

Editor's Notes

The sheer number of books on the market concerned with church and ministry indicates that something is felt not to be right in the evangelical fold. That most of the books I will note deal to a greater or lesser extent with the cultural change being experienced in the west suggests why this is. Exhilarating or uncomfortable as we may find it, the cultural change summed up in the word postmodernism affects us all and all of us, even unconsciously, are having to adapt to it. The must read in this whole area is **David Wells's** *Above all earthly pow'rs*,¹ the fourth and final book in his quartet that has sought to analyze the theological and spiritual condition of evangelicalism. Readers of previous volumes will be on familiar ground here, but in this volume Wells takes us further. In particular he begins and ends by putting evangelicalism in the context of globalisation with particular reference to mass migration and its impact on western societies. The most helpful and stimulating chapters are those that examine the common yearning for spirituality in the light of orthodox Christian doctrine. Helpfully he distinguishes between agape and eros spiritualities, the former being about God coming to us in grace and the latter of our search for deity or deities. The tragedy is that much modern evangelicalism is tapping into eros spirituality. There is a very stimulating section dealing with eschatology, incarnation and justification in this context where Wells interacts with the new perspective, open theism and other theological fashions. The last section examines the mega-churches of the United States and concludes that in their cultural accommodation they are converging in some ways with the older and dying liberalism even while they remain nominally formally orthodox. One of his *bete noire's* is the homogeneous unit principle of the church growth movement and the way this has been tied into marketing strategies to gaining and keeping church members. Here paradoxically the churches that ostensibly are so desirous of growth are limiting themselves to one segment of American society – relatively well-off white suburbanites – while the country is becoming more racially, socially

and culturally diverse. In this there are some salutary lessons for British churches, especially as some with impeccable conservative evangelical credentials seem to be adopting this approach in church planting. However that is a hobby horse of mine that I better not ride. The bigger issue is whether our churches are truth centred and driven because of our commitment to Jesus Christ and the gospel.

Within mainstream Baptist and charismatic circles there has been some interesting thinking on church life. One of most remarkable is *The Gospel-Driven Church*² by **Ian Stackhouse**, the senior minister of Guildford Baptist Church. What is remarkable about the book is the very honest and thoughtful way in which Stackhouse critically examines the charismatic movement with which he is identified and finds it wanting in so many respects. In the opening chapter he castigates the faddism that afflicts the renewal as he calls it and he goes through all the most recent fads. In particular he is critical of the revivalism that has obsessed the movement to the detriment of the ongoing renewal of the churches. For this he advocates a retrieval of the classical ministries of the church. His chapter on preaching is excellent and will be welcomed by all who believe in expository preaching with passion and life-transforming power. He has a strong emphasis on the importance of the Lord's Supper and baptism that strikes me as quasi-sacramentalist, but he is right in wanting to see them restored to a central place in the life of the church. His reflections on the work of the Spirit and how it has been understood in charismatic churches is very insightful. There is also a welcome call to return to classic pastoral care, although again there is too much of an inclination to Catholic forms of spirituality. In all this Stackhouse doesn't repudiate the renewal but simply wants to bring it back into line with the great tradition of the church. That is welcome, but the book could have done with dealing more directly with the Bible, which in the end is the way we centre our churches on the gospel. Having said that there is much here that more Reformed evangelical churches could learn from. Indeed such

churches would benefit from as honest an examination by one of their own. One other caveat: the book is written in rather theologically academic English.

In *Post-Christendom*³ Stuart Murray recalls churches to a somewhat different tradition than Stackhouse. While Stackhouse wants to recover the churchly classical tradition Murray wants to recover the dissident Anabaptist tradition. He thinks this is particularly appropriate in the post-Christendom context in which we find ourselves. Secularisation has brought the long reign of Christendom in Europe to an end and that is no bad thing according to Murray. Christendom meant the captivity of the church to political, economic and cultural power and with it a whole mentality that shaped the life of the church and Christian discipleship or lack of it. Much of the book is historical and I think Murray is somewhat simplistic in both his understanding of the Anabaptists and of the magisterial churches. There is a tendency to see in the Anabaptists trendy post-modern Christians much as the same are seen by others in Celtic saints. Murray's bad boys are Constantine and Augustine of Hippo. The truth is that for good or bad Christendom is part of our heritage and while it has had many baleful effects, providentially it was used by God. However Murray is right in pointing us to the Anabaptists for help for living as a minority in an increasingly non-Christian culture, even if one doesn't buy into the whole Anabaptist package. As Murray points out it would be wrong to try to recover Christendom as some do in the way they promote revival or social transformation. Where I fear Murray's kind of neo-Anabaptism is leading is in the direction of the Emerging Church movement in the United States. There is a dislike of preaching and a tendency to downplay doctrine and to emphasise a more relational, inclusivist and non-judgmental approach to church.

For such an approach you need go no further than Steve Chalke's *Intelligent Church*.⁴ This book will be less controversial than his last one and like it contains much that is good. By 'intelligent church' Chalke means church

that is intelligently thought out theologically and in terms of its social and cultural context. Much of what he writes he born out of his recent experience as the new minister of church.co.uk in London, formerly Christ Church and Upton Chapel. Using the chapter headings he wants churches to be inclusive (welcoming to everyone), messy, honest, purposeful, generous (with money, lives, gifts, etc.) vulnerable, political (not in a partisan way, but living and proclaiming the lordship of Jesus), diverse, dependent (on God in prayer) and transforming (of lives and communities). As I say there is much to benefit from even if here and there are things to disagree with such as where in the chapter on prayer he gets close to open theism. The real problem with the book is its basic premise. While Chalke is to be admired for his desire to engage people he has an inadequate understanding of the problem facing the church. It is expressed in this quote: 'The real problem for Christian mission in the West is not the absence of spiritual hunger in our postmodern society but rather the inability to engage with this longing'. Is that really the problem? Chalke assumes that the spiritual hunger is positive and not itself an expression of rebellion against God. The assumption is that if we only get church right people will respond. But that is a fundamentally Arminian assumption. The problem is not that we are unable to engage this longing, although that needs to be worked at, but that when we do so people are still sinners who need to have their hearts opened to receive Christ. So, yes, let's work hard to engage our culture, but let's also realise that we are confronted with unbelief that can only be overcome by the prayerful preaching of the gospel in whatever form or setting. And that gospel will include the truth of Christ's penal substitution for sinners. These words from David Wells sum up the issue well;

... those churches which have banished pulpits or are "getting beyond" the truth question are, however inadvertently, going beyond Christianity itself. The proclamation of the New Testament was about *truth*, about the truth that Christ who was with the Father from all eternity had entered our own time. As such he lived within it, his life like ours marked by days, and

weeks, and years. He lived in virtue of his unity with the Father, living for him, living as the Representative of his own before the Father, his very words becoming the means of divine judgment and of divine grace. But in the cross and resurrection, the entire spiritual order was upended, his victory reached into and across the universe, and saving grace is now personalized in him. The world with all its pleasures, power and comforts, is fading away, the pall of divine judgment hangs over it, a new order has arisen in Christ, and only in this new order can be found meaning, hope and acceptance with God. It is truth, not private spirituality that apostolic Christianity was about. It was Christ, not the self as means of access into the sacred. It was Christ, with all his painful demands of obedience, not comfortable country clubs that early Christianity was about. It was what God had done in space and time when the world was stood on its head that was its preoccupation, not the multiplication of programs, strobe lights and slick drama. Images we may want, entertainment we may desire, but it is the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen that is the Church's truth to tell.⁵

There is a need for a contemporary restatement of free church and Baptist ecclesiology. In *Free Church, Free State*⁶ Nigel Wright does so very accessibly if not wholly acceptably. The book is accessible in that it gives us a clear and well-written survey of Baptist tradition, practice and issues along with biblical argument and theological engagement. He makes a good case for the classic free church and particularly Baptist understanding of the church and its relevance to our context in Europe. However Wright is too ecumenically minded. Among other places this comes out in his chapter on mission and relationships with Roman Catholics. More reliable and practical if not as stimulating is *The Deliberate Church*⁷ by Mark Dever and Paul Alexander. Dever is minister of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC. The book is almost a how-to manual on church government. It could have been better organized, leaves out some things and reads a bit like transcribed addresses. Nevertheless it is very helpful and is a necessary affirmation of the importance of trying do church biblically. Even among some free church people the Puritan idea of the regulative principle seems to have

evaporated and the Anglican normative principle (only the gospel matters and everything else is negotiable) seems to have taken hold. If like Dever we believe that the Bible speaks authoritatively about how to do church then we need to act on it. This applies not only to church officers but also to all Christians. Personally I cannot understand why principles of biblical church practice don't matter for many Christians when deciding which church to attend or join. Dever may help them. Here is a lot of wisdom that can help us from someone who is thinking these issues through in our contemporary context.

Here, briefly noted, are some other books related to church and ministry. *The Gospel Ministry*⁸ contains the papers delivered at the 2002 John Owen Centre Conference. Six writers (including myself) seek to restate for the 21st century a classically Protestant understanding of pastoral ministry. *From Embers to a Flame*⁹ by Harry Reeder III, minister of Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, is a very helpful and brief guide to a ministry of renewing older churches. With so much emphasis on church planting today it is good to be reminded that older churches can be renewed. Derek Prime also gives us some helpful advice on leading churches in *A Christian Guide to Leadership for the Whole Church*.¹⁰ There is much practical wisdom here from the former minister of Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh on everything from recognizing leaders to delegation and team leadership. There is also more such wisdom from another experienced minister in *Transform Your Church*¹¹ by Paul Beasley-Murray. Here are '50 very practical steps' that can help change church life for the better. You may not agree with them all, but reading the book is like giving a church a spiritual health-check. On the subject of leadership, *Leadership Next*¹² by Eddie Gibbs of Fuller Seminary is a useful survey of current thinking along with theological reflection and practical application. Gibbs's concern is for the church to have leaders appropriate to the changing culture. My concern with books like this is whether theology actually matters in the making of a

good leader. For a good biblical orientation on the nature of the church read *God's New Community*¹³ by **Graham Benyon**. Each chapter takes a biblical passage with a view to unfolding the New Testament pattern of the church. For a pugnacious polemic on the church read **Peter Glover's** *The Virtual Church*.¹⁴ Glover takes no hostages as he assesses the churches in the UK and beyond. While aiming his fire mainly at charismatics and pragmatists he doesn't neglect to lob a grenade or two at conservative evangelicalism. If he is a bit unfair to some of us neo-Puritans (not all of us are determined to meet whatever the 17th century throws at us) Glover says some things we need to hear.

I want to commend several books that have little relation to each other except that I have enjoyed them immensely and that in different ways they winsomely commend the Reformed evangelical faith. In *An Unexpected Journey*¹⁵ **Robert Godfrey**, president of Westminster Seminary in California, unfolds the Reformed faith in the form of an autobiography threaded through with biblical reflection. It is a very fine book that is an accessible introduction to Calvinism. *On Being Black and Reformed*¹⁶ by **Anthony J Carter** warmly and clearly expounds Reformed Christianity within the context of the African-American experience. Carter, who I believe is a Reformed Baptist, deals honestly with the injustices that blacks have had to suffer but uses that to open up the comforting and empowering reality of God's sovereign grace. I really loved this book and commend it to everyone. The ministry of Francis Schaeffer and L'Abri has so much to teach us today as **Wade Bradshaw** shows in *By Demonstration: God – Fifty Years and a Week at L'Abri*.¹⁷ Schaeffer wanted L'Abri 'to show forth by demonstration,

in our lives, the existence of God'. How we need that in our lives and churches today. For a fresh and God-centred exposition of the gospel read **John Piper's** *God is the Gospel*.¹⁸ All the familiar Piper themes are here in a soul satisfying and mind stretching reconfiguration. Piper has been very influenced by Jonathan Edwards, selections of whose writing you can find in *Day by Day with Jonathan Edwards*.¹⁹ With a short reading for every day of the year here is a book to kindle the fire of your daily devotions so that they are truly God-centred. The theme of joy that is so prominent in Edwards' (and Piper's) works is warmly unfolded in **Marcus Honeysett's** *Finding Joy*.²⁰ As evangelicals we talk a lot about grace but how much is it a living reality that fills us with joy? With excellent biblical exposition and practical application, Honeysett helps us to be gripped again by grace. The man who helped me to appreciate grace in a fresh way was the late **Jack Miller**. He used to ask people as a leading question Paul's question to the Galatians, 'Whatever happened to all your joy?' Miller's *The Heart of a Servant Leader*²¹ is a collection of his wide-ranging correspondence to co-workers, family, friends and others. What a privilege to receive such letters! There is also a short biography of Jack – pastor (Presbyterian, OPC and PCA), professor (Westminster), missionary (World Harvest Mission) - that tells the story of how he rediscovered the grace of God and dared to live accordingly. Here is a testimony to the transforming grace of God in one of his servants who was far from perfect but knew where to find the joy-giving grace of Jesus. If you are weary in ministry or in life generally read and savour these letters.

References

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