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Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

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The CODEC Research Project
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Codec (n) co'dec:
A device for converting data from one format to another, esp from analogue to digital format. In communications engineering, an integrated circuit or *chip*. The term is an acronym for '**coder/decoder**'.

CODEC is a research initiative at St John's College, Durham University. Pioneered by two Methodist ministers – the Revd Professor David Wilkinson and the Revd Brian Brown, and now overseen by the Revd Dr Peter Phillips (Secretary to the Faith and Order Committee) and the Revd Kate Bruce (Chaplain at St John's College, Anglican minister and an Associate Minister within the Methodist Church) – the project developed out of an initial grant of £80,000 from the Joseph Rank Trust given to explore the area of Biblical Literacy in a media-dominated culture. That initial work quickly developed further to embrace the ever-developing digital environment. How could the Christian Church grasp the opportunities which the digital world offers and how could it do so without losing its identity along the way? By its launch in September 2008, CODEC was focused on three main areas of engagement with the digital environment: biblical literacy, preaching and theological engagement.

To those pioneering the initiative and now pushing the research agenda forward, the twenty-first century offered new challenges to the communication of the Christian message and a new horizon to cross. That horizon is digital – not just digital equipment and technology, but rather a complex worldview which has opened up before us.

The digital environment is not just 'cyberspace', a world created within a computer like in *Tron* or *The Matrix*. The digital environment is a conglomeration of technological and philosophical advance, enhanced by market capitalism and entertainment culture, to produce a mind-numbingly rapid cultural shift. The Digital Environment already permeates every part of our lives – homes, schools, workplaces, public spaces (transport, libraries, cafes, cities), and government. It is, in fact, very hard to get away from the digital environment:

Even those who continue to resist computers, faxes, e-mail, personal digital assistants, let alone the Internet and the World Wide Web, can

hardly avoid taking advantage of the embedded microchips and invisible processors that make phones easier to use, cars safer to drive, appliances more reliable, utilities more predictable, toys and games more enjoyable and the trains run on time.[2]

Much of the digital environment that fills our homes and workplaces and which engages our personal identities more and more today has all arrived so quickly – much of it is less than a decade old. The digital environment includes but is not synonymous with: digital technology; the ubiquity of the internet and world wide web; the move from analogue to digital broadcasting; the mass appeal of mobile phones; the demise of printed newspapers; the philosophical shift from Enlightenment to Postmodernity, with its accompanying shifts from definitions to word games and from words to visuals; the move away from front-led teaching and the promotion of student-centred learning, from passivity to interactivity; the proliferation of information, infotainment, advertainment, and the demise of the expert; the commercial and political strategies associated with globalization and commercialization; the ubiquity of the microchip and personal computing. The digital environment is the conglomeration of all of those events, facts, realities into a tangible experience of a changed way of being.

CODEC is engaged in trying to see how that world interacts with the world of the Christian faith – how do we communicate an ancient faith in a digital world? It is an interesting mix of looking backwards and looking forwards. Rooted in Durham, surrounded by a world heritage site, focused on the role Durham played over a thousand years ago as a place of pilgrimage, scholarship, asylum and security, how does CODEC follow that example by carrying the Gospel and translating Christian faith into the emerging digital environment? But at the same time, how does CODEC challenge the current ascendancy of all things digital and ask whether Christianity demands a more embodied approach to human life?

CODEC is located in many places – both physically and virtually. It is located in offices in an old building at the College; on the web, on Twitter and Facebook; in research events around the country; in social media pub lunches bringing Christians involved in social media together; in research conferences held across the country; in Swaledale in the person of the Revd David Wood; at Premier Christian Media in the person of Dr Bex Lewis; in briefing papers and research students and conversations in coffee shops and bars; at Methodist Church House and Greenbelt; at campsites and on church weekends away; at Biblefresh and in a chaplain's office; even at the Royal Society of the Arts on one occasion! Envisaged as a network from

the start, CODEC continues to live out that vision right through.

Of course, a fixed location at Durham is actually quite important to enable the rest of the virtual and real network to have some substance. St John's College is an independent institution with a Christian foundation within the University of Durham. As well as accommodating about 500 undergraduate and postgraduate students from all parts of the University, it is also home to Cranmer Hall and the Wesley Study Centre – both renowned centres of excellence for ministerial formation in the Anglican and Methodist churches.

This location offers CODEC access to:

- **academic rigour:** a home in a world-class university and engagement with the UK's top theological research facility and one of the world's leading centres of biblical research at the Department of Theology and Religion.
- **practical engagement:** CODEC is not an ivory tower engaged in detached theoretical research. By immersion into training establishments offering ministerial formation and in developing training resources for the local church, we have direct access to what it means to put theory into practice in the local churches.
- **ecumenical exploration:** via Cranmer Hall and the Wesley Study Centre but also through the Receptive Ecumenism project based in the Department
- **developed expertise:** a history of research in Christian communication, preaching, apologetics and media literacy.
- **regional impact:** bringing resources to an area of the country often overlooked, engaging closely with the local community, but a region of crucial historical importance to the Christian faith in the UK.

But the vision of those developing CODEC was not to create a static entity but to create a research initiative and network which would thoroughly penetrate the Christian world and deepen the capacity of the Christian community to engage with, and communicate effectively in, the digital environment.

As such, CODEC was established to:

- provide a research community, which would be a base for academic projects and initiatives
- develop resources to improve media and biblical literacy within the Christian community
- contribute to ministerial formation in Durham and beyond

- create opportunities for media professionals and Christian leaders to learn together
- engage creatively with the media industry on issues of faith and values
- support, disciple and encourage young Christians working in the digital environment.

What has happened so far?

1. Research project in biblical literacy

The pioneers of the research initiative were two Methodist ministers: the Revd Professor David Wilkinson, now Principal at St John's, and the Revd Brian Brown, creator of the hit animated series *The Storykeepers* and *Friends and Heroes*. Brian and David worked together to set up the research centre at the College focused on a National Biblical Literacy Survey (NBLS). By September 2008, the Revd Dr Peter Phillips was seconded to the project to complement his new role as Secretary to the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church. Other funding allowed the Revd Kate Bruce to become Fellow in Preaching and Communication, and Dr Colin Green to head up the theological engagement part of the project.

By this time, NBLS was well on its way to completion. Brian had managed to raise enough funds to employ professional market researchers, although members of his own family completed much of the data entry and processing in their spare time. The survey was conducted via face-to-face interviews with ordinary people of all ages, from all classes, backgrounds and religious and cultural traditions, at nine different locations in England and Wales. At least 100 interviews were conducted at each of these sample points, with the only quotas set on age and gender (in particular, there were no quotas set on religious affiliation). Interviewers invited people randomly gathered from streets and shopping centres to answer face to face a series of questions in halls nearby. The face-to-face interviewing was completed over a 4–6 week period between November and December 2008 by teams of experienced professional interviewers who were not church-affiliated.

Interviewees were asked about their possession of the Bible and their usage of it both now and in their childhood; its significance in their lives; its place in their schooling; their attitude to the Bible now and their knowledge and valuation of biblical ethics (the Ten Commandments, Golden Rule, etc). As our national calendar is based upon the Christian festivals and these in turn have biblical stories associated with them, interviewees

were also asked their knowledge of these biblical roots. Recognizing that biblical stories are a source of entertainment on the stage, cinema and TV, and that much information about the Bible may now be gained from these sources, questions sought to elicit their knowledge of non-print biblical presentations.

In addition, since Christianity is a religion of story, which has been kept alive not only in the preaching and teaching ministry of the church but also in wider art, music and culture, and more recently in stage, film and TV shows, interviewees were asked a series of questions on Bible characters and well-known Bible stories.

The interviewers reported an unexpected willingness on the part of the respondents to give over half an hour of their time to be interviewed on such a sensitive issue as their knowledge of the Bible and religion.

The headline findings of the survey showed that:

The Bible is certainly still out there in people's homes and in schools:

75% said that they owned a Bible, 46% of these owned a traditional Bible, 18% a modern version and 36% said that they owned both a modern and a traditional version

The Bible has been an important part of many people's education and upbringing:

39% said that their parents read them Bible stories as a child
72% said that they heard or read Bible stories in primary school
49% said they heard or read Bible stories in secondary school
18% studied the Bible for school examinations

But the Bible is read by only a small minority of the public, with only a few more thinking that it remains significant to them:

18% said that they had read the Bible in the last week
13% said that they had never read the Bible
31% said the Bible was significant in their lives now
47% said the Bible was never significant to them
70% of 16–24-year olds said the Bible was never significant to them

Bible knowledge was often associated with the visual arts – especially films and shows:

51% said they had seen the blockbuster biblical films such as *Jesus of Nazareth*
50% said they had seen *The Ten Commandments*

45% had seen *Samson and Delilah*
27% had seen Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*
19% had seen the BBC's *Passion*
18% had seen the cartoon *Prince of Egypt*
48% said they had seen either the show or film/TV versions of *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*
41% had seen *Jesus Christ Superstar*
15% had seen *Godspell*

The celebrity nature of this knowledge tended to be reflected in people's knowledge about key characters:

75% could accurately say something about *Moses*
68% could accurately say something about *Judas*
42% could accurately say something about *Thomas*
42% could accurately say something about *Mary Magdalene*
However, only 21% could accurately say something about *Abraham* (one respondent confused him with the former President of the United States!)

There was a similar breadth of knowledge (from good to bad) concerning stories of the Bible:

With respect to New Testament stories, the positive news is that 83% could accurately tells us something about the *Crucifixion*; 80% about *The Resurrection*; 78% about *The Feeding of the 5,000* and 74% about *The Last Supper*
With respect to Old Testament stories, the positive news is that 73% were accurately able to tell us something about *David and Goliath*; 66% about *The Crossing of the Red Sea*; 65% about *The Ten Commandments* and 63% about *Samson and Delilah*

However, when asked to give some information about a number of central New Testament stories, the lack of knowledge was staggering:

83% had nothing to say about the parable of *The Sower*
80% had nothing to say about *The Stilling of the Storm*
62% had nothing to say about the parable of *The Prodigal Son*
60% had nothing to say about the parable of *The Good Samaritan*

Similarly, with regards to the Old Testament:

89% could say nothing accurate about *Jacob and Esau*
85% could say nothing accurate about *Daniel in the Lion's Den*

79% could say nothing accurate about *Abraham and Isaac*
76% could say nothing correct about *The Destruction of Jericho*

NBLS also asked the interviewees, 'Who does read the Bible and why?' The responses to these questions deserve some more detailed research, not least because they are all verbatim answers rather than multiple choices. However, what is clear is that most people in the survey think that holy people read the Bible regularly – people holier than them: religious people, holy people, vicars, theology students, priests, nuns. Moreover, when asked what puts people off the answers are similar: lack of understanding, lack of faith, lack of religion, it's boring, unreliable, associated with church, needs explaining. In other words, the masses have been persuaded that the Bible cannot be understood without someone else coming to interpret it or indeed make it more simple – to broker the Bible.

NBLS hit the press in July 2009 and featured in a whole host of press outlets across the UK and internationally. It even made Radio 4's *This Week* programme, as well as regular religious slots on radio and in the printed press.

NBLS and its results matched similar surveys completed by the Bible Society (Taking the Pulse) and the Evangelical Alliance, as well as the Fairfax Reports, two major reports from academics in the USA. Although none of these surveys had been repeated over time, the anecdotal presupposition which was confirmed by the survey results seemed to be conclusive: society in general was losing its knowledge of the Bible, and the situation was only slightly less dire within the Church itself. It may be that as we move away from the survey results and look at taking another snapshot of biblical literacy in 2013, we may find that there are other factors involved – not least the move away from book-based knowledge towards web-based knowledge and the move away from retained facts towards retrieved web-information.

2. Outcomes from NBLS

The results of NBLS pushed CODEC strongly in the direction of engagement with biblical literacy and towards developing a number of ideas on how we could do further research about biblical literacy in the Church and in society in general. Almost immediately, CODEC was involved in the Biblefresh initiative, co-ordinated by the Evangelical Alliance. This initiative brought together a wealth of different agencies and churches to look at how the Church might re-engage with the Bible. In 2009, the Methodist Church agreed that 2010–11 would be a Year of the Bible and CODEC has

sought to support the work of the Evangelism, Spirituality and Discipleship Team in promoting Biblefresh within the Methodist Church.

Secondly, CODEC developed an MA module in Biblical Literacy at Cranmer Hall (part of the MThM and DThM programmes offered at St John's). This module takes a closer look at the results and the philosophical issues surrounding the potential decline in biblical literacy. However, the module also queries some of the historical fascination with biblical literacy *per se*. The module tracks the impact of the loss of biblical literacy on contemporary society and agrees that much knowledge is being lost. It relates a good deal of that loss to secularization, decline in church attendance and other factors. However, the module also tracks the historical pattern of biblical literacy and queries whether recent low levels of Biblical Literacy are typical since the birth of the Church and whether they are as dire as some predict.

In order to determine further the impact of the decline in biblical literacy, CODEC is working with the Darlington District and the North Yorkshire Dales Circuit. The Revd David Wood has been appointed part-time and on a two-year contract, to explore the biblical literacy levels of churches within the circuit and to explore how biblical literacy levels might be increased and what the impact of this increase might be. David's work is only just beginning but already he is developing some interesting results which suggest that biblical literacy and Digital Literacy may have a creative partnership, as well as finding a real thirst for increased Bible knowledge and engagement in the Dales.

CODEC also developed the BigBible Project (www.bigbible.org.uk) with Dr Bex Lewis based at Premier Media in central London. The site was initially focused on taking a local North-East project called The Big Read onto a national scale. So, working with Tom Wright, SPCK and a host of others, CODEC developed a series of housegroups for Lent 2011. The result was a loose network of Bible study groups across the country working on Tom's book, *Luke for Lent*, downloading study materials and videos from CODEC and feeding back ideas to the central website.

However, the BigBible site is also actively exploring the interaction between social media and the Bible. It is trying to tell good news stories about the Bible in an attempt to counteract some of the Bible's poor PR on the internet. So, Bex is blogs daily good news stories of how the Bible is a force for good within contemporary society and how social media can be used to spread the Gospel message. It is hoped that, if we can find the right funding, BigBible will continue into the future to do this important work as well as to develop BigRead2012.

3. Preaching and CODEC

A major focus for CODEC has been on contemporary preaching. The Revd Kate Bruce was appointed to oversee this area of CODEC's work. Her preliminary work has been to develop her own PhD programme in the area of Preaching and the Imagination. However, Kate, with other CODEC staff, has also developed a number of other projects.

Preaching conferences

A group known as 'Durham Preaching Conferences' was already operational following on from the work of David Day, Geoffrey Stephenson and David Wilkinson at the Centre for Christian Communication. These conferences have been further developed with six now held in Durham, and a further two in Edinburgh, with scope for further regionalization and expansion in the coming years. The conferences have focused on the provision of resources for preaching on the gospels and attract up to 100 preachers to each event. In November 2010, CODEC also offered an evening conference exploring digital resources for preaching. In November 2011, the subject will be John's Gospel.

Preaching courses

Kate already co-teaches the basic preaching courses at Cranmer Hall/ WSC for ordinands alongside David Wilkinson. These course are focused on the presentation of preaching and on preaching and apologetics. All are well-received with the College.

From next year, Kate will also be teaching a new MA module based on the material from the preaching conferences: 'Preaching from the Synoptics'. In this module, she will also explore further her own research on preaching and the imagination. It is possible that the material will be available in the future in printed format.

Kate's preaching/teaching ministry is also being developed nationally with involvement in diocesan retreats, Reader training, continuing ministerial development events and in Methodist local preacher training. Kate has also been developing a network of young preachers based in and around Durham but which is attracting wider attention.

View from the pew

In partnership with the College of Preachers, we developed a micro-research project called 'View from the Pew'. The research centred on a brief questionnaire issued to 19 churches across a number of denomina-

tions randomly selected from denomination lists. The questionnaire asked about the reception of preaching in the churches and engaged with congregations rather than preachers – i.e. it was not about what preachers thought of preaching but on what congregations felt about preaching. The research was carried out during summer 2009 in preparation for the Jubilee celebrations of the College of Preachers in January 2010. The College of Preachers part sponsored the project.

The results of the project were produced in a small book (available from CODEC priced £5), but the highlight statistic was that up to 96% of those questioned either frequently or sometimes looked forward to a sermon. In other words, the majority of the congregations, by far, were supportive of preaching. Other findings were that congregations preferred motivational sermons centred on discipleship issues rather than sermons which aimed for conviction or challenge. Congregations tended to be split over the optimum length of the sermon and on its biblical content.

The research was heavily featured in both the national and international press. It is hoped that we could develop the micro-research project into something much larger across the whole country and we are currently exploring funding streams for this work.

4. Digital theology

From the start, CODEC was meant to be centred on research. The basic idea is of research at the centre with projects and teaching centred on this core. Of course, in the initial stages, it has sometimes been hard to keep that ideal structure in place with a greater emphasis on developing projects, which give CODEC a basic sense of what it is and provide deliverable outcomes for funders to assess. However, research remains central – especially research into what we might call, somewhat loosely, digital theology, or the theological/philosophical/cultural/ anthropological affects of engagement with the digital environment.

In July 2009, CODEC developed *digitalsymp* – a conference on Christianity in the Digital Environment. This successful event brought together about 60 practitioners, experts and theologians to look at the subject at the heart of CODEC's existence – how do we communicate the gospel in a digital age. The conference mixed theory with practice, and speakers included Andrew Graystone (Church and Media Network) and Bishop Tom Wright.

CODEC also developed a series of research seminars attracting about 20 people from across Durham University and locality with up to another 10 joining virtually. In the original series, five seminars were held with

papers delivered exploring Christian communication, digital identity and ethics. The research seminars have continued in a less formal manner this academic year and will be revived in 2011–12.

Out of both *digitalsymp* and the research seminars, CODEC worked with Premier Media to develop a theological strand for the Christian New Media Conference held at the CASS Business School in London in November 2010. Over 300 people attended the conference. The theological stream looked at the impact of engagement with the digital environment – especially the idea of *homo connectivus* – on whether humanity was being changed as a species by interaction with the internet and other aspects of the digital environment. We were joined by international speakers (Heidi Campbell, AKM Adam and Maggi Dawn), as well as a number of speakers from the UK Christian social media scene.

CODEC has also developed a teaching course focused on a synthesis of digital/biblical and media literacy known as MediaLit. The week-long intensive course offers an opportunity for first-class training and resources in media for ministry initially for ordinands at St John's but also for those already engaged in local or national ministry and anyone concerned to connect Christian faith with communication in a digital age. The course draws on CODEC staff, alongside staff from national church press offices and leading practitioners including Andrew Graystone from the Church and Media Network. MediaLit explores communications media, providing an overview of the workings of the media – both broadcast media and the press – as well as offering some key skills training in how to create material for the media and how to handle various media opportunities. The course encourages participants to reflect theologically on the media's interaction with society and public values and to think critically about how ministers and congregations consume the media's products.

The conversation continues: we are currently exploring how best to continue it. On the one hand, CODEC is involved in bigger conferences and teaching opportunities. So in Spring 2011, CODEC worked with the Faith and Globalisation Project at Durham University and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation to put on the Faith 2.0 Day Conference at the Royal Society of the Arts in London. The event attracted leading international scholars looking at the impact of the internet on faith studies. On the other hand, through the winter and spring of 2011, we have also developed a series of pub lunch events in London to explore further contemporary theological issues. CODEC will also be present at Greenbelt 2011, where we will also be holding informal research seminars.

CODEC is also producing research papers on key issues relating to our

work: on biblical literacy, preaching and digital theology. We are also exploring whether the nature and practice of Christianity itself (and other world faiths too) provide problems for full integration into the digital environment. We are currently exploring the haptic nature of Christianity – how Christianity is all about touch and the senses. Is it possible to translate Christianity into a currently non-haptic/somesthetic digital experience? Is the digital experience of Christianity as real and authentic as a haptic, embodied experience? While some of the thinking in this area is guided by films such as *Avatar, Inception* and *Source Code,* other influences include developments in mobile phone technology, the computer games industry and medical research equipment, alongside a whole wealth of research about faith online.

Recently, the Principal of St John's talked of CODEC as being an international centre of importance in exploring Christian communication in a digital age. It is always difficult to live up to such a claim. It is interesting to note, however, that there are not so many people exploring faith online. A group of scholars at the recent Faith 2.0 conference sat around a table in a Turkish restaurant in London discussing much the same thing. We could think of people who were not included. We could think of people we would want to have around the table. We could think of practitioners, especially, and non-embedded academics who would also have much to feed into the process. However, the field remains relatively small.

In such circumstances, CODEC has the potential to play an important part in the development of our thinking about Christian communication in a digital age. Part of that potential is hampered by financial limitations. We are constantly distracted from research and from developing the important project opportunities by the need to fill out grant requests and funding applications. Of course, if you are involved in such fun, you will know that only a small percentage is successful. As such, we are reliant on the support of the Methodist Church and on a key number of charities who support Kate's work in the area of preaching. We are always looking for other partners to work with and to help us develop what we are doing.

We believe that to help the Church cross over into an embodied presence within a digital age, CODEC's work is of crucial importance.

NOTES

1   Pete Philips is the Director of Research of CODEC at Durham University and the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee of the British Methodist Church.
2   John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Boston: Harvard Business School press, 2000) p. 13.