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# ROOTS OF THE MALAISE?

The "*O Tempora! O Mores!*" Blogposts

October 2020 to March 2021

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## Preliminary attempts to get down to the roots of the current evangelical malaise in the UK

These blogposts are reproduced more or less as originally published on my blog. So they are fairly rough and ready, with lots of ‘wagging on the tee’ and other prevarications. Rather than spend hours editing and refining (for which I really don’t have the time currently), I decided to present them as was (with only a little bit of tidying up).

So please read them as such! This was very much an exercise in thinking out-loud, with some conversation and comments from friends in between. Definitely not a last word, and not even really a first word, but a preliminary word on a number of observations.

I’ve gathered them together here at the suggestion of one or two of those friends to make life a little easier!

Mark Meynell

23rd March 2021

(the 1-year anniversary of the UK Covid-lockdown!)

*(NB there are video links which should be playable if online)*

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## 1. APPLICATION REDUCTION

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*18th September 2020*

That exclamation—*O Tempora! O Mores!* (*Oh the times, oh the customs!*)—is one of Cicero’s few linguistic legacies extant today, propped up by those with a classical bent or aspiration to one. Perhaps Robert Harris’ page-turners have kept his flame alight, despite the fact that the old Senator could be a real bore at times (well, so my teenage self thought).

But the greatest orator of the Roman republic’s dying days was deeply shaken; his exclamation was no mere rhetorical flourish. The corruption and decay at the heart of Rome’s highest echelons genuinely shook him, giving him deep anxieties about her future (with good reason, as things turned out). The phrase comes from his prosecution case against Catiline, an aristocratic rebel conspiring with others to foment an uprising. The republic’s overthrow would come eventually, of course, the result of a different aristocratic agitator: one Gaius Octavius who ingeniously built on the thwarted precedents of his great-uncle (and then adoptive father), Gaius Julius Caesar. But Cicero couldn’t have known all that in the late 60s BC.

Now, this is all rather too niche, so I'd better stop wagging on the tee and get to the point.

## Today's Evangelical Mores

Evangelicalism is a peculiar beast. And no, it is not identical to fundamentalism, despite some aspects in common, despite 'fundamentalist' being a word that, as one commentator put it, gets lobbed at *anybody* to another's 'theological right'! Regardless of its external connotations, evangelicals themselves understand the label to embrace believers in the old, old story, especially as the Reformers retold it, and refers to those who mill around a generally agreed, but loosely formulated, consensus.



In David Bebbington's still useful formulation (in his book *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*), this is built around the quadrilateral of:

- ◆ **conversionism** (the necessity of a personal response to Christ rather than merely corporate membership)
- ◆ **activism** (at its best, it means conversion results in a lifestyle of service)
- ◆ **biblicism** (a high view of the scriptures, which does not entail a literalistic approach), and
- ◆ **crucicentrism** (the centrality of Christ's sacrificial death).

Strangely, though, evangelicalism has no officialdom, no structures, no authority figures; it is not exclusive to particular denominations nor nationalities, to political agendas nor even theological traditions. In the UK at least, you are still as likely to find evangelicals within historic denominations as within the free, independent or newer groupings. Despite the insistence of some acolytes of the USA's Republican Party, beyond the States, there is nothing pre-determined about an evangelical's political allegiance. In fact, as several have noted, the British 'Left' (and especially that of the Labour Party) owes as much, if not more, to the legacy of George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers, as to Marx and Engels.



Yet quite naturally, under this loose banner, thinkers and influencers gain prominence, as do streams and movements, with varying and even divergent emphases. We would expect that over time, not least because even strongly hierarchical traditions, like Roman Catholicism, feature such variety.

This wider picture is needed because without it, the rest of these vague thoughts will make little sense. If adherents do have concerns, it is hard to know where to take them, other than merely to articulate them. What I will write

comes not out of hostility or a spirit of opposition, but is motivated by little more than just a feeling of unease currently. It may develop into something else over time, but since I know I'm not alone in feeling it, it needs articulating.

I'm referring to a growing malaise within evangelicalism, an anxiety that the house is not in order. The feeling goes deeper than a generation's habitual frustration with its predecessors. Furthermore, it can't easily be dismissed as a nervousness derived from unsettling cultural forces without. No. It's more serious. It's the disconcerting sense that we've been sold a bill of goods (as our North American cousins put it). We are detecting, all too often, flaws and facades, not just in individuals (as if that was news) but rather in the very *reality* of evangelical community-life. Or to be even more specific, in the nature of its leadership cultures. And, before anyone points it out, I am, of course, entirely aware of my own leadership role, as a teacher and trainer. I am hardly immune to criticism or challenge.

The press unsurprisingly picks up on the most extreme scandals of abuse and hypocrisy. However, I am thankful that they are few and far between, since there certainly are individuals and fellowships that are refreshingly counter-cultural and safe for others. But still... this unease persists. We fear that the media knows not even the half of it, that they've just grasped the tip of a proverbial iceberg. We fear there's more dirt—much more—where that came from...

So for a while, the need has been growing in me (for my own sanity's and faith's sake, as anything else) to identify some of the (many?) roots of this malaise, in the hope of rooting them out and realigning (dare I even say,



renewing and re-focusing) ourselves with all the good and healthy aspects of this inheritance. I've no idea whether this will evolve into a longer series, or what it might lead to. But for the time being, I've got at least 3 concerns to get off my chest. A post on each, perhaps. This first one will seem tangential, at best. But if you've got this far, hopefully, you trust me enough to show why it's crucial! For this post brings us uncomfortably close to a genuine issue in some of the circles that I know well. If this has no relevance to contexts you know, then thank goodness for that!

## The Five Evangelical Mores

I'm not talking here about the evangelical message but its outworking in everyday life. The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians with this profound encouragement:

*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose. (Phil 2:12-13)*

His point is basic.

“Look, folks! It's not about me but HIM! It's never to impress me but to live out your gratitude to Him. Knowing and living for Christ is the only thing that matters.”

Notice the parallel ‘work’ here; it's actually there in the original Greek. The only difference comes from the way the verb for working relates to its contexts. God works IN us; we work OUT (*an unavoidable English paraphrase*). It certainly doesn't say work FOR your salvation; and ‘work

out' doesn't mean work it out intellectually, as one might solve a tricky equation. Instead, it is a matter of working it through and living it out, with all the myriad variables that result from the circumstances of each unique life. I suppose another way of putting it is that this involves mind and heart and soul and strength—all of which are essential to loving God, apparently. (See Mark 12:30). You think that comes naturally? Of course not. It takes everything we've got for all the time we've got. It's about the discipleship of a life for a lifetime. The best analogy, to my mind, is working yeast into a lump of dough to make bread. It needs to be kneaded thoroughly and laboriously. It requires hard graft and sweat. No dollop of dough can remain untouched. As with the yeast, so with the gospel. No corner unworked...

So far so good.

But this is where one of my bigger frustrations with one subculture kicks in. Because the way the Christian good



news is applied in preaching, it seems far removed from this bread-making principle. There is a reductionism, an over-simplification. The result of which looks perilously

close to legalism. All too often, an exposition's application can be summed up in what I call the **5 MORES**:

Any variety, such as it is, then derives from the ever-so-unpredictable combination of several of the above.

Now don't get me wrong – none of these is wrong! They all have their place and they certainly form elements of the salvation we must 'work out'. No doubt about it. But... I'll never forget the moment, years ago, when I started to worry on these lines... It was at a large well-known UK church (not one I've worked at, I hasten to add – it will remain nameless) and I was looking forward to hearing a particular preacher (who too will remain nameless). The passage was from John's Upper Room chapters – some of scripture's richest and most spell-binding. Great, I thought. This'll be good.

I left so disappointed. The sum-total (literally) of his application was that we should read the bible more deeply. I mean, seriously? Is that all?! The bible is given to encourage us to read the bible more?! Now, I know, if he was questioned, he would be very clear – that's all so that we can spend time with the Lord, learn at his feet, revel in his gospel and his presence, be thrilled etc etc etc. But that's not what came across in the talk. Which is pretty much my point. For communication is not what we might intend to communicate but what actually gets communicated.

If the **5 MORES** become a person's spiritual staple diet, then it's going to be very hard to avoid several consequences:

- ♦ *the Christian life becomes weirdly insular and circular:*  
it's just about sustaining personal and sociological

habits and rituals. It has no need to engage with the world around, to grapple with the impact of the surrounding culture on us.

- ◆ **the Christian life becomes *quantifiable***: it's possible to keep my personal tally of minutes/chapters/services/gifts/conversations. There's ALWAYS more to do, naturally (that's why there'll never be an end to the 5 mores), but we're doing *something* at least. And a modernist mindset always needs *that*.
- ◆ **the Christian life becomes *manageable***: by which I mean both doable by us (despite the sense that we can *never* save ourselves) and manageable by a leader. It is a means of control because a leader (whether well-meaning or malevolent) can easily keep tabs on the tally too.

An exaggeration or unfair caricature? Well, of course. But only just? And the result, amongst other things, is a desiccating dearth of wonder, of worship, and of love. Above all, it leaves one thinking that for all the talk of grace, it's all just one big slog. In which case, it's not hard to identify this as one of the factors in the prevailing malaise...

As I said, there are many who sense this malaise, which is half the battle. And some are seeking to deal with its root causes. The situation is by no means hopeless. There is a nascent counter-culture that will no longer tolerate such arid reductionism (and rightly so). I Hope this results in communities that face up to the broadest possible implications of the grace of God. That is how we begin to ensure we 'don't receive it in vain' (as Paul put it in 2 Cor 6:1-2). So for me, oases like **English L'Abri** have been a lifesaver along the way. They show that there is no end to

the wonder and richness of exploring this 'working out'. That the whole of life matters to the one who created us, and so there is no end to what concerns him. It is a task that demands imagination and creativity, as well as courage and perseverance. It is unpredictable but captivating, challenging but rewarding.

Now THAT is something that can get the blood pumping and heart racing. That is an adventure I'm up for! And I know I'm not alone.



## 2. HE'S BEHIND YOU!

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*2nd October 2020*

**"He's BEHIND you!"** resound the shrill cries of 500 families. All part of the Christmas ritual of that peculiar British staple; undoubtedly one of the odder cultural phenomena of these islands. Welcome to the world of **Panto(mime)**: hard to encapsulate for the uninitiated so just read the wiki page!

One of Panto's constants is the use (the less subtle the 'better') of *dramatic irony*. The audience knows something characters don't. The kids love it, which is why in Panto, productions crave the breaking of the sound barrier (and the fourth wall) with shouts to get the protagonist to turn round to face the baddie creeping up behind him/her. Or vice-versa.

Curmudgeon that I am, I seriously dislike Panto. But I do enjoy an excellent morsel of dramatic irony. And in fact, so does the bible, it seems. Exhibit A: **Caiaphas' appeal for one man to die for the nation**, anyone? (**John 11:49-51**) It's fun to be in the know when a character on stage isn't. It ratchets the tensions right up. Unfortunately, it's not quite so fun when stuff that matters is under discussion.

Readers of the [first post in this little series](#) may well sense déjà-vu as I again wobble on the tee. But there is some method. Because those in the limelight remain in blissless ignorance of things that are obvious to everyone else. For if I'm correct in discerning a malaise in corners of UK evangelicalism, my fear is this: the last people to recognise how the unsettled feel are precisely the ones to perpetuate the root causes (even if unwittingly).

I sense some cruel ironies at the moment. Please note: I'm not here engaging with the doctrinal issues themselves; this really isn't the place for a systematics debate. I'm more concerned with how often those doctrines' advocates appear not actually to believe in them. Or at least, that's the impression given. Several such ironies spring to mind, but here are the first two for now.

### **So you proclaim God is Sovereign...?**

Depending on which circles one is in, divine sovereignty is either a blessing or a curse. I've tended to hang out in the former and have come to appreciate how precious it is, especially at times of my own deepest brokenness and/or chaos. The doctrine was never designed to offer easy answers since it quite obviously provokes so many subsequent questions of its own. Yet what was always clear to me is how scripture typically articulates it. Again and again, it's offered as a source of comfort and hope when nights are dark and hope is faltering. It has incalculable value.

Now, I could discuss here how the doctrine itself gets crowbarred into justifying coercion or control. That certainly happens and you can follow the logic (sort of):

**God is in control... So I am in charge... So whatever I decide, goes...**

**Disobedience/disloyalty to me = disobedience/  
disloyalty to God.**

**A. N. O. Nymous**

*(Pastor, BigTown Community PlantFellowship Church)*

*Etc, etc sordid etc.* Perhaps for another post. Instead, my narrower focus now is merely to expose the grim irony of professing to believe the doctrine but acting as if not.

Some gruesome sagas (on either side of the Atlantic) have come to light in recent months (some of which have been uncomfortably close to me). Leaders steadfastly committed to this doctrine's pastoral treasures have been exposed as monstrously abusive and manipulative. Heartbreaking, especially for the several survivors that I know personally and value deeply.

One frequent problem is that such treatment can be tricky to identify; behaviour that is highly abusive might be ingeniously subtle and covert. Perpetrators can be so adept at ensuring that only their targets are in the know. And even they often fail to recognise it for what it is until it's far too late.

That's on the extreme end. Yet, further 'in' along this spectrum towards more accepted practices and approaches, there might be thoughtless rhetorical or social pressures to encourage conformity





(especially to the *5 Mores of the previous post*). These make it hard for someone to decline or disagree or even just ponder. This is not to suggest that what is encouraged from the front is automatically negative or wrong; nor to imply that the encouragement of peers and fellows shouldn't be a healthy spur to joining in. We all need each other, especially at dark times. Isolation is so poisonous, as I know all too well. It's merely to expose dishonesty and control tactics.

Do any of these sound familiar?

- ◆ The Lord is on His Throne! We've no need to challenge the status quo/leadership/pastor/government? It'll work out ok. (*Oh, unless they enforce mask-wearing, that is. That's totally different.*)
- ◆ Are you on board with the vision? Pray about it... Because the Lord has told me / the passage clearly teaches / our church has for generations been convinced that this is really what we must do. (delete as appropriate)
- ◆ You coming along to the meeting on Friday? Everybody else will be there... You'll have the chance to hear more about where we're going as a church... There won't be another chance.
- ◆ All Christians on their way to heaven are in bed before 11 and are up before 7, oh and they come to the bible studies and retreats and summer camps that I lead and definitely not those people's...
- ◆ You do realise that if you talk publicly about this, you'll be gossiping as well as potentially wrecking a fruitful ministry, don't you? Trust God. He's in control.

Now, of course, surely, if there is a Sovereign God, and he is trustworthy, then he'll overrule and sort things out? Won't he? For sure, we need not fear in the end, because as Tolkien understood so beautifully, it is the grounds of hope.

*"Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?"*  
*"A great Shadow has departed," said Gandalf, and then he laughed and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days upon days without count."*

*J. R. R. Tolkien (Return of the King)*

But we're walking a tightrope. J.I. Packer was onto something with his 1961 classic *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* because such truths can never justify present pastoral inactivity. Of crucial importance here is what pastoral leaders *rely on*, precisely at those moments when things start heading in the 'wrong' direction. This is no call to passivity or thoughtless compliance to a prevailing view. It is simply an appeal for integrity, for both the leader and the led, an integrity that surely flows from the liberty which itself flows from truly trusting in God's good purposes. Doing all one can do to do right in the right way for the right reasons, and then trusting him for all that lies beyond our limitations.

How crucial Paul's words (albeit for a slightly different, but related, issue) are for us all...

*We put no stumbling-block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses... (vv3-4) ... in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left.*

*2 Corinthians 6:6-7*

A ministry discredited? No! Surely not?! Not **here**...

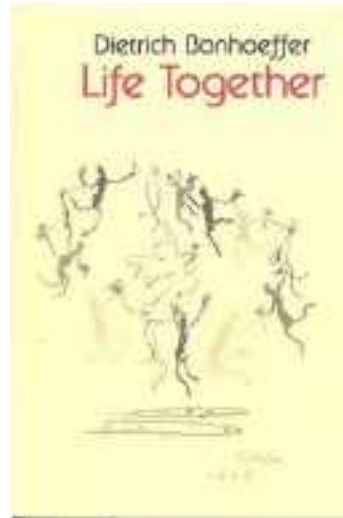
So here's the thing. Of all those in Christian ministry, nobody has more grounds *NOT* to manipulate or coerce than those who cling to divine sovereignty? Surely? Or have I missed something?

### **So you proclaim Grace is foundational...?**

Yup, grace is amazing and its sound surely sweet. Especially once you *seriously* get it. Just wow. It's life-changing.

But how much of Christian community life is shaped by it? I mean, *actually*? You see, the acid test is not the bums on seats, or busyness of its programmes, or youtube hits, or even the range of options for members. Those kinds of things might be fine, or even just occasionally great. But they're associated with entirely the wrong metric (a concern that has been rather a **hobbyhorse for a while**). They answer the wrong questions, questions preoccupied with measuring *success*. Which does not seem to be a preoccupation of the Bible's writers (not in such terms, at any rate). This is because the things that really matter – *integrity, godliness, the fruit of the Spirit, virtue, and above all*

*a relationship (individual and corporate) with God* – cannot be measured in the same way. They just can't. No wonder we default to the 5 Mores.



But here's where we come to the second grim irony. If we are concerned to measure things that can be measured, we have little room for those who don't measure up. Groups get sucked into the darkness of pressurizing, coercion, cold-shouldering; practices more akin to the cultic than the Christlike. They need to prop up the facades of conformity and cohesion because otherwise, the entire edifice might collapse. I guess we could call it the sociology of legalism. And legalism, by definition, has no room for failures. Which is why legalists can never admit their own failure. Legalists require their boundaries clearly flagged because only then can transgressors be promptly exposed.

But *when* (NB not *if*), somebody fails, what then? Now, again there's a tightrope. (Isn't there always!?) Perpetrators of abuse and controlling behaviour are all too quick to appeal to a need for grace when caught out. Shame they didn't allow it to characterise those they sought to lead. Which is not to say they shouldn't receive grace, (because in this life, it's *never* too late for it), merely that the hypocrisy needs naming. So grace and forgiveness, even for them? Yes. But trust? That's a different matter. Perhaps, but definitely not immediately. You can forgive a kleptomaniac who has faced their inclinations and wrong-doing; but you don't

automatically make him church treasurer. Grace is not naivety. But it is generous, especially to the broken and failed.

Which is why grace inspires no boundaries. Instead, it promotes virtues. And it's no accident you can't measure virtues.

I have found myself regularly returning to Bonhoeffer's classic pre-WW2 work, *Life Together* on this front. I urge you to read it, if you've not. It's short, thankfully (!) but the writing is incredibly dense. You almost need to pause to catch your breath again after every paragraph! But apart from going a little nuts about primacy Lutheran style of hymn-singing (we can forgive him that, probably!), it's gold. ESPECIALLY on this matter of grace and brokenness. I engaged with it quite a bit in my *Darkness/Depression book*. So let me just quote this bit, because it gets to the nub.



*Members of the Finkenwalde community in the 1930s*

*Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. We thank God for what he has done for us. We thank God for giving us brethren who live by his call, by his forgiveness, and his promise.*

*We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what he does give us daily. And is not what has been given us enough: brothers, who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of his grace? Is the divine gift of Christian fellowship anything less than this, any day, even the most difficult and distressing day?*

*Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God Jesus Christ? Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together – the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. When the morning mists of dreams vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship.*

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together (pp16-17)*

What I'm pressing for, longing for indeed, are communities with the grace to handle *failure well!* Not so that failures may abound. By No Means! But for when we all – yes pastors and leaders included (not least, this one writing here) – screw up. This is vital. Because unless a church is characterised by a culture of grace, it can never grow a culture of honesty. It really is as simple as that. I'm glad to say that they do exist and I have found friends I can trust with my mess. But I do know they are fewer and further between than they ought to be.

For sure, we preach Christ; but don't we also vigilantly patrol boundaries? Not to seek the best for people's flourishing, even if that is the justification for having them (boundaries are not intrinsically wrong), but to scaffold the creaking structures of a controlled group. Isn't there also a tendency to call out even hints of false teaching, or slight differences in practice, or willingness to associate with those we wouldn't? Not necessarily because of a concern for those people, but out of the need to buttress personal influence. Isn't that so often why people tarnish others with derogatory and simplistic labels, with slanders and vitriol? It minimises opponents' appeal, as if kingdom work was a zero-sum game, but is a tactic ripped right out of the demagogue's playbook. Not Christ's. Sadly, we can't just blame Twitter for this. Luther, for one, had some pretty dubious things to say about his opponents, for all his prophetic brilliance.

But surely, grace keeps forgiving, we say, grace keeps loving, grace shows open-handed generosity. Is that naive? Perhaps. Sometimes. But I see no room whatsoever for some of the menace wielded today in Christ's name. None.

I don't say any of this stuff because I have an axe to grind against evangelicalism; precisely the reverse. I'm still on the team. Nor do I think that everything is rotten and to be discarded. I do know people and fellowships of openness and humility. Thank goodness. If the cap I've described in caricature doesn't fit, you don't need to wear it.

I am nervous, though. I am concerned that those for whom the cap fits all too neatly will dismiss this as distracting nonsense, or worse. I guess some will assume I'm no longer on the team on the obvious grounds of disloyally flagging up these questions.

But all I've done is shout from the theatre stalls: **Look behind you!** See what all with eyes to see can see and ears to hear can hear.

Because otherwise, the One who truly IS behind it all, will simply come and burn the branches no longer fit for purpose and then give the vineyard to others. They might feebly cry, 'May this never be'. But it will be to no avail.





### 3. ALL IN IT TOGETHER?

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*10th October 2020*



*Charlie Chaplin in The Great Dictator: The Globe Scene ([click to watch](#))*

There is a fine line between global-sized passion and totalizing imperial zeal. When that fact goes

unacknowledged by Christian movers and shakers, we have a problem. A serious problem.

The former is motivated by a clear sense of the world (in all its created beauty, complexity and variety) as a divine gift. It is His world, and as such, is our home for sure, but one to enjoy as privileged guests rather than customers with rights.

The latter is derived from presumption, both to *being right* and to *having responsibility*.

While the old '*noblesse oblige*' of '*l'ancien régime*' undoubtedly resulted in some with privilege using it for the benefit of the less fortunate, they were probably the minority. Unfortunately, that culture has bequeathed dark legacies that remain to this day, even if they are harder to spot than they once were.

Yet even acknowledging complexity here carries risks. In the self-righteous reductionism of contemporary 'cancel culture', the idea that the legacy of imperialism might be mixed (rather than wholly and irredeemably evil) is suddenly contentious. As if saying "*X aspect or Y event might have had a positive influence*" is a statement that denies all the horrors. Which is patently absurd in all but the most diehard reactionaries.

It's surely a matter of working for historical nuance. Because ironically enough, it's often when some of the positives are placed alongside the prejudices and exploitation that the latter can be seen for their true barbarity. That someone capable of X *actually sanctioned* Y? Like getting your head around the SS camp commandant lost in sublime Schubert *lieder* one moment, then taking potshots at prisoners the next.



*Ralph Fiennes as Amon Goeth in  
Schindler's List*

Likewise, trying to discuss the history of church missions today is fraught. Can *anything* good have come from it? Much entrenched ignorance is spawned on this front, not least the lack of awareness of how it was missionaries, often in the face of colonial obstruction, who insisted

on the dignity of indigenous people and on preserving 100s of indigenous languages. See my brief profile of [Lamin Sanneh](#), for example. But that's not my point here. I simply want to bring up what is for many evangelicalism's most objectionable feature.

## Kingdom or Empire: what's it to be?

If we return briefly to David Bebbington's evangelical quadrilateral (as quoted in [chapter 1](#)), the emphasis on personal responses to the gospel (rather clunkily termed 'conversionism') has fuelled global mission for perhaps the last 300 years or so. For example, it is little remembered that the [Clapham Sect](#) (of Venn, Simeon, Wilberforce, Hannah More *et al*), was as concerned for people's spiritual renewal as it was for political reform and justice. *[In fact, the assumption that one can separate them off from each other is an enlightenment fallacy, but it's a divorce all too prevalent in evangelical circles, with the*



*usual result of churches abandoning one or the other. But that, yet again, is another story...].* Theirs was no parochial vision; their dogged commitment to slavery abolition went hand in glove with their passion for global mission. Their contention was simple: just as *nobody* should be beyond the *reach of justice*, so should they never be beyond the *reach of grace*. And who can fault them? So thousands upon thousands heeded the challenge to up sticks, often (usually?) at great personal cost.

Inevitably, various patterns of European mission took shape. But the archetype so often was the ‘mission station’ (as has often been pointed out, a contradiction in terms since the former word is dynamic, the latter static). Even



*Rev Hans Astrup holding a Sunday Service. from "Unkulunkulu in Zululand" by Andrew Burgess, 1934*

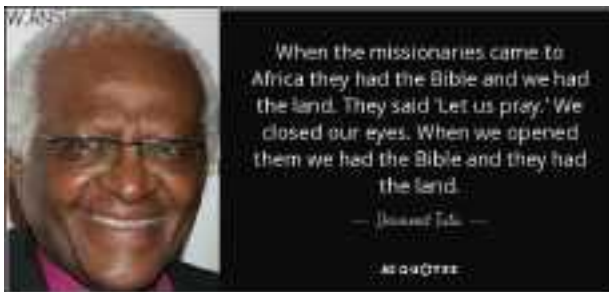
when we lived in Uganda in the early noughties, several

still existed, albeit in reduced or adapted forms. Back in the day, intrepid pioneers would head out 'into the bush' and set up in what seemed like the middle of nowhere. A station would then evolve into a hub primarily for 3 things:

- a hospital (to share the benefits of western medicine)
- a school (to share the benefits of western education)
- a church (to share the benefits of ... er... western (?) religion)

So far so good. The motivations were often benign and well-intentioned. But it's not exactly rocket science to see why so many found the arrival of Christianity hard to distinguish from an ingrained culture of white rule. As Abp Desmond Tutu liked to joke, "when the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray'. We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land!"

It was much more complicated than this, of course, and Tutu knew it. But the power imbalances were profound. To be reluctant to enjoy one of the three mission station benefits (in church, say) might inevitably undermine your access to medicine or education.



How could it not? The terms were stark; the hands gripping all the reins, clear. The white man's burden was evidently not for sharing. Good was done, but the mindset too often was imperialistic.

The problem is, despite protestations to the contrary, the attitude has not really gone away. I'm not talking about overseas enterprise since this does seem to be declining in the UK (though **Eddie Arthur is far more expert** on this than pretty much anybody at the moment). I'm talking about an uncomfortable aspect of evangelical subculture. We might take some comfort from the fact that in this country we don't tend to fall into the obvious trap of naming our ministries after the leader (something that **RZIM is having to come to terms with right now**). But that doesn't prevent British forms of Christian celebrity culture, or a gravitation towards strong leaders with ministries crafted in their image, or loose(ish) networks that nevertheless wait on every nod from particular movers and shakers. It's hard to ignore the bitter flavour of small-scale imperialism. Empire-building in all but name.

Now, notice what I am and am not saying. I'm not rejecting the notion of having a shared vision for developing new ministry, or for planting a church, or for trying to be coordinated and strategic in how to meet needs in a local area (whether spiritual, social, physical or other). It is a matter of who owns the vision and, more unnervingly, who controls the vision. Or to put it another way, does it serve God's kingdom or build a person's empire? Perhaps it's a mixture (because our motives are always mixed, are they not)? But even so, shouldn't we *always* anticipate, and therefore *plan* for, an ongoing process of rooting out the latter in favour of the former? Again I only throw out a few diagnostic questions here:

- ◆ How dependent is the vision on **one (or a few) individual(s)**? Of course, that is not a problem in itself, especially as things begin. But how about in the mid- to longer-term? Do those individuals resist changing or sharing or handing over the vision?
- ◆ What part does **money (along with the ‘money-men’)** play in the vision because with money comes power? Whoever pays the piper always calls the tune, we’re told. That’s certainly how the world works. But it is all too true in the church, isn’t it? Does wealth automatically render someone spiritually mature? Put like that, of course, it sounds absurd. But I don’t think we stop to think about it enough. Now, I know of a number of remarkably generous (what we might call mega-) donors and they do have maturity and insight that shouldn’t be ignored. But that’s not my point. I sometimes worry that ministry and missional agendas and priorities are almost exclusively set by donors.



- ◆ How do these ministries and projects (which may well bring unique characteristics and gifts to the wider community) **relate to others**? What is the rhetoric about those who are different (especially when they are so similar as to be barely distinguishable)? Does it breed a them-vs-us mentality? Surely that is more likely in a human empire than a divine kingdom mindset?

But we must move on. For while leaders might well have a genuine and legitimate heart for inviting and serving all



and every person they cross paths with, there is a bit of an undercurrent. Some of the recent scandals have shed light on it.

## **All invited but the usual suspects chosen?**

Let me repeat. While it was never perfectly adhered to, inevitably, the professed commitment behind world



mission was that all human beings, wherever they live and whatever their race, are made in G o d ' s

image and therefore to be included in all kingdom invitations. Without exception.

This is why it is so agonising, if not actually abhorrent, for churches and their leaders to manifest prejudices that do make exceptions. Of course, this is rarely explicit policy, not in our egalitarian age. Still less would it be acknowledged in public teaching. Quite the reverse.

Now, the tightrope to navigate here is very tricky in the current climate. Language is constantly shifting and so meaning is fluid. A word like 'inclusive' will connote all kinds of different things, especially now it's become a political signifier. It seems to me that a biblical approach is to be resolutely inclusive because God's kingdom is; which means being inclusive of all people and types in our gospel appeal to trust in Christ AND inclusive to all in



our gospel call to repent to Christ. As Bonhoeffer warned us. Grace must never be cheap.

The problem is that there are some who implicitly regard inclusivity as some kind of worldly agenda that denies a need for personal surrender or change. Which is pretty weird, because I'm pretty sure that inclusion agenda in its original form derived from God. See the bible *passim* – not least this subversive little cracker:

*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

*Apostle Paul (Gal 3:28)*

Sure, people can do some funny things with that one, but the plain meaning is plain – Christ shows NO PREJUDICE of any sort. And nor should his people. End of.

So let me ask a few questions that trouble me [and before anyone points it out, I am all too aware that, yes, I am a super-privileged, white, Anglo-Saxon, privately educated doctoral student, male with friends in high places (secular, ecclesiastical and international) who in 50 years has now enjoyed the kind of opportunities that few even dream of. Yup, I'm one privileged brother]:

- ♦ **Why does the British church still seem to mirror British social divides so closely?** Especially when it comes to leadership? And evangelical leadership in particular? **Race** is a profoundly entrenched boundary marker in UK society, but if there anything is even more entrenched it is surely **class**. Don't misunderstand. People can't be faulted for having privileges, only for failures to recognise those privileges and then making

kingdom use of them for the sake of those who lack them. It is not even necessarily wrong to work with others of similar background; but what surely *is* suspect is the attempt to ensure (perhaps in the guise of seeking 'trustworthy and faithful gospel co-workers') that it is *always* the same type of person who leads. We have to at least question how much our backgrounds have formed our assumptions, presumptions and prejudices. The scary thing is that they will have done so to a considerable degree.

- ♦ So a question I find myself returning to is this: **in the immediate social context of a local church, who are the marginalised? Who are struggling at the bottom of the social ladder?** Are they represented in a local church? If not, is there a way of reaching out to them? If they are, how precisely do their roles in the church mirror those they might have outside it? If, for example, there is a particular immigrant group in the neighbourhood, they will probably be doing the menial jobs like cleaning, deliveries, night-guarding. If they do the same thing in church and nothing else, in what way can the church be said to be different from the world? If such folks are regularly overlooked for mentoring or for a toe-dip into ministry waters, there must be something awry, mustn't there?
- ♦ **Why is paternalism still so rife, towards churches outside the big city centres, and then beyond, to churches in other countries?** What makes us think we have a monopoly on both truth and practice so that we always know what should be done? As if we are the ones uniquely entrusted with influence elsewhere? Of course, we have an amazing heritage, with generations of experience and resourcing to draw on, as well as the old imperial networks to exploit. All can be used for

good. And there have been, and I hope will continue to be, great ones who serve and love in the most extraordinary ways? And some of them have been quite posh! But why the presumption that *only* certain types have it in them to be in charge? A side-effect, of course, is that those who are not 'the certain types' live with perpetual insecurity which leads to trying even hard to be that type, rather than accepting who they are; with sometimes very grim consequences. An extreme example cropped up a number of years ago, while I was on the faculty of that small Ugandan seminary. I'd heard about a British church leader discussing a seminary they were supporting in another African country by sending a couple of workers there. In the course of drumming up support for this vision – a friend who was there and heard it – this leader said that, of course, the seminary in question was *the only place in Africa where the Bible was being taught properly!* My first reaction was to feel a bit miffed because I thought I was doing a reasonably proper job of it. But my second thought was to be aghast at such absurdity. Apart from the impossibility of knowing such a factoid, it revealed a profoundly dangerous, but alas common, mindset. *Unless they do things like I do, and unless I know about it, it can't be good.*

I could go on. But I worry (again perhaps because of the 5 mores) we are blind to the prophetic demands on scripture on the wealthy and powerful are being conveniently overlooked in churches. After all, it only takes a cursory read through the letter of James to throw up some very awkward questions.



## 4. DOWN A NIETZSCHE RABBIT-HOLE

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*21st October 2020*

We had a week beside the sea, last week. Nothing quite like the North Sea in October! Blustery Norfolk skies and coastal walks are the perfect combo.

Another bonus was the chance to catch up with some serious reading. The highlight for me was Sue Prideaux's astonishing 2018 biography of Friedrich Nietzsche, *I am Dynamite!*

Now those who felt I waggled on the tee too long in the previous 3 posts of this series will really think I've lost the plot by including this one. It will seem a complete red herring and actually unhelpful. But please bear with me. In the next post, I hope to ground this a bit more in our reality.



## A Gripping Read But A Desperate Life

I couldn't put the book down. Yet I felt overwhelmed...

- ♦ by compassion for a desperate man who lived such a difficult life (constant illness treated with detrimental 'cures', deeply frustrating dependence on others to help him read and write as his eyesight gradually failed, and in the end, 10 years of insanity while effectively incarcerated by his supremely unpleasant sister).
- ♦ by feeling completely intimidated at such paradoxically creative and destructive brilliance. I didn't even begin to plumb those depths. If Nietzsche is notorious for one thing today, it is the fact that he put that brilliance to such devastating use in his battle against Christianity, the faith of his Lutheran pastor father. It needs to be noted, as Prideaux warns more than once, that

*his condemnations were reserved for the Church and priests rather than Jesus Christ, the founder of the religion, whom he admires and reveres." (Prideaux, 310)*

Sounds familiar? His influence is now evident in the man and woman of the western street. Then, of course, it is impossible to ignore the even more dangerous ends to which his thought would be the means (often unjustly), after him. And he knew that risk was real:

*I am frightened by the thought of what unqualified and unsuitable people may invoke my authority one day. Yes, that is the torment of every great teacher of mankind: he knows that, given the circumstances and the accidents, he can become a disaster as well as a blessing to mankind.*  
(Prideaux, 375)

Friedrich Nietzsche

So for example:

*Tragically for Nietzsche, the need to overcome ourselves became so blatantly distorted into the need to overcome others that it tended to overshadow his ability to ask the eternal questions in such a gloriously provocative way. Similarly, his devotion to examining every facet of the truth and never recommending an answer beyond 'perhaps...' has afforded infinite possibilities for interpretation.*  
(Prideaux, 376)



No wonder Prideaux is constantly attentive to distinguishing precisely what he said and meant from what others claimed. One thing is abundantly clear: Nietzsche was *by no means* a proto-Nazi.

Anyway. Of the book's scores of insights (which are still percolating in the little grey cells), this particular point hit home. Nietzsche was *super* confident about his thinking once he reached his conclusions. He could write with masterly aggression or clarity, as context demanded; he

could be infuriatingly opaque and even confusing if the whim took him. But he always did so with vigour and nerve. Yet, here's the paradox. As already hinted, he was super-confident in his demand for profound epistemological humility. Now, let me try to unpack that!



*Friedrich (painted posthumously) and his very scary sister, Elisabeth, by Edvard 'The Scream' Munch (1906)*

## **A Confident Call for Epistemological Humility**

Here he concludes his book, *Daybreak* (1886). My understanding (as I've not read that one) is that in it, he explores a deliberately non- (if not *anti*-) theological understanding of human nature, while simultaneously rejecting the scientific materialist's reduction to everything being determined by our biochemistry and physics. He saw himself as a philosophical Columbus departing from Genoa into the unknown. Remember, he had no certainties at all about the outcome of his voyage...

*We are aeronauts of the spirit... whither does this mighty longing draw us, this longing that is worth more to us than any pleasure? Why must in this direction, where all the suns of humanity have hitherto gone done. Will it perhaps be said of us one day that we too, steering westward hoped to reach an India--but that it was our fate to be wrecked against infinity? Or, my brothers. Or?-* (Prideaux, 185)

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

Prideaux laconically comments, 'Few authors are brave enough to end a book on 'Or?' Are there *any*, in fact?!

He would, of course, go on to declare, via the madman of *The Gay Science*, that God was dead 'and we have killed him.' (Prideaux, 209). The consequences would be catastrophic: "*Incipit tragoedia*", he wrote. *The tragedy begins*. Why? Because it was impossible to preserve Christianity's ethical content without its theology. (Prideaux, 210) As his thinking developed, he showed how we can no longer be certain about anything declared to be true, especially in ethics. It is possible to trace what he called "the genealogy of ethics", because we can never recognise things as eternal absolutes, only 'fleeting conventions'. (Prideaux 268). And he didn't pull his punches, especially against philosophy and science. It wasn't only religion in his cross-hairs.

- ◆ Philosophers were 'spokesmen for their ideas which they baptise 'truths'... Philosophy is a glorification of universalisation. It is imposition... **Philosophy is a tyrannical drive**, the most spiritual will to power, to the "creation of the word", to the *causa prima*.' (Prideaux, 269)



- ◆ It is no better for science.

*The **conclusions of the microscopists** provide no more truth than do the philosophers. The meaning of science is not religion. Yet science, somehow, is becoming substituted for religion. The modern world is mistaking scientific theory for moral dogma. (Prideaux, 269)*



*The Nietzsche Stone, near **Surlej**, where he experienced the inspiration for **Thus Spoke Zarathustra** (taken by Armin Kübelbeck)*

- ◆ This led to an even more radical conclusion:

*'Having called into question the nature of self and declared **objective truth to be an impossible fiction**, he mischievously goes on to point out that to assert that objective truth is a fiction to make a statement of objective truth which must itself be a fiction.'* (Prideaux, 271)

So, if 'truth' is mere interpretation, what on earth do we do?

*Distrusting all system-builders, Nietzsche steadfastly refuses to build a system for us. He loves to contradict himself in the realm of ideas, and to force us into the position of the free spirit who is independent of him. Sue Prideaux (p271)*

Now, it is way above my pay grade or abilities to work through all this in order to reconstruct something workable and liveable while doing justice to Nietzsche's thought. I'm no philosopher at all.

Consequently (perhaps?!), I do believe it's possible to hold to Truth as a reality, or more accurately, to find ways of getting closer to it, without claiming an objective let alone complete grasp of it. So Nietzsche is not completely right. His philosophy is *not* enough to kill God, or even to be able to discern that he's been killed.

But here's the point. He is not entirely wrong, either. In fact, he is right for an unnervingly large proportion of the time; 'unnerving' to me, at least, because we try to cling to what seem primarily **pre-modern truth claims**, while inhabiting a **largely/too modernist framework**, despite accepting the validity of many **post-modernist objections** to it. *No wonder* it's such a deeply unsettling and destabilising position to find oneself occupying. (*Those*

*with pastoral hearts for those in their contexts who wrestle with this stuff should therefore take note.)*

The implications of all this are, to put it mildly, significant. But more of that anon...



## 5. DISHONOURABLE CONFIDENCE?

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*29th October 2020*

We're all aware of body language. It's part of the vocabulary of daily life. Some are perhaps more conversant than others, but it would be hard to deny how much trickier relationships have become with lockdown's retreat to the virtual. When 'reading' others, non-verbal cues are much more imperceptible. In the normal run of things, we can tell a great deal from someone's posture, especially when it betrays feelings truer than those suggested by their spoken words. As ever, the medium is as significant for communication as the message itself. And that includes the medium of embodied people.

So naturally, we should be concerned with posture. If we seek integrity – so every aspect of our humanity is *integrated* and whole – then, we will want to work at matching our verbal and corporal communication. The problem is, once identified, it becomes easier to fake.

That's why phrases like 'adopt a posture...' make me nervous.

A niggle in the back of my mind wriggles (if that's what niggles do) when someone says "we need a posture of listening" because you want to retort, "don't have a posture of listening, *just listen!*" Or, from a slightly different context (that of Chuck de Groat's superlative analysis of extreme narcissistic pathologies in Christian leaders, *When Narcissism Comes To Church*), don't conceal manipulative agendas behind what de Groat terms 'fauxnerability', work hard genuinely 'to *be* vulnerable'.



All of which brings me to another concern that I have with my tribe and subculture; but not just that, it's also with myself. I'm referring to confusion about, and in some quarters an almost apparent lack of, humility. This gets concealed by postures of humility but when things get pressured, such postures get exposed as fake. George Burns, that master quipster of a previous generation, once said this:

*The key to success is sincerity. If you can fake that, you've got it made.*

*George Burns (1896-1996)*

I can't help feeling that many contemporary evangelicals have adopted a parallel habit. With the exception that instead of sincerity, it's humility they're faking. Whereas for integrity's sake, instead of adopting "a posture of humility" why not actually try to "*be* humble!

## Confidence and Humility do go hand in hand...

Now, this is where my previous digressions about Friedrich Nietzsche will begin to make sense (hopefully). As I mentioned, I was very struck by the strength, and even the vehemence, of Nietzsche's confidence in his opinions. And yet the subject of his confidence—namely, his epistemology, or philosophy of knowledge—was his consistent willingness to allow his convictions to be provisional and open. Any human statement must always be accompanied by a whacking great 'perhaps'. How much more true should this be of the Christian?

Of course, this sets off all kinds of warning flares for some. What about 'the *full assurance* of faith'? (Heb 10:22) Or the promise that *knowing* 'the truth will set us free'? (John 8:32) Or that we are to *know* we have eternal life and thus '*confidence* ... in approaching God.' (1 John 5:14)? What indeed?

Well, here's one of the issues. As I said last time, there are ways to hold to the reality of objective truth without claiming to have an absolute grasp on it. Two particular schools of thought that have drawn cleverer folks than this here blogger are that of **Critical Realism** and **Common Sense Realism**. I tend towards the former probably (with N. T. Wright, D. A. Carson, Alister McGrath and others, to name just a few). Here are Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse (quoted in D. A. Carson's paper *Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths in a postmodern world*)

*We are critical realists, which means that we believe that there is a real world out there where it is possible to know and know truly (hence, 'realism'), but we also believe that our theories and hypotheses about that world, and our religious presuppositions and beliefs about reality, color and shape our capacity to know the world (hence, 'critical realism').*

*Jones & Yarhouse*

Put most simply, this means that we have no alternative but to accept the possibility that we have been, can be, and indeed will be, wrong about stuff. To deny this is both folly and absurdity. The radical postmodern may well throw babies out with the bathwater, but that doesn't mean everyone has to. Yet nor should that excuse any reactionary and stubborn splashing about with our rubber ducks in the modernist bath-waters that are seriously past their sell-by (or should that be smell-by?) date. The flaws in so-called enlightened frameworks are simply too profound and catastrophic. Yet the residue of such

thinking persists in all kinds of places, and especially in churches.

The postmodernist will claim that any personal confidence in knowledge is inherently arrogant. Which



is a bit dumb really, because they seem pretty confident about insisting on their rectitude. Just consider how such folks might respond to negative reviews of their books, or the crusading moralism of cancel culture if you don't believe me; not that Alt-Right will-to-power can claim any humility high ground). Surely the issue is more a matter of both *what* you have confidence in and *how* you express such confidence.

Thus, if one considers a classic expression of Christian confidence like Toplady's *Rock of Ages*, it is clear that it bears few hallmarks normally associated with arrogance. Let me highlight just the odd line from it (though we could profitably have analysed all, line by line:

1. Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
let me hide myself in thee;  
let the water and the blood,  
from thy wounded side which flowed,  
be of sin the double cure;  
**save from wrath and make me pure.**

2. **Not the labours of my hands**  
can fulfil thy law's commands;  
could my zeal no respite know,  
could my tears forever flow,  
all for sin could not atone;  
**thou must save, and thou alone.**

3. **Nothing in my hand I bring,**  
**simply to the cross I cling;**  
naked, come to thee for dress;  
helpless, look to thee for grace;  
foul, I to the fountain fly;  
**wash me, Saviour, or I die.**

4. While I draw this fleeting breath,  
when mine eyes shall close in death,  
when I soar to worlds unknown,  
see thee on thy judgment throne,  
**Rock of Ages, cleft for me,**  
**let me hide myself in thee.**

Is it arrogant to reach the end of oneself and thus throw oneself entirely onto the mercy of another? And having done so, found immense relief in doing so and thus keen to express that relief? Surely that is humility, albeit an exuberant humility? By way of contrast, reliance on 'the labours of my hands' or even 'forever flowing tears' is to suggest that an end has not been reached; to imply that we still have some resources within ourselves on which to



lean? That strikes me as arrogance, in the face of usually overwhelming evidence.

So we can see that humility and confidence are *perfectly* compatible. Confidence is not the problem; misplacing confidence *is*. As ever, Chesterton got there before most of us, way back in 1908. He quickly grasped the corrosive effect of Nietzsche's undermining of knowledge by coating everything with a varnish of suspicion. He sensed that had gone too far since all but the most paranoid can function without fearing everything and everyone.



*But what we suffer from to-day is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert--himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt--the Divine Reason.*

*G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (p27, Hendrickson edition 2006)*

But what has this to do with evangelicalism? Well, rather too much. After all, to be an evangelical at its heart is

about being someone who flies the flag of good news. If it's not that, it's literally worthless.

Yet the error still made by far too many is to ignore the difference between confidence in a divine grace that stoops to the human level and confidence in our own opinions, manners and abilities. I don't know Chesterton's writing well enough to imagine how he might have responded (and indeed some readers might be able to point to places where he did). Yet I hope it might have gone something like this...

### **... but gospel confidence never guarantees confident authority**

I've struggled to nail this thought down (hence the clunky header!). But I sometimes fear that evangelicals who have drunk deeply from gospel confidence wells have somehow presumed to believe that the full assurance of faith simultaneously grants the full assurance of their perspectives. Thus, they can speak with often legitimate conviction one moment (perhaps in explaining a text studied at length, say) only in the next minute assert something very different with *identical* conviction (about the rightness or wrongness of this or that political position, for example). Where, at the very least, is the great 'perhaps'?

Nine years on the preaching team at All Souls were both a great privilege and a terrifying challenge. I've talked about this



on here before. I can honestly say that it wasn't caused by the history or heritage of the pulpit, or to be more precise, not once I'd got over the early weeks at any rate. The challenge was due to the demands of speaking to a congregation that not only represents reservoirs of biblical understanding but also expertise (in at least a handful of individuals) in pretty much anything. Mention gaffs made by a sports commentator and, sure enough, someone who does that for a living, will tap you on the shoulder after the service to explain how hard the job is. Throw in a comment about nuclear waste and your comments will be corrected by someone who has studied uranium for 50 years. Take an explicit or definitive position on some political controversy, sure as eggs is eggs there will be someone working full-time on the issue for the other side.

This is perhaps the nature of things in a capital-city-centre-gathered-church, and if an issue is not represented within the regulars, there is bound to be a visitor with 3 PhDs in the field. With perhaps a couple of hundred visitors every week, you never knew *who* was out there. Definitely occasions for achy knees. Talk about humbling. It certainly provoked not a little reticence, and rightly so.

What quickly became clear to me is that regardless of whether we admit it, there's a considerable amount of Ego at stake in leadership and preaching. Standing up in front of hundreds in the knowledge that they will take your words seriously brings an awesome responsibility. It is true power. And like all power, it can be used for good or ill. But the one thing we should never do is deny the presence of such power.

Unfortunately, because Ego is involved, a preacher's statements can never be reduced *solely* to matters of truth or falsehood. You and I are hardly mere data-processing

microchips; we are human beings with vested interests, insecurities and flaws (as well as gifts, compassion and love). Publicly challenge or prove me wrong, my authority/status/influence/pride/public image/fragile security (delete as appropriate) will be seriously undermined. I won't tolerate that. I can't accept that. I can't handle that.

So no wonder that hostility to questions is a tell-tale indicator of insecure and controlling leadership, even if those questions lie at the innocent end of the enquiry spectrum (lying from the genuine and truth-seeking to the awkward and intentionally subversive). This phenomenon is in part what lies at the root of the Nietzschean culture of suspicion of our age. We simply don't trust the motives of the powerful, and we are right not to. It's a matter of avoiding naivety and being real. Now again, it doesn't mean we should *never* trust as if a leader is *never* an honest or genuine broker. But trust takes time to build up. We *can* be critical realists.

So what am I appealing for?

**... but gospel confidence must deepen humility**  
*(leaders included)*

That's not revolutionary. Or shouldn't be. The gospel humbles us (as we've seen). We come to the end of ourselves and cast ourselves on Him. *Nothing* in the hand I bring... So how come when we get given tastes of responsibility, we suddenly discover that we weren't at the end of ourselves after all!? There's some residual capacity for self-sufficiency that suddenly equips us to be impressive, decisive, and above all, CORRECT! Absurd!

Now, I know what it's like. We have a few years under the belt, perhaps. We've started to believe our own spin doctors. We find ourselves in situations that are familiar; ah yes, we've been here before.

I can handle this. We think...

I'll never forget something John Stott said in one of his last talks before his full retirement from public ministry. I'm afraid I'm just paraphrasing because I stupidly didn't write it down at the time (doh).



*Don't underestimate pride. The constant temptation for both young and old is to be unteachable. The young are unteachable because of an arrogant naivety. Unlike their seniors, they know how to do things properly. The old are unteachable because of an arrogant cynicism. Unlike their juniors, they've seen it all before.*

*John Stott (1921-2011)*

Is there ever a time when I can avoid affixing that little 'perhaps' to my statements? Or have I nothing left to learn now?

I've bumbled on long enough in this one. Let me conclude again (at last!) with a few more questions.

- ◆ How much do we **blur distinctions** between what has been divinely revealed and our own understanding of that revelation?

- ◆ How much do we distinguish between our convictions (theological or otherwise) and our opinions? How often do we make assertions about cultural trends or political events with the same rhetorical force as we might use for basic gospel truths? Is there the not-so-subtle implication that **preachers are pundits**; and so need social media platforms and PR campaigns to widen their 'impact'?
- ◆ I suppose this follows directly, but too often preachers and pastors assume the role of what I can only describe as a kind of **oracular guru**. By which I mean the ability, authority and imperative to 'speak into' lives, sharing mere advice or wisdom, but perfect insight and instruction. The same goes for an uncanny ability to discern the motives of 'their disciples'.
- ◆ Then even with so-called gospel truths, is there **safety for doubting**, a place to discuss and wrestle with difficult things, or is there a welcome only for those with things tied up or (more likely) willing to take the leaders' line on stuff?
- ◆ When was the last time we heard leaders **apologise publicly** for something (it doesn't particularly matter what it's for)? Part of the Or **change their mind publicly** about something? Or read a book they knew they would disagree with and still find things to learn?
- ◆ How often do we use phrases like 'as I currently see things...', 'it seems to me...', 'can you help me understand...?', 'I'm not sure I understand this passage...' etc etc. In short, where is the **humble PERHAPS** of those who see only in part (and must wait patiently for the time when seeing in full is even conceivable – 1 Cor 13:12)

Even these apparently insignificant linguistic tweaks would make a big difference to many people. It would certainly demonstrate a change in posture, which is sadly lacking in too many evangelical circles. And by demonstrating a posture of humility, I do, of course, mean actually *being* humble.



## 6. WHO NEEDS A HERO?

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*4th November 2020*

One of my favourite novels ever does not, at first glance, have a plot to inspire confidence. Not in sophisticated 21st-century readers, anyway. 12th-century junior monk (Reginald) goes to live in freezing Northumbrian cave with exceedingly grumpy and ancient ascetic monk (Godric), on the orders of another monk, in order to write his life story. Hmmm.

Sit at the gnarled feet of a grumpy old monk?

But **Frederick Buechner's *Godric*** is astonishing. It was even a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1981, which, for a novel rich in theological and ecclesiological themes, is unusual, to say the least. Once immersed in it, though, it's easy to see why it was so honoured. It is a masterpiece, full of human





realities, the contortions of the human heart in its self-justifications, confessions and profound regrets. In short, it is about a saint and his sin.

Yes, it was inspired by the real historical person of **Godric of Finchale**, who was declared a saint by the Catholic church. Yet this is a book far more concerned with the ordinary realities of *all* saints (in the usual NT sense of the word), as one might expect from a novelist who is also a Presbyterian minister. This is about a church leader who (despite his unconventional 'platform') insists on resisting his contemporaries' worldly temptations to idolize and adulate him. It is about a spiritual hero who knows all too well that he is no hero at all.

Buechner's prose is as concise as it is richly immersive, written as Godric's first-person narrative of his shame-inducing former life; he won't allow Reginald to hear a sanitised version. What the latter does with that is, of course, an entirely different matter...

*Aedlward the freeman was my father, and Reginald has it that his name means Keeper of Blessedness. If so, he kept it mostly to himself, more's the pity. I pity Aedlward. If he pitied me, he never said. Godric (p9)*

*Reginald's eyes are rolled up in his head so all that shows is white. He crosses himself and like a herring in a basket gasps for air.*

*Yet I've spared him things far worse for the sake of sparing Godric too. I've spared him wasted Burcwen nibbling like a hare on grass and leaves. I've spared him William calling out along the darkened banks of Wear for what he'll never find. I've spared I'm two that lay as one in one another's arms and never spoke a word. "There's much you're better not to know," I say, "but know you this. Know Godric's no true hermit but a gadabout within his mind, a lecher in his dreams. Self-seeking he is and peacock proud. A hypocrite. A ravener of alms and dainty too. A slothful, greedy bear. Not worthy to be called a servant of the Lord when he treats such servants as he has himself like dung, like Reginald. All this and worse than this go say of Godric in your book." Poor Reginald's tears run trickling down his cheeks like tallow. He asks for sweet, and bitter's all he has from me. Have I no honeyed crumb to take the taste away? Godric (p21)*



Buechner's Godric is a broken man. And we weep with him. But here's the great gospel irony. It is precisely this recognition and self-awareness that qualifies him for moral authority. Reginald had been commissioned to write a hagiography. Godric will do everything he can to undermine that. He's simply not having it – because he's committed to truth-telling.

This illustrates perfectly a dynamic that is all too common in Christian circles. I'll never forget something that my former teacher, David Jackman, said often.

*Every congregation's temptation is to place their leader on a pedestal. Every Christian leader's temptation is to want to be there.*

*David Jackman (et al)*<sup>1</sup>

This, of course, raises a tension (at the very least) with another key dynamic, one derived from something the NT itself encourages: the importance of mentors and older brothers/sisters in the faith, the need to choose whom to imitate, and the necessity of being willing to obey those in authority. Put it in those terms, and you have the perfect recipe for potential manipulation, control and abuse. As, in fact, it has become. So let me chew the cud a little with Paul in Philippians, which intriguingly enough is where he touches on at least something of the problem.

## **Choose your role models wisely**

The centre of gravity in Philippians must, of course, be the famous “Servant Song” of Philippians 2:5-11, God's

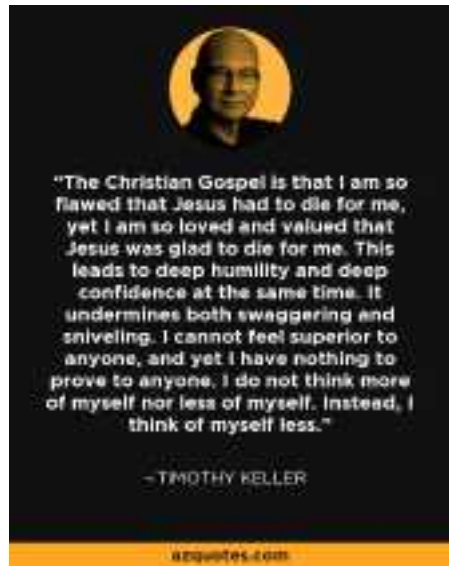
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<sup>1</sup> Having now read the 31:8 report into Jonathan Fletcher, it was chilling indeed to discover he would quote this line himself. It would seem, in the end, it was to little effect.

breathtaking *riches-to-rags-to-riches* story that is the Incarnation narrative. There really isn't a story quite like it in its magnitude and apparent absurdity. But here's the rub. Far from being a bald doctrinal statement which expects little more than assent, it is a profoundly moral statement that demands imitation. This is how Paul introduces it:

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God... (Phil 2:5-6)*

In other words, be willing to serve, even to the point of suffering, because of the hope held out. This then creates a kind of imitation baton race in the letter.



So, in Phil 3:15-16, Paul says what at first sight seems an appalling leadership precedent. He seems to anticipate the archetypal narcissistic leader as profiled in **Chuck de Groat's book mentioned previously.**

*All of us who are mature should take **such a view of things**. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. (Phil 3:15-16)*

Jeepers!

But hang on a sec. The key is that final phrase: living up to what is already attained. You see, Paul is keen that the Philippians don't get distracted by the kind of false teaching which heaps intolerable moral burdens on believers (in the 1st-Century Philippian context, that meant the so-called circumcision group). These are the people he brands as *mutilators of the flesh* in 3:2. Then he contrasts his own worldview with what it had been pre-conversion. He'd piled up spiritual credit with God (or what he assumed gave him credit) only to realise that it was utterly worthless. He was still spiritually bankrupt. To put it mildly, 'whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.' (3:7) And it is the life of knowing Christ that Paul now enjoys now and, even more, in the life to come when he anticipates truly gaining Christ. So:

*I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:14)*

In other words, the Now & Not Yet of the Christian life. It is THIS view of things that Paul refers to as a sign of maturity. To think otherwise is simply not gospel thinking. It is not Phil 2:5-11 thinking. So do you see the point? Paul insists the Philippians imitate him in this interim life-stage just as he seeks to imitate Christ's mindset in it. Service before rest, suffering before glory.



But Paul's not the only model in the letter. Why else do you think Paul seems to digress immediately after the servant song to these two pen-portraits?

- ◆ **Timothy:** I have *no one like him...* genuine *concern* for your welfare (2:20); everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy has *proved himself...* (2:21-22)
- ◆ **Epaphroditus:** whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you... he was ill and almost died... (2:26-27)... honour people like him because he *almost died for the work of Christ*. He risked his life to make up for the help you (2:30).

Timothy is concerned for Christ's interests, which explains why he is concerned for the Philippians. Epaphroditus risked his life for serving Paul as the Philippians' emissary. Both men put flesh and bones onto the

Christlike mindset of Phil 2:5; now this church didn't need to try to imagine what it might look like. They just had to remember their friends. And imitate them.

They aren't the only ones imitating Christ in the letter to the Philippian church:

- ◆ **Believers in Rome:** inspired by Paul's priorities even in prison. So 'because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear'. (Phil 1:14)
- ◆ **Believers in Philippi:** Paul's longing is that they do what they have already proved themselves capable of, that of **shining like stars 'in a warped and crooked generation'**. (Phil 2:15)

In the end, it's not a complicated point but it does hint at Paul's deep psychological insight. Human beings imitate other human beings. The question is always not *whether* but *who* we imitate. We seem wired to need heroes; or if not heroes, then at least role models. So choose them wisely. That means using the divine template of the Philippian servant song.

## **Imitate self-aware servants not celebrities with charisma**

It has been one of the greatest blessings of my own life because I can say that I have been mentored and helped by individuals who know themselves. This means both knowing their own weaknesses as well as strengths, their own failures as well as gifts. Chuck de Groat's analysis of narcissism makes clear that the terror hidden in the hearts of such destructive leaders is that of being exposed as

flawed. Which is nuts as well as agonisingly sad. Because who of us can honestly claim *not* to be flawed?

So one deeply discouraging feature of modern evangelicalism is its celebrity culture. In one sense, this is nothing new. The Corinthians, it seems, made a point of noting who had been baptised by whom (as if that counted for anything) because that had somehow become emblematic of their various factions. (1 Cor 1:13-17) But it is clear that the things that beguile and impress us too often these days are no more than thinly coated models from the world. They might look good on TV, or seem authentically personable when they post Instagrams from the kitchen table or study desk, or have a great podcast manner. But all they prove is the ability to present themselves well. They may be the real deal, but there's no way of telling from these media.



Now, that's not precisely true of all circles. But the common feature will be that if there is an attribute or skill that a community prizes, then those who excel in it will gain something akin to celebrity: gifted preacher (or sometimes, ahem, 'bible teacher'), worship leader, social activist etc etc etc – the nature of the beast that these people get idolized. We want them on our pedestals, for whatever reason. And they want to be there. Unless they have the honesty and rigour of Godric. Despite the Abbot and Reginald's determination to write a hagiography. We need our heroes pure. And when they're not, we whitewash/ignore/downplay/erase. Or rather, when



they fit the mould we want for them, we plaster over the ways in which they don't live consistently with the Philippians 2 ethic. "But he's such a great \_\_\_\_" (complete as applicable).

**Paul Tripp made a vital point**, (so obvious that it shouldn't need saying but it so clearly does). To paraphrase what, if you use the world's values for identifying leaders then don't be surprised if they turn out to be worldly.

*And our definition of a leader now is – strong personality, quick-witted, forceful, domineering, able to win the day in a discussion or argument, can cast vision and collect people. I'm going to say this: no wonder we've produced a culture of ministry bullies who mistreat people.*

*Paul Tripp*

In what ways is that consistent with Philippians 2? None at all. A bully, by definition, is someone who looks out for his or her own interests. Other people are mere instruments by which to salve their own deepest insecurities.

The problem is I know my own heart and I have plenty of my own insecurities. More than my fair share's worth, probably. We all do. So does this mean all are barred? What would Paul say to that?

My guess is something on the lines of imitating his maturity. That is not conceit because Christian maturity precisely entails knowing how much we need Christ and how far we have to go. *Not that we have already attained all this...* That is the mark of the mature believer in grace.

It's common for those outside the church to disparage Christians for their hypocrisy. And rightly so. It's fair enough! I know full well as a 'professional' Christian that there is no way in a million years that I live up to what I preach. Which is truly scary.

But God knows that too. I need to *own* my hypocrisy. I need to confess it and strive to overcome it – over a lifetime. *Not that we have already attained all this...*

So here is the ideal model for believers: Someone with the maturity to accept the reality of their sin and failure, to confess it and seek forgiveness for it whenever they can, to keep looking to Christ. In short: someone who knows what to do when they fail.

*Not that we have already attained all this...*



## 7. THE INNER RING OF RACE

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*19th November 2020*

C. S. Lewis nailed the phenomenon in a 1944 lecture given at King's London. He clarifies that he's not referring to the need for discretion or keeping confidences - there are plenty of circumstances which make those wise, if not morally imperative.

No, what he's warning against is what he calls the 'Inner Ring', an invisible grouping to which one aspires to belong (for whatever reason) and whose appeal lies largely in the fact that it seems quite exclusive.



*And you will always find them hard to enter, for a reason you very well know. You yourself, once you are in, want to make it hard for the next entrant, just as those who are already in made it hard for you. Naturally. In any wholesome group of people which holds together for a good purpose, the exclusions are in a sense accidental. Three or four people who are together for the sake of some piece of work exclude others because there is work only for so many or because the others can't in fact do it. Your little musical group limits its numbers because the rooms they meet in are only so big. But your genuine Inner Ring exists for exclusion. There'd be no fun if there were no outsiders. The invisible line would have no meaning unless most people were on the wrong side of it. Exclusion is no accident; it is the essence. (*The Inner Ring*, 1944)*

The entire essay needs regular reading because its brevity conceals such importance and weight. You can find it [online if you follow this link](#).

But this point, towards the end, struck me forcibly just the other day.

*... if in your spare time you consort simply with the people you like, you will again find that you have come unawares to a real inside: that you are indeed snug and safe at the centre of something which, seen from without, would look exactly like an Inner Ring. But the difference is that the secrecy is accidental, and its exclusiveness a by-product, and no one was led thither by the lure of the esoteric: for it is only four or five people who like one another meeting to do things that they like. This is friendship. Aristotle placed it among the virtues. It causes perhaps half of all the happiness in the world, and no Inner Ring can ever have it.*

He was, of course, perfectly describing his friendship group, the Inklings. But the thing is it was porous and people floated in and out, drawn together by shared interests. It wasn't exclusive. That's presumably one reason they would have one of their weekly meetings in a pub.

But I've been chewing on the nature of friendship groups. How easily, how inadvertently an innocent and altogether helpful thing can degenerate into an exclusive, social evil. As I say, please read the whole essay which [has been posted here](#). Recent events have prompted me to consider how this operates in so many ways, including within church circles. I need to say more about this with specific reference to evangelicalism in a future post. But it needs mentioning that one notable failure is in the realms of race and racism.

So I was very pleased when a few [BAME](#) (for want of a better term) members of the church had instigated a prayer meeting for racial reconciliation in the church. The idea is to meet monthly. Perhaps prompted by that, on

Saturday, two of them, Daniel & Karnie, were asked to facilitate a morning's zoom for our church's leadership council (PCC) on race. For some reason, to tee up their input, they asked me to contribute, giving a white British perspective on why this was so important. So this is a tweaked version of my notes.

Some thoughts to introduce a discussion on race...

I have found, when addressing issues of race and prejudice, that I need to get some things straight, for my own sake, if no one else's. You see, what we're talking about is not a matter of following some external agenda imposed on us by activists; nor is it the result of some new-fangled philosophical shifts that have come to the fore in the last 40 or 50 years; even less is it because of a desire to look politically correct in order to curry favour, or at the least, to avoid any cultural heat. No. It's none of those (although each unquestionably presents challenges that must be engaged with when the time is right). It's as simultaneously simple and complex as being

- ◆ BOTH God's creatures made in his image
- ◆ AND God's redeemed, granted citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is not about worldly politics. It's about Kingdom politics.

## **God working through church &/or society**

We must accept one awkward thing here, though. At various points in church history, wider social trends or cultural dynamics have been used by God to shake up the church. To wake it up when it's asleep. This is usually necessary at the times when the church has not been

faithful in its God-given job of shaking up society. And I think we are clearly living in just one of those times.

I was at a lecture given in London a few years ago by the remarkable novelist, **Marilynne Robinson**. Her brief was to analyse religion in America. And one (of many insights) that lodged in my brain was the notion of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s under MLK *et al* genuinely being America's *Third Great Awakening*

- ◆ **First Great Awakening** – a revival associated with George Whitefield in particular and others like Jonathan Edwards' grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. It marked the first time African Americans came to Christ in great numbers;
- ◆ **The Second Great Awakening** took place several decades later and was also linked in various ways with the American movements for temperance, slavery abolition and women's rights.
- ◆ The Third Great Awakening – now other events have laid claim to the title. But Robinson described the **Civil Rights movement** of the 60s in profoundly theological and spiritual terms. Which is hard to deny if you've ever heard recordings of MLK. Perhaps to be more accurate, though, what we saw then is one part of the church being used by God to shake up another part. It's just taking a stupidly long time for the wider church to catch up. If that isn't an illustration of the Lord's astonishing patience, I don't know what is.

Perhaps that seems overblown. Which is why we need to wheel in another word that often brings more heat than

light in the current climate. But it's important. That word is... PRIVILEGE.

## Facing our privilege(s)

Now, the problem with privilege is you don't appreciate it until it's threatened or lost. And until it's threatened, you probably don't even recognise you have it. Because it's normality. Like the oxygen we breathe.

There's a lot of talk about white privilege and while I might have some philosophical problems with the framework it derives from, I really can't deny the fact of it. If my brother or sister in Christ (*an identity which must trump everything else, surely*) is wounded by an unfairness of which I'm simply unaware, I must accept at least the possibility of there being a real problem. Because that is the nature of things. Just because I'm unaware of a problem, it doesn't mean there isn't a problem.

You see, I know that I am given the benefit of the doubt in countless situations by virtue of my skin colour in the UK; perhaps it's even more so abroad (including the parts of Africa we have lived in and visited); I just know it, and it's far more often than I care to admit. It does work occasionally the other way around, to be fair. But that is rare. Most of the time, whiteness is an asset. Which is absurd, isn't it? Why on earth should my skin colour indicate a *single thing* about my character, my temperament or inclinations? And yet, it does.

So even if this makes us feel uncomfortable, we must at least face the possibility of having unacknowledged privileges, however alien that seems. Of course, as I say, prejudices work the other way around. That's a fact too. But in this world, for all kinds of reasons, white skin



brings privileges. And when these get identified by people in Christ that I respect and love, I've got to take notice. Of course, I can't help it if I have certain privileges, especially if they come as a result of accidents of birth or upbringing. The point is not to send everyone on a guilt trip. We can't blame people for having privileges; only what they do with them. And if they seek to patrol their privileges in order to preserve their exclusivity, whether on race grounds or any other, then they have succumbed to the lure of the Inner Ring.

Which brings me to the main point. For which I want to make a rather silly analogy. It's not perfect but hopefully, you'll get the gist – so please bear with me!

### **If it's my brother or sister...**

Imagine if one person has a problem with the sound made whenever somebody else chews a biro. It's excruciating, like that scene in the movie JAWS when Robert Shaw scratches down an old blackboard. It would never have occurred to you that this might be difficult. But still. One describes something that nobody has before. As a friend, you might listen, you might even be empathetic. But you certainly don't imagine it represents a bigger problem. So you commiserate. And try to remember never to chew your biro in their presence. But then a few weeks later, someone completely different says the same thing. That's funny – 2 in a month. But when a third mentions, 'oh well, actually, I find it quite difficult too, but I was too embarrassed to say' that must give you pause, don't you think? You're at least going to assume that there are probably others out there with similar issues. So you'll now be serious about what people have to say. Biro-chewing may be the last thing you lose sleep over. But

since it's affecting people in your wider family, the body of Christ, you're going to take it seriously.

That's a silly analogy of course – but I hope you get the idea. But before I finish, let me give it a sinister twist.

What if you then discover that the noise of biro-chewing had been used by the KGB to torture prisoners. Not everyone of course – just those with a genetic predisposition to be sensitive to the sound. And accident of biology perhaps. It works not because of anything to do with their character, apparent weakness, or politics or worldviews. None – just their biology. What if you have some in the church who escaped from the USSR with memories of that torture. Do you see that this adds a whole other level of pain? There are connotations of man's inhumanity to man, and it brings it all back. Don't you think that if a brother or sister in Christ had that kind of experience, you will do everything you can to make them feel welcome and prevent biro-chewing in their presence? Of course, you are unlikely to find those in church who do it as torture. It's probably just being thoughtless or unaware as they blithely chew one biro after another while they take notes in the sermon. So you'll make them aware, won't you?

Now, as I say, it's a dumb and very imperfect analogy (at several levels). But please grasp this. We're not addressing racism in church because we've capitulated or compromised or gone all politically correct. We're addressing it because we love our brothers and sisters enough to hear them speak. To take *them seriously*, we must, at the very least, take *their stories* seriously.

We then heard from Daniel and Karnie, which was deeply affecting, as one might expect. We had some zoomed

break out discussions and some feeding back. It was all-too-brief and inevitably hampered by being Zoomed. *But it was a start.*

But I'm in no doubt that this, coupled with issues of class, is a major blindspot in contemporary British evangelicalism. But the notion that (i) the church contains all kinds of inner rings and (ii) that these might operate their exclusivity on the basis of race or class, is abhorrent for Kingdom-minded people and should be anathema. On which, more anon.

For now, here are a couple of things. One of the inimitable forces behind Veggie-Tales is Phil Vischer and he created a superb video about race back in June, albeit for the USA context. There are of course differences, but they can't hide the fact that the UK shares many uncomfortable similarities.



Plus a small reading list I put together for last Saturday (in the Bits and Bobs section at the back).



## 8. CIRCUMNAVIGATING CHURCH INNER-RINGS

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*18th December 2020*

This one's been a struggle, strangely. Hence the delay. I keep returning to the fact that Lewis' original essay is entirely sufficient on the matter. So if you've not read *The Inner Ring* yet, or recently, then please do so. Lewis was putting his finger on something that, decades later, would come to be known (in its mildest form) as FOMO.

But the problem goes much deeper and more insidiously than that. Because it afflicts even those who decry it the most. The temptation for those excluded from one inner ring is to retaliate through their own alternative. It's disturbing how often they then function in mirrored ways; similar to when those who were bullied so often become bullies (for example, just look at how things escalate on Twitter with the platform providing the perfect tool for counter-attack and harassment); persecuted become persecutor, and *vice-versa*.

But I'm already digressing. Let's stick to the Inner Ring (and its spawn, the equally grim, anti-inner-ring Inner Ring). Just what is it about this phenomenon?

## Invisible Boundaries

To begin with, it's because everything is concealed. Here is Lewis, describing the contrasting hierarchies simultaneously at work in just one scene in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. One is visible, that of military rank.

*The other is not printed anywhere. Nor is it even a formally organised secret society with officers and rules which you would be told after you had been admitted. You are never formally and explicitly admitted by anyone. You discover gradually, in almost indefinable ways, that it exists and that you are outside it; and then later, perhaps, that you are inside it.*

C. S. Lewis (*The Inner Ring*)

That was certainly my experience. I suddenly found myself included in a few inner rings by virtue of things of whose significance I was barely aware, at first (education, accent, ethnicity, family, relationships, *ad inf*). This meant being blissfully unaware of the inner ring dynamics.

I soon learned.



There were risers and fallers; there were no-go-areas; there were shibboleths

(or should that be sibboleths? e.g. what contortions some get into around a word like ‘worship’!!); there were codes (articulated and assumed); there were loyalties. Being ‘in’ was somehow delicious, being ‘out’, agonising. I’d never have articulated it at the time – I have had neither the vocabulary nor the necessity (I was only 18 or 19). It just felt good to be ‘in’. I just wasn’t quite sure how I’d made it. Until I realised I hadn’t.

I soon learned.

## Prioritized Loyalties

The crisis, for the purposes of this series, comes when this inner-ring-mentality gets baptised; by which I mean that it’s granted a veneer of holiness and righteousness through whatever motivated its initial gathering. So let me exaggerate some hypothetical cause to see how this might take place, at first seemingly well-intentioned and good-natured. A little intense and over-zealous perhaps, but transformation was never achieved by the mild, historically speaking. Right?

- ♦ **Phase 1. Urgency and threat:** So, friends, our culture is going to the dogs down the pan. The world is a lost cause anyway, it’s all gonna burn. But, we mustn’t be naïve. There are those, within and without the church, who are only too happy to let this happen. In fact, they want it to happen. We have a battle on our hands.
- ♦ **Phase 2. Rallying Point:** There are grounds for hope and optimism, though. We’re not alone and we’re not doomed. We can stick it out. Why? Because of God in Christ. He sends us out into the world; we’re to be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Not naive but confident. He is Emmanuel. He is with us. He is with

US. He is at work building his church. Let us rally round HIM and his Kingdom. Because he's with **US**.

- ◆ **Phase 3. Kingdom Servants:** But we know that one day, some will say "Lord Lord", to which he will respond, "I'm sorry, I don't think we've met." Who wants to hear *that*? So don't let it. Live with your life with him as Lord. It's by far the better way. And he's going ahead of us – he's calling us to plant his church in X neighbourhood. The gospel's not been preached there for well over 80 years. I've not met the local vicar but I did hear a sermon online and, let's face it. She's weak on the gospel. In fact, I don't even recognise what she claims is the gospel. So the need is very great. So join US.
- ◆ **Phase 4. My way/High way:** We have to be united, we have to be in partnership. We have to fulfil the divine call on our lives. So if this enterprise is going to succeed, we need 110% from everybody. At least. So much is at stake. So what I need from each of you is your loyalty and your commitment. And I will serve you and this dream with everything I've got. Are you in? Or are you agin'?
- ◆ **Phase 5. You trust me, don't you?:** I've been here from the beginning. I was there in the original planning and it was clear to us all what God was calling me to do. So we want people to join in, but we're an express train that knows where it's going. If you're on board, there can be only one driver. If you have other ideas, go and plan your own project. But I'd urge you: don't be like *Fred and Ginger Jones-Jones* – we could all see there was something flakey about them but never put our fingers on it. One of my big regrets trusting them so much. But they let us all down; they let God down. And we've



suffered. They were poison. You're not like them, are you? Or are you? Please, not you as well? Don't do this to me.

Now of course, in a project like a church plant, much less can be concealed. But in the hands of a 'strong' leader (a term for which much

further thought is required), the sacrificial and costly nature of the enterprise easily degenerates into something darker. A leader with insecurities and fears (especially when unacknowledged) will find the willing participants easy prey. It's a cinch for him (and it's invariably a him) to divide and rule through inner rings. Nothing can happen in the community without the leader's nod; all must defer; the vision belongs to one. There can be only one.

Not that this is ever articulated. Lip-service is always given to the community's values, of course. And 'community' is such a wholesome and attractive word, isn't it? But when twisted into a tool of a magnetic leader's power, it's toxic. Like everything good. Such is the nature of human fallenness. We cast shadows over, and even ruin, everything meant for light. After all, friendship circles are wonderful and vital gifts. But never once they've become inescapable or controlling rings.



## Exploiting Risks and Fears

Now, there are some trying to make the facile claim that certain truth claims (let alone the attempt to make such claims in the first place) are to blame. As if it was *inevitable* for *doctrine A* to lead to *gruesome behaviour B*. That's lazy and reductionist politicking, the kind of thing that looks valid in a tweet but is absurd in real life. In fact, that is its own kind of power play, ironically enough, forging its own Anti-Inner-Ring inner ring. To suggest such inevitability is to play the *post-hoc-ergo-propter-hoc* game with abandon.

But here's the thing; there is *something* in it. Otherwise, it would never gain any traction. So I think we must recognise that ideas/theologies always entail the risk of exploitation by the



unscrupulous, even the best of them; as do certain activities. [Note that I'm not talking about bad theology; that by definition can never be healthy.] For, in fact, the fallen mind is capable of twisting, justifying, exploiting anything for its own ends. Even when it knows precisely what it is doing. No theological framework—nor any ideology, come to think of it—is invulnerable to such abuse: *liberal, conservative, neo-orthodox, catholic, progressive, reactionary, evangelical, charismatic, traditionalist, middle-of-the-road* etc etc. What we might say is that some convictions might be more vulnerable to particular forms of exploitation than

others. But can we insist that exploitation is necessarily or inevitably so? I just don't think so.

A crucial task, therefore, for those with any convictions is surely to identify the risks peculiar to those convictions. Rather than fling mud at the frameworks they dislike on the basis of what some people did with them.

Some years ago, some overseas friends moved to London (they've since taken British citizenship, but that's another story). I always find it fascinating to hear the first impressions of newcomers, especially of contexts that are (too?) familiar. They went to a number of services and events at one church (which shall remain anonymous) and the husband's comment sometime later was fascinating. *'I've never been to a church before where I've heard the word 'fear' so often.'* It would come up in all kinds of places.

- 'We need to do X... or I fear Y will happen'
- 'My fear for the church is that people ... and so we need...'
- 'We are very nervous of the way the wider culture will ... '

That was a lightbulb moment. It confirmed to me that something was not quite right.

Of course, fear can be healthy, integral to a complex, genetically-inherited, biological system that ensures survival. We need the fight/flight/?flout responses to our fright. And I'd argue this is God-given, and he can use it for the kingdom. Nor I do not deny that some identified concerns may genuinely be causes for alarm.

Yet what seemed to be happening in that community, through the rhetoric and culture, was something else. At one level, it seemed a denial of deeper convictions (as [I touched on in #2 in this series](#)). But worse, it seemed a subtle weapon, a tool of inner-ring boundary-marking. Because what is feared is that entertaining this or that thought/practice/soundbite represents a burgeoning disloyalty to the leader and his crowd. And that will never do.

So the thought then occurred that a possible means of distinguishing healthy from harmful fears is identifying what response is expected. I've not given much time to this yet, so perhaps comment with ideas and suggestions. But presumably, healthy fear leads to adequate risk assessment, which in turns results in wise procedure. It doesn't prevent doing X or Y necessarily; only doing it recklessly. But if the fears are orchestrated by an inner-ring manipulator, members will steer well clear and not even entertain the possibility of personal responsibility or agency. The risks are too great. Not from the activity, *per se*, but from the social consequences. Because, ultimately, as hinted [in the very first post of the series](#), the controlled, inner-ring-mentality will always tend towards enslaving adherents in the bonds of legalism. Which suits the manipulator just fine. Because after all, it's *his* will, and not God's will, that matters most.

Unfair? Quite possibly. And you will undoubtedly deem my next line grotesquely so. But is there not a particular propensity for those drawn to become church planters to be like this? It's not conscious, probably; it's certainly not deliberate. But isn't it the case that the characteristics sought after in a church planter (*risk-taker, personal sacrifice-maker, willingness to go out on a limb; powers of persuasion to bring others on board; a creative vision for*

*something that doesn't yet exist and the perseverance to pioneer and see things through; infectious confidence in that vision)* have shadow sides that are the very things to turn it all sour?

Which is not to reject church planting. (Some of my best friends have been churchplanters!) Only a plea to face the risks and potential vulnerabilities. Which is the way of wisdom, after all. Because it seems to me that the very worst distortion of what a Christian fellowship should be is for it to become an Inner Ring. My fear is that it is much more prevalent than we care to admit.



## 9. BELIEVING THE PROPAGANDA

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14th January 2021

You will know of **Godwin's law**, I'm sure, whereby the longer an internet discussion continues, "the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1." So, I'm afraid, the time has come.

One of the most gripping if chilling works of history that I've read is one that I find myself returning to a lot these days, despite the fact that it is well over 10 years since I first encountered it (in early research for *Wilderness of Mirrors*). **Sir Ian Kershaw** has spent a lifetime researching 20th Century German history and has brought all kinds of profound insights to the anglophone world (including through his mammoth two-volume biography of Hitler). The one I'm referring to, though, is his 1987 *The "Hitler Myth"* (revised in 2001).



## Believers in the "Hitler Myth"

In this book he examines the simple problem of what people believed about the dictator, how they came to believe it, and most significantly, how much of it was true. Here is his summary (pp252-3):

- Hitler was the **personification of the nation**, aloof from selfish sectional interests
- Hitler was the **single-handed architect** of Germany's 1930s 'economic miracle'.
- Hitler was **representative of 'popular justice'**, the embodiment of strong, if necessarily ruthless, action to strengthen 'law and order'.
- Hitler was personally **sincere and even 'moderate'** (and therefore different from, and ignorant of, what Nazis were actually doing).
- Hitler was a **statesman of genius**, and a fanatical defender and rebuilder of Germany's rights.
- Hitler was an **incomparable military leader** who truly understood the ordinary soldier (having been one himself).
- Hitler was the **mighty bulwark** against Germany's ideological enemies: Marxism/Bolshevism and the Jews.

This is what people believed. And the diehard acolytes continued to cling to this. Even as the Soviet army was closing in on the Berlin outskirts.

But here's the thing. None of this was true.



**Not. One. Scintilla.** Every single statement was a complete fabrication, deliberately promulgated by Goebbels and his Propaganda Ministry. And in a grotesque irony, if one wants to know the true nature of the man and his regime, one simply needs to inverse each of the myth's tenets. And that is not guesswork or hearsay, since throughout the book, Kershaw systematically evaluates documentary and eyewitness evidence for each belief. His conclusions are **unequivocal**.

But perhaps even more scary is the simple fact that even many architects of the myth were *themselves* sucked in. Kershaw again:

*What is striking, therefore, and of importance for the drive and dynamism of the regime, is that the undiluted 'Hitler myth' - the fully-fledged cult of the 'superman' Leader in all its glorification - embraced the Nazi elite almost in its entirety, and was not simply regarded cynically as a functional propaganda manufacture. If the glorifying speeches and writings of sub-leaders during the Third Reich itself are no proof of this, the behaviour of the Nazi leaders arraigned at Nuremberg and post-war memoirs (for all the obvious apologetics) demonstrate it conclusively.*

*Ian Kershaw (p263)*

How was on earth was this possible?

Well, a probable major factor was simply that they *wanted* it to be true. Then before long, as the war turned in the Allies' favour, they desperately *needed* it to be true. Because the consequences, if it wasn't true, were too horrendous to contemplate. So it just had to be true. Which is why they then just *knew* it to be true. Such are the *deceptive depths of the human heart*.

I'm writing this, as it happens, from the United States, in a week that's witnessed some of the most unsettling and disturbing scenes of recent years with the assault on the Capitol. The grim parallels (and 'parallels' is probably all we can currently call them, rather than 're-runs') are all too plain. Tragically. There are those who persist in believing that the incumbent US President is a stable genius, brilliant businessman of astronomical wealth and standing, who alone has what it takes to drain the swamp.



Despite evidence to the contrary. Despite so *much* evidence to the contrary. And the true believers cannot be easily dismissed as the uneducated or ignorant. As **Jacques Ellul** chillingly explained, propaganda in a mass society (in which people are necessarily remote from centres of decision-making), can work best on the educated and discerning, by appealing to, say, a concern to be well-informed or sophisticated ([see this helpful review, for example](#)).

*[Incidentally, if you need insightful evaluations of what seems to be going on, despite the constantly shifting situation, then these are the best I've read so far:*

- *Yale historian Timothy Snyder's chilling overview [The American Abyss](#) (\$);*
- *For the best theological engagements see [David French's commentary on the so-called Christian elements of the Capitol insurrection](#)*
- *and [Russell Moore's brilliant piece, the Roman Road insurrection.](#)*

So why bring all this up?

## **Believing in the Pastor Myth**

One of the peculiar cruelties of abuse is the credibility trick played on the abused. After looking at recent church cases on both sides of the Atlantic, it seems that perpetrating leaders commonly exploit the willingness of people to believe their mythology. This is emphatically *not* because those people must be weak-minded or especially gullible, because so many factors lie behind that mythology. But what is clearly evident is that people are consequently far slower to face reality.



The evidence of eyes, or gut instincts, or even trusted friends or family, gets dismissed. *It just can't be true.* Why? Because pastor/leader/pioneer is... *(delete as appropriate)*

- uniquely gifted and equipped to lead XYZ mission/ministry/project
- so greatly used by God to achieve GHI.
- so helpful and insightful about our cultural context and climate.
- by so many accounts, known for his pastoral sensitivity and concern for individuals
- trusted in many different circles as an effective organisational leader
- committed to purity and high personal ethics
- is trusted by so many women, not least because he seems to go out of his way to give women ministry opportunities
- etc, etc, ad infinitum

I can only assume that this seems to have been a contributory factor behind **the reluctance within RZIM to accept the allegations that Ravi Zacharias** had abused several (and perhaps many) women. Another motivation was clearly the desire to preserve the global juggernaut of a ministry that bore his name (but that's a rather different issue, for another time perhaps). Yet, as so often, the cover-up causes as much, if not more, damage as the individual abuses (as the collapse in the reputation of **Boston Archdiocese after the Boston Globe exposé** proved).

There is a process at work here.

It might start because of personal needs and insecurities, but it doesn't always; e.g., the lack of a positive father figure (because of early bereavement, abuse, or trauma, say); or being overwhelmed by doubts in one's faith and so needing the comfort and reassurance of someone who knows what they're talking about. So they get drawn to a strong leader. On the basis of his reputation, they are expecting, and even *wanting*, to find it valid. This makes it all too easy to latch onto alternative explanations every time counter-evidence is presented. Because leader X just 'isn't like that'; Because guru Y 'would never do it'. Even as evidence begins to pile up, the *wanting* can become *needing*. And the *needing* somehow becomes *corroborating*. They just *know* he's not like that.

Until they don't. Until the convergence of evidence reaches a critical mass and reality shatters the myths. The leader is exposed; the wizard of oz is just a pathetic old man. The reputation was mythical; some people were always going to believe; but the truth was always going to emerge eventually.

However, the longer that took, the greater the scale of abuses and victims.

Now, again, it might seem from the outside, that the process of *wanting* to *needing* to *knowing* is a mark of weakness or unintelligence or lack of discernment. All I can say is that it is far more complicated than that, particularly when an abuser is a sophisticated and skilful manipulator (essential if he is to get away with it for a while).

Grim, isn't it?

## Checking the credibility of the plausible

Here is perhaps the saddest thing about all this—apart from the obvious atrocities and abuses, of course. None of us can afford NOT to lose our innocence. Too much is at stake. But one thing is certain. We can no longer say 'oh that could never happen *here*' (regardless of 'here' being a nation, an organisation, a ministry, a church). Ever.

Here's Kershaw's conclusion to the book:

*Even if a collapse into new forms of fascism is inherently unlikely in any western democracy, the massive extension of the power of the modern State over its citizens is in itself more than sufficient cause to develop the highest level possible of educated cynicism and critical awareness as the only protection against the marketed images of present-day and future claimants to political 'leadership.'*

*Ian Kershaw (p269)*

Quite apart from whether or not western democracies are now more likely to collapse like this way than when

Kershaw wrote, he's surely right. We need to be on high alert.

But does this make sliding into the suspicion vortex inevitable, even in the places where we are supposedly safest (like the church)?

It's a massive question. And in *Wilderness of Mirrors*, I tried to address it. But I'm horribly conscious of scratching the surface. It definitely needs even more work (and blog posts no doubt – because there is definitely more to be said with regard to evangelicalism in the UK and elsewhere).



For now, I'll limit myself to an anecdote that I've used often in. But it has a rather more chilling relevance, now. I've no idea where I picked it up and over the years did try to verify it. Perhaps now, it's no surprise I never could...

*A Canadian Christian took her very secular neighbour to hear Ravi Zacharias at a big event on a nearby university campus. As they walked to the car, the two women chatted. Inevitably, the key question arose. 'So! What did you think?'*

*'Amazing! I've never heard anything like it. It's given me loads to chew on. Thanks for bringing me.'*

*So did that mean she was ready to sign on the dotted line and come to church. Not at all. Because she then thought for a minute and uttered a crucial thought. 'But I wonder what he's like at home...'*

**Precisely.**

And therein lies the problem. In mass culture, we face a huge disadvantage when seeking out integrity and truth. We're too remote. Which means that the onus on those in Christian ministry can only be an even greater willingness to be known, to be vulnerable, even in our brokenness. And for that, a culture of reality-facing truth and grace is essential. (*Which is quite another story...*)

Otherwise, people are justified, and even wise, to dismiss spiritual authority figures. As in fact they are increasingly doing.



## 10. WHEN GURUS GET OUTED AS OGRES

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*31st January 2021*

One of *The West Wing's* big themes is quest to find 'my guy'. By which I don't mean searching for the perfect date. In the backstories episode that opens season 2, Josh Lyman is working for Senator John Hoynes as he eyes up the Presidency. Nevertheless, his old family friend Leo McGarry urges him to come to Nashua, New Hampshire just to take a look, to watch Governor Bartlet in action. Bartlet is the outlier, Hoynes a far more bankable candidate. Nothing that Josh witnesses at a low-key, and frankly chaotic, town hall meeting disabuses him. Until this moment...

Yes, of course, it's a highly romanticised, rose-tinted dream of what politics could or should be. But cast that aside for a moment. What makes Josh perk up from his paper. When a local farmer challenges the presidential candidate over his voting record (and it doesn't really matter that we don't understand the political detail), what do we expect? Prevarication; obfuscation; vacant soundbites. What do we get? After just a beat, there is none of the above. Instead, Bartlet comes clean but simply

lays out the *realpolitik* of higher priorities that motivated his change of vote. Most of the people in the room seem unsurprised (though of course the camera pans over those we all know end up on the White House staff), but for Josh it is a revelation. Here is a politician who seeks to do the right thing, even if unpopular. And he tells the truth, even if inconvenient.



*Click on the image to watch (if you're online)*

*Quel horreur!* A politician with honesty and integrity? Blow me down (as one friend always says). And thus, Josh Lyman has found his guy, and all's utopian that ends utopian.

We saw in the 6th of these posts that we all imitate, and indeed, we need to imitate others. We all need a hero. It's how we're wired. But what do we do when we discover



that the guru is not all he's matched up to be? And this is where I encroach on difficult and painful areas, not simply because of increasingly common headlines.

## **The Unsurprising is still Shockingly Surprising**

Objectively speaking, we know there is nothing that a deceptive heart *cannot* justify. So why be surprised if leaders are discovered to have done the unspeakable? Even when those very people who taught about the heart's deceptiveness clearly and articulately. So don't be surprised.

Yet, of course, that's profoundly unsatisfactory. Because the nature of human relationships is that we build trust over time. That entails track records of reliability and integrity. I guess, the longer we have trusted, the harder it is to see that we were wrong to. But it is precisely this willingness to trust (especially if we have particularly emotional needs or longings) that the unscrupulous exploit, whether through gaslighting, patrolled groupthink or rigid hierarchical structures. Or all three, and more.

When that gets exposed, what then? Does the entire edifice collapse? Is confidence in anything to do with the church, Christianity, bible or gospel even possible? One of the saddest statements after the horrors of the Boston Archdiocesan abuse covers-up came from a man whose son had been molested repeatedly by one of the worst perpetrators.

*"I left the Church," said Frank Taylor now seventy-seven. "I never went back again." **Betrayed** (Boston Globe investigative team, p57)*

Well, why would you if the entire system was so rotten that it repeatedly favoured the perpetrators over the most vulnerable? You'd have to be certifiably insane to head back into the place of danger.

One of the reasons I find U2 so vital to my spiritual walk is that they're not afraid to confront precisely this kind of question. They can be agonised, they can be enraged. And that is crucial – because if one's faith in God is so disconnected from daily reality that you can't come to him with the big doubts and angers, then what on earth is the point of it. So here they are at their darkest, in a deceptively beguiling and understated song. And it is all about priestly child abuse.

The song is all the more disturbing because it's not always clear whose voice we're hearing. Are we seriously eavesdropping on the priest chatting to his victim at breakfast?



But the most devastating lines come in the third stanza, devastating because the logic is unassailable

*Hope is where the door is  
When the church is where the war is  
Where no one can feel no one else's pain  
(U2, Sleep like a baby tonight, Songs of Innocence  
2014)*

The church door ought to be the way IN to hope.

## **No Conveyor Belts or Timetables to Trust Regained**

The first thing to say is that we can't resort to some action plan or 6-week course to get people back on track. For, in the end, trust betrayed is existential, not intellectual. It is incredibly difficult to repair and heal. But we nevertheless seek both. So obviously, there can never be a one-size-fits-all. One person's glorious gospel praise song is another's trauma-inducing trigger, even though the traumatised might fully acknowledge there's nothing remotely problematic with its contents. It just has too many connotations, say.

So this complexity alone is going to result in much time being necessary. But not only time. There needs to be a process of sifting, of delinking truth and human reality from a subculture, an individual or context. Some may find that impossible to do; some may be too scarred to even attempt it. But what is palpably clear is that it will demand limitless patience and gentle concern (with perhaps very occasionally some light steering) from friends and loved ones. You can't just tell somebody to *be* safe when they don't *feel* safe (however irrationally).

The problem with distorted perceptions always is that they don't feel distorted! But I know first hand how hard it is to accept that I'm not seeing straight. It's not a pride thing, necessarily. It's simply how we all live, especially if we are 'high-functioning', so-called.

A crucial goal, however, is to try to unpick the reality of God (if we can still accept that) from the way God was presented and represented by the trust-breaker. That's so hard to do. A priest or pastor who exercised cruel and abusive power over someone looms so large that the possibility of any truth in what they taught seems entirely eclipsed.

This is why I want to reiterate. It cannot simply be a matter of telling someone to sort it out. So it occurs to me that one strong indicator of pastoral ineptitude is the imposition of arbitrary timetables, especially when the depths of pain or scarring has not been factored in. The symptoms get addressed, often harshly or impatiently (e.g. telling someone to stop using intemperate language or to calm down etc), without probing the underlying grievance or wound. Of course, there may well be incentives *not* to probe, but that's a different matter.

But I guess I want to still hold out the possibility of healing and restored ability to trust. *Please note.* I do not necessarily mean that an individual perpetrator can (or even should) be trusted again, even though they might well be forgiven (for trust and forgiveness are by no means synonymous). What I have in mind is that there is hope for the person who is reluctant to trust anybody and anything again. They've had their fingers burned just too much. It can be possible... And I write this NOT to pressurize or minimize but to encourage and inspire with possible light out of the fog.

## Some help for 'reckoning with the past'

I recently read Alan Jacobs' excellent, shortish book, *Breaking Bread With The Dead* (2020, *Profile Books*). It's a nice broadside against the absurdities of cancel culture and literary canonical criticism (which is not to say that it's all nuts – of course, we should read and engage with those who had been invisible or silenced in the past). There's a lot of gold in here, especially in helping to see how the media and entertainment industries drive people ever deeper into their own self-selecting echo chambers.



But this is the part that really struck me. He puts the problem succinctly:

*There is an increasing sense not just that the past is sadly in error, is superannuated and irrelevant and full of foul ideas that we're well rid of, but that it actually defiles us – its presence makes us unclean*

*Alan Jacobs (p15)*

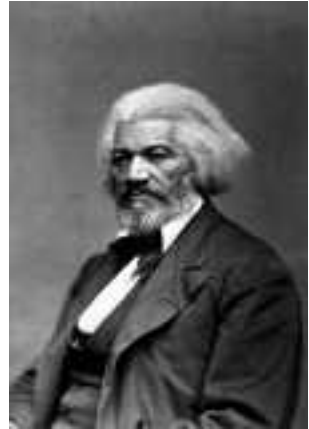
But won't we lose something if we jettison everything? Won't we set ourselves onto a kind of literary fast-track to Pol Pot's Year Zero, as if our era is the only truly enlightened one and go hang all the rest (An extreme manifestation of C. S. Lewis' chronological snobbery)? Surely there are *some* things to gain from the past, if not a great deal? Even when we find ourselves disagreeing with aspects of it. And perhaps especially at those points.

The most telling example of someone doing this in Jacobs' book is *the extraordinary Frederick Douglass*. A former

slave in the American South, he became one of the most potent and impressive advocates for abolition. So here he is giving a speech about Independence Day, which of course for a former slave is a multi-layered and complicated event:

*'The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro'* (delivered Rochester, NY, 4th July 1852)

*The point from which I am compelled to view [the Founding Fathers] is not, certainly the most favourable; and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration.*



As Jacobs notes, 'Douglass is *compelled*' to view them critically, because their failure to eradicate slavery at the nation's founding led to his own enslavement, his being beaten and abused and denied every human right, forced him to live in bondage and fear until he could at long last make his escape. Nevertheless,

*... for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory. (Jacobs, 114)*

But he can't stop there. Every time he hears the Founders praised, he simultaneously hears many others:

*Fellow-citizens, above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions, whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are today, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reads them... to forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be a treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world. My subject, then, fellow-citizens, is American slavery. (Jacobs, 115)*

A few more lines from Jacobs in the light of this.

*If I had been there at that moment the hair would have stood on the back of my neck; indeed it sometimes does so even when I just read the words. (p116)*

*It is a model of reckoning with the past, to sift, to assess, to return and reflect again. ... What Douglass offers instead is a model of negotiating with the past in a way that gives charity and honesty equal weight. (p117)*

*I do not tell you that this is an easy task; I do not even tell you that it is one with which you can be finished. If you think as Douglass thought, you will never reach a final verdict on those who came before you; you will at best agree to a continuation. And it is in agreeing to a continuation with the past, not in pronouncing a universal verdict either for or against, a simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down, that we increase our personal density. (p118)*

No, it is not an easy task. **Understatement.** Please do not hear me, if you are someone who's been crushed by

betrayals and broken trust, to be placing the pressure of more 'oughts' onto your already burdened shoulders. Because, apart from anything else, the very notion that a person's worst abusers might have had a point (on anything) is unbearable. For the betrayed and abused, the scarred and disoriented, that is just too much.

Which is what makes Douglass's magnanimity so remarkable isn't it? He can distinguish between the ideals of the USA's foundation and Constitution and the failures of the ones who crafted it.

For a former slave to be able to do this, while slavery was *ongoing*, is remarkable. Spine-chilling. As Jacobs says.

But there is at least one big difference between the abused believer and the abused slave here. For the latter, he or she could and did appeal to the idealism of the Constitution, and it fell on deaf ears so often. But that is a flawed document. For the Christian believer, there is no charter, nor philosophy, nor even code, to appeal to, ultimately. But a person. Which is so much better. Because he is the ultimate slave. Who came to serve a broken humanity. He is the perfect benchmark.

Which means there IS someone who is truly safe, even (or especially) at times when his people are not. And there IS someone against whom every perpetrator of abuse and control must be measured.





## 11. THE POWER OF THE *IMAGO DEI* & THE *IMAGO DEI* IN POWER

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*17th February 2021*

Last summer, I was a contributor at Oak Hill Theological College's annual *School of Theology* day. It was a real privilege to be involved and it pushed me to work hard on an angle I'd not previously given much thought to. The conference theme was **IMAGE BEARERS**: essentially on the implications of being created in God's Image (*Imago Dei*). I was asked to address the issue of power and power abuse.

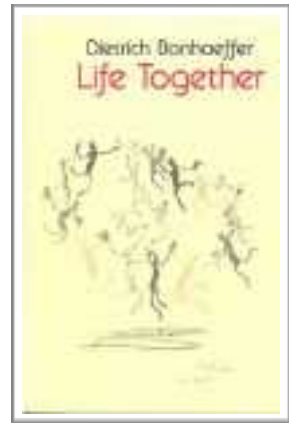
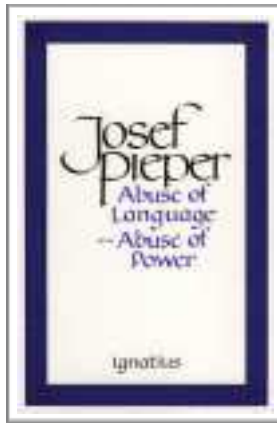
I had made a little video to break up the zoom monotony but on the day, the technology completely failed me (it was definitely not Oak Hill's fault) so the delay in getting the fuller video online was because of the editing needed to insert it and remove evidence of chaos! Anyway. It's now up and I'm even more convinced of the necessity of this discussion. I don't claim any definitive take on it.

But only this week I heard of a Christian speaker being accused of a wholehearted sellout to *critical theory*. Why? Because the talk in question raised issues of racial injustice in the aftermath of George Floyd's horrific death as a means of building bridges with the audience. It was an outreach talk and it resoundingly proclaimed the astonishing gospel hope that Christ will bring true justice. This made that person a false-teacher. Seriously?

So in this lecture last June, I sought to prove that **not only is it possible** to address issues of power abuse and injustice (of whatever sort) without capitulating to some contrary agenda, **it is actually fundamental and necessary** (especially if we understand the doctrines of both anthropology and salvation to apply corporately as well as individually). This is not a compromise because actually it is based on writers who LONG predate modern sociological theorists: such as Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos to name but 3!

But when it comes to the *Imago Dei*, I was especially struck by some of the writing of **Josef Pieper**

and **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, so drew deeply from them (as well as from abolitionists like Wilberforce and Frederick Douglass).





So if you've got an hour or so to spare (!), here is the lecture; the slides and the handout can be found in the [Bits and Bobs](#) section at the end.



## 12. ONLINE CRIES OF THE WOUNDED

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26th February 2021

### Why don't you just try to win them over...?

A complaint that I've heard frequently goes something like this.

If you have a grievance against a person, you should take it up with that individual. Of course, that's probably scary and nerve-wracking; but it's vastly better than gossiping and rumour-mongering. If you don't feel you've got anywhere, please have another go, but take a friend with you. So far, so Christian. It's precisely what Jesus advised, after all.

*15 'If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. 16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." Matthew 18:15–16*

Then, and only then, is it appropriate to take things further, by addressing the whole fellowship. **So what on**

earth do people think they're doing by shouting out on social media? That's appalling behaviour, clearly unmasking a divisive and vindictive spirit. They should cease and desist. Etc etc etc...

Now, please don't misunderstand. This is precious wisdom. How one longs for the restoration of trust and good will. But it is not always as simple as it might seem. The reason is a phenomenon that is necessarily getting increased attention these days: **power imbalance**. Despite the claims of some, the simple step of identifying this as a problem does *not* entail spineless capitulation to political correctness nor slippery slopes to wokedom (whatever that might be). It's just naming a fact of life.

But when those in power have actually abused their power—which essentially is achieved by exploiting that imbalance—the Matthew 18 injunction becomes nigh-on impossible. The scales are always tipped in favour of the empowered. I mean, it's not exactly rocket science, is it? But for those whose grievances are genuine, it is agony.

A cursory google search took me to various places that described power imbalances. So here are a few observations I gleaned about the experience of being on the wrong end of the imbalance.

- ◆ Decisions are made without taking your perspective into account
- ◆ The needs of the powerful are met whereas yours are not.
- ◆ In contrast, you are expected to give far more than you receive.

◆ You feel (or are made to feel) uncomfortable defending yourself

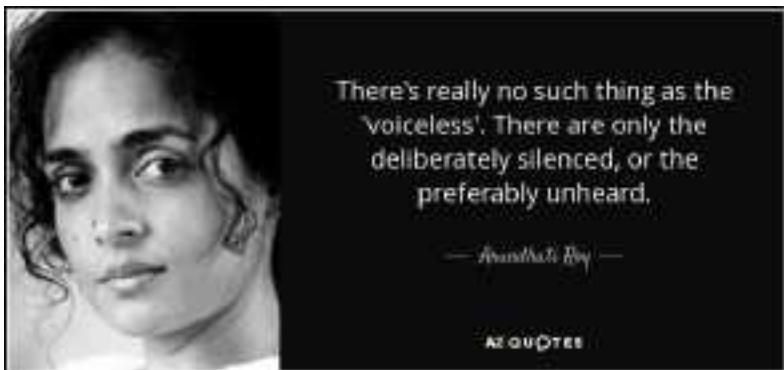
◆ You are isolated and lonely in the relationship

◆ You feel that maybe it's all in your head and so you should just pull yourself together. But because the effects are real, you begin to doubt that you're actually even sane.



We can't be naive here. Power imbalances are not inherently wrong but are inevitable features of life in large communities (such as a town or nation); just as uneven privileges will always exist in a complicated and broken world. The issue is what is done to manage the imbalances. The ideal is that the greater the power, the greater the extent of others' flourishing.

Yet, as the writer Arundhati Roy famously put it, "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." Because



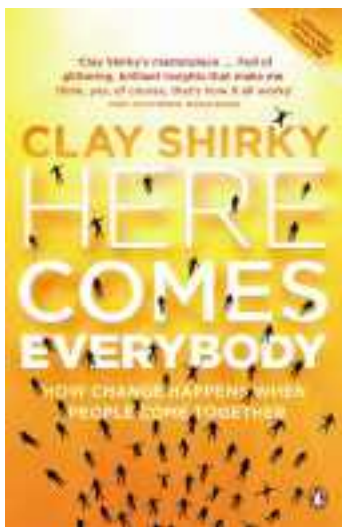
that is a privilege that power does offer: the means to silence, ignore, scapegoat, or isolate.

I'm not a relativist. I don't believe that all statements are equally valid; furthermore, I know perfectly well (from bitter personal experience of mental illness) that perceptions can get skewed and distorted. We all need discernment. So a claim to victimhood does not automatically entail the fact of victimhood. BUT... it must entail being taken seriously and investigated properly rather than brushed off. Discernment is emphatically *not* the same as deliberate avoidance or drowning out.

Yet for too long, many experienced precisely that.

## No longer 'why publish?' but 'why read?'

In 2008, NYU professor, Clay Shirky brought out a book on social media and the internet that blew me away. I picked out a **number of its key ideas on the blog back then**, so I won't repeat myself unduly. One thing that has



stuck in my mind ever since has been the internet's astonishing potential to give the voiceless a voice. Because of the impediments of cost, inconvenience and intensive labour, print media could always maintain some degree of quality control (although my notion of quality control might well be your idea of censorship), the internet precisely inverted this. Before the question was 'why should we publish this?' Now, once

you've paid to be online (a price that's negligible in the West at least), there's little to stop you. So, 'why *shouldn't* we publish this?' The tally of published items is already astronomical. That inevitably raises another lingering question: 'why should I read this?'

12 years on, the book now seems too optimistic, naively so; the high hopes of toppling tyrants (as heralded by the Arab Spring) have been supplanted by the potential for those same tyrants to achieve maximum surveillance. Be that as it may, the social changes this has all brought are only beginning to be understood. Its relevance to the topic in hand is obvious.

Let me simply quote a few paragraphs from *Wilderness of Mirrors* about how the horrors within Boston Roman Catholic Archdiocese came to light



*Most of us can sympathize with Frank Taylor, seventy-seven-year-old father of one of Father Joseph Birmingham's young victims, who said, "I left the Church. I never went back again." The conspiracy of abuse and concealment was too great for him to regain his trust in the institution or its message. Likewise, victims of spiritual abuse and cultic practices in unaffiliated or newer churches are wary of anything remotely resembling organized religion. The attractiveness of a spirituality (whether or not it is shaped by Christianity) that is not bound by any structures, orthodoxy, or hierarchy is self-evident. Of course, it also appeals to a Western individualistic mindset, but to dismiss the whole trend on that basis is to ignore the genuine grievances that underlie it.*

*The surprise, however, is how many resisted that path. After an evidently long and painful journey, some recover and even thrive within more wholesome Christian communities. Some, like Tom Blanchette, turned to another denomination; others sought justice and transformation within their denomination. This has led some to create pressure groups and victim support groups. One such is Voice of the Faithful, whose tagline is telling: "Keep the faith, change the church."*

*Social media offered such groups revolutionary opportunities for information sharing and collective action, to the extent that the ability of a grassroots protest to take on a global institution like the Catholic Church has become the subject of sociological study. Clay Shirky noted that there had been protests and allegations in the early 1990s, but these were quickly silenced, in part because they were not coordinated. By 2002, the Internet facilitated effortless coordination and instantaneous dissemination. The authorities had no means of containing it. Shirky writes, "Social tools don't create collective action – they merely remove obstacles to it."*

*No wonder the bushfire of suspicion spread so far and fast.*

*A Wilderness of Mirrors, 2015, p62*

Before the internet, it was practically impossible to identify, let alone make contact with, others who had experienced abuse. The balance of power lay entirely in the institution's favour. Covers-up and obfuscation were straightforward. Facebook and Twitter changed all that. #MeToo and #ChurchToo bubbled up from the grassroots – and the likes of Weinstein and Epstein ended up behind bars. It also meant that survivors could find reassurance they weren't going mad, while also feeling connected and understood by others, even if they lived on the other side of the globe. For that's the weird thing about social media. For all that snarky preachers might dismiss online connections as "so-called Friends", there is *genuine* community to be found online.

## Where else can I turn?

What would you do, if you felt you had exhausted every avenue? If behind every door was a brick wall? Not only that, if you felt that everybody seemed to be protecting their chums while you're left out in the cold? Or worse, being traduced and dragged through the courts.

What I am pleading for, I think, is a greater reticence before berating those on social media seeking redress, at the very least. Ask yourself: *What would you have done in their position? Have you genuinely done everything within your power to attend to the grievance?*

But I fear I cannot leave it there (even though this runs the risk of the wrong people homing in on the wrong half of this post).

Because we need to reflect on a grim irony. The internet has brought about another inversion: an inversion of power dynamics. A well-aimed hashtag with a band of willing retweeters can wreak havoc and make somebody's life a misery. As Jon Ronson so effectively proved in his chilling *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, twitterstorms can be devastating. There's very little that a target can do other than to bunker down and somehow weather the storm. In full knowledge that the briefest googling of their name will hereafter bring everything back up again.



So I just wonder — NB *I'm thinking out loud here, so do suggest correctives or alternatives, but please do so in the constructive spirit with which I write* — how those who brandish powerful Twitter handles might do so in a thoughtful and careful manner. By no means am I suggesting that the wounded or hurt should avoid social media. Quite the opposite in fact. If anything, I'm trying to grasp at a responsible and perhaps *more effective* way to do that. So here are a few undeveloped, disordered thoughts.

- ◆ If pre-existing hashtags (like #MeToo or #ChurchToo) correspond to your grievance, by all means make the most of them. The fact that some use bandwagons as a kind of weird virtuous-victim-signalling is not reason enough to avoid them.
- ◆ It is certainly not wrong to call out situations of corporate or institutional bad practice – and where they have a social media presence, they are clearly inviting interaction. So raising pertinent or difficult questions is reasonable.

But please take care.

- ◆ We must take fact-checking as seriously as we can. Obviously, the majority of us are not journalists or researchers so we don't have the means or time. But seek reputable sources rather than rumour or hearsay or 4th hand retweet. I also wonder if we need to be confident that there are concrete examples of malpractice in mind rather than vague accusation (and even when we do, I'm not sure it is wise or even in our own best interests to air them, unless every alternative avenue has been frustrated). What's more, over the years, whenever a news story

has featured something or someone that I know a bit about, I'm amazed how often they get details wrong. It's not surprising - journalists are human, they're on crazy deadlines and it's hard to dot every i. So not everything you read in the paper is right.

- ♦ Might it be possible that the worst possible interpretation is not the only one? That error rather than skullduggery is to blame? Or that incompetence rather than conspiracy might be the cause? Or that someone who has made an easy mistake then gets driven into the dead-end of denial by escalating twitter shame? Shouldn't the Sermon on the Mount, and the ethic of the Golden Rule, result in an effort to be generous (without being naive or enabling) until the facts make certain conclusions unavoidable?

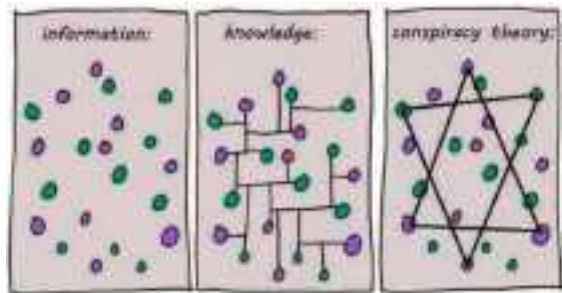
Again - please do not mishear. I am not denying that there *have* been awful breaches of good practice and oversight in some situations (the Zacharias case being the most recent to have been investigated); terrible things have been perpetrated and then concealed. The problem is once one has experienced one such betrayal, it's hard not to feel every resonance and parallel is on the same level. That is perfectly natural - it's how we



protect ourselves from getting our fingers burned a second time. But unfortunately, that is also how conspiracy theories start. And social media is the perfect incubator for them.

- ◆ So perhaps we need to be very careful about naming names. I'm not saying it is a wrong move necessarily. Only that it needs to be done sparingly in order to be effective, with very specific goals in mind.
- ◆ Speaking of goals, I fear sometimes that sometimes there are unrealistic expectations at work. A tweeted accusation may take 60 seconds to make; an appropriate let alone satisfying response may take weeks or months. It is rarely possible in a tweet and may depend on several forces beyond one person's control: such as waiting for a report's conclusions, having to engage with several individuals involved, or to do some fact-checking of their own.

- ◆ Beware of arguments from silence. In



academic historical research, arguments from silence are usually treated with degrees of scepticism, and rightly so. For sure, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence (the conspiracy theorist's mantra). But at the same time, the absence of evidence will be precisely what we find if what is suspected *didn't happen!!* Then it actually IS the evidence of absence. But the one accused cannot

win; the accuser merely needs to release a tiny wisp of doubt and their job is done. SOOOO, just because somebody has not commented on Twitter or the blogosphere or anywhere else about the latest atrocity, it is hardly fair to conclude immediately this represents complicity or condoning.

You see, if we don't do this well, the genuinely guilty can legitimately defend themselves as having been unfairly condemned in a trial by media. But if we are seeking truth and justice, even if just an apology, it is important that we don't respond to abuses of power by resorting to another abuse of power, albeit one of a very different kind.

But let me end where I began. It is all too easy to jump on the heads of those whose pain and despair have driven them to cry out online. Have some compassion. Have some empathy. And simply ask what might have occurred to push them to pouring out as they have. And then consider what might help them most. Especially in the real, rather than virtual, world.



## 13. RESTORING THE PURSUIT OF VIRTUES

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*9th March 2021*

To be fair, I've had a mixed response to what I'm offering here. One friend, in particular, felt it was a waste of time because, of course, anybody can sign a piece of paper. That means diddly-squat. Which is entirely fair and reasonable. And I agree.

But sometimes I think just the fact of articulating and airing such things is reason enough for sharing them, even if it doesn't develop into anything more. So here goes...

### **Where are the virtues?**

As this little series has continued, I've been trying to get under the skin of where things have gone wrong. It's not all doom and gloom; but there are causes for genuine concern about what evangelical subculture(s) have become, especially that of English private school evangelicalism. I'm not the only one by any stretch, nor am I particularly authoritative, nor do I have a job that offers much scope for doing anything about it. Which is perhaps both a drawback and an advantage.



But I wonder if one problem has been a lack of concern for the virtues of Christ-likeness. They get talked about, of course. I don't mean that. I just don't think they're truly valued in the final analysis. Too often, they get trumped by other stuff. Ends justify means, pragmatism rules; strategic ability, rhetorical prowess, personal magnetism, and apologetic skill (in fact, gifting generally) have such weight that we're prepared to overlook character flaws. I don't mean mistakes, aberrations, or failings. I mean habitual flaws. Perfection is not to be expected, but we are to crucify the sinful nature, are we not? We seem to have been distracted from the fact that *character* seriously matters. I feel slightly ridiculous even writing that because it seems platitudinous. It's not rocket science.

I remember Don Carson saying years ago that a congregation will forgive their pastors more or less any lack of gifting or competence *IF* they know they love them. But the converse is certainly not true, is it? That puts this in some perspective, doesn't it?

So I want us to articulate the virtues that form true Christlike leadership right out. This is what we aspire to. This is what we can be called on. This is what we need help with.

**This is a first draft, a work in progress. So please don't treat it as anything more than that!** If you have amendments, additions, or subtractions, I would love to hear them. Bung them down in the comments. I have no delusions about changing cultures by getting signatures on a random piece of paper. But I do wonder how different things might become if we all pledged to live these virtues out in our leadership and discipleship... Is this the beginning of getting things back on track?

I've called it the 'doulos' covenant after the Greek for 'slave'. Christ is our master. We are his. And we are to serve him and his people.

## **The Doulos Covenant** *for Christian leaders*

### **DRAFT**

1. **I seek to serve**, rather than lord it over, those I'm called to love
2. **I seek to serve the reputation of Christ** and his kingdom above all things
  - (a) By a commitment to proclaiming the truth while being personally truthful and honest
  - (b) By standing for justice for the vulnerable while always interacting with others with fairness and without prejudice.
  - (c) By constantly showing grace to the repentant, while never shying away from my own need to repent.
    - \* All this I seek to do, as a fool for Christ, even if it is at the expense of my own ministry, institution, or prestige.
3. **I seek to promote the flourishing** of all those for whom I have responsibility
  - (a) As a means of honouring the Image of God in each one
  - (b) By never reducing anybody's significance to their strategic usefulness, giving potential, or social status.
4. **I seek to keep confidences**, especially when the interests of the vulnerable are at stake
  - (a) This will take precedence over the interest of the powerful, wealthy, or influential.
5. **I seek to honour** those with whom I disagree
  - (a) To represent their views fairly
  - (b) To be sparing with labels and reductionism
  - (c) To turn the other cheek when necessary
6. **I seek to be accountable...**
  - (a) within my ministry - so that others are free to question my decisions appropriately, without fear of reprisal or ostracism.
  - (b) outside my ministry - so that at least one or two trusted friends know enough about the details of my life and work to question, challenge, as well as encourage me.
7. **I seek to grow** in Christ-like virtue rather than Caesar-like influence.



## 14. BLINKERED ABOUT THE SYSTEMIC?

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*17th March 2021*

I love the British Museum. It's a treasure house and a marvel. It covers the entire world and even just a few minutes within its hallowed confines constitute an education. I've often led tour groups around different parts of it, to trace some of the history behind the Old and New Testaments. And the classical stuff...? Well, I'm in my element. That was always my first academic love.

So the Elgin Marbles? Sublime. And rightly viewed in situ. By which I mean, of course, Bloomsbury. Because they could have suffered far worse fates if left on the Acropolis. After all, the Parthenon was nearly completely destroyed when it was attacked as an Ottoman stronghold en route to expand deeper into Europe. And it went through other batterings subsequently. Thank goodness for the British, I say. Being British has nothing to do with it, quite naturally.

### **Beneficiaries of the past**

Now, believe it or not, my purpose is not to get embroiled in the debate about returning them to Athens here. But one fact is inescapable: that the BM is one of the world's great museums is a direct consequence of the British

Empire, with its exhibits gathered (pilfered?) from across the globe by people with intent both good and ill, in part as an expression of imperial might and dominance. Imperialism is hard to square with modern sensibilities, of course; but identifying benefits and achievements done in the empire's name needn't deny the fundamental hubris and presumption that motivated it. Nor the atrocities and sins.



The fact that the UK, a country of nearly 70 million (and globally so 21st in size), is in the G8 group of wealthiest countries *still* is startling; we hover around 6th, just above or below India (depending on which site you look at), with a population that *18 times bigger*. It's a crude measurement, probably, and economists would no doubt pull it to pieces. But this is in no small part the legacy of empire.

Now I've been cogitating about all this because I've recently had my first Covid vaccine and already have a date for the follow-up. Whereas friends in other parts of the world are a long way off such things; in fact, more than one colleague lives in a country where they've not even started *ordering* vaccines. That's very unfair. But it's the way of the world, we say. And an accident of birth. Why should the UK be so quick and others not? An absurdly complex question. Yet it's hard to ignore the wealth and power that are imperial residue. We might have "given people back their countries" in the 'Winds of Change' and all that. But we hardly let go of our soft power so readily.

And so we are — or to be more specific, I am— its beneficiaries. Of some horrendous misdeeds and injustices, some of which were hardly unique to Britain (but were more central than we care to realise) while others were specific British sins: slavery; the Opium Wars; tribalist divide & rule; the Scramble for Africa; the suppression of the Mau Mau in Kenya; the Amritsar Massacre, and the famines in India; the Irish Potato famine; Indian/Pakistan partition; etc etc. This is not a betrayal of our history or undermining national pride; it's a question of truth and facing darkest corners. Nor is it to deny achievements or benefits such as they were.

What are we supposed to do with this? We can't change the past; British imperialism is simply a fact. Just the twentieth was the American century and the 21st probably the Chinese century. The privileges Britain enjoys even in the present are equally a fact. We must not deny such facts, wilfully ignore some aspects nor deliberately distort others. I might not be able to help the privileges I accrued by virtue of birth, skin colour, education, or opportunity. But I can help what I do with them or use them for. And

when the country promote policies which compound or sustain the unfairness that results from imperialism, shouldn't we do something? The question of reparations for slavery, for example, is fraught and complex, but surely the principle isn't. I'm probably woefully naive, but couldn't a case be made for funding COVID vaccines for all our former colonies, for example?

## **Blinkered to be individuals?**

Now. What's the point of all this? Well, I take it as given that westerners are instinctively and unavoidably individualistic. Over the last 500 years, western mindsets have shifted philosophically and sociologically to such an extent that our primary points of reference are ourselves. Me, myself, and I. Unwittingly but inevitably the western church has followed suit. Which is why doctrinal truths tend primarily to be understood and therefore articulated in individual terms. We might give lip-service to wider relevance but we rarely explore that. In fact, we might even find ourselves asserting that to do so is an unhelpful move, actually resulting in a dilution, distortion, or even betrayal of those truths. Could that not be a factor in the hasty scorn in some corners for social action or political involvement?

Let's take the problem of sin. I rather dislike the word. Not because I reject the phenomenon but because of the word's cultural baggage. I sought alternatives in my *Wilderness of Mirrors*, with debatable success!

So I suppose we must stick with it. Yet the way we've often considered or (been) taught it, sin is essentially an individual's rejection of his/her Creator's authority, which brings 1001 devastating consequences.

In terms of that classic gospel mnemonic *2 Ways to Live*, it's represented by me replacing the divine crown with my own. But as the mnemonic proceeds, it sustains the image. If someone starts to believe, with Christ's crown displacing my own. So far so good. It's true. But it's simply not the whole truth. Nothing like.

I know, I know – it's impossible to do that in any diagram, illustration, mnemonic or summary. Which is why we need lots. But isn't it interesting? If we place the most well-known such tools alongside one another:

- ◆ 2 Ways to Live
- ◆ 4 Spiritual Laws
- ◆ The Bridge Diagram
- ◆ Billy Graham's 5 Steps to Peace (based on John 3:16)
- ◆ The Wordless Book (Gold, Black, Red, White, Green)



What stands out? *Every single one* articulates sin's *individual* reality; none has the scope for its *corporate* reality. Let me repeat. I *know* they are only tools and don't even try to cover all bases. But this is surely indicative of our soundbite reductionist world for which corporate, or dare I say it 'systemic', sin is too abstract or complex or unimportant. I've not read it properly so may well have missed it, but a quick glance at Grudem's new edition of his *Systematic Theology* has nothing on it. I don't know of other popular level systematics that do either.

## Trapped within the systemic

Does this matter? Well, I think it matters greatly because, weirdly, we humans tend not to grasp the significance of our experiences (whether they be emotions, suffering, our own misdeeds or relationships etc) until we land on words for them. When they are offered to us—just as in my darkest days of depression when a friend suggested William Styron’s superb *Darkness Visible*—we feel the palpable relief at the AHA-moment. And for a subject as dark as corporate sin, it is similar, even if the Aha-moment is in some way self-incriminating.

Here is one articulation I read this week. I have adapted it a **little from the original** but it’s still not quite there yet. Heading in the right direction, though.

- ◆ **Privilege + Individual Sin** *leads to Preserving its Exclusivity* and so tends towards **Oppression** of those lacking that privilege
- ◆ **Oppression + People** *leads to an Oppressive Culture*
- ◆ **Oppressive Culture + Time** *leads to Systemic Sin*

This makes it incredibly complex, not least because sometimes, the very habits or processes that get introduced for *good* get twisted into compounding the sin. Think of it as a lattice or network of exponentially-increasing complexity. Which is why the good intentions and integrity of an individual within the network might be powerless to change the overall web, even if she or he can make a difference to those within their own orbit.

So here are 3 reasons for facing corporate and systemic sin to get us started. I’m sure you can think of more.



◆ We are confronted by **sin's inescapable complexity**. If I only grasp human weakness in terms of me and God, I might possibly think it is something I can deal with by myself (with enough willpower, or the motivation of punishments and rewards, or shame of exposure etc). As if it is enough simply to get right with God. Once I see that it is much bigger than this, that it is often as much a question of omission within networks as it is commission, then I realise how impossible that is. I really do need God here. I really do need grace. The challenges are simply too great.

- Consider life in the Roman Empire, for example. In the Book of Revelation, a frequent metaphor for Rome is Babylon, because of all that the city represented, particularly in the 1st Century as it systematically persecuted monotheists like Jews and Christians. Its systems and networks were intricate, vast and overwhelming. So what on earth were you supposed to do when John's vision cries out on Rev 18:4 *"Come out of her, my people, so you will not share in her sins!"* But how!? Should they all emigrate to the furthest reaches of Asia Minor or the Teutonic Forests? Or should they try to preserve a degree of integrity within? Just as believers did under communism in Eastern Europe. Total purity was a fantasy; the system was overpowering; and complicity impossible to avoid (even for people at the bottom). Is it so different in a capitalist system where ethics are ultimately trumped by \$s or ££s or ¥¥s? The real world? Sure. Does that mean we do *nothing* about it? You have to decide...

◆ We are confronted by our reality as **simultaneously perpetrators AND victims**. I affect others profoundly

by my omissions and commissions; and am affected profoundly by others' omissions and commissions. I



*Please don't read into the fact that many of the people are uncrowned!  
I just got bored copy and pasting! Take it as read that everyone has their own!*

leave scars and I have scars. We are all in this together. And when somebody mistreats or abuses somebody, it is highly likely that this is a byproduct of the mistreatment or abuses of others somewhere back in the lattice. Now, there is clearly a tension here. Factors and explanations sit uncomfortably alongside responsibility and culpability. We can't avoid the latter. Abusers *are* responsible for their abuse. But the labyrinthine web of traditions, habits, and cultures all have a part to play to harm and damage even the abusers. (Could this perhaps be part of the secret to that seemingly utopian gospel call to love our enemies? I wonder...)

- ◉ This is why it is never enough to resort to the 'few bad apples' excuse when things go wrong. We

must analyse the cultures that enabled and blinded. Are there elements of the 'systemic' that can be shifted or altered (in full knowledge that a perfect culture is impossible) to make a difference? Or *in extremis*, is revolution and total destruction the only way? My gut feeling is history repeatedly proves that even the most diehard revolutionaries end up ruining the day of revolution once they witness the chaos that ensues.

- This is why it is invariably simplistic (and thus irresponsible) to channel all bile or twitter shame onto a particular demographic, or class, or gender, or sexuality type, or race, or whatever else. I'm not saying aspects of particular culture and history have crafted tendencies and systemic problems (so there *is undoubtedly* a problem with how white people treat black people; how men treat women; how straight treated gay people). Some power imbalances have survived generation after generation; and perennial victims deserve to be heard. This does not necessarily mean that if they gain power and privilege they will automatically do better.
- But difficulty and complexity must never be allowed to excuse the failing to do *anything* about it.
- ◆ We are confronted by our **even deeper need for grace**. None of us is innocent; none of us is immune. Please don't misunderstand: this is not to flatten everything as if blame (for perpetrating, enabling or ignoring abuse, for example) must be *equally* shared and never focused. For in cases of systemic failure, there will be a spectrum of culpability. But it is only, I think, when confronted by

the systemic that we truly say, “this is beyond the wit of man” to sort out... It takes one who can both instigate unimpeachable justice and offer beauty-restoring mercy. It takes one who went to a cross.



## 15. A MILESTONE & A DECISION<sup>2</sup>

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*20th January 2021*

I wasn't going to include this under the **O Tempora O Mores** tag, but as I've come to its conclusion, it does actually have some bearing on wider issues. But I'll leave you to decide that for yourself...

Something Hugh said at that meeting in Sheffield has been etched on my memory every since. I'd only been in ordained ministry perhaps 2 or 3 years and we were having our normal post-Summer catchup and planning session.

We would habitually begin with a short devotional, but that day, Hugh was in reflective mood. Only a few weeks before, he'd celebrated his 50th birthday, and now he openly described how affecting that milestone had been. If memory serves, it was on the lines of "I now realize that I have more years of formal ministry *behind* me than ahead of me."

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<sup>2</sup> This was originally #10 in the series, but for various reasons, it seemed more fitting to move it to the end of this little compilation.



*Our happy little Sheffield team (ca 2000/01)*

I can't say exactly why this so arrested me, but it did. Perhaps it was one of those tiny intrusions of mortality that challenge the careless presumption of immortality we all share when young.

Anyway – *mirabile dictu* – just before Christmas, I too reached the same milestone. So Hugh's words inevitably jangled around my brain. Rachel, Joshua, and Zanna did an amazing job of making it a special day despite lockdowns and distancing. Still... it's been chastening. Despite being in the USA at one of the oddest moments of recent years (for the last full teaching modules for my DMin) has actually been timely. It's offered me the chance to reflect, refresh, and realign.

### **My strategy allergy (an African legacy)**

Friends and Q-regulars (not to be confused with QAnon) alike are bored of me saying this. But our Uganda years (2001-2005) finally inoculated me against what you might call the *strategic ministry mindset*. This is not quite the same thing as making plans and trying to fulfil them. And it's

profoundly different from having priorities and guiding principles that might lead one to making such plans.

What I'm getting at, I think, is the strategist's *presumption*. It's the idea that one can view life, people, society – and even, ultimately, *God's kingdom* – as some vast chessboard upon which we can, and should, plot a successful, impactful, and lasting legacy.

To which all I can say is, 'good luck with that!'

I mean, just *who* do we think we *are*?

History is littered with the committees and drawing boards on which great plans have been forged. Only to find those plans pulverized by reality on the ground. One of my 'favourites' (although it's actually grim at so many levels) is **Norway's wonderfully generous project to build a state-of-the-art fish-processing factory by Kenya's Lake Turkana**. After all, Norwegians understand a lot about fish; why wouldn't they share their largesse and competence? What's more, that part of Kenya is very remote, under-'developed' and tough. But the project failed utterly and sat empty for decades (apparently some are trying to rehabilitate now but that's another story).



Many factors contributed to the fiasco. The most telling was the rather incidental issue of the Turkana people themselves. Nobody actually asked *them* what *they* thought. But their views were plain and clear. Among the



*hard at work in my Kampala office...  
or perhaps just doing the crossword...*

Turkana, a fishing 'career' is evidence of failure. Which is obvious when you stop to think about it. If the lives of countless generations have revolved around cattle and other livestock, to the extent that wealth and status are measured by the size of herds, then fish are an irrelevance. And who wants to be involved in that?

Anyway - you get the idea. At a rather absurdly young age of 33

(see left!), I ended up as the acting principal of our little seminary. And I had lots of plans and ideas about what we could and should do. And hardly any came about. Now, perhaps it's just because I'm really bad at strategizing. After all, I am ludicrously bad at chess - not only do I struggle to think several moves ahead, but I don't particularly want to!

## **Doing the absurd right thing**

Last weekend, I finally watched Terrence Malick's recent movie, *A Hidden Life*, with a few friends. I'd been meaning to for ages, but somehow it never happened. I have to say it was one of the most profoundly affecting works of art that I have ever experienced. It's probably a sign of where I'm at, but I've had to choke back tears even



in the split seconds when the mere *fact* of it crosses my mind. I was a pitiful wreck while we were watching.



The plot is not complex; the script simple, sparse even; the drama rather stretched out. On paper, the film shouldn't amount to much. But as with Malick's previous epics, this is cinematic poetry, and theological cinema, of the very highest order.

**Franz Jägerstätter**, is a peasant farmer in the glories of upper Austria in the 1930s. His father had died in the First World War trenches. After the *Anschluss* and Greater Germany's aggressive militarisation under the Nazis, Jägerstätter felt in all Christian conscience he couldn't swear allegiance to the Führer.

Everybody around him thought he was completely insane. Not to mention treacherous. Well almost



*Jägerstätter's memorial at Brandenburg-Görden prison*

everybody. One or two friends understood, like Trakl the miller; and his amazing wife Fani. Most of the time. One could hardly blame her for moments of acute doubt after the agonies she herself endured. But he stuck to his principles. And paid the highest price.

Apparently, Malick took 3 years to edit – and wow, it is a rich experience. I need to recover a bit more before re-immersing. But it is so multi-

layered, musically, visually, historically, theologically.

The pertinence to this post, though, is simple. All the voices around him (not to mention guns, truncheons, and fists) were screaming the absurdity of Franz's stand. Captain Herder interrogates him in several scenes, here taunting him with the pointlessness of it all:



*A scene from A Hidden Life. Picture: Reiner Baio/20th Century Fox*

*What good do you imagine your defiance is doing anyone?*

*[no reply]*

*Do you expect to change the course of things? Do you think the authorities are aware of you? That your protest will come to their attention? That anyone will know of it? Ever hear you? Do you think it will influence some decision? No one knows what goes on here. Behind these walls. What purpose does it serve?*

...

*How do you know what is good and bad? Do you know better than I? You seem to think there is a nobility in this. Who is this God that requires you to destroy the life of your own family? You think he wants your blood in order to satisfy him? Will it get you on his good side? Blood- drinker! What have you done to him to make him send you this misfortune?*

*[Franz nods; he will not deny it]*

*Knowing that your Jesus suffered shouldn't make you want to suffer. He never sought it out. There's a difference between the kind of suffering we can't avoid and that we choose. You suffer for no reason*

*[no reply]*

*I can't imagine how hard it was for him to persevere. Would I have such moral courage? I can't bear even to imagine. Would I be prepared to do what was right, even when every single consequence seemed horrendous and even counter-productive...?*

## **Attending to the sowing**

The final element in this actually came from our DMin classes in St Louis. We had the joy of 3.5 days of Alan Noble teaching (I think his book *Disruptive Witness* is SO helpful – we got a heads-up on material for his follow-up book)), followed by 3.5 days of Michael Goheen, as well as various bits and bobs from the in-house team. An incredibly rich few days – intense, but goodly intense.

One reason it was so good to have Noble was the joy of engaging theologically with a literature professor as our guide. I've suffered too long at the hands of engineers

disguised as theologians for whom the tightness of a system is somehow a sufficient apologetic (that is a grotesque calumny, I realise and far too harsh... perhaps). It was just in passing but these lines from T. S. Eliot just blew me away. I've slowly worked through different Eliot works over the years (*and of course, you can too, if you visit my bookshop and check out the 1st editions I have available!!*). But I didn't know *The Choruses from The Rock* at all.



*While in St Louis, couldn't resist a cheeky little visit to TSE's teenage home (though NB small omission of his 1927 renunciation of US citizenship to become... er... BRITISH ... teehee)*

Yet these lines captured EVERYthing I've been trying to get at in this post.

So there we have it. I resolve, from this point on:

- ◆ To make plans and hone principles; but I seek to sit loose to the former and cling to the latter, all while trusting the Lord of all plans and purposes.
- ◆ To figure out how to proceed in any given situation not so much on the basis of any perceived *ends* but by

clinging to whatever *means* seem most consistent with the character of the one who called me.

- ◆ To aim at being faithful in an overwhelmingly (increasingly so?) confusing age, by attending to proper sowing while trusting the Lord of the harvest attend to the proper fruit.

*from Chorus from The Rock*  
T. S. Eliot

The lot of man is ceaseless labour,  
Or ceaseless idleness, which is still harder,  
Or irregular labour, which is not pleasant,  
I have trodden the winepress alone, and I know  
That it is hard to be really useful, resigning  
The things that men count for happiness, seeking  
The good deeds that lead to obscurity, accepting  
With equal face those that bring ignominy,  
The applause of all or the love of none,  
All men are ready to invest their money  
But most expect dividends,

**I say to you: Make perfect your will,**

**I say: take no thought of the harvest,**

**But only of proper sowing.**

# OTHER BITS AND BOBS

## **The Power of the *Imago Dei* & the *Imago Dei* in power**

Mark Meynell (Langham Preaching)

14th July 2020 - Oak Hill School of Theology

### **5 Impediments to Understanding**

*or why many evangelicals just don't (want to?) get it...*

*(i) The Blindspot of the Enlightenment?*

*(ii) The Reductionism of Critical Theory?*

*(iii) The Currency of victimhood?*

*(iv) The Insecurity of Privilege?*

*(v) The Aversion of a Generation?*

## 1. The Abolitionist's Cause: Am I not a Brother?

Slavery - the ultimate abuse of power over another human being (barring execution)

### **Wilberforce**

*Speech to Parliament (12 May 1789)*

As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave trade, I confess to you sir, so enormous so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished, let the policy be what it might,—let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition.

### **Hannah More**

What wrongs, what injuries does Oppression plead  
To smooth the crime and sanctify the deed?  
What strange offence, what aggravated sin?  
They stand convicted — of a darker skin!  
Barbarians, hold! the opprobrious commerce spare,  
Respect His sacred image which they bear.  
(from 'Slavery')

### **Frederick Douglass**

You hold,—and so do I, that the image of our common God ought to be a passport all over the habitable world. But bloody and tyrannical governments have ordained otherwise; they usurp authority over you, and decide for you, on what conditions you shall travel.

(Letter to Henry C. Wright, Manchester, 22 Dec 1846)

Join no political party, which refuses to commit itself fully, openly, and heartfully, in its newspapers, meetings, and nominations, to the doctrine, that slavery is the grossest of all absurdities, as well as the guiltiest of all abominations, and that there can no more be a law for the enslavement of man, made in the image of God, than for the enslavement of God himself.

(Letter to American Slaves, 5 Sept 1850)

## II. The Purpose of a Human Power: whose wellbeing?

### (i) **Human Power and Truth**

#### **Josef Pieper**

Whoever speaks to another person—not simply, we presume, in spontaneous conversation, but using well-considered words, and whoever in so doing is explicitly not committed to the truth—whoever, in other words, is in this guided by something other than the truth—such a person, from that moment on, no longer considers the other as partner, as equal. In fact, he no longer respects the other as a human person. From that moment on, to be precise, all conversation ceases; all dialogue and all communication comes to an end. But what's then is taking place? (Pieper 1992, 21)

Rather, he has become for me an object to be manipulated, possibly to be dominated, to be handled and controlled. Thus the situation is just about the opposite of what it appears to be. It appears, especially to the one so flattered, as if a special respect would be paid, while in fact this is precisely 'not' the case. His dignity is ignored. I concentrate on his weaknesses and on those areas that may appeal to him—in order to manipulate him, to use him for my purposes.... an instrument of power (Pieper 1992, 22)



This lesson in a nutshell says: the abuse of political power is fundamentally connected with the sophistic abuse of the word, indeed, finds in it the fertile soil in which to hid and grow and get ready, so much so that the latent potential of the totalitarian poison can be ascertained, as it were, by observing the symptom of the public abuse of language. (Pieper 1992, 32)

## (ii) *Human Power and Freedom*

### *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

God did not make others as I would have made them. God did not give them to me so that I could dominate and control them, but so that I might find the Creator by means of them. Now other people, in the freedom with which they were created, become an occasion for me to rejoice, whereas before they were only a nuisance and trouble for me. God does not want me to mould others into the image that seems good to me, that is, into my own image. Instead, in their *freedom from me* God made other people in God's own image. I can never know in advance how God's image should appear in others. That image always takes on a completely new and unique form whose origin is found solely in God's free and sovereign act of creation. To me that form may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every person in the image of God's Son, the Crucified, and this image, likewise, certainly looked strange and ungodly to me before I grasped it. (Bonhoeffer 1996, 71-72) my emphasis

First of all, it is the *freedom of the other* ... that is a burden to Christians. The freedom of the other goes against Christians' high opinions of themselves, and yet they must recognize it. Christians could rid themselves of this burden if they didn't release the other person but did violence to him, stamping him with their own image. But when Christians allow God to create God's own image in others, they allow others their own freedom. Thereby Christians themselves bear the burden of the freedom enjoyed by these other creatures of God. All that we mean by human nature, individuality, and talent is part of the other person's freedom—as are the other's weaknesses and peculiarities that so sorely try our patience, and everything that produces the plethora of clashes, differences, and arguments between me and the other. Here, bearing the burden of the other means tolerating the reality of the other's creation by God—affirming it, and in bearing with it, breaking through to delight in it. (Bonhoeffer 1996, 78-79)

### *Enlightenment Liberty*

- ◆ American Declaration of Independence: 3 inalienable rights given to them by the Creator - “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”
- ◆ US Constitution Preamble: Union exists to ‘secure the blessings of Liberty’

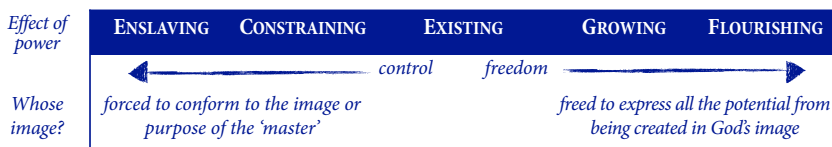
### *Kingdom Liberty*

Genesis 1 artfully shatters both ancient and contemporary rhetorical expectations and, instead, depicts God as a generous creator, sharing power with a variety of creatures (especially humanity), inviting them (and trusting them—at some risk) to participate in the creative (and historical) process. In Brueggemann's summary, the picture of God in Genesis 1 and of humanity as *imago Dei* foregrounds “the creative use of power which invites, evokes and permits. There is nothing here of coercive or tyrannical power, either for God or for humankind.’ Drawing both on the text's rhetoric of God's “gracious self-giving” as the model for human action and its protest against ancient Near Eastern views of human servitude, Brueggemann concludes: “The text is revolutionary.” (Middleton 2005, 267)

### (iii) Human Power and Flourishing

#### **Spheres of influence in church leadership:**

- ◆ Culture and Vision
- ◆ Pulpit and Training
- ◆ People management



#### **Ministry Temptations**

When I ask myself the main reason for so many people having left the Church during the past decades in France, Germany, Holland, and also in Canada and America, the word “power” easily comes to mind. One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power – political power, military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power – even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are. The temptation to consider power an apt instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel is the greatest of all. We keep hearing from others, as well as saying to ourselves, that having power – provided it is used in the service of God and your fellow human beings – is a good thing. With this rationalization, crusades took place; inquisitions were organized; Indians were enslaved; positions of great influence were desired; episcopal palaces, splendid cathedrals, and opulent seminaries were built; and much moral manipulation of conscience was engaged in. (Nouwen 1989, 58)

One thing is clear to me: the temptations of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love. (Nouwen 1989, 60)

Powerlessness and humility in the spiritual life do not refer to people who have no spine and who let everyone else make decisions for them. They refer to people who are so deeply in love with Jesus that they are ready to follow him wherever he guides them, always trusting that, with him, they will find life and find it abundantly. (Nouwen 1989, 63)

### III. Acid Tests - Some diagnostic indicators

- ◆ weak and strong
- ◆ questioners and doubters
- ◆ disciplines and discipliners
- ◆ strategies and the strategic

### Lessons from Corinth and 1 John

### Suggested Reading

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- Wright, N. T. 2013. *Creation, Power and Truth: The Gospel in a World of Cultural Confusion*. London: SPCK.
- 5
- Mark Meynell (@quaerentia / [markmeynell.net](http://markmeynell.net))

# Race, God's People and the Kingdom

Some reading suggestions: a personal not exhaustive list! (Mark Meynell)

## Christian Engagement

Hays, J. Daniel	<b>From Every People and Nation: a biblical theology of race</b>	IVP 2003	More in-depth and academic perhaps, but really good for a biblical overview on the issue.
Hill, Daniel	<b>White Awake</b>	IVP USA 2017	Such a helpful and eye-opening book by a white church planter in Chicago - some translation from USA context required!
Holmes, Jasmine	<b>Mother to Son</b>	IVP USA 2020	A beautiful if painful book, written by an African American to her toddler son preparing him for life as a black American.
Killingray & Edwards	<b>Black voices: The Shaping of Our Christian Experience</b>	IVP 2007	A powerful collection of essays on the long history (i.e. long before the <i>Empire Windrush</i> ) of being British, black, and Christian.
Lindsay, Benjamin	<b>We need to talk about race</b>	SPCK 2019	The best I've read from a UK Christian perspective. Very helpful and insightful indeed, remarkably gracious, all things considered.
McCaulley, Esau	<b>Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope</b>	IVP USA 2020	Only just come out and I have it on order! But am hearing great things from friends in the States.
Smith & Dykstra-Pruim	<b>Christians and Cultural Difference</b>	Calvin Press 2016	Brief but hugely helpful overview of how we handle our cultural differences, even before we get to the point of addressing our prejudices.
Keller, Tim	<b>4 blog posts on The Gospel in Life</b>	A brilliant and crucial series. <a href="#">Click on this link</a> 1. The Bible & Race      2. The Sin of Racism      3. A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory      4. Justice in the Bible	

## Secular Engagement

Eddo-Lodge, Reni	<b>Why I'm No Longer Talking About Race To White People</b>	Bloomsbury 2018	Challenging and widely read (the first black British woman to have a book at UK #1). I don't agree with all the underlying worldview assumptions - but many do so we must engage.
Hirsch, Afua	<b>Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging</b>	Penguin 2018	Hirsch is a brilliant and original thinker (apart from anything else, I love the wordplay in the title!) and has very important things to say.
Malan, Rian	<b>My Traitor's Heart: Blood and Bad Dreams A South African Explores the Madness in His Country, His Tribe and Himself</b>	Vintage 1991	I read this when we first moved to Kampala, Uganda. Blown away and convicted by his honesty, humility and willingness to share his story. Much is outdated now (NB publ. date), but the nature of sin isn't.
Meyer, Erin	<b>The Culture Map: Decoding How People Think, Lead, and Get Things Done Across Cultures</b>	PublicAffairs 2016	Essentially a business manual for multi-cultural teams. So useful since I'm a member of a leadership team of 8 from 6 cultures, while leading another of 7 from 7 cultures! But it opens eyes to all kinds of cultural dynamics that we never even consider.
Olusoga, David	<b>Black and British: A Forgotten History</b>	Pan 2017	If you weren't aware of the long history of those of African descent in Britain, then you need this. A brilliant writer and communicator. Just noticed that a shorter version for teenagers has come out this year.
Sowell, Thomas	<b>Race and Culture</b>	Basic 1995	An old book now, but blew me away. Sowell is an African American economist and the political right; but he's a unique and challenging thinker. He asks very non-PC questions even for the 90s.

✓ = start here



A person is seen from behind, looking out a large, multi-paned window. The window looks out onto a cityscape with a prominent spire, likely a cathedral or church tower. The scene is captured in a cinematic style with soft lighting. A purple semi-transparent banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the title and author information.

# **The Roots of the Malaise?**

Mark Meynell

[www.markmeynell.net](http://www.markmeynell.net)

2021