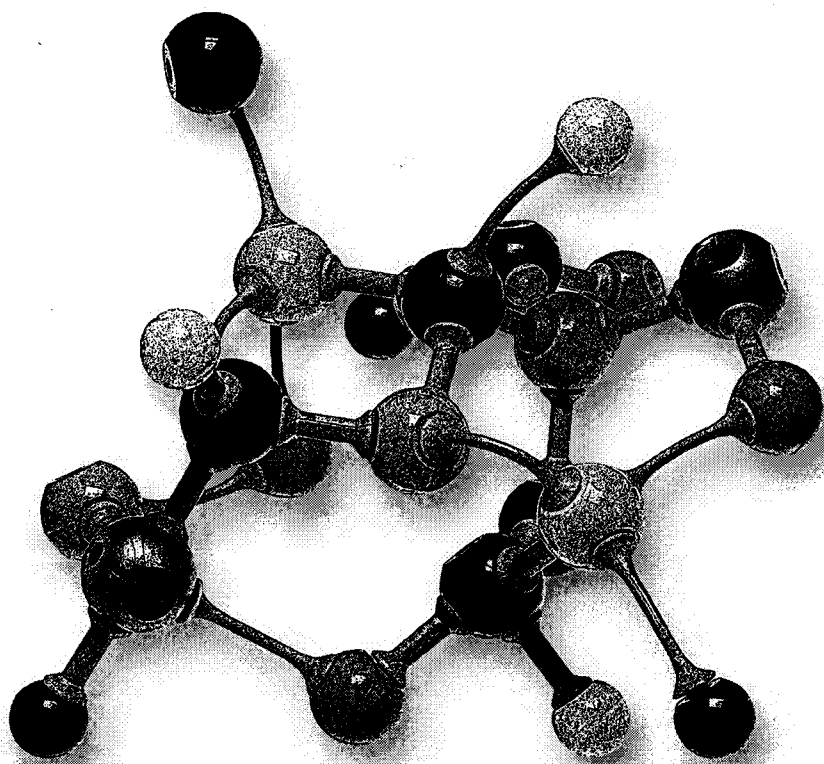


Summer 2001

TALK

The Mainstream Magazine



Connecting leaders

INSIDE Preaching Today

- Has preaching had its day?
- Views from preachers and listeners
- Rob Warner on preaching
- Nigel Wright
- Interview with Walter Brueggemann
- News and reviews
- and much more . . .

What's Mainstream all about?

Mainstream is an informal network, mainly comprising Baptist leaders and churches. We are absolutely convinced that the authority of God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit must always be brought together. It's only then that we can be fully under the Lord's control, direction and empowering and have any hope of doing properly the things he wants us to do.

- Local groups where leaders get together to talk, pray and encourage each other.
- Regional meetings where we encounter God and receive significant input to resource our ministries.
- A national leadership team drawn from those leading the local groups.
- A quality magazine that addresses the issues and concerns that matter to us.
- An annual conference for teaching, ministry, building relationships, and releasing gifts and ministries.

What do we hope to achieve?

- A network of leaders and churches with authentic relationships, sharing their experience and resources and committed to working together for the advance of God's Kingdom.
- A visible difference in leaders' spiritual lives and in God's work through the things we do together.
- Our churches throbbing with spiritual life in their worship, outreach and ministry to the poor in Jesus' name.
- The recognition, mentoring and release of emerging ministries.
- A prophetic voice within the Baptist community.

Introducing Talk

Welcome to *Talk The Mainstream Magazine* re-imagined! We're told you have to 're-imagine' these days! It's not enough to change, rethink, redesign – you must re-imagine. So here goes! We want a re-imagined magazine to help church leaders keep abreast of ideas and developments. One for whole church leadership teams – not just ministers. Page 15 gives details on group subscriptions. Order today and get more of the current issue at a special rate.



Our aim is for a magazine that will help you connect with others, with current issues, give you new 'takes' on old values and truths. There will be a theme for each issue. But we've also gone for other regular features such as: news from the Christian world, Word & Spirit network news, reviews, a column for worship leaders, useful web sites, tips and quotes. We hope to have a regular interview with a key thinker or practitioner related to the theme. Also we've invited two well-known writers to have their own regular column, Nigel Wright and Rob Warner. We're leaving it up to them to write on whatever. We'll try to keep re-imagining *Talk* so please write with feedback and suggestions on Theibbos.Altrincham@btinternet.com.

We kick off with an edition on preaching. We are a Word and Spirit Network – so we go to the heart of our values as we think about the preached word. It's not easy preaching these days. Old certainties gone – the mood anti-authoritarian – questioning – a climate of DIY beliefs. Church members live among people who find and develop their own truth . . . or just go shopping. It's the world of the polite 'That's fine if it works for you.' In the midst of this, each week, there is the task of preaching a word that claims to talk of eternal truth. Congregation members come from a society that has long since stopped listening to the Church as having anything relevant or plausible to say. Christian preaching is pushed to the margins. What is the place of preaching for today's churchgoer?

Few have done more thinking about the place of Christian preaching today than Walter Brueggemann – the theologian and prolific writer on the Old Testament. He has risen to cult status amongst many of us – an infrequent happening for any theologian, let alone one on the Old Testament. Glen Marshall – the writer of our main article – has been heard to utter in hushed tones that he's the fourth member of the Trinity – but then Glen could never count! But when you read Brueggemann's books, you see why he's being listened to. Here is no dull academic or turgid scholarship, but one writing with passion and sensitivity, whose every word displays understanding of the human condition, casting light on a confusing culture. We are delighted Dr Brueggemann was willing to be interviewed for the launch of *Talk*. We review some of his books on preaching in this edition.

So welcome again to *Talk*. We hope you like it, find it useful – even exciting, come back for more, take out a subscription for your leaders and join the conversation.

Stephen Ibbotson is the Editor of *Talk*.

He is currently pastor at Sharing Life in Leeds and is moving to join the pastoral staff of Altrincham Baptist Church in autumn 2001.

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Has the sermon had its day?

Glen Marshall examines preaching's vital signs

Glen Marshall is a pastor in Wakefield where the church has been involved in church planting. His expository teaching ministry has become widely appreciated. He has been involved in the leadership of Mainstream nationally and regionally. He is about to undertake postgraduate study in preaching and we welcome these reflections in our main article for this edition.

The knives are out for the sermon as we have known it.

The sermon paradigm is choking the church to death ... I can find little biblical precedent for the dull 40 minute monologues that passes for communication in many churches. ... This doesn't mean we need less teaching. We need more, but imparted via conversation, dialogue, small groups, one to one mentoring, books, videos, etc.

So says Dave Roberts writing in the June issue of *Christianity and Renewal*. It is Dave's thesis that our obsession with the traditional sermon is one of six symptoms of a potentially deadly sickness that is gnawing away at the vitals of

No Sacred Cow

The particular form of communication that we know as the sermon is not sacrosanct. The purpose of preaching is to enable people and communities to be addressed by the word of God in such a way that they are helped to know, love and follow Jesus more effectively. If other forms of communication fulfil that purpose better then they should be used and not merely as a reluctant concession, but enthusiastically. It would be sinful to maintain the sermonic form without regard for its power or its lack of power. If the organ was merely one time-bound way of delivering church music then perhaps the sermon is just one time-bound way of helping people to hear the

and they watch video, listen to poems, meditate on scripture, sing freshly written laments and share their reflections on whether or not we've put *God in a Box* (the title of this month's worship event). At most there might be one or two five minute 'talkie bits'. Great!

But I'm not yet convinced that it's time for the sermon to move over entirely – budge up a bit, yes, stop hogging the time that's given over to hearing from God, maybe, but slope off into the fast receding modernist distance leaving the way clear for a bright new postmodern dawn of multimedia pyrotechnics and stream of consciousness methods of absorbing scripture? I don't think so.

Why not? Well, while I recognise that I'm not entirely immune to mere reaction and self-interest, fundamentally I am persuaded that good preaching is an excellent form of communication. In many ways it is uniquely suited to the task of helping people to hear and learn from God, especially a personal God who became incarnate as a human being in order to communicate.

The Power Of Preaching

Good preaching has a unique power that arises from it's combination of immediacy, simplicity and humanity. In the same way that for me attending a live Billy Connolly gig will always have more impact than watching even the best edition of *Trigger Happy TV*. My experience has been that whereas discussion groups, Powerpoint, OHP slides and video clips properly used can

Preaching is at its best when there is an uncluttered, eyeball to eyeball moment and the preacher speaks from her heart to my concerns

the evangelical wing of the church. In questioning the continued validity of preaching he is of course far from being a lone voice in these postmodern days but it is interesting that such opinions are now being aired in popular magazines aimed squarely at the ~~man in the pew~~ person in the comfy church chair. The thing is, setting aside Roberts' assumption that the purpose of the sermon is necessarily to teach, or indeed that it need be dull, I think he is right – at least in part.

word of God and maybe in the next twenty years it should go the way of many a church organ in the last twenty.

Even as I write this article a group of people from my church in their 20's and 30's are setting up the chapel for *Mysterious Ways*, our church's adventure into the exciting and, to me, faintly exotic world of alternative worship. Come Friday night there'll be people squatting on scatter cushions, sitting cross legged or lying flat out on the carpet as ambient music plays

We preachers have to become more adept at telling stories, and painting verbal pictures.

enhance an *average* sermon they tend only to detract from a *good* sermon because they rob it of immediacy, the literally unmediated interaction between preacher and people. Preaching is at its best when there is an uncluttered, eyeball to eyeball moment and the preacher speaks from her heart to my concerns about our God and life in his world.

I write in the midst of the election campaign, the day after Tony Blair has been confronted outside a Birmingham hospital by the wife of a cancer patient whose passion about the shoddy treatment her husband is receiving has stopped the PM in his tracks, requiring him to listen and, hopefully, causing him to realise the human reality of the issues with which he is dealing. The election campaign has come to life in a way that a thousand stage-managed Dimbleby interviews and a million computer generated graphics could never achieve. To lose that kind of simple, immediate, human communication would be to do a

Passion communicates; reasonable passion persuades

severe disservice to the business of helping our people to hear from God. Lets' make sure we retain the sermon and recover confidence in it as a unique and powerful means of helping people come face to face (ear to mouth?) with the voice of God.

Retaining & Reforming The Sermon

However, this does not mean that the sermon isn't in need of a serious rethink and a profound overhaul. You only need to

watch a 1960's TV documentary with its ponderously slow, overly laboured logical progression and intrusive commentary and then switch to a contemporary piece of film-making with much shorter scenes, less patronising tone and a readiness to leave the audience to fill in many of the gaps, and you soon realise how styles of communication have moved on. The sermon cannot remain immune and isolated from such influences.

We preachers have to become more adept at telling

The long standing evangelical elevation of reasoned argument and suspicion of imagination needs some serious readjustment

stories, and painting verbal pictures. The long standing evangelical elevation of reasoned argument and suspicion of imagination needs some serious readjustment. Many who were told 20 years ago that the best preaching has just one main point and that no sermon is ready to be preached until its central theme can be expressed in one simple sentence should be told to forget it – the spread shot of the blunderbuss can be just as effective as the precision of the rifle.

The sterile isolation of the pulpit from the pew needs to be infected by response, feedback, questioning, cross examination, even heckling – remember this is meant to be real interpersonal communication not a stage managed set piece with the preacher lobbing homiletical mortar bombs from a safe distance only to retreat later behind the safety of the final hymn and a speedy benediction.

Furthermore, if we are to gain a hearing we preachers may well have to change our tone. We dare not be seen as the

institution's official spokespeople handing out the official version of how it's meant to be. Instead we must become fellow travellers talking with our companions about how journey really is.

Not that in becoming less authoritarian we should become less passionate. God forbid! Passion communicates and reasonable passion often persuades. If what we offer people is merely the official line they won't want to listen, if we share our convictions then they are likely to hear. For this to happen preaching must also become more eventful, less scripted, something that happens 'in the pulpit' not the reporting of something that happened last Wednesday in the study. We need to prepare well loosen up and let it happen.

All Tooled Up

The Word of God is rich beyond our imagining and we need a wide variety of means of communication in order that it might be heard in our day and age – if the gospel and the church need to be appropriately enculturated then so do our means of communicating what God has said and continues to say to his people. But the siren voices calling us to give up on preaching *per se* must be resisted at all costs. It would be extreme folly for the people of the incarnate Word to give up on the simple power of one person talking directly to a group of other people. Preaching may not be the only tool for the vital job of helping people to hear God's word, and it may well be a tool that needs some serious sharpening but I for one am convinced that its a tool that the church simply can't afford to be without.



Market-place preachers, please!

by Elaine Crutchley

Elaine Crutchley is Consultant of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry and Medical Director of a community mental health trust in Surrey. She has an interest in theology. Her own teaching ministry has been appreciated and she has recently taken a course on preaching. She has a concern for relevant preaching and teaching that connects with people's everyday lives.

I can remember the sermon that prompted me to make my first adult commitment to Christ, thirty-two years ago. Closing my eyes I can see the preacher – Stanley Voke, I can feel the atmosphere in the crowded tent, and I can run the message through my head, not word for word but in the pictures which his preaching evoked in my imagination. The story was Zacchaeus but it was me up the tree believing that I was unacceptable to God, and that evening, it was me that climbed down and admitted that no-one is unacceptable to God, certainly not me and my mediocre sins. Strangely, the day I started to write this article our assistant minister preached on Zacchaeus, and this connection will mean that today's sermon is likely to stay with me for the next 20 years or so.

So what is it that stamps a sermon, whether we call it preaching or teaching, on one's

I was younger! I am not so sure though, I really do sense that the importance of preaching and teaching has declined in our churches and that it now is often outranked by worship and an emphasis on an emotional experience of Jesus. There was a need to redress the balance from an over intellectualised approach to God, but not at the expense of a faithful proclamation of God's word. David Watson once said: 'All Word and no Spirit we dry up, all Spirit and no Word we blow up, Spirit and Word together we grow up'.

Making sense of my Christian faith in a secular post-Christian environment, means that I need to hear the Word proclaimed in ways which help me when I am being seduced by the attractions of our individualist, consumerist culture, or when I am struggling with an ethical dilemma. I need preaching which puts God not just at the centre of my individual life, not just at the centre of our

is prophetic in the sense that it evokes an alternative God centred version of reality. It guards against the danger that church life, unable to make an impact on the tidal wave of secularism, becomes a spiritual ghetto.

I am also looking for honest preaching, which is not afraid to articulate the feelings we hide away or deny even from ourselves. The preacher will engage with the whole Bible and not just with selected passages. Why have I heard so many sermons on the gifts of the Spirit but hardly any on Job or some of the Psalms of lament? Honest preaching enlarges and deepens our worship, and prevents it becoming a triumphalistic roller-coaster of warm fuzzy feelings. Instead it can ensure that worship becomes the gateway into a relationship of intimacy with God, where I can be accepted for who I am, and from that secure base be equipped for change and growth to become the person God knows I can be.

Finally in the Bible we read of many ways of sharing this good news – parables, proclamation, disputation, poetry, song. Let us not limit preaching to the 20 (or maybe 40) minutes per service. I remember when the preacher sat down on a stool and talked to us; I remember when another preacher bravely allowed us to question and discuss. Stories are not just for children, but for all ages, poetry can crystallise a truth which many words of a sermon cannot convey. If we recognise that there are many ways of conveying God's good news then preaching will be rehabilitated and take its place at the centre of church life.

Thank you to members of my Link Group at Bookham Baptist Church whose shared thoughts sparked off many ideas for this article.

I need preaching which puts God at the centre of life but also out there in the marketplace where there is much pain and where there are no easy answers

memory? Most sermons disappear into oblivion, some within a few hours even – 'What did I hear this morning at church?' A few linger on to be turned over and examined in the mind, a few continue to perturb and prick the conscience and occasionally, one takes residence in the heart and will and leads to a reorientation of beliefs, values and commitment. Maybe such moments have always been rare and it is trick of age that makes me think that it happens less often these days than it did when

Christian community, but also out there in the market-place, in the place where there is much pain and where there are no easy answers. Such preaching struggles with issues and accepts that they cannot always be resolved even by our most loved credo that Jesus makes it right. However, it also articulates a deep joy, that God is in this with me and uses the Bible to reawaken awareness of the work of God with his people. It emerges from the heart of the preacher passionate for God and



Craig Millward brings us information from the Christian world. Pastor at Ormsby in Norfolk, Craig is a member of the Mainstream leadership team.

Evangelical Alliance web site for Leaders

Joel Edwards made an impromptu reference to his '10 Commandments for Church Growth' on a recent Evangelical Alliance tour, and was quoted in the Times on March 17th 2001:

- 1 Don't just have a welcome mat: Be welcoming.
- 2 Get the building to say 'Hello'.
- 3 Worship like you mean it.
- 4 Make everybody feel important
- 5 Make the kids happy and they'll bring their parents along.

6 Act generally as though you expect 'outsiders' to come in.

7 Preach about the things people talk about.

8 Take the Bible more seriously than you take yourself.

9 Talk about God as though He's turned up.

10 Make Jesus a midweek Man.

The Evangelical Alliance now runs a Leaders Digest.com web site specially for leaders. Visit their web site at www.eauk.org for more details.

Those who give shall receive

Missionaries from Africa, Asia and the Americas are flocking to Britain in their hundreds to convert a nation that they believe has slipped into godless secularism. About 1,500 missionaries and staff from 50 countries are believed to be operating in churches in Britain at the moment. 60% are from the Americas. Most come from countries where Christianity was introduced by Britons in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The role reversal follows vast growth of the Church in Africa, Asia and South America and a steady decline in churchgoing in Western Europe.

Source: *Charisma News Service*

Jesus Video Give-away

Over 1500 churches in the UK have signed up to the Jesus Video Project. Run by Agape, the project supplies specially produced copies of the film Jesus for giving away. Each video costs £1 and is a simple but effective way for churches to help reach every household in a community with the gospel. For more information contact www.agape.org.uk

Christians fighting for the right to be heard – in UK!

Thousands of Christians are calling on the British government to lift a ban on national religious broadcasting in response to news that a government forum on the future of religious broadcasting is set to exclude independent religious broadcasters.

The government forum was originally proposed in connection with United Christian Broadcasters (UCB) Europe. However, UCB Europe has learned that the meeting now excludes independent

religious broadcasters, and is misrepresentative of the 6,500 responses made in a white paper consultation requesting the lifting of the ban.

The response of Christians forms part of a growing movement of strong concern about freedom of speech by 300,000 supporters of UCB Europe (a Christian radio station that has been banned from applying for a national license in the UK for the past 10 years but broadcasts via satellite). The response also

unites Christians from a wide range of denominations and organizations who are concerned that the ban is unjust and undemocratic.

The ban on religious broadcasters has been in place since the 1990 Broadcasting Act, and the UK is one of only four countries to have such a ban, alongside Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Iran. It is believed that London's Premier Radio may also be refused a renewal of its licence.

Source: *IRN News*

Plea from Belarus:

Over the last 3 years I have got to know the Evangelical churches in Belarus. On my last visit it became clear that persecution is increasing. Friends in Belarus recently sent me the following plea:

Greetings to you in the name of Jesus.

In this time we have a prayer request for Belarus.

Pentecostal and some Baptist people are persecuted by the government there very strongly. National television are publicly saying that they sacrifice people and showed on TV that one brother died because believers did not want to bring him to hospital and gave some poison. Also another program said to people that we have to 'smear on a wall' this sect and

believers are praying that people would not believe these stories. More than two thousand believers signed a letter to president and, as before, have received no answer. Everything they have been saying is slander. Believers have been trying to publish their side of the story in newspapers, but none except one opposition paper printed their letter.

On the TV Eugeny Novicov (television announcer) said that America wish to conquer Belarus not by war but by Pentecostal sects. He said people should be attentive and not give them chance to lift their heads. So, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ would you pray for Belarus and believers there, please?

The ear becomes the eye

by Robert Parkinson



Robert Parkinson is pastor of Lumb Baptist Church in Rossendale, Lancashire. Robert completed his theological studies in USA where he pastored a church for over thirteen years before returning to his native Lancashire in 1995. He is actively involved in the leadership of Mainstream regionally, and has become our production editor for this new look magazine.

Did you ever hear Gardner C Taylor preach? I did but only on tape. I own a copy of Taylor's *Seeing our hurts with God's eyes*. When life gets me down or I lose my enthusiasm for preaching I pop it in the cassette player and listen. I find myself transported to another world. I laugh, I cry and by sermon's end I respond in faith and repentance, my perspective renewed.

Gardener C Taylor is an African-American. He represents a tradition that has much to teach the rest of the world and not least those of us in white Anglo-centric congregations.

African-Americans, after all, shout 'preach it'; the English moan 'don't preach'. Who, I wonder, has been exposed to the better preaching?

Some aspects of Taylor's preaching belong uniquely to him, others such as his use of visual language beg to be incorporated into any and every preacher's style.

Taylor's language is specific. When speaking of our maladies in *Seeing our hurts with God's eyes*, for example, he names them one by one then captures our

how many fears, how many disappointments, how many betrayals, how much love unrequited? What a mountain it would make! If I could take a poll tonight of all of the scars that are represented here stretched out before my face, what a mountain it would make! Sickness endured, sickness feared, the loss of those whom we have loved, miscalculation about our ambitions, frustration of our hopes, the brokenness of our dreams, the unmet ambitions; what a mountain!

His words are visual because descriptive. He uses plenty of adjectives but more, his verbs are strongly visual too. See the scene of mockery in Taylor's *His own clothes*:

they jammed a reed in his hand to mock a scepter, plaited a crown made out of a thorn bush for his brow, and flung around the Lord's shoulder an old, faded red tunic, the scarlet cloak that was part of the parade uniform of the Roman soldier . . . and then their loud, uncouth laughter rang and echoed through the

Yet more than artifice is here. For Taylor's language is shaped by his theology, his keen social conscience and his love of scripture. He advises other preachers to rise above flat, colourless preaching by opening

Catch the sounds and sights and smells of the accounts recorded in the Bible. Enter as much as you can into the climate of each scene – Gardner C Taylor

their whole beings to the scripture. 'Catch the sounds and sights and smells of the accounts recorded in the Bible. Enter as much as you can into the climate of each scene.' (*How shall they preach*, Progressive Baptist Publishing House 1977, p 60).

Painting verbal pictures – that's, in part, what preaching is about. Gardner C Taylor is brilliant at it. Listen to him, in person, on tape or in print and see whether he doesn't inspire your preaching too.

Books, tapes, and CDs by Gardner Taylor are available along with books about him at www.judsonpress.com

African-Americans shout 'preach it'; the English moan 'don't preach'. Who, I wonder, has been exposed to the better preaching?

imagination with a metaphor:

If I were able to . . . poll . . . this great congregation. How many reports of deep inner hurt would come back, how many apprehensions, how many anxieties, how many misgivings,

barracks. (In A Chorus of Witnesses edited by Thomas G Long and Cornelius Plantinger Jr, Eerdmans 1994, p 289).

Taylor is a wordsmith. He plays with words, crafting images and stories that stay in the mind.

worship file

David Montgomery, *Sing a new Song* (Rutherford House, 2000, paperback, 142 pages, ISBN: 0-946068-78-X)

Last Christmas Eve I was handed a highly critical letter (all ministers get them) which carped about the songs I had chosen for our church's worship over the previous few weeks. Maybe it was no coincidence that on the same day I began reading Montgomery's helpful book about the sung aspect of Christian worship. 'Leading praise' (his term) in today's church takes a deftness of touch which can only be added to by reading this book. Montgomery cogently argues that the sung aspect of Christian worship requires both the best of the classic hymns that have inspired believers for centuries combined with the best of contemporary material that communicates its message in a radically different way.

Starting from a solidly biblical basis Montgomery charts the history of Christian's singing and its place in our spiritual heritage. What makes some words inspire us or some music move us? He includes two particularly helpful chapters exploring the nuts and bolts of what makes a song effective as a vehicle of worship. His extensive research displays a keen awareness of both the historic and contemporary worship music.

He wisely observes that the tensions we experience today in the field of worship stem more from cultural differences than musical preferences and the book would have been enhanced if this theme had been explored in rather more depth as the post-modern generation enter the communication loop in a completely different way from people whose approach is more didactic. He charts the benefits and pitfalls of music emanating from such sources as Spring Harvest and the Iona Community

both from a musical and theological standpoint.

If you lead worship this book is a must. You may not agree with all Montgomery's conclusions but you will find in it a rare mixture of down-to-earth advice, Biblical wisdom and numerous ideas for the next time you stand in front of God's people and say 'Now let's worship the Lord'.

... and whether his advice will placate my critic remains to be seen.

Rev Dr Ian White, Victoria Baptist Church, Eastbourne

CD release – Matt Redman, *The Father's Song* (May 2001, Kingsway, £14.99)

Although still in his twenties, Matt Redman has made a huge impact on worship in the UK over the last few years. His song writing has grown and developed since the early songs, such as Undignified in 1995 and this is very evident in his latest album *The Father's Song*. Gone are the days of 'Na, na, na, na, na, hey!', this latest offering is deep and searching, touching real issues of mercy, justice, intimacy with God. Lyrics like 'I'll stand in awe of you and I'll let my words be few, Jesus I am so in love with you' (Let my words be few), demonstrate that Redman is a man after God's own heart. This, and 'You must increase' follow on in the spirit of 'The heart of worship', but the title song takes us into a new place, contemplating the love of the Father and his song over us.

Personally I find I can relate to the lyrics, they help me to worship God, to draw close to him. The words are powerful, drawing you into the presence of God. This is very much a worship album, rather than performance, but that is not to say it is not impressive musically. Drawing on talents as diverse as Stu G. and Martin Smith of Delirious?; The

London Community Gospel Choir and Zarc Porter from the Tribe, this is a well put together album. The various styles and instruments enhance the overall appeal. The provision of a song book to supplement the album makes this a blessing to both Matt Redman fans and local congregations. These are moving and passionate songs, but they are also very singable, ideal for congregational worship in even the most vocally challenged churches.

It is a great album, but not entirely without cheese, for example, lines like 'Light of the world you shine upon us' sound a little tired, but no Christian album will be without a bit of that!

Matt Redman's 'The Father's Song' is not a snack, it is meat, it's beefy, it's there, it's with it. Go and buy it now!

Andy Mills - Battle Baptist Church - Leading worship in the 412 Youth Congregation

Mainstream Conference 2002 with Roy Searle & Ken McGreavy



see insert for further details

Preaching among exiles

Walter Brueggemann in conversation with Stephen Ibbotson



Walter Brueggemann is a leading Old Testament theologian and currently Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. He has had a phenomenal writing output in this area of study. He has become influential amongst Christian preachers and pastors because he always develops his biblical thinking to inform the mission and ministry of the Church for a post-modern culture. His recently published "Theology of the Old Testament" is set to become the seminal approach for our generation.

There is widespread questioning of the place of preaching within the church. There's a general feeling it's passé. Communication is increasingly visual. Is there a place for preaching in today's church?

There is no doubt that the force of the media and electronic communication have changed the environment of preaching. There is also no doubt, however, that in an electronic society there is a deep hunger for face-to-face direct communication and I believe that preaching fits that bill

explain for readers unfamiliar with this emphasis, why you see this image as helpful for preachers to use, in helping members of a congregation make sense of their lives and world?

By 'exile' I mean to practice faith in a cultural environment that is at least indifferent to those faith claims and perhaps hostile. In the sixth century BCE there is no doubt that Jews in Babylonian exile had to try to hold to Jewish faith in an imperial environment that was indifferent to their faith or perhaps hostile. It has dawned

in an electronic society there is a deep hunger for face-to-face direct communication and preaching fits that bill like nothing else

like nothing else. Partly that may be because of historic and conventional expectations of the church and its preaching, but partly I believe that speaking and hearing is definitional to the character of human personality and human community.

My impression is that while preaching in such a cultural environment is not easy, if one has courage and imagination, is in touch with the real context of people, and is deeply rooted in the tradition, that preaching can make all the difference in people's lives.

You have made much of the connection you see between Israel's experience of exile and our own context of faith and its outworking. Would you briefly

on me, in my book *Cadences of Home*, that serious Christian faith in the environment of US consumer capitalism must be held in an environment that is at least indifferent to our faith and probably hostile.

I believe that it is useful for congregations and for pastors to recognize this new cultural situation that some call post-Christendom and certainly reflects the cultural disestablishment of the church. On the one hand, this means that the church can no longer count on conventional cultural support because of pluralism and secularism. On the other hand, it means that the church does not need to be the 'chaplain' to the socio-political establishment but now is free for its own mission in

this environment of bringing more and more of our common life under the rule of Christ.

Allied with this, is your emphasis on the 'sub-version' of the text and preaching and therefore its subversive effect. What do you mean by this?

It has occurred to me that there are many versions of reality floating around among us and what I have done is to play with the word 'version.' So with the Bible we have the King James Version, the Standard Version, Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version, all of which are alternative tellings of biblical faith.

It occurs to me that we have many versions of reality among us including liberal capitalism,

the dominant version of reality wants no crucifixions and no resurrections

Marxism, Freudianism and so on. All of these versions are competing and none is privileged except that the dominant version of reality in our culture is now that of consumer capitalism. The play on words that I have meant to suggest is that preaching is to offer a version of reality that lives

underneath the dominant version so that it is a sub-version, but that the purpose of a subversion of reality is to subvert the dominant version. I believe that the sub-version is focused on the crucifixion of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus and both the Friday moment of loss and the Sunday moment of newness are unacceptable in the dominant version of reality that wants no crucifixions and no resurrections. Thus every time a Christian preacher preaches, he or she offers a sub-version that subverts the dominant version.

Your work makes much of the power of words and rhetoric to construct new worlds of understanding and meaning. This suggests the crucial place of preaching to help believers live authentic Christian lives. But today the church is a marginalized community within a society that no longer listens to its message. Is there any place for preaching as you propose it to reach into the wider public sphere?

It is very difficult to understand how the Christian gospel is now understood in the public sphere. However, in the Reformed tradition especially it is clear that when the preacher preaches inside the church he or she addresses the local congregation but addresses the local congregation about the public issues of the day, which in our time have to do with all of the pathologies of the economy including our commitment to capital punishment, prison, and nuclear arms, all of which are functions of our economy.

It is my judgment that if a congregation and a preacher have the courage to do this, it will very soon attract the attention of those who are outside the church. And while those outside the church will be a mix of those who agree and those who disagree, such preaching as it moves beyond its own church sphere does provide some materials for new dispute and

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new imagination that may need a new social reality and a new social policy. It is a hard task but it requires the courage and the learning of pastors who know enough about the issues to connect the gospel to the public issues that concern all the members of the baptized community.

I have benefited in my own preaching from your understanding that the bible has many different and distinct voices that stand in tension and juxtaposition with one another. I have taken each text more seriously. But is there a downside with this? Some members of my church have been liberated by this, but others have found it difficult perhaps because they sense that the coherent and 'simple' voice of scripture as a whole might be lost if we listen to its message as a multiplicity of voices. What happens to the clarity and coherence of scripture in your approach to text?

There is a difficult tension between the notion that the gospel can be coherent and simple and the recognition that scripture that mediates the gospel to us is not coherent and simple but is a multiplicity of voices. I believe that preaching must mediate between coherence and complexity. There is danger that if it moves too much to complexity at the expense of coherence, it will seem to be falling apart. We have not so much recognized the opposite danger of moving too much to coherence at the expense of multiplicity, and that produces authoritarianism and one-dimensional reductionism that is simply not credible to people who know that their lives and the life of the world are endlessly complex.

So I think that the pastor must speak with clarity, but it is the kind of clarity that recognizes complexity in the life of the world and the life of the church as well as in the life of the Bible.

Learning to preach – slowly



By Rob Warner

Rob Warner is one of our regular columnists.

A pastor and author, he has served in London churches at Herne Hill and Wimbledon where he presently leads Kairos, a church that's been started from scratch.

He has a wider speaking ministry and is involved in Alpha for believer baptising churches.

Dear Theophilus,

You ask how to fulfil your potential as a preacher, and the best way I can help is to tell you of my many mistakes.

First, not getting inside the text. Sometimes I don't protect enough time for the hidden work of preparation. When the commentaries annoy or bore me I have to ask an awkward question: are the scholars failing the preacher by asking the wrong questions, or is this preacher failing his church by wanting to preach the wrong sermon, not grappling properly with what the biblical text really says? And then I usually need several drafts to turn my fumbblings into a coherent talk.

Second, not getting inside the audience. I have gradually learned to hear and heed five kinds of criticism. 'God really speaks to me in the last part of your talks.' – My introductions have been too pedestrian, asking the questions of the study not of Sunday morning. 'It was too predictable' – Faithfulness to the biblical text is no excuse for lack of freshness. 'I can't stay with you for the whole talk' – Like quasi-advertising breaks in the BBC news, I need to build in stories and humour rather than plough on with abstractions. 'Your illustrations were all impersonal' – I shy away from personality centred preaching, but I need to make sure I'm being vulnerable, sharing in the struggles, uncertainties and mistakes of the journey of discipleship. 'It was all OK, but there was too much for one sitting.' – My preaching must be determined not by what I would like to give out, but by what my hearers are able to take in.

Third, not getting outside the church. There are times when I have been sucked into an unduly narrow, church-centred agenda. Just like the Bible, my preaching needs to connect with work, home and leisure. My words need to link with the big

Christocentric and crucicentric. Centred on grace, not law. Emphasizing servanthood and avoiding any kind of domination or manipulation. Embracing mystery rather than claiming too much certainty. Remembering always that there is no Easter Sunday and Pentecost without Gethsemane and Calvary.

Fifth, not allowing sufficient variety of response. For some a song is best. For some quietness. For some a moment of prayer. For some

**I need to be vulnerable,
sharing in the struggles,
uncertainties and mistakes
of the journey**

a symbolic action or a creative activity. If I only encourage one kind of response, I starve those whose temperament or culture craves a different way of expressing their response to God. This is not only true after preaching, but also in communion. I have come to the reluctant conclusion that if my church always takes communion in the same way, our creativity has been amputated.

Preaching is a kind of madness. When it's ego-driven, it's a madness of futility. Who can hear God through my words if I'm merely full of myself? When it's a divine calling, it's a madness of grace. I look back at old sermon notes and shudder with shame: so many mistakes, so slow to learn. And yet, the miracle of grace: I fall short so badly, but still some hear God's promise of hope and love. Someone asked me recently how long it took to prepare a series of Bible studies for a conference.

Embracing mystery rather than claiming too much certainty

issues of our world and the felt needs of individuals. I need to make reference to the headlines, TV programmes and movies; not just to Augustine, Calvin and Spurgeon.

Fourth, not getting aligned with Christ. Central to divine revelation is the personal Word incarnate. Then comes the inspired and authoritative written Word. If my preaching is in any small degree to become an instrument of revelation, it needs to be faithful to the written Word and centred on the Incarnate Word. That means my preaching must be

'I'm very slow,' I replied, 'So in my case a passable talk usually takes about 25 years.'

So Theophilus, remember to take preaching very seriously, but please don't take yourself very seriously at all. Your brother in the mystery and discipline of preaching,

Rob

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www.kairos.org.uk



Dr David Instone-Brewer is a Baptist minister and Research Fellow & Technical Officer at Tyndale House, Cambridge. Having appreciated a review he previously made available directly to the world wide web and by e-mail, we were delighted when he agreed to provide a similar service for our readers.

Sermon resources on the web

by David Instone-Brewer

You probably have sermons to prepare and little time to do it. There is help on the Web. Much is of dubious value but this is the best I have found. My advice: Don't try to preach someone else's sermon - just use their ideas. Unlike in the academic world, plagiarism of sermons is flattering.

Commentaries and study aids

CrossWalk Bible Dictionaries
Mainly older sources. All usefully linked together. Good for quick Bible facts.
<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Dictionaries/>

CrossWalk Bible Commentaries
Mainly older sources. Easy to use and search.
<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/>

Index of full-text academic articles on the web, organised by Bible text.
www.bsw.org/scripture/

Advent's Catholic Encyclopaedia
Very good on biblical subjects and good links to Early Church Fathers.
www.newadvent.org/cathen/Sermon_illustrations

Pastor Holwick's Sermon Illustrations
Thousands of illustrations ready to import into various types of database.
www.users.nac.net/wdh2000/illust.html

Holwick's Links To The Best Free Sermon Illustrations
Links with star ratings and useful descriptions.
<http://users.nac.net/wdh2000/ill-link.html>

SermonIllustrations.Com
A well organised site with superior search facilities. One

which Holwick missed!
www.sermonillustrations.com/si_search.htm

Reader's Digest funny stories
Search by word or phrase. You can usually find something to fit, and they are much funnier than most collections on Christian sites. Holwick only points to the USA one, but the Canadian and UK sites are much easier to search. And I think the jokes are funnier (but I'm British).
www.readersdigest.ca/laugh_search.html
www.readersdigest.co.uk/mjokes/webjokes?SearchView

Pictures for preachers

Pictures can assist preaching – to illustrate archaeology, Bible stories, themes or just feelings.

Goshen list of Clipart collections
A huge list, sorted alphabetically, with no independent assessment.
<http://directory.crosswalk.com/WebDirectory/browse.cgi?cat=cpr033>

Bible Picture Library
Online demo with free samples. OK, I run this. But there is nothing like it for accompanying sermons.
www.ccart2.free-online.co.uk/HTML/ALL_DEMO.HTM

Sermons ready-made

You can get your sermon ready grown, or just look over someone else's shoulder for inspiration. There are lots of sites ready to sell you sermons (lots of ministers needing cash) but the best ones are free.

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30,000 sermons, searchable and organised by topic and text
www.sermoncentral.com/sercentral/default.asp

Youthworkers Exchange
Youth talks, stories, games, jokes etc. Remarkable!
www.geocities.com/Heartland/Hills/4045/index.html

Visual Sermons
I'm encouraging the use of pictures while preaching. You can use a data projector or an OHP. Few sermons at present, but the pictures are good.
www.VisualSermons.co.uk/

Historical Sermons
Sermons by the great preachers of the past: Jonathan Edwards, Martin Luther, John Wesley, George Whitefield, John Chrysostom, St. Augustine and Spurgeon. A bit wordy but inspiring.
www.gtu.edu/library/LibWorship.html#sermons
Lectionary sermons

Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary
Every week, short comments on upcoming texts.
www.montreal.anglican.org/comment/

Sermons for the Revised Common Lectionary
Sermons for each Sunday, with hymn suggestions and a 'sermon' for children.
www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermon.html

Worship that Works - sermons for the Revised Common Lectionary
From many churches, several for most Sundays
<http://www.dfms.org/worship-that-works/>

Alpha conference with a difference



Peter Nodding brings us news from the Mainstream network and other connections. Peter chairs Mainstream Leadership team and is a pastor in Guildford.

Many of our churches have benefited from the *Alpha* Course. It is one of the most effective approaches to evangelism we have seen for many years. Yet, as with all projects and courses, it has its limitations. Some find the course too long; others struggle with the way the Holy Spirit is presented; some churches are disappointed in its lack of emphasis on the sacraments – in particular many Baptists wish to see baptism explained and encouraged in the process of coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

Now there is an opportunity for some of our concerns to be addressed. On Thursday 21 – Friday 22 June a special *Alpha* Conference is being run at Sutton Coldfield Baptist Church. The organisers of *Alpha* strongly commend attending a conference to maximise the benefits of *Alpha* in our churches but this conference adds a new dimension. Sandy Millar and Nicky Gumbel will be joined by Rob Warner as the main speakers and, in addition to the usual training material, will introduce new resources, in the style of *Alpha*, presenting the subjects of believer's baptism and committed belonging to a local church. A number of key leaders have

Community Engagement in Horley:

The **RAC London to Brighton Vintage Car Rally** takes place each year. Families line the main road outside Horley Baptist Church to watch and wave as the assorted cars, motorbikes and an occasional penny-farthing pass by. Last year from the church foyer we served free tea, coffee and squash along with bacon butties at 30p, which enabled us to cover costs. The event was a great success. We served non-stop from 9 am to gone 12 while people relaxed and chatted at tables on the church lawn. Our people handed out flyers with service details on the back. The atmosphere was friendly and informal; many commented that it was good to see the Church getting involved, especially as the hotel up the road was charging a lot more!

The **New Neighbours scheme** is still in its infancy.

welcomed and endorsed this new emphasis, which can only make *Alpha* more attractive to believer-baptising churches. These materials could be used as an addendum to an *Alpha* course, or as a free-standing resource.

The publicity aims the conference at 'Baptists, Pentecostals and New Churches' and is intended to introduce *Alpha* to churches

The idea is to provide a welcome pack for anyone who buys or rents a property in Horley. The pack will include a high quality joint Churches leaflet promoting our activities. I have contacted all the estate agents in the town and they are all willing to pass on our information or give us the addresses for us to personally deliver the leaflets.

Finally, **band nights**. Here the Church provides the premises and the PA expertise for local up-and-coming teenage bands. The events are widely promoted in local schools and the newspaper. So successful was the first event last autumn that a night is now arranged every other month, the hall is filled to capacity with 150 teenagers and many more have to be turned away.

Guy Partridge

which have never run a course, and to give training and encouragement to those already using *Alpha*.

For more details contact: Ian Frith, Sutton Coldfield Baptist Church, Trinity Hill, Sutton Coldfield, B72 1TA 0121 323 2839

ian@ifrith.junglelink.co.uk
Danny Pritchard

Word & Spirit Network

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Hereford and Wors: John Lewis 01989 720312
gorsleychapel@msn.com

North London: Graham Watkins 020 7376 7802

Surrey, Hants, Sussex: Peter Nodding 01483 839490

Anglia: Craig Millward 01493 731009 craig.millward@virgin.net

New church at Weir

If you have seen the latest BU video, the village of Weir will be familiar to you. The 'resurrection' of a Church in Weir owes much to other Baptist Churches in the Rossendale Valley and beyond working together.

Weir is a small village south of Burnley and originally home to two Churches, a Baptist and a Methodist. For a variety of reasons both closed,

yet the village began to grow as builders moved in to increase the housing stock. It is estimated that the population will be around 4,000.

The remaining members of the original 'Ebenezer Baptist Church, Doals' had a dream that a viable Christian witness might be restored to the village. This dream was caught by others in the

Rossendale Valley and when the Association asked for Districts to consider opportunities for church planting, the East Lancashire District adopted Weir. In 1997 a Working Group was formed to restart a Baptist Church in Weir by applying for a Home Mission grant and appointing a full-time Church planter / pastor.

Yet even with a Home

Mission grant, there would be a substantial shortage of money. The Baptist Churches in the Rossendale Valley work closely together and responded to a request for financial and prayer support. This request was extended to all East Lancashire District Churches. In total 22 Churches replied promising to pray and to give. Some gave a 'one off' gift and others

Ascension—UK Reaching Gen X

Ascension, a new Manchester-based initiative to reach an emerging generation, comes of age on June 21st, when 'Landed', the first Ascension club night, takes place. In their own words:

Ascension is primarily an 'evangelistic process' seeking to address the stark reality that only 4% of 18-35 year olds in the UK are linked in any meaningful way to church. Traditional models of evangelism have largely failed to reach post-modern people; Ascension is a new model of relational evangelism that has been tailored specifically to communicate with the emerging culture.

The evangelistic process involves four stages: establishing the reputation of Ascension within the secular music world; the development of Ascension club nights and larger events; establishing an Ascension Bar in Manchester city centre; and developing a discipleship process for enquirers wanting to explore Christianity further.

The first is well under way. Cameron Dante, a DJ and founder member of Ascension, has signed a deal with Bush records and his first single will be released in the run up to the first club night, along with his autobiography Ascension – Clubs, Drugs and

the Eternal High. Regular club nights will begin to associate Ascension with a search for spiritual meaning and the Ascension Bar, run as a professional business but staffed primarily by Gen X Christians, will provide a place where people can explore questions of faith and meaning, through friendship, specially written literature and the interactive spiritual web sites in the cyber-café area! The Bar will also provide an accessible and familiar place for cell groups to meet, where those interested can enquire further and come to a personal relationship of faith in Christ.

The long-term goal of Ascension is to help resource other cities in their mission to 18-30's. This may be either in a consultative role or in the development of other Ascension Club nights and Bars both in the UK and beyond.

To support Ascension-UK or for more details of this ground breaking initiative, contact Cameron Dante or Steve Cockram at: Ascension UK, PO Box 159, Altrincham, WA14 2GU; e-mail: stevec@ascension-uk.com; Secular web site – www.ascension-uk.com; Church information web site – www.ascension-uk.com/church.

promised to give over a three year period. With £30,000 promised it was possible to search for a church planter.

Baptist families living in Weir caught the vision and decided to meet each week in a home, which had been extended for this very purpose. As I write, Neil Hepworth has been appointed as the Church planter and starts on 1 July. They will meet

in the Weir Hotel until sufficient funds can be raised to put up a community centre/church building. Weir Baptist has had a great foundation laid through Churches working together, without which I am sure the 'dream,' would still be just that.

Adrian Argile

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off the shelf

compiled by Daniel Pritchard



Daniel Pritchard is a member of the pastoral staff at Battle in Sussex. He has an interest in theological studies and will be arranging reviews in each edition.

Walter Brueggemann – *Finally Comes the Poet* (Fortress 1989); ***Cadences of Home*** (Westminster John Knox 1997); ***Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope*** (Fortress 2000)

Here are three books on preaching from a prolific writer and much-respected Old Testament theologian and thinker about faith and culture. He believes passionately in preaching. 'Church on Sunday may be the last place in our society for imaginative speech that permits people to enter into new worlds of faith and to participate in joyous, obedient life'. *Finally Comes the Poet* is

with God and others. Third it is summons to join in God's mission for creation, humanity and the church. He ends by applying this gospel core, to the living of authentic human life, so much under distorting pressure in today's world. He illustrates with the narrative of Daniel. This is a book for preachers tired in their preaching and who need recommissioning to take the word seriously.

Cadences of Home is about the context in which we preach: the condition, mood and sensitivities of the people who listen Sunday by Sunday. The appropriate metaphor for believers in a post-Christendom

about preaching. It is a demanding and difficult task... His lack of optimism concerns the situation in which preaching takes place, about the world we live in and the tenor of our times; but he knows the power of the gospel, and those that sit at his feet find their own convictions about that power renewed and their preaching invigorated.' Come, sit at his feet!
Stephen Ibbotson

John Blanchard – *Does God believe in Atheists?* (Evangelical Press 2000)

John Blanchard rides into battle against the forces of atheism with crusading vigour, taking on all comers from Aristotle to Peter Atkins. The dust jacket announces that he will explore the development of atheistic thinking from Greek philosophy to the present day, expose the weaknesses of determinism, existentialism, secular humanism and Darwinism. In addition he will highlight the flaws in nine world religions and fourteen major cults. The tone is combative. He begins with a definition of God tight enough to brand most of the world's faiths as 'atheistic'.

It is a useful compendium for the hard pressed preacher wishing to trace the development of philosophical thought and to relate it to contemporary culture. There is, for example, an excursus on the effects of existentialism upon the creative arts (see pp. 138–40). There is an astonishing breadth of reference, with over two thousand footnotes.

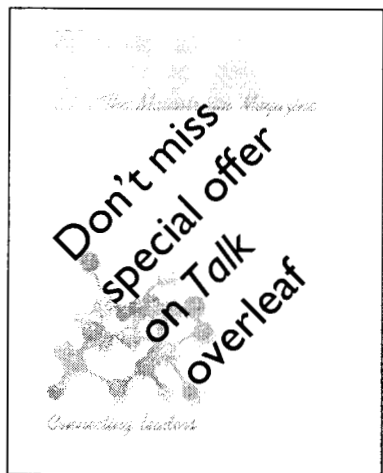
Yet for me, the sheer scope of the book is also its fundamental weakness. On this whistle-stop train ride most things are glimpsed, little is seen in detail. So, the author asserts, 'in this high speed survey we can jump five hundred years (from Pyrrho) to Platinus' (p. 36). Or again, writing of those who have significantly influenced atheistic thinking, he claims that 'we can virtually ignore the Middle Ages'.

Church may be the last place in our society for imaginative speech that permits people to enter into new worlds of faith and to participate in joyous, obedient life

about the prophetic preaching of the gospel. He believes in the power of speech to shape life and lives. He suggests three core themes in gospel preaching: forgiveness, communion and obedience. It is good news of forgiveness for people experiencing guilt and a desire for healing. Second it is answer to yearning for a lost communion

culture is exile. Like the Babylonian exiles, we face loss of a structured, reliable 'world' – for them Jerusalem and Temple, for us the dominance that Christian faith once held in the public and private spheres of life. At times a little repetitive, borne of the fact this is a collection of essays, it provides fresh insights and food for thought on preaching. It is insistent that we must be aware of the changed situation in which we preach, one that demands a different style and mode of speech.

Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope is again a collection of essays. Their focus is on preaching, the character of speech in Scripture and the power of language. They all reflect his deep concern for communicating Scripture and its meaning to a wider audience. Patrick Miller writes in his forward that Brueggemann provides 'little optimism and no triumphalism



Such a 'broad brush' approach means that major religions and important philosophies are debunked in a sentence or two.

The Cliché ridden prose style makes for plodding reading. Phrases like 'C.S. Lewis hit the nail on the head' and 'it wasn't long before rationalism was winning hands down' hardly scintillate! In the end, I was left wondering for whom the book was intended. The serious scholar will find the philosophical material covered more fully in any number of reference books, and the case for creationism has been argued more cogently by the like of Colin Mitchell. Although the dust jacket opines that 'no self-respecting atheist would be without it', I find it difficult to believe that he or she would be convinced by such slender apologetics. At nearly £20.00 and over 650 pages, you need to know what you are getting.

David John, Green Street Baptist Church, Gillingham

Steve Chalke, Faithworks 'actions speak louder than words' (Kingsway £5.99 ISBN: 0-8547.6966-8)

The *Faithworks* campaign was launched amidst speculation about a General election in the spring. Its objective is to tackle the frequent prejudice and discrimination against faith-based welfare programmes and to make a plea for fair and objective treatment of such programmes by the powers that be, whether they be national or local. Aware that high profile figures in all the major parties have expressed opinions on the subject, *Faithworks* challenges the incoming government to 'put its muscle (and money) where its mouth is' (p.23) ending discrimination and guaranteeing a fair share of resources to churches and faith-based agencies.

Steve writes the way he speaks; the book is pacy and anecdotal, and goes some way to fulfilling the claims on the cover; to 'help clarify the issues and equip us to respond both to human need and to those in government that influence welfare issues and funding'. He

presents a good case for Christian faith-based programmes, arguing that they are *rooted; sustainable, committed, imaginative and transforming*, precisely because of the faith which under girds them. In doing so, he tackles the attitudes which attempt to force Christians to abandon their position, to 'act like agnostics' in order to gain confidence and respect (p.22) and appeals for a 'level playing field'. There is no doubt in Steve Chalke's mind that faith-based programmes and agencies have a vital part to play in the future welfare plans of any government, but he recognises the tension between the short-term interests of politicians and the long-term commitments of agencies, which require greater stability in the area of funding.

That is not to say that we have it all worked out and Steve Chalke challenges the churches and to improve their serve. Included in his concerns are the need for greater empathy and understanding of people's needs and pain; greater respect for the opinions of others, especially when they differ from our own; greater professionalism; stronger partnership with the authorities including praying for them; and a more holistic approach ('welfare isn't a warm-up round for evangelism' p.68) recognising welfare as important in its own right as a powerful expression of faith.

This is not a pretentious book, it sets out simply to be a useful introduction both to the *faithworks* campaign and the wider issues involved. I think it succeeds well and would repay the short investment of time it will take you to read it.

See also www.faithworks.org
Danny Pritchard

John Houghton, A closer look at Harry Potter: bending and shaping the minds of our children (Kingsway 2001, £5.99 ISBN 0 85476 941 2)

It is a pleasure to find a book you can read at one sitting, but is challenging and thought provoking. This little paperback (only 80 pages) fits the bill. For our children, Harry Potter is

unavoidable, and we would do well to consider the impact of the books and the forthcoming film on the minds and lives of our youngsters. John Houghton sets out to help us do just that.

'Those who want a simple unqualified condemnation of Harry Potter should look elsewhere; you will be disappointed' (p. 12). Houghton does not set out to rubbish J K Rowling, indeed as a fellow author he admires her gift. Neither does this book simply address the phenomenon of Harry Potter, but offers a wider analysis of the genre of fantasy literature. Although a short read, *A closer look at Harry Potter* is a valuable resource. The author knows his subject well and makes perceptive comparisons between J K Rowling's work and that of Lewis and Tolkien, his own books (*The Oswein Tales*, also published by Kingsway) and also with cinema and television; *The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, et al.

What concerns Houghton is the values and world views which underlie these works. He explores the gift of imagination, examines the concept of myth and the use of fantasy and allegory to communicate spiritual ideas, recognising the positive aspects of these approaches and warning against dangers. He identifies some underlying values (or lack of) in the Harry Potter stories; the absence of any sense of transcendence typical of a neo-pagan world view, where there is no supreme being or object of awe and worship; the inevitable loss of moral absolutes inherent in such a world view.

Along the way the question of witches, wizards and warlocks and their suitability as subjects for children's reading is addressed, with numerous other valuable insights for those of us concerned with 'training up our children', the theme of the last chapter. Should you let your children read Harry Potter? John Houghton leaves that decision to you, but he understands the times, and will be a great help to you in making up your mind.

Danny Pritchard



Becoming a denomination worth joining

by Nigel Wright

Dr Nigel G Wright is the principal of Spurgeon's College, London and vice-president of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. He is well known for his many books including *The Radical Evangelical* and *Challenge to Change*.

As I reach back into the mists of time to remember the beginnings of Mainstream in the late 1970s I recall two motivating concerns. One was acute anxiety about the spiritual and numerical decline of the Baptist Union. So Mainstream's first strap line was 'Baptists for Life and Growth'. It served us well for a long time and captured accurately what we were about. The other concern, more of a subtext, was to stem the haemorrhaging of churches and pastors out of the Union into the new church networks.

History moves on swiftly so we tend to forget the social forces that were so pressing for former generations. We now look back from a vantage point in which the new, or Restorationist churches have become a settled part of the landscape. Some networks have declined, others have developed. Some have retired to the margins, others have re-entered the mainstream. But for all of them it is indisputably true that their highest early vision has not been fulfilled. The new churches have not proven to be the last chapter of church history, the church of the Restoration that would succeed where everyone else had failed. They have not been the bride of Christ, without spot or wrinkle that would bring back the King. They have proven to be, well, not all that different from the rest of us. Moreover, the denominations over which they were prepared to write 'Ichabod' have not withered on the vine and gone out of existence. They have proven to be remarkably resilient with surprising levels of spiritual vitality. Who would have predicted that Holy Trinity Brompton and its Alpha Course would have such immense impact? The doctrine of irony is the most-overlooked feature of much modern thinking.

denominations attendance at Baptist churches has grown, albeit only by 2%, over the last decade. More recently a significant if modest increase in membership has been recorded. As the last century has given frequent evidence of people finding false dawns in temporary blips I don't want to overstate the case. But for many who once may have been tempted to go elsewhere it is obvious that the Baptist Union offers as good a deal as any other show in town and a constantly improving one.

What next? My suggestion is that being a denomination worth staying in should be seen as a step towards becoming one it is worth joining. European Baptist history is replete with examples of churches which began as groups of believing people who met to study the Bible and came to realize that they were Baptists but hadn't known it. It is also clear from comparisons of the different European unions that there are different ways of being Baptist. Some unions are much more centralized than we. Some accord greater authority in their elders. Some call their superintendents bishops. So in this country there is no shortage of Baptist-compatible churches, some new and others of long-standing, for whom a home in the Baptist Union is conceivable. Many of them 'do church' in ways which are different from the received norm in that Baptist Union but would not be out of place in the European Baptist Federation. They are believers churches as are we.

The Baptist Union can grow through numerical increase within its member churches. It can also grow through adding churches at a greater rate than is currently the case. To become a denomination worth joining it would have to argue

being a denomination worth staying in is a step towards becoming one worth joining

Things have a habit of turning out very differently from what is predicted.

One of Mainstream's aspirations has been achieved. The Baptist Union is worth staying in. It would be wrong for Mainstream to take the credit. That lies with people like David Coffey and his team and with many good people throughout the country who have made the cumulative decisions that point us in a new direction. More could be done. But no-one could attend the recent Assembly at Blackpool and doubt that things are different. The Baptist Union was worth sticking with and now it's worth staying in. Alone among the historic

theologically that inter-church communion is not an optional extra for any church but a necessary expression of the church's interdependence and catholicity. It would have to develop *institutionally* in such a way that it could cope with variations within stated parameters in the way churches organize and govern themselves. It would have to develop *ecclesially* so as to make membership of the Union meaningful not just when it comes to borrowing money or seeking a new pastor but in the ongoing mission and ministry of everyday church.



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