

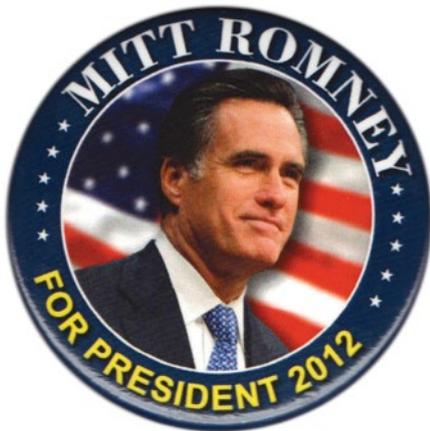
Commentary

WINTER 2012/13

**Nick Tucker looks at the downfall of two idols and asks what we can learn from the systems which kept them in place
Page 18**



**James Halstead shares his experience of a pastoral crisis and media storm which happened on his doorstep this year
Page 8**



**Seulgi Byun explores the declining influence of evangelicals in America as seen in the race for the presidency
Page 4**

**Oak Hill
College**

Real faith, real world



What happens when strongly-held religious conviction collides with real life experience?

Mike Ovey, Principal of Oak Hill, introduces the underlying theme of this edition of Commentary

One of the surprising things about reading space opera (my preferred kind of science fiction) is the frequent references, amidst descriptions of embattled space fleets and warring star empires, to the German military thinker, Helmuth von Moltke. This is not quite what you expect.

Von Moltke is the one who said no plan survives contact with the enemy. He is getting at the point that we can plan all kinds of things in the abstract and make all sorts of suppositions about what will happen and how someone will behave, but when these grand plans meet reality, they come crashing down.

For some, that is a parable of how faith, whether Christian or any other, collides with the real world; it simply crashes and burns. Obviously the problem of evil and suffering can create just such collisions. For others, this is a parable of what happens when too-clever-by-half theologians have their vast abstract schemes cut down to size as they try to explain them to a seen-it-all church leader.

Now, there are grains of truth here. It is perfectly true that sometimes the collision between religious belief and real life experience shatters someone's belief. It is also perfectly true

that sometimes what sounded so good and so sophisticated in a seminar room sounds glib and arid in a marriage counselling session.

Sometimes that can make us wary and even a little afraid of having what we truly believe really meet real life. It can leave us living dual lives, genuinely loving our faith, but keeping it safely away from the reality that might prove too strong a challenge, or shouting so antagonistically that there is no real chance of discussion.

I imagine we have all wondered whether Richard Dawkins shouts so loud against God because he is secretly afraid God is there after all. Perhaps it is worth asking whether we sometimes shout loud because we are secretly afraid

All of us want to affirm that our experience and reality can collide with faith, and that the collision can refine and improve our faith

Richard Dawkins is right. (No, he isn't, in case you are wondering where I stand on that.)

But if the scriptures are what Jesus says, the very word of God, then they will be sufficient for the purposes for which God intends, to make us wise to salvation and to train, rebuke and encourage us. They will be sufficient for us to exist as God's people in the world while remaining not of it.

So we come to this edition of *Commentary* stressing the sufficiency of what God has revealed for addressing our world. Nick Tucker reflects on a world whose heroes, such as Lance Armstrong, have feet of clay (page 18), while Duncan Forbes writes on developing 'council estate Christianity', and what that really involves (page 14). My article picks up on how thinking Christianly and thinking in a worldly way inevitably produces dissonance – and why that can be good (page 11).

Seulgi Byun writes in the wake of the American election and how Christians in another context may see real life very differently from us (page 4). Chris Green does some lateral thinking on evangelism, looking at different styles which are suited to our individual gifts (page 22). Matthew Sleeman reviews two books which give excellent food for thought about the local church in the local community (page 28).

To cap things off, it is wonderfully encouraging to have two graduates write in this edition. James Halstead reflects on the sometimes violent reality of ministering in our world (page 8), while Martin Ayers picks up a reality that sometimes 'dares not speak its name' in evangelical circles: doubt (page 26). Martin thinks about how we deal with it and shift our thinking about it.

In that way, all of us want to affirm that our experience and reality can collide with faith, and that the collision can refine and improve our faith. But actually, as you think through the truth, power and reality of God's word, isn't it better to start putting things the other round from von Moltke, and say that in the case of God's plan, it's the plan that survives contact with the enemy? That's what we want to show here.

Commentary

- 4 **American politics and the evangelical vote**
Seulgi Byun



- 8 **Pastoral crisis and media storm**
James Halstead

- 11 **Worlds in collision**
Mike Ovey

- 14 **Council estate Christianity**
Duncan Forbes



- 18 **Cycles of deceit**
Nick Tucker

- 22 **Commuter Christianity**
Chris Green



- 26 **Faith under bombardment**
Martin Ayers

- 28 **Two books**
Matthew Sleeman

American politics and the evangelical vote



Many in Britain believe it was the American evangelical vote which kept George W Bush in office for eight years, and which promised to put Mitt Romney there too. Seulgi Byun begs to differ

It's like clockwork. Every four years, from July to November, my productivity takes a nose-dive and, conversely, my media consumption spikes upward. Two events can be blamed for this. In July and August, and quadrennially thereafter, I get caught up in the spirit of the Olympic Games. I love watching the various sports, even the ones I know little about (this year's novelty: handball), and count me in as one who follows the medal count on a daily basis, hoping that the USA will ultimately prevail.

In the fall months, my attention quickly turns to another competition: the US presidential elections. This year, the intensity and drama surrounding both events was unlike anything in recent memory. From beginning to end, the London Olympics was both inspirational and gripping. It was quite possibly the best Olympic Games, at least in my lifetime (and this coming from a Korean-American; think Seoul, LA, Atlanta). And the presidential election was equally captivating, but for different reasons. I am not a political analyst – and this is not a political essay – but by

all accounts this was a crucial election that may shape the landscape of American politics, society and religion for the next several decades.

As an American expat living in the UK, conversations on US politics, whether in person or on social networks, are inevitable. Some discussions are constructive and insightful and others are, to put it mildly, tedious. Not surprisingly, the most frequent topics of conversation I have engaged in are those that involve politics and religion, specifically evangelicalism. On more than one occasion, however, I have found that British people have a somewhat naive understanding of American evangelicalism and its impact on US politics.

At best, the perception of evangelicals is that they are a large, monolithic voting bloc that are obsessed with moral shibboleths such as abortion and gay rights, and favour policies that marginalise the poorest in society. At worst, evangelicals are a bunch of war-mongering, gun-toting, bible-thumping capitalists who can't syllabify their words

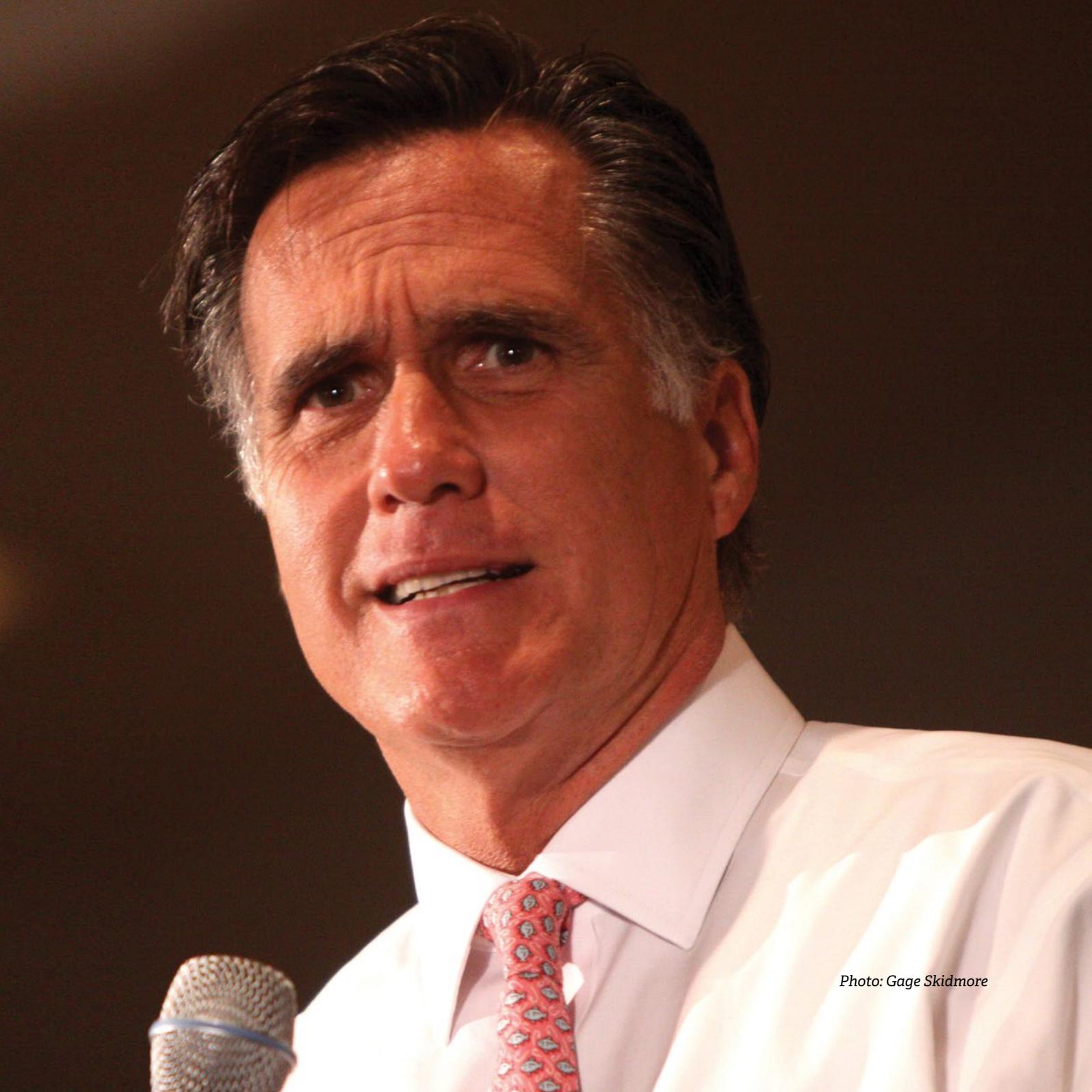


Photo: Gage Skidmore

and kept George W Bush in office for one term... scratch that, two terms too many.

Mercifully, space precludes me from responding to such characterisations (the short answer is, 'yes and no'). Instead, I shall offer a few thoughts on American evangelicals, specifically, addressing some misconceptions and throwing in a few things that seem to have gone unnoticed on this side of the proverbial pond.

Evangelicals are diverse

People tend to think of American evangelicals as a homogenous group – all conservative, all Republican – who will vote monolithically. There are, in fact, two sub-groups within American evangelicalism. The larger of the two is the usual suspect: the traditional evangelical bloc, the majority of whom are registered as Republicans, would describe themselves as fiscally and culturally conservative, and tend to vote pro-life and against gay marriage.

The other group, which has been called everything from 'progressive evangelical' to 'freestyle evangelical' to 'modernist evangelical', tends to focus on broader, more systemic issues, such as social justice and economic justice. Most people in this group sympathise with the

I have lost count of the number of times the words 'Republican' and 'evangelical' have been collocated together, as if all Republicans are evangelicals and therefore almost half of all Americans are evangelicals and voted for Romney

pro-life position on abortion, but they would argue for a 'consistently pro-life' agenda (helping the poor, advancing human rights, anti-capital punishment, anti-war, etc.). Not only is this group growing rapidly, especially among the younger generations, but it is a voting bloc that is a clear 'swing' vote (i.e. persuadable) and is ripe for the picking. This group has, arguably, tipped the previous six elections one way or the other.

In his re-election campaign in 1996, Bill Clinton won between 35-40% of the evangelical vote, most of which consisted of the latter category of evangelicals. In 2000 and 2004, Karl Rove, senior advisor to George W Bush, made it a point to win back the majority of the evangelical vote and did so successfully, winning the White House in back-to-back elections. But in 2008 and 2012, the pendulum swung back and Barak Obama won enough of the progressive evangelical vote to win both elections easily (self-described 'conservative' evangelicals voted for Romney by a larger percentage than Bush or McCain).

Evangelicals are a minority

Contrary to what many seem to think, evangelicals are a small proportion of the American population – just 7% of adults. What, then, accounts for the perception, especially here in the UK, that evangelicals make up a disproportionately large percentage of Americans? Just a hunch, more anecdotal than empirical. One reason may be the British media. This is admittedly a gross generalisation, but the tendency in this country is to over-simplify and caricature Republicans as ultra-conservative, right-wing Christians.

I have lost count of the number of times that the words 'Republican' and 'evangelical' have been collocated together, as if all Republicans are evangelicals and therefore almost half of all Americans are evangelicals and voted for Romney. But the reality is that evangelicals are only a small percentage of the population.

The Catholic vote has taken over as the single largest voting bloc and represents more than a quarter of the

The evangelical vote was largely irrelevant. It wasn't even about economics. This election was primarily about the changing demographics of the American people. Perhaps a new slogan going forward should be: 'It's the demographic, stupid'

electorate (26-27%). 'Protestants', i.e. non-evangelical Christians, make up another 18-20% of the electorate. Exit polls in the 2012 election are not conclusive, but most pundits think that evangelicals accounted for only 25% of the electorate.

A second reason for the misconception may be the impact and global reach of celebrity pastors based in the US. We live in a culture where every step taken and every word uttered by well-known pastors and thinkers is tracked in real time on Twitter or Facebook. Conservative Christian voices such as John Piper, Tim Keller, Al Mohler and Mark Driscoll dominate the airwaves and webspace, leaving the impression that most Christians are of the same conviction. But such is not the case.

The evangelical vote is over-emphasised

If there was one theme that Mitt Romney ran his campaign on it was the economy, and rightly so. As Bill Clinton famously said, 'It's the economy, stupid', and most Americans seemed to agree with him. According to exit polls, the economy was the single most important issue, and a majority of voters viewed Romney as more likely to turn the economy around. Romney also courted the religious vote – evangelicals, Catholics, Mormons, Jews and Christians – and

by all accounts he exceeded expectations. So where did he go wrong? Political analysts will dissect this election for the next few months, but I suspect it had less to do with the economy and more to do with the demographics of the electorate. Romney won a surprising 79% of the white evangelical vote, a higher percentage than McCain or Bush, and one percentage point higher than the Mormon vote (78%). He also won the majority of the white Catholic vote (59%). In other words, he exceeded all expectations with the white religious vote.

However, Obama won 75% of the Hispanic Catholic vote and 95% of the black Protestant vote. Sans religious affiliation: Obama won 93% of the black vote (13% of voters were black); 71% of the Hispanic vote (10% of voters were Hispanic); and 73% of the Asian vote (3% of voters were Asian). Romney won 59% of the white vote (72% of voters), but he couldn't capture the imagination of the non-white voters.

In short, the evangelical vote was largely irrelevant. It wasn't even about economics. This election was primarily about the changing demographics of the American people. Perhaps a new slogan going forward should be: 'It's the demographic, stupid.'

Political historians will tell you that the 20th century witnessed a shifting American electorate with flexible political structures, especially with the Christian vote. In the late 1950s and 60s, it was the Democrats who were known as the party of two-parent families and moral values. In the 70s, secularists dominated the Democratic party, resulting in the eventual collapse of the evangelical left.

The early 80s saw the rise of the religious right and many evangelicals coalesced around the Republican party. Since the mid 90s, not only has the Republican grip on evangelicals gradually loosened, but the number of self-identifying evangelicals has steadily declined. And the pendulum continues to swing back and forth. American evangelicalism in the 21st century is increasingly more diverse, but is dwindling in numbers and political impact.

Seulgi Byun lectures in Old Testament at Oak Hill

Pastoral crisis and media storm



When two policewomen were recently killed in the line of duty in Manchester, the church's man on the spot was James Halstead, who graduated from Oak Hill three years ago. He shares his experience of the fast-unfolding events

Only three years after leaving Oak Hill – and just six months into my first 'proper' job, post-curacy – I found myself on national television, telling the lovely presenters at *BBC Breakfast* how 'vicar school doesn't really prepare you for this!'

In my defence, it had been a particularly challenging month. I had recently buried a young boy who hadn't quite made it to his second birthday. The following day, the headteacher from one of my church schools arrived home to find her husband had killed himself. And then, two weeks later, two police officers were shot dead while attending what had appeared to be a routine call-out to a property about 200 yards away from my back garden.

Of course, only local people knew of those first two tragedies. But very

quickly the police shootings became national news. The days immediately following were something of a circus, and a lot of the details have now disappeared into the haze of my memory. But local, regional and national TV and radio were all beating a path to my door. As the anchorman of *BBC NorthWest Tonight* put it to me: 'We love it when we get a vicar, you always get a coherent sentence!'

The Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police yanked me out of a school assembly in order to lead prayers at a special vigil service. At one stage, I mentioned a special church service on the evening news, only to realise afterwards that I'd better call a local colleague to put that service together, as I'd made no arrangements at all and had announced it for just 12 hours' time.

So finally, a few days in, a very smart car pulled up at my front door at 6.15am on Sunday, to whisk me into the heart of the BBC in Salford. Chocolate croissants, all the sparkling water you could imagine and a distinctly unsettling experience of make-up later, I found myself on the Breakfast sofa – and, well, how much good I did Oak Hill's reputation is a matter of opinion!

All in all, it was a very odd time. Learning a model of leadership and ministry from scripture which is all about service and humility, it felt very strange to be almost courting the attention from the media. But then I realised I had three things to say.

First, whatever we think of the blanket coverage the 24 hour news industry provides, it helped me to say (and to demonstrate) that in the midst of this appalling situation, the



Manchester is brought to a standstill for the funeral of police officer Fiona Bone. Photo: andreasandrews

church was present and we care. On the day of the shootings themselves, though there were many interviews with others in the TV studios, the only organisation I could spot being pictured on the scene (apart from the police on duty and our local MP, just returned from parliament) was the church. It matters to us when our communities get hurt. Cameras or no cameras, it is right that we are there.

Second, this is not a terrible area. Yes, this is a broken area – but so often that’s where our faith starts, isn’t it? In acknowledging that this world is a broken world. It might have made for a ‘better’ story, but to suggest this was somehow unsurprising because it was where it was (this particular part of the region does have a disturbing history of serial killers) is deeply offensive and wholly unfair. We’re not perfect in this parish, but that’s where the gospel begins. Nobody is.

Third, all this means we have the only possible way of beginning to ‘explain’

Whatever we think of the blanket coverage of 24 hour news, it helped me to say (and to demonstrate) that in the midst of this appalling situation, the church was present and that we care

these events, although even with the wisdom of God on our side, we can barely hope to fully understand. As Christians we begin with a grasp of our brokenness, our fallenness. Though we haven't shot innocent police officers, we all have minds and hearts distorted in some ways. But even as we are present and care for those affected by this tragedy, so too we have a God who cares enough for us that he comes to be present among us, to redeem and restore us.

My walking onto the scene that day was a very small sign, the tiniest reflection of God's walk into this world, born as a baby, to grow and be a man amongst God's people. Then ultimately to die – innocent and in the service of his people – to make us new. Good may come out of these events, especially if it draws our communities closer together. But only the good news about Jesus Christ will help us find real and lasting hope.

In times of grief, fear and uncertainty, it is appropriate to defend a community against shaming accusations, provide comfort and hope to those affected, and to speak of the gracious work of God in the Lord Jesus Christ to redeem and restore a broken and sin-infected world. That was the job in front of the cameras in the early days, and that's the ongoing job now the media have left.

So, did 'vicar school' prepare me for this? As every good theologian loves to answer: yes and no. The emotional shock and strain is as raw and

unpredictable as you might find in any pastoral crisis. Handling the media is a skill I had to learn very rapidly. (My top two tips: If you've a choice, go with the BBC; and don't forget that if you're 'live', you can say what you like. But I think there are two very specific ways in which Oak Hill 'prepared' me.

First, in word and example, the community at college led me, taught me, helped me to trust in God more and more fully. We love to hang on to our pride, don't we? That we're capable and competent, able to handle anything. And when you're feted by the nation's TV cameras, it's very easy to succumb to that!

Yet here I found the most extraordinary generosity of God. The simple fact is that I am rubbish at speaking off the cuff. Anyone who shared in a college seminar with me will know that. What I'd prepared would be fine, but come to questions and I could rarely say anything useful. Yet responding to the reporters' questions, that dependence on the Lord, nurtured during my training, resulted in coherent, gospel-filled answers I could never have managed by myself. When I was weak, the Lord was very strong.

Second, there was one particular essay I wrote, the theme of which is what I've written here so far: that the church is to be both present and prophetic. It would have been very easy, that week, to have stayed in my study, preparing to thunder against evil, delight in gospel truths and deliver the

I've discovered I can be living testimony to his kindness, strength and wisdom, if only I'll be humble enough to let him do the hard work

healing balm of hope from the pulpit on Sunday. It would have been just as easy to have spent the days walking the streets, listening to people and crying with them, but without speaking life to them. Yet it's our job and our joy, isn't it, to do both? To be amongst the people where God is working, then to work with God in speaking his precious words to those people.

By his grace, I've had an astonishing – if equally devastating – opportunity to be both God's presence and his prophet through these events. I wasn't up to that task then and I'm not now. But I've discovered I can be living testimony to his kindness, strength and wisdom, if only I'll be humble enough to let him do the hard work.

And whatever I said on national television, without the space and the provocation to think, which Oak Hill provided, I'm not sure I would have done anything good.

James Halstead is Vicar of the Parish of Mottram in Longendale

Worlds in collision

CS Lewis famously observed that modern people have half a dozen different philosophies turning round inside their heads. Mike Ovey asks, how do we work with the anxiety this produces?



Worlds in Collision was the title of a famous (or infamous) book by Immanuel Velikovsky, first published at the start of the 1950s. Why infamous? Because he meant the title quite literally. His thesis was that Venus and Mars had at different times passed close enough to Earth to create all kinds of catastrophes, commemorated in the mythologies and folk tales of the peoples who survived these apocalyptic events.

For a lot of other academics reading the book and its sequels, this was simply impossible. Worlds do not collide. Or at least, not in human history. Of course, if worlds did collide, that would indeed be catastrophic, and there is even a Hollywood film genre which is all about trying to ensure worlds do not collide.

The thing is, worlds do collide, and with extraordinary consequences. Not necessarily physical worlds as Velikovsky suggested, but thought-worlds, or worldviews. CS Lewis noted long ago in the first of his *Screwtape Letters* that modern humans in the cultural West have half a dozen different philosophies turning round inside their heads, and they sometimes conflict with each other. That is probably even more the case in our generation than in the 1940s, when Lewis was writing.

Equally, the worldviews inside our heads sometimes collide with our experience of the outside world. One does not have

to be religious in a conventional sense to experience this. Think of the collision for someone brought up in one of the old Iron Curtain regimes, realising that the course of history which they had been taught would inevitably follow was not what history was actually doing.

Social psychologists have made acute observations about all this. Notably, Leon Festinger in the 1950s studied the impact of collision between experience and belief in the case of a doomsday cult which expected its deliverance from the end of the world by extra-terrestrial agencies. Unsurprisingly, the time for doomsday came and went, and Festinger and his colleagues analysed the reactions of the cult's members.

Obviously, some did lose their faith, but others not only retained their belief, but if anything intensified it. They produced rationales for the delay and became more assertively proselytising. Festinger's term for such events is cognitive dissonance. It occurs as two 'cognitions' (ideas, values or behaviours) collide.

Festinger and others noted that cognitive dissonance frequently provokes discomfort and anxiety. Understandably, people then try to reduce this dissonance to reduce their discomfort and anxiety. This can be done by denying one or other of the cognitions, or more subtly by

re-writing one's perceptions of those cognitions and their import. One does not deny the cognition so much as revalue it.

From our point of view as Christians, cognitive dissonance can be a useful analytical tool for understanding some of our own discomforts and anxieties and for how we may be tempted to deal with them.

First of all, we expect Christians to experience cognitive dissonance. We live in a cultural world in the West which does not explicitly acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ. This is very clear in the current debate over who 'owns' marriage: the British state or the King of the Universe. But also, even where we do agree on something like racial equality, we do so for reasons that are ultimately different from, say, the European Convention on Human Rights.

Moreover, the dissonance is not just between the individual Christian and the outside world. It is within the Christian. Luther famously commented that in this life we are simultaneously both justified and sinful. There is a reality to both, although in God's grace, our sinful natures will be perfected and glorified at Christ's return. Before his return, though, there is inevitably dissonance between our renewed natures and the sinful appetites that cling so closely to us.

This matters because the issue is not, 'Does a Christian experience cognitive dissonance?' but rather, 'How does a Christian deal with that dissonance?' I suspect the best advice here is the counsel my old rector, Dick Lucas, offered on receiving criticism: *examine it*. Examine the dissonance. Does it arise because I as a Christian am simply in conflict with the world? Does it arise because I in my sin am in conflict with the world on an issue whereby God's common grace in the world is in fact right? And critically, what is the way I am resolving those dissonances? Denial? Revaluation? Or what?

In effect, of course, what I am suggesting here is an application of Psalm 139:23. 'Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!' The thing is, though, this is not simple self-examination, in the sense that I scrutinise myself. The aim rather is to have God examine my

hearts and thoughts, so that as I experience dissonance and deal with it, as I will, one way or another, I do so on the basis of how he weighs that dissonance, rather than how I see it.

If there is denial, is it one of which he approves? If there is revaluation, is this one of which he approves? And naturally here, God's revealed word is the means by which we discern his examination. This is what stops this examination being mere self-examination.

The reason why we have to think cognitive dissonance through in this deliberate way is not only that it is inevitable. It is going to increase. Why? Culture today is increasingly a series of overlapping subcultures, based around race, religion, interest, education, region, wealth and so on. But the shapes of these sub-cultures are going to shift increasingly as our over-arching culture continues to change.

This means the dissonances I experience now as I face the sub-cultures of London N14 will not be the dissonances I face in 10 years' time. After all, it is certainly the case that some of the dissonances are different now in N14 compared to what they were in 1998 when I first came here. At the purely local level, the ethnic mix is different, with a much higher profile for Greek and Turkish communities. And change has made some things easier – social media such as Facebook oddly make the rich, gated communities just north of the college more accessible.

Other changes introduce new dissonances, as in the dissonance local Muslims, with whom I must share the gospel, now encounter and feel after 9/11. And these dissonances will be different again in 20 years' time. So, an answer to the cognitive dissonances I experience now may well be simply irrelevant to the ones of 10 years' time. That is why the prayer of Psalm 139:23 is a continual one.

One final thought. Obviously, I am suggesting that experiencing cognitive dissonance is natural and in fact can be a sign of Christian health. Most Christians I know experience it, even if they do not use the term. My closing question, though, is do we experience dissonance with as much intensity and as much anxiety as God would desire? Cognitive dissonance: how are we coping?



The reason why we have to think cognitive dissonance through in this deliberate way is not only that it is inevitable. It is going to increase. Why? Culture today is increasingly a series of overlapping sub-cultures, based around race, religion, interest, education, region and wealth

Photo: tj.blackwell

Council estate Christianity

When Duncan Forbes planted New Life Church on the Alton Estate in south London, he was faced with social situations which demanded fresh theological thinking

My Mum was getting hassled by a gang, and the police weren't doing anything about it. I went to home group at a middle class church and asked them for advice. I was told to forget the matter and forgive.

I went back to my estate that night discouraged and thinking, 'Surely the Bible says more about this?' I searched through my Bible looking for and discovering answers. I suddenly became aware that the Bible was vitally relevant to estate life, yet at the same time the church I was going to didn't know this.

That night I began my quest for council estate Christianity. Like a missionary, I began to explore scripture to see how Christianity works out on a council estate.

Both my experience and countless missionary stories showed me that

you can't just take a middle class church culture and plant it on an estate. Church planting on estates is not about taking a potted plant from another culture and then trying to make it grow in a foreign climate.

Instead, you need to plant the seed of the gospel in an area and see how it grows in its natural soil. What does this look like in practice?

Indigenous preaching

Livingstone realized how important it was to have indigenous preachers, because the locals understood the African preachers so much better. One of the great challenges for Bible translators is to be able to translate in such a way that modern readers can hear the text in a similar way to the original audience. Ideally, when





On more than one occasion I have had to counsel people on being witnesses in court cases. When the families of witnesses are threatened, you find yourself in a tricky ethical situation – protect the family or stand up for truth?

we hear Isaiah, we should hear it in a similar way to how the Israelites heard it back then.

This is a very difficult job in translation, and is also a difficult job in preaching. Imagine then how much more difficult it becomes if the preachers themselves are from a different culture to the congregation.

If we do not have indigenous estate preachers, then the sermons preached each week are one stage further removed from the people.

Self-theologizing

Calvin spent time theologizing, looking at how the Bible played out in his culture. Spurgeon and the Puritans did the same, and at our church on the Alton Estate, we are following suit. We are not trying to change the doctrine of the trinity, or substitutionary atonement, but we are asking fresh questions about how the Bible plays out on our estate.

In asking these questions, we have the following presuppositions: Christ died for all kinds of people; the Bible is God-breathed and totally sufficient;

Christianity is a missionary religion that contextualizes; God has been guiding his church throughout history through his word by his Spirit.

Based on these principles, we prayerfully go to God's word asking how it applies on our estate, while considering what others in church history have said. There are many ways we are doing this, but here is just one example: seed theology.

There are very strong family and friend bonds on council estates. A young Christian walks down the estate in the evening to a Bible study. On the way he bumps into the old friends he grew up with and treated as family. They offer him some drugs and he never makes it to Bible study. What does the Bible say about this?

There is a Reformed doctrine called 'the antithesis'. It talks about the sharp contrast between those of the light and those of the darkness, and the hostility between the two. It first appears in Genesis 3:15, which talks about enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the Devil.

The doctrine of the antithesis has been used in presuppositional

apologetics, in terms of how to share your faith with people. As far as I am aware, in academic circles it has only been used in the sphere of apologetics.

I took the doctrine out of apologetics and applied it instead to estate life. Because 'antithesis' is an academic word, I renamed it as 'seed theology'. People in our church are now taught that there are two seeds, two communities on earth: the believing and the unbelieving community. We explain why their families sometimes give them such opposition to their conversion, and why old friends try to drag them back into their old lifestyle. It is all part of the hostility prophesied in Genesis 3:15.

We then teach them the mission of the seed, to hold out the gospel to the unbelieving community. However, we also teach them to do it in a wise way, with both feet planted in the believing community.

Seed theology has been an immensely helpful doctrine in our church. It has helped people understand the hostility and temptations they receive, as well as giving them a vision for reaching the lost. It has also helped people see the importance of being fully stuck into church.

We have also gone to God's word for our ethics. Middle class Christianity has spent time looking at ethical issues that are prominent in their culture. On estates, we need to develop our own ethics. It may be that we use the same principles, but how they work out is different.

For example, on more than one occasion I have had to counsel people on being witnesses in court cases. When the families of witnesses are threatened, you find yourself in a tricky ethical situation – protect the family or stand up for truth?

Being practical

Each culture has its own blind spots and its own strengths. Some people say the Reformed community tends to be academic, emphasizing doctrine over practice. Estate culture tends to be very practical. We therefore enjoy the doctrine of the Reformed community, but at the same time ask, 'Can we make it more practical?'

One of the ways this has worked out is in our discipleship program, 'The Roehampton Catechism'. Like other catechisms, ours places a big emphasis on knowledge. However we don't stop there. We have additional catechism application questions which apply doctrine to the nitty-gritty of life, which we then follow with prayer.

Our catechism is a time of learning doctrines which lead to godliness, and confessing, praying and praising God.

Church style

For me, churches reflect middle class culture. There are many good things about middle class culture, but I naturally feel like an outsider. At our church, we have resisted adopting middle class values, unless we are

convinced by scripture to adopt them. We dress informally, and I usually preach in a hoodie or a tracksuit. This is not based on some attempt to be cool, it's just my culture. When I did a biblical theology on clothes, I was not convinced that I should wear chinos and a blue blazer.

Our worship songs are also contextualized. Soft rock electric guitar music smacks of middle class culture. We're not middle class at our church so the music has an RnB/Reggae/Hip Hop/Soul feel to it. We sometimes remix old hymns because we really like

the theology of them. At other times we write our own music.

We try to model our songs on the psalms. We sing laments and cries for deliverance – something that is very relevant to estate culture. We look forward to the day when we will all be in heaven with our other brothers and sisters from different cultures worshipping God in our own languages.

Duncan Forbes is a former Oak Hill student and is now Pastor of New Life Church on the Alton Estate





Cycles of deceit

Two cultural idols came crashing down this year: the cyclist Lance Armstrong and 'TV personality' Jimmy Savile. Both had bulletproof reputations, which were maintained by intimidation and moral blackmail. Nick Tucker asks what we can learn from the systems which kept them in place



On 24th August this year I woke up to the news that I had now won the Tour de France as many times as Lance Armstrong. After a series of failed attempts in the American courts to block the United States Anti Doping Authority (USADA) from bringing charges against him, Armstrong announced on 23rd August that he would no longer be fighting those charges. The next day he was stripped of all cycling results going back to 1998 (including seven victories in the Tour) and he was banned from competition for the rest of his life.

The details of the case are readily available to anyone who wishes to find them and make for depressing reading. The romance of a man who cheated death in the face of cancer, which had spread to his lungs and brain, and went on to win the toughest race in the world seven times, a story which seemed too good to be true, was exactly as it seemed.

Not everyone was taken in. A few journalists and cyclists spoke out, but two women in particular raised serious

concerns about both Armstrong's medical regime and his intimidatory behaviour in the past. They were Emma O'Reilly, his former *soigneur* (a personal assistant who looks after the professional rider's diet, clothes and massage therapy) and Betsy Andreu, the wife of his former team mate Frankie.

Both women faced intimidation, harassment and public defamation at the hands of Armstrong himself, his associates and to some extent others with a vested interest in the growing brand that was Lance Armstrong. Perhaps it's not too surprising then that very few were prepared to raise in public what was pretty much an open secret in cycling.

The journalist David Walsh describes the scenes in the press room at the 1999 Tour when Armstrong took his decisive hold on that year's race by sprinting up a steep Italian mountain to the ski resort of Sestriere faster than most recreational skiers could get down it. 'All the journalists laughed, because they saw how ridiculous it was. We knew what EPO had done to the sport, guys riding up mountains at flat-road speed without hardly taking a breath.'

Lance Armstrong taking part in the Intersport Oslo Grand Prix in 2009. Photo: Oddne Rasmussen

The Lance Armstrong story has some parallels with the Jimmy Savile affair. Both men did so much in the realm of philanthropy and charitable giving that it made them almost untouchable, but now the charities that bear their names look set to suffer

Scarcely any concerns were published that year. Once the dam of denials was broken, however, a growing flood of witnesses to the systematic programme of drug use on Armstrong's *US Postal* began to appear. There are all sorts of reasons that people didn't speak or act. Many were intimidated by Armstrong's litigious reputation and his willingness and ability to destroy the careers of those who crossed him.

Others, though, seem to have been convinced that Armstrong's career was worth more to them alive than dead. Within his own sport of cycling, many felt that he brought an unprecedented level of exposure and interest to the sport in the very lucrative American market. Others believed that his work in raising cancer awareness and his status as a sort of totem for those smitten with cancer and a symbol of hope was too valuable to lose.

There has been a great deal of speculation that this might explain a strange detail in this story from earlier in the year. On 3rd February this year, the US Justice Department suddenly and without any explanation dropped a very expensive two-year investigation into Armstrong. From the dossier produced by USADA in October it seems unlikely that lack of evidence was the problem. Many are now asking whether the decision had more to do with the risks associated with toppling a symbol of hope, who represented

the American dream on steroids (so to speak) in a time of economic depression, and in an election year.

It is at exactly this point that the Lance Armstrong story has some parallels with the Jimmy Savile affair. Both men did so much in the realm of philanthropy and charitable giving that it made them almost untouchable, but now the charities that bear their names look set to suffer as much from their respective appellations as they ever gained by them.

It is unsurprising then that the stories have often been juxtaposed. One more frivolous example of this was at the annual Edenbridge bonfire, where they paid Armstrong the dubious compliment of burning him in effigy this year. His effigy initially wore a 'Jim fixed it for me' badge, though this was later changed.

I have no wish to draw any equivalence between the particular crimes involved – although this is not to minimise the seriousness of the Armstrong scandal. The case is about much more than cheating at sport. It is a story of high level corruption, intimidation and fraud; it is a story about the deliberate ruination of individual careers and reputations, and it is allegedly a story of international drug trafficking, using money provided by an agency of the US federal government.

Armstrong might still fare well by comparison with Savile, but it would be misleading to suggest he is guilty of a misdemeanour equivalent to little more than craftily using his thumb to keep egg on spoon during the Dads' race. The parallels are not at the level of the misdeeds involved, but in the way that in both cases they were protected by vested interests and by the shield of their charitable work.

Savile's secret, like Armstrong's, was not well hidden. Large numbers of people knew about his behaviour – or perhaps, to express it more accurately, large numbers of people should have known. Like Armstrong, Savile was protected by a reputation in the wider world for philanthropy and in his own circle for ruthlessness and intimidation. Both his and Armstrong's potential for good and for harm made others wary of crossing them.

This was a powerful combination indeed, as people could look after their own interests by protecting them while convincing themselves they were serving the greater good. It is perhaps reminiscent of some of the more outrageous of the medieval Popes who were simultaneously feared for their holy office and for their unholy vengeance.

The media of course have reacted with delicious outrage at the stories of Savile and Armstrong. The two men in their different ways became scapegoats, focuses of moral outrage acting to reassure us that we ourselves are good and decent. We humans have a powerful drive to justify ourselves and a scandal provides a wonderful opportunity to do that by comparing our apparently modest failings with the spectacular sins of others.

Indeed the widespread willingness to overlook their crimes for so long also reflects that drive to self-justify. This is particularly so in the case of Armstrong, whose reputation was so bulletproof that in more cynical circles he was nicknamed 'cancer Jesus'.

Given it is of the essence of Christianity that we cannot justify ourselves before God, how then should we respond to all this? We dare not react with self-righteous indignation at the sins of others, instead we do well to remember that our good deeds will never, in the end, atone for or cover over our sins. Paul warned that, 'The sins of some are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them.'

Shakespeare's Mark Antony expressed this biblical idea memorably: 'The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.' Even our very best and most self-sacrificial acts of Christian ministry and service may impress others briefly, but do nothing to erase the stain of our sins. The same is true for the Jimmy Savile Charitable Trust and the Lance Armstrong Foundation (Livestrong), which could not protect the names of their founders.

The temptation to look to what God may have done through us as a sign of our spiritual health is a deadly one. Jesus warned, 'Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive

out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

But there is another lesson, perhaps less obvious, that we might also draw. We should be on our guard against the pragmatic, 'ends justifies the means' kind of thinking which winks at evil that good may result. In the 19th century, for example, Charles Grandison Finney was at the forefront of a new kind of revivalist movement that relied on what were known as the 'new measures' to ensure revival and guarantee conversions.

This included psychologically manipulative tactics like 'the anxious bench', where sinners were placed on public display as a means of ensuring their seriousness about the salvation of their souls. By creating the right environment, Finney was convinced he could effectively force people to convert.

He was not alone in being convinced that a form of religious conversion could be produced by the right methods. Derren Brown, a mentalist (which is a job description, not insult) who professed Christian faith in his teens but became an atheist in his twenties, demonstrated in a 2005 TV show that he could exactly reproduce the effects of evangelical conversion under the right settings just by touching people. He later 'deprogrammed' his converts.

We must wonder how much good really results from tactics such as Finney's. There is no place for deceit in the service of the God of truth, but the temptation to manipulate and soften God's self-presentation for the palate of a 21st century audience is profound.

Similarly, in our willingness to be held accountable, and importantly to hold those close to us accountable, we must not succumb to the temptation to believe that any person or ministry is too important or valuable to be called to account. As uncomfortable as it might be, we must encourage others to ask tough questions of us and be prepared in our turn to ask difficult questions where we might not want to hear the answers.

Nick Tucker is Research Fellow at Oak Hill

Commuter Christianity



Should churches be running evangelistic events or equipping their people to become better evangelists in their daily lives? Chris Green looks at different ways of getting the gospel out

I spent a weekend recently in Ramsgate, helping a church begin to plan their Oak Hill mission for next Easter. On the Saturday afternoon I was working with the church council to think through some of their responsibility for raising the evangelistic temperature in the church.

On the flipchart we mapped out the many groups and ministries the church runs, looking for the gaps that need to be plugged. And then someone made a simple, truthful and utterly devastating observation. We were planning extra things for the church to do, but most of the church members are already doing things with non-Christians, at work, at the school gate or doing some voluntary work. We needed to equip them to be better evangelists, rather than laying on more events.

That chimed with several other conversations I'd been having, all around the same issue. Maybe it's because it has become a slight obsession with me that I'd been having these identical conversations, but I hope it's not just me thinking this: we are short-changing our church members if we equate training them in evangelism with giving them the confidence to talk about Jesus, or having the confidence to bring their friends to an event. They need to learn how to lead someone to Christ.

The commuting life

Part of my concern is pragmatic. For instance, I really enjoyed the last *Passion for Life*, and I'm looking forward to the next one. The best part for me was a curry evening with a talk that our church arranged. I'd been getting to know some of the other dads in the school playground, and I was bowled over when the two I invited along wanted to come, enjoyed the talk and were really keen to talk it over afterwards.

But what's the plan when they can't come? Not because they're too busy, but because they live too far away? Any church member who spends significant waking hours at work has colleagues who are probably the easiest people to invite to things.

Yet one of the rising features of Britain today is the distance people commute to work. People are travelling further, and spending longer getting to the office. In cities like Liverpool, Manchester and London, the average commute is now nine miles; if a Christian and her colleague both do that, then they live 20 miles apart. Popping over for a curry isn't going to happen. Nearly one million of us commute more than 30 miles each way.



Photo: sharkbait

I see this in my own workplace. One colleague commutes to north London from Ely, and another from near Guildford. His predecessor came in from Kent.

We need to equip the church members so they can do the whole work, right through to leading their colleague to Christ, without being invited to any intervening events.

Everyone, everywhere evangelism

So a second part of my concern is theological. I'm persuaded that there are a few people with the special role of being an evangelist, and even though it is one of the many New Testament roles which are named without being defined, we can probably get close to it with the idea of someone with the gift of being able to explain the gospel in ways that seem particularly clear and persuasive to an unbeliever.

The rest of us do not have that gift, but since the Great Commission still stands, we all have the duty to get the gospel out; and I don't think we fulfil that by getting the rest of us to come and hear the few evangelists. That is good, but it's not the whole. We must each of us be ready to give an account for the hope within us.

Central to the role of pastors in this is that we train people properly. Evangelists and pastor-teachers have an Ephesians 4 role of equipping the saints, so this needs to feature in our diaries.

Properly, in this instance, means allowing people to be themselves rather than forcing them into a mould. Mark Mittelberg, in his book, *Building a Contagious Church*, has suggested that we should adopt a range of different 'styles' of evangelist, both for training and encouraging, and for explaining to outsiders:

Bold – I know someone who regularly stands in Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park in London and engages Muslims, not only answering questions but challenging their assumptions, and provoking a strong response. It is not for everyone, but we should honour our bold friends.

Invitational – Like most pastors, I regularly arranged events for people to invite their friends to, and gradually noticed that some people were especially effective in

bringing guests. In fact, I thought I should have given almost all the tickets to just one person! But that person would be hopeless in Hyde Park.

Intellectual – These people love interrogating the latest secular best-seller. Throw them into any book or film club and the conversations always turn to Jesus.

Befriender – I know someone with an astonishing ability with non-Christians during sad times, and over many years gently turn those friendships into gospel opportunities. This is slow evangelism.

Testimonial – Christians with a clear account of how God has worked in their lives, either at their conversion or subsequently, are 'shop windows' for the gospel. We need to be cautious, though. One speaker stopped giving his testimony because he found people were more interested in him and his drug-gang past, than in Christ. And many Christians testify to God's faithfulness with no drama and in the midst of tragedy; those are testimonies too.

Personal – Some Christians are at their best talking one-to-one over a cup of coffee or a golf ball. Help them to see that although they could never get their neighbours to a big meeting, they have conversational opportunities that big-name speakers would never have.

Explainer – These people explain the gospel so clearly that non-Christians frequently become believers. We most naturally call these 'evangelists', although that narrows the idea too much. God uses these people significantly. I was humbled to listen to one such speaker, thought, 'Well, that wasn't very special; I could have done that,' and was then awed as non-Christians laid their lives before Christ.

We can extend Mittelberg's list, because he does not pretend it is exhaustive:

Trainer – Paul said that evangelists equip the saints. We can identify people with the gifts and passion to encourage others to do the work of evangelism. They are evangelists for evangelism!

Planter – Since a clear element in New Testament Christianity was establishing new churches, we need to identify those who will start churches, either by themselves

or with a team, to reach new communities and cultures with the gospel.

An example to the flock

A final part of my concern is what we model as pastors. One friend pointed out to me, 'You get what you teach'. Which means that if we pastors preach that evangelism is important, but don't do anything about it, then what we actually teach is that Christians are people who talk a lot about evangelism but don't do anything about it.

Assuming that such a picture worries you, what can we do about it? Assuming, too, you're already doing evangelistic talks and sermons, and maybe even running a decent course.

The missing element is this: pastors have to model to churches exactly what we want them to do. They're never going to preach a sermon or give a talk. And so good as our talks may be, they can never really serve as a model. That's true even when we deliberately identify the questions of non-Christians and help people see how they can answer them.

This is where we need to help, but it is costly. We need to put ourselves in the position where we find it just as potentially awkward as anyone else. I have to be in a position where nobody knows that I'm a minister, because I'm not there in any professional capacity – I'm just Chris. I'd want that put in any staff contract for a church. Show me where you are in deliberate contact with non-Christians and they have no idea you're a Christian before you open your mouth. Show me that you know what it's like to risk a friendship by talking about Christ.

Then, and only then, can we say, 'Look, I really understand how hard you find this. I do too. But this is how I managed to have a conversation last week. Would that work for you?' And if you're too busy to do anything about evangelism, but feel a bit guilty about it, guess what you're modelling to the church?

Chris Green is Development Projects Vice Principal at Oak Hill



“We try to engage specifically with the demanding issues people are facing in their jobs. Seeing God at work in the heart of Westminster is an amazing privilege.”

Revd Jason Roach, curate engaged in workplace ministry, Whitehall

**Oak Hill
College**

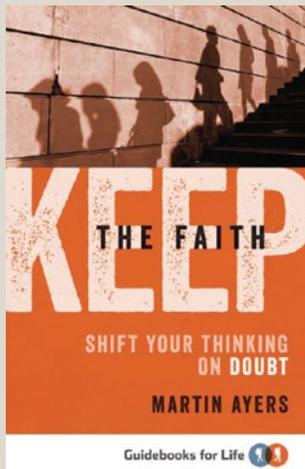
**people equipped
for ministry**

oakhill.ac.uk/jason

Faith under bombardment



We interview former Oak Hill student Martin Ayers, who is now serving a curacy in Preston, about his new book on doubt and faith



Keep the Faith

Martin Ayers

£5.39 from <http://bit.ly/martinayers>

The Good Book Company, 2012

Martin, you left Oak Hill last year, and your new book *Keep the Faith* has recently hit the shelves. Tell us a bit about it.

Martin: As you'd guess from the title, it's a book written for those who already call themselves Christians and, in short, I'm encouraging them to keep going.

The particular problem I'm addressing is that of intellectual doubts, where the reader might be struggling to keep trusting Jesus Christ because they are no longer sure that the Christian worldview is really true. I think that's much more common under the surface than many people are willing to admit. Lots of Christians have nagging doubts, and sometimes the more we engage non-Christians with the gospel, the more those doubts can grow, especially when we challenge others, but are also challenged by

them. Sometimes we will be told that the reasons we give for our hope are not very good reasons!

There are lots of books available already arguing for the truth of the Christian faith. What makes *Keep the Faith* any different?

I agree that there are some great books out there setting out evidence, addressing objections and offering reasons to believe. Some of them are enormously helpful.

But my aim in *Keep the Faith* is to explore a different and yet biblical angle on our intellectual doubts. I think it's all too common in our churches to treat the realm of intellectual debate as though it's some kind of neutral territory. The Bible doesn't leave room for that, and I think there is scope for the truth to encourage the doubting Christian and

change the way they think about and deal with their doubts.

If a Christian thinks that our minds are neutral, and they are having doubts about the claims of Jesus Christ, then perhaps they'll stop following him so wholeheartedly for a period, and spend their time reading books about ultimate reality written by all kinds of people with different viewpoints and different agendas. Such a doubting Christian, going through what you might call, 'a season of withdrawn investigation', might still be helped by a Christian book containing evidence for faith. But they might be swayed – even persuaded away – by mistakenly thinking there is a neutral playing-field for these arguments. What's more, even if they come back, they remain vulnerable to doubting again when they hear the latest decent-sounding response from non-Christians.

The Bible confronts this rationalistic approach, and challenges us in passages such as Romans 1 to consider how the fall has affected our minds and the minds of everyone around us. Fallen humanity simply does not want the Christian worldview to be true, and intellectual arguments against the Christian faith are tied up all too closely with these sinful desires.

What difference would that make to a Christian who is struggling to believe?

If the doubting Christian takes that on board, it can be hugely encouraging

as they live in the world facing a bombardment of arguments against the truth about Jesus. The intellectual battle has spiritual roots. It's not that unbelievers have looked into things with an open mind, weighed up the evidence for Jesus and found it wanting. The Bible is plain that they are suppressing the truth about God in their unrighteousness, and that affects the way they evaluate the evidence.

Alongside this encouragement, we should also feel the challenge ourselves not to draw back from following Jesus when faced with doubts. The less we fix our eyes on him, the more our hearts may wander to cherish other things. If our doubts really are connected to our desires in this kind of way, then they're only going to get worse as we hold back from following Jesus Christ. Conversely, as Jesus said, it's when we obey him that we come to know the truth.

So what's the story behind you coming to write *Keep the Faith*?

Throughout my Christian life I have certainly had seasons in my own walk with the Lord where my doubts about the claims of Christ have felt stronger and more troubling than at other times.

But I've also experienced the awful tragedy of friends who had once professed faith falling away altogether, citing intellectual doubts as a primary factor in their reasons for giving up on Jesus Christ.

We know to expect this, from the parable of the sower and passages like it. But it's still deeply unsettling for those who remain, who at one time had looked to such friends for encouragement and inspiration to keep going. And of course it's horrendous for the individuals themselves, with their eternal destinies at stake.

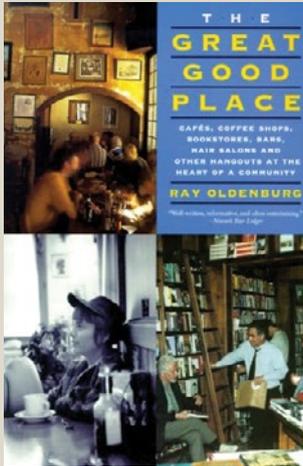
At Oak Hill I thoroughly enjoyed the courses on engaging with the contemporary world, including apologetics. And it was very striking for me that these courses always started so intentionally with the presuppositions of the Christian worldview, including the rational effects of the fall.

I found this enormously encouraging in my faith. It made me think about unbelief differently. To the extent that apologetics is about challenging unbelief, it can do this for the believer as well as for the unbeliever. As I was strengthened in my own faith, I was also left wondering, 'Why have I not thought about my intellectual doubts – and those of others – in this biblical way before? How do we pass this on to members of churches up and down the country?'

That's why I've written *Keep the Faith*. I think this biblical wisdom could really help a lot of Christians who are struggling to trust Jesus while surrounded by non-Christians. I'm praying that the Lord will use the book to strengthen and preserve many in their faith, and I'd be grateful if you could join me in that.

Two books

Matthew Sleeman has been reading two books which focus on the need for public places which foster community, acceptance and participation. Sounds familiar?



The Great Good Place

Ray Oldenburg
£9.89 (Amazon, paperback)
Perseus, 1997, 368pp

The Space Between

Eric O Jacobsen
£13.49 (Amazon, paperback)
Baker, 2012, 297pp

Although significant for their members, Britain's local churches are marginal in the minds of many others. Their buildings are either invisible or historical relics; their 'place' in society is increasingly questioned, or simply ignored. The long task of rendering churches as real in people's lives and imaginations lies before Oak Hill's graduates and all other ministers of the gospel.

Ray Oldenburg's book, *The Great Good Place*, provides a helpful resource in equipping ourselves with a grounded mindset for this task. In it, he outlines the importance of what he terms 'third places'. These are not places where we live or work, but are a third kind of place which lies between these two poles. Third places are, Oldenburg asserts, vital for the civic and social good of any society. And, he adds, they are in decline in the contemporary western world.

His examples of third places are varied, ranging from English pubs

and continental coffee shops to bookshops and Main Street in small town America. What commonalities link such places and help define the qualities of a third place? Oldenburg proposes eight such dynamics.

They are levelling places, established on neutral ground: that is, they are public, comfortable, freely-accessed

In such places, good, playful and lighthearted conversation is the main but not necessarily only activity, and their playful mood engenders a 'let's do this again' desire about the place

places, fostering commonality and participation, and they are conducive to fraternity. As such, third places are open and accessible, and also exhibit a plain, homely and non-pretentious quality of accepting people. This shows itself through such places keeping long hours, being largely unplanned but nevertheless accommodating and meeting the occupants' needs.

In such places conversation, typically good, playful and lighthearted conversation, is the main but not necessarily only activity, and their playful mood engenders a 'let's do this again' desire about the place.

Finally, there is typically a reservoir of regulars who help generate a sense of a home away from home, who foster feelings of warmth, intimacy, possession and belonging. Such regulars keep the place alive, help set its tone, its mood and characteristics, and they attract, welcome and accommodate newcomers.

Although not a recent book, *The Great Good Place* deserves considered attention by church leaders and other ministers of the gospel. What can we draw from this work, such that our churches can function better as third places within our community, as beacons of light and association in a culture increasingly lacking such qualities?

That question is acute. Tellingly, churches do not merit any attention within Oldenberg's book. His only two mentions of church are brief and negative, referring to clerical

attempts to oppose the development of third places. This absence sharpens the book's usefulness, especially in communities where the local church might be the only obvious contender for fulfilling the roles which Oldenberg desires from third spaces.

It also dulls the book's usefulness, unless and until a theological dimension is forged for it. Otherwise, the desire for third places risks reducing to mere optimism, or denying the historical influence of the gospel on many of the cultures which have created Oldenberg's exemplars.

Nevertheless, as it stands, Oldenberg's vision for third places provokes us to ground and flesh out what God's vision of a community of believers in a place can look like in particular local expressions. Thinking about the local church as both its people and its physical spaces challenges us to build and nurture churches of local, relational influence.

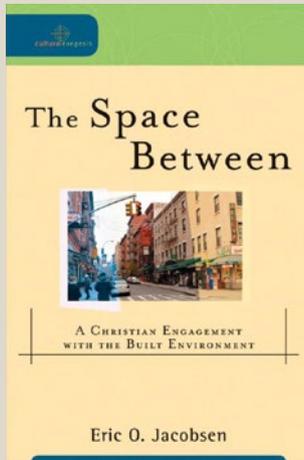
More recent desires for a 'big society' have politicised Oldenberg's ideas. While such a notion remains contested and undefined, there is room for local churches to lead and to project a vision for our future. The question is, do we have the theological and relational imagination for such a task?

Eric Jacobsen, a Presbyterian pastor, has recently written a book which will help individual Christians and local churches light the fuse that is provided by Oldenberg, but which Oldenberg has failed to light. The book's title, *The Space Between*, portrays a double

Tellingly, churches do not merit any attention within Oldenberg's book. His only two mentions of church are brief and negative, referring to clerical attempts to oppose the development of third places. This absence sharpens the book's usefulness

meaning which locates its course. On the one hand, this is a book about the built environment: as such, it looks beyond mere architecture to a wider concern with how buildings interconnect the spaces between them as part of the wider urban sphere. On the other hand, the title heralds a stimulating theological reading of that built environment, locating it between the two comings of Christ.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, following a helpful introduction outlining what is meant by 'the built environment', orientates readers by sharpening them to their surroundings. Jacobsen has particular focus on American urban forms, but



he does explain terms such as 'exurb' and 'functional zoning' which will be unfamiliar to many British readers.

Put simply, he opposes constructing the built environment around car ownership, preferring instead more localised communities where people build their lives among people whom they tend to know. He prioritises roots, not routes, and the dream of a porch to sit in and engage with neighbours, rather than that of a Porsche safely parked up behind a garage door. He locates this vision within scripture, and within a reformed framework of creation-fall-redemption-eschaton. Such a framework might be familiar to many, but the insights gained from it by Jacobsen will be new.

The book's second section, 'Participation', is somewhat more

fragmented, but draws further insightful connections. Three chapters examine family, politics and church. Jacobsen locates the family within the built environment, exploring how different kinds of urban environment influence family life, for better or for ill.

His chapter on politics moves into more theoretical spheres which might at first glance appear less appetising to church ministers and members, but part of Jacobsen's intention is to widen the aperture of our vision to accommodate such matters. At the very least, this chapter will help pastors care and counsel better those working in such spheres.

The chapter on church will be more immediately home ground – literally, so, with its appeal for local churches to be local. Jacobsen risks romanticising the parish model (perhaps consideration of places beyond America would help him here), but us old-world readers will benefit from his fresh insights.

The book's final section, 'Engagement' brings together what has gone before. Part cultural critique, part cultural

manifesto, the final two chapters cap the book with some fine cultural exegesis. Jacobsen remains wide-ranging, which has the strength of stopping conclusions being drab, but sometimes leaves me, at least, wanting more. Throughout the book, there is a focus on the North American experience; what this all looks like in the contemporary but different British situation is left for the reader to discern.

Such comments do not dent my enthusiasm for a thoughtful book on a rarely explored topic. His final vision of 'a geography of rest' is challenging and suggestive. For churches seeking to be 'real' within 21st century Britain, however, there remains more to be said and much more to be done.

How we make a world of difference – how we nurture local churches as sites of particular, lived transformation within their surroundings is begun here in this book. But the question remains a vast one, and one which requires the careful crafting of answers as this century begins to mature.

He prioritises roots, not routes, and the dream of a porch to sit in and engage with neighbours, rather than that of a Porsche safely parked up behind a garage door. He locates this vision within scripture and within a Reformed framework



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.

Contacting us

Oak Hill College
Chase Side
Southgate
London N14 4PS
Tel: 020 8449 0467
Fax: 020 8441 5996
Website: oakhill.ac.uk

Comment

If you would like to comment on any of the articles in this edition of Commentary, please contact us here: davidk@oakhill.ac.uk

Production

Produced for Oak Hill by House Communications Ltd

Editing and design: Simon Jenkins
Print: Yeomans Press

Photographs

The following images are used under Creative Commons licenses:

Page 1 (top), 3 (bot), 18: Oddne Rasmussen
<http://flic.kr/p/6R9Uus>
Pages 1 (right), 9: andreasandrews
<http://flic.kr/p/dgDbuy>
<http://flic.kr/p/dgDdAE>
Pages 3 (top), 4-5: Gage Skidmore
<http://flic.kr/p/anomhS>
Pages 6-7: Micky** <http://flic.kr/p/gXPTQ>
Page 13: tj.blackwell
<http://flic.kr/p/cPPQJf>
Pages 22-24: sharkbait
<http://flic.kr/p/4Bshaz>

All other photos: Richard Hanson

© The Kingham Hill Trust

A company limited by guarantee
Registered in England No. 365812
Registered Office:
Kingham Hill School
Kingham
Oxon OX7 6TH

A Registered Charity
Charity Number 1076618



“One of the opportunities God has opened for me is to become chaplain at Hearts football club. It’s fantastic to have weekly conversations with guys who have very little knowledge of the gospel.”

Andy Prime, Assistant Pastor at Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh

Oak Hill College

people equipped for ministry

oakhill.ac.uk/andy