

# Editor's Notes

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This is my last issue editing *Foundations*. It has been a great privilege and joy to edit the theological journal of Affinity, but it is time to let someone else take over. I want to thank the three general secretaries that have been so supportive and patient – Alan Gibson, David Ford and Jonathan Stephen. My thanks are also due to those in the background who have helped in various ways in the production – Digby James, Paul Brown and Derek Williams. The contributing editors and most recently the Affinity Theological Team have been great encouragers and supporters. Not least I must mention Ian Herring and Phil Grubb, Affinity's successive administrators, who have been very patient with me. There is so much more that I would have liked to have done with the journal. I would have liked to have had more exegetical articles, but strangely they have not often come my way. In fact, articles don't flow in. As deadlines approach I more often than not found that the cupboard was spare. But the Lord is gracious and there was always enough to get an issue out. Some issues were better than others, but from the feedback I have had the journal is appreciated. As I depart I want to thank you, the readers, for your support and urge you to contribute material and to urge others in your circles to do so.

I am an historian and this last issue has an historical flavour to it. For my last Editor's Notes I want to reflect on Protestantism by looking at several books. The selection is somewhat random as they are some of the ones sent by publishers left on my shelf. Nevertheless they offer something of a snapshot of Protestantism at the beginning of the 21st century. 'Protestant' is something of a dirty word today in Britain. In part this may be due to its associations with loyalism in Northern Ireland. I suspect it is also due to the doctrinal downgrade not only in the main denominations, but also in the mindset of many evangelicals, who while technically orthodox are not particularly doctrinal in their evangelicalism. Many prefer a reductionist 'mere Christianity' which, in the form of evangelicalism, may be more alive, but deprives itself of the doctrinal and spiritual riches of the evangelical heritage and is too susceptible to passing fads and obsessions. The idea of

holding a clear set of beliefs and practices is anathema to many. If *Foundations* and Affinity stand for anything it is the recovery of historic Protestant Christianity. For what is the classic evangelicalism that they stand for, but living orthodox Protestantism? It is the orthodox Protestantism of the Reformation (salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, from Scripture alone), but alive through the work of the Holy Spirit as it was in the ministries of men like Luther, Calvin and Knox and experienced and understood by later generations such as the Puritans, John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, William Carey, Thomas Chalmers, C.H. Spurgeon, J.C. Ryle, B.B. Warfield, Gresham Machen, Wang Ming Dao, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, William Still, John Stott and so many others. It is our job to appropriate this great tradition that like Calvin we trace back through the best men of the middle ages and the fathers to the Bible itself. It is necessary to do this for the sake of Christ's kingdom here in Great Britain and more widely in Europe, if we are to see the forces of unbelief and false religion pushed back and the church being renewed and growing. It is also necessary with the phenomenal growth of evangelical Christianity in what has become known as the Global South. For the sake of the evangelisation of the nations living orthodox Protestantism needs to be understood, taught, lived and communicated in our fast changing world.

It is interesting to notice that the positive contribution of Protestantism to British identity and culture is being increasingly appreciated. One historian who does is Tristram Hunt of Queen Mary, University of London. The book for his recent BBC 4 series *The Protestant Revolution*<sup>1</sup> has recently been published. While Hunt presents the series, the book is written by William G. Naphy of Aberdeen University. From the author's previous writings as well as the photographs (the last one is of the gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, Gene Robinson) I thought this might turn out to be a gay history of Protestantism. Towards the end it gets near to that and seems to reduce Protestantism to being about the freedom of the individual conscience. However the bulk of the book is a not bad survey of Protestant history.

While not agreeing with Naphy at many points, he shows a good deal of understanding and certainly tells a good tale. What is not in doubt is the revolutionary impact of the dangerous Protestant idea that every Christian should be able to read and understand the Bible. This idea has shaped European culture and increasingly global culture. Hunt provides a long and very good introduction that recounts how deeply indebted we are in Britain to Protestantism. Sadly, more contemporary classic evangelicalism is largely missing. Nigerian Pentecostals and American fundamentalists make an appearance, but the kind of classic evangelicalism represented by Affinity's constituency doesn't. That may be because of ignorance and prejudice, but it is more likely to be because we do not here, or elsewhere, make much of an impact. Our numbers are relatively small and, except perhaps in the USA, we simply don't appear on the radar our culture. We mustn't be content with that. Our desire is not to gain recognition and certainly not respectability, but rather to see, as happened at the Reformation and in the early 19th century, our culture being so penetrated with the gospel that it is transformed for good. Like the early Christians may we be accused of filling our cities with the teaching of Christ (Acts 5:28). Of course, to do this we need to focus on the priorities of gospel ministry. Meditation on the Pastoral Epistles is always a good antidote to temptations to get away from the teaching of the word and prayer. Ben Witherington III has produced in volume one of *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*<sup>2</sup> a fine commentary on the pastorals as well as 1–3 John. He approaches these letters with his socio-rhetorical method that helps to bring out their historical and social background and literary form. The commentary has weaknesses. His treatment of 1 Timothy 2:9–14 is not complementarian and being a Methodist (I assume he is as he teaches at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky) he is weak on election. But there is a lot here that is very helpful for Bible study and sermon preparation. Those of us who are pastors need to remind our congregations regularly of what Protestant, pastoral ministry is all about. Someone I always find helpful in this area is Eugene Peterson. His *Christ*

*Plays in Ten Thousand Places*<sup>3</sup> is the first volume in trilogy on spiritual theology. Peterson can be a bit too open to some critical theories, but I love his fresh takes on familiar passages of Scripture and his Bible infused approach to spiritual life. I think that some of us evangelicals can drain the life and colour out of Scripture in the way we teach it. Peterson's books are a good antidote to that as well as a feast of good things for the soul. For another feast of good things read *Authentic Christianity*,<sup>4</sup> sermons from Acts 7: 1–29 by Martyn Lloyd-Jones. I suspect that Lloyd-Jones would have found Peterson frustrating and not a little annoying. Banner is to be thanked for publishing these evangelistic sermons of Lloyd-Jones that remind us that he was, as he himself thought, primarily an evangelist. How we need such straight, Christ-exalting preaching today. I must admit that the sermons can be a little repetitive, but that is the problem of printed sermons that cannot convey the original context and act of preaching. This and its companion volumes are not commentaries on Acts, but an example of preaching from it.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to classic Protestantism in recent times has been the New Perspective on Paul. What has made it so difficult is that many of its advocates come from within evangelicalism and have such a deep understanding of and reverence for Scripture. So much of what someone like N.T. Wright writes is good and helpful. Certainly we must be thankful for his robust defence of the historical resurrection of Christ. Read his Faraday Lecture at Cambridge earlier this year, 'Can a Scientist Believe in the Resurrection?',<sup>5</sup> and rejoice that Christ has given his church someone who can so ably commend orthodox Christianity and defend it against its cultured despisers. Nevertheless I cannot go along with him in regard to justification by faith. I don't pretend to have read everything he has written on the matter or even always to understand him, but what I have read does not seem to add up when weighed against the Bible. Of course he argues that what he is doing is simply what the Reformers did in going back to the Bible. That is where he must argue the case one way or the other. Wright makes some valid points on the role of justification in

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answering the question, ‘Who now belongs to God’s people?’ which he asks in *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*.<sup>6</sup> But justification is also about how sinners under God’s wrath can be accepted and forgiven by God through faith on the basis of Christ’s finished sacrifice and imputed righteousness. It seems to me that if we lose this we will undermine classic Protestantism. I sat in a conference once as a jobbing pastor, surrounded by academic theologians, listening to Wright on this subject. Many erudite questions were asked, but the one I wanted to ask and wished I had was, what his teaching means for me as a Protestant pastor? If he was right then 500 years of not only Protestant theology, but Protestant spirituality was wrong. Not only our confessions, but our hymns – ‘Jesus your robe of righteousness’, ‘Jesus the name high over all’, ‘Yes, finished the Messiah dies’ – and the spirituality they express is wrong. In principle he may be right. If what we believe on justification is not biblical, then we must change – we are Protestants after all! But there will be a price. We will lose a spirituality that has at its heart the imputed righteousness of Christ and I suspect that in its place will come a much more ‘catholic’ spirituality. Before I deconstruct the classic Protestant theology and spirituality of the people under my pastoral care I want to make sure that the proposed alternative is right. I think Wright and others would say that the choice is not that stark. They are only changing some of the categories but offering essentially the same thing. Perhaps in some respects, but I suspect that there is something much more fundamental at stake. In order to understand what is fundamentally at stake I recommend *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ*<sup>8</sup> by Cornelis Venema. For a clear and straight-forward analysis of the New Perspective and exposition of the classic doctrine of justification this can hardly be beat. Venema is in no doubt about what is at stake in this debate. He has also written a much shorter book that distils the larger one. *Getting the Gospel Right* is a useful summary that helps keep the issues in one’s head as well as being a helpful introduction to the issue for thoughtful Christians. But in addition to reading about justification we must preach the doctrine with boldness, clarity and joy. Perhaps this is an issue

because even among classic Protestants it is less a living reality and more a confessional commitment. The late Francis Schaeffer understood how important this was with his emphasis on a moment by moment appropriation of the finished work of Christ and that the absence of this produces a cold, hard and judgmental evangelicism that is unattractive and discredits the gospel. Let’s love, live and preach the classic and, more importantly, the biblical doctrine of justification.

Someone who does that and who has ably defended the doctrine is John Piper. His recent book *What Jesus demands of the world*<sup>9</sup> is vintage Piper with its careful exposition of Scripture, warm-hearted application and passion for God’s supremacy in all things. When there is so much talk today of the true message of Jesus, Piper puts before us the gracious demands of Jesus in all their radical simplicity. Here is a book, divided into 50 short chapters, to read meditatively over a period of time in order to deepen your commitment to Christ.

## References

1. William G. Naphy, *The Protestant Revolution – From Martin Luther to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (London: BBC Books 2007).
2. Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, volume I (IVP/Apollos 2006)
3. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places – a conversation in spiritual theology* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 2005)
4. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authentic Christianity*, volume IV, Acts 7:1-29 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 2004)
5. See ‘Can a Scientist Believe in the Resurrection?’ at [www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Faraday](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Faraday).
6. N.T. Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK 2005).
7. Cornelis P. Venema, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 2006)
8. Cornelis P. Venema, *Getting the Gospel Right* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 2006)
9. John Piper, *What Jesus demands of the World* (IVP 2007)