

Newsletter

SPRING 2019

FROM THE EDITOR

'... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'
(Matthew 28:20)

When I write this, we have just celebrated Easter: 'The Lord is risen, He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!' This is the way we greeted each other in church, in London. On the same day, we heard the devastating news about attacks on several churches in Sri Lanka.

Death and life – so close together. In the midst of all the turmoil of this world, the suffering of individuals, tribes and nations, in all the uncertainty about political developments in the world and in our own countries, we hold on to this fact: Jesus is risen, He is the Lord of everything!

That is what Jesus leaves his disciples with: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' It is in his strength that we live and do our work in the place where God has put us. In that place Jesus asks us to be his witnesses, to make disciples, to baptise, to teach. For most of us the teaching is central to our daily work. What a privilege God has given us: to teach his Church, to teach people who are seeking, to search for treasures in the Bible and pass them on. Teaching the Bible, teaching Jesus' words and commands, is teaching that matters. Not just for our daily life now, but for eternity. Whatever situation we are in, let us remind ourselves and each other of the power of the resurrection. We serve a living Lord!

Dr. Hetty Lalleman, London

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Partnership between FEET and the Theological Commission of the EEA: recent developments

Prof. Pierre Berthoud, chair of FEET, Aix-en-Provence

In recent years the executive committee of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians (FEET) has explored different ways of establishing partnerships in order to fulfil its mission. Since the creation of FEET in 1976 much has changed in the evangelical theological scene. National and regional Fellowships have developed in Germany, Switzerland, within the French speaking populations and Mediterranean countries. Other organisations have set up networks and run regular conferences. Coming together in order to strengthen a network and coordinate a meeting or publication, for example, is a means to grow in mutual understanding, to deepen our theological acumen and to strengthen our fellowship.

As FEET pursues our theological mission we need to be aware of the broader European picture. FEET is eager to promote partnerships which can hopefully expand the audience and relevance of evangelical theology within a largely secularised, multi-religious and divided Europe. Thus in 2016, FEET organised its biennial conference, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, in partnership with the Theological Commission of the European Evangelical Alliance (TCEEA) and with the European section of World Reformed Fellowship. One outcome of this collaboration was the publication of the proceedings of the conference.¹

Over the years we have had informal relations with the EEA and more recently, more formal ties with TCEEA were initiated by its former chairman, Thomas Schirrmacher. Presently, three members of the FEET committee are either a member of or closely associated with the TC. This overlap calls for more interaction

between the two organisations. This happened when the FEET committee meeting took place in January near Aix-en-Provence in the south of France. The new chairman of the TC, Evert van de Poll, lives in Nîmes just an hour away from where the committee met. Thus Evert was invited to attend our meetings and was involved in our discussions and decisions, especially with regards the further partnership between TC and FEET. It was agreed to pool resources in the following areas:

- The CT of the EEA would call on FEET network to find theologians who are willing and able to write on current issues and developments in the churches and in the cultural and social environments.
- FEET and the CT would seek to continue to cooperate in common ventures such as organising theological conferences, contributing articles to the European Journal of Theology and issuing publications.
- Sharing information and making sure that major activities and events (conferences, meetings, publications) be made known by both organisations so as to encourage mutual involvement and interaction.

Evert van de Poll has now sent us a provisional list of topics on which our committee could work or request a contribution from our members. In other words, the members of FEET should not be surprised if they are asked for a contribution on a crucial contemporary issue according to their expertise, interest and availability. We are convinced that this partnership can contribute to broadening the networking of both organisations and enhancing the audience and impact of evangelical theology in Europe.

¹ *The Reformation, Its Roots and Its Legacy*, Pierre Berthoud and Pieter J. Lalleman, Editors. Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017.

Reconciliation in Europe: A revisionist proposal for theological and spiritual disciplines

Revd Dr Stephen Dray¹

Introduction

This paper comes with a ‘health warning’. It is drafted by an academic generalist and pastor. This has a double consequence. On the one hand it means that disciplinary specialists may well be able to expose significant weaknesses in the argument (or at least be able to offer a more nuanced reflection upon the themes addressed). On the other hand, a more panoramic (even impressionistic) inter-disciplinary approach with a view to practical application may provide a perspective or dimension that can offer a perspective that is different than that of the specialist ... at least I hope so!²

My suspicion is that reconciliation has failed to function adequately as a key concept in theological reflection and praxis; not least in evangelicalism. What follows will explore whether there is a case to be made for this claim, and assuming there is some ground for it, tentatively propose some possible implications for the renewal of our theological and ethical methodologies and application; not least in the context of our European setting.

As noted, I come to this subject from two very different angles. On the one hand, as a pastor, I am, firstly, painfully aware of the profound difficulties one encounters in congregational life in effecting reconciliation between separated brothers and sisters. Secondly, and as a United Kingdom citizen, I watched as the whole process that led to the decision to Brexit was conducted in a manner in which evangelical church members made decisions based, on both sides of the argument, on claims or (more often) assumptions which failed to apply the biblical emphasis upon ‘reconciliation’ to their decision-making processes. One side promoted (largely) economic arguments that highlighted ‘my’ personal benefits in remaining within the European Union. The other side appealed to a certain form of nationalism and, in particular, the need to protect ‘our’ borders (and supposed well-being) from a perceived sea of economic migrants. Singularly missing, then, not least in Christian rhetoric, was the ethical demand, based on God’s reconciling activity in

Christ of loving others as God has loved us, applies in shaping our reflection and in making such decisions. It was frustrating to seek to present biblical principles to those I am called to shepherd, and witness little or no grasp of what I was trying to share! Simply, there was an inability to comprehend a biblical worldview.

This leads to the second ‘angle’ and arguably the greater; it is the theological. We recognise, I think, that we are unlikely to convince others if we do not incarnate our own teaching and, secondly, if the balance of our teaching is such that our foundational convictions are inadequately constructed. In the latter case, the ‘burden’ of our teaching can be such as to exclude or marginalise those things that make for a fully healthy spirituality. It is my view that our consistent failure to provide adequate teaching on ‘reconciliation’ has created a scenario where the biblical worldview has not been integrated and internalised. Hence my frustration with my congregation is, in reality, a recognition of failure on the part of both myself and my contemporaries.

A Caveat

In the discussion that follows I will use global language that might appear to imply I am advancing universalist convictions. Thus, I want to affirm here that I stand four-square within the Reformation (and more specifically, the Reformed) tradition. I have no wish, on the one hand, to minimise the penal, sacrificial, substitutionary self-offering of Christ on the Cross. I can, therefore, affirm, with Philip Bliss that:

¹ Recently retired as a pastor, Stephen has been in Christian ministry for over 40 years, nearly half of which has been in theological training and mentoring. He holds doctorates in hermeneutics, church history and pastoral theology. This is the text of a workshop given at the FEET conference in Prague in 2018.

² The panoramic nature of this study means that footnotes (especially references) have been kept to a relative minimum. Otherwise, they would have been in danger of swallowing the paper whole!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!

Guilty, vile, and helpless we;
Spotless Lamb of God was He;
Full atonement! can it be?
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!

Lifted up was He to die;
It is finished! was His cry;
Now in Heav'n exalted high.
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!³

To quote Dora Greenwell, I can wholeheartedly affirm that 'In my heart I find a need of him to be my Saviour'.⁴

Further, I do not wish to minimise the awesome, compassionate, prevenient, electing grace that enabled such a faith-response to be made! For me, and for all, the future reconciliation of all things is utterly dependent upon God's redeeming and saving grace in Christ. The peace that characterises reconciliation is, as Paul makes clear, 'through his blood'.⁵ To that extent, I am not wholly comfortable with the words of one of the founders of the Evangelical movement, George Whitefield, when he says:

Why should we lose our time inquiring about what will become of the heathen, and not rather inquire

what will become of our own souls? We may be sure that God will deal with heathens according to their light; if he has given them no revelation, then they will not be judged by revelation. If they have not had a law, then they will be judged without law.⁶

Whatever the basis for God's dealings with the 'heathen' (or children who die in infancy or all those who have never heard or been adequately disciplined in Christian truth) it cannot, in my view, be on the basis of anything other than Christ's work on the cross.⁷

I also want to affirm that I simply cannot evaporate all meaning from biblical texts which refer to wrath and judgement.⁸ As to the final condition of the 'lost' I am aware of evangelical disagreement. I have some sympathy with, though I am not fully persuaded by, the annihilationist position.⁹ However, I cannot escape the fact that judgement will be excruciatingly painful.

At the same time, I have been deeply influenced by the postmillennialism of our evangelical fore-fathers and those who have emphasised the new creation as the biblical hope.¹⁰ I have also been shaped by scholars such as Warfield, Hodge and Shedd, who believe the language of the Bible anticipates the majority of humanity as, ultimately, heirs of the kingdom.¹¹

Thus I am convinced that there is a cosmos-embracing reach to God's purpose, that I struggle to grasp, but is unequivocally present in biblical hope and believe that to neglect it is to fail to grasp the sheer magnitude and scope of his reconciling work.¹²

³ Published in 1875. Bliss was a colleague of Moody and Sankey and was tragically killed in a train crash (in which he died trying to save his wife) the following year. He was 38.

⁴ From Dora Greenwell's wonderful hymn, 'I am not skilled to understand', published in *Songs of Salvation* (London: Strahan & Co, 1874) 4–6.

⁵ See discussion below.

⁶ From Whitefield's sermon on 'The Righteousness of Christ, an Everlasting Righteousness' based on Daniel 9:24 and published in his *Works* (London: Dilly, 1772).

⁷ Compare, B. B. Warfield, 'Are They Few That Be Saved', in B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed) 350, who also denies salvation outside of Christ.

⁸ The nineteenth century Reformed scholar, W. G. T. Shedd, perhaps over-states the point in *History of Christian Doctrine*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1877) 418, where he comments, 'it is impossible to eliminate the tenet [of endless punishment] from the Christian Scriptures, except by a mutilation of the canon, or a violently capricious exegesis.' However, he correctly draws attention to the fact that the interpretation of language can be stretched to the point of absurdity.

⁹ I was present at the Rutherford House Conference in 1991, the papers of which were subsequently published under the editorship of Nigel M. de S. Cameron as *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992). Those papers provide a good starting point for reflections on this subject by evangelical scholars.

¹⁰ As a young man, I was deeply influenced by Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image* (Leicester: IVP, 1989) and Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979).

¹¹ On Warfield, see 'Are They Few', 334–350. Note also Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* vol. 3 (New York: Scribner, 1876) 879–880 and W.G.T. Shedd, *Syllabus and Notes*, 3rd Edition (New York: Scribner, 1885) 525. I am, of course, aware that the arguments used by these scholars do not always agree.

¹² I am happy to follow the discussion of Nigel M. de S. Cameron, 'Universalism and the Logic of Revelation', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 11.4 (1987) 321–335 which was originally given at a FEET conference.

Reconciliation Central to the Gospel

Simply, then, I want to note that the apostle Paul places ‘reconciliation’ at the heart of his gospel. In Colossians, powerfully and beautifully, he reminds us that:

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [the Son], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:20–21)

The scope of the apostolic teaching is universal (more precisely, embracing every universe) and the purpose of the incarnation and the ministry of Christ, he affirms, was to reconcile all to the Father; and through the Son to effect universal reconciliation; the diverse parts to the One and, in him, to one another.

Systematic Theology

Nevertheless, when I turn to systematic theologies, I fail to find this emphasis. Understandably, most systematic presentations of Christian doctrine, follow, broadly, the Nicene Creed. This is explicit, for example, in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.¹³ There is some logic to this. The original creed was drafted within an essentially historical framework in which ‘life everlasting’ was indeed the end to which all history was moving.

However, especially within Protestantism, with its understandable soteriological focus (it was after all, the battle ground of the Reformation) the effect (exacerbated by intra-evangelical disputes on the ‘last

things’) has been to view eschatology as something of an appendix and, then and all too often, to focus upon what has been described as ‘future’ at the expense of ‘realised’ eschatology and the individual rather than cosmic reconciliation. This can be recognised when the texts that have been used to train successive generations of pastors and theologians are consulted.¹⁴

Christian Spirituality

Perhaps this is the point to introduce Christian spirituality. The greatest Christian theologians and spiritual writers have always recognised the conjunction of Jesus’ two commandments to love God and one another. At their best, they have understood that this has a profoundly social implication. John Wesley, the most famous English evangelical of the eighteenth century, once said, ‘Christianity is essentially a social religion, and to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.’¹⁵ At various times attempts have been made to establish ‘heaven on earth’ as a direct consequence. Basil the Great sought to establish a community on this basis;¹⁶ as did the early Irish church, Calvin in Geneva, Cromwell in his ‘Parliament of the Saints’ and others who could be named.¹⁷ The impetus in the more collective forms of monasticism was to form reconciled communities.¹⁸ The failure of these projects (to some degree or another) may have had a subliminal effect in shifting ‘piety’ in a more individualistic direction.

But such help was scarcely required. Whether for reasons of historical context or prevailing philosophical world-views (and/or indeed other factors), Christianity early adopted a spirituality where the accent was placed upon ‘me’ and ‘my’ relationship with God.¹⁹

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994)

¹⁴ A brief survey of the classic systematic texts by Reformed and evangelical scholars demonstrates this point. This can be seen in earlier works like those of R. L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemical Theology* (St Louis: Presbyterian, 1878), C.G. Finney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (New York: George H. Doran, 1878) and Hodge, *Systematic Theology*. It is the same with a number of early twentieth-century works; for example, A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (many editions, commencing from 1907) and Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939). Both these were standard texts in theological institutions for many decades and their influence was substantial. More recent texts are similar. So, for example, C. C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1986) and James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986).

¹⁵ John Wesley, *Works*, 3rd Edition, vol V (New York: Harper, 1891-21) 296.

¹⁶ See Jean Gribomont, ‘Monasticism and Asceticism’ in Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff and Jean Leclercq, *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (London: SCM, 1985) 98–101.

¹⁷ Most standard textbooks on these situations will exemplify the point made here.

¹⁸ These can be traced as far back as Pachomius whose model deeply influenced monasticism within both the eastern and western churches. See Gribomont, ‘Monasticism’, 96–98.

¹⁹ Anthony of Egypt, for example, deliberately set out on the path of individual salvation as a consequence of the spiritual barrenness of the institutional church. See R.T. Meyer (trans.), *Athanasius: The Life of Antony* (New York: Newman, 1978).

Magnificent examples of sanctity, extraordinary texts that outlined the pathway to perfection, placed the accent on the individual;²⁰ even if, as noted above, the community was (in at least many cases) vital to advance this process.

From the perspective of Protestantism, the impact of the Renaissance only served to further place the individual at the centre, not least in piety. This is, of course, not to deny the fact that many (if not most) of the social and economic benefits which the modern world (at least partly or regionally) enjoys are the fruits of Christians with a pronounced social conscience and, so it appears, a deep spirituality.²¹

However, it is to say that evangelical spirituality (along with its theology) has, in my view, generally failed to place the locus of its teaching upon the biblical emphasis on living as a reconciled and reconciling people. It follows, of course, that if as theologians and pastors we are ‘out of sync’ so will be those who look to our lead and are shaped by our convictions. Again, the reason my congregation (and I am not singling them out) failed to recognise that Brexit raised profound questions as to their beliefs, attitudes and actions was my failure (our failure).

Superficial as the above analysis inevitably is, if there is any truth in it, how might I/we move forward? The implications for systematic theology are inferred in the above discussion. However, I want here to explore biblical theology first.

Biblical Theology

Biblical theology has always sat somewhat on the margins of (Protestant) scholarly endeavour. Part of the reason for this, of course, is the question as to whether

it is even possible to speak of a or one biblical theology.²² The recognition of diversity within the Christian canon has often been seen as destructive of the possibility of unity.²³ However, where attempts have been made, none (at least to my knowledge) have centred on universal reconciliation in Christ as the unifying motif; even where the Scriptures have been viewed as the ‘history of redemption’.²⁴

Thus, even when the last has been promoted, two major weaknesses are often apparent. Firstly, the accent on history has tended to bracket out texts that are not generically historical.²⁵ Secondly, the ‘unity’ between the Old Testament narrative and Christ as the fulfilment has often resorted, over quickly, to a typology that has read the biblical text backwards;²⁶ often foregrounding certain texts that lend themselves to the method, at the expense of others. Without wishing to deny that some books/passages of the Bible are more obviously ‘core’ than others, these various failings in biblical theology have tended to a form of neo-Marcionism which only focuses upon certain parts of the Old Testament at the expense of others. In this context, ‘reconciliation’ gets overlooked.

Hermeneutics

Evangelical Protestant hermeneutics has not always helped. For example, many have emphasised the –methodologically questionable – traditional threefold division of the law into moral, ceremonial and juridical (the latter a ‘temporary’ expedient when God’s people were a theocracy).²⁷ Evangelical discussions, more recently, have embraced extremes from seeing the whole law abandoned in Christ on the one hand to viewing the juridical law as required of modern nation-states on the

²⁰ This produced a vast library of texts on ascetical theology that continue to inspire. Perhaps the most renowned early work was that of John Cassian. See Boniface Ramsay (trans.), *John Cassian: The Conferences* (New York: Newman, 1997).

²¹ I am not a specialist in this area but recognise that, for example, the Clapham Sect, had a significant impact on British (and global) social life. See, for example, Stephen Tompkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce’s circle changed Britain* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010).

²² The failure (if that is the word) of a number of such attempts in the mid-twentieth century by Edmund Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1955), Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1961), Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1962) and Th.C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970) and others probably explains the relative paucity of subsequent attempts; until, at least, recently; largely under the impetus of canonical criticism. See, especially, Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

²³ See, for example, D. L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible* (Leicester: IVP, 1976).

²⁴ From an evangelical perspective, Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) holds a landmark status in reading the Bible as salvation history.

²⁵ Vos, for example, only refers to Job on four occasions and to Proverbs on five. He never refers to the Song of Songs or Ecclesiastes.

²⁶ An example might be S. G. de Graaff, *Promise and Deliverance*, 3 vols (Ontario: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977–1979).

²⁷ Still, apparently, the prevailing methodology of many evangelicals; see the systematic discussions referred to above.

other.²⁸ However, without resorting to the latter, it is possible, adopting the theme of 'reconciliation', to see in Israel the principles by which reconciled communities are to live in an anticipation of the age to come. Again, I would suggest, 'reconciliation' has been given short shrift.

Other genres may also be embraced within the guiding 'principle' of 'reconciliation' as will be explored below. However, in sum, I think that reading the whole of the Bible as the library of a God who is reconciling all things in Christ helps us to live together in the midst of a history which 'begins with the tale of a garden and ends with the city of gold' and where the 'best is the story of Jesus'; its fulfilment and example.²⁹

A Biblical Perspective?

How, then, might this insight be applied to the theme of Christian identity and mission in a divided Europe?

Assuming, at the very least, we are sympathetic to the notion that the canon (certainly in its final form) was viewed by the collectors as a self-consistent whole,³⁰ we may approach the biblical material expecting to find some unifying theme or themes. How far, then, can we proceed with an approach inspired by Paul's claim in Colossians?

The early chapters of Genesis are widely regarded as prolegomena to the remainder of the Scriptures. God's original purpose for humanity to live within and be deified in a world in harmony with both its creator and those created in his image and likeness is well-rehearsed. The nature of this likeness has been variously debated, but the possibility that the 'image' lay in humanity-in-communion as a reflection of the God-in-communion is attractive and consistent with what follows.³¹ For, in the Fall, humanity is severed

from God, one another and nature itself. Communion is exchanged for alienation. The nature and extent of that alienation is seen, above all, in the social context. Cain slays Abel, Lamech boasts of his double murder, society descends into a fragmented abyss; and it is the society that is subjected to judgement. After the flood, the accent lies (in the account of the tower of Babel) on alienated society seeking to bolster itself in a grotesque attempt to call the gods on-side rather than submit to the LORD. The sequel is as tragic as it is inevitable.

However, and this is the point, Genesis 1–11 describe a human society and world in a communion that was fatally lost at the Fall. The proto-evangelium in Genesis 3:15, in this context, promises a reconciler; one who will unite (again) all things in himself.

It is significant, then, that the choice of Abram and the promises repeatedly made to him, find their climax in the words 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Genesis 12:3 and parallels).

As the story unfolds it is Israel, as a people, who are foregrounded as the community called to communion with the LORD and one another. In this context, the juridical law (see above) functions as a blue print for such communion. Though the laws are undoubtedly rooted in their cultural context, it is, I suggest, the differences between Israel's laws and those of the surrounding peoples that are the most telling.³² They are to be a people characterised by that same all-embracing compassion that reflects the deity himself. It is significant, therefore, that a close reading of the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20–23) suggests that the sub-text is that Israel are to live before a watching world as a communion in which all created in the divine image have a part. The only outsiders are those who refuse to bow the knee to the LORD. Thus slavery is recast as a means of social welfare for the disadvantaged and (more evident in Deuteronomy) property and other

²⁸ Lively debates centred around Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy and Christian Ethics*, which was first published in 1977. Others reacted to an extreme that muddied the waters. The work of Christopher J. H. Wright, most recently in his *Old Testament Ethics and the People of God* (London: IVP, 2010) and John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2002), among others, seems more productive.

²⁹ I am citing here a well-known old English children's hymn by Maria Penistone that says, 'God has given us a book full of stories, Which was made for His people of old, It begins with the tale of a garden, And ends with the city of gold. But the best is the story of Jesus...'

³⁰ A conviction for which evangelicals have reason to thank Brevard Childs and his disciples and work undertaken by Craig Bartholomew and his colleagues. See, for example, Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) and his subsequent essays, and Craig Bartholomew, Colin Green and Karl Moller (eds), *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000) and the following volumes produced by the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar.

³¹ Karl Barth appears to have been the one who popularised this view. See discussion in D. J. A. Clines, 'The Image of God in Man' in *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968) 53–103.

³² I have sought to work out what I affirm here in my *Exodus* (London: Crossway, 1992).

rights (as exemplified elsewhere) are curtailed in such a way that no family can be landless, in poverty and debt for long. Meanwhile, the most vulnerable in society, the widows and orphans are ‚privileged‘. Repeatedly it is noted, this is because this is the nature of the reconciling God.³³ Reconciliation cannot live with any form of alienation within its communion.

The stuttering manner in which Israel fulfilled (or more usually failed in) their calling is well documented in the remainder of the Old Testament. The Old Testament was/is indeed a ‚schoolmaster‘ to prepare for Christ (Galatians 3:24). This can be seen in a negative sense: granted the mess, something infinitely better is needed! But it can also be viewed positively: the nation of Israel, for all its failure and situatedness, was called to live as a light to the world: a communion which, dimly perhaps, pointed forward to the perfect communion, promised by God, to which all history was progressing through the reconciler to come. In this context it is interesting that a book such as Esther is about a community, the communion of the promise, who are delivered from extinction.³⁴

Other genres of the Old Testament can effectively be embraced under the theme of ‚reconciliation‘; especially if the perspective is one nuanced by the tension between communion and sin’s effects. It is precisely because Job knows his redeemer/reconciler that he struggles with the loss of the fruits of communion in a fallen world. Arguably, Qohelet is troubled by similar (more global) concerns.³⁵ Meanwhile, Proverbs offers advice (and shows us the way) to how to promote and experience the fruits of communion with God in the here and now. Again, it is to be noted, its emphasis is, essentially, corporate. The Song has always tantalised interpreters (especially Christians who have ambivalent attitudes to sex). However, I would suggest that, in this

beautiful book an emerging life-long love is set within an approving community which celebrates such a union as one that enriches and sustains the communion of the whole.³⁶

The Psalms are an interesting case. Though sometimes intensely personal, their very publication as the hymn book of the ancient temple indicates that their fundamental focus is upon life in community and, above all, the life that is lived, individually and collectively, in communion with God. Those psalms that express the deepest anguish almost always combine a sense of loss of fellowship with God and communion with others. Again, for all the effects of sin, there is an inspired intuition that life as it should be lived inseparably involves communion with God and one another. It is also to be noted that many psalms are inescapably universalistic; the nations will yet be adopted ‚into‘ Zion.³⁷ At its best, and in its songs, Israel never lost sight of its calling and destiny!

Finally, in this section, some observations should be made about the prophetic books. The prophets are preachers who almost invariably appear to be addressing those who have departed from Israel’s calling and are finding themselves the objects of the Deuteronomic curses;³⁸ curses articulated in terms which are realised in a manner in which the disintegrating effects of a failure to live in communion with God are experienced by the community. Into these situations the prophets both warn and encourage. Incidentally, it is interesting how interested the prophets can be in the suffering world: a better understanding, for example, of Habakkuk than simply his expressing the concerns of God’s people is, in my view, that the prophet cries with the pain of all those who do not experience ‚communion‘ and live in a world replete with and threatened by the effects of alienation.³⁹

³³ Deuteronomy 7:8 appears to function as programmatic for much that follows. The Lord has brought his people into communion with him; their life is to reflect the loving God who has brought them to himself.

³⁴ Vos, *Biblical Theology*, also ignores Esther.

³⁵ All too often Qohelet has been read (certainly by evangelicals) as a statement as to what it is like to live apart from God. Approaches that interpret the book in the context of life in a fallen world seem preferable.

³⁶ This suggestion, in my view, cuts the Gordian knot as to whether the Song is christological. It is, precisely because it depicts human love, at its best and, as such, it depicts that ‚reconciled life‘ which alone is perfectly found in and through Christ.

³⁷ Without being universalistic the Psalms do look to a time of global renewal. In Psalm 47, for example, he who is ‚king of all the earth‘ and ‚reigns over the nations‘ rules in such a way that ‚the nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham‘ on the basis of which ‚God is greatly exalted‘. The Psalm appears to be proleptic. It is also not unique. However, evil is real and must, ultimately, face the divine wrath; something that the psalms repeatedly affirm.

³⁸ Readers of the Old Testament will be familiar with the way much of it is ‚shaped‘ around the blessings and curses described in Deuteronomy

³⁹ This is especially well articulated by Francis I. Andersen in his monumental *Habakkuk* (Yale: University Press, 2001).

I have sought, both briefly and superficially, to suggest that the Old Testament literature *as a whole* and *in its individual parts* can be viewed successfully under the twin themes of alienation and reconciliation; both with reference to the LORD and one another; and that the latter is global in its scope.

Crucially the New Testament reveals the fulfilment of the hopes and longings for reconciliation and the one through whom this reconciliation is affected. Several points can be made here. Firstly, Jesus' own re-expression of the expectations of the reconciled is the juxtaposition of fellowship with God and communion with one another. Then his language is frequently corporate. The language of a kingdom is, inescapably, of those sharing life under a common leader and community commitment. He, too, uses figures that approximate to the universal. As Warfield pointed out, the parable of the wheat and tares presumes that there is more wheat than weeds.⁴⁰ This suggests that Jesus understood his ministry in terms of restoring a world and its inhabitants who had been alienated from God and one another to their Father and to enjoyment of filial status with him. Again, the language is that of fellowship and communion, family likeness and friendship that is anticipated even while it is presently partially experienced. It can come as no surprise that the Bible ends with an archetypal picture of social nearness: the 'city of gold'.

I would suggest that nothing that I have hitherto said is, as we say in the United Kingdom, 'rocket science'. Most of us have probably said something similar ourselves at some time or another. However, the point I have tried to stress here is that we have, perhaps, failed adequately to make the theme of 'global' reconciliation of the alienated a significant interpretative factor in our studies nor allowed it to adequately shape our systematic reflections and praxis.

The Critical Question

This brings us to the critical question; how might such a conclusion have relevance to the 'threat' of migration on the southern borders of Europe, of rising right-wing nationalism across the continent (east and west, north and south)? How might it shape the relationship between different communities (black/white, socially

privileged or underprivileged, etc.)? What implications does it have for addressing deprivation (in its various forms) and the way we respond to the abused and abusers (from those within the home to the conflicts of nations)?

Being Church

I think the first challenge is that we re-discover what it means to be Church. In both Old and New Testaments the fundamental picture of the people of God is precisely that they are a people, a community that demonstrates the fundamental mark of community – togetherness. Christianity is inescapably social. This, of course, is counter-intuitive to believers who live in an 'I did it my way' world and in a church that has emphasised 'personal' salvation. This helps, too, to explain so many of our problems when we seek to emphasise the biblical expectations of a disciplined and mutually supportive and self-sacrificial community.

Yet, in a world that is longing for communion (and seems to look for it in all the wrong places!) the Church has a calling like Israel of old to be a people who bring light to a darkening world and a personal warmth to which many are complete strangers. Bonhoeffer grasped this when in a letter from his prison cell to his parents, he said:

That the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel, as a result of which people can no longer understand each other, because everyone speaks a different language, should at last be brought to an end and overcome by the language of God [at Pentecost], which everyone understands and through which alone people can understand each other again, and that the church should be the place where that happens – these are great momentous thoughts.⁴¹

Momentous indeed! The Church is to exemplify and effect reconciliation after the image of him who has formed it.

This requires the sort of renewal in systematic theology and teaching that is noted above. Reconciliation needs to be seen as God's appointed end for his world and its inhabitants to which all other prepares and points. At this juncture, I welcome the renewed interest

⁴⁰ See above.

⁴¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1971) 53.

in the doctrine of the Trinity that has marked out theological endeavour in the last couple of decades.⁴²

However, this, too, needs to be set within the context of ‚reconciliation‘. In a letter written in 1835, the English evangelical leader, Charles Simeon, commented, ‚because God himself is love, I think that the more intensely I love those who are beloved of him, the more I think I resemble him.‘ Specifically, he locates this within the inter-personal relationship of the members of the Trinity. He says, ‚The union that should subsist between saints should resemble, as far as possible, the love that exists between God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.‘⁴³

African scholars have made a similar point. The Catholic scholar, Camillus Lyimo, comments:

The Trinity establishes God as community. Jesus Christ revealed the Trinity to us. God wished to share with humanity and the entire creation his own community life in the person of Jesus Christ who became consubstantial with us. Our life is a shared life in the Trinity.⁴⁴

Christopher Mwoleka adds, ‚As long as we do not know how to share..., as God would have us do, it is an illusion to imagine that we know what it is to share the life of the Trinity which is our destiny.‘⁴⁵

This, I venture to suggest, probably also requires a renewal of our spiritual disciplines. My preferred spirituality is naturally reclusive. This may be all-right if my life is then lived outside of the closet. But, however reticent I may be, it also requires my engagement to the point of vulnerability with other pilgrims, other members of the ‚family‘. Bonhoeffer again, sagely observes: ‚Let him who cannot be alone, beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.‘⁴⁶

Somehow, then, we need to (re)discover and implement *in the life of our churches* a spirituality where mutually vulnerable people live in communion with one another. Invariably, it is in such circumstances

that the church appears strongest and most effective. From my knowledge of the Bruderhof, the Clapham Sect and L’Arche this appears to have been true of them; but other examples could be cited. In all this, example born of personal conviction should be seen alongside what we teach; and the ‚glorious body of Christ‘ should, perhaps, more often be our theme! Given this, the ‚overflow‘ of reconciling love ought to issue forth to every part of God’s world destined for reconciliation; the reconciled community being both an exemplar but also an agent of reconciliation.

However, we all, I think, recognise the fact that worldviews are shaped by the prevailing intellectual context. Unless we and our hearers are ‚saturated‘ by the biblical emphasis upon reconciliation, we are unlikely to have much impact; especially given the prevailing secular instincts of many in Europe. This requires the development of an alternative narrative, deeply embedded in the renewal of the disciplines already listed (and, doubtless, others).

A Closing Word

Given this, those of us who are theologians need to do some demanding reflection. What are the areas we need to address? Critical, in my view, is the question of nationalism. Nationhood (or other forms of ethnic or other groupings) is legitimised in the Bible; even if ultimately it is God’s common-grace response to human depravity. We probably also all recognise the richness that such diversity brings to our world. However, nationhood, under sin, invariably divides rather than reconciles. By such means we build walls, identify ‚us‘ and ‚them‘ and those who are ‚in‘ or those who are ‚out‘. These become the basis for posturing and, not infrequently, hostile, self-affirming and imperialistic actions. Sadly, this seems, almost inevitably, to place the ‚vulnerable‘ in the class of the ‚other‘. In the United Kingdom, therefore, we have relatively no problem with people from northern Europe: they are ‚like‘ us and place few demands on us.⁴⁷ The problems arise mainly

⁴² Colin Gunton had much to do with this, beginning with his *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

⁴³ Charles Simeon, in a letter to Mary Elliott, in William Carus (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon* (London: Hatchard, 1847) 769–772.

⁴⁴ Camillus Lyimo, ‚An Ujamaa Theology‘, in Aylward Shorter (ed.), *African Christian Spirituality* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978) 128.

⁴⁵ Christopher Mwoleka, ‚Trinity and Community,‘ in Shorter, *Spirituality*, 124

⁴⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM, 1954) 70.

⁴⁷ When, for example, the number of Poles migrating to the United Kingdom reached numbers that seemed, especially to the political ‚right‘, to threaten a sort of ‚take over‘, problems did arise.

at the level of colour and those from economically deprived areas (often deprived, if we are honest, by the way in which we have impoverished and indebted peoples by the plundering of their natural resources in the past). To support those who now seek some improvement in their lot (sometimes in desperation of life itself) prompts little ongoing sympathy. 'They' are a 'problem' to be solved; ideally by others who are less able to resolve matters than 'we' ourselves. The rhetoric used by the political 'right' is quick to build upon fears and the 'myth' that 'we' are being over-run by 'them' in a country where the 'full' sign is hanging on the doors. So powerful is this narrative that compassion is lost. 'Compassion starts at home' we are told; but, in reality, home is little better since 'our' own, then excludes the homeless, the addicted, the 'different' and other victims of our society. I have little doubt that the United Kingdom is not unique!

Sadly, evangelicals seem unable to provide another narrative; perhaps because we have not given adequate thought to what it might say and where it might lead us (or are we frightened where it may lead us?). Perhaps, too, we are still fearful of the 'social gospel'. Yet, if we see the message of the Bible as grounded, ultimately, in the reconciliation of all things in Christ, we cannot be content with walls that divide, wherever we find them. Wherever my 'walls' are designed to advance me at the expense of another, I am following another gospel than that of Christ. The Old Testament law and the teaching of Jesus himself was designed to be a glue, not a solvent; to unite those made in the image of their maker, not to divide them. Some serious theological reflection is required in this area!

An additional issue (ironically one that divides) is ecology: 'planet earth'. If God's purpose is to reconcile all things in Christ, it is explicit that this includes creation itself. In this connection it is surely significant that the

means by which the primal couple were to engage with the created order was as stewards. Through their stewardship, the created order itself was destined to be deified with them. Though sin entered, the jubilee legislation was designed not simply to ensure that economic power was not gathered into the hands of the few and enjoyed by the many, but that the land should enjoy a sabbath so that it, too, could be renewed and not destroyed by over-use. God's people were thus called upon to live in a stewardly relationship with their ecological environment so that creation itself might enjoy the upward progress toward ultimate and final renewal. If this interpretation is a fair one, then the biblical narrative of the reconciliation of all things in Christ needs to be given greater emphasis; not least among those who are the 'first fruits' of this cosmic divine plan of which they are the primary agents on earth. Without offering a specific blueprint (I am no expert) it appears to me that 'reconciliation' impinges powerfully, inescapably and centrally upon the lives of those 'in Christ'. Consequently, the abusive use of finite natural resources (and peoples) and the misuse of the by-products of such abuse place demands upon our discipleship that are critical to our spiritual life and well-being. The prophets were quick to address such situations; so should we.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to set out a basic thesis and to test whether it can sustain itself. I have little doubt that it requires substantial refinement in the hands of the specialists. However, it has sought to argue that 'reconciliation' requires to be given greater prominence in our theological reflection and praxis or we fail, ultimately, to be the 'Gospel' people we like to think we are.

New Testament Reflections on Migration

Revd Simon M. Jones, London

Context – who I am and what I am doing

I am a baptist minister, a theological educator, writer and activist. I teach New Testament, mainly Paul, and I'm the author of five books focussing on NT history and interpretation and another four about the church.¹ I am the co-founder of Peaceful Borders, a small-scale grassroots response to the refugee situation in Calais, formed to accompany community leaders in the jungle in peace-making and community building. I am also now working alongside one of those community leaders in Hopetowns, a refugee-led project offering welcome, English classes, legal and housing advice and friendship to new arrivals. And I am a trustee of the Association Maria Skobtsova, a French association that runs a safe house some 25 mainly Eritrean young exiles in Calais.

Three stories

I am starting this reflection with three stories that touch on the refugee crisis that has unfolded from 2015, focused on Calais and London, on initiatives that I was a part of. I tell these stories as part of an auto-ethnographic reflection on this crisis as I was a participant-observer in what unfolded. I speak as one profoundly affected by the experience; it has challenged, shaken and reshaped how I understand God, mission and my call to follow Jesus in a turbulent world as I hope will become clear in what follows.

The term 'refugee crisis' is discussed in the media and conference halls but it is potentially misleading and unhelpful. It is not really a crisis for Europe but the European Union as a family of nations was tipped into panic by what unfolded through 2014/15 because of its unpreparedness and lack of flexibility and imagination. It is not really a crisis for me though it confronted me with experiences and feelings that caused me to rethink much of my relationship with my European culture, my God and my understanding of mission. It is, of course, a major crisis for all those forced to flee from conflict and the destruction of their homes and livelihoods

across North Africa and the Middle East. Each of those clinging to rubber boats, trudging the trail through the Balkans or up through Italy had experienced more crisis in a year than most of us will experience in a lifetime.

The Jungle – with God on the edge

I first went to the so-called Jungle, a growing collection of tents and ramshackle structures behind the port in Calais, in October 2015. It changed my life. The Jungle was not a planned response to a growing crisis. It was not established by the French Government as a way of managing the growing number of migrants gathering in Calais mainly in a bid to reach England. The camp formed because it was the one place from where migrants were not removed by the police. Through the spring of 2015 more and more were corralled onto the site that measured 1.5km by 0.5km between the Jules Ferry Centre and the A16 motorway that had been used a dumping ground for all kinds of waste products from nearby factories.²

In April some 1000 people lived there. By the time of my first visit in October around 4,000 were resident according to the first census conducted by L'Auberge des Migrants, a small French NGO that was attempting to coordinate the humanitarian response; from its warehouse it supplied food, clothing, care for mothers and children, medical services, and such like. By the time the camp was removed in October 2016 the Jungle was home to 10,000 people.

I witnessed this growth on weekly visits until the destruction and beyond. I went because the camp was on my doorstep and people were talking about it and I felt the need to be properly informed. I needed to witness what was happening for myself. I went with no agenda except the vague sense that there needed to be a Christian presence in this place and Christians telling its story in the UK where misinformation was rife.

Among the first people I met was a young man from Sudan, already emerging as one of those attempting to bring some organisation in the chaos of arrivals. On my

¹ A workshop at the FEET conference in Prague, August 2018.

² Help Refugees/Refugees Rights Europe, *A Brief Timeline of the Human Rights Situation in the Calais Area* (London, October 2018)

second visit I was able to take him a caravan to be his home and the base for whatever operations we would be involved in. At first our aim had been to establish a pastoral support base for the many unattached volunteers working tirelessly to meet the humanitarian need. But very quickly this was supplemented by the need to support and encourage a growing number of leaders in their efforts at community building and peace-making. So Peaceful Borders was born.

Week by week I and some colleagues – including a handful of students from Spurgeon’s College – visited and worked alongside a growing team of community leaders and key L’Auberge/Help Refugees volunteers. We helped to sort out a network of community kitchens that could be supplied with food for refugees to cook for themselves. Our feeling was that we needed to support any effort to ensure the residents of the camp retained as much agency as possible, that they were able to create the community in which they lived, with those of us from outside the camp merely acting as facilitators of that.

One of the principles of community organising associated with Saul Alinsky is ‘nothing about us without us is for us’. In the world of humanitarian relief those who have resources and power concoct plans to help those without. They set up systems and programmes and those in need have to fall in line – often literally; the number of hours spent in queues in the Jungle was eye-watering. Community organising is built on the mantra that those who need help ought to be the key players in determining what help they need and how it should be delivered. Nothing about us without us is for us.

For Alinsky and his compatriots community is not a static or inherited social formation that can be acted on from outside. Rather, as Luke Bretherton says, ‘a community was an ongoing project of social and symbolic interaction through which people form meaningful relationships with each other and develop a collective sense of identity and place’.³

This is what we saw emerging in the Jungle; this is what we wanted to get alongside to support and key to this was being consistently present. Alinsky in his studies of organised crime noted that faithfulness was vital for

creating any kind of common life. Bretherton again, ‘Without it trust cannot develop, promises are broken, commitments are not kept, and so the possibility of long term reciprocal relations is dissolved. In short, faithfulness and relational power are inextricably linked.’⁴

The most important thing I did that year was to turn up regularly and spend time with my Sudanese friend and others. My being consistently there meant that I was able to support him in his efforts to create a network of community kitchens in the part of the camp for which he was responsible. His idea was simple. ‘People who cook and eat together do not fight each other,’ he said. So in partnership with L’Auberge we helped to resource the establishment of community kitchens through supplying materials for fires (in the early days) and gas cookers (later on), rudimentary kitchen equipment and a thrice weekly distribution of dry groceries for groups of between 20 and 30 to cook and eat together. This supply chain depended on a morning distribution of cloakroom tickets and an afternoon session where a couple of representatives of each kitchen would come and exchange the ticket for a box of food.⁵

This sustained a pretty healthy and peaceful life for eight months. But in October 2016, the French authorities decided to remove the camp and all its residents. And in a flurry of destruction they scattered my friends across France and consigned their homes to skips. It was one of the most painful events I have ever witnessed. It left me with deep questions about European civilisation, human rights and an appropriate Christian response to it all (of which more later).

The Maria Skobtsova House – finding safety in community

At the same time as we were developing Peaceful Borders in the camp, one of our close colleagues was establishing a safe house in the Calais suburbs. Brother Johannes, a Belgian Benedictine monk, had arrived from the London Catholic Worker House where he had been living, with a vision of starting a similar work in Calais. Secours Catholique, the French arm of Caritas, had made a house available to him and his aim was

³ Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015) 23.

⁴ Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 27.

⁵ Two of the volunteers we worked alongside have written their reflections on those times in Fearghal O’Nuallain (ed.) *The Kindness of Strangers: Travel Stories that Make your heart Grow* (London: Sommersdale/Oxfam 2018). See the essays by Amelia Burr, ‘Stop giving and Start Taking’ (27–35) and Tina Brocklebank, ‘Kindness as Rebellion’ (299–307).

to establish a base for a prayerful presence among the refugees. It was to be a mixed community of volunteers working in the Jungle and refugees needing short-term respite care because of illness or injury.

It started in February 2016. I was invited on the management group to cement the UK connection. When the Jungle was demolished in October that year our feeling was that the house would probably close or move to somewhere like Lille where a number of Jungle residents had gone to study at the university. But in the winter of 2016–2017 refugees started returning to the city. In particular, a significant number of young Eritrean migrants turned up on the streets of Calais, homeless, rootless and destitute. Some of them came to the house and Johannes took them in. In the depth of that winter there were some 35 people living in a house designed for 12! And so was born the second phase of the Association Maria Skobtsova.

The house was named after a Russian orthodox nun, mother Maria of Paris, who had devoted herself to the needs of refugees in Paris in the late thirties into the forties, providing food and shelter to countless, mainly Jewish refugees needing a safe place in the face of Nazi persecution. Mother Maria provided that. She also persuaded the rubbish collectors of Paris to help her smuggle Jewish children out of the football stadium where the Nazis corralled them and their families before transporting them to the camps. For this reason she is also known as the ‘trash can nun’, as she got large numbers out in the bins which the rubbish collectors brought in and out of the camp. Eventually her luck ran out and she was arrested and sent to Ravensbruck where she died in the gas chambers on Good Friday 1945, taking the place of a young mother slated to die that day. She is an excellent role model for our work!

The house is now home to a moveable community of around 25 mainly young Eritreans. It is a place of safety, friendship and faith. Life in the house is rich and complex. One of the volunteers, a retired French nun called sister Joëlle, says, ‘We always live in vigilance – who will be sick, injured, visited by the police, encounter trouble today? This means whenever we are at peace, we are living with tension.’ She adds that everyone in the house is always on the point of leaving. People might leave the community today. The fact of leaving is a constant factor that everyone in the house lives with. Furthermore, everyone who arrives in the community

has had a difficult journey and so comes with wounds – both physical and much more psychological.

But she adds that ‘the community is a dynamic place, full of life, hope and energy, full of young people keen to make something of their lives.’ And these young people are the ones who make the community what it is. The house is full of difference – different countries and continents, different life experiences, different religious understanding and denominations. And yet together these young people, resourced by the association, are able to make a place of safety for all who come. It’s a place of laughter and learning, creativity and music.

A former resident, now in London, says of the house, ‘Your home is not where you come from but where you feel safe; I feel safe here.’ Joëlle tells the story of what she calls a present from Daniel, one of the young residents, to the house. One day he wrote Matthew 11:28 in Tigrinya, applying those words to the house. ‘I think this was very important for Daniel,’ says Joëlle, ‘because he wrote it out again and put it back up when we had a periodic clean-up of the walls!’ It is a lovely image to think of the house as the outworking of this saying of Jesus, suggestive of how Scripture is fulfilled through the people who hear it, and act on it, often when they are not consciously trying! To see the house as the embodiment of Jesus says something deeply profound about what has been created there in Calais.⁶

Hopetowns – welcoming and meeting needs

In March 2018 the dream of my Sudanese friend finally came to fruition and Hopetowns opened on Sunday afternoons for English classes, friendship and advice. He had dreamed of this in his caravan in the Jungle and here it was full of young asylum seekers and recent refugees being drawn into a community of mutual support and friendship

He is a natural community organiser, someone who sees what is happening, what needs to be done, and who gathers around him those who will help him make it happen. So once he was settled in London, he gathered a close circle of friends, a Swedish PhD student who works for Refugee Rights Europe, a partner with Price Waterhouse Cooper (who met him at a fundraising event and has been a supporter ever since) and me from Peaceful Borders (which has been able to pay him

⁶ Her comments were delivered orally on a house retreat day in September 2018.

for two days a week to free him to do the organising he wants to do).

Hopetowns had been an idea bubbling around for months and then we all went to visit a hostel for young asylum seekers in London. Run on a government contract by an outsourcing organisation, this damp, rat-infested house which could comfortably take about 50 people is home to 200+. They pass their days in lethargy, waiting for the moment when their claim is successful and their lives can start. Some have been there for two years or more. This visit was the catalyst we needed to find a centre – a basement Sudanese cafe and cultural centre off the Edgware Road in London – and get volunteers to help with English classes and open on a Sunday afternoon. The first term ended in the summer of 2018 with 35 going to Southend for a day at the beach and ice creams on the promenade.

Capturing some theology that emerges from all this

This is the story of a journey where I am the only common factor and therefore the burden of my theological reflection is on the journey that I have made, how my response to this crisis on my doorstep has forced me to ask how I understand some fundamental theological truths. So this is theology as testimony, auto-ethnography.

I have already reflected on peace-making, storytelling, hospitality, liminality and incarnational presence in an article in *Baptistic Theologies*.⁷ Here I want to deepen those reflections by setting them in the context of texts in migration that witness to a movement of people creating new worlds in strange places because of the migratory God they have encountered on the road, texts that we call the New Testament. I will group my reflections under four headings outlining four contrasts that have arisen for me as I have journeyed with the refugees and pondered their impact on me.

1. Place versus journey

Sociologist Avtar Brah has defined ‘home’ for uprooted people as

A mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return even if it is

possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality.⁸

And we have already heard one of the residents of the house, a young man from Eritrea, say, ‘Your home is not where you come from but where you feel safe.’

These quotes seem to capture the ambiguous relationship the refugee has with place. Most of my friends in the Jungle journeyed for between 12 and 18 months before they landed in Calais and ‘settled’ in the camp. But the camp was not their destination; it became a temporary refuge on their continuing journey to the place they were seeking. As the writer to the Hebrew Christians put it, ‘For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come’ (Heb 13:14). This hope, however, does not mean that in the temporary place in which we find ourselves we will not seek to make the best of life that we can in the circumstances.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that belonging to a place is part of our identity, saying there is ‘human hunger for a sense of place’, adding that ‘it is rootlessness and not meaninglessness that characterises the current crisis. There are no meanings apart from roots.’⁹ He was writing sometime before the present crisis and yet puts his finger on a key feature of the refugee experience, namely that no-one we met in the Jungle had a safe, secure place to call home; they were rootless. And though able to make a daily life for themselves that worked, they felt the pain of their rootlessness, their detachment from the home they had left and the home they had not yet arrived in. They were truly in a state of liminality.¹⁰

Those of us whose lives are rooted in the migratory texts of the New Testament should have a good deal of empathy with this. We have already reminded ourselves of Hebrews 13. Earlier in the letter, speaking of the heroes of the faith, the writer says of them that they are ‘seeking a homeland’ (11:13–14). Rupen Das comments, ‘God then responds to the problem of displacement and loss of their home by bringing them into an eternal city, a new home, and a new identity in a heavenly country.’¹¹ Paul also speaks of us possessing a heavenly citizenship

⁷ Simon Jones, ‘Tea and Story Telling Round the Family Album: Baptist Peacemaking in Liminal Times’, *Baptistic Theologies* 9.2 (2017) 101–115.

⁸ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London & New York: Routledge 1996) 192

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as a Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 4.

¹⁰ See Robert Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space: Four Biblical Studies* (AAR Studies in Religion, Chico: Scholars Press, 1981) chapter 2, ‘Liminality in the Wilderness’ for a reflection on how the idea of liminality informs our reading of scripture and engagement with the world.

¹¹ Rupen Das, ‘Refugees: Exploring Theological and Missiological Foundations’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 16.2 (2016) 33–47, 37.

that inspires our life in the here and now (Phil 3:20, cf. 1:27).

It is a reminder that at the heart of our tradition is a sense of rootedness, of having a place, of being at home. And it means that in our encounter with those who have been uprooted, rendered homeless, forced onto the road, we are brought face-to-face with the stark reality of the disordered world of sin, a world that falls short of God's best for all its inhabitants. Hence the call to be community builders and organisers.

When I begin teaching Paul to new students, I ask for a 25-word summary of who the apostle is. I usually get something that is a cross between a description of Billy Graham and Karl Barth. I suggest that the following is nearer the mark: 'Paul was a tent-making migrant, anarchistic community builder, establishing networks of outrage and hope across the empire in pursuit of the Jesus who had captured him on the road to Damascus.' Okay, that's 30 words, but... Counter imperial with a flat hierarchy, Paul's *ekklēsiai* were little pockets of resistance to the prevailing authoritarian pluralism of the Empire. They were places where migrants created new traditions drawn from the mists of old ones (to paraphrase Avtar Brah's lovely phrase). He wrote as a migrant to migrant communities. In Margaret Aymer's words, he wrote 'sojourners' truths', stories to sustain a people called home but still on the journey to it.¹²

In Paul's circle we encounter Prisca and Aquila, exiled by Rome in 49AD, pitched into a craft worker's life in Corinth, next found in Ephesus and then back in Rome. Was this the exiles return home or was Rome just a place they were caught doing business? Were they refugees or economic migrants? Those terms mean nothing in the ancient world but in our context they press all kinds of buttons. And Paul on his journey joins them in Corinth, works in their workshop, establishing *ekklēsiai* of outrage and hope across the city.

And as I reflect on that story, I reflect on life in the Jungle, on chai with my friends round a fire, telling stories, sharing life, building community, keeping hope alive. Recently, we all met again round my kitchen table in Peckham, South East London. Four community leaders and the two founders of Peaceful Borders and we talked about about those days. One by one they all testified

to a strange and unsettling truth: the months spent in that place that they did not choose, were not heading for, turned out to be the pinnacle of their experience of community (we will return to this). The point is that though the Jungle was a liminal place, a place between home and refuge, a break on the journey not a destination, it turned out to be a place where they experienced what it means to belong.

We reminded ourselves of all the businesses that were established in the camp, of the forlorn attempts to persuade the French authorities to allow the camp residents to pay tax on the sale of meals in the cafes, to pay for the water and electricity supplied to the site, and how those overtures were rejected for fear of this temporary, liminal place becoming permanent. We laughed about the look on the Prefect's face when it was suggested that temporary shelters were replaced with more permanent homes with plumbing and electricity in each one, on streets of tarmac, in squares with gardens and communal space, with workshops and businesses and restaurants for everyone in Calais to eat at.

And I was pitched into thinking about 1 Thessalonians and Jungle Beards. Paul urges his first hearers, leather workers in Thessalonica's back streets, to 'work with your hands as we directed you, so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent on no one' (4:11–12). This could have been written as a description of the Jungle. There was a strong urge to contribute, not to sit idly in receipt of handouts. And so a group of Syrian men with two of our team set up a small production facility making beard oils and balms. The intention was to sell these products, suitably branded, to the hipsters of London and Calais under the name Jungle Beards. It was a way of raising the profile of the camp and giving stranded men the chance to contribute, to earn a living. This was what Paul urged on his Thessalonian hearers; this was what Wassim and those in his shelter were eager to do.

And this made me think about 1 Peter, a letter written to exiles, dispersed at the eastern end of the Empire. This takes exile as a reality. It is possible that the Letter's first hearers were those expelled by Claudius to the eastern extremities of the empire, as Karen Jobes suggests.¹³ The hearers were those who had literally

¹² Margaret Aymer, 'Sojourners' Truths: The New Testament as Diaspora Space', *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre* 41 (2015) 1–18. The Brah quote is from page 208. The phrase 'networks of outrage and hope' comes from Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (London: Polity Press, 2012).

¹³ Karen Jobes 1 Peter (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Baker 2005) p19–41.

been displaced and were living as refugees far from home. Indeed in France the migrants in the camps all over the country are known as 'exiles'. But, of course, this is also a theological category, offered by Peter as an identity to embrace. The letter is a riff on Jeremiah 29:7, where the Jewish exiles were called to live well among their enemies. What does seeking the shalom of the Empire look and feel like both for those forced into it (refugees and exiles) and those who choose it (Jesus followers exiled from their neighbours through joining the movement)?

Eileen Poh, interacting with John Elliott and David Balch, says,

The issue of social relationships between Christians and non-Christians in 1 Peter is significant because almost half of the letter is devoted to it (out of one hundred verses [excluding the greetings at the beginning and the end], forty-five have direct reference to relationships between Christians and non-Christians). 1 Peter is the only NT writing which systematically and thematically addresses the issue of Christians living in a non-Christian society. ... In the instructions to Christians concerning their relations with non-Christians, one theme is prominent: 1 Peter exhorts Christians to do good to non-Christians (2:12, 15, 20; 3:6, 11, 13, 16, 17; 4:19). This is another neglected aspect in the study of social relationships between Christians and non-Christians in 1 Peter. While most scholars acknowledge the importance of doing good, they are as silent as 1 Peter when it comes to explaining what it means.¹⁴

Jungle Beards was the attempt of exiles to bless the host community, an echo of these words. And for me, a challenge. I hear the voice of God in those trapped in the liminality of the Jungle, calling me to take seriously the call of Jesus to embody something of the new world of his Kingdom in this desolate place.

2. Exclusion versus welcome

I have reflected on hospitality elsewhere.¹⁵ It is notable that the residents of the Jungle, the refugees strung out across Europe, were being systematically

excluded. Refugees were not welcome anywhere they went. The Jungle was a physical expression of that exclusion that was turned by some accident of grace into a thriving, welcoming community.

And as I sat drinking tea and telling stories, watching pots of stew simmer in the run-up to lunch, I was reminded of Suzanne Watts Henderson's analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:17ff. She speaks of Paul not talking about religious rituals but creating networks of hospitality in the city's back streets, places where tables were laid with whatever people could share and everyone, where even – maybe especially – those with nothing to share were welcomed and enjoyed the same food as everyone else. 'Do you not have houses to eat in,' says Paul, 'so wait for and welcome one another, for if you do this, you will be having the kind of meal Jesus would be happy to put his name to.' That is a very loose paraphrase of both Paul and Watts Henderson.¹⁶ Her argument is worth engaging with because she captures something at the heart of the gospel. The kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, it is so much more than that; but it starts at a meal table in welcome and sharing.

And so often we saw this in the Jungle. Those who had been excluded, shunned, sharing what they had and welcoming all who came. And the voice in my head repeated over and over, 'Why is my church not like this...?' In particular the words of Romans 15:7 – 'welcome one another just as Christ welcomed you, in order to bring praise to God' – echoed in my mind every time I sat down around a fire for tea or food. I was being welcomed by the poor and dispossessed and in a very real way I was encountering Jesus in that welcome. Both Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, and Maria Skobtsova remind us that unless we meet Jesus in the face of the poor, maybe we have not met him at all. As I reflected on days in the camp, I repeatedly wondered who was offering hospitality to whom?

3. Community versus isolation

It is a cliché to talk about the New Testament's emphasis on the church as community. We read Paul

¹⁴ Chu Luan Eileen Poh, *The Social World of 1 Peter: Socio-Historical and Exegetical Studies* (unpublished PhD thesis, King's College London, 1998) 8–9.

¹⁵ Jones, 'Tea and storytelling', especially 108–111.

¹⁶ Suzanne Watts Henderson, "'If anyone hungers...': An Integrated Reading of 1 Cor 11:17–34", *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002) 195–208.

in Romans 12–13, 1 Corinthians 11–14 and we see the richness of the emphasis on life together (in Bonhoeffer’s rich phrase). In 1 Thessalonians the whole point of working with your hands was so that you had something to share in the community.

But one thing that we might easily miss about the early congregations that we encounter in the NT is that they are incredibly diverse. Look at Acts 13’s description of the migrant status of the church in Antioch. How many of these leaders were refugees (fleeing trouble or persecution) and how many were economic migrants (travelling to work, to better themselves)? And is this distinction not undesirable? What we do know is that of the five named leaders not a single one was born and bred in Antioch; this is a migrant church led by migrants for migrants and locals alike. And where does Lydia fit into this? An independent business woman or a craft worker travelling to keep a roof over her family’s heads (in both Philippi and Thyatira). She welcomed Paul and his team under her roof and another migrant gathering for migrants and locals alike arose in Philippi.

As we sat around my kitchen table, we reflected on how we had met and how far we had travelled. And suddenly in mid-sentence, Ali jumped up, put the kettle on and answered my front door. This was home for him although he lives on the other side of London with his wife and family! Having let my wife in and offered her tea, he sat back down and said, ‘The great thing about the Jungle is that we were all equal; no one ran anyone’s life, we looked out for each other, made our own rules and made sure everyone was okay.’ With that he was up offering my wife his chair and asking if she wanted sugar in her tea. And in that moment I saw community at work.

One of the principles of community organising that I have seen work wonders in the camp and beyond is that people do not do for others what they can do for themselves; no one creates a structure that everyone else has to fit into. Communities work best where everyone contributes everything they can for the good of everyone else. And in this I am reminded of Paul in Ephesians 4 where he talked about the grace of Christ being given to all in the church that erupts in the gifts needed to build the community of the church, gifts

that would ensure everyone plays their part in building everyone else up.

Elsewhere I have argued, along with Richard Ascough, that this is a chaordic model of leadership and community organising.¹⁷ The founder of the Visa network, Dee Hock, was tasked by the Bank of America in the 1960s with creating a payments system that would be based on competitive banks cooperating with each other. Visa was the result. Out of it came an understanding of management and leadership that Hock called chaordic – a crashing together of ‘chaos’ and ‘order’.¹⁸ In an organisation marked by this mode of operating everyone led everyone else. And this is a picture of the best communities where people are able to offer the skills and ideas and talents unique to them in a way that leads everyone to a much better place. This is a picture of the church as Paul outlines it in Ephesians 4. And I was reminded of how much the Jungle was an echo of that when Ali made my wife tea!

It is also an engagingly missional idea. In a recent article surveying the state of the church across Europe, Darrell Jackson argues that the demise of Christendom across the continent has coincided with a rise in ‘spirituality’, defined in all kinds of ways. He observes, ‘The newly “spiritual” are not on a journey towards faith but instead are on a journey away from church affiliation.’¹⁹ It is an astute observation. But it does not mean that those who embrace a spiritual view of the world – whatever they mean by that – are not open to a conversation about faith.

In the dark days of February 2016 the French authorities tried to demolish the camp. They started with the southern end of it, sending in the bulldozers and the CRS. On the first day of the demolitions a dozen Iranian Christians sewed their lips together and went on hunger strike until the destructions stopped. One day I visited the camp with Revd Lynn Green from the Baptist Union of Great Britain and we sat with these men, sharing Scripture and praying. It was profoundly moving. A little later in the day I was sitting in Ali’s shelter drinking tea with a mixed group of people, including one of key organisers from L’Auberge. She leaned across to me and said, ‘I am not religious in any way but what happened with the Iranians earlier gave me goose bumps. I can’t

¹⁷ Simon Jones, ‘Tinker, Tailor, Teacher, Talker: New Testament Reflections on the Leadership Myth’, unpublished paper delivered at Spurgeon’s College in May 2014; Richard Ascough, ‘Chaos Theory and Paul’s Organisational Leadership Style’, *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1.2 (2002) 21–43.

¹⁸ Dee Hock, *Birth of the Chaordic Age* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999).

¹⁹ Darrell Jackson, ‘The State of the Churches in Europe’, *Review and Expositor* 115.2 (2018) 157–174; here 164.

stop thinking about it.’ An energetic, young, committed, slightly anarchic community organiser, who would never darken the doors of a church, had felt God tiptoe across her back and she had no words with which to understand her experience. Since that day we have had a number of conversations about where Jesus might be in her life. She was not the only one. The young, spiritual, slightly rootless Europeans who had come to the camp to make a difference and change the world were finding that Jesus was all over it. And some met him face-to-face.

4. Listening versus speaking

Mission, of course, is about us telling our story in a way that persuades others to accept it. Except that it isn’t. In the first instance mission is about going and being present. This is what Paul did in Athens; he wandered the city, listened to it, was present in it for a good while before he spoke.²⁰

When people asked me what I was doing when I went to the Jungle, was I doing mission, if so, how? I used to reply that I went to loaf. Loafing is a key missional skill for Jesus followers in the twenty-first century. Loafing is the art of doing nothing, having no agenda, being present without a diary full of places to be and folk to meet, and paying attention. The great John Berger, artist, cultural critic, social activist, once said ‘if I’m a story teller, it’s because I listen.’²¹ He was a consummate storyteller, able to capture the heart of another human being in a few well-chosen words. He was able to do this because he listened. When asked at a conference in 2015 how people and especially governments should respond to the burgeoning refugee crisis, he paused for a long moment, and replied, ‘I have been thinking about the story teller’s responsibility to be hospitable.’²²

This caused me to reflect afresh on James 2 and the question of hospitality. It is to ask the question whether mission is a form of colonialism, an exercise

of power that is the opposite of God’s call that we create communities where faith can grow and all are welcome without any suggestion that some are insiders and others are outsiders, those we establish ministries for, before they are welcomed into the church having crossed an indeterminate number of hurdles.

Blogger and author Rachel Held Evans, reflecting on ‘cool’ and ‘uncool’ people in church, says, ‘Jesus taught that when we throw a party our invitation list should include “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind”. So why do our church marketing teams target the long, the hip, the healthy and the resourced?’²³ Her point is that we should not draw invidious distinctions between the kinds of people we welcome and those we feel uncomfortable around. She adds, ‘We have one place for the uncool people (our ministries) and another place for cool people (our church services). When we actually bump into one another, things can get awkward, so we try to avoid it.’²⁴

She is on the same page as Michael Stroope, who in a major study of missional thinking suggests that ‘mission’ language creates an unhealthy bifurcation between insiders and outsiders and leaves us with an awkward relationship with our culture. He argues that Christendom and its attendant thinking has left the followers of Jesus with an ‘obsession with organisation and power’ that has led to ‘Faith and witness [becoming] reified as systems and objectives, plans and roles, methods and strategies’.²⁵ He adds, ‘Instead of pilgrims, men and women become managers of programmes, employees of organisations, professionals and power brokers. Sojourning in the Christ way is displaced by religious events, mission trips, and third-hand involvement in social causes.’²⁶ He echoes Lesslie Newbigin, ‘The missionary movement of the past two centuries has been profoundly infected by cultural and economic domination, by paternalism, by all the elements which have brought colonialism into disrepute in so many parts of the world.’²⁷

²⁰ John Drane, ‘Patterns of Evangelization in Paul and Jesus: A Way Forward in the Paul and Jesus Debate’, in Joel B Green and Max Turner (eds), *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994) 281–296, especially 291–296.

²¹ Kate Kellaway, ‘John Berger: if I’m a storyteller, it’s because I listen’; interview in *The Observer* 30 October 2016, at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/30/john-berger-at-90-interview-storyteller> [accessed 2 Jan 2019].

²² Ali Smith, ‘John Berger Remembered’, *Guardian Review* 7 January 2017, 19.

²³ Rachel Held Evans, ‘Blessed are the un-cool’, blog at <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/blessed-are-the-uncool?rq=Blessed%20are%20the%20Un-cool> [accessed 2 Jan 2019].

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Micheal W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (London: Apollos 2017) 274.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (London: Carling, 1958) 14.

It is Stroope's focus on the figure of the pilgrim that helps bring into focus what Peaceful Borders was about in the Jungle and beyond. Everyone in the listening caravan was on a journey; everyone had faith that the journey would lead to a good outcome. So James' warning that we who are powerful, well-resourced, and especially in possession of documents that give us the right to cross borders unhindered, need to allow the poor to possess the space we share as equals.

Hence Berger's observation that we need to be hospitable storytellers. One cannot tell another's story

until one has listened. One cannot tell one's own story until a connection has been made that grows out of mutual hospitality, given and received by equals. What better definition is there of missional praxis than this? We can only welcome the excluded, create community for the isolated, offer a place (even if it is just a pause) to those on their long and arduous journey if we listen hospitably, so that we can be true witnesses to what we have seen and experienced. Of course this is equally true when we turn our attention to the Jesus we also meet on the road and listen to him in the mouths and eyes of those we encounter.

Bible Study: Jeremiah 29

Dr Hetty Lalleman, London

Introduction¹

When we moved to London in 2000, an English minister used Jeremiah 29:11 in a prayer for us: ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ I had never heard this verse applied to me as an individual. Having now lived in Britain for 18 years, I have discovered that British Christians (and I believe Dutch Christians as well in the meantime) use this verse very often. They apply it to individual Christians to encourage them that God knows what he does, even when they find it difficult to discover his plan for our life. God has ‘good thoughts’ about us and wants the best for us.

I have often taught the Book of Jeremiah and have often taken Jer 29 to show students how to do an exegesis. I usually asked them at the beginning what they thought verse 11 meant and it turned out to be a very popular verse amongst them. After digging into the passage, I asked them again what they thought the verse meant and this was usually considerably different. Many still found it a hopeful verse, but not only for individuals! What is the context of this verse? Read verses 1–23.

Historical context

In its canonical setting the chapter is placed between chapters 27–28 on the one hand and 30–33 on the other, and several links can be noticed. Jer 27 and 28 are usually dated in the time after the deportation of Judeans to Babylon in 597BC and before the exile and the fall of Jerusalem in 587BC. The main issue in these chapters is whether the remaining people in Judah with their king Zedekiah should surrender to Babylon or not. In Jer 27 several surrounding nations have come up to Jerusalem, apparently to plot against king Nebuchadnezzar. The prophet Jeremiah, however, is commanded by God to tell them to submit to him. If not, they will be attacked and harmed by Nebuchadnezzar. In both

chapters, there are other voices than Jeremiah’s as well: there are prophets who proclaim the opposite of what Jeremiah says. Their advice is not to serve Nebuchadnezzar. Besides, prophets and priests in Judah proclaim that those who have already been exiled by Nebuchadnezzar in 597BC will return soon, as will the temple treasures which he took. Jer 28 is about a confrontation with a prophet named Hananiah, who proclaims a short exile as well. The message of these prophets is: no worries, those already in exile will soon return to Judah and Jerusalem, God will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon.

Both Hananiah and Jeremiah speak ‘in the name of the LORD’, which makes it all the more confusing for the audience. At the end of Jer 28, however, the prophet Hananiah dies – as Jeremiah had to predict – which is evidence that Jeremiah is the true prophet sent by God. It may not always have been so clear-cut, but in this case it is obvious that Hananiah proclaimed a false message and Jeremiah was sent by God.

The issue of prophets proclaiming a speedy return from exile is central to Jer 29 as well. Verse 8: ‘Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD.’ Verse 21 mentions two of those prophets by name: Ahab, son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah. They have not only spoken lies in God’s name, as verse 23 says, but also committed adultery. Their words and their life are in contrast with the will of the God of Israel and they are ‘false’ prophets.

Jeremiah the true prophet

Divination (verse 8) was forbidden in Israel (Deut 18:10), but God uses dreams at various moments. And it becomes complicated when people call themselves ‘prophets’ and even use the so-called prophetic formula ‘declares the LORD’ or ‘This is what the LORD says...’

¹ Bible study given at the FEET Conference in Prague 2018.

Who is right and who is wrong? Jeremiah or the other prophets? This is a major issue in the Book of Jeremiah. The Book purposefully starts with describing the call of Jeremiah, to emphasise the truth of his message and the authenticity of the person of the prophet. The later appendix of chapter 52, which is almost similar to 2 Kings 24:18–25:30 with its story of the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of the Judeans, including King Zedekiah, also shows and proves the truth of the prophet's message throughout the years of his life and ministry which were so much intertwined.

Yet we can understand how unpopular Jeremiah's message was. Was he not giving in to the enemy, the king of Babylon, a pagan world power? At a particular moment he was even arrested and nearly killed on suspicion of treason and discouraging the Judeans.

(On the basis of Deut 13:1–5 and 18:17–22 we can say that a prophet should lead people back to God. Even though people may work miracles, they are wrong if they lead to worshipping idols. Yet we do not read that this was the case with the prophet Hananiah, for instance. If a prophet 'presumes to speak' in God's name (Deut 18:20), he 'is to be put to death'. How do you know if someone speaks genuinely in God's name? If it does not come true. In Jer 28 the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prediction of Hananiah's death proves that Jeremiah spoke words from God. In Jer 28:8-9 Jeremiah himself argues that it is 'normal' for prophets to warn of disaster and not peace. True prophets of the LORD call for repentance and warn against God's judgement in case the people do not listen.)

Text

So, what exactly is *Jeremiah's* message in Jer 29? Verses 4-23 contain a letter that Jeremiah sent to those exiled in 597 BC. They were the 'upper class' of society: the royals, the skilled workers, the craftsmen; the later prophet Ezekiel was among them.

The less well-off people had been left in Judah, and Jeremiah was one of them.

There was obviously some diplomatic traffic from Judah to Babylon, as we read in verse 3: king Zedekiah sent Elasah and Gemariah to king Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, probably to assure Nebuchadnezzar of his

loyalty. Elasah belongs to Shaphan's family, whose members were supportive of Jeremiah. The prophet takes the opportunity to ask Elasah and Gemariah to take a letter from him and give it to the exiles.

The prophetic message in the letter is, we may assume, not what they expected at all. Basically, the message is that the exile will not be short but last three generations. The exiles must get married and have children and grandchildren. This matches the 70 years of exile which are repeatedly mentioned in Jeremiah. The message of verses 5-6 is basically: lead a normal life, as you would do back home. Planting and eating the produce implies a longer period than just two years, as the (false) prophet Hananiah had predicted in the previous chapter.

On the one hand this is also a reassuring message: the people will not die out but survive. They are encouraged to survive and not sit down and wither away. Whereas the prophet Jeremiah was prohibited to marry and did not have children, as a sign of God's judgment on his people, they are now implicitly promised offspring! On the other hand, it is a difficult message: the exiles of that particular generation will not see their homeland again.

What follows in verse 7 is even more remarkable: 'Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.' The words 'peace and prosperity' (NIV) are the translation of the word 'shalom'. (I do not like 'prosperity' because it sounds like the 'prosperity gospel'). 'Shalom' not only means peace, but it has the connotation of 'wellbeing', 'prosperity' when used in a material or secular way.²

What does it mean to 'seek' (Hebrew *drš*) the shalom of Babylon? The verb is also used in verse 13 for 'seeking' God (with the synonym *bqš*). The following meanings are given for the *qal* (which is the form used in verses 7 and 13): 'to care about, inquire (of), seek, require (of), study, investigate, examine, ask'.³ 'Jeremiah brings God's instruction that the exiles seek the welfare of Babylon as Yahweh's plan for their own well-being (29:7...)'.⁴ '...*drš* involves [here as in Isa. 1:17 and Amos 5:14, HL] acting for others' well-being.'

² VanGemeren, *NIDOTTE*, vol. 4, p. 131.

³ *NIDOTTE* vol. 1, p. 993.

⁴ *NIDOTTE* vol. 1, p. 994.

There are also commentators, like Lundbom (AB), who see ‘to seek for’ as an equivalent of ‘to pray for’. The Hebrew verb for ‘pray’ (*hitpallel*, plus *ba’ad*) means to intercede, to pray for. Jeremiah was forbidden to intercede for his people, because judgment was inevitable (Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). In 14:11 he is even prohibited ‘for the good (*tob*) of this people’, that is, Judah.

The exiles, however, are now given the task to intercede, not for the good of their own people, but for the well-being of Babylon!

Verse 7 clearly states that it is God who led the people into exile – and in that sense, the king of Babylon is only acting as the one who executes God’s judgment; his is a temporary role. The verse demands that the exiles pray for Babylon, which is in fact their enemy. I make two comments about this command: 1. Obviously it is possible to pray in a foreign country even when the most important place of worship is absent and far away – the temple. 2. It is unheard of to pray for your enemy!

The reason for the command, however, is not so much ‘love for the enemy’, as we find it in the New Testament, but very practical: if things are well in Babylon, you will benefit from this. It is like 1 Timothy 2:1-2, where Paul writes: ‘I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.’

Verses 8–9 are a clear rejection of any prophets who do not preach in the name of God but declare that the exile will be over soon. Verse 10 again mentions the number of 70 years for the exile, and only after this period there will be a new beginning. Literally it says that God will ‘raise up’ his ‘good word to bring you back’. Verses 10–14 clearly emphasise what God will do. Several times the ‘I’ of the speaker, God, is mentioned separately for emphasis. The grammatical *hif’il* form of verbs is used, expressing that God will make it happen – He will do it. Verse 14 says that God will ‘bring them back from captivity’, but I would rather read: ‘I will restore your fortunes’, indicating that there are two forms of the verb *šub*. This expression is typical for Jeremiah. The ‘I will bring you back’ at the end of verse 14 is a *hif’il* of *šub*; ‘return’ or ‘repent’ in the earlier stages of Jeremiah’s ministry. The emphasis on what God is doing should also influence

the way we read verse 12: ‘Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.’ This is not a condition – *if* you do that, I will rescue you, but part of the promises in verses 10–14. There *will* be a new beginning, only because of God’s grace. *He* will make it possible. In this context we should interpret verse 11. In Hebrew, the word ‘plan’ is not there. Literally it says ‘I (with emphasis) know the thoughts I think about you – word of the LORD – thoughts of *shalom* and not “for evil” or “bad” to give you a future and hope.’

These words correspond with what Jer 24 tells us about the ‘good figs’ and the ‘bad figs’ in two baskets. The ‘good figs’ are – surprisingly! – the exiles, the ‘bad figs’ are those left in Judah, who may have seen themselves as the ‘good ones’, because they were not exiled. God does not regard the ‘good ones’, the exiles, as morally good, but they are the ones who will receive God’s ‘good plans’, the fulfilment of God’s promises – read Jer 24:6: ‘My eyes will watch over them for their good...’

The future of God’s people lies with the exiles, to our surprise!

It is through judgment that God makes a new beginning. This new beginning is also proclaimed in the chapters which follow, i.e. Jer 30–33, which contain the promise of a new covenant. A restored and new relationship with God came about after judgment for their sins has been executed. There is no escape and no cheap option to get out of or avoid the exile.

Back to verse 11

We see that, read in context, verse 11 does not say much about individual believers, but about the people of God then and there. It does, however, tell us much about who God is and how he acts in history. In the context of the whole Bible, it tells us that God takes sin very seriously: sins of idolatry, social injustice, violence, half-hearted worship. It also tells us that judgment is necessary, but that God will never give up on his people and establishes a new beginning.

It tells us that these words are trustworthy, because they are God’s words.

It tells us of the goodness of God and his loving loyalty for those with whom he entered into a covenant-relationship. In this sense, you and I can apply the text to ourselves: we can trust God in his faithfulness, in the same way as Israel experienced his faithfulness.

Application

Is Jer 29:1–14 relevant for the church today, or, more specifically, for us as theologians? Does the passage say something about our role in society, in today's world, in the Church?

- First of all: are we as Christians in exile? I would say yes and no. We are not in exile in the way the Judeans were. That exile was God's judgment on their sins. Our sins have been paid for and carried away by Jesus on the cross. We live as a redeemed people, in a restored relationship with God through Christ. Verse 13, the seeking and finding the LORD, has already happened when we confessed Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.
- However, on earth we do not live in the promised land. Even England is not the promised land. Christians may feel at home in this world, but at the very least they should feel a kind of restlessness. This is not paradise, this is not the new world yet. Believers are on a journey, as Hebrews 11 tells us, 'longing for a better country – a heavenly one' (verse 16). Peter calls Christians 'God's elect, strangers in the world' (1 Peter 1:1), 'aliens and strangers in the world' (1 Peter 2:11). For me personally, the fact that believers are called 'foreigners', puts the whole discussion about migrants and foreigners in a different light. In a way, I can identify with them. Who is a foreigner in this world, where is our real home?
- Many Christians are 'too much' at home in this world. I think of the fact that many Christians in Western Europe care more about property, home, car, money than about the Kingdom of God. What is the focus of our lives and our efforts? What do we work and live for?

Maybe we should feel more often that we are in a 'foreign' land – a world rather far removed from how God intends it to be.

In countries where people are less well-off, the hope of a new world where God is King and everything will be restored and renewed can be something to cling to, a reason to hope.

- In the history of the Church Christians sometimes focussed so much on the world to come that they did not get involved in anything of this world. I don't

mean the bad things of this world, but the good things, like establishing an orderly and righteous society. In my childhood, many Christians would not vote in elections and or get involved in politics at all. There were and are also Christians who expect Jesus to come back soon and, because God's Kingdom is not of this world anyway, they shun government and politics. I even heard someone say: We should not strive for peace in this world, because Jesus announced that there would be wars...

- Contrary to this view, Jer 29 is very down-to-earth: alright, you live in exile. This is not ideal, but just live a normal life and don't give up. Keep the hope of a better future, even though you may not see God's promises fulfilled during your lifetime. In your daily life do not fight the enemy, but, as much as possible, focus on your daily things and be good people in the place God brought you to. An example of this way of living is Daniel, who was also deported from Jerusalem, kept his own principles, and still played a major role in Babylon.
- This is, I think, also what Paul means when he writes to the Christians in Rome to submit to the authorities, pay taxes and 'live at peace with everyone' (Rom 12:9–21 and 13:1–7).
- Intercession for the world should be one of the priorities of the Church! Give space to this in our church services.
- There is one other issue in Jer 29 on which we can reflect: how do we recognise false prophecy, people who claim to speak words of God, but only emphasise one aspect of the Bible and say what the audience like to hear? This is a major issue in the Church worldwide. It strikes me that even people who have been Christians for a long time can sometimes be carried away by a particular theory some preacher may proclaim, often about things that they claim they have 'discovered' and now it is the time to 'reveal' it. An example is that non-Jewish Christians are adopting the Jewish festivals and regulations, as if the Letter to the Galatians was never written...
- As theologians, teachers, preachers, we have a great responsibility to teach the Bible honestly and worthily. May we discover more of what it means to be 'true' teachers, students, disciples of Christ in today's world. To the glory of God!

Welcome to Prague 2020!

The Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians (FEET) aims to advance the Christian Religion in Europe through the study of Evangelical Theology in a spirit of loyalty to the Bible. Our next conference is being planned for 28–31 August 2020 in Prague and the theme will be “**Discerning the Work of the Holy Spirit in and through the Church**”. Five main papers are planned:

1. Biblical perspective
2. The Church’s testimony on the work of the Holy Spirit (models of renewal)
3. The transforming work of the Spirit in the worship of the Church
4. The transforming work of the Spirit in the personal life (including those in Christian ministry)
5. The work of the Holy Spirit through the witness of the Church in the public sphere

Workshops planned are:

1. Revivals in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century
2. The ethical role of the Holy Spirit in the area of business
3. The gift of prophecy in the Church today
4. Current theological dialogues on the Holy Spirit
5. Evangelical and Pentecostal movements in Europe
6. Burn-out and spiritual renewal in Christian ministry

There will be plenary Bible studies on Isaiah 61, John 14–17 and Acts 2.

Please note that the conference will be a day shorter than previous conferences. Do reserve these dates in your diary. Booking will be possible in 2020; keep an eye on the website <http://www.paternosterperiodicals.co.uk/european-journal-of-theology/conference-2020-introduction>



The pictures show the Executive Committee of FEET as they are preparing the conference



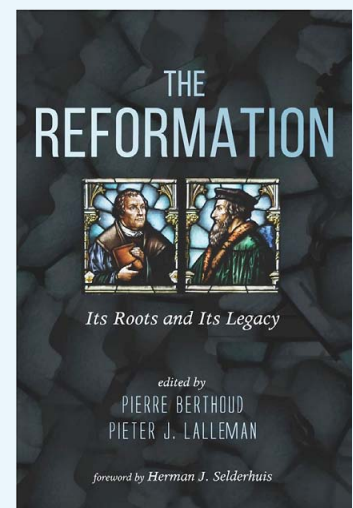
The Executive Committee of FEET

THE FIRST FEET BOOK

The papers and workshop notes of the 2016 FEET conference on The Reformation have been published in a book: Pierre Berthoud and Pieter J. Lalleman (eds), **The Reformation: Its roots and its Legacy** (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017) xxiii + 22 pp., \$30.

Details can be found at <https://wipfandstock.com/the-reformation.html>. A review of the book has appeared in the October 2018 issue of the European Journal of Theology. Professor Henri Blocher, a former chair of FEET, said:

“What surprised me when I read that symposium was not the solid scholarship that undergirds the various essays: I had heard several of them in Wittenberg, and I know most of the authors; I was struck, and pleased, by their freshness, beyond expectation (I confess). Five hundred years, but no mere exercise of memory. They open windows wide on our present. Discussions reveal relevant options. They offer rare and fascinating insights. They show the heritage alive, and life-giving.”



EJT APRIL 2019

Issue 28.1 of the **European Journal of Theology** contains six major articles and the usual book reviews. Torsten Uhlig gives a detailed presentation of recent study of the Pentateuch with the help of three important books. He shows how little agreement there is about almost every aspect of the origins of the 'Books of Moses'. Christoph Stenschke investigates the connections between local churches according to 1 Thessalonians. He gives special attention to the roles of Silas and Timothy in this respect, as they are rooted in local churches and represent important links between them.

Ronald Michener appropriates insights from Radical Orthodoxy to argue that creation should neither be reduced to a mere product of God nor regarded as identical to God. He argues that Christians have a duty to cherish, guard and care for creation as participants of God's gift of revelation. Beate Schmid analyses the recent rise of populism in Austria which is connected with migration and globalisation. As an Austrian citizen, she finds the rise of populism and the incipient racism cause for concern. She probes how churches in Austria can respond and act as agents of ethnic reconciliation.

Benjamin Giffone explores the introduction of mediating technologies into worship, such as trade, the codex and unfermented grape juice. On this basis he argues that Scripture and church history offer resources to assess the effects of electronic technologies (like smartphones) on our worship and reading Scripture. Finally our FEET Committee member, Pavel Cerny, argues that the Church is indispensable in God's plans. She may not have a good reputation in society, yet she is not a relic of the past but a substantial part of the gospel.

Understanding Roman Catholic Theology Seminar with Leonardo De Chirico

Co-sponsored by

The Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians

Tyndale House, Cambridge

European Leadership Forum Theologians Network

The Reformanda Initiative

This seminar will take place on 3–5 December 2019 in Barcelona. Between 20 and 25 evangelical theologians can take part. The aim is to discuss the significant differences between Catholics and Evangelicals, and how to love and communicate the Gospel to Roman Catholic friends and family. All participants should be actively interacting with Roman Catholics through their academic or ministry work. The cost is 150 Euros per person.

Leonardo De Chirico is the pastor of Breccia di Roma, a church that he helped plant in Rome in 2009, and Vice Chairman of the Italian Evangelical Alliance. Previously, Leonardo planted and pastored an evangelical church in Ferrara, Italy from 1997 to 2009. He earned degrees in history (University of Bologna), theology (ETCW, Bridgend, Wales) and bioethics (University of Padova). His PhD is from King's College (London); it was published as *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism*. In 2015, he published *A Christian Pocket Guide to Papacy* through Christian Focus. He is a lecturer in historical theology at Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione in Padova, Italy. Additionally, Leonardo is the director of the Reformanda Initiative, which aims to equip evangelical leaders to better understand and engage with Roman Catholicism, and the leader of the Rome Scholars and Leaders Network.

For more information, please contact Leonardo at leonardo.dechirico@ifeditalia.org

