersed
journeying together even when alone
rooted within the Baptist story.

Where we hold a view of Baptist ministry
as a way of being that mediates the presence of Christ,
particularly expressed in word, sacrament, pastoral care and mission.

As a foundation statement it forms the basis of what we seek to be and do.

The Cell is one of the occasions when this dispersed community can gather together in a small group every six weeks. Each meeting begins by saying the Daily Office, including the reading of the Scriptures, sometimes retelling The Dream, and asking one question from the Cell Review, which can be found on the website here https://www.orderforbaptistministry.co.uk/cell-review-process-and-structure/

Over recent meetings the Cell to which I belong has reflected upon the following questions:

• *What and who are enabling me to be attentive to God at this time?*

• *What and where are the hidden rocks in my ministry? And where are the safe harbours and refit yards, the wise guides and fresh supplies?*

• *Jesus challenged his disciples to leave self behind, take up a cross and follow him. Am I following Christ wherever he leads, remaining faithful to him?*

• *How far am I serving and leading the people of God through pastoral care, gentle nurture and faithful teaching, setting before them the whole counsel of God?*

I have been surprised and delighted at the depth that these questions have called forth as the Cell has responded openly and honestly.

Another aspect of the Order I value is **Convocation** which is the annual gathering of the whole Order. While we recognise the value of retreat and conference, Convocation has its own distinct purpose as the time and space where we gather together before God to pray, to worship, to listen, to discern and to be. At each point in Convocation we aspire to hold what we have heard, without immediately jumping in to offer our responses and blessed thoughts or questions. This isn't in any way to prevent reflection but to reflect in such a way that we hold what we've heard and deepen that response. In doing this the hope is that we hold and are held in a different kind of space, distinct from either a retreat or conference.

Within our life as Baptists Together there is diversity in our expressions of worship and prayer. The Order for Baptist Ministry provides not an alternative but an additional expression of spirituality which is nevertheless grounded in who we are as Baptists. Some members come from a charismatic context and welcome the contemporary style of sung worship, while others are rooted in a more formal liturgical style of worship, but all find the reflective and contemplative core of the Order's spirituality deeply nourishing.

Looking back

As we reach this point in our history, a decade since that germ of an idea, it is with a sense of surprise and gratitude to God that we have come this far! The experience has

frequently been one of feeling our way and working things out as we've gone along.

A thorny issue in the early days was the focus of the Order and it is a cause of continuing regret that some people were deeply hurt that it became focused on ministers. We have from time to time revisited the possibility of an Order for Baptist Contemplatives as a sister movement but without making any headway. Brother John Hennings, at the first convocation encouraged us to discern our distinctive charism and this is where we came to—but not without causing some disappointment.

From our beginnings at Ivy House there were more men than women involved and we have not expressed ethnic diversity. Furthermore, our numbers are skewed towards middle age. While we have sought to address this lack of diversity, change happens slowly.

Several on the Core Group have trans-local and national roles. Some are retired. Despite considerable effort there has been a deficit of pastors/ministers in pastoral charge on this group. At this point, however, there looks to be some change which is greatly welcome. Geographically we are largely southern-centric, with limited interest further north.

One of the things that I often reflect on is that in the early heady days, we aimed high in terms of some of our aspirations and while they may have been noble, they may have made the Order inaccessible to some. I like to think that over time we have become more grounded.

Looking forward

A while ago, talking to a friend, he asked, 'Does it have legs?' Some of the issues that I've reflected upon looking back will need to be addressed if we are to go forward. The Order has found a resonance with those who have made a commitment and others who use the offices but is there a critical mass? And while it is an addition to the breadth of Baptists Together, it can feel dissonant with our prevailing Baptist culture. If this is the case, is this a bad thing or does it mean that we are providing something of a prophetic voice?

We are where we are *not* because of a carefully planned route-map! The Order for Baptist Ministry continues to reflect on where we are, how this is expressed and how we continue to develop in helping ministers flourish and sustain their calling. In all this we are thankful for what God has done, we are graced with a sense of excitement at what God seems to be doing among us now, and hopeful for the future.

Further information can be found at https://www.orderforbaptistministry.co.uk and at https://www.facebook.com/Order-for-Baptist-Ministry-1049397895240313/.

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Church under lockdown

by Bob Allaway

Having been forced to cease meeting physically, are we still a church? The classic text for evangelicals in the 'gathered church' tradition would be Christ's 'Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them' (Matthew18:20). How can we gather in his name, when we cannot physically gather?

One activity that we have been able to continue as before (by using Zoom and telephoning others) is our prayer meeting, and we certainly pray 'in his name'. The other activity that we still continue, on a small scale, is providing food and other necessities to those who need them (in a socially distanced way). More of this later.

The activity that does not work as before is the Sunday service. Some churches may livestream their services anyway. We do not have the technical ability to do this, and, in any case, does this not turn the service into a performance? This is especially so if, under lockdown, it is all done by one person. Our pastor has experimented with stringing together different contributions on YouTube. This makes it multivoiced and means our people, who have no sense of timekeeping, can log in whenever they want! Until this got going, on Pentecost Sunday, I was emailing the lectionary readings and a 'Thought for Sunday' to everyone in our church for whom we have an e-address.

I could not understand why our pastor was so keen to get on YouTube and did not bother with a service on Zoom, like our prayer meeting. After all, if Zoom is used, there is opportunity for instant feedback to the talk, through chat: even better than normal! What must go by the board on Zoom is corporate, communal singing and prayer. It just becomes a mush unless individuals take it in turn to participate. But, under lockdown, there is no corporate singing on the YouTube service, either. Then I realised that our pastor was thinking as an evangelist, and impressed by the thought that people outside our church might come across a YouTube service. For my part, I think of our services as being for the spiritual formation of believers, so they can be witnesses to non-believers 24/7.

Classically, we express our physical gathering in the sacraments. Providentially, our church baptised nine youngsters on the last Sunday before social distancing came in. If we are true to baptism's origins, though, this could still be done on Zoom or Skype. Christian baptism came out of Jewish proselyte baptism. This involved two people, but

the role of the baptiser was to witness the candidate baptise him or herself. The Eastern Orthodox form of baptismal words, said by the baptiser, would fit with such practice: 'The servant of God, N, is baptised into the Name …'

The biggest problem is communion. How can we do this without someone to commune, to share, with? (1 Corinthians 10:17). I have read online what my fellow Baptists Stephen Holmes and Simon Woodman have contributed to these discussions. Holmes says: *If the way we have celebrated communion in our churches in recent years is OK, then celebrating communion in our present virtual gatherings is also OK.* Personally, I don't think the way we celebrate communion in our churches is OK! Whether high Anglican or low Baptist, I believe we tend to assume that it is about 'my relationship with Jesus', whereas Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11: 20ff, is concerned with our relationship with one another.

Consider this: if a Brahman and an Untouchable in India, or black and white in the southern states of the US, shake hands in peace and share the same loaf and same cup in the same place at the same time, does that not say something prophetic: powerful, shocking, revolutionary in witness to our unity in Christ? If they break their own bread in their own homes, while watching someone else do it on-screen, that says nothing.

Or should we have a purely spiritual communion, following the words Holmes says he quotes from the Book of Common Prayer: *If a person desires to receive the Sacrament, but, by reason of extreme sickness or physical disability, is unable to eat and drink the Bread and Wine, the Celebrant is to assure that person that all the benefits of Communion are received, even though the Sacrament is not received with the mouth.* Note, though, that this is someone who, by virtue of ill-health, is unable to eat or drink. Suppose they are also housebound, then they are not without Christ's fellowship, for they experience it (in the days before social distancing) in the celebrant visiting them to deliver this assurance!

Communion is a problem for our church, anyway, since we are Anglican. While the pastor and I are licensed by the bishop, neither of us is ordained in Anglican eyes. This means that, if we want to have communion, we have to invite our local parish priest to do it for us, or share in bread and wine that have already been consecrated in another church (communion by extension). While I have never believed ordination is necessary to preside at the Lord's Supper, I can see some virtue in these regulations, in that they force us to recognise that our communion is not just with our own fellowship, but with the wider church. We can have no communion without our brothers' and sisters' help.

I mentioned another activity that our church has continued under lockdown: sharing food with those who need it. It is a matter of historical record that some of the earliest churches maintained food and clothes banks. The Eastern Orthodox may have preserved a liturgical relic of this in the tradition of *antidoron*: sharing leftover,

*un*consecrated bread, after the service, with anyone who wants it. I note that Jesus' actions over the bread at the Last Supper echo his actions at the feeding of the 5000 and 4000 and at Emmaus. Also, there is a stress in Acts on breaking bread together. If you ask, 'Is this a communion or an ordinary meal?', then 1 Corinthians 11:20f suggests the answer: 'would they have seen any difference?'!

If we can deliver food and medicine under lockdown, in a suitably hygienic and socially distanced way, why not bread that has been seen to be prayed over online? We need to remember that Jesus promised to be with us as we go (Matthew 28:19,20), as well as when we gather (18:20)!

One final thought: those of us sharing a home with a spouse and/or family have not felt deprived of fellowship to the same extent. Is the lockdown a call to all Christians to be involved in intentional community in future, at least at the household level?

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The future after Covid (AC)

by Simon Russell

When we closed our buildings, we looked forward to returning and perhaps imaged a big service to announce we had survived and conquered the virus. Life would return to the same as it was before coronavirus (BC). Maybe the VE celebrations were in the backs of our minds, but we were forgetting that the war in the Far East went on, and that things like rationing continued for a number of years.

When the virus came, church leaders went into overdrive to decide what to do and how to keep the gathered community together and proclaim the gospel. Of course, for some ministers/leaders there was a loss of role, loss of status and feeling adrift from the usual. Not to be forgotten: a financial concern in churches in which a reliance on the physical Sunday offering is strong and fear of using standing orders has become ingrained.

The situation now. Ministers/leaders/teams have tried to get to grips with new technology to communicate and support congregations/communities. As we might have expected, these attempts have been varied: posting through letterboxes; phone calls; information about what is available via phone and internet; and of course the use of YouTube and Zoom. The challenge has been not only what each minister/team/congregation is capable

of, but also what should be put out to the congregation.

When thinking about the internet, some have transposed Sunday events straight onto the web, including being in the church with the lectern and sense of place or even power. Do we need to reflect on our understanding of being a minister or, dare I say, priest, as individuals and as congregations? Others have used their own homes, sometimes with a table or something lectern-like and we are invited into that situation. It has been disappointing that given a new method of communication many—especially larger—congregations have simply chosen a straight switch of medium. Some ministers/associations have put things out every day, by e-mail or YouTube. I worry that ministers may be running themselves ragged to produce 'stuff' to appease a perceived need. Do we look too often at the number of views or thumbs up signs? Perhaps instead we can be critical of one another's output in a way that enhances what we all do. The real question is about the nature of our spirituality exercised in our BC meetings—and how much of that can we now communicate.

It has been a delight to see Baptists Together taking a higher profile online and enhancing our associating. At or church, we have anecdotal evidence that we are contacting more people by using the internet than we were on Sundays. I have enjoyed embracing my church's Sunday event early in the day and having the rest of the day to myself, becoming more a Sabbath and less of an endurance course! Midweek meetings with other clergy *etc* have involved less travelling and less waffle—but we are slowly approaching a new time: after Covid-19 (AC).

The situation to come. Like the end of WW2, any reopening will be gradual and variable across the nation. There will be no opening service with a bun fight, no praise in the park. There is going to be a lot of head scratching, according to the size of the meeting room. Questions will range from the practical to the spiritual—how many can we fit in, who gets the invite, what if a new person just rolls up, have we enough cleaning stuff, are refreshments completely out of the question, is singing important to our spirituality, when can we open for the people who rent our space (schools are facing similar questions).

Can we be more radical? I remember the house church movement starting (many, like New Frontiers, now occupy large warehouses). I recall books being written about cell churches. Is it time to look at these expressions of church again, if only for a season? Do we encourage family/home/house worship? We are going to need distanced church life for longer than we first thought. Can such units become new congregations of a central church body, so that we create a mixed economy of congregations in the same area? It is not longer either/or, but both/and. I hope we keep connected and do not become separate.

In ministerial formation we now need training in the use of camera and radio. We know

how to communicate to the pews/chairs, getting that eye contact, face gestures *etc*, but it doesn't always transfer directly online. Some of my viewing has been hysterical or painful as well as delightful!

Dare we believe that Sunday will no longer be the big hit opportunity? There will be people who won't want to come back to be part of the crowd. Many of the new contacts will not want to pass over the doorsteps of our buildings or are busy on Sundays. We will need to keep the internet profile/output going and that has an impact on resources and pastoring the flock. Those watching during the day may be returning to work and will therefore go back to their previous pursuits—the advantage with an internet presence is that they can pick up the output any time of day. What is our aim of this content; to get them over our doorstep, or into the Kingdom?

We have a tradition of being radicals, nonconformists being creative for the sake of the Kingdom. Surly it is part of our heritage to grab this opportunity, not to fail or succeed, but to *try* because of who we are?

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'God is Good' and 'There is a God'

by Pieter J. Lalleman

Some piece of good news is announced in church or on Facebook. The spontaneous response of many: 'God is good!' You lost your keys and find them again after a long search. Your shout of relief: 'there is a God!' I have yet to come across the opposite. When bad news is announced, we don't say 'God is bad', 'God is immoral', 'there is no God' or equivalent. I want to question the practice of saying that God is good—and of confirming our belief in his existence—in this way. I hope you won't find me heavy-handed.

The God in whom we believe as Christians is greater than we are. He is wiser than we, he is omnipresent and omniscient, he is more loving, and so we could go on: but God is not just 'more of everything'. Karl Barth reminded us that God is totally different than what we might think of him, '*der ganz Andere*', '*totaliter aliter*', and on this issue he even agreed with Rudolf Bultmann.[1]

This divine otherness implies, among other things, that God is elevated above our

judgement. There’s simply no way in which we would be able to judge God’s action or lack of action. Because he is infinitely wise, how would we humans ever be able to assess the wisdom or otherwise of his decisions? Or how would his existence be proven by us retrieving our keys, or disproven by our failure to do so?

The book of Job speaks into this issue. Job is introduced to us as a happy and godfearing man, yet one day everything goes dramatically wrong and he loses everything. Job then sets out to convince God that this fate is not fair, that he, Job, did not deserve so much bad luck. Job goes very far in his accusations, for he is so convinced of his innocence that he even accuses God of dishonesty, a thought which occurs repeatedly in his speeches in chapters 6-7, 9-10, 12, 14, 16-17, 19, 23 and 30.

Job is correct in so far as he struggles with God and appeals to him directly, whereas his 'friends' merely reason about God. Yet God in no way agrees with Job and in chapters 38-41 he shows Job that he is wrong (38:1-2, 40:1-2) – and Job admits that he was indeed mistaken (40:3-5, 42:1-6). He was wrong to apply his human standards to God, the creator of the universe. That’s the thing: human standards don’t fit the Holy One of Israel.

Many Christians no doubt say ‘God is good’ without realising what they are really saying. As ministers we need to help them to reflect on their language and this begins with us reflecting on our own language. When we say ‘God is good’, this creates the suggestion that we are passing judgement on God: he is good because he healed someone, he is good because he conformed to our moral standard, we are in a position to evaluate him. But what is the theological status of my moral standard? Would it be strong enough to assess the Eternal One, blessed be his Name? Does the fact that I was finally bright enough to remember where I left my keys really confirm the existence of the Father of our Lord Jesus? Can my friend who did not recover his keys justifiably say that there is no God?

I hope that we can stop saying things like ‘God is good’ and ‘there is a God’. These are forms of the vain use of the Name, which are covered by the Ten Commandments. Instead I suggest that we simply say ‘thank God’ or ‘hallelujah’. Such catchphrases do not bring God down, but they respect his position, provided we use them attentively and avoid them becoming empty slogans.

I would humbly submit that these sayings are inappropriate for believers, and that as ministers we are called to set our flocks an example of good practice.

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Note to text

1. See the German Wikipedia at https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totaliter_aliter [accessed 04/05/2020].

The reading habits of Baptist ministers

by Paul Beasley-Murray

Do ministers still read? Is it signficant that in recent years a number of British Christian publishing houses have gone to the wall, while of those who have survived, some have given up publishing serious books, and others seem to make their money by publishing the religious 'blockbusters'? In March 2017, with the help of Peter Thomas (a Baptist minister) and Steve Smith (a retired geography teacher used to encouraging students to devise surveys), I decided to seek an answer to the question by sending out two surveys, one shorter and one longer, to 1900+ Baptist ministers, and received in reply 309 responses to the shorter survey and 175 to the longer survey. On the basis of that study I wrote a scholarly article, 'Ministers' Reading Habits' published in the *BQ* 2018, **49**(1). The full analysis of the surveys together with my reflections are found on my website: www.paulbeasleymurray.com/reading. In this article I want to look at how much ministers read, what they read, and how they might find more time for reading.

Some ministers read a good deal. In the longer survey ministers were asked "About how many hours do you spend in an average week reading—including not just print and digital, but also articles, blogs and websites?", the following answers were received:

1-3 hours	*12%*
4-6 hours	*19%*
7-9 hours	*23%*
10-12 hours	*20%*
13-15 hours	*12%*
More than 15 hours	*15%*

Stated in another way: just over half (54%) of all the ministers in the survey spend fewer than 10 hours a week reading, and almost three-quarters (74%) fewer than 13 hours.

Ministers have to balance their reading. In the longer survey ministers were asked: *Approximately what percentage of areas was spent in different areas of reading?*

Percentage	*0-20*	*21-40*	*41-60*	*61-80*	*81-100*
Personal Bible reading	64	30	3	2	1
Reading for sermon prep	27	49	20	4	
Other ministry-related reading	51	33	14	2	
General reading	52	39	7	2	

Ministers have varied patterns for their personal reading of the Bible. In response to the question *What scheme(s) are you currently using for your reading of the Bible?* the following answers were received in the longer survey:

The lectionary	*13%*
Printed Bible reading notes	*19%*
Online Bible notes/devotional thoughts	*19%*
Reading through a Bible book with a commentary	*19%*
Reading through a Bible book without a commentary or notes	*36%*
I don't have a regular pattern of reading	*19%*

The figures would suggest that a few ministers are using more than one scheme.

The response which causes the greatest concern is that almost one-fifth of ministers have no regular pattern of reading the Bible. This is a travesty of a minister's calling. Ministers need to commit themselves to the daily discipline of a rule of life, of which the systematic reading of scripture is central.

Should we also be concerned that only 13% of ministers enjoy a rich and balanced diet of scripture? For this is the great advantage of using a lectionary for personal Bible reading: it provides daily readings from the Old and New Testaments as also from the psalms.

Ministers read widely. In the shorter survey ministers were asked *In the last year what types of ministry books have you been reading?* The answers were as follows:

Biblical studies	*82% [of ministers]*
Prayer and spirituality	*66%*
Theology	*66%*
Mission/outreach/evangelism	*61%*

Leadership and management	*55%*
Church history/Christian biography:	*41%*
Community involvement/justice issues	*36%*
Pastoral care and counselling	*36%*
Preaching	*32%*
Worship	*23%*
Specialised ministries: children/youth/families/chaplaincy	*17%*
Other	*9%*

It was not surprising that biblical studies comprised the most popular type of book ministers were reading—with the pressure of weekly sermons and sometimes midweek Bible studies, this would have been expected. What is perhaps surprising is that 'prayer and spirituality' ranked second alongside 'theology'. Yet, as we have seen, despite this interest in spirituality, the discipline of personal scripture reading appears not to be strong. Or is the lack of disciplined reading of the scriptures an outcome of some forms of contemporary spirituality? Whereas in traditional Catholic spirituality *lectio divina* (meditation on scripture) has always played a key role, in some modern expressions of spirituality scripture is downplayed. In the workbook that accompanies *Breathing under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* by the Franciscan Richard Rohr, not one of the 100 plus exercises involves reflecting on scripture.[1] Similarly in *Soulfulness: Deepening the Mindful Life* by Brian Draper, a British evangelical, scripture has no place in his 'journey into soul'.[2] By contrast Alister McGrath made the point that 'The *sola scriptura* principle, so central to the theological method of the reformers, is equally evident in their spiritualty. Scripture is the supreme God-authorised and God-given resource for the generation and nourishment of Christian faith'.[3]

As might be expected within a largely evangelical denomination, the reading of books on 'mission/outreach/evangelism' was relatively high (61%), but it was pleasing to note that with over a third (36%) of ministers having read books on 'community involvement/ justice issues', Baptists have developed a much more holistic approach to mission.

It was good to see that in the past year over half (55%) have read books in leadership and management, for studies have shown that effective leadership is the key to the health and growth of the church.[4] However, it was strange to see the relatively low ranking of pastoral care and counselling (36%), preaching (32%) and worship (23%). That fewer ministers read about worship almost certainly reflects the way in which in many Baptist churches worship is now the prerogative of worship leaders rather than of the ministers themselves.

Most ministers favour print books to digital reading. What impact has the digital revolution had on ministers reading? To find out, we asked several questions. In the

short survey of 309 ministers we asked: *How often do you use a digital device in your reading?*

Almost always	*6%*
Most of the time:	*10%*
About 50/50	*35%*
Occasionally	*40%*
Never	*9%*

Here we see that only 16% use a digital device 'almost always' or 'most of the time', compared to 49% who only 'occasionally' or 'never' use a digital device.

We then asked a question relating to the proportion of digital and print books read in the last three months:

Almost all e-books	*3%*
Mainly e-books	*7%*
Roughly 50/50:	*18%*
Mainly print books	*29%*
Almost all print books	*40%*

Here only 10% read 'almost all' or 'mainly' e-books, whereas 69% read 'mainly' or 'almost all' print books. Most clearly favour print books to digital reading.[5]

Most ministers particularly favour print books when preparing sermons. Regarding Bible study and/or sermon preparation a series of questions were asked relating to the frequency of use of print books, digital e-reader, TV/radio, down-loads, and websites, and came up with the following results

	Print (%)	*Digital reader (%)*	*TV/radio (%)*	*Downloads (%)*	*Websites (%)*
Always	51	7	Less than 1%	9	15
Often	29	15	20	32	39
50/50	12	8	17	18	24
Rarely	7	29	46	32	19
Never	Less than 1%	41	20	11	3

Here 80% always and often use print books in their sermon preparation.

Ministers are more open to digital media for reading related to their personal ministry development. Regarding personal ministry development, we asked the same series of questions, and came up with the following results.

	Print (%)	*Digital reader (%)*	*TV/radio (%)*	*Downloads (%)*	*Websites (%)*
Always	37	6	2	5	9
Often	41	20	14	25	33
50/50	15	13	16	24	30
Rarely	6	30	47	34	24
Never	0	31	21	13	4

Print books remain dominant: 78% 'always' or 'often' rely on print books for their ministry development. By contrast the percentages for those who 'always' or 'often' rely on other media are as follows: websites 42%; downloads 30%; digital readers 26% and TV/radio 16%.

Time and other priorities. In the shorter survey ministers were asked: *What restricts your ministry-related reading?* A variety of reasons were given:

Demands of ministry	*46%*
Other priorities	*25%*
Time management	*15%*
Not a reader	*2%*
Other	*12%*

That almost two-thirds of ministers (71%) are restricted from ministry-related reading because of 'demands of ministry' and 'other priorities' is a significant finding. However, I wonder if the 15% who referred to difficulties of 'time management' might have made an even more significant response. Good time management involves setting priorities, which once set give the minister the freedom to say 'no' to many of the demands made upon them.

The response of the 25% who cited 'other priorities' for restricting their reading may also be significant—for the inference is that there are other tasks which take priority over

reading and study. But is that so? Clearly if someone is dying or has just died, then a minister will want to drop everything and be there with the person. However, I would argue that in the overall pattern of a minister's life, the spiritual discipline of reading and study is a key priority—in Gordon MacDonald's phrase, it is 'building below the waterline'.[6]

Many ministers do not set aside specific time in the week for reading relating to ministry. In the same shorter survey ministers were asked *How much time are you able presently to set aside for reading related to your ministry?* (*ie* not general reading such as novels or poetry]. The responses were as follows:

None	*2%*
Irregular—as opportunity arises	*53%*
One session—about three hours	*24%*
Two sessions—about six hours	*18%*
One day a month	*5%*

Here we discover that only 42% of ministers are able to devote specific time to ministry-related reading, and that even then it is no more than 6 hours a week. I wonder, is this failure to find time to read linked with the trend for ministers not to have 'studies', but to have 'offices'? This may be related to the way many (most?) ministers today do not safeguard the mornings for study on the basis that they need to relate with people at other morning activities such as a toddler group or a church café.

Most ministers do not avail themselves of a reading week. In the Baptist Union's recommended terms of settlement, in addition to five weeks of holiday, ministers are entitled to a week of study or reading. Bearing in mind that during the working year just over half of ministers are unable to set aside specific time for reading relating to study, one might think that most would be keen to take advantage of the yearly reading week. However, this is not the case.

In answer to the question, *Over the last three years or so how many reading weeks (or equivalent) have you taken?* the responses of the 300 ministers replying to this question in the shorter survey were as follows:

None:	*56%*
One:	*15%*
Two:	*10%*
Three	*20%*

This decision not to take advantage of a reading week stands in contrast to one of the ordination questions asked of past generations of Baptist ministers: *Do you promise to be faithful in prayer and in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, and to lead a life*

worthy of the calling to which you have been called?[7] In the most recent Baptist manual, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples,* that promise is absent in the main ordination promises, although an expanded version appears in the section entitled *Additional Material*: *Will you endeavour to lead a godly life...and will you be diligent in prayer, in reading the Scriptures and in all the studies that will deepen your faith and ministry*.[8] If ministers do not feel it important to take an annual reading week then we might well wonder how seriously ministers feel it is to grow and develop in their thinking and understanding of their calling.

A practical way forward: adopt a strategy for reading. On the whole, ministers will only find time to read, if they make time—and that takes effort. Indeed, Martyn Lloyd Jones, the former great Welsh preacher of Westminster Chapel, commented that 'one literally has to fight for one's life in this sense'.[9]

According to John Stott, the former Rector of All Soul's, Langham Place, an hour a day is an 'absolute minimum for time for study which even the busiest pastors should be able to manage'. He went on:

Many will achieve more. But the minimum would amount to this: every day at least one hour; every week one morning, afternoon or evening; every month a full day; every year a week. Set out like this, it sounds very little, Indeed, it is too little. Yet everybody who tries it is surprised to discover how much reading can be done within such a disciplined framework. It tots up to nearly six hundred hours in the course of a year.[10]

John Piper, who for more than 30 years was the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minnesota, suggested that if pastors could not block out an hour, then they could set aside 20 minutes early in the morning, 20 minutes after lunch, and 20 minutes before they went to bed: 'Think what you could read! Thirty-six medium-sized books!'[11]

In the last 21 years of my ministry, my strategy was a mixture of Stott and Piper. Monday afternoons tended to be devoted to reading commentaries, with more time spent on Tuesday morning when I began the task of writing my sermon. Wednesdays and Thursdays I sought to read for at least an hour a day in my church office—but would often squeeze in more time at home before going out in the evening. Fridays afternoons were normally spent reviewing books (a quick reader, I would manage to 'gut' around some 180 books a year in that way). The church gave me four weeks a year for 'wider ministry', some of which was devoted to reading in preparation for the lectures I was to give or the books I was to write.

I always enjoyed reading *Ministry Today UK* and the *bmj.* I enjoyed too *Future First; Providing Facts for Forward Planning*, a newsletter edited by the indefatigable Peter Brierley. As a longtime member of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas and of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research I received *New Testament Studies* and the *Tyndale Bulletin*—two worthy scholarly journals, which have limited relevance to pastoral

ministry. Much more relevant are the 28-page long Grove Booklets of Cambridge—I greatly benefitted from their various series on such subjects as evangelism, leadership, pastoral and worship matters. For life beyond the church, I take *The Times*—I read the *Daily Mail* at the dentist's, and the *Daily Mirror*, *The Sun*, and *The Star* at the car wash! For relaxation I am an avid reader of thrillers—on a recent cruise we took away with us one whole suitcase packed with books!

Reading alone does not make for effective ministry. To those ministers who may feel that I have over-emphasised the importance of reading, let me say that I recognise that there is more to effective ministry than reading. Effective ministry is determined by many factors. For instance, ministers who read for hours a week, but never get out into the wider community are unlikely to make a significant difference. Likewise ministers who never miss a reading week, but who are not natural communicators, may not hold a congregation in the same way that some of their more gifted peers may do. However, there is no doubt that ministers who read are likely to be much more effective than if they had not devoted themselves to the discipline of reading.

Francis Bacon, the English philosopher, famously said 'reading maketh a full man'.[12] In turn I would say that reading makes a 'complete minister'. Or to quote John Wesley, 'It cannot be that ministers should grow in grace unless they give themselves to reading. A reading ministry will always be a knowing ministry'.[13]

Paul Beasley-Murray is now retired from Baptist ministry but continues to research and write. He can be contacted on paulbeasleymurray@gmail.com

Notes to text

1. Richard Rohr, *Breathing under Water: Companion Volume. London:* SPCK, 2016.

2. Brian Draper, *Soulfulness: Deepening the Mindful Life. London:* Hodder & Stoughton, 2016.

3. Alister McGrath, *Roots that Refresh: A celebration of Reformation Spirituality.* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991, p34.

4. See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Living Out the Call: Book Two—Leading God's People.* Amazon, 2nd edn, 2016.

5. A Bible Society online survey of 2294 Christians in April 2013 revealed that 8 out of 10 Christians preferred using a physical book, compared with 7 out of 10 (69%) of the public—but that was 7 years ago!

6. This metaphor is taken from a reflection on the Brooklyn Bridge, which joins Manhattan to Brooklyn. 'The Brooklyn Bridge remains a major transportation artery in New York City today because 135 years ago the chief engineer and his construction team did their most patient and daring work where no one could see it: on the foundations of the towers below the water-line. It is one more illustration of an ageless principle in leadership: the work done below the waterline (in a leader's soul) that determines whether he or she will stand the test of time and challenge…'. See Gordon MacDonald, *Building Below the Waterline.* Hendrickson, Peabody, Massachusetts, 2011, p1.

7. Ernest A. Payne & Stephen F. Winward, *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship: A Manual for Ministers.* London: BUGB, 4th edn, 1967, p219.

8. Christopher J. Ellis & Myra Blyth (eds), *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples.* Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005, p131.

9. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Preaching and the Preachers*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971, p67.

10. John R.W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching.* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982, p204.

11. John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals,* 2nd edn. Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group, 2013, p81.

12. Francis Bacon in his essay *Of Studies*.

13. I have taken the liberty of altering the actual quotation: 'It cannot be that the people should grow in grace unless they give themselves to reading. A reading people will always be a knowing people'.

Reviews

edited by Mike Peat

What's So Funny About God?: A Theological Look at Humour

by Steve Wilkens

IVP Academic

Reviewer: Colin Sedgwick

Often throughout my Christian life I have found myself vaguely wondering why, given that humour is such an important part of life, it figures so little in the Bible. I say 'vaguely' because of course in the busyness of Christian ministry one is so occupied with such little matters as leading a church, and wrestling with such topics as the doctrine of the Trinity, or predestination and free will, or the person and work of the Holy Spirit, that it necessarily takes a back seat.

But I knew there were those who believed the Bible was a whole bundle of laughs. So I grabbed with both hands the opportunity to focus on the question via this book. (For light relief, I will scatter a few totally random examples through this review, prioritising some short and truly groan-worthy ones.)

Steve Wilkens is a professor of philosophy and ethics at an American Christian college. He is a good, clear writer and—appropriately—has a good sense of humour. *Regardless of which family tree you shake, some nuts are bound to fall out.*

I can report two conclusions. First, I thoroughly enjoyed the book, and would gladly recommend it to anyone interested in the subject. But second, I wasn't really convinced by his insistence that the Bible is indeed full of humour (or even 'humor'). *No one who ever said that laughter is the best medicine had diarrhea at the time.*

Wilkens rests a lot of his case on the notion of incongruity, which might be roughly defined as the juxtaposition of things which don't logically or normally belong together. Beyond any doubt, much humour does indeed involve the incongruous, but, as Wilkens himself recognises, not every incongruity is therefore funny. *'I learned today that it's a bad idea to pet a tiger', she said off-handedly.*

Certainly, if we stand back from our faith and look at it from an outsider's perspective, it

comes across as containing some extremely odd features: the very notion of incarnation, for example, or of Jesus gaining victory through a horrible and humiliating death—or of our podgy, wrinkly and unlovely bodies (let's be honest, now) being temples of the Holy Spirit. No shortage of incongruity there! But funny…? *I couldn't figure out why the baseball kept getting bigger and bigger. Then it hit me.*

Wilkens has no trouble demonstrating the riotous sense of fun with which Jews to this day treat the book of Esther. But whether the original writer—and readers—saw it that way is, perhaps, another matter. *OK, maybe I can't spell Armageddon. But it's not like it's the end of the world, is it?*

It's tempting to go on, but I hope I've given a flavour of a thoroughly refreshing and lively book, whatever my misgivings.

It reminded me of a couple of good quotes: 'It's the test of a good religion whether you can make a joke of it' (GK Chesterton); 'Whom the gods would make bigots, they first deprive of humour' (James Gillis).

It's always darkest before dawn. So if you want to steal your neighbour's paper, you know the time to do it.

Enjoy!

Inhabiting the World: Identity, Politics, and Theology in Radical Baptist Perspective

by Ryan Andrew Newson

Mercer University Press, 2018

Reviewer: Henley

Postmodernity, argues Ryan Newson, marks a move away from modern foundationalism's drive towards certainty, matched by an increasing complexity in both the way language is understood to 'work' and in the way human being and identity is construed. The question, therefore, is what it might look like for Christians to inhabit the world they find themselves in 'without acquiescence or retreat'. The answer, he suggests, might be found in the 'baptist vision'—especially as articulated by James McClendon. In particular, our way of inhabiting the world should be marked by 'listening…to oneself and one's embodied, organic desires; to one's neighbours; and to the untamed voice of God' (p21).

This 'listening' is expanded upon through the lens of McClendon's understanding of the three interwoven strands—body, social and resurrection—which make up Christian theology and ethics. The body and social strands together point to an understanding of human identity as being formed by the multiplicity of narratives, shaped by language and culture, in which we are embedded from birth and which shape both our individual and communal convictions and desires. 'Conversion' requires the adoption of practices, and especially ecclesial practices, which will re-form our desires and convictions towards Christ. However, this should not lead to a sense either of resigned relativism in relation to others or to a 'convictional imperialism' which seeks to impose Christian convictions on others. Instead, the church should recognise that it is 'formed at the border of encounter' and therefore be receptive to conversation and listening to others, both in the wider church and the world.

The formational value of ecclesial practices has received renewed interest in recent years. However, Newson joins a growing number of voices in acknowledging, by using the example of racism, that these practices do not automatically produce fruit and can easily 'go wrong'. There needs to be, therefore, a constant willingness in the church to confess and repent so that sin might be removed as

quickly as possible.

The resurrection strand seeks to balance the Baptist focus on communal listening to God and interpretation of his word with a sense of how these things should prepare us for an element of eschatological 'surprise' in what God might say or how he might act. This prevents the ecclesial practices from becoming a means simply of re-producing that which has gone before, but instead creates space for transformation as the *ekklesia* is formed into the *koinonia* of God. This in turn allows the church to inhabit a place of witness in the world.

There are a number of aspects of this book which are immensely helpful—in particular the framing of postmodernity and insights into the narrative formation of individuals and communities. The book also serves as a useful introduction to elements of McClendon's thought. However, Newson's argument seems to presume a theology of ecclesial practices which is never quite articulated, leaving questions about exactly what practices he has in mind and how the various practices which shape our life together might help or hinder the transformation he is arguing for. It would also have been good to see a book claiming to offer a 'radical Baptist' vision pay more attention to the distinct set of practices that have historically shaped Baptist life (for example the significance of covenant in relation to the church meeting), and what these might have to offer to the theological task. The 'listening' that Newson advocates is well embedded in Baptist ecclesiology, and this could have been drawn out more here. That said, this is an engaging and perceptive book, which I recommend to anyone seeking to learn and reflect more in this area.

The HTML of Cruciform Love: Toward a Digital Theology of the Internet

By John Frederick & Eric Lewellen

Pickwick, 2019

Reviewer: Sally Nelson

If you have been interested in thinking theologically about how the Covid-19 lockdown has affected communication, then this book might interest you. An edited volume of essays, it explores a set of questions about the impact of the internet on our lives and behaviours, and was written before the Covid era.

I am particularly interested in theological anthropology and the chapters on the projected digital self, and how a self can be narratively formed online, are really pertinent to ongoing explorations about the person in the digital age.

Our fascination with the screen is not just a 21st century issue—one chapter draws comparisons with patristic thought on the 'discipline of the eyes' and Roman spectacles: when does a show become an idolatrous fascination? We, today, *can* exercise some control over our need to be voyeurs, and we should be mindful too of the temptations of viewing in the privacy of our homes. Our desires are shaped by what we see. We do not just look at the screen: the internet now looks back, says Eric Stoddart.

I also appreciated the explorations of the interface between the human body and the technology. We like to think that we are somehow identifiably separate from the computer: that we are 'real' and the world of the screen is only 'virtual'. But where *exactly* does the human end and the digital begin? You will never think about your touchscreen in the same way again!

Essay review

by Helen Paynter

Bloody Brutal and Barbaric? Wrestling with Troubling War Texts

William J. Webb & Gordon K. Oeste

Downers Grove: IVP, 2019

As the title suggests, this book seeks to address the big questions of the character of God which arise from the biblical war texts, particularly those which might be described as 'genocide' and 'war rape'. It uses elements from William Webb's rightly respected thesis set out in *Slaves, Women, Homosexuals*.

The book is the product of 14 years of thinking by at least one of its authors. The tone of the argument is influenced by Bill Webb's experience of watching the slow decline and eventual death of his son Jon from a degenerative brain disease. He writes, 'If you have ever loved someone who is dying...there is a potential for untold pain. So it is with God, the so-called war God'. The book is long and detailed, but is written throughout in admirably clear prose. The case is made in an exemplary way, with evidence for and against the thesis set out transparently, and the argument built logically and systematically. The argument is here reproduced in some detail, in an attempt to do some justice to the complexity and thoroughness of the analysis.

The **introduction** sets out the six theses presented in the book. This is accompanied by a modest authorly apologia for not allowing the overall argument to emerge gradually. However, this reader very much appreciated having a road map from the beginning. The theses are as follows:

1. Traditional approaches to contemporary questions about biblical genocide and war rape have failed.

2. The 'total-kill' rhetoric in Joshua and elsewhere is hyperbolic.

3. In holy war, God is accommodating himself to the ethical practices of ancient Israel..

4. ...but he 'tugs' his people towards something better.

5. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is not detached from the Old Testament 'God as warrior' imagery, nor from the 'eschatological warrior' imagery of the New Testament.

6. God's eschatological justice will right *all injustice*, including any injustice occurring

within Old Testament war.

In **chapter 1**, the authors invite us to consider the mental images which are conjured up for us when we read of genocide and war rape. (Bosnia? Rwanda? Congo?) They then suggest that there should actually be four sets of images: (1) Modern-day war pictures; (2) Ancient Near Eastern war pictures; (3) War pictures representing the actual biblical practice of war; (4) War pictures representing God's intention for the Israelite wars. Most of the images immediately conjured by the biblical text fall into the first category, but should not be confused with images that belong in categories 3 and 4.

Thesis one states that the traditional answers offered for the problems are unhelpful—not because they are (broadly) wrong, but because they only work when they are applied to the wider biblical storyline, rather than the close detail of the war texts. In the remainder of the book the authors make the case in more detail.

Chapter 2 deals with the four approaches offered in the now-classic *Show Them No Mercy: Four views on God and the Canaanite genocide* (ed E. Merrill). In the most conservative of the 'views' offered, C.S. Cowles offers the view that the actions of Joshua were reprehensible, and takes a neo-Marcionite approach to the problem. Webb & Oeste dismiss this fairly quickly as arising from a failure to read the war texts in their original contexts. The other three 'views' in the book (Eugene Merrill, Daniel Gard and Tremper Longman) all operate from the stance that the problem is only a perceived ethical problem; what Webb & Oeste call a 'pristine-ethic' view. By this argument, God gave the instructions, so they must be ethically acceptable, and the only problem lies in our inability to understand this.

Webb & Oeste dispute that the only problem is one of perception. Their argument in this chapter falls into three parts. First, they suggest that it is important when reading holy war texts to distinguish the higher-level 'abstracted' purpose (such as loving God exclusively) from the lower-level 'pragmatic' purpose (such as to kill), which is directly situated in the world of the text. Representing this scale with a ladder, they suggest that hermeneutical, and—more importantly—ethical blunders take place when we argue backwards from the higher purpose to the lower methodology. 'The virtue of up-the-ladder principles or purposes never rescues down-the-ladder methodology' (p41). A helpful illustration makes this point clearer.

Their second argument centres on the assertion made by Merrill and others that the Canaanites were evil, and that none of them—even babies—was innocent. Webb & Oeste vigorously dispute this, firstly by arguing that even for those who commit evil deeds there should be a limitation to how they can rightly be treated; and secondly by pointing out the category error: it is important to distinguish *military* innocence (non-combatant status) from *theological* innocence. Confusing these two categories

underlies a major error in the traditional interpretations, they assert.

The third issue which they dispute is that these texts can be read as a foreshadowing of eschatological judgment. While they clearly view the war texts as part of a theological theme which connects with judgment, they argue that it is simply inappropriate to read eschatological judgment back into the texts. It 'does not magically erase all elements of ethical injustice found within the justice of an earlier world (p47).

In **chapter 3**, the authors set out a more positive response to the traditional approaches. They argue that the argument 'God commanded it so it must be ethically perfect' is logically flawed—indeed, God's own expressed discomfort with David's militarism (1 Chron 22:7-8; 28:3) 'declares his accommodating posture in war actions' (p69). Instead they offer a biblical theology (or canonical reading) of 'sacred space', in a few pages which I commend to every reader for their lucidity, subtlety, and explanatory power.

Essentially, the ethnic Canaanites that we encounter in Deuteronomy, Joshua and elsewhere (*eg* the Hivites, Jebusites, Girgashites and so on) are just one example of what Webb & Oeste term *literary Canaanites*. This (henceforth C^L) is a category that occurs throughout both testaments; C^L are the people who bring pollution into sacred space. So Adam and Eve are C^L, as they pollute the garden-temple of Eden, and are driven out by an angel with a drawn sword. Then the ethnic Canaanites are viewed as C^L, also driven out by an angel (Ex. 33:1-3) because of their pollution of the land of Canaan. (Note that by this understanding it is the *driving out* which is the fundamental principle, not killing; this will be picked up later.) Later, Israel, and then Judah become C^L, and are *driven out*, or *vomited out* at the time of the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles respectively (*cf* Lev. 18:25). Then as the sacred space/ Temple metaphor makes its way into the New Testament, we see Jesus consorting with all those who would traditionally have been viewed as C^L; rather, he reveals that those who considered themselves *insiders* are, in fact, C^L (*eg* Matt. 21:28-31).

On the basis of this analysis, Webb & Oeste urge us to reframe the question that we normally approach the text with: *How can Christians believe in a God who encourages genocidal killing and virgin rape?* to something more akin to the question that the ancient audience would have asked: *In the creation of 'sacred space', is God just in driving out the idolators of any generation?*

In **chapter 4**, Webb & Oeste set out their methodology. This is a surprisingly brief chapter, partly because it is the methodology which underpins Webb's well-known book *Slaves, Women, Homosexuals*. To understand their approach, we need to realise that in many ways our own cultural ethics have often—but not always—progressed considerably from the cultural ethics of the ancient Near East. (These

liberal ethics, of course, can themselves largely be attributed to the influence of the Judeo-Christian worldview on the great thinkers of Western philosophy and political thought.) Therefore, when we look back on many of the instructions given in Leviticus and Deuteronomy (for example), they rightly seem to us to be ‘bloody, brutal and barbaric’. But the text is not expecting to be read from this horizon. Rather, it is expecting to be read from the horizon of its own context, where even more ‘bloody, brutal and barbaric’ things are happening routinely. Webb & Oeste propose that, viewed in this way, many of the war texts which give us serious ethical concern in fact can be seen to represent a redemptive move towards the *shalom* of the kingdom of God.

The remainder of the book is essentially the application of this methodology to the two great issues raised by the war texts: battle rape, and genocide. Traditionally, these two issues have been separated and dealt with in different ways; a methodology that Webb & Oeste regard as a category error.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the issue of war rape. The problem is set out in chapter five, and concerns texts that allow a soldier to identify an attractive women among the enemy population, bring her back home with him, and after a month, have sex with her (Deuteronomy 21:1014, and Numbers 31:17-18, 35). The hermeneutic of redemptive trajectories is then applied in chapter six. In comparison with the far more brutal actions against women that were permitted and even normal in the ancient Near East, the biblical laws move the ethic considerably, though not wholly, towards the redemptive goal. In particular, Webb & Oeste make the following points where the biblical ethic differs from the other nations. First, there is good evidence from scripture that battlefield rape was not a permitted norm. It appears that soldiers routinely kept themselves from sexual activity around the time of battle. Second, there is no provision within law for women serving at Yahwistic shrines to be used for sexual purposes. Third, the restrictions around the sexual relationships with female battle captives are significant (a month-long waiting period—no rape on the field of battle; mourning rituals which *decrease* a woman’s desirability; the establishment of a marriage covenant before sexual activity with her; prohibition against selling the woman on to another man; and concern voiced for the woman’s honour). None of this, as the authors clearly express, makes us feel comfortable with the law that gives permission for such things. But, viewed from the original culture, the move is clearly towards the redemptive goal.

In **chapter 7**, the authors link war rape with the issue of genocide, principally to contest the traditional understanding that the two phenomena can be viewed entirely differently. This ‘traditional understanding’ is that war rape can be viewed as morally reprehensible yet *accommodated* by God because the law is concessive not imperatival; whereas the genocide command must be ethically pristine because it is commanded by God. Webb & Oeste’s argument against this point of view is in two parts. First, ‘sanction’ by God

takes place in both instances (‘sanction’ covering both permission and instruction); second, in the Numbers iteration of the war rape law (31:17-18, 35), an imperatival verb is used, ‘Kill the boys...kill the [non-virgin] women...save for yourselves the virgins’. Thus the logic of concession (accommodation) versus imperative (ethically pristine) is invalid. As the authors say, ‘The presence of command language does not provide a reliable indicator that something is unaccommodated’ (p132).

The second thesis of the book is that ‘total kill’ language is hyperbolic, and the writers take the next four chapters to develop this argument.

Chapter 8 sets out the use of hyperbole in battle reports in the ancient Near East; not simply hyperbole of numbers, as is often described, but hyperbole of speed, severity, completeness of conquest, and of geographical domination. This provides the background for **chapter 9**, which considers the use of similar hyperbole in biblical battle reports. The authors conclude that hyperbole is certainly present, and that it should be interpreted simply to mean ‘a sound defeat of the enemy’ (p172). This should not threaten our understanding of this as a reliable text, however. ‘Familiarity with the conventions of genre...aids in proper interpretation’ (p167).

In **chapters 10 and 11** the authors address possible arguments against this hyperbole thesis. In particular, they consider the work of Gregory Beale, who argues that the language is not hyperbolic. Beale considers that failure to annihilate all Canaanites constituted disobedience by the Israelites; and failure to kill every single Amalekite resulted in Saul’s rejection from the kingship. With regards to the first of these, Webb & Oeste make the argument that any case for literal ‘total kill’ must account for the fact that the clearance of Canaan is described as often in ‘drive out’ terms as it is in ‘total kill’ terms. In this regard they consider that Beale is being disingenuous, and indeed misrepresenting the biblical text.

In the following chapter they address what would otherwise be an undermining text for their ‘hyperbole’ thesis. This is 1 Samuel 15, where Saul is told to completely destroy the Amalekites, and his failure to do so results in the loss of his kingship. Here too they see hyperbole: Saul's army is inordinately large; the geographical scope of the battle is impossibly huge; and the assertion that every Amalekite except the King died (indeed, the King himself was later killed) is evidently contradicted by the appearance of a Amalekites later in the biblical narrative; indeed even by the same narrator. The key to understanding this, the authors claim, is that ‘Saul is vilified not because he left one last Amalekite alive...but because of *whom* he left alive—the King, the living embodiment of the Amalekite threat’ (p217). The king is widely understood in ancient near eastern terms to embody the people. Therefore failure to strike the decisive blow against the king is an utter failure of the command because of his representative status. It is this that is necessary, rather than the total slaughter of every man, woman and child, which

would view the king as simply one among many people.

Further, the animals that Saul chose not to kill were retained for the purposes of making a great sacrifice, which would enable a grand victory feast. In other words Saul, acting in his own honour, 'wants to have his cake and eat it too' (p225).

In **chapter 12** the authors take a closer look at Gregory Beale's argument, by considering the relationship between 'total kill' texts and 'drive out' texts. Beale, they argue, subordinates 'drive out' language to the more aggressive 'killing' terminology. Rather, as they make the case here, it is helpful to understand that killing (described in hyperbolic terms) and driving out are both conducted in pursuit of the goal of taking possession of what was considered to be the 'sacred space' of Canaan, and thus purifying it for divine use.

Having pursued this extended argument for the 'total kill' language being hyperbolic, the authors then—rather unexpectedly, to my mind—return in **chapter 13** to look at the practice of warfare in the Ancient Near East, in what proves to be a particularly difficult chapter to read. By comparison the practice of ancient Israel, as both commanded and described, was relatively humane. For example, Ancient Near-Eastern temples were generally decorated with pictorial representations of the way that they treated their victims. By contrast, Solomon's temple had natural imagery (pomegranates and the like) and no depictions of violence.

This argument that the war practice of Israel is moving along the redemptive trajectory in a positive direction is strengthened by the following chapter (chapter fourteen), entitled 'Yahweh as uneasy war God'. Here, evidence is assembled that although God uses warfare (in accommodation) he is revealed in scripture as a God who is uneasy and reluctant about doing so. Thus creation takes places without conflict; the effects of war are lamented; war is sometimes unexpectedly averted by direct divine intervention; the 'king texts' of Deuteronomy 17 and 1 Samuel 8 stand firmly against the construction of a royal war machine; God relents from war; and he discourages faith in weaponry and armies. Pointing to the pivotal words of Exodus 34:6, Webb & Oeste suggest that his character is 'lop-sided' towards compassion and mercy: God punishes to the fourth degree, but forgives to the thousandth.

In **chapter 15**, the authors return to the work of Greg Boyd (*Crucifixion of the Warrior God*) to highlight points of agreement and disagreement with his work. Fundamentally, they disagree with his assertion that God's love always has to be non-violent, in a fallen world. They track the warfare imagery as it is used by the New Testament, noting how the topography of the battlefield and the nature of the enemy has changed. (Thus Jesus now casts out demons (enemy) from the human person (topography)). This new kingdom established by Jesus and empowered by the Spirit is characterised by an ethic that far exceeds that of the Hague or Geneva conventions.

Chapter 16 turns to the apocalyptic violence of Revelation, arguing that it does not legitimise the violence of the Old Testament, but that in its turn to the metaphorical it, too, is part of the redemptive trajectory that they have been demonstrating. The battle is fought by the divine warrior by the sword of his mouth, and by his saints with weapons of virtue, not violence. Even within this metaphorical world, there are some significant differences between the eschatological violence of Revelation and the (hyperbolic) warfare of the Old Testament. Notably there is no indiscriminate slaughter of non-combatants; no slaughter based on ethnic identity and no war rape.

In the **conclusion**, the authors express themselves not wholly satisfied with the sum of the arguments presented, and admit that questions remain outstanding. In the end, their faith is in the God who will make all things right. Nine online appendices are signposted after this, which help to present the argument in more detail for those who wish to pursue it there.

I have spent the greater part of the most recent few years of my life grappling with the questions that Webb & Oeste tackle here. I greatly admire Paul Copan's and Matthew Flannagan's closely argued examination of the subject (*Did God Really Command Genocide?*), though I do not find their conclusions wholly convincing. John & J. Waltons' book *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest* is very helpful in its attention to the Ancient Near Eastern context, but is limited in its scope. I applaud the intention and starting point for Gregory Boyd's magnum opus *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, but cannot agree with his methodology or conclusions. (I have reviewed this here https://www.csbvbristol.org.uk/2019/04/25/crucifixion-of-the-warrior-god/) I have written a modest book on the subject myself (*God of Violence Yesterday, God of Love Today*). This book by Bill Webb and Gordon Oeste is the most convincing treatment of the subject that I have encountered to date. While, as the authors themselves concede, questions still remain, it represents a significant step forward towards reading these texts in a way that remains committed to the text as part of scripture, and to the goodness of God. It will be an invaluable resource for any minister, particularly for those whose congregations are already asking these questions – and whose are not?

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