

# Commentary

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# Certainty and uncertainty

**'Nice try NASA... Not even your reptilian overlords can help you hide the truth now!' With these words from a conspiracy theorist, Mike Ovey introduces our theme for this edition of Commentary.**



The photographs of the Apollo 11 moon landing of 1969, the conspiracy theorists say, are faked. There are no stars in the photographs, and there should be on the moon. The stars and stripes flag flutters in a breeze that should not be there. And the astronauts are obviously posing. As it happens, the last point strikes me as true, but then I think I might well have posed a little had I been on the first moon landing.

It's intriguing that these theories can simultaneously create new certainties and new uncertainties. The maze of intricate arguments can leave you breathless and uncertain. In part, that feeling of uncertainty is created precisely because of the awful certainty displayed in the involved accounts of, say, what was or was not possible for a camera of the kind (allegedly!) used in 1969. You can find yourself wondering if you are as certain of anything as they are that Armstrong and Aldrin were faking.

Another reaction in the face of the certainty that the moon landings are fake is that this is certainly wrong, but there is nothing to discuss, because whatever evidence is produced to show the landing was genuine will be explained away. Here the problem is the terrible certainties that fears of conspiracies can create, and the consequence that this

isolates, so that people with different certainties can no longer communicate and discuss.

WB Yeats catches some of this in his poem, 'The Second Coming', when he writes of a time when 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.' Ours is a time when new uncertainties have crept in, and there are strange new certainties. Both carry problems.

As regards the new uncertainties, it is genuinely difficult not to devise conspiracy theories as the Chilcott Inquiry unfolds, just as Americans found it difficult not to do the same after the Watergate revelations. How certain can anyone feel that any government tells the truth? Or any major company, for that matter? Have newspapers really been full and frank about phone tapping? Or a child or spouse? Where have they been all this time? Uncertainty creeps in, and it can paralyse.

Our uncertainty about government, big business or the individuals in our lives can paralyse, so we cannot act and decide. I suspect this is reflected by our culture's commitment-phobia. Augustine saw a spiritual consequence here, too, that such paralysis born from uncertainty kills faith in God, because faith too is commitment.

But ours is also a time of new certainties. Some beliefs are held with a passionate but isolating intensity. That is evident in the way that our discussions so easily become single issue questions, for this is increasingly a time of single issue politics and groups. There may be nothing wrong with the particular issue, but it can come to dominate the landscape and become the touchstone on which everything else turns. It's a little like seeing a weightlifter who has only ever worked on the biceps, so that the result is something disproportionate and even grotesque.

In Christian theology, of course, we can see this when secondary issues are treated as primary, and primary issues treated *in effect* (if not in theory) as secondary. There is much wisdom in the old advice to listen to someone's speech and hear if she or he talks much of Christ and his cross, or if the topic is actually something else.

It would be, for instance, a great grief to hear justification by faith treated as if it were a secondary issue. And it is doubly sad to see energies poured into these secondary-treated-as-primary issues, because such new certainties do not unite, but rather divide us. They can leave us in our own tight little circles with our own versions of the masonic handshake.

So let me start this issue of *Commentary*, with its theme of certainty and uncertainty, with a gentle challenge to be certain and uncertain at the same time: rightly certain about the right things, and rightly uncertain about the right things, too, not with a certainty that isolates, and an uncertainty that paralyses.

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# Spring comes to the Arab world

Since the start of the year, the Arab world has been defying all predictions. Ray Porter, Director of World Mission studies at Oak Hill, reflects on the Arab Spring



The Arab spring has begun to make the October 2010 edition of *Operation World* look out of date already! Changes of government in Egypt and Tunisia, with ongoing conflict elsewhere, have begun to open up the possibility of change throughout the Middle East.

The death of Osama bin Laden is another piece of the jigsaw, as the long-term political predictions for the Middle East are unravelling. The end result of all these events is unpredictable, but the expectation is that there will be

*Protesters in Tunis on 19 January 2011. The Tunisian revolution sparked similar protests for political change throughout the Arab world. Photo: Nasser Nouri*





change. That change may be for the advance of the gospel. The prophetic books of the Old Testament present us with a God who is in control of the politics of the world. Is God still working like that today? We have no such divinely inspired explanation of the modern world and the news media are a poor substitute. We recognise that God's pattern of working in the nations since the coming of Christ is different from that in the Old Testament.

Now Jesus has been given authority over all the nations of the world. God's people are no longer primarily restricted to one nation, but scattered across the world. But the change in the nature of his people does not imply that God is working in any different way now to what he did in the Old Testament. He is still the one who is in charge of the times and seasons. He crushes dictators and raises up new rulers. He shakes the nations to achieve his purposes.

### God's unexpected work

What are God's purposes? Jesus said that he would build his church and we look at world politics to see how he is doing that. In the lifetime of many of us, we have seen God at work to grow his church in unexpected ways.

In the 1950s, no one expected that the withdrawal of the nominally Christian colonial powers would be the stimulus for the fast growth of indigenous evangelical churches in Africa. In the 1960s, it was not expected that a failed attempt at a Communist takeover would result in the rapid growth of the Indonesian church, giving the largest Muslim majority country over 15 per cent of the population professing faith in Christ.

In the 1970s, no one expected that 20 years of the Communist takeover of China would provide the nursery beds for the fastest growth of the Christian church in Asia since the first century. In the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the opportunity for the church to grow in the territories it held in bondage. Who would have predicted that Yeltsin, its last President, would have an Orthodox Christian funeral? In these and many more countries, political events had a major role in gospel growth.

## **As we consider God's actions in history, we cannot conclude that democratic governments will always be conducive to gospel growth. God does not link the growth of his church to any particular political system**

What has this to do with what is now happening in the Middle East? The situation remains confusing and unpredictable. Some governments have fallen and others are fighting to survive. Rebellion is in the air and a new spirit of rejecting the status quo is sweeping the region.

Political commentators have noted that these actions are not Islamic revolutions. In Egypt, it was notable that Muslim and Coptic Christians rebelled together against Mubarak (although sadly there has also been inter-communal fighting). There appears to be a common desire for greater economic benefits and freedom from the restraints that have been imposed for decades.

Of the countries of the Middle East, only Egypt and Lebanon now have sizeable Christian communities. Both are predominantly ethnically and culturally defined groups who have a long history of living alongside the Muslim majority, but little evangelistic engagement. The attitudes produced by the Islamic concept of *dhimmi* – briefly defined as the conquered 'people of the book', who accept Islamic law and taxes – prevail across the region.

As Islamic militancy has increased, this long history of mutual tolerance has been broken. As dictatorships have been destroyed by foreign intervention, existing Christians have suffered and the only contribution to gospel advance has been the creation of uncertainty, in which people are ready to rethink their world view.

In Iraq, Christians had greater freedom and security under Saddam Hussein than under American and British conquest and there are now half the number of Christians compared with the 1990s. Many have been killed, but others have fled the country. One church in Baghdad reported that it had seen converts, but all of them have been killed. Only in the Kurdish areas has there been growth and the first official recognition of the Kurdish Christian Church.

In recent years, the greatest Christian growth in Muslim countries has probably been in Iran. Ever since the Islamic republic was established in 1979, the growth has been faster there than at any time since the 7th century. More recently it has accelerated both within the country and among the exiles. This growth has been by conversions from Islam. In a country where apostasy carries the death penalty, such growth is the work of the Holy Spirit.

### How should we be faithful?

As we consider God's actions in history, we cannot conclude that democratic governments will always be conducive to gospel growth. God does not link the growth of his church to any particular political system and Christians should be very cautious in supporting their government's action to deliver democracy. Democracy is not the same as gospel advance. We must not confuse actions that we may see as for the advantage of our own nations with the advance of the Kingdom of God.

While we look for signs that the church is growing in different countries around the world, and recognise that this is God's revealed purpose for the present era, we should not think that this is the only work that God is doing in the modern world. The whole of the scriptures teach us about a God of justice who is carrying out his judgments on nations not only at the end of time, but also in the course of history. Such judgement may not only be shown against nations who reject him, but also towards churches that have turned from him.

God raised up the Babylonians as the punishment of apostate Judah, just as the Assyrians had devastated Israel.

Habakkuk grapples with the theology of such an action. As the biblical story develops it becomes clear that God has purposes of blessing in the establishment of the diaspora as his people learn how to live faithfully under different demographic policies.

The Persian policy of reuniting people and their traditional territories called for a more difficult decision about remaining faithful to God. Ezra and Nehemiah led the return to rebuild the temple, but some like Mordechai, perhaps after a brief return to Jerusalem (Ezra 2:2 and Nehemiah 7:7), decided to remain in Persia. The Old Testament call to God's people to be faithful to him, in whatever situation they are placed, became the pattern for New Testament believers. God is not tied to any one political system, but we are called to be faithful in whatever situation we are placed.

The question for us in the Arab spring is how we should be faithful. Two mission agencies working in the area have written as follows. First, this from Arab World Ministries (who are now part of Pioneers) writing about a new television programme:



*Demonstrators take over an Army Truck in Tahrir Square, Cairo, during protests. Photo: RamyRaouf*

## **Not everyone can move to a Middle Eastern country and be involved directly in ministry, but many of us live in areas where there are people from the countries in turmoil**

*Right now, the Arab world presents us with an unprecedented opportunity. We can choose to act or sit back and ignore this odd part of the world. No one knows how things are going to turn out or, for that matter, how they will affect each one of us. But right now, across the whole Arab region, there are people asking the question: 'Why?' 'Why do we have to go on putting up with the same old ways?' It is now time for us to make the Arab Christian voice be heard.*

And from Middle East Christian Outreach:

*If young Arabs are losing their fear of repressive, totalitarian regimes, perhaps they are also losing their fear of asking deep questions about their own faith, and of standing up for what they believe even if it is not what they have always been told. As we've seen God moving in Arab hearts and minds in an unprecedented way over the last few years, fear has nevertheless continued to be a theme in the messages we receive from those God is touching. It is what keeps many Muslims locked into Islam even when they are deeply dissatisfied and have found something much more satisfying in the Gospel.*

These two statements are looking at the situation from slightly different points of view. One is looking for the presence of an authentically Christian voice speaking out boldly from the oppressed minorities joining in with the criticism of current regimes. The other is looking to see a change of mindset that will open up the Islamic world

in a new way to the gospel. Both want to engage with the present situation in a positive way.

This presents us with some clues as to how we should respond to the situation. As outsiders, we have no part in the political actions and would not want to encourage our governments in any specific action. Such direct action is in the hands of local Christians and we can pray that they may be wise. We want them also to be gospel-centred, which is where our own emphasis should be. We look for the present turmoil to open doors for the gospel into the Muslim world. We will pray that the desire for freedom is not hijacked by extremist Islamic groups.

One of God's judgments on nations is the withholding of the word of God from them. This does not seem to be the present situation in any of these countries. In each of them, there are Christian communities both national and expatriate. However, many of them are not concerned with evangelising the Muslim majority. Our prayer should be that these churches are revived, become biblically directed and active in evangelism.

The proportion of missionaries (by whatever name they are known) in the Middle East is disproportionate to the needs of the situation. More Christians should look at the changing situation and ask what forms of help from outside might be given to the church and how they themselves could be involved.

Not everyone can move to a Middle Eastern country and be involved directly in ministry, but many of us live in areas where there are people from the countries in turmoil. They may have relatives killed or injured. They may themselves have escaped from threatening situations.

British politics may be striving to keep foreigners out, but this is a time for Christians to welcome these people that they might know the love of Christ through his followers and be open to hearing the gospel of salvation. Christ is the only certainty in a time of uncertainty, and we want to introduce him to them.

*All statistics in this article are taken from Jason Mandryk (Ed), Operation World, 7th edition (Biblica, 2010).*

# How are we getting on with evangelising the nation?

**Michael Lawson argues that the litmus test of belief is whether you believe the gospel is urgent. The decline in personal evangelism therefore raises some tough questions**



I come from a Jewish family, and by my later teens had given up the practice of my religion and thrown myself into a career as a composer and concert pianist. I was hugely fortunate to study in France with the great French music teacher, Nadia Boulanger, who taught and mentored, among others, the composers Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky and Leonard Bernstein.

For a boy of 16, it is hardly surprising that this heady, full-on international experience was deeply formative. Music was my everything. I performed countless recitals and concertos, and



wrote orchestral, piano and chamber music scores until my last drop of ink ran out. All this confirmed in me that life without God was certainly more

meaningful than the rituals I had encountered in synagogue. I felt free as I had never felt before. And music – well, music seemed to me to explain the

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world in which I lived. In all its beauty, drama and mystery, it appeared to offer a liberty for the spirit like nothing else.

I might not have been able to understand the universe as such, but I could certainly find my place in it with the transcendence music offered. So gradually music became like a drug. I was fine when playing or composing, but strangely, as for many composers, I felt gloomy and disconnected when I wasn't.

The answer? Throw yourself into composing and performing more and more, and never let up. As I know well now, that wasn't an answer at all, and I am forever grateful to the person who took time out to show this to me. Her name was Yvonne and she was Singaporean.

Yvonne was the first person ever who explained the gospel of Jesus Christ to me. She explained it step by step, very articulately, and when I asked what difference this good news had made to her – if at all – she confounded my cynicism and explained how God was

shaping and transforming her life, answering her prayers and filling her with a very obvious joy.

I have never forgotten that conversation. It is certainly one of the most important conversations of my life. It's classic, really: a clear presentation of the gospel and a compelling, realistic testimony to bring it to life.

And here's the issue as I see it. How are we getting on evangelising the nation? Not so well, I fear. Precisely because what once was classic, and our standard practice in proclaiming the faith – the practice of personal evangelism – is beginning to go to the wall.

Of course, some people are still committed this way, and how good that is. But somehow it appears that this kind of gospel and testimony presentation in some places is on the wane. Why should that be?

We are rightly grateful for the wonderful impact made in particular by Alpha and Christianity Explored. So many people have found faith through

these courses. But with this emphasis on what I call process evangelism, we have perhaps lost some of the personal dimensions of witness. We can't expect these courses to do everything, neither can we reach all our friends through them. So do we need a resurgence of training for personal evangelism in our churches where that is not happening?

There is another dimension, though. That is to do with what I would describe as the urgency of the gospel. After all, we only need to witness if there's an urgent need. If we just have a 'take it or leave it gospel', why bother? Do we then need what is somewhat grandly called theological renewal?

So many people say they believe in the gospel. For me, the litmus test of belief is whether you believe the gospel is urgent. Judgment is real. Not all will be saved. Yet for a perplexed and dying world, we have the best news possible.

How are we getting on evangelising the nation? Frankly? Pretty poorly. But it can change.

With a revival of the urgency of the gospel, and the prayerful mobilisation in personal evangelism of the enormous number of Christians in this country, we'll bless the heart of God, and bring wonderful liberty to many, many people who are as yet unevangelised.

*Michael Lawson is Chairman of the Church of England Evangelical Council, and Rector of St Saviours, Guildford. The article was first published in the Church of England Newspaper.*



# DIGGING INTO THE BIBLE'S PAST

**A recent TV series pitted archaeology against the Bible in an attempt to expose its 'buried secrets'. Matt Hornby argues that archaeology has in fact confirmed many aspects of the Bible record.**

Shock, horror! Modern science disproves the Bible! Yes, it's another TV documentary, this time the BBC's *The Bible's Buried Secrets*, presented by Dr Francesca Stavrakopoulou. Headline claims were that David and Solomon never existed, God had a wife and the Garden of Eden was invented in the 6th century BC.

For an engagement with the specific claims of the series, I cannot improve on Professor Alan Millard's article in the May edition of *Evangelicals Now*. But it's worth taking time to reflect on the nature of archaeology, the nature of Old Testament history, and how they relate.

## Archaeology is not comprehensive

Archaeology studies what survives. Most things don't. Things rot, burn, rust, crumble or are recycled. For example, 99 per cent of papyrus records from the Nile delta have perished. As the Hebrews also wrote on papyrus, we shouldn't be surprised how few written records survive. It's not a conspiracy; it's decomposition.

Therefore, as in any field of study, it's hard to prove non-existence. The fact that we don't have any writing from the 10th century BC mentioning David doesn't mean he didn't exist. It just means that no written records have survived for this period, as is the case for surrounding areas as well. In fact, an Aramean inscription from the mid 9th century mentions the House of David. By the standards of Ancient Near Eastern archaeology, this is good evidence.

Furthermore, just because evidence has not yet been unearthed by archaeologists doesn't mean that it might not be there awaiting discovery in the future. Previous generations of biblical scholars wrote off Belshazzar, the Hittites and the pool by the Sheep Gate as figments of the imagination. Solid archaeological evidence for all three has now been found.

Having considered some of the limitations of archaeology, let us turn to what it can do. Archaeology can confirm



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specific people, places, events and dates. It can show whether the setting is accurate. And it can suggest how old the original form of a document was. All of these are subject to sufficient evidence being available, as discussed above. Let us consider each of these in turn.

From 853BC onwards, the Assyrian Empire expanded westwards, swallowing Aram and Israel and attacking Judah. The Assyrian records on clay tablets have survived much better than Hebrew or Egyptian papyrus. These records confirm kings, cities and events in the books of 2 Kings and the prophets.

In the British Museum alone, there are Assyrian records confirming the existence of Kings Ahab, Jehu and Hezekiah, and that they reigned at the times mentioned in the Bible. Before 853BC, there is less certain confirmation, as is the case for all areas outside the Assyrian sphere of influence. After the Assyrian Empire waned, Babylonian and Persian records confirm the remainder of Old Testament history, including the exile to Babylon and the return.

Even where we do not have confirmation of specific people or events, archaeology can confirm the accuracy of

*Left: Cuneiform tablet from the British Museum. Photo: listentoreason. Previous page: the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal hunting for lions, British Museum. Photo: Martin Beek.*



the general setting. For example, the cultural practices and even the names of the patriarchs in Genesis are consistent with documents and material artefacts from the early second millennium BC – just when Genesis says they lived. The fortified gates of Megiddo, Hazor and Gezer show that someone was carrying out major building projects at these cities just when the Bible says Solomon carried out major building projects.

In a similar vein, other ancient documents can demonstrate the antiquity of the biblical books. The structure of the covenant in the book of Deuteronomy is almost identical to treaties from the late second millennium, when it purports to have been written. The early chapters of Genesis are similar in structure (but not theology!) to Mesopotamian records from before 1500BC. This suggests that the Garden of Eden was not invented in the exile (post 586BC) as argued in the BBC series.

*Dr Francesca Stavrakopoulou, as seen in the BBC's The Bible's Buried Secrets.*

### **Nobody is unbiased**

Returning to the TV series, one surprising claim made by Dr Stavrakopoulou is that she and other secular archaeologists are 'objective', while Christian and Jewish archaeologists are 'biased'. One does not need to be familiar with postmodern theory to know that everyone is biased; knowledge of the human heart is enough to show that desires and presuppositions affect us all, whether or not we are conscious of this. No one can claim complete objectivity.

Dr Stavrakopoulou seemed concerned to argue that archaeology does not support the territorial claims of the present-day state of Israel. She contrasted her approach

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with a previous generation of archaeologists who argued the contrary. How does this make her objective, but them biased?

And no television programme, not even on the BBC, can be made without the desire to attract and retain viewers. My sister-in-law edits TV documentaries for a living, and she constantly tells people that documentaries are primarily entertainment, rather than information. The producers know well that 'Shock, horror! Modern science disproves the Bible!' gets much more publicity than 'Actually, archaeology confirms that the Bible's been right all along.'

To get the programme to fit the desired template, Dr Stavrakopoulou frequently misrepresented the Bible. Much of what she 'disproved' was never said by the Bible. The Bible does not present the Philistines as uncivilised barbarians. The Bible does not present David and Solomon as ruling over an 'empire' comparable to the Assyrian and Egyptian ones. The Bible does not present the Israelites as consistent monotheists; it says they consistently worshipped Canaanite fertility deities alongside Yahweh.

That the Bible draws a parallel between Eden and the Temple is common knowledge; it's taught at Oak Hill! Dr Stavrakopoulou either has very little knowledge of what the Bible actually says, or she deliberately misrepresented the Bible in order to make her TV series more sensational.

## **The Old Testament as history**

Turning to the Old Testament, we see that it does not attempt to present a comprehensive account of everything that happened; no historical document can do this. It presents the fortunes of successive kings of Israel and Judah as dependent on their relationship with God. Documents from other Ancient Near Eastern cultures similarly show the successes or failures of a king as dependent upon divine favour.

Therefore, we cannot dismiss these accounts as unhistorical merely because they have a theological element. That history and theology should be separated is an enlightenment concept that would have been entirely alien to anyone in the ancient world.

The striking difference between the Bible and other Ancient Near Eastern records is that other records were written with the aim of glorifying the country's king. Remember, no historical document is unbiased. For example, Ramesses II claimed a great victory over the Hittites at the Battle of Qadesh, though it was more likely a draw – or even a defeat. By contrast, biblical accounts spend more time on the weaknesses and failures of kings than on their successes. The book of Judges through to 2 Kings show that a good king can rescue his people from oppressors and can help them to obey God, but no merely human king is good enough.

Where archaeology can comment on the historical reliability of the Bible, archaeology generally confirms reliability or at worst does not disprove it. That archaeology confirms the Bible is no secret. There is a wealth of evidence in the British Museum alone; an entertaining and instructive afternoon can be spent there with TC Mitchell's *The Bible in the British Museum*.

Demonstrating the historical reliability of the Bible is not the same as demonstrating its divine inspiration and authority, but it's a start. Archaeology by its nature cannot prove the latter. Instead we must turn to the Bible itself, starting with Jesus' own use of the Old Testament. But that's a topic for another article.

# Thou shalt not be certain



**In the lexicon of modern sins, 'thou shalt not be certain' seems firmly established as a cardinal offence. Mike Ovey looks at why this has happened and explores the sins of certainty and uncertainty.**

'Forgive us for our sins of certainty.' It was a certainly a striking prayer to hear at a communion service and I had little doubt who it was aimed at. I was not sure whether to be amused or take offence.

Nevertheless, there is something about the phrase that nags away at me: can certainty be a sin, and if so, when and how? Why is it that this person felt such obvious antipathy to conservative evangelical assurance?

We need to decode some of these sentiments because Paul the Apostle clearly tells us to renounce disgraceful, underhanded methods in our proclamation of the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:1ff). We rightly see this as ruling out lying and deception for the gospel's sake, but if certainty is disgraceful or inappropriate, then we should renounce that too.

## **Certainty, extremism and fundamentalism?**

So why might someone have misgivings about the notes of certainty that evangelicals and other Christians characteristically sound as they talk about Jesus and the instructions of the Bible? There are those, whether inside or outside the church, who point to the dangers of extremism.

After the Second World War, it was of real concern to understand what had made totalitarianism in its fascist forms possible, and this led to discussions of 'the authoritarian personality' by thinkers such as TW Adorno.



*Photo: Leo Reynolds*

From the 1960s it was becoming clear that religious extremism was not a thing of the past and the investigation of religious fundamentalism was a matter of genuine political importance.

It hardly needs saying that the murders of 9/11 in New York, or those of 7/7 in London, injected further deep unease about where some certainties could lead you. For better or worse, religious certainty is associated with extremism and, that *bête-noire* of op-ed writers, 'fundamentalism'.

'Fundamentalism', though, can be a much misunderstood word in today's discussions. It's worth remembering that the Fundamentalism Project, which spent years in the 1980s and 90s researching the patterns of 'fundamentalism', moved away from a tight association of certainty with the kind of fundamentalism that led to 9/11, or that we can see in cults. Instead they suggested we think in terms of a fundamentalist scoring several ticks on a list of characteristics.

It is quite a long list. Those characteristics are: first, reactivity to the marginalisation of religion, especially secularisation; secondly, a selectivity by fundamentalists in picking out bits of their own religious or ideological tradition; thirdly, a moral dualism, so that the world divides into the light and the dark; fourthly, an absolutism and inerrancy about the fundamentals, whatever those might

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be; fifthly, a millennialism and messianism, where history ends in victory for the believer; sixthly, an elect membership; seventhly, the saved and sinful are separated by sharp boundaries; eighthly, organisation in the movement is authoritarian, with no loyal opposition, but often a charismatic leader; and ninthly, in terms of behaviour, the believer, with his or her time, space and wealth, is treated as a group resource.

There are several points of interest here. First, the list really catches quite a lot. Arguably, and with pleasing irony, secularist organisations qualify for characteristics 3, 4, 5 and 7, and perhaps even 1, 2 and 8. Secondly, for a Christian, there is a striking lack of charity or compassion for the sinful who are 'outside' the blessed community of light.

Thirdly, and importantly for present purposes, certainty is featured here in relation to some but not all the characteristics. Certainty is there over the fundamentals of the religion or ideology, over the course of history and over the division between those who are in and those who are out. But certainty by itself does not automatically guarantee fundamentalism.

In one sense, there is nothing startlingly new about that observation. But I don't think that means we can simply heave a sigh of relief and dismiss outright the misgivings that our surrounding culture has, because certainty is indeed completely consistent with some of these marks of fundamentalism. That in turn suggests that certainty is not *necessarily* a virtue.

Conviction politics is not automatically a good thing: look at the conviction evident in the old *apartheid* politics of South Africa. Conviction religion is not necessarily a good thing either, and perhaps I would do well to be less impressed by the certainty, passion and conviction with which a fellow-Christian says something and more aware that fears about fundamentalism are not always groundless.

### **Certainty and arrogance?**

However, we haven't yet thought about the genuine theological concerns behind the phrase 'sins of certainty'.

The person who prayed the prayer (at the beginning of this article) was not, I think, simply wanting to argue for a multicultural democracy. Rather, I think the word 'sin' was being used with a real theological intention: certainty was in some sense associated with offence against God. Why might that be? In fact, there can be a legitimate concern here for God's honour and glory. God is infinite in all his perfections and the words and descriptions that we have of him do not begin to exhaust him. In Psalm 131:1, David speaks of things that are too great and too marvellous for him, and the corresponding need for David and us is not to lift our hearts or eyes too high. If God is great in this kind of way, then the idea of being 'certain' that he is this or that seems presumptuous.

Here, of course, an evangelical wants to draw a sharp distinction between the words of scripture and other words that humans might speak. With regard to those other words, the fear of presumption and arrogance is very well taken. But the words of scripture are different, not because they have no human dimension to them, but because they have an authenticated divine dimension, authenticated ultimately by reference to Jesus himself.

Of course, I think this evangelical distinction between the words of canonical scripture and all other human words is right. I do, though, want to hear the warning that says it is perilously easy to confuse the words of God with my words, especially when my words are words about the words of God, as the sermons of evangelical ministers must be, and as the writings of evangelical theologians must be too.

In fact, it is not just perilously easy to confuse the words of God with my words, it is also perilously tempting. Naturally, we want people to be persuaded by what we say. We think it's right or we wouldn't say or write it, and it can seem an attractive short-cut to imply that there is not really a cigarette paper between our words and God's words.

Yet we need to be clear what this can involve. Not only is there the presumption of ascribing things to God that are the products of finite and fallen human speculation, there is also the presumption of speaking our words to others with a certainty that properly belongs only to the words of

**Uncertainty is sometimes a way of not trusting and not relying. The biblical God is one whose word achieves what he intends, and who cannot lie. The problem of radical uncertainty is that it stops us trusting God.**

God, which amounts to lording it over others. This violates proper love of both God and neighbour.

At this point, the warning to us from those who speak of the sins of certainty relates to pride, especially the pride of intellect and domination.

### **Uncertainty and arrogance?**

Nevertheless, the evangelical also wants to pose a question back to those who see certainty as lying so closely to sins of pride and arrogance. Can sin also lie behind uncertainty?

Initially this seems an odd question because we are so used to hearing uncertainty associated with humility. The argument runs that it is humble not to be definite or assertive about God. As God is an infinite being, all we can be sure of are our own inadequacies to speak truly of him.

In a similar vein, it can seem humble not to be too definite about what a particular passage of the Bible really means. The truth or definite meaning of the Bible is too uncertain for us to rule anything out. In this way, uncertainty can come to have a *chic* value, something too subtle for the cloth-headed proponents of certainty to grasp. Being uncertain comes to be a badge of honour.

But does this kind of uncertainty that honours us also honour God? I am afraid it does not. There are several reasons. First and foremost, something that sets God

**Radical uncertainty inclines me to doubt Jesus: it makes me doubt that he is a perfect God who has taken flesh and who claims to have revealed things to me, notably the very name of his Father. He may not have revealed all things in heaven and earth to us, but he does claim to have revealed who God is.**

apart from idols is that he speaks. Idols are silent and have nothing to say, but God speaks and his words declare the future (see Isaiah 45:21 and Jeremiah 10:5). This means that to treat God as a god who cannot speak is to reduce him to the level of an idol. The idea that God cannot say anything, or at any rate nothing that can with certainty be understood, does treat him like an idol. That may not be the open intention, but it starts to look like the result.

Now the reply to this might be that this is circular. It relies on something the Bible says to assert something definite about the God who inspires the Bible. So it is worth remembering at this point that a circular argument can be completely true. Technically, circularity is something that deals with the validity of an argument, not the truth of its conclusion. More importantly, this idea of uncertainty about God is in fact certain about one thing: it is saying we can be certain we cannot be certain. There is something that we know God is not, namely a competent communicator.

But we also know that an awful lot of human communication (not 100 per cent it is true, but still a lot) is effective for its purpose: I can order the right pizza in Pizza Hut and in many of my conversations with non-Christians their point is not that they don't understand me, but that they don't agree with me. It is, to put it mildly, odd to think

that God cannot do something his human creatures can, namely use human language for effective communication. It leads one again to ask whether he really is perfect, or all that different from idols.

Secondly, the biblical God is a God who makes promises. In particular, he makes promises about my future and how I may enjoy eternal life. If I am certain of my eternal destiny or the rightness of my actions just through my own speculations, then that does look like arrogance and presumption.

On the other hand, if I refuse to believe a promise that God himself gives then there is an element of presumption there. For if he gives a promise which he intends humans to rely on and humans turn round and say that the promises are not reliable, they are dismissing what God says the promises are. It is a way of disbelieving and distrusting God.

At this stage, we can see that uncertainty is sometimes a way of not trusting and not relying. Obviously, humans are sometimes not trustworthy, so that uncertainty about their words and promises is entirely reasonable. But the biblical God is one whose word achieves what he intends, and who cannot lie (Titus 1:2). The problem of radical uncertainty is that it stops us trusting God.

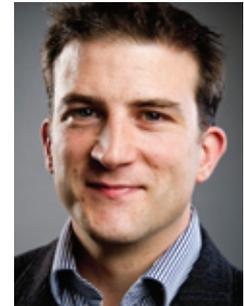
Spiritually, this is deeply dangerous: it dishonours God and inclines us to rely on ourselves or our idols. Unfortunately, this is also deeply tempting, because I may prefer to rely on myself, with all the control and self-assertion that self-reliance suggests, than to trust God, with the humility and dependence that such trust suggests.

Thirdly, radical uncertainty inclines me to doubt Jesus: it makes me doubt that he is a perfect God who has taken flesh and who claims to have revealed things to me, notably the very name of his Father (John 17:6). He may not have revealed all things in heaven and earth to us, but he does claim to have revealed who God is.

Is it a sin to be certain of Jesus? Definitely not. Is it a sin to determine to remain uncertain of him and his words and will? Very definitely. Of course, certainty by itself can be sin. But so can a wilful uncertainty, and that is just as real a danger, and, I fear, a rather bigger one.

# Looking for someone to trust

**This has been a year in which the apparently rock-solid has suddenly failed. Nick Tucker, Research Fellow at Oak Hill, thinks through our misplaced attempts to find and possess security**



On October 16th 1834, the Houses of Parliament were destroyed by fire. Where Guy Fawkes failed in 1605, the exchequer accidentally succeeded.

It had, in the Middle Ages, kept track of debts by means of 'tally sticks'. These sticks had notches cut into them representing the size of the sum owed to the treasury. With the advent of more widespread literacy, this method of recording became unnecessary and in 1724 the use of the sticks was officially discontinued, though in practice it did not cease until 1826.

After eight years of disuse, it was decided that the sticks (two wagonloads of them) should be destroyed. This was done by burning them in two stoves in a cellar under the House of Lords. But the sheer number of sticks being burned meant that the stoves overheated, resulting in a fire which destroyed nearly the whole of the Palace of Westminster.

The ancient looking buildings that now stand on that site are only about 150 years old. Their youth bears silent testimony to a banking disaster which reduced parliament to ashes. Though not quite déjà vu, this does have a certain resonance with Britain in 2011. This piece really isn't about politics. I'm not going to write about the rights and wrongs of the deficit, the cuts, or the 'big society', I have no desire



*Photo: jordi.martorell*

to opine on the size or role of government, the bank bailout or university tuition fees. I am more interested in thinking about how it is that the things that seem most solid, immovable and safe can in fact turn out to be evanescent.

**There are, of course, a multitude of things to which people cling for safety other than money, yet attitudes to money offer a penetrating insight into our need of something we can see for ourselves in which to trust.**

As I grew up in the 1980s, it seemed that the Soviet edifice was permanent and unmovable – symbolised in some ways by the concreteness of the Berlin Wall. Then suddenly, or at least so it seemed to me as a child, not only was the Berlin Wall razed to the ground, but Communist governments throughout Eastern Europe, indeed the Soviet Union itself, had collapsed.

In December last year, a young Tunisian market trader, Mohamed Bouazizi, feeling himself a victim of a corrupt system and unable to take it any longer, set himself on fire outside a local government office. His act of self-immolation set in train a wave of protests and even revolution throughout Tunisia and into much of the Arab world.

Regimes that seemed to hold a whip hand over their people suddenly seemed weak and shaky. It remains to be seen what the eventual outcomes will be in the political geography of the Arab world. But that things will be dramatically different from now on seems assured.

Financial systems, political regimes, and horrifically for many this last year, even the ground underfoot have proven to be less solid and certain than they appeared. Though these things often come as a shock, perhaps they should not be so surprising. Paul's comment to Timothy about wealth is particularly striking: 'Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.'

It is striking because of what wealth offers: in an age of flux, money offers stability, security and insulation from

the uncertainties of a changing world. This week alone, £80 million will be gambled on the national lottery. This year, as people are anxious about making ends meet, the average British adult will, through buying lottery tickets, 'invest' over £150 in the dream of complete financial independence.

In fact, the national lottery operator Camelot has as its company motto, 'serving the nation's dreams'. But that's exactly the point. Promises of money, like the promises of the lottery, are dreams and not reality. Wealth looks so certain, but it cannot deliver the security for which people yearn.

Throughout the history of the people of God recorded in the Old Testament, we see those people time and again yearning for something tangible on which to depend. Of course, one example of this was their tendency to offer sacrifice to the Baals and the Ashtoreths – the gods of the powerful tribes surrounding them. But just as significant was their tendency to look to the military might of nations such as Egypt and Assyria. Horses and chariots, which could be seen, offered much more reassurance than the unseen hosts of the Lord.

In contrast to the apparent certainty offered by Pharaoh, the prophets described him in very much the same way as Paul describes wealth. Their descriptions of Pharaoh repeatedly use the imagery of a 'bruised reed'. So Isaiah writes, 'Behold, you are trusting in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust in him.'

There are, of course, a multitude of things to which people cling for safety other than money, yet attitudes to money offer a penetrating insight into our need of something we can see for ourselves in which to trust. The illusion that so easily ensnares is that if we had enough money there would be no need for anxiety. In fact, deep down this springs not from a belief about money, but a belief about ourselves: that we are the ones who can be best relied on to serve our own best interests; that no one cares about my wellbeing like I do.

Perhaps you hear in those thoughts the echo of words whispered long ago in a garden. Words that suggested to Adam and Eve that God gave them rules not so much

because he was interested in their well-being as because he was interested in keeping them down. Tragically, they believed the serpent. From that day forward, a grievous lie, that God doesn't really love me, that he is out for himself and cannot be trusted with my best interests, has sunk down deep into the hearts of all Adam's children. It is that lie that has given birth to the desire to find something tangible in which to trust.

Life with God inevitably involves trust. Trust that if I submit myself to God, if I obey him even when other options seem more attractive, he will indeed know and do what is best for me. That feels risky, not least because God cannot be controlled or manipulated. He will do what he thinks best. My desire for control, my belief that I and I alone know what is best for me, militates against my trust and therefore my obedience of the God who claims those things.

This is why Paul instructs Timothy that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. For the love of money speaks of another trust, another allegiance, competing with my allegiance to my heavenly Father. It shares a root with that ancient lie that God is not good and cannot be trusted. The alternative is to believe what God has revealed about himself: that his love is beyond our imagining, that he works everything for the sake of those who love him. This is no vain trust, as this is the God who gave up his own Son so as to give life to his people. Is a God like this not worth trusting in?

As Christians living in an age of insecurity and anxiety about money and the future, we have a great opportunity to demonstrate the difference trusting God makes. If we live in the knowledge that it is God who knows and cares for us best, we can show that though troubles and uncertainties come to us in common with everyone, we have something that is uncommon. We can demonstrate that rarest of commodities: hope.

The alternative to putting one's security in wealth, according to Paul as he writes to Timothy, is to be generous, as a means of investing in the future. Paul describes this as a way of taking 'hold of the life which is truly life'. This is the life that awaits Christians at the resurrection. This is the



*Photo: tenaciousme*

hope that Christian share because Jesus is risen from the dead.

The reality of Easter does not set us free from trouble, but it sets us free from anxiety, because the good things of this life which God gives are expendable and disposable. The life to come is the reality and not the fancy. By comparison, the things which characterise our age and appear so solid have the quality of mist; when the sun rises they burn off. For many, perhaps the majority of us, to live like this means a fundamental reordering of our perspectives. We need to see with Paul that in the light of Jesus' resurrection the achievements and possessions of now, real though they are, are but as fantasies compared to the realities that lie in store.

Stephen Hawking recently asserted that heaven is just a dream for those who are scared of the dark. The reality is quite the reverse. As the old hymn puts it: 'Solid joys and lasting treasures, None but Zion's children know.'

# Don't give up, Japan!

Certain uncertainties were shaken on March 11th 2011 when an earthquake of magnitude 9.0 hit northeast Japan, causing a huge tsunami and a nuclear radiation threat, killing over 15,000 people and totally changing the lives of many more. It was the biggest earthquake recorded in Japan's history and the fourth largest recorded in world history.

The Japanese are not strangers to earthquakes; on average, there are 400 per day, but most of those are hardly detectable. There are strict regulations to make buildings as earthquake resistant as possible. There are designated evacuation areas, including sports fields and local parks. Schools and workplaces conduct regular drills in preparation for a disaster. Lying on a fault line, with 10 per cent of its land being volcanic, not to mention the annual typhoon season, Japan is accustomed to natural disasters.

But the scale of this catastrophe exceeded expectations. There were sea walls and defences, but they were not big enough to keep this 10

**For 15,000 people, life came to an end in Japan on March 15th when a colossal earthquake struck at 2.46pm. Former Oak Hill student Nat Ayling, who is working in the country, reflects on the tragedy, questions and promise of the event for Japanese people.**



metre tsunami from sweeping away everything in its path up to 2km inland. The Fukushima nuclear power plants were built to withstand earthquakes, but not of this magnitude.

## **Gambaro, Nippon!**

In spite of this, the Japanese have coped admirably. There were no reports of looting by opportunists in

the aftermath of the quake. On the contrary, people quietly lined up in orderly queues outside shops that were rapidly selling out of goods, outside petrol stations during fuel shortages, and outside evacuation centres when supplies of food, water and other essentials arrived.

True to the Japanese value of not showing much emotion (although this has been slowly changing in recent



Photo: Dylan McCord / US Pacific Fleet

## **A Japanese friend asked me, 'Where is God in all this?' Churches in the area who previously had no contact with their neighbours are able to minister to them in their need and tell them of Christ.**

years), tears are rarely seen on the news. They put on a brave face, akin to the British stiff upper lip. More than the British, though, the Japanese seem to be comfortable with talking about death. As one Japanese friend put it, 'In Japan, there is plenty of opportunity to die!'

This is not simply a passive fatalism. All over the country resounds the slogan, *Gambaro, Nippon!* – 'Don't give up, Japan!' Most shops have collection pots. Many charity concerts are being held. Famous sportsmen are playing sports with children in the affected area, many of whom are orphaned. The 'Fukushima 50' have shown great courage as they try to bring the reactors under control.

Large quantities of aid supplies have been sent to the area, and not just by Christians. In fact, the Yakuza (the Japanese mafia) were the quickest to respond, sending truckloads of aid within hours of the calamity.

The Japanese collectivist sense of group identity and harmony has been showcased to the world.

### **Getting back to nature**

However, all this might not be an entirely good thing. While many people are praying that these events will stir people from their complacency and false hopes in the gods of Shinto, Buddhism and materialism, these reactions could be showing quite the opposite. There seems to be a pride in being Japanese and being able to cope in such dire circumstances. People are chatting in the public baths about how this disaster happened because of a neglect of the nature worship of Shinto, and about the need to get back to their Shinto heritage.

In apparent paradox with the *gambaro* spirit, there is also much fear. Fear of more or even bigger earthquakes. Fear of a Chernobyl, or even of an Hiroshima-type nuclear explosion. At the time of writing (mid May), the nuclear situation is still critical. And why not be fearful, if your gods are unpredictable, not always loving or good and have no power to control the elements? 'For their rock is not as our Rock' (Deuteronomy 32:31).

In contrast, the God of the Bible is loving, good, wise, sovereign over all of nature – and so can be trusted. But also, if he is that powerful, he is the one to be feared. Even more so, because, although earthquakes can kill the body, we should 'fear him who, after he has

killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!' (Luke 12:5).

It is interesting that this earthquake hit the least churched area among the largest unreached people group. Jesus said that we should regard events like this as a warning to us all: 'unless you repent, you will all likewise perish' (Luke 13:5).

It is also a reminder that we are in the last days, experiencing the beginnings of the birth pains (Mark 13:8), so we must be on guard, stay awake and ready for the end. But there are some who, having seen God's judgment in a great earthquake, would still rather call on the mountains to fall on them than to face the wrath of the Lamb (Revelation 6:12-17).

### **Hope for repentance**

There are reasons to be optimistic, though. Never before has there been so much prayer for Japan across the world. There are some signs that God is using these events to work in people. A Japanese friend asked me, 'Where is God in all this?' Churches in the area who previously had no contact with their neighbours are able to minister to them in their need and tell them of Christ.

A missionary friend wrote an article several years ago about a hymn written during the great Tokyo earthquake of 1923. The hymn is about the cross shining brightly, standing on swaying ground, bringing comfort. That same friend was surprised to meet a non-



Christian who turned up at her church clutching that article, feeling the need to pray.

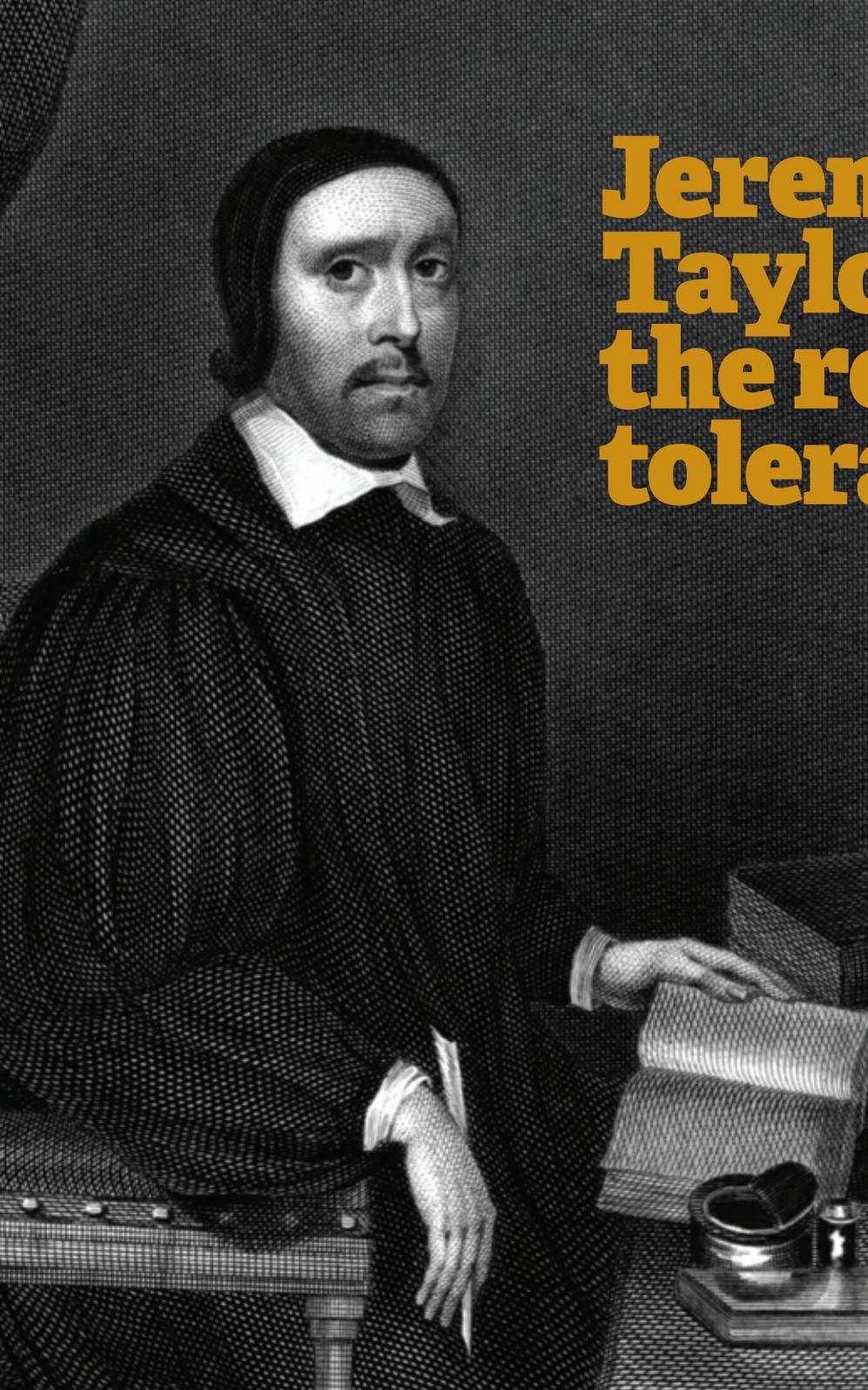
We have been reminded of the folly of chasing after the newer, bigger and better flat-screen TV, luxury car or ideal home (not a uniquely Japanese temptation!). Whether those things will last until tomorrow is not certain. We have been reminded of the fragility of this fleeting life. We are certain that we are small and cannot take on the forces of creation, let alone the Creator. So we pray this for the Japanese, as well as for ourselves:

*They saw the deeds of the Lord,  
his wondrous works in the deep.  
For he commanded and raised the  
stormy wind,*

*which lifted up the waves of the sea.  
They mounted up to heaven; they went  
down to the depths;  
their courage melted away in their evil  
plight...  
Then they cried to the Lord in their  
trouble,  
and he delivered them from their  
distress.  
He made the storm be still,  
and the waves of the sea were hushed.  
Then they were glad that the waters  
were quiet,  
and he brought them to their desired  
haven.  
Let them thank the Lord for his  
steadfast love,  
for his wondrous works to the children  
of man!  
Psalm 107:24-31*

*In one of the areas most devastated  
by the earthquake, a local church still  
stands even though its building was  
destroyed. The church community is a  
powerful testimony to the promise of  
Jesus that he will build his church and  
nothing will prevail against it.*

May they cry to the Lord, who alone can deliver them, not just from tsunamis, but from the greater judgment to come; who can still the storm and bring them to an eternal haven. May the public baths be filled with talk of turning to worship the Creator, rather than the creation. From their fearfulness and uncertainty, may they fear the one in whom alone we can be certain.



# Jeremy Taylor and the roots of toleration

**Toleration of the different beliefs of others is so deeply ingrained into the secular mindset, it is widely believed to have been invented by secularists. Peter Sanlon, who lectures in doctrine and church history at Oak Hill, traces its roots to a rather different source.**



Our secular age prides itself on its supposed virtue of tolerance. Christians are accused of intolerance – evidenced by the Crusades and Reformation executions. That Christians have in the past used state laws to silence and punish theological opponents cannot be denied. However, the modern practice of crediting secularism with inventing toleration ought to be challenged.

Forty-three years before John Locke wrote his *Letters of Toleration*, an Anglican bishop, Jeremy Taylor, made a seminal argument for tolerating people whose beliefs differ from our own.

Taylor hailed from Cambridge and studied there as a poor scholar. Ordained at the unusually young age of 21, Taylor's wit brought him to the attention of Archbishop Laud. When Taylor stood in for a friend and gave a lecture at St Paul's Cathedral, Laud commented that he was rather young. With verve and boldness, Taylor replied to the archbishop, 'I humbly beg my grace to pardon the fault. If I live I shall mend it.' Laud appears to have been taken with the young man's forwardness. He overruled the warden of All Souls to grant Taylor a prestigious fellowship. Thereafter Taylor was appointed chaplain to Laud and Charles I.

His first wife and most of his children died during Taylor's lifetime, leading him to frequently seek time with friends for distraction from grief. Imprisoned more than once – ostensibly for theological matters

but in reality often due to his strong royalist links, Taylor finished his ministry as a Bishop in Ireland.

### **'Men are too forward in condemning'**

Jeremy Taylor's book, *A Discourse of the Liberty of Prophecy* (i.e. preaching), stated its aim in a subtitle: 'showing the unreasonableness of prescribing to other men's faith, and the iniquity of persecuting different opinions'. Taylor lived in a day in which Independent and Anglican ministers were at each others' throats, politics was riven with factions, and the Reformation's divisions were still felt keenly.

Taylor observed grimly, 'Many mischiefs proceed not from this, that all men are not of one mind, for that is neither necessary nor possible, but that every opinion is made an article of faith, every article is the ground of a quarrel, every quarrel makes a faction, every faction is zealous, and all zeal pretends for God, and whatsoever is for God cannot be too much. We by this time are come to that pass, where we think we love not God except we hate our brother, and we have not religion except we persecute all but our own.'

Taylor was one of the first Christians to apply the implications of 1 Corinthians 4:5 to religious disputes: 'Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the

motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.'

He argued that 'men are too forward in condemning, where God hath declared no sentence, nor prescribed any rule'. Despite being a noted critic of the errors of Roman Catholicism, Taylor could observe of them: 'That a thing is not true, is not argument sufficient to conclude that he that believes it true is not to be endured.'

It was not just the extent of controversies he observed which moved Taylor to write *On the Liberty of Prophecy*. He also thought the complex nature of the Bible itself commended the cessation of religious persecution. So he argued that we are saved by believing the plain,

**Every opinion is made an article of faith, every article is the ground of a quarrel, every quarrel makes a faction, every faction is zealous, and all zeal pretends for God, and whatsoever is for God cannot be too much.**

fundamental truths of scripture. However, when we consider less clear 'places, which God hath left under a cloud, for other great ends reserved to his own knowledge, we shall see a very great necessity in allowing a liberty of prophesying, without prescribing authoritatively to their consciences and becoming lords and masters of their faith.'

Some matters in the Bible are not entirely clear to all sincere readers. This ought to caution us against commending religious persecution. Sinful human nature tends to assert secondary matters as primary, and then persecutes those who differ over secondaries.

While most theological debate prior to Taylor had focused on the mere facts of writers' conclusions and beliefs, Taylor thought that motivations and culpability were part of the overall picture. 'Although all heretics believe their errors to be true; yet there is a vast difference between those who believe so out of simplicity, and them who are given over to believe a lie, as a punishment or an effect of some other wickedness.'

Many in Taylor's day thought reason a self-evident and reliable guide to truth. When a person disagreed over something, it could be assumed to be a willful lack of submission to reason's dictates. Taylor warned against granting reason excessive respect. Doing so ignored the frailty and limitations of the very people who use reason: 'It is with reason as with men's

tastes; although there are some general principles, which are reasonable to all men, yet every man is not able to draw out all its consequences, nor to understand them when they are drawn forth, nor to believe when he does understand them.'

These and other arguments were marshalled by Taylor in defense of the then innovative idea that religious toleration ought to replace persecution.

### **Room for theological refinement**

It is encouraging to realise that granting toleration and liberty to those with whom we disagree theologically, was not the invention of secular thinkers. The Bible contains a fully sufficient revelation from God; at times some matters may be clouded in obscurity. In the fullness of time, God can lead his people to discern the implications or applications of matters not previously given adequate attention.

Taylor's writing is eloquent and compelling in style. The central thrust of his argument is far-sighted. However, much room is left for theological refinement. If we were to build on his plea for toleration, we may wish to consider a method of discussing various categories for issues about which we could disagree, with perhaps more groups than the traditional twofold scheme of primary and secondary. We would also need to explore how issues which in one

situation fall into one category, can in a different setting shift to another. All of this is simply to recognise that church history is an ongoing story, in which Taylor and we are but moments.

Finally, it is humbling to note that Taylor appears to have fallen short of his own clarion call for liberty and toleration. Like all of us, Taylor struggled to embody his own theology. As a bishop, he was noted to be rather authoritarian, brooking no resistance to his decisions. He defended robustly errors about original sin, as aggressively in the latter years of his life as he had pled placidly for toleration in his earlier years.

As bishop in Ireland he moved swiftly to remove non-episcopalian ministers from their livings, not pausing to await requisite legal statutes to do so. His devotional writings were the best selling Christian books of his day, gently and wisely offering counsel about death and ethics. Yet Taylor was, by the account of many contemporaries, a pugnacious man who did not deal well with disagreements.

On hearing of Jeremy Taylor's death in 1667, Archbishop Sheldon observed, 'I am glad he left no more trouble behind him. He was of a dangerous temper apt to break out. I have had, of late years, much to do with him to keep him in order, and to find diversions for him.' Which is simply to say that Taylor needed, as we do, the pastoral wisdom of his justly celebrated treatise, *On the Liberty of Prophesying*.

# The mastermind of history

**We live in uncertain, menacing times, says Dan Strange. How do we cope in the face of secularism, multiculturalism, Islam and consumerism, to name just a few of today's challenges?**



I remember it so well, as if it was only yesterday. 1989, dressed in my full uniform, pitch black all around apart from the bright lamp shoved into my face, making me squint. The formality of having to give my name, rank and number. The seemingly endless interrogation over what I was supposed to know, with every question like an invisible punch pushing me further into that cold black leather chair.

And now as I look back on that whole experience, it fills me with great... pride. Pride as I remember how I beat them all. Pride as I remember how I gave them... absolutely *everything* they wanted. Pride as I sat there at the end, my mum and dad applauding to the announcement: Daniel Strange, Southend-on-Sea, 22nd Company Boys Brigade Mastermind Champion. (Just for the record, my specialist subject was *The History of the World Snooker Championship*.)

OK, so I'm over-dramatizing a tad, but for me this was the fulfilment of a childhood dream: the amateur (and I mean amateur) recreation of the classic quiz show, a quiz show without any frivolity and without any immediate financial incentive, but one that imbued seriousness, gravitas, importance. Who wants to be a millionaire, when you can have the title of 'Mastermind Champion' and a grotesque glass sculpture creation?

And then there was Neil Richardson's iconic theme tune, maybe the most memorable TV theme of all time, that pounding drum beat, invoking an oncoming army, a





drummer by the side of a scaffold before an execution, a pounding heartbeat, getting louder and louder all the time before the sudden destructive climax and ensuing silence. With good reason this theme was called 'Approaching Menace'.

Approaching menace could well be the soundtrack to many lives in the UK as we are faced with menaces that seem legion: financial, political, global, technological, environmental. Only recently it was announced that prescriptions for anti-depressant drugs such as Prozac rose by more than 40 per cent over the past four years, due it is thought to the economic downturn and the cycle of insecurity, uncertainty and plain dread many feel as their lives spiral out of control and they become increasingly 'breathless', constricted by circumstances seemingly out of their control.

For many in these situations, any thought of God is far in the distance because God, even if he exists, seems himself all too distant. God can't help me or God won't help me, but either way, this is not a God worthy of my worship.

As Christians, do we at times entertain similar thoughts? For aren't we faced with these same challenges which just appear overwhelming? Where is God in all this chaos?

In Isaiah 41, the Lord recreates his own Mastermind scenario with himself as both interrogator and contestant. His specialist subject is the approaching menace of one from the east, Cyrus of Persia, who is rapidly conquering all before him and creating fear and trembling among the watching nations, including Israel. The Lord's first question is: 'Who is behind this approaching menace?' And his first answer is: 'I am'. Correct.

Here we have an unambiguous affirmation of the Lord's sovereign might and right over this event, indeed over all events, past, present and future. He is behind all rulers and empires, whether despotic or benign. Because we immediately find such an answer awkward and uncomfortable, it's worth remembering our revision notes on another specialist subject: God's sovereignty. His hand is behind all things, and his word is just as clear in affirming that individuals and nations are accountable for their actions and are judged accordingly.

Then we contemplate that if the Lord God is not in total control and is not the ultimate explanation for all events, then who or what is? For someone or something must always be an ultimate explanation. Is it that our God is subject to another personal god, to an impersonal fate, to blind chance, to our 'free' decisions? Surely that is far more concerning and uncomfortable?

If we are still in doubt concerning evidence for God's sovereign reign over history, we can fast-forward to another interrogation, when the spokesperson of another all-conquering world empire, Pontius Pilate, asks Jesus, 'Don't you realize I have power either to free you or crucify you?' Our Lord, bloodied and beaten, and to all appearances a passive 'victim', replies, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.'

Yes, we may not have all the answers, or know all the reasons – for we are not he – but it is a comfort to know that it is our Lord who is truly the mastermind of history.

### Our next contestant, please

Tragically, there are those who are blinded to this sovereign Lord behind-the-scenes, and who *only* see the approaching menace. How do they respond? Well in verses 5-7 and 21-29 of Isaiah 41, the story takes a darkly satirical turn as we see the trembling nations shuffle onto the stage, looking for solace and encouragement in the other, giving tepid pep talks and looking for protection from their objects of devotion. These man-crafted 'gods' need a helping hand and some quick DIY to stop them falling over. And under interrogation about the approaching menace, they have no answers. They just give 'pass' after 'pass'. They don't know what has happened, what is happening or what will happen. They are 'worthless'.

Isn't this desperate scene all too familiar to us? Many people's first resort when faced with an approaching menace is often their ultimate resort. They turn to those things they think will offer them an escape route, provide certainty, guarantee security, supply answers, give them control and soothe their fevered brows. The list of what they turn to is long: money, relationships, politics, software, education, work, sport, alcohol, drugs.

While some of these may be good things to be enjoyed, and while they may offer temporary relief and escape, when the tidal wave of life comes crashing in, as it always does, they are shown to be useless god-things and completely out of place, dashed on the rocks of reality. 'See, they are all false!' says Isaiah. 'Their deeds amount to nothing: their images are but wind and confusion.'

But because we are devoted to them and really believe they are 'it', we pick up the pieces and patch them up for the next onslaught. We give them a second chance, and a third, and a fourth, and as we do we become more obsessed with them, more compulsive, more desperate, more fearful.

**Despite everything, God tells us there is comfort to be found in the face of the approaching menace. That comfort is in the one behind the approaching menace: the Lord God who is the mastermind of history.**

### If you trust in idols you will always be afraid

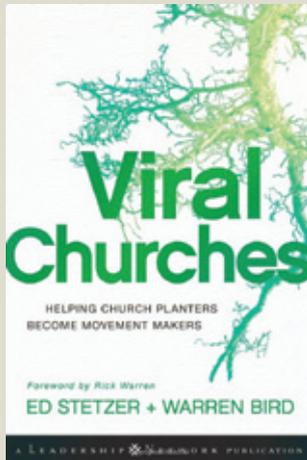
Despite everything, God tells us there is comfort to be found in the face of the approaching menace. That comfort is in the one behind the approaching menace: the Lord God who is the mastermind of history. This awesome Lord who orchestrates world events is the same Lord who takes the hand of 'little Israel' and 'worm Jacob' and says, 'Do not fear, I will help you. Do not be afraid.' This Lord is our Lord.

And it is this Lord, the first and the last, who in the first century walked out on the water to his disciples when they were struggling against wind and waves. They were terrified, believing Jesus to be an approaching menace, but the Lord immediately came to them and told them to take courage and not be afraid because he is the great 'I am' who is behind all things, even the wind and the waves. God comes to his people. God can help and will help. This is a God worthy of our worship.

Therefore, over the wind and confusion of the claims of 21st century false gods and false lords, and in the face of our continuing menaces of secularism, multiculturalism, Islam, modernism, postmodernism and consumerism, the Lord calls us, his little worm church, not to be afraid but to renew our strength. We are small, often tired, dispirited and seemingly defeated, but it is our task to proclaim the hope and certainty that the Lord of history offers, and to boldly call the nations to Jesus Christ.

# Books

**Chris Green, Vice Principal of Oak Hill, has been reading two books this summer which make ideal reading for church planters – one of them written by the CEO of Starbucks**



## **Viral Churches**

*Helping church planters become movement makers*

Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird  
Jossey Bass, 2010

## **Onward**

*How Starbucks fought for its life without losing its soul*

Howard Schultz with Joanne Gordon  
John Wiley and Sons, 2011

I was on my way to one of the recent church planting networking conferences, and being a bit early I stopped off for a coffee. A very particular coffee. Because one of these two books was in my bag.

At the conference, I recommended it to someone. And browsing the book-table at the conference, I saw the other book for sale and recommended that to someone, too. Savvy church planters have both books on their desks.

Ed Stetzer is a shrewd man. To my mind he's the best writer on church planting at the moment, and I would take anything he gives. His website (edstetzer.com) is a fascinating resource. But this book is slightly different, and when I first came across it I became very excited, because he has written just the book we've started to need.

Recently in both London and Birmingham, church planters have begun to spend time with each other, talking, praying and seeing how they

might work together. Under God, it looks as though a movement is starting to happen. And that's what Stetzer and Bird have observed in the US as well, and what some people in the UK have started to join in with, at Acts 29 and Exponential.

This book is not just a repository of current research and wisdom about planting (though there is masses of that). It is also about how movements

**This book is not just a repository of current research and wisdom about planting. It is also about how movements happen, and how we might amplify the courageous impact of church plants.**

happen, and how we might amplify the courageous impact of church plants. If you are meeting with up a bunch of other church leaders to discuss these kind of issues, this would be a great book to chew over together.

The single aspect of British evangelical culture that most hinders gospel work, in my view, is our pretence of amateurism. It shows itself in our childish dismissal of someone who has done serious research, or who knows what they are talking about. Even with each other, we put on a mask of, 'Don't ask me, I'm just making it up'. Which means we can't learn from each other, and the next generation can't learn from us.

We need to kill that idea, and taking a deep breath and deciding to learn from this book would be an excellent and bracing start.

Of course, the book is open to the usual criticism that it's about over 'there' not over 'here', and that is obviously true. Up to a point. But I was struck that when Stetzer and Bird demolish many of the myths about the lifecycle of church plants, how similar the patterns are in both contexts.

The modest church plant I am a member of maps exactly onto the numerical graph for the US context. That doesn't mean we are heading for a mega-church, and Stetzer and Bird are keen to encourage and value smaller (i.e. average-sized) churches. But they argue that the level of sustainability, and therefore the size at which we should plant again, is much lower

than we might like to think. And if the figures do work over here as well as there, then we should take that challenge seriously.



Howard Schultz is also a shrewd man. He got to be the CEO of Starbucks. Twice. Here is a man, not a Christian as far as this book reveals, who is blazingly passionate about the company he created, rescued and now leads. He is not passionate about the coffee, primarily, but about the encounter between the customer and the multi-sensory embrace of a Starbucks store.

Their mission is to 'do an extraordinary job of building emotional connections'. He means that. Of a staff conference, Schultz says, 'It had to be visceral. Interactive. Genuine. Emotional. Intelligent'.

Three observations. One, this is a very good secular book about

**People are looking for deep human meaning and relationships, and they find even the small scraps of it in a coffee shop so markedly different from their otherwise lonely lives, that they think they've found God there.**

leadership, and if you are interested in that field then you will enjoy it. There is an extraordinary statement on the cover from Warren Bennis, which calls it, 'the single most important book on leadership and change for our time and for every generation of leaders.' Bennis is no fool in this area and I normally listen carefully to what he says. In this case I think he has overstated his case, but that if you want to see a really good case study of what the very best writers (say Jim Collins and John Kotter) do talk about, then this book comes into its own.

Collins' latest book, 'How the Mighty Fall' (Random House, 2009) would be an especially good companion read. Schultz is a smart, honest, ambitious and reflective CEO, and not many men like that write books.

Second, this is a book about idolatry, or misplaced worship. Repeatedly, Starbucks is described in openly religious terms. 'I was promising revival', the staff 'believe' – and in an extraordinary sequence about the rebuilding of New Orleans, they 'BELIEVE'. When Schultz had to close 600 stores to keep the company afloat, there was international news coverage about the way customers wanted to keep them open. Daniel Henninger wrote in the following terms in *The Wall Street Journal*:

'A friend said that the Starbucks stores' bitter-enders reminded her of the protests against the closing of the neighborhood Catholic churches. True. The stores are like secular chapels. No sign on the wall says you must be quiet, polite or contemplative, but people are. Ritual abounds. So too with the refusal to walk two blocks to a nearby Starbucks. Back in the glory days, when cities had a church every 10 blocks, no one would go to a church blocks away with the same service. They wanted their church. But they'd drop into a Catholic or a Presbyterian church anywhere in America, knowing the feeling would always be the same... I don't go to Starbucks that much. I don't go to the Baptist church either. But I'm glad we've got one just about everywhere.'

I don't want to tut disapprovingly at that. I even want to lose my cynicism. I confess I found some of the stories here deeply moving, because people are looking for deep human meaning

and relationships, and they find even the small scraps of it in a coffee shop so markedly different from their otherwise lonely lives, that they think they've found God there.

Schultz writes of a photo exhibition, 'Each photo and its caption was a reminder that every Starbucks location is a rare place where people who increasingly live their lives in front of screens and behind steering wheels can physically interact with others. The pictures reinforced how much a barista's job matters given that he or she quite possibly might serve up the only human connection in a customer's day.'

So, third, I wanted to say, time after time, 'But that's our job!' Not that we should be serving nice coffee, or mistaking friendship for something even more profound, but that because Christians are genuinely related to the living God, and therefore to his people, then we should find that all these trace elements of common grace and God's image are shiningly true of our churches, and all those needs for significance and relationship are ones that the Lord Jesus has arranged to be met in Christian fellowship.

There's a tragic story at the heart of Starbucks' development of their instant coffee. The man who had the passion and dream for this product (codenamed Stardust) died within months of its being launched, and Schultz went to see him frequently before he died.

'Behind closed doors, with Don lying covered with a blanket on a couch and

me sitting nearby on a big chair, we would talk for well over an hour about so much more than coffee. The last time I saw Don was in the hospital on a Tuesday in early December. Standing at his bedside, I leaned in close. "Don, we are going to roll out Stardust," I whispered. I wanted Don to know that his vision – one of so many that he had brought to fruition during his lifetime – was also becoming reality. Four days later, on December 8, 2007, Don Valencia passed away.'

Isn't that a most tragic death bed scene? These men have imbued coffee and the way they sell it with such altruism and value that Schultz cannot imagine there could be anything more valuable to talk about on the brink of eternity.

So, planters, here's the task. We have not just to match the passion, ambition and hard work of Schultz, but to surpass it on the gospel plane. We have to take his ultimates of justice, conscience, meaning, and sustainability, and show how much more ultimate they are than he has imagined, when aligned with the God of the gospel.

We need to commit to relationships so the people making our espressos envy us. Starbucks employees are called partners, but we can show we are God's fellow-workers, and fellow-workers with each other too.

This summer, Howard Schultz is due to speak at the Willow Creek Global Leadership Summit. Let's pray that Bill Hybels points him to Jesus.



### **Oak Hill College**

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

Oak Hill is an Associate College of Middlesex University. Oak Hill is accredited by the University to validate its own undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes.

### **The Kingham Hill Trust**

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

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*Left: photo by Richard Hanson*

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