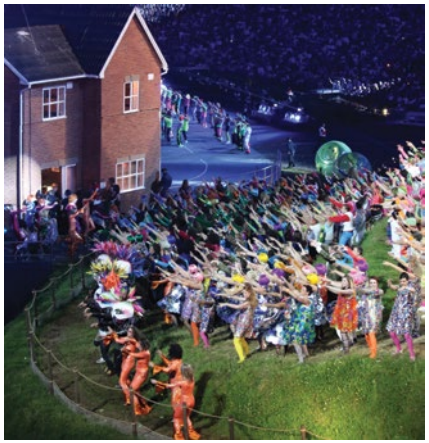
# Commentary

WINTER 2015/16

Dan Strange looks at how the gospel responds to one of the most powerful myths of our time: progress
**Page 4**



Jesus talked about money more than any other topic, so why do we spend our lives avoiding the subject, asks Graham Beynon
**Page 29**


Comic strip artist and former Oak Hill student Richard Thomas talks about how his theological education helped shape a new comic book Bible
**Page 8**

Oak Hill College

# A faith which seeks understanding

**Mike Ovey introduces this edition of Commentary by reflecting on the commitment of our writers to understand the world in order to see it transformed by the gospel**

As I write this, the Western world is reeling from the apparently Islamist terror attacks in Paris. Anger, pain, grief – all of these emotions are understandably and rightly to the fore. But there is something else as well that resides in the responses from political leaders and commentators we have seen over the last few days: sheer incomprehension.

By sheer incomprehension, I do not mean an inability to call evil evil. From my point of view as a Christian who wants to understand the secular culture in which God has set me, it is striking that there is so little being said on morally relativistic lines. Wicked acts have been very rightly called wicked. What does seem to me to be missing is any deep appreciation of why something that seems self-evidently evil to so many Westerners appears good and noble to people who have apparently been raised in situations where they have at least some working knowledge of Western society.

Western society seems so self-evidently good to Westerners, and yet here are people who manifestly have not found it good, but instead evil enough to commit mass murder. The French President very aptly described what happened as declaring war on France, and that is true enough, but there is little comprehension of why the terrorists conceive this as a just war and a just way of waging it. Strikingly, so much comment implies terrorists are simply a deranged minority in one way or another. This analysis, of course, exonerates us from the task of seeking to understand more deeply: terrorists are 'safely' consigned to the category of Broadmoor.

In the light of this, I want to underline how important the kind of work is that the writers of this edition of *Commentary* are doing. On the one hand, there is, as usual, a huge range of topics. On the other hand, the writers are Christians who are seeking to understand some aspect of the world in which God has placed us, and not in order to conform to it, but in order that the world may be transformed by the gospel.

Hence Dan Strange and Kirsty Birkett (on pages 4 and 19) tackle very disparate subjects in the notion of progress and reincarnation respectively, but which we need to understand if we are to minister to those who have been bewitched by those different mythologies. My own article (page 11) on the apparent demise of the 'secularisation' theory, is in the same territory of analysing an account of our world which has been and still is hugely influential on how our world sees religion.

Pete Snow and Dave Baldwin (on pages 14 and 16) reflect on why the effort of learning is worth it in terms of time and effort. This relates to the way Christian disciples in this world need to be teachable, and teachable in the right way, so that we are 'valiant-for-truth' rather than enthused by lies.

Graham Beynon (page 29) takes us to an understanding of ourselves as he examines the hold our culture has on us through our love of money. Mark Pickles and Ray Porter (pages 22 and 26) keep the spotlight on understanding ourselves. Mark works through how an issue can be secondary yet still important, while Ray considers what will constitute godly mission in the modern world.

**I do not refute something by shouting it down, or flatly contradicting it, or writing off those with whom I disagree as deranged. I refute when I demonstrate by rational argument that something is wrong.**

Yet I suspect the question will still be raised: why bother with this task of understanding? I think the answer is implicit in Titus 1:9. Christian ministers are called on to 'refute' false teaching. I do not refute something by shouting it down, or flatly contradicting it, or writing off those with whom I disagree as deranged. I refute when I demonstrate by rational argument that something is wrong. To do that, I must understand what makes it tick and bring that to the bar of scripture.

At the end of the day, I must apply God's Word to the world around me, not understanding the world on its own terms, but applying God's Word to the world and – and this is the critical step – to the world's own self-understanding. Why as a Christian of faith must I seek to understand how my world sees itself? Because the Bible tells me to.

# Commentary



# The problem with progress

**Progress is one of the deeply embedded myths of our society, and when Christians get in the way of it, we are seen as out of date, out of touch, reactionary and repressive. Dan Strange looks at progress and asks how does the gospel respond to this powerful myth of our time?**

With Rio fast approaching next year, let's indulge in a little nostalgic reminiscing. Remember those heady Olympic days of July and August three years ago when, in Boris Johnson's words, 'Britain was crop-dusted with serotonin'? Since London, I have made much cultural apologetic mileage out of Danny Boyle's 'sermonic' introduction in the opening ceremony programme of 27 July 2012:

*But we hope, too, that through all the noise and excitement you'll glimpse a single golden thread of purpose – the idea of Jerusalem – of the better world, the world of real freedom and true equality, a world that can be built through the prosperity of industry, through the caring nation that built the welfare state, through the joyous energy of popular culture, through the dream of universal communication. A belief that we can build Jerusalem. And that it will be for everyone.*

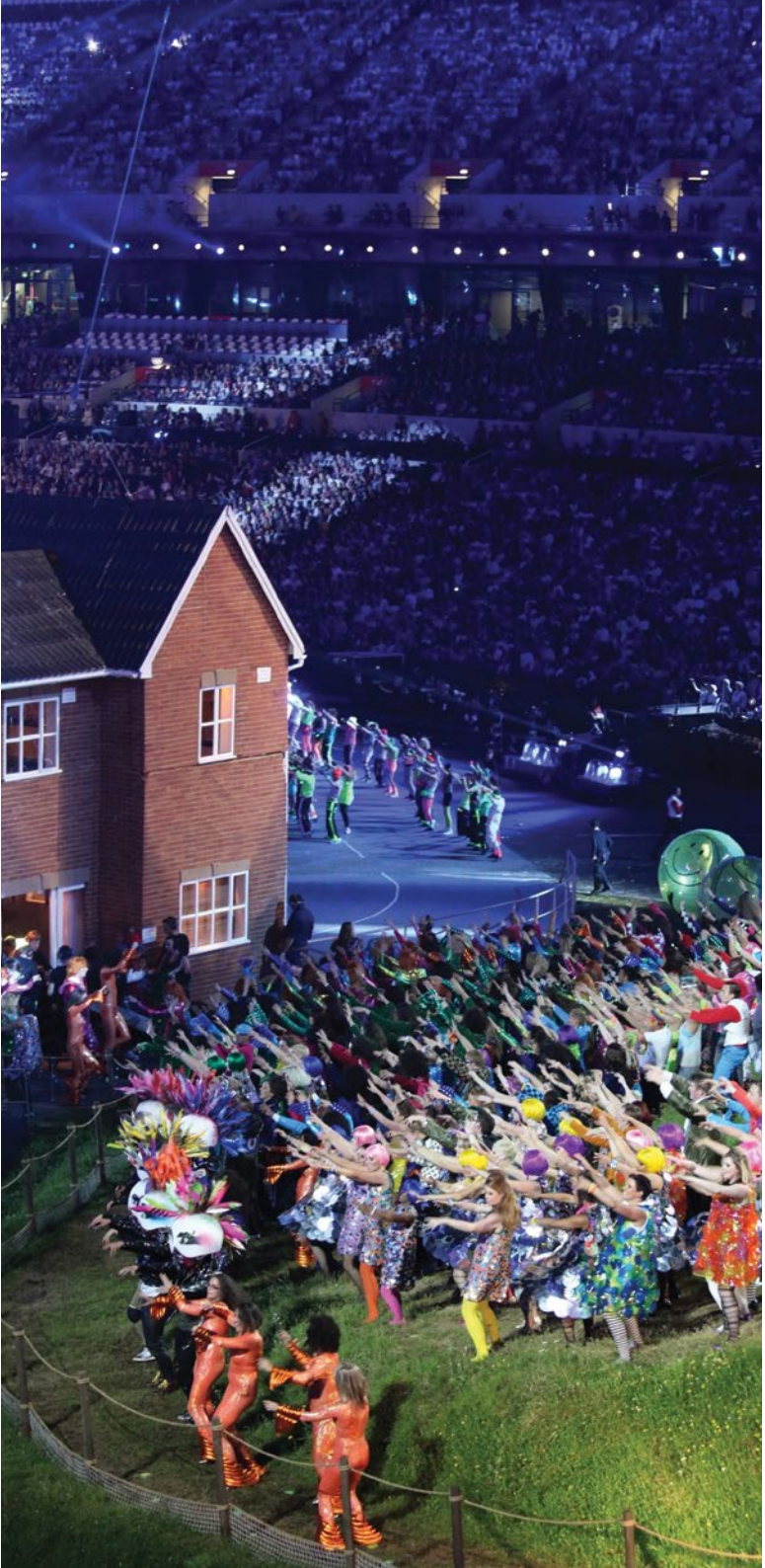
Far from being old hat, the mantra of progress continues to be deeply embedded in our cultural narrative. And such a narrative impacts the plausibility of the gospel because, if and when we are considered at all, Christians are often seen as in the way of such progress. We are old hat, out of date, out of touch, reactionary and repressive.

Whether it's our belief in a personal God, our beliefs in what it means to be a human person, or our beliefs in what accounts for human flourishing in our human relationships, we belong to the 'then', not the 'now', and definitely not the 'tomorrow'. Moreover, even if we wanted to believe this stuff, we simply can't. There is no going back, only going forward. We need to adapt or die, and even if we adapt, the reality is that the best we can hope for as regards our long term future is probably a kind and gentle euthanisation.

This myth of progress is a problem we need to deconstruct. The good news is that progress has some insurmountable problems which makes it ripe for such a demolition job, and into which the gospel can be constructed.

## Personal progress?

Let's start with the present and our own lives. In their must-read forthcoming book, *Virtually Human: Flourishing in a Digital World*, Ed Brooks and Pete Nicholas make the point that something like Apple's progressive numbering system of products, gives the illusion of smooth continual progress and improvement when in reality it's a little more of a bumpy road. Smartphones have been getting smaller,



*Left: The London Olympics opening ceremony, 2012. Photo by shimelle: http://flic.kr/p/cEzNhh*

but the iPhone 6's greatness is... that it's bigger. What's more, as many of us can testify, fixes and upgrades can create more problems than they solve.

We can mention more sobering examples. For all the benefits, technological progress is meaning both a loss of personal privacy and the ability to hide the most terrible abuse. We're safer than we've ever been, but many of us feel afraid. We cry freedom, freedom, freedom, but the government's proposed counter-terrorism measures, together with those infamous British values, are making us at Oak Hill feel nervous for our future, as we are slowly suffocated by a regulatory nightmare. As my boss Mike says, we are living more and more as if we are in a Kafka novel.

Moreover, for all the utopian glow and positivity, the popularity of shows such as *The Walking Dead* show that dystopian visions are touching a popular cultural nerve. Despite our talk of progress, many people are feeling dehumanized and it's becoming more and more difficult to know who we are and what makes us humans human. And so we grasp at things to get us back in touch with ourselves and with each other.

The phenomenon of *Park-Run* (yes, I indulge), seems to be about community as much it is about staying fit. And then there is craft beer, sustainable food sourcing and more Bake Offs, Sewing Offs and Pottery Offs than we can say 'Off' at. And even then, there is something we are missing. The following little poem by Anthony Thwaite was tucked away in a corner of *The Spectator* a few months back:

*Oh Dear*
*How many times these days I say those words,*
*Muttering them quietly under my breath*
*Or petulantly as the telephone rings*
*Or shocked at some reported piece of news*
*Or simply as a constant formula*
*For things that pass by daily, and are gone*
*Into the nowhere that life seems to be*

*Day after day, as if unceasingly.*
*Too soft to be an expletive, too repetitive*
*To have distinction, more sigh than cry of rage,*
*How many times these days I say those words*
*And may well say them till the day I die*
*When everything's worn out and stiff with age*
*And I have nothing else to say but 'Why?'*

What's going on here? As Brooks and Nicholas point out, 'progress' needs a direction and a destination, the idea of a target getting closer and a concept of the 'good' on which we are all agreed. Our modern idea of progress is fuzzy on all three of these things. And this nicely takes us back in time.

## Historical progress

It's difficult for Christianity to be against progress because the whole concept was deeply influenced by the Christian worldview in the first place. Similar to contemporary Eastern religions, many in the ancient world believed history to be a series of endless repeating cycles without end or resolution. Christianity, however, 'understands history to be under the control of God who is moving it purposefully towards a great and irreversible climax' (Tim Keller).

What seems to have happened around the time of the Enlightenment is that a singular Christian understanding of progress as spiritual improvement was merged with a plural term, *Les progres,* which referred to technological improvement. As Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy says in his book, *The Christian Future*, the concepts might conflict: Bombs get better all the time in the technological sense, but we make progress in the spiritual sense only in not using them.

And then slowly but inexorably, the Christian meaning of the term started to be gradually eroded. In his 1852 poem, 'Progress', Matthew Arnold makes clear how Christianity is to be 'improved': 'Leave then the Cross as ye have left carved gods, But guard the fire within!' However, a modernistic

*Right: The London Olympics opening ceremony, 2012. Photo by shimelle:* http://flic.kr/p/cEzHw9

optimism in the 19th and early 20th century began to give way to a postmodern pessimism both philosophically and experientially in two World Wars and countless other conflicts. Such pessimism remains with us, hence the dystopian nihilistic visions.

One would think this might be the end of progress, but it's a hardy perennial who won't take 'no' for an answer. In a very helpful recent chapter in the book, *Religion and Transhumanism*, Michael Burdett describes the history of the myth of progress, calling it 'a thoroughly religious act' and charting the rise of the transhumanism movement. 'Transhumanism radicalizes the myth of progress. It asserts that not only does technology transform society and the economy for the better, but also individual human experience can be affected directly through bodily enhancement. Transhumanists advocate for applying growing technologies such as nanotechnology and other computer hardware to the human body.' The myth of progress is still very much with us.

## Back to the future

And so we return to the present. How does the Christian worldview and the gospel respond to the myth of progress? First, we need to show how the very concept of progress betrays a Christian way of viewing the world.

Second, we need to show that without direction, destination and a concept of the good, progress is actually regress. The Christian faith gives this direction and destination – in fact, this is where the 'saviours' in Danny Boyle's vision of Jerusalem have their origin. Those things that we most cherish in our liberal Western democracy – freedom, human rights, legal systems, education, care for the weak in hospitals and hospices – didn't simply appear out of nowhere but are the Christian fruit of Christian doctrinal roots. Christians believe that all human beings are created in the image of God and have an inalienable, ineradicable and infinite dignity. With such a high view of humanity, how can a Christian view of the human person be seen as a backward step when compared to a naturalism which says, in the words of John Lennox, that we are 'a stage in an endless, mindless, purposeless unfolding of what is latent in the atomic structure of matter.'

Third, we need to recognize that though humans have a wonderful dignity, they are also capable of terrible depravity, which we don't seem to be getting any better at avoiding, no matter how many times we reboot the system. We must prick the bubble of a naïve idealistic optimism that the progress peddlers sell us.

Fourth, we need to offer a more plausible way of understanding reality which is able to deal with both our dignity and our depravity. As Tim Keller says: 'History ends with the resurrection. Resurrection is complete restoration, but only after death and destruction. This avoids the unbalanced optimism but also the hopelessness of dystopianism.'

Fifth and finally, we offer a challenge. In *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis notes: 'Progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man.'

In Acts 17, the apostle Paul called this 'about-turn' repentance; repentance in the light that history is indeed heading somewhere, the proof of which is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. 'For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17:30).

We call people to turn from the religion of progress with its false promises that will only deliver terrible judgement on that Day. We call people to come in repentance and faith to the Risen Christ and the kingdom he has inaugurated. And from within the context of the church community, our heavenly outpost, we offer the tangible hope of the new heaven and new earth, the idea of Jerusalem – of the better world, the world of real freedom and true equality.

*Dan Strange is the Academic Vice Principal of Oak Hill.*

# Picturing the Word

**Comic strip illustrator and former Oak Hill student Richard Thomas talks to us about how his theological training helped shape the newly-published *Lion Comic Book Hero Bible*.**


**Ever since I was a child** I've read and loved superhero comic books. A few years ago, I was meeting with a group of Christian comic artists, talking about how we could bring the gospel into the wider world and to where we believed people needed it, and I shared with them my idea that the comic book superhero approach would work well in telling the story of the Bible. I was reading Hebrews 11 at the time, with its heroes of faith, who build up into the ultimate hero, Jesus, in Hebrews 12.

**I drew some of the** Old Testament characters to see whether it would work. I drew Moses as the Law Man based on Judge Dredd. I did Samson as the Strong Man, the Hulk-type figure. And I drew the Devil as a character

called the Doppleganger, the person of a thousand changing faces. Others in the group liked the approach and thought it had legs – and several years later we had the green light to produce it as a comic book Bible.

**Three of us made up** the creative team. Siku (Ajibayo Akinsiku) worked on all the Old Testament illustration, and had previously produced the *Manga Bible*, which had tremendous success. Jeff Anderson drew the New Testament pages in a very different and more sensitive style, bringing the chaos of the Old Testament into a much more sober place.

**My role was to write** the text of the book. I was just starting as a student at Oak Hill at that time, so the three of us met as often as we could in our busy lives! We looked at the rough first drawings Siku and Jeff were producing and started to work out how to write the dialogue.

**I always wanted** the narration of the story to be strong. I love the moments in the Old and New Testaments where someone gets up and tells the history of Israel, giving the long view of it. Jesus does that on the road to Emmaus, unfolding the whole gospel story from end to end. Paul does it in Acts 13, telling the story longways and showing how Christ is its fulfilment. So as I wrote, I thought, this has to do the same thing. It has to carry the theology of the whole Bible story.


**The book gives you** the opportunity to sit down for two or three hours and get an impression of the Bible from cover to cover – and get the story into your heart. King David had huge success in fighting the victories of Israel, but it was the Son of David who had the final victory, So for those who have never been able to see how the Old Testament links to the New Testament, this is for them.

**The book of Ruth** was covered in my second year at Oak Hill by Chris Ansberry. He brought to life the whole idea that Ruth was the outsider, who came to be a blessing to Israel. So that's how we portrayed her in the book, as the outsider. It was incredibly enriching for me to concretise my learning, and to be able to get onto paper the essence of what I was learning.

**I'm very pleased** by the way the book has turned out. If I was asked, 'Is this what you planned initially?' I would say 'No!' It looked very different in my head. But I think what the illustrators have done is incredible. We all pushed for high quality in the illustrations, and for very bright colour, because that's how superhero comics are.

**We definitely wanted** to put out something which would intrigue someone who hadn't read the Bible before. We hoped they would see that this book is a bit different, and a bit edgier than expected.

**We are in a literate culture** but it's illiterate in the sense that it doesn't want to read. I think we need a new kind of stained glass window so that people can see the gospel in a simpler form, without being bogged down with detail. Hopefully that will lead people to read the Bible and seek the details. That is what studying theology taught me – that faith seeks understanding.

*Richard Thomas is an artist, designer, and writer, whose works include UNESCO Comic Books and best-selling SU Comics. He is the illustrator on the Book by Book series by Paul Blackham and Richard Bewes.*

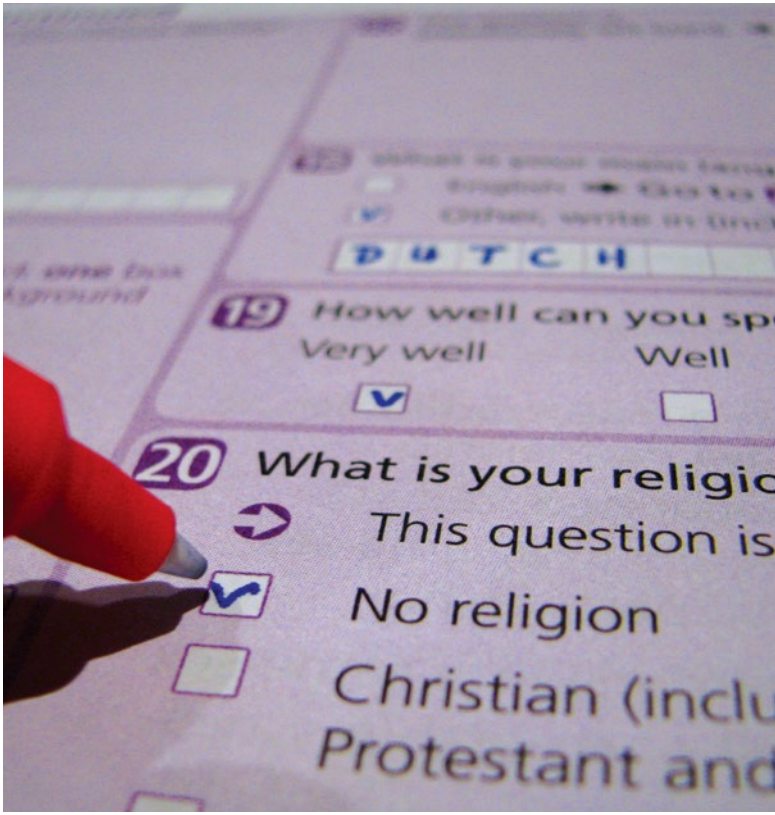
*The Lion Comic Book Hero Bible was published in November and retails at £14.99.*

# The wicked witch is dead. But which witch?

**News that militant atheism, despite its noisy presence, actually numbers a tiny percentage of the population, has not been greeted with outpourings of 'Hooray, the wicked witch is dead!' by Christians. Mike Ovey explains why.**

Want some good news? I was listening to some stats at a recent conference and we were told that of those who say there is no God, there are only very few – a 'tiny percentage' – who actually come under the heading of angry, militant atheist. There are, it seems, very few real Richard Dawkins clones. So, the speaker suggested, do not fret about the growth of militant atheism. Statistically, it just ain't happening.

Admittedly, those who do fall into the militant atheist bracket may make a lot of noise (just read the posts following articles on religion in our *soi-disant* quality newspapers), but demographically an awful lot of it comes




*Right: Completing the 2011 Census.*
*Photo by Tico: http://flic.kr/p/9t24aa*

**In an important sense, does it matter if someone is not a Richard Dawkins groupie when he or she still does not come to hear the Word of God and worship him?**

from affluent, over-educated white middle-aged/elderly males residing in the leafier parts of north Oxford. To that extent, the speaker concluded, the old paradigm of the inevitable, progressive secularisation of western culture is just 'not true'. The secularisation theory is dead and buried.

Interestingly, quite a few of my fellow-attendees did not greet the news of the death of this theory with outpourings of 'Hooray, the wicked witch is dead!' I find that intriguing and shrewd. But it is surprising. That's because an awful lot of Christian thinking since the mid-60s has been posited on the truth of the secularisation thesis – the idea that western culture was moving to a position where religion was not needed as a sacred canopy to guarantee society.

Secularisation theory was demoralising, because it gave us the impression that Christians were on the wrong side of history. The historical process was moving inevitably against us and all we could be, it felt like, was a minority voice on the margins. At best tolerated, but there would be little point in evangelism when we were all doomed by the ineluctable historical process of secularisation. It was paralysing. So, to hear that this theory was 'discredited' by responsible sociologists ought to have cheered us all up, yes? But why then did some of us wonder whether this was to some extent false comfort?

Do not misunderstand me here. There are at least two reasons why I think it is good that even secular sociologists are – belatedly – falling out of love with the secularisation thesis. First, I think it was demoralising to feel on the wrong side of history, and demoralisation can paralyse proclaiming

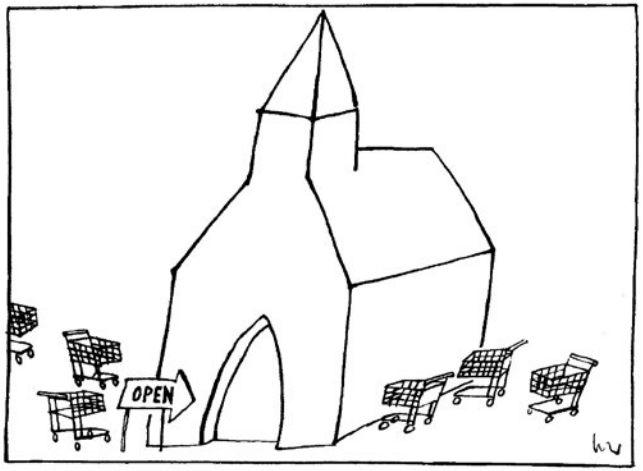



*Image by jimforest: http://flic.kr/p/63Amrn*

the gospel. Secondly, I think as it was normally put, the theory was not true, never true, and acting on fallacious sociological theories is unlikely to advance the gospel, even if I have not been demoralised.

Nevertheless, there are three things that should give us pause. First, what the theory was meant to explain was why organised religion, and Christianity in particular in the western context, was becoming more marginal. Put sharply, why are so few people in churches on Sunday mornings rather than playing sport, going to a shopping mall, having a weekend break or just plain having a lie-in? That sharp empirical fact was what, I think, stuck in the gullet of my fellow-attendees. In an important sense, does it matter if someone is not a Richard Dawkins groupie when he or she still does not come to hear the Word of God and worship him?

Secondly, we need to be clear that the problem with the secularisation theory was not just that it painted a false picture of the historical social process, but that it misconstrued what Christian theology and faith is trying to do. Christian 'religion' is not about providing a sacred canopy under which members of society can have an integrated, cohesive set of social values which are aptly

appropriated and internalised by members of that society. Theologically it is about, as Paul puts it in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 and 10, turning in repentance from idols to serve the true and living God and awaiting his Son who has conquered death and delivers us from the wrath of final judgment. Obviously, part and parcel of this summary of the gospel is that humans are caught in idolatry and need to serve the true and living God.

This perspective of idols v true and living God is vital. It is very clear that idols can provide a 'sacred canopy' which functions to help the social construction of reality. That does not tell us whether it is a good canopy, or whether the reality that it helps construct is humane or cruel, good or bad, or – even more importantly – true. To that extent, I might even welcome secularisation if it helped eradicate a 'sacred canopy' that acted as a guarantor of something like a caste system which saw some of my fellow men and women as 'untouchables'.

However, Christian theologians have long recognised that idols are not simply found in 'other religions': an idol is something that functions in Tertullian's classic words as *pro deo adversus deum* – 'for God and against God'. (*On Idolatry*). That word 'pro', though, has a significant double edge: it can mean 'in place of' / 'substitute for', but can also mean 'in front of'. I find this double edge quite telling. An idol is a God-substitute in that it stands in place of God and can do so by standing in front of him – he is obscured by it. This helps me see that an idol need not be another 'god' like Zeus or Wotan, but anything that comes between me and the true God, usurping his proper place in my worship, blocking him out of my sight.

**An apparently non-church, non-mosque, non-synagogue, or non-temple society can positively reek of idolatry.**

Put that way, of course, an apparently non-church, non-mosque, non-synagogue, or non-temple society can positively reek of idolatry, because there are all kinds of ways in which something can come between me and God and distract my attention onto it. Notably, wealth, reputation and self-glorification, the idols that Jesus sees at work amongst the Pharisees. In that sense, the secularised society is just another way of describing an idolatrous society. And that is the vice of the secularisation thesis: it distracted us from looking at our post-60s western culture as profoundly religious in an idolatrous sense. And the vice of simply rejoicing over the demise of the secularisation thesis is that it continues that distraction and does not take us to the key issues of whether we are idolatrous, what our idols are and how as Christians we can expose them as lies.

That takes me to my third observation. We are duty bound to expose idols wherever we find them as lies. There is only one true God and Jesus is his eternally begotten Son. But as soon as I say this I offend not merely Richard Dawkins (an admittedly far from disagreeable duty) but also all those people who are not 'militant atheists', but are deeply committed to a culture which regards 'religion' much as it regards an extensive restaurant menu: some will like fish, some red meat and others lentil stew. But the choice is a matter of the individual taste of the consumer, and circumscribing that choice is seen as authoritarian and inconsistent with consumer sovereignty.

In fact, such authoritarian attitudes show, to a consumerist mindset, a kind of protectionism, in that consumer choices are artificially constrained by vested interests in favour of one product or brand rather than another. Blend that with the misgiving that religious protectionism is associated with violence and you have a very strong set of antipathies. To that extent, who cares if militant atheism is dead if what replaces it is a social attitude, backed by the relevant laws, that attempts to stop me saying that the difference between Christianity and idols is that Christianity is true? Oddly enough, the sociology stats didn't deal with that one.

*Mike Ovey is the Principal of Oak Hill.*

# The art of sword fighting

**STUDENT PROFILE**

**Pete Snow, who is in his final year at Oak Hill, reflects on his time at the College**

'So you're going to study at theological college?' My friend grinned over the table at me. We were having breakfast in a Clapham café. Two Full Englishes and steaming mugs of tea had just arrived at the table. My companion picked up his knife and fork and tucked into his protein jackpot.

'That's great. I mean, theology's *lovely*, isn't it? There's something indulgent about studying it for a long time like you'll be doing,' he said through a mouthful of egg and toast.

That made me smile, for two reasons. First, in his Cockney twang he pronounced 'lovely' with an 'a' vowel. It was a much more enthusiastic tribute than with an 'o' sound. Secondly, he had only recently come back to the Lord. Several years of debauchery (his word) had finally been punctuated by a reunion with his heavenly Father and real repentance. So for him to pronounce theology 'lavely' was a mark of how far he'd come. Here he was, envying me my three years at theological college.

His evaluation troubled me, though. Was I indeed being indulgent? Was spending so long studying theology really a good use of time, or should I feel guilty about all the other worthy uses to which I could put those years?

More recently, I was helping at Oak Hill's graduation ceremony, seeing close to 40 of my peers get their degrees in a packed Lecture Room 1. It was a masterpiece of sartorial splendour, and I was quite moved to see a whole cohort of gospel workers leave college equipped for ministry. As a third year student myself, I felt my own graduation ceremony encroaching. My time at Oak Hill is ebbing away. In a mere 12 months, I'll be in their polished

shoes, shaking the Principal's hand. How can I begin to process all that's happened to me here?

There are many memories I'll take away, of course. Whether it's the boisterous lunchtime discussions or the often-painful Greek classes, football in the driving rain or praying with a few friends in Chapel, trying to memorise church history dates or perhaps being on the maintenance team and finding myself in first term face down on the front drive, cleaning rotten leaves out of the drains!

I'll also remember some less tangible but nonetheless impressive things. I'll remember the camaraderie between Independents and Anglicans, typified by our lectures with Graham Beynon and Mark Pickles, which were nonetheless rigorous and passionate about ecclesiology. I'll remember the waves of new students arriving each September – 58 of them in the most recent intake, 20 of them ordinands – and the fresh opportunities for training they represent. I'll remember the part-time students arriving on Mondays from their various ministries and the distance students dialling into lectures online, reminding us that we're part of something bigger.

But I think most of all I'll remember the sword fighting. Yes, sword fighting. But alas, I don't mean that fencing has become part of the curriculum. Rather, I've come to see sword fighting as an apt analogy for the whole gamut of theological education that Oak Hill provides. Humour me, if you will, as I try to explain.

We are familiar with the idea of scripture as a sword (from Ephesians 6:17 and Hebrews 4:12). Well, before I came to college I engaged in some sword fighting. I was a church apprentice, and thereafter a youth worker and a church planter. I was entrusted with some sermons and Bible studies, and I wielded the sword with the zeal of one who believes it is the living and active word of God. If one were using fencing parlance, one might say that I could lunge. And I might even hope to score some points.

What I'm realising, now I'm approaching graduation, is how great the sword is. Learning systematic theology here, for instance, has taught me how the sword fits together: I have a new confidence in the parts and in the whole. Learning the biblical languages has made me less afraid of what opponents might call weak spots in the Bible: I'm *au fait* with the rules and bonds that constructed it. And learning about culture has made me willing to go and slice open any given cultural trend and expose what lies beneath: I'm confident in the sharp edge of scripture to pare whatever the world has to offer.

In short, I've become a better swordsman. And I don't mean that I've learnt clever moves, or that I have a sort of 'game plan' for fighting the world, the flesh and the devil from graduation onwards – although I've picked up some helpful tips. Rather, I hope I have become a swordsman in the best possible sense: I have become more a man of the sword, more confident in the weapon that's been handed down to me.

I'm reminded of the parting words of Mr Valiant-for-Truth in *Pilgrim's Progress:* 'My Sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my Pilgrimage, and my Courage and Skill to him that can get it. My Marks and Scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought his Battles who now will be my Rewarder.'

I take up the same great sword as the saints of old! It's the same weapon God has given to all his ministers for all their tasks, all down the ages – if only they would use it.

No doubt I have much to learn. I suspect a few hours into my curacy I'll be realising that. But I'm glad my time here at college hasn't been wasted. As I now point out to my Cockney friend who I met in the café, it's not indulgent to train hard to protect the flock, defend against error, ward off the devil and win souls for Christ. It's sword fighting!

# Teacher or learner?

**STUDENT PROFILE**

**When Dave Baldwin swapped the lecturer's podium for the student's desk, he gained a new appreciation for how teaching, learning and living work together.**

For the past two years at Oak Hill College, I have been leading a double life.

After teaching missions as a visiting lecturer in the Theology for Crossing Cultures stream for a year, I realised that I too needed to learn more. Others, frankly, confirmed me in that opinion. And so I was enrolled on the Oak Hill MA programme alongside my visiting lecturing. I was 50.

Many strange experiences ensued. The first was getting an NUS (National Union of Students) card. I hadn't had one of those for over 20 years, but quickly learned how to look dubious retailers in the eye and insist on my discounted cinema tickets or free cheeseburger, while holding out my student card for inspection. This

provoked much mirth and envy among our children, one of whom now has to pay full price, another of whom could flash his card alongside mine and two of whom are still dreaming of the day when their student cards drop through the letterbox.

More substantive was the odd mix of emotions I experienced while sitting in MA classes alongside students I had taught the previous year as undergraduates. One term I'd been their teacher, the next their fellow student. I'd gone from David, in a jacket, who presumably knew something, to Dave, in jeans, who didn't seem to know anything. At least that was how it sometimes felt when I encountered new material that stretched me and I had to lean on my fellow students for help. They were consistently gracious and welcoming as my fellow learners, and I developed a deeper appreciation for them.

As well as appreciating the Oak Hill students more, sitting on the other side of the desk deepened my appreciation for the teaching staff. I credited four taught modules in addition to the self-study involved in the MA dissertation. In every class I was challenged by the depth of the faculty's expertise, their passion for the Bible and resolute determination to make even the most technical aspects of their subjects relevant and applicable to everyday life. It was a bit weird being taught by lecturers at 10.40am and then having tea with them in the staff room at 10.50, but we soon got used to it. I've since realised that my smug assumption that I was the only lecturer to be engaged in ongoing learning was premature – one colleague is even doing a distance MSc in Digital Education, whatever that might be.

At the risk of sounding like a wedding speech, let me direct appreciation in one further direction: older learners. College life is full of 'bright young things' and we'd be foolish not to rejoice in that. But experiencing first-hand the frustrations and delights of being a mature learner brought home to me how important but difficult is the quest to be a life-long learner.

At the start of every module I was on the look out for other students as chronologically challenged as myself. In my worst moments, I was glad that my grey matter wouldn't necessarily be the slowest in the room. In my best, I was able to be sensitive to the initial bewilderment older learners often feel when coming back to academia after years away, breathless at the blistering pace set and wondering how to keep up. I delighted in the rich depths and earthiness of the life experience they brought into the classroom. Fast food, they bring not, but you can't beat the flavours brought out by long marinades.

I'm not quite old enough to have heard him say it, but apparently Seneca the Younger (4 BC to AD 64) offered this advice to his correspondent Lucilius: *docendo discimus* ('by teaching we are learning'). That he said this around the time of Christ may make his wisdom pale by comparison, but it's worth letting him remind us that teaching and learning are intrinsically linked. His particular point, picked up by trendy modern pedagogues, is that we learn through teaching. At first sight

**In every class, I was challenged by the depth of the faculty's expertise, their passion for the Bible and resolute determination to make even the most technical aspects of their subjects relevant and applicable to everyday life.**

this seems a bit back to front, a bit counterintuitive, but Seneca's genius was that he noticed that it wasn't. If you really want to know something inside out, try teaching it.

But is teaching it enough? I have a love-hate relationship with catchy little phrases that sum everything up in a memorable bite. Here's one from a website, Fortune Management, about being successful and making lots of money (not yet among the Oak Hill module offerings). 'Learn it, live it, teach it!' Or should that be, 'Teach it, learn it, live it'? Or 'Live it, teach it, learn it'? It probably doesn't matter. However you feel about cute slogans, there is definitely a further connection to be made here. Learning and teaching are divorced from everyday life at their mortal peril.

Fortune Management probably isn't the authority one might have expected to be cited here, but as the old adage goes, even a broken clock is right twice a day.

The ultimate rabbi's half brother, James, who had doubtless heard Jesus' own teaching on students and their masters (Matthew 10:24 and Luke 6:40) warned those under his care not to presume to be teachers (James 3:1). The immediate context is eminently practical – taming the tongue – and the broader context is James's characteristic determination that all Christian teaching must necessarily be worked out in Christian living. If I don't realise that 'faith without deeds is dead', then James writes me off as a 'foolish person' (James 2:20).

So coming back to theological education, and my schizophrenic existence as both Oak Hill teacher and student, James's groundedness reminds me that I might well have been wasting my time on both fronts over the last two years. The authenticating test is how the theological learning, bartered in the classroom and leeched out of the library, fleshes out in my life, my ministry and that of my students. If it isn't organically connected to our mission life, youth work and church service then it's little more than a theological corpse. Conversely, if it's properly earthed, then I learn better, I teach better and I live better.

What's the next thing I want to learn, to teach and to live? Professor Andrew Walls describes the present explosion of the church in the global south as part of an original, 'Ephesian moment' (as described in his 2002 book, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*). Just as 1st century Christians from different backgrounds and cultures were thrown together in newly forming Christian churches, so too Christians today are increasingly thrown together in an ever shrinking world.

We are so long accustomed to considering ourselves to be in the Christian export business, as the purveyors, guardians, packers and shippers of sound doctrine. So my big question is this: What can Western Christians now learn from the majority church in the rest of the world? What can I learn? What must I learn?

The MA is more or less over now, but looking forward, I'm wondering just how teachable I'm really going to be?

*Dave Baldwin is Director of Theology for Crossing Cultures at Oak Hill.*

# A glittering horror story

**A survey conducted for the Church of England in 2012 found that 26 per cent of people in the UK believe in reincarnation. Kirsty Birkett reflects on this belief, which is powerfully attractive today because of its focus on individuality and enlightenment.**

I have been reading a novel recently based on New Age ideas of reincarnation. It's all there: souls that move from body to body, and life to life; all connected to the universe and to each other; magic and power and spiritual awakening can be ours if we just open ourselves to the possibilities, connect back to our souls. It's a long time since I came across it. I used to read this stuff all the time, pre-conversion (in longing) and post-conversion (in disdain), but seeing it now after many years as a Christian, it strikes me just how horrific this view of the world is.

**It destroys relationships.** If souls can migrate from body to body, lifetime to lifetime, then none of our relationships are real. You might be my father in this lifetime, but in a previous one you could have been my brother or my friend or my daughter or my slave. Even my deadly enemy. We may have lived many lifetimes together, but in each of those lifetimes our relationship was completely false.

When the only reality is the transhuman one of migrating souls, human relationships are illusions. You are not actually my father, or my brother or sister or friend; you are an indeterminate, genderless being who, for a time, lives a lie in which I collude. New Age reincarnation is presented as a wonderful doctrine, that makes relationships eternal and immensely deep; in fact it makes relationships unreal.

**It is utterly lonely.** In any lifetime, I do not know myself or anyone else, and my goal is for my own enlightenment. The ideal is to be some kind of advanced soul, aware of the reality of one's own spiritual path beyond all other relationships. The ascended souls, the self-aware ones, are pictured as entirely self-sufficient, serene people who need no one because they are beyond weakness.

Western New Age seems to have taken the mystical notions of losing identity as the soul becomes one with the universe, and changed it into a profound individualism. It sounds attractive because one is at peace with reality, knowing all things, being able to do all manner of magic, beyond the normal stresses of daily life – but what is actually being described is a losing of all the ties that actually make us human.

**There is no judgment, just forgiveness. And no real forgiveness, either.** In this particular novel, part of our hero's coming of age is the ability to forgive souls who have done him terrible wrong in past lives. One betrayed him when they were Roman slaves together, then when he was her daughter during the Inquisition, then when she was the daughter of a neighbour under Nazi Germany.

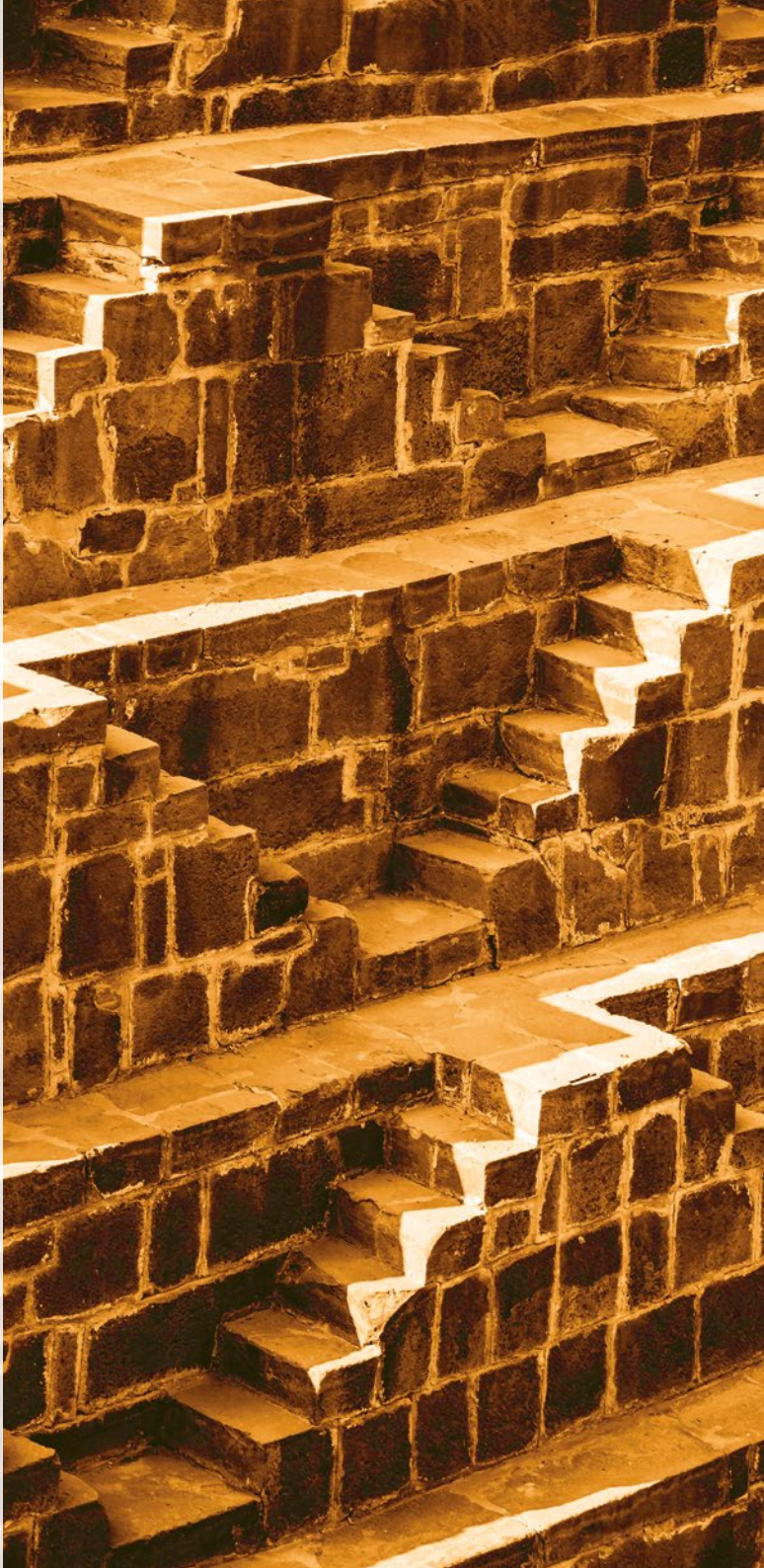
Each time, he was able to forgive because he saw into her own life and the cruelty she/he had suffered; he decided that he could understand why someone would do something so terrible.

That's not forgiveness; that's making excuses. If the person really couldn't help acting in a terrible way, if it's really that understandable, then there is actually no need for forgiveness. True forgiveness is costly, because it comes when a person actually is guilty. Making excuses is finding reasons why the person is not really guilty.

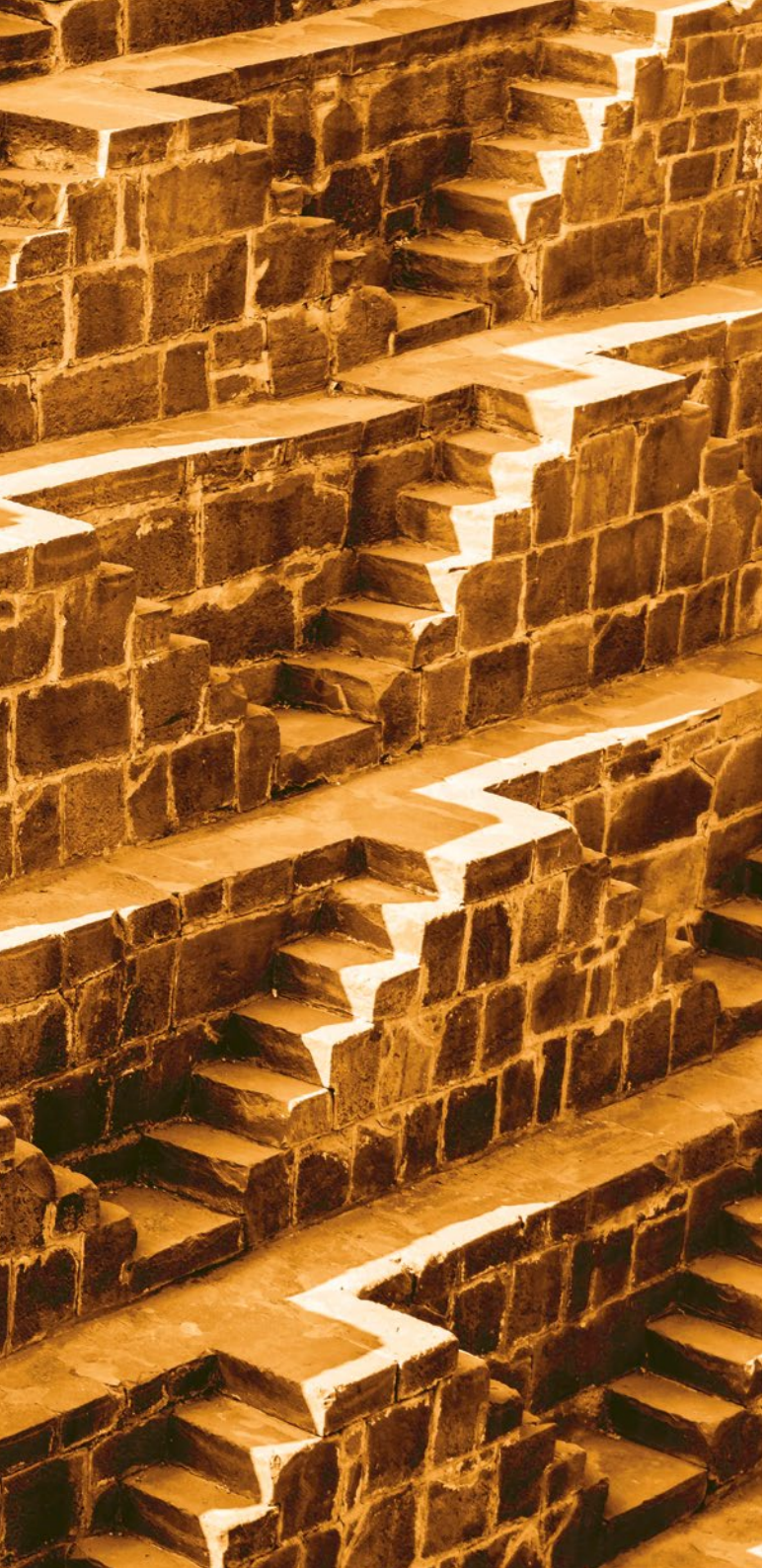
If a person is guilty, then at some point there needs to be judgment. If there is no such thing, then there is no forgiveness; what is being forgiven? Something that didn't deserve any retribution in the first place? If there is no judgment, there is no actual forgiveness. Just deeds that don't really matter.

'Forgiveness is powerful. You may think it benefits the other person, but it is all for the forgiver.' This sounds like a nice sentiment, but ultimately lets us down. If forgiveness doesn't benefit the other person, they didn't really need it, did they? This is not forgiveness, it is merely ceasing to be angry at something that deserved anger. That's self-deception, not a benefit.

**There is no evil in the universe other than what humans do.** One might object that this is still quite a lot of evil; but in this worldview, even that is relatively easily overcome. Humans simply need to get in



*The stepwell at Chand Baori, Rajasthan, India. Photo by r.monroy: http://flic.kr/p/qRdRQs*



touch with their souls again and stop being evil. Just like that. However, the evil they have done already will never be dealt with, because as we have seen, there is no judgment and no forgiveness. The best to hope for is a collective amnesia, or massive self-deception, to pretend that the bad things never really mattered in the first place; and with no guarantee that evil won't start up again.

When there is no actual explanation for greed or violence or other destructive behaviour, there can be no solution for it, either. There's a lot of hope and wishful thinking; but even in a novel where reality can be manipulated to make a false worldview true, it leaves a deeply despondent sense of the future.

**Yet New Age reincarnation sounds so good.** Nonetheless, this worldview is immensely attractive. It is attractive precisely because of its inhumanity. To be human is to be dependent; dependent upon God who created us, and dependent upon each other because we were created in his image to be in relationship. We don't like it.

How much more attractive to be unaccountably powerful, forgiven without cost, losing the effects of being sinned against simply through willpower. How attractive to be independent and free, above time and physicality, able to enjoy relationships without ties or responsibilities or consequences because no one is ever really attached to anyone else, and in another lifetime it will all be different anyway.

It is profoundly inhuman in all its loveliness. Glittering with magic and auras and the spirituality of nature; full of a web of interconnectedness that nonetheless binds no one; offering community and friendship without commitment or any loss of freedom. It lies, under the guise of age-old truth. Spirituality without God – the ultimate rejection of his goodness.

*Kirsty Birkett lectures in Ethics, Philosophy and Church History at Oak Hill.*

# First is first, second is ~~nowhere~~ second

**Mark Pickles believes that Anglican evangelicals need to be clear about secondary as well as primary issues, without turning secondary issues into primary issues, or saying that they are unimportant.**

The legendary Bill Shankly once said, 'First is first, second is nowhere.' Though it pains me to disagree with the great man, I have to say that I think he was wrong. To rip his words out of context, mangle them somewhat and apply them theologically, it is not true to say: 'Matters of first importance are primary, while matters of secondary importance are nowhere.'

At a recent College Council meeting, Graham Beynon (Director of Independent Training) and I outlined the principles and content of the Joint Ministry Training Course that we run together. From a shared commitment to the gospel and the authority of scripture, we told the Council that we begin with biblical principles for pastoral ministry and then move to practical application. We agree on issues of primary importance, but want to communicate and model that we differ on 'secondary issues'.

For me, the decision to leave parish ministry after 26 years to come to Oak Hill was prompted by an increasing conviction that as Anglican evangelicals committed to parish ministry and the flourishing of the gospel within our denomination, more than ever we need to be clear about secondary as well as primary matters. Historic Anglicanism, which finds theological expression in the 39 Articles and *Book of Common Prayer*, contains so much treasure and wisdom, that it is vital that evangelical Anglican ordinands are equipped to mine that treasure and see its contemporary relevance and application for parish ministry today.

This is never less than a commitment to the biblical gospel and the authority of scripture, but it is more than that. Being Director of Anglican Training has a kind of *Catch 22* feel to it: If you want to be at college teaching about ministry, then you shouldn't be at college! If you would rather be in the parish getting on with gospel ministry, then you might be the right person to be teaching about ministry!

It is easy to misunderstand a nuanced approach to secondary issues. We can either put secondary issues together with or even above issues of primary importance, so that we become narrow and isolationist. We grow wary and suspicious of anyone who does not hold to our lengthy list of the necessary components of orthodoxy.

Or we can misinterpret 'secondary' to mean 'unimportant'.

Like many other theological complexities, this choice is subject to pendulum swings of reaction and overreaction. However, in our present day context within conservative evangelicalism, I fear that we are more prone to the latter error.

The proliferation of Gospel Partnerships in recent years is a tremendously encouraging development for the furtherance of the gospel and the deepening of genuine evangelical unity rooted in the gospel. Similarly, the work of UCCF and the strength and vitality of many university Christian Unions has been greatly used by God to bring people to Christ and to disciple and nurture them effectively in the faith. Part of the genius of these organisations and others like them is precisely that they focus on issues of primary importance and do not divide over issues of secondary importance.

However, when considering full-time gospel ministry, issues of secondary importance inevitably come into play and need to be thought through carefully and prayerfully. At Oak Hill, we want to encourage students to be clear on what is primary and what is secondary, but also to have clear and firm convictions about secondary as well as primary issues. We encourage students to have strong convictions that they hold with gracious humility.

With Independent and Anglican students working side by side, thinking about, debating and discussing such issues, Oak Hill provides a natural context to foster convictional humility and gracious doctrinal clarity. If you are an Anglican ordinand, for example, you cannot get away with thinking that paedo-baptism is unimportant and therefore it really doesn't matter what you think about it. At the same time, you won't be able to leave Oak Hill with unformed, unclear, vague opinions about paedo-baptism that you have not thought through. Your Independent neighbour will be very quick to challenge you and force you to scrutinise your theological position in the light of scripture.

Such an environment demands that you think through your understanding carefully, thoroughly and biblically. Furthermore, you cannot get away with concluding that paedo-baptism might be wrong, but that you will continue to pursue Anglican ordination because you deem it to be 'the best boat to fish from'. Issues of integrity and doctrinal consistency come to the fore. Contrast that with a college environment that simply trains students for the same denomination. Of course you can teach, explore and discuss matters of secondary importance at single denomination colleges, but inevitably the stakes will not be as high, and the experience will lack the cut and thrust of debate with fellow students who challenge you to give a coherent defence of your position.

Furthermore, in training Anglican ordinands in particular, we certainly prize and encourage convictional clarity about the authority and trustworthiness of scripture and the biblical gospel but we also want to encourage convictional clarity about secondary issues that are part and parcel of what it means to be Anglican. In a sentence, the goal of the training course we run here for Anglican ordinands, is that they might leave College as enthusiastic and convictional Anglicans, with an appreciation of Anglican distinctives as part of the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' church.

There is no one defining characteristic that sets Anglicanism apart from other Christian churches

**It is easy to misunderstand a nuanced approach to secondary issues. We can either put secondary issues together with or even above issues of primary importance, so that we become narrow and isolationist. Or we can misinterpret 'secondary' to mean 'unimportant'.**

or denominations, but it is rather the overall combination of a number of characteristics that give shape to the genius and wisdom of Anglicanism.

In his booklet, *The Thirty-Nine Articles: Their Place and Use Today*, JI Packer writes: 'The 39 Articles seem not only to catch the substance and spirit of biblical Christianity superbly well but also provide as apt a model of the way to confess the faith in a divided Christendom as the world has yet seen.' I share his enthusiasm and want to encourage a similar conviction amongst ordinands.

Historic Anglicanism is catholic and reformed, committed to the supreme authority of scripture and the biblical gospel. It gladly affirms the Reformed doctrine of grace and contributes a liturgy that is shaped by it. It is episcopal and parochial, which is an expression of a desire to serve the nation and win it to Christ, and it has a Reformed understanding of the sacraments and of their importance in congregational life.

A commitment to the biblical gospel and the authority of scripture enables us to understand, critique and evaluate our rich Anglican heritage from Cranmer, Hooker, the Caroline Divines, the Evangelical Revival and the Oxford Movement down to the issues facing us as Anglicans today. Some obvious implications of this are:

**The importance of time** – The riches and complexities of Anglican theology, history and practice take time to understand, process and evaluate. This cannot be done quickly or superficially and it takes more than merely listening to lectures. Theological college enables students not only to be taught, but also to reflect, meditate, discuss and debate. It provides the necessary resources, such as a faculty which is on hand, a library that is immediately available, and a natural environment for ongoing discussion over meal times and coffee.

**The importance of clarity and precision** – Studying at college alongside Independent students helps to focus and sharpen ordinands' own understanding of Anglican distinctives, especially in terms of ecclesiology, sacraments and polity. A unity in the gospel provides a framework of mutual respect in which to think through secondary differences in a way that is stimulating but not threatening; challenging but not divisive.

**The importance of the integration of theology and practice** – The constant movement between theology and practice is an intrinsic part of college life. Lectures on pastoral ministry will constantly ask: How does this principle work out in practice? What are its implications for church life and ministry? Placement experience constantly provokes questions such as: Why is it done this way? What are the theological principles shaping and driving it?

A young ordinand leaving college today faces potentially 30-40 years of ministry in a rapidly changing world, in a culture that is increasingly secular and in a broad denomination with competing theological traditions. For such complexity, it is essential that ordinands are as well-equipped as they can possibly be.

Oak Hill is intent on providing such a training. We work to foster unity in matters of primary importance, and gracious humility in matters of secondary importance, while also holding them with strong and clear conviction.

*Mark Pickles is Director of Anglican Ministry Training at Oak Hill, where he also teaches courses in Homiletics and Gospel Driven Leadership.*

**Historic Anglicanism is catholic and reformed, committed to the supreme authority of scripture and the biblical gospel. It gladly affirms the Reformed doctrine of grace and contributes a liturgy that is shaped by it.**

# ENDURING IN AUTHENTIC MINISTRY

**Ever struggle with aspects of your ministry? You will feel at home in Paul's letter of 2 Corinthians.**

Paul mentors us in standing against false teachers, enduring through suffering, loving a congregation, and following Christ as we are shaped into more authentic ministers of the gospel.

This intensive course for pastors and teachers was led last summer by Dr George Guthrie.

Listen to all the sessions from the intensive on the Oak Hill website. Also see our video interview with George Guthrie, as he talks about his life, theological study and ministry.

**oakhill.ac.uk/guthrie**

# Mission impossible?

**What are the characteristics which will help world mission survive and flourish in the 21st century? Ray Porter has five items at the top of his list for churches, mission agencies and gospel workers, as we work together to present Christ to the whole world.**

Lottie Moon will not be on your Christmas list, but for the Southern Baptist denomination in the USA, the annual giving to a fund in her name has been the main source of support for the 4,700 missionaries who serve with their International Mission Board (IMB). But giving has not kept up with expenditure and over the last five years, IMB has spent $210m dollars more than it has received. Now it needs to shed 800 missionaries. It seems that the denomination's 16 million members can't support world mission as it used to.

If one of the largest mission agencies in America is having to retrench, what does it say about the viability of world mission in the future? The UK rarely operates a salary structure like the IMB. Instead, individual missionaries have to raise or pray in their funding. Most aspiring UK missionaries eventually get the required support, especially if they have supportive churches or friends who are earning good salaries. But costs continue to mount. Are they sustainable in the long run?

We hear of the growth of the world church. We admire African bishops who appear to have a heart for the gospel. At the same time, we see the poverty of some countries and want to dig deeply into our pockets to respond to their needs. Integral mission, seeing proclamation and social action as two wings of the same bird, has been the watchword of most mission agencies since Lausanne 1974. More recently for some agencies, the verbal proclamation of the gospel has been given a much lower priority than social action. Interestingly, under the influence of the churches of the South, the World Council of Churches, which seemed to abandon gospel proclamation in the 1960s, has begun to talk again about evangelism at a time when many evangelicals are more muted about it.

So what should the British church be doing about world mission?

## 1 The gospel at the centre

First, there needs to be a reaffirmation of the centrality of gospel proclamation in all evangelical mission work. An assumed gospel centre can become a neglected gospel. If we do not have Christ presented as the only Saviour of mankind, and his call to repentance proclaimed, then a mission agency is little more than a poor imitation of a secular NGO.

## 2 Working with other cultures

Secondly, we must embrace friendship with our brothers and sisters in other countries and cultures. The patronising era when the West knew best and mission was from the West to the rest has ended. Many years ago, when I was in Indonesia, the government wanted the churches to only have foreign experts who would fill gaps in their abilities. Church leaders responded that they would always want brothers and sisters to come to work alongside them. That is the nature of a world church.

Many Western Christians and mission agencies still think they know what others need. They plan their work without consultation. They export the latest flavour of Christian training, sometimes without a thought of contextualising it or even presenting it in the language of the recipients. They may send out volunteers that undermine local labour or initiative. They send in funds that destroy local stewardship. They want instant results and cannot give themselves to the lengthy process of developing friendship and trust.

I once heard the story of three women who went to work in a Middle Eastern country. Initially, all three joined in with a local church, but then two left to do their own thing, because they did not think the church had any evangelistic outreach. It was about a year later that the remaining woman was taken on one side by the pastor's wife and introduced to all the outreach that was taking place. Asked why they had not been told earlier, the pastor's wife replied, 'It is only now that we know we can trust you.'

## 3 The question of stewardship

Thirdly, the question of stewardship must be addressed. There are many areas which need to be thought about. Churches need to encourage, examine and recognise the call of God to overseas and cross-cultural mission amongst their members. They, as much as the missionary and the agency,

*Children in school in a hill village in central Myanmar. Photo by Eliseo García Nieto: http://flic.kr/p/6dKXMV*

need to seek funding from the Lord for this work with as much energy as they address to their own local needs. All mission agencies should ask themselves whether they need to go it alone. Small agencies in particular either absorb a disproportionate amount of finance in administration or else provide so little support that the churches might send missionaries to an overseas church without them. When an agency is working harder at its own viability than in furthering the mission to which it was called, it should reassess its position. Mergers, joint-working agreements, and avoidance of duplication are all issues to be addressed.

The financing of missionaries should also be thought about. When William Carey went to India, he looked for finance to get himself established there, and then found employment. One of our former students was able to write to his supporters a few years ago and say that his local activities were providing all the money he needed to live in his country of service, and the only support he would need in future was for those needs particular to him as a foreigner.

We need to develop a new vision of people going out with their professions to serve in other countries. Their finance would come from their employment. Their mission field would be in the workplace as much as domestically. And sending churches must recognise and pray for such ministry, providing pastoral support and helping them to keep mission central to their vision.

## 4 The world church starts here

Fourthly, we need to see ourselves as part of the world church. Many missionaries are now coming to darkest Britain. Some are seeking their own lost sheep, but others have a vision for the pagan British. Are we making friends with them? Are we helping them to contextualise to us? Are we seeking to work together with them rather than their repeating all the missionary mistakes we made in their countries? Do we see their response to our local needs and our engagement with work overseas as part of one circle of ministry?

**We need people who are prepared to give themselves to the long task of language learning and cultural acquisition that they might know how to bring the gospel to impact on people cross-culturally.**

## 5 Cross-cultural training

Fifthly, we need to think about the people who are sent as missionaries. There are overseas churches which need friends who will get alongside them and help them in training pastors and discipling believers. But these must be people who are equipped intellectually and spiritually for such a task. There are still many parts of the world where there is little gospel light. We need people who are prepared to give themselves to the long task of language learning and cultural acquisition that they might know how to bring the gospel to impact on people cross-culturally.

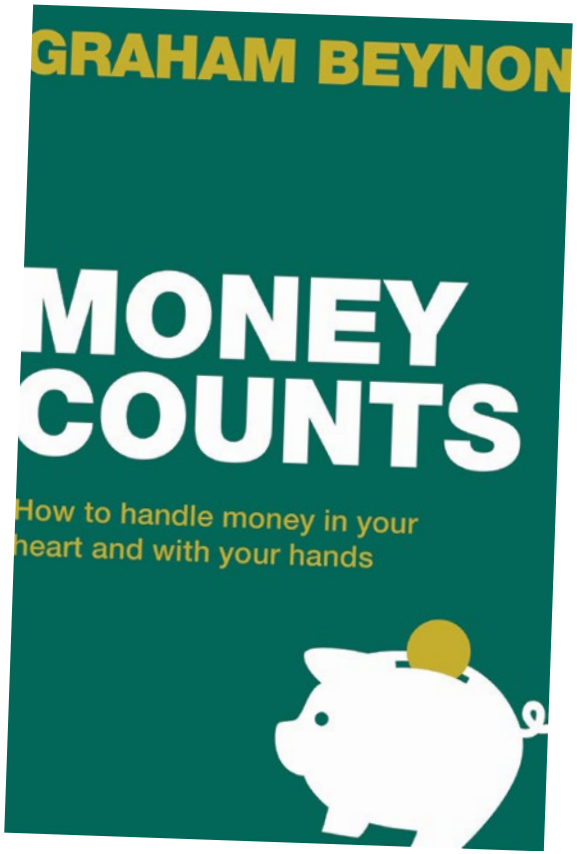
When we began the Theology for Crossing Cultures Course 10 years ago, it was with the conviction that those going into world mission need at least as much training as a minister going into Bedfordshire, plus having the tools to begin to apply that knowledge cross-culturally. (For some of us, going to parts of Bedfordshire might be a cross-cultural ministry!) With God's grace, such people will be able to sustain a long ministry.

Jesus said that he would build his church. We are called to be fellow-workers with him in that task. Let us ensure that we do not, by our failure to think seriously about what we are doing, become part of the power of Hades that needs to be overcome.

*Ray Porter is Visiting Lecturer in World Mission Studies at Oak Hill.*

# The topic no one wants to talk about

**Money is one of the great non-subjects of church life: we don't think about it, don't discuss it, and are rarely challenged on it. That's why Graham Beynon has written a book, *Money Counts*, to help get money back into the thinking and decision-making of Christians and local churches.**




Jesus said more about money than any other topic: more than sex, more than hell, and more than salvation. That simple fact should tell us how important it is — or rather, how important it is that we get money right. Yet the thought of talking about money in any meaningful way in our church might make us squirm. In fact, Martin Luther once said that there were three stages to a person's conversion: their heart, their mind and their wallet. He recognised that often the last area of Christian life to be devoted to God is our money.

There are a number of reasons for that. One is cultural: we don't think it's polite or right to talk about money very much. We don't ask people what they earn, let alone what they give. Another reason is biblical: Jesus warned us about

making our giving something we were proud of. So he told us to do it secretly (Matthew 6:1-4). Another reason is personal: we think it is our money. We earned it; we own it; we can do as we please with it.

Of course, all over the pages of the Bible we are reminded that everything belongs to God, and everything we have should be offered to him. Our whole life is to be lived in worship of God (Romans 12:1); we are to love God with all of our being (Deuteronomy 6:5). We cannot point to any part of life and say: 'Hands off, God, that's mine.'

We may know those truths, and yet still think, 'Hands off, God' with our money. At most, we give some money away, and then spend what's left as we want. In other words, we are in danger of never thinking about our bank balance as Christians.

There's more to a Christian view of money than merely giving. It's about how we view money and what our attitude is to money. That flows into how we decide what to give and where to give it; but it also affects what to spend, and what to spend it on; what to save and what to save it for.

It's worth asking: apart from possibly giving more, do we as Christians look any different to our non-Christian neighbours when it comes to how we view, and how we handle, money? If the answer is no, then something must be wrong.

One thing that goes wrong is that we simply don't think about it, don't discuss it, and are rarely challenged on it. A pastor I know said that in decades of ministry, people have come to him asking for help with all kinds of problems in their lives. There were marriage issues, parenting concerns, work pressures, relationship breakdowns, sexual sins, self-image problems, anxiety and more. But no one had ever come to him and said they had a problem with handling money. No one had ever said: 'Please help me with my greed.'

We may have a vague feeling that we may need to turn the volume control down on 'greed'. But that's about it. If you are like me, you need to think much more deeply. I am no different. Reading, thinking and writing for my new book Money Counts has been challenging to me. My hope is that it will be helpful to those who read it, but also that it might open up conversations among Christians about money. Money Counts is not just some top tips on finance, because that's not what we need — what we need is some surgery on our hearts.

**A pastor I know said that in decades of ministry, people have come to him with marriage issues, parenting concerns, work pressures, sexual sins, self-image problems, anxiety and more. But no one had ever come to him and said they had a problem with handling money. No one had ever said: 'Please help me with my greed.'**

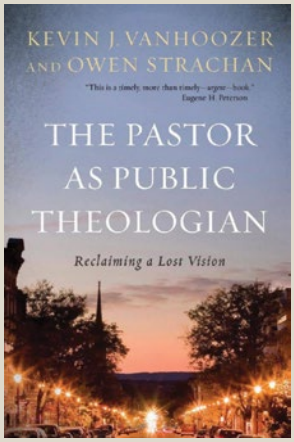
But that doesn't mean we need to be negative about money. It certainly doesn't mean the answer is to ignore money or avoid dealing with it. As with all areas of creation, the Christian answer is not to shun it, but rather to learn how to use it well. Jesus told his followers: 'Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings' (Luke 16:9).

That must mean there is a way to use money in a way that is approved by God, and that we can please, glorify, honour and worship God with our money. We can care for his people and extend his purposes in this world. We can use our money in a good and meaningful way. It is truly exciting to think we can use our wallets in a way that pleases God!

*Graham Beynon is Director of Independent Ministry Training at Oak Hill. His new book, Money Counts: How to handle money in your heart and with your hands (The Good Book Company) is released in January 2016.*

# Books

**David Shaw has been reading two books which explore the relationship between theology and the pastoral ministry, and the pressing need for theological leadership in the church**




## The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision

Kevin J Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan
Baker Academic, 2015

As the saying goes: 'You wait for ages for a bus and then two come along at once.' For some, the arrival of these two nearly identically titled books evokes a similar feeling: long-held expectation suddenly met with seemingly redundant supply. To be sure, other buses have been down this road in the past (most recently John Piper and Don Carson's The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor), but it has been a while. Now they are here, the casual observer might be forgiven for thinking they can climb aboard whichever book they pick up first.

On the other hand, their arrival has also been met with some exasperation. Can pastors really be expected to be public theologians or scholars? Even if church history furnishes us with the occasional example, the theologians usually namechecked (Augustine, Calvin, Edwards) were so uncommonly gifted that it is unrealistic to hold them up as models for the regular local pastor.

In light of these responses, this review focuses on two main issues. First, it will explore the ways in which these two books are actually rather different. Despite the similar titles, despite the dedication of Vanhoozer and Strachan's book to Hiestand and Wilson, despite the chapter that Hiestand contributes to Vanhoozer and Strachan's book, and despite the anecdotes and quotes that are common to both, they are actually buses heading in slightly different directions.

Second, we will focus on definitions as we go, because they are key. Both works introduce new terms and define them carefully: public theologian, organic intellectual, ecclesial theologians, and academic theologians. Only by attending to these definitions can we decide if the proposals are viable or the exasperation justified.

We will begin with Vanhoozer and Strachan. The 'lost vision' of the title is the theological vision of

pastors. 'It is difficult to pinpoint the precise moment when pastors lost interest in theology,' but lost it they have. In part this happened when theology as a discipline migrated to the academy, where it was stripped of its supernaturalism and compartmentalised into the narrow disciplines of biblical studies, church history, systematic theology and practical theology.

The result is that when pastors turn to scholarship, they find little to help them in their task, and everywhere the assumption that their department (practical theology) is somehow unrelated to biblical studies, systematic and historical theology. To make matters worse, pastors in the 20th century were encouraged to base their leadership on any number of secular models – as CEOs, therapists, or social agitators. And so, for want of theological vision among the pastors, the people perish.

The solution proposed by Vanhoozer and Strachan is for every pastor to recapture their calling to be pastor theologians and to understand that calling as a public ministry. This is where the language of pastors as 'public theologians' or 'public intellectuals' arises and also where the potential for misunderstanding is high. By public theology, the authors do not mean the specialism of addressing Christian thought to public policy, but simply a ministry that is 'involved with people in and for the community', because the gospel touches every area of life.

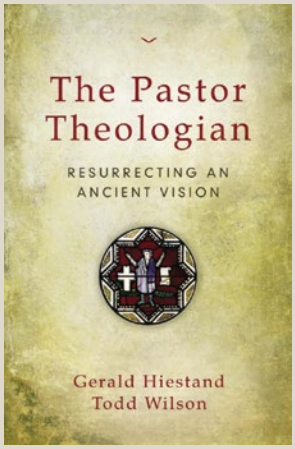
**Pastors in the 20th century were encouraged to base their leadership on any number of secular models – as CEOs, therapists, or social agitators. And so, for want of theological vision among the pastors, the people perish.**

This way of putting things is rooted in the view that the church is to be a witnessing community in the world and that the pastor is called to equip the church for that task. In Vanhoozer's earlier language of theodrama (for which see his The Drama of Doctrine), pastors direct the performance of local congregations. Relatedly, pastors are called to be 'organic intellectuals', but again, banish all thoughts of Parisian salons and ivory towers from your mind: 'The kind of intellectual we have in mind is a particular kind of generalist who knows how to relate big truths to real people'. In particular, the reality of what is 'in Christ', the great indicatives of the gospel, and of our place within its narrative.

One of the implications of this, it seems to me, is that pastors can breathe a sigh of relief. This is a stirring vision for pastors, but they are not expected to be academic or apologetic specialists in ways that are beyond the reach of most of us. Rather, Vanhoozer emphasises the generalism that pastoral ministry calls for and locates apologetic power, not so much in a sophisticated cultural analysis delivered by a pastor, but in a congregation living out the gospel. The rest of the book trends in a similar direction.

Strachan's chapters offer biblical and historical theologies of leadership which ought to thrill pastors, reminding them of their privilege to serve as agents of 'divine business'. Distributed throughout the book are 'pastoral perspectives' contributed by various pastors. Most of these explore their own self-understanding as pastor theologians in some way. A couple, however, offer a trailer for the benefits of a pastoral-theological ministry, namely some notes towards a theology of technology by Jim Samra, and a piece by David Gibson, 'On Death'. The latter especially is a kind of firstfruits, and a highlight of the book.

Turning to Hiestand and Wilson, we ought first to note the agreement between the two books on the problems facing pastoral ministry. Both agree that pastors have been disenfranchised by the secularisation of theology within the academy and that all kinds of alternative models of leadership are in the mix, such that 'pastors don't know who they are or what they are supposed to be'.




**The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision**
Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson
Zondervan, 2015

Beyond that, however, the analyses begin to diverge. For Hiestand and Wilson, the problem is not so much that pastors have forgotten the theological nature of their calling, but rather that theology has left its natural home in the church. Thus while the historical chapter in Vanhoozer and Strachan demonstrates that historically pastors saw themselves as theologians, the corresponding chapter in Hiestand and Wilson argues that formerly many leading theologians were pastors.

The solution then is to restore theological scholarship to an ecclesial setting. This does not call for the restoration of the pastor theologian *per se*, but for a particular kind of pastor theologian. At this point, Hiestand introduces a threefold taxonomy. There are 'local theologians' who seek to give theological leadership to their own flocks, and 'popular theologians' who exercise a popular-level writing ministry. Taken together, these are really what Vanhoozer and Strachan mean by public theologians.

The problem, however, is that both these figures draw down theological resources from the academy and make them accessible for their audiences. They are merely brokers, and this is problematic, because the connection between the church and academic theology is broken. The secularised academy does not provide the kind of theological resources that pastors need. There are topics the academy will not address (giving contemporary voice to biblical sexual ethics, say) and whatever it does address it does so in a 'neutral' and 'objective', rather than a pastoral voice.

Hence the third category of pastor theologian: the 'ecclesial theologian' who 'provides theological leadership to God's ecclesia', writing 'theology to other theologians and scholars', but always inhabiting the church and speaking to its concerns with explicit Christian convictions. It is this figure that is at the centre of this book's proposal, and the restoration of ecclesial theologians is seen as crucial. Not every pastor is so called, but without them, Vanhoozer and Strachan's vision for (local/popular) pastor theologians will perish.

**The connection between the church and academic theology is broken. The secularised academy does not provide the resources pastors need.**

Notably, this proposal puts less store in theological colleges. For Vanhoozer, colleges must strive to produce generalists rather than reproducing the disciplinary divisions of the academy, but they have a key role to play. For Hiestand and Wilson that role is much reduced, chiefly because a larger role would perpetuate the idea that theology can be delegated to others outside the church. Additionally, in their view, theological colleges adopt the academic mode of speaking and are not sufficiently shaped by the church's social location and agenda. College lecturers are therefore 'academic theologians', specialists who will play a supporting role to ecclesial theologians, but cannot meet the need of the hour.

What then to make of these arguments? Well, first I am acutely aware of my own location in these

**Why could churches not set men or women apart for research and oversee them, or delegate such projects to other ecclesial bodies?**

issues. I teach part time at a theological college and part time I serve a network of 500+ churches as their theological adviser, developing resources to support pastors in their theological engagement. So, I can't offer an entirely objective appraisal (and of course no one can), but at least you have been warned. Bearing that in mind, a few comments.

First, the pastorate is a theological office and Vanhoozer and Strachan's vision for it should be compulsory reading, even though most pastors I know have embraced this and have neither lost their interest in theology nor are as confused about what they should be doing as these books suggest. But, we can forgive them some overstatement, and doubtless the generalisations ring true in many places.

Second, with Hiestand and Wilson, I am persuaded that the church needs to look within for theological leadership. The church, after all, is the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). We must not, therefore, respond to the secularisation of the academy by throwing out the theological baby with the bathwater, but rather by bringing it back home to the church and taking the initiative to see it prosper.

Third, reliance on the academy to train scholars or to provide resources is increasingly unwise; both because the academy is increasingly hostile to evangelical convictions – as some of my fellow Cambridge PhD students discovered to their cost – but also (at least in my context) simply because theology and religious studies departments are closing down. So, the supply as well as the demand needs to come from the churches, one way or another.

I am, however, more optimistic about the potential for theological colleges to contribute. Many are confessional, identify themselves as servants of the church, and function as 'nurseries of piety', in Jonathan Edwards' phrase. Their facilities can enable 'doctors of the church' (whether pastors or faculty members) to exercise a wider ecclesial ministry.

Lastly, there is the question of who can produce ecclesial theology. Hiestand and Wilson give the impression that it is only the serving pastor. For example, 'the ecclesial theologian is a theologian who constructs theology as a vocational pastor'; or again, 'the theological contributions of the ecclesial theologian spring from the overflow of the shepherding responsibilities that he carries for his local congregation'. Understandably, some reaction to the book has focused on this, wondering about the identity of these supermen who are capable of producing anything, let alone works of high scholarship, once they have seen to their 'sermons, leadership, pastoral care, administration, and outreach'. Doubtless there are a few such exceptional figures but they are rare.

A solution might be to grant that ecclesial theology is a broader category than just the output of serving pastors. Given the need rightly identified by Hiestand and Wilson, it's surely worth trying to get creative. Why, for example, could churches not also set men or women apart for research and oversee them, either full-time or for a season, or delegate such projects to other ecclesial bodies? After all, delegation is not necessarily the abdication of responsibility, but often the wise exercise of it, as every pastor knows.

In conclusion, there are two invaluable insights championed by these books: the pastorate is a theological calling and theology is an ecclesial enterprise. The current cultural climate makes those insights all the more urgent and calls for imagination on the part of churches and pastors alike. Happily, there is much fuel for imagination here.

*David Shaw is Lecturer in New Testament at Oak Hill, Theological Adviser of the FIEC, and editor of Primer: A Theological Digest for the Local Church (primerhq.com).*

## Oak Hill College

Oak Hill College is a theological college in North London, training men and women for ministry in the Church of England and other spheres of Christian service.

Oak Hill is an Associate College of Middlesex University. Its validated programmes have been developed and are delivered and assessed by the College; they are awarded and quality assured by Middlesex University.

## The Kingham Hill Trust

The Kingham Hill Trust is the registered charity that owns Oak Hill College. It has contributed spiritually, financially and practically to its development. The Trust has delegated responsibility for Oak Hill to the College Council and the Principal.

## Contacting us

Oak Hill College
Chase Side
Southgate
London N14 4PS
Tel: 020 8449 0467
Fax: 020 8441 5996
Website: oakhill.ac.uk

## Production

Produced for Oak Hill by House Communications Ltd

Editing and design: Simon Jenkins
Print: Buckland Press

All comments on Commentary to: davidk@oakhill.ac.uk

## Cover images

Olympic ceremony: shimelle http://flic.kr/p/cEzNhh

Elisha illustration by Siku, taken from *The Lion Comic Book Hero Bible*

*Photo (left): Eleanor Bentall*

# THE GOSPEL
## ACCORDING TO MOSES

### Save the date: 12-14 July 2016

Daniel I. Block, Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, Illinois, is visiting Oak Hill next summer to lead a three day intensive for those involved in Christian ministry

What the Gospel of John is to the New Testament, the book of Deuteronomy is to the Old. Like John, Moses had decades to reflect on the theological significance of God's dramatic intervention in human history, specifically in providing salvation for his people. In both books, we are presented with a gospel of incredible grace. Join us at this special intensive next summer to rediscover the gospel of grace in the Old Testament, by studying the book of Deuteronomy.

Oak Hill College

oakhill.ac.uk