

ministry for the real world

commentary



Oak Hill
College

Engaging our times



Johnny Juckes and Dan Strange introduce this edition of *Commentary*, which has a strong focus on engaging biblically in whatever cultural context God has placed us

In the past 20 years, the Western world seems to have been fulfilling the widely quoted curse, 'May you live in interesting times'. The hugely significant advent of the internet in the 1990s has been overtaken by the runaway growth of social media. The rapid development of computer technology is now in our lives and homes in the form of artificial intelligence. And the sexual landscape has been altered beyond recognition as LGBTQ culture has entered the mainstream of public life. These and other big trends mean that our culture is stuck on fast-forward change.

This edition of *Commentary* gives space to thinking about some of the key areas of change in our times, and asking how we can engage biblically, and discover positive, fresh opportunities for the gospel.

Ben Clube (page 5) traces the growth, future and threat of artificial intelligence, and how it is gripping the imagination of our culture. But more than that, he explains why this mainstream infatuation offers ripe evangelistic opportunities.

Kirsty Birkett (page 20), in her last piece for us as a faculty member, takes a look at the self-help industry, asking why its plethora of books promoting me-time, mindfulness and personal fulfilment, doesn't have a genre of self-sacrifice.

Meanwhile, in another area of culture which generates at least as much heat as light, transgenderism has recently been described as a new form of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, in which transgender people believe the 'real me' is trapped inside the wrong body. This proposal produced a strong

response, and Michael Hayden (page 32) weighs the arguments, calling for theologically informed debate over an issue that is right at the top of the cultural agenda.

Fiona Gibson (page 26) has noticed that 'whenever I get together with other vicars, one of their first questions is, how big are your congregations?' She asks why rural ministry is frequently judged by numbers, when village churches often serve their communities so well. Also thinking about community is David Baldwin (page 14), who asks why we treat hospitality like an optional extra in the Christian life when it is such a strong theme in the Bible. He takes a fresh look at a practice which lies at the heart of the gospel, and is vital in communicating it.

Eric Ortlund has been travelling over the past few months, first to Japan to teach Old Testament. He shares (on page 8) what it meant to take the Japanese context seriously when opening up the Pentateuch or the book of Job, saying that the experience deepened him as

a Christian. Meanwhile, he also visited closer to home, going to the exhibition of Assyria's last great King, Ashurbanipal, at the British Museum. He says the show 'shed much light on the ancient world, and helps us enter the pain and hope of the Old Testament more imaginatively.'

David Shaw (page 17) takes us into the heart of the New Testament with some focused commentary on Jesus' last words on the cross in the Gospel of John. It was 'one of those passages I knew exactly how to preach until I thought about it,' he says.

Oak Hill's faculty have produced two new books this year. One by me (Dan Strange), *Plugged In*, is all about 'connecting your faith with what you watch, read and play'. Although I was very much writing a 21st century book, I found the 'five solas' of the Reformation invaluable (see page 12). Also out this year is Matthew Sleeman's illustrated new book for children, *Follow Jesus with Peter*. The book is a sequel to Matthew's book of two years ago on Mark's Gospel for children. and he talks (on page 24) about Bibles, epistles and young discipleship.

Finally, Chris Green (page 35) closes this issue of *Commentary* by reviewing an important new book which asks questions about the disturbing world coming into being via Google, Facebook, Microsoft and Amazon. 'As a direct consequence, I've tried to stop using Google as much as possible,' he says.

Johnny Juckes is President of Oak Hill, and Dan Strange is College Director of Oak Hill

commentary

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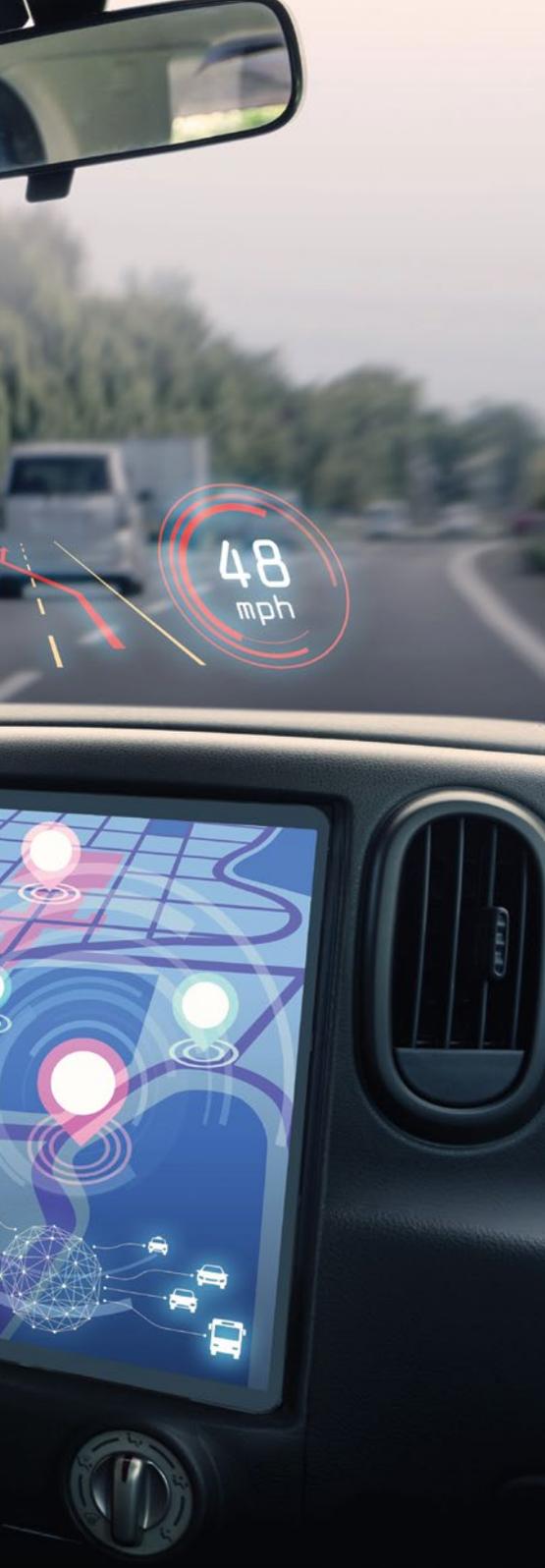
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The kingdom of bots is near



The future, growth and threat of AI (artificial intelligence) is currently gripping the imagination of our culture. Ben Clube explains why this mainstream infatuation offers ripe evangelistic opportunities

The past century has seen explosive interest in Artificial Intelligence (AI). Undoubtedly, pop-fiction has perpetuated the hype with *The Terminator* in the 80s, *The Matrix* in the 90s, and a deluge since the millennium with *I-robot*, *Ex Machina*, *Black Mirror*, and *Westworld*.

But the fixation is not confined to fiction. AI is already here – that is, non-biological machines that in some way mimic human intelligence. In existence today, all around us, are machines that vastly outperform humans at specific intelligence tasks, such as memorisation, calculation and recognition. Consider your smartphone: it remembers thousands of dates and numbers perfectly. Ask it nicely and it will tell you. Supposedly, 50 per cent of Westerners now speak to AI in their homes, whilst 95 per cent carry devices with them at all times, checking them on average every 4.3 minutes.

Like early cyborgs, we are inextricably connected to our tech. Moreover, according to 'the law of accelerating returns', tech is advancing exponentially. We already have AI that flies planes, composes music and recognises faces, as

well as robots that run and jump over rough terrain. So what does the future hold?

Becoming pets

Experts and entrepreneurs such as Larry Page, Elon Musk and Stephen Hawking have warned that once machines achieve human levels of ability and intelligence they will necessarily race ahead, becoming superior in every conceivable way, including physicality, creativity, morality, emotionality, logic and endurance. Marvin Minsky states that humans are about to become 'pets' to a far greater species. Max Tegmark pleads that this is 'the most important conversation of our time', while Bill Joy fears that humans could be 'replaced' in his lifetime.

Theologian Russell Moore recently said, 'There are many heated debates in Washington, many of them important, but no issues keep me awake at night like those surrounding technology and artificial intelligence. The implications artificial intelligence will have for our future are vast.'

Becoming machines

So what hope do we have in the face of this coming invasion? Well, if you ask the tech gurus in Silicon Valley, the solution is bold but obvious: the human body is outdated hardware and our only hope for survival is to become machines. Like modern Gnostics, they propose that we liberate ourselves from our accursed flesh, although they also propose that we unite ourselves to new silicon bodies, thus becoming impervious to death and able to upgrade ourselves infinitely under the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent rule of AI. (Quite where materialists get the idea of an 'eternal, immaterial me' that lives inside my body, I don't know).

The most prominent proponent of this transhumanist movement is Google's Director of Engineering, Ray Kurzweil. A remarkably ambitious and accomplished academic with 20 honorary doctorates, three presidential awards and an astonishing history of inventions and predictions, Kurzweil isn't just some crisp-covered blogger who's seen too much *Star Wars* – he's deadly serious with this strategy. Kurzweil concludes: 'By the

end of the twenty-first century, there won't be a clear difference between humans and robots... there won't be mortality.'

Metal gods

Of course, there is plenty of lively debate around the realisation of these wild dreams. In some sense, the more pressing concern is how quickly people are embracing this strange story. Through exciting films, incredible advances and mind-blowing promises, the story has inexorably gripped our collective imagination. Billions are being invested in the hope of acquiring upgraded bodies and eternal life. Given the utter magnitude of the claims, we can confidently assert that the AI myth has become a techno-religion. But it might not be as modern as you think.

Isn't it strange that even our earliest ancestors habitually made metal statues that looked like us in the hope of procuring blessing and eternal life? Isn't it strange that in God's top ten commandments for life, he includes, 'I am God – do not make metal gods'? He knows us well. Far from being a new problem, this seems to be one of humanity's most consistent habits, a project indelibly etched in our hearts: to fashion gods from the ground. All the while, we scoff at the almost unfathomable stupidity of the ancients for praying to lifeless statues, thinking, how could they be so primitive?

Icarus revisited

Icarus once declared, 'All limits are self-imposed'. It's a quote now cherished by entrepreneurs who I'm pretty sure have never read about Icarus. The sorry demise of Icarus was a matter of misplaced trust in his technology. But imagine the intrigue when Icarus first told people he could fly. Imagine the wonder when they first saw him take flight. It was for freedom that Icarus flew higher than his wings allowed, and it was precisely freedom that he lost. The AI world desperately needs to recover a posture of humility before hubris turns utopian dreams into dystopian reality.

I want to propose that this is now a critically important (and exciting) field for Christians to engage with. Not least to provide theological input into its claims and the ensuing ethical debates. But also because this mainstream

infatuation – which doesn't appear to be departing anytime soon – offers ripe evangelistic opportunities as it strikes right at the heart of key existential questions, such as, who are we, why are we here, what is death, how do we solve it, where are we headed? Evidently, our deep, dark, secular world is filled with people asking profoundly religious questions and seeking profoundly religious solutions.

Don't be such a technophobe

Christians are not supposed to be dragged into the future kicking and screaming, clinging to the glory days before electricity and exorcising Alexa devices. Like the technopians, Christians are deeply optimistic futurists. After all, the Bible begins with God commissioning primitive garden dwellers to bring things to order (Genesis 1:28) and ends with a highly engineered city (Revelation 21:15-21). Technology is essential for us to carry out the creation mandate.

Of course, the fall has grossly affected technology and our relationship with it. While we are capable of making amazing technology (e.g. defibrillators) we are also capable of making destructive technology (e.g. sex-bots). Truthfully, most technology is more neutral, such as the knife, which can be used to chop vegetables or murder somebody. AI is like no technology we have seen before and we desperately need Christians to engage meaningfully with it for God's glory and the common good.

The Pinocchio problem

Here are just a few firm statements Christians can make:

1. Being made in God's image bestows all humans with inherent value. This stands in opposition to transhumanism, which says we are outdated machines destined for domination. To label a person 'outdated' relative to a superintelligent master race implies that intelligence equals value. The history books are replete with horrific examples such ideologies have wrought on humankind. Robot-rights are arriving essentially because materialists cannot clearly distinguish between human and machine. Their answer to

Pinocchio's question, 'I can move! I can talk! I can walk! Am I a real boy?' is fast becoming a befuddled 'yes'.

2. The Image of God insists that our dominion and stewardship over creation is incapable of being repudiated or transferred to machines. While we may relinquish increasing control to algorithms, machines cannot and must not pretend to usurp human government.

3. Machines should never be ascribed human identity, value, or moral or spiritual agency, regardless of how convincingly they are programmed to mimic consciousness.

4. While AI presents promising possibilities for the world, transhumanism is an inherently void assignment. Although we can replace (and technically upgrade) parts of our anatomy, human beings are innately embodied. Christ's incarnate resurrection affirms this for eternity.

5. Eternal life cannot be acquired through technology, principally because death is not a technical problem, but a spiritual problem incurable outside of Christ.

A pirated story

Like most stories, the AI story is a pirated copy of the Christian story. It begins with humans in the place of God breathing life into creations fashioned in their image. But it transpires we live in a broken world with cursed bodies facing death. Modern prophets prepare the way for incarnate saviours – a hypostatic union of metal and man. The gospel is offered through union with these saviours: broken people born again once the old self is removed and the new self put on. This ushers in an eternal age of blessing, with upgraded bodies where every tear is wiped away under superintelligent rule.

Sounds familiar? I'm really passionate to share with people how the Christian story is better than AI. After all, everything AI is ultimately after has already been achieved and offered freely in the hands of Christ.

Ben Clube is studying on the Theological and Pastoral Studies stream at Oak Hill College

Old Testament meets Japan



A recent experience of teaching the Old Testament in Japan shows Eric Ortlund the value, as well as the transformative effect, of taking the context seriously in theological education

I recently had an opportunity to teach a week-long seminar on the book of Job at Christ Bible Seminary in Nagoya, Japan. It was my third time teaching there and I hope to return on a regular basis. Japan is perhaps not the most natural country for an Old Testament scholar to be interested in – at least, not when the Middle East has so many sites and antiquities of direct relevance to the Bible, and not when Arabic has so many similarities to biblical Hebrew (Semitic languages have a remarkable ability to resist change).

But I started praying about ways to be involved in Japan when I learned, much to my surprise, that despite being a modern, developed country, Japan is the second-largest unreached people group in the world. Since 99.9 per cent of Japan's 127 million people will never meet a Christian or know enough about Jesus to even have an opinion about him, ministry in Japan takes on special urgency.

It's a commonplace that one has to know one's audience to speak effectively. Speaking effectively to Japanese seminary students, however, presents special challenges. This is not bad: part of the goodness of creation is a near-riotous diversity in the world's environments, its species,

and the humans who rule it in God's image; it is human sin and pride that insist on complete uniformity, and it's when all the earth speaks one language that Babel is attempted (Genesis 11).

But any teacher or preacher who underestimates these differences inevitably miscommunicates, and Japan is profoundly different from any Western country. It actually took me a while to realise this. On the surface, Japanese airports, stores and cities look pretty Western; it was only until my second trip that I realised how completely different the cultural 'code' is, how different the complex set of expectations and interactions and cultural 'scripts' are. That's when the culture shock hit!

One of the most pronounced differences – one which must be remembered constantly while teaching – is that Japan is a culture of obligation. One does one's duty and respects one's superiors regardless of personal feelings. I was told by my translator that if you are given a gift by a friend and then don't see that friend for 10 years, it is expected that you bring a gift to your next meeting – and the gift should be of equal value. Individual expression,



setting out on your own, 'doing your own thing', are definitely not valued in Japan. Even though Frank Sinatra's 'I Did It My Way' is popular in karaoke, no one really does.

This means that teaching the Pentateuch (for example) in Japan requires special care. In Western contexts, teaching the part of the Old Testament which has the most rules requires a defence of Torah, even for Christians. Our individualistic context, in which autonomy and personal

I read of one evangelist in Japan who speaks more of Christ purifying our dirtiness than suffering our sins - both explanations are entirely biblical, but the former has more traction with Japanese audiences

self-expression are prized above all, finds rules confining and restricting; as a result, teaching the Pentateuch effectively must show how God's rules are not arbitrary impositions but a means of extending and preserving the salvation and new life he has won for his people in the Exodus.

One has to approach the same truth from a completely different angle in Japan: it can be easy for Japanese Christians to read the Pentateuch as if God is setting up a relationship of obligation with his people, as if God's people discharge the debt they've incurred in the Exodus by obedience to the Torah. In contrast to this, the 'good news' of God's law is that even his rules are a means by which he extends and protects his saving actions for his people so they can flourish. Even God's law is, in other words, a means of giving to his people, not obligation. The meaning of the text does not change, but must be approached from a diametrically opposite perspective.

Other examples of this sort multiply. Reading Ecclesiastes with students raised in a Shinto context has been especially eye-opening, since they assure me that a Shinto priest would probably agree with Qohelet's diagnosis of life 'under the sun' as passing away and full of vanity. But while a Shinto response to this diagnosis would probably emphasize detachment and freedom from desire, Qohelet distinguishes himself by naming the vanity and shortness of life as themselves reasons to engage with life enthusiastically as a gift from God (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10).

The purity laws of the Old Testament register in a similarly interesting way: Japanese are extremely particular about cleanliness, in such a way that bleeds into social manners and how one's character is assessed. Leviticus also (as part of the old covenant, in which God is physically present with his people) addresses both physical and spiritual purity as necessary to enter God's presence.

In fact, I read of one evangelist in Japan who speaks more of Christ purifying our dirtiness than suffering our sins - both explanations are entirely biblical, but the former has more traction with Japanese audiences. (The Japanese word for 'sin,' *tsumi*, literally means 'crime', and can be confusing for people hearing the gospel who have never been convicted in court.)

And every time I walk past the Shinto shrine near the seminary, I can't help but notice how the outer courtyard (filled with beautiful cherry blossoms) leads to a building with a smaller room at the back where the kami ('god' or 'spirit') is enshrined. One doubts that there's any connection to the tripartite structure of the Israelite tabernacle (outer courtyard, holy place, and most holy place), but it is awfully suggestive. One of the faculty at the seminary told me that ministry in Japan requires a very healthy doctrine of common grace. Whenever I see a Shinto shrine, I find myself agreeing.

But all this makes it sound as if the Western professor of Old Testament is expertly adjusting his teaching strategy to a different context. My experience has actually been that something more subtle and beautiful happens: without meaning to, and simply by being what they are, one's Japanese friends (or Chinese, Indian or African) deepen you as a Christian. As one's teaching is translated into Japanese, one finds oneself translated as well, and the better for it.

I mentioned purity laws above. Would it surprise you that after having been to a country where one changes shoes when entering a building or a bathroom, I became much more conscious of tracking 'dirt' inside and started to change shoes when I came to my office? And that I found the practice edifying in a way difficult to put into words?

Or a more significant example: in a karate class, the instructor jokingly told us that even when he was wrong, he was right – but he was only half joking. Karate is not a democracy! Although Japan's authoritarianism frequently runs to extremes, I found it liberating to be in a context where I always had to bow to the instructor – liberating because it gave much-needed distance from my own feelings. Regardless of whether I felt like doing it, I did.

For an American raised in a culture obsessed with self and positive self-regard and self-expression, it was quite a relief to simply do what I was told. The implications for Christian discipleship are obvious and, for me, profound. One bows before the Lord Christ and does what one is told – no mess, no quibbling, no waffling.

But all this makes it sound as if the Western professor of Old Testament is expertly adjusting his teaching strategy to a different context. My experience has actually been that something more subtle and beautiful happens: without meaning to, and simply by being what they are, one's Japanese friends (or Chinese, Indian or African) deepen you as a Christian. As one's teaching is translated into Japanese, one finds oneself translated as well, and the better for it

There is much darkness in Japanese culture which I haven't had opportunity to talk about, but which one quickly comes across during visits: very high suicide rates, especially among young people; the phenomenon of *karoshi* (overworking oneself to death) or *hikkimori* (hermits who stay in their rooms for years, refusing to participate in the culture); the entrenched sexual sin (child pornography only recently became illegal, and attitudes toward it are still lax); the profound loneliness ('cuddle cafes' offer hugs and embraces with a stranger – nothing more – for a fee). In fact, a recurrent experience in Japan is a startling juxtaposition of pleasantness with darkness.

But even a culture formed with essentially zero Christian influence has been generous to me. I am reminded of something CS Lewis said, in his book *The Four Loves*, after Charles Williams died, which applies as much to other cultures as it does individuals:

'In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's [Tolkien's] reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from having more of Ronald... I have less of Ronald... In this, Friendship exhibits a glorious 'nearness by resemblance' to heaven itself where the very multitude of the blessed (which no man can number) increases the fruition which each of us has of God. For every soul, seeing Him in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest... The more we thus share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall have.'

The happy effect of contextualizing the gospel is that one receives by so doing, and is a better Christian for it. Not only that, but the vision of 'every tribe and tongue and nation' worshipping before the throne (Revelation 7:9) becomes a little more tangible, and the God being worshipped more manifoldly beautiful, as each declares some aspect of his perfections.

Eric Ortlund lectures in Old Testament and Biblical Hebrew at Oak Hill

PLUGGED IN

Dan Strange's new book, *Plugged In*, is all about 'connecting your faith with what you watch, read and play'. We asked Dan to take us through some of the theological background to the book



For the last 14 years, I've been teaching various Oak Hill courses in the areas of cultural engagement, mission, evangelism and apologetics. My new book *Plugged In: Connecting your faith with what you watch, read and play*, is a pocket-sized, accessible version of lots of this material, aimed at all Christians.

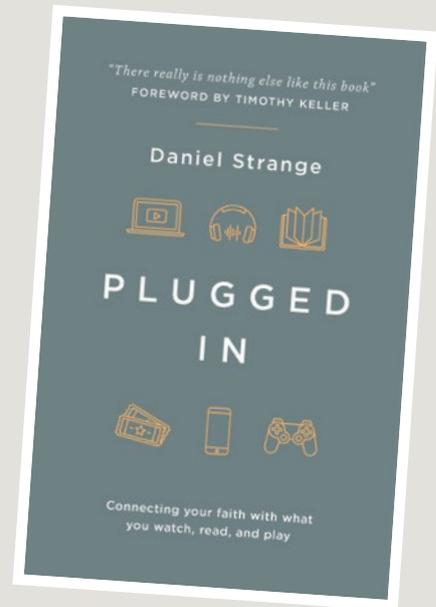
We engage culture because we care are about Jesus, about following Jesus, and about telling others about Jesus. *Plugged In* not only gives this a biblical and theological rationale, but is also a practical 'how to' guide, with contemporary worked examples, including some of the brilliant Oak Hill student work I've marked in the last decade. I hope and pray that the book will be a useful resource to Christians in the UK and beyond.

If it's OK to dream (and of course it is!), I dream that Christians would buy it, read it, and get together to have 'Plugged In' groups in their homes and churches which can use

the book's framework to both engage our culture, 'filling and subduing the earth', 'keeping ourselves from idols', and all for the glory of Christ and his kingdom.

Now, no book on engaging culture would be complete without the much-asked question: 'As a Christian, is it OK for me to watch a TV show with sex and/or violence?' A chapter of the book is devoted to this issue, although I was reluctant to write it, as I knew how complex this question is and how much heat has been generated from it over the last few years. In this chapter, while I offer some practical suggestions, the heart of it is a somewhat surprising test or filter through which we can measure our cultural consumption and creation.

You might remember that 2017 saw the 500th birthday celebrations of the Reformation. During that summer, I was asked to give a series of conference talks on the five Solas



of the Reformation – five slogans featuring the word sola (Latin for 'alone'), which became a rallying cry for what it meant to be Protestant. Let's call them theological football-chants: Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, God's glory alone.

At the time, I thought preparing this material would be a welcome 16th century break from all the 21st century culture stuff I'm normally thinking about. To my surprise, as I prepped, I was struck by the relevance of these slogans to the whole cultural engagement topic. These precious truths, which are the heartbeat of our faith, can act as foundations, fences and flags for us. Here's a taster of how I talk about this in the book.

Scripture alone - declares that the Bible is our ultimate authority and that we must interpret the world through the Word. This is not just thinking about the Bible but thinking through the Bible, or thinking biblically about everything else. So it's not about cherry-picking verses, stories and isolated truths, but going deep. The Bible has repeated structures and patterns which act as a pair of x-ray goggles we put on to see all the world all the time as it really is. If we don't discern, articulate and persuade others - using the Bible's blueprint for the flourishing of human life and culture - then others will... and are. And ultimately these alternative stories are all hope-less.

Grace alone - reminds us that our acceptance before God is not based on anything we do, but on what God has done in Christ. We contribute nothing. We can't earn our salvation - it's a free gift. What's the cultural relevance of this? It means that our reason for watching or not watching something needs to be grace focused.

We should be wary about any rationale for 'no' that puts imperatives

(e.g. be holy) before indicatives (e.g. you are holy in Christ). This order matters. If I'm saved by grace alone, then the motive behind my cultural choices is not to keep rules to somehow impress God or prove myself worthy, but to love and honour God because of what he's already done for me.

Faith alone - reminds me of the means through which I am united to Christ and receive all his benefits - it is through faith alone. These benefits include what John Calvin calls 'double grace'. First, through our initial faith we are reconciled to God - Christ's blameless record becomes our blameless record. Second, through our ongoing faith we are, in the words of John Calvin, 'sanctified by Christ's Spirit [so that] we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.' Far from tip-toeing around simply trying to avoid evil, our living faith spurs us to pursue good works that spill out into our churches and communities, bringing blessing to individuals, families and society at large: 'You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love' (Galatians 5:13). Our good works include our cultural endeavours, which are part of the way we have dominion and fill and subdue the earth.

Christ alone - should act as a sobering reminder of our call to holiness. In 1 Peter 1:17-19, the apostle says that we are to live in 'reverent fear', for we know that 'it was not with perishable things such as silver

or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.' We should be rightfully fearful of ever conducting ourselves in a way that suggests our new birth doesn't matter - that Christ was wasting his time when he laid down his life, and probably didn't need to bother. John Piper gave us a slap around the face, wake up call here, in a blog post from 2014 entitled, 'Twelve Questions to Ask Before You Watch Game of Thrones': 'If we choose to endorse or embrace or enjoy or pursue impurity, we take a spear and ram it into Jesus's side every time we do. He suffered to set us free from impurity.'

God's glory alone - is the glue which sticks all the solas together and sums them all up: there's nothing we bring, it's all about him. So whether or not God is being glorified is the ultimate litmus test of faithful cultural consumption and creation. Everything we do can be, and ought to be, done for his glory: 'Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God' (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Daniel Strange is the Director of Oak Hill College, and the author of Plugged In: Connecting your faith with what you watch, read, and play (Good Book Company 2019)

Hospitality and the gospel



Generous, open hospitality is a recurring theme in the Bible, but we often treat it like an optional extra of the Christian life. David Baldwin takes a fresh look at a practice which lies at the heart of the gospel

Have you ever rooted around at the back of an old medicine cabinet and discovered some archaic looking medicines they don't seem to make anymore? Usually it goes straight in the bin, even if the bottle's pretty, but just occasionally you might find something really potent, but sadly forgotten.

The medicine I've just rediscovered, mouldering at the back of my cabinet, is called *philoxenos*. Sounds like a fancy new drug, marketed by some slick pharmaceutical company, doesn't it? If I tell you that it's a wonder drug with a sinister and deadly antidote, I hope your ears will prick up. If I add that the antidote is *phoboxenos*, or *xenophobos*, you'll start to see through me.

Yes, I'm talking about a pair of words from the Bible, which you probably suspected all along. We immediately recognise one of those words from common usage: 'xenophobia', the fear of strangers. But the other doesn't seem to be very current; *philoxenos* certainly hasn't cropped up in any recent conversations I've had. Literally, 'love of strangers', *philoxenos* is most often translated as 'hospitable' in the New Testament. It crops up several times, often with imperative force:

- Pursue hospitality – it requires effort (Romans 12:13)
- Practice hospitality – it makes us grumble (1 Peter 4:9)
- Don't neglect to practice hospitality – your guests might be angels (Hebrews 13:1-2)
- Elders should be hospitable – a key leadership qualification (1 Timothy 3:2)
- Widows get listed for help – only if they've been hospitable (1 Timothy 5:10)
- Missionaries must be welcomed in hospitably – and thus sent on again (3 John 5-8)
- Jesus teaches us to welcome strangers – because actually it's him (Matthew 25:35)

Many of us seem to have a cultural blind spot here. We have somehow formed a corporate delusion that hospitality isn't for everyone. There are always those in the church who are very good at it, so we naturally want to stand back and let them get on with it. In so doing, we assume that hospitality is more like a spiritual gift or ministry preference, than a normative Christian grace.

And so we leave it to those who seem natural at it, those with lovely big homes, those who have enough time, those with the bank balance to make it feasible, those who are married, those who have separate dining rooms, those who can cook, those who 'like to entertain'.

The very heart of the gospel

However, the Bible won't let us see hospitality as an optional extra. Instead, the gospel itself is hospitality – God's incredible hospitality to us. God is the ultimate host, and we are the strangers, now guests, at his table. He's delighted to have us. Forgiveness in Christ is the main course; wonderful side dishes adorn the table. Good

If Christ's Easter passion is the very heart of the gospel, how strange is it that Jesus considered the best way to remember his saving work was through communal eating and drinking?

friends are there; none of us deserving the invitation.

If we rightly identify Christ's Easter passion as the very heart of the gospel, how strange is it that Jesus considered the best way to remember his saving work was through communal eating and drinking? Not a shared credal statement, but a shared meal. How weird is that?! (Don't worry, I like creeds too.)

Then there's Jesus himself. As Tim Chester points out in his book, *A Meal With Jesus* (IVP, 2011), while the Son of Man came to seek and save, and to serve, bizarrely, he also came 'eating and drinking' (Luke 7:34). So prominent was this, that 'glutton and drunkard' was the tab he was labelled with. He hung out with unworthy people, in unworthy homes, around unworthy tables, eating and drinking. One writer, Robert Karris, comments of Luke's gospel: 'Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal.' Did Jesus have a problem – or do I?

But I wasn't even on the New Testament shelf of the medicine cabinet when I rediscovered the importance of *philoxenos*. I was way back in Genesis where everything got started. When Abraham and Sarah welcome the three strangers by the oaks of Mamre they heard from their lips a crucial message (Genesis 18:1-16).

I realise that the promised son was more important than the 22 litres of flour Sarah made into bread, not to mention the curds, the milk and the fatted calf. Yes, I get that. The 'main point' of the passage isn't: 'be hospitable'. But the excessively generous hospitality and its acceptance somehow seem to be wrapped up in the main business, not just the context for it. We already know Abraham to be a man of faith, so maybe these guest-host exchanges are enacting greater things that are going on. This hospitality around the tents, the first recorded example, seems to be a distinguishing mark of true faith.

When I turn the page into Genesis 19, I'm sure of it, because that chapter tells the torrid tale of Sodom's destruction and Lot's salvation. Like Abraham, Lot demonstrates his faith through his hospitality. He's saved. Likewise, the people of Sodom demonstrate their godlessness through their in-hospitality (Genesis 19:4-9). Hospitality graciously brings in and gives out; the Sodomites ruthlessly seek out to suck dry. Was their main sin sexual at all? Divine judgment follows. Rosaria Butterfield, in her recent book, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*, comments that 'hospitality is the ground zero of the Christian life.'

Call that hospitality?!

Is inviting church people around for a meal – Sunday lunch, say – hospitality? Well... yes and no. In a recent essay, fourth year Oak Hill student Song Tsai argues that asking contemporaries over is more like entertaining or 'having a dinner party' than what Luke-Acts has in view. Inviting your church friends round to share your home cooking may be little more than 'having your mates round for a nice meal'.

But while inviting people home from church might not be the full *philoxenos* picture envisaged in scripture, it's certainly a start. How can that start be built upon?

Andrew Arterbury, in his book, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting*, makes five observations about New Testament hospitality:

- Hospitality may be initiated by either host or guest
- Believers seek out hospitality from other fellow believers in new locations
- Food and lodging are vital components of hospitality
- Hospitality entwines guests and hosts intimately
- The host provides for the guests' onward journey and escorts them as they leave

And then there's the whole 'stranger' thing. That all sounds like a whole lot more than most of us thought we were signing up for. Butterfield describes a 'radically ordinary hospitality' that is radically different from prevailing norms and ordinary in its deliberate simplicity. She's onto something. Occasionally there may be a place for a gourmet feast with the finest dishes and choicest wines

(Isaiah 25:6) but that's not how we normally eat. Usually it's something like pasta.

Most of our hospitality should be incredible ordinary, which really takes the pressure off. What should be special is not the food but the time we give to our guests, the warmth of our welcome and the loving space we create in our homes for them to open up like flowers and, as it were, unwrap their gifts. Butterfield writes as somebody whose own heart was first warmed through the loving hospitality she experienced in a Christian home. Though she was an adversarial stranger to the Christians who lived there, she first saw the gospel fleshed out in an ordinary home.

How should *philoxenos* be taken?

Here are a few suggestions:

- Start with small doses and gradually build up
- Don't bother with a silver spoon, any old cutlery will do
- Don't keep out of reach of children – if taken wisely, children thrive on *philoxenos*
- Take internally and externally – apply liberally to heart and mind, then allow *philoxenos* to inform muscle memory
- Not only to be taken individually, try taking *philoxenos* as a group
- Warning! *Philoxenos*, though costly, will make you a bit giddy with gladness

In a Christian subversion of *feng shui*, perhaps we might take a wander round our homes with a bottle of *philoxenos* in our hands. Stand at your threshold and come in. Imagine you are a variety of guests. Pause inside the door. What happens here? When you've been a guest, what has made you feel welcome? Move into the other rooms, lingering in each. What does the guest see? What wordless messages are conveyed? Where are the obvious spaces for guests? Sit a while in your lounge. What is the main feature in this place of sitting and who is it for? How might the space say 'strangers are welcome here'? Whose home is this? What might need to change? Whose time is measured by the tick-tock of your clock?

David Baldwin is the Director of Theology for Crossing Cultures at Oak Hill

JESUS SAID, 'IT IS FINISHED'

The account of Jesus' last words on the cross in the Gospel of John was 'one of those passages I knew exactly how to preach until I thought about it,' says David Shaw. He takes a fresh look at the words of Jesus, in our commentary series on the text of the Bible

'Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.' (John 19:28-30, NIV)

This is one of those passages I knew exactly how to preach until I thought about it. It seemed obvious: It is finished. Sins are atoned for. Forgiveness is won. Let's sing 'Tis finished! The Messiah dies' and be on our way. And yet, the more I reflected, the more I realised I was about to make two mistakes. First, I was in danger of missing that the 'it' that is finished is a far bigger 'it' than I realised. Second, I've come to see that 'it is finished' also means that something is beginning.

It is finished

That something is finishing or being brought to completion is very clear in the original Greek here. In verse 28 we read that Jesus, knowing that everything had been completed (τετέλεσται), and so that Scripture would be completed (τελειωθη), asks for wine and then, in verse 30, he himself says 'It is completed' (τετέλεσται).

And what is the 'it'? Well, in the wonderful words of Spurgeon, 'It is the biggest "it" that ever was. Turn it over and you will see that it will grow,

and grow, and grow, and grow, till it fills the whole earth.' So, without any claims to exhausting what might be said, let's mention a few things. To do that we can rummage back through the Gospel and capture something of what is being completed here.

Back in chapter 1, we hear that the Word becomes flesh that we might become children of God (John 1:12), and here in John 19 we are shown that Jesus has finished everything necessary for that. That's the connection between John 19:27 and 28. Jesus has just forged his new faith family by his words to his mother and his beloved disciple, and it is after this (John 19:28), that he knows everything has been completed. Jesus' death is the birth of the church into the family of God and their relations of mutual love. This is the 'it' that is finished. But there is more.

Staying in John 1, we could think about the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). John's Gospel consistently flags up this final Passover (John 13:1, 18:28, 18:39, 19:14) and now the lamb of God is sacrificed. John will show us that in the verses to come. As Jesus is taken down from the cross, no bone of his body will be broken (John 19:33, 36), showing that Jesus meets the regulations for a spotless Passover lamb (Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12). And here in John 19:29 there is an echo of the Passover in the hyssop, used to paint the blood on the doorways in Egypt (Exodus 12:22), now used to lift the wine to Jesus' lips. A perfect atoning sacrifice. This is the 'it' that is finished. But there is more.

Think of Jesus' meeting with the

Samaritan woman in John 4. That's the last time Jesus asked for a drink in the Gospel, and there he spoke of meeting our thirst. 'The water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (John 4:14). When Jesus comes back to that thought in John 7, he speaks of how rivers of living water will flow from within those who believe in him. We are told that this is according to Scripture (John 7:38), and, given that John both connects this water with the gift of the Spirit and echoes Ezekiel's promises of washing and new life in various places, it is likely we are to think of the blessings of the new covenant here that accompany the forgiveness of sins.

Believers will be new temples from which water flows (Ezekiel 47 and Zechariah 14:8); they will be cleansed and purified by the gift of the Spirit (Ezekiel 36). This too is the 'it' that is finished. But there is more.

John would surely want to say something about the defeat of the Devil and the gathering of the nations. In John 12:31, when 'the hour' arrives, Jesus announces that 'now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.' In John 16:11, Jesus says that the prince of the world stands condemned and it is surely here at the cross, where contrary to all appearances, he is the one condemned. He is the one stripped and shamed and exposed.

Likewise in chapter 12, Jesus says that 'when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself' (12:42). Throughout the Gospel, Jesus has hinted at this worldwide family



that he will draw together, and it is in his lifting up that he will do it. Everything necessary is done. All of that and more is the 'it' that is now completed.

Read as a whole, John wants us to realise how enormous, how world-changing, is the 'it' that is finished.

It begins

In this section I want to suggest that when Jesus says 'it is finished', we should also hear that as a rallying call to ministry. Having listened to few sermons on this passage, I suspect that's counter-intuitive. By far the most common application goes like this: 'Jesus has completed everything, so you don't need to do anything. Salvation has been accomplished, so stop it. Whatever you're doing, stop it.'

OK, I exaggerate a bit, but you get the idea. In the words of one hymn, we are to 'Cast our deadly "doing" down'. There is a lot that is true and helpful here. I myself was itching to apply the completed work of Christ to our busyness and anxieties that reflect hearts still seeking approval and vindication.

And yet, I think John's Gospel points in a different direction. At the very heart of it are two sendings. First, the Son is sent by the Father into the world. Then, just as the Father sent him, so the Son sends his people into the world (John 17:18, 20:21). In the chapters leading up to Jesus' arrest, he is preparing the disciples to go into the world, to be sent by Jesus just as the Father sent him. The upper room is not so much a witness protection programme as a witness preparation

programme. They will be equipped by the Spirit (a third sending) and will go proclaiming the gospel of forgiveness, and feeding Jesus' sheep. And now that Jesus has completed his mission, their mission can start.

John alludes to that even here in John 19:30. Again the Greek is instructive; it could be translated: 'Jesus said, "It is finished," and, bowing his head, he handed over the Spirit.' The attentive reader has been expecting Jesus to hand over the Spirit to his followers for their mission, and this is a subtle nod to that (with John 20:22 developing that theme a little more).

Taken together, then, there is wonderful encouragement for gospel ministry here! In this scene we see the faithful completion of one mission and we are stirred to complete our own. Without his completed mission, ours would be impossible. But with his completed, everything is changed.

Think of the world into which we are sent. Full of hatred, to be sure (John 15:18-21); but this is a world from which we have been called out to join God's family. This is a world in which there is forgiveness of sins and Spirit-wrought new life; this is a world whose prince has been cast down and from which the nations are being gathered to the one who was lifted up. Every aspect of the 'it' that Jesus finished is an encouragement for us to pursue our mission until we, in our own way, can say 'it is finished.'

David Shaw lectures in New Testament and Greek at Oak Hill

Happiness and other problems



The self-help industry, with its plethora of books promoting me-time, mindfulness and personal fulfilment, doesn't have a genre of self-sacrifice. Kirsty Birkett looks at the problems of selfishness and a materialist world view in the search for happiness

A few months ago, a Dutch man, Emile Ratelband, made international headlines for his attempt to change his legal age. He has the body of a 45-year-old, according to his doctor, he said. He identifies as a younger man, and he is discriminated against unfairly when he has to reveal his actual age. If transgender people can change their legal sex, why could he not change his legal age?

He lost his legal battle, and he was met with responses from outrage to derision. The legal argument was interesting. There would be practical problems, the court apparently said; part of his life would have to be legally deleted. 'For whom did your parents care in those years?' the judge apparently said. 'Who was that little boy back then?'

The judge has a point; although, as I'm sure Mr Ratelband would have been quick to point out, such an argument applies just as logically to a person changing gender. Similarly for the judgment that 'there are other alternatives

available for challenging age discrimination, rather than amending a person's date of birth.'

Another response I came across objected to Mr Ratelband's trivialising of the transgender experience. Experiencing oneself as transgender, this objector complained, is a serious and traumatic condition. Mr Ratelband's feeling of being younger is, on the other hand, 'not even a thing'.

I've no desire to belittle the struggles of transgender people. I have seen the trauma it causes. I would, however, be inclined to agree with Mr Ratelband when he said that he would expect to be the first of thousands of people who want to change their age. Consider the massive industry around plastic surgery, designed to correct the disintegration of ageing bodies. It is most definitely 'a thing'. It is common that ageing people feel the same inside as they did when they were 20 or 30, and view with some bewilderment their bodies denying that perceived reality.



'Is there such a thing as "Vegan depression"?' a *Guardian* headline asked last September. Australian psychologist Clare Mann apparently thinks there is; she has coined the term 'vystopia', the psychological condition experienced by people who are vegans for ethical reasons. Sufferers of vystopia 'perceive a dystopian reality where government, business and most humans collude in horrific, ubiquitous exploitation and abuse of other species.'

They feel despair and loneliness, and can experience symptoms similar to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and other problems. They are genuinely horrified and appalled by the suffering they see all around them, and the dissonance of living in a world where most people seem not to care.

The response to this endeavour to make 'vegan depression' a recognised condition has been met with some scepticism. Get a grip, some of the response has been. Seriously? Vegan depression? You just need to eat a good steak, love. Your iron levels must be low.

Magazines put advice about good mental health alongside an unrelenting focus on materialism, glamour and the superiority of the thin and famous

So far, this article might seem rather disjointed; some random observations on things in the news lately. However, there is a point, and it came together for me recently as I was considering the problem of happiness.

Seekers of happiness are often met with derision, at least from those who consider themselves more thoughtful. The self-help industry with its plethora of books seeking happiness, and claiming to find the secret, is generally discounted by serious commentators, Christian and non-Christian alike. It's true that if any of these books or programmes really held the solution, then the world wouldn't keep buying more of them. Fads, tricks, lifestyles



that demand considerable wealth and leisure before they can even be contemplated, habits that would require ditching most of a social life – they are all out there, offering that elusive thing, a happy life.

It's also seen as hopelessly shallow. 'I have to practice my mindlessness', Edwina tells her long-suffering daughter in the *Absolutely Fabulous* film. Christians would add that there is a further theological problem: it's fundamentally selfish, seeing self-fulfilment as the ultimate goal. This is not just a moral problem; it is a basic theological problem, the essence of sin. It is the direct opposite of how Jesus lived. For that reason, many Christians will reject happiness as a worthy goal or aspiration at all. Anything so fundamentally self-centred is just theologically wrong.

They are right. The selfishness behind most of the self-help industry is a theological problem. Where is the genre of self-sacrifice, for instance? A useful tip about the psychological benefits of taking a walk outside very quickly degenerates into a dictum about the essential value of 'me-time', even if it means sacrificing duties to others in order to achieve it. Magazines will put advice about good mental health alongside an unrelenting focus on materialism, glamour and the superiority of the thin and famous.

Yet I would like to point out another theological problem, one that goes beyond ordinary selfishness. It is a theological problem which, I think, unites the rather disparate examples I have described above. What do a man wanting to change his legal age, a putative 'vegan depression', and the happiness industry have in common? They are not only about people seeking a better life, but also tell us about the constraints on where they are looking. They show us the problem of immanence.

Our world (or at least the only one acknowledged by public agenda-setting intellectuals) has been flattened to the here-and-now, the material universe and the material bodies that cease to exist when we die. This is the default view that is taught in schools, that holds sway in academia and the public square; anything else reduced to private opinion or wishful thinking. This is proclaimed as the triumph of rationality over superstition, the progressive view, the view that liberates us from darkness. However, on the contrary, as souls designed for eternity, it cripples us as we scrabble to cope with the tiny material box we

allow ourselves. A universe existing for and within the transcendent makes no sense without it.

In general, commentators from the secular world do not see this. Indeed, in some examples they do not even understand when it is pointed out to them. In an interview I read with two nuns who practice the strict Greek Orthodox tradition, the reporter was not even able to get the word right, recording their views on the 'imminent' rather than 'immanent', as if their emphasis was merely on avoiding work pressure. That is a problem that the world recognises, but it's not the real one. These nuns saw the true issue, that people have lost their sense of the transcendent.

If this world is truly the only one we have, the only one we can live for, then we have no way of accepting the reality it presents us with. It just can't be right that my body is ageing away around me. There has to be a solution. Medicine has to fix it and then the legal system has to redefine it. They just have to. This reality can't be as it is, if that is all there is. It's unbearable. If I only have this world, then I have no way of understanding what animals are and how to value them. Is it absolutely wrong to kill and eat them?

If I only have my feelings to guide me, and I happen to be a sensitive person, how am I to cope? Where can I turn if I am surrounded by people who just don't see the problem? What recourse have I except to spiral into depression?

There are ways to achieve happiness, but the difficulty we have in an immanent world is that those solutions – the ones that really work – require rejecting what is immediately in front of us. The things that are attractive, that sell the magazines, that propel the lucky to fame and fortune, don't actually bring happiness. To reject them in favour of a world-denying philosophy is, however, extremely hard; it's an almost impossible discipline when that same world is telling you, all the time, that there is nothing else. Our Western post-Enlightenment world has embraced immanence with unrelenting, overpowering fervour, and it is destroying us. Destroying itself.

Preaching transcendence in any form can feel foolish, especially in the scriptural form. However our world is parched for it. We must preach it, fervently. We need it.

Kirsty Birkett lectures in ethics, philosophy and church history at Oak Hill College



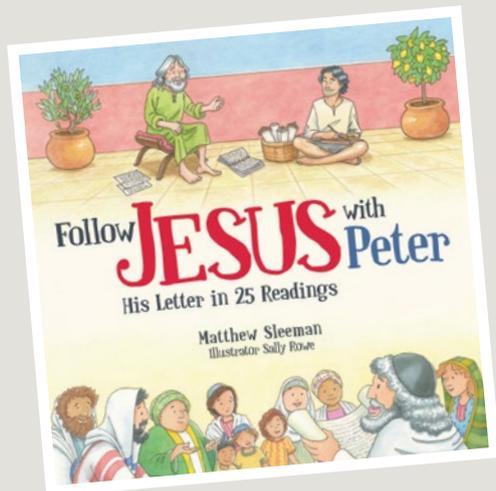
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FOLLOW JESUS WITH PETER



Two years ago, Matthew Sleeman wrote a book opening up Mark's Gospel for children. This year, his new book, *Follow Jesus with Peter*, draws on his teaching of the Greek text of 1 Peter. We asked him about Bibles, epistles and discipleship for children

Matthew, this is your second children's book – what's driving you to write them?

Two years ago, Christian Focus published *Meet Jesus in Mark*, a book for primary age children and those who read to them. This second book, *Follow Jesus with Peter*, is aiming at the same kind of audience. What's driving me to write them is a combination of having children and wanting them to enjoy and benefit from good, faithful Bible materials, and my teaching of New Testament

at Oak Hill. Each year, our first-year programme includes Mark's Gospel, and I work through 1 Peter in Greek with a third-year class. They're annual treats which feed me each year, which I want to share with others.

Isn't working on a children's book radically different to teaching 1 Peter in Greek at College?

Yes and no. Actually, there's a surprisingly strong overlap between the two. Both require being carefully

attentive to the text, for what God is saying in his word. The tougher thing with working for publication is that you've got to come to a fixed, singular decision on how to render it for print. Knowing the Greek text helps with making those calls. It raises emphases and sheer liveliness of expression which aren't always carried in translation. Teaching 1 Peter for 10 years at College has been a lengthy time to get to know the book, and to reflect on its message for various audiences.

What do you think children's Bibles lack, when they don't address the epistles?

On one level, exactly what adult Bibles would lack without the epistles. And you're right – too many children's Bibles do ignore the epistles. Perhaps they're put in the 'too-hard' basket, or lack an obvious narrative line. But as a result, children's Bibles lack a lot of rich reflection on what the gospel means, how it remakes us, and what fruit it wants to grow in our lives. For me, they're big costs, and I want children to be able to read and hear more of the whole counsel of God beyond those familiar parts with a strong story line.

What, particularly, do you think 1 Peter has to say to children?

A lot. Children who are following Jesus, or considering his call on their lives, need – as we all do – to know the greatness of Jesus' sin-bearing work on the cross, on our behalf. Unashamedly and seamlessly, 1 Peter also casts Jesus as an example for believers to follow. Peter urges children and adults that it's better to suffer because you're living your life for Jesus than to sin in order to escape suffering.

Increasingly, children hearing the call of Christ in our day face undermining challenges which reduce Jesus to just one voice among countless counter-voices

Also, the vastness and the tender care of God's plan for his people shines brightly, and practically, in how to live in the 'now' before Christ's return. Increasingly, children hearing the call of Christ in our day face undermining challenges which reduce Jesus to just one voice among countless counter-voices. I'm confident that 1 Peter will strengthen Jesus' call, and sweeten it, even for the youngest hearer. Sally Rowe, who illustrates the book, brought this home to me when she drew for 1 Peter 2:18-20 a child who is a slave. That was a first-century reality: Peter wrote for children, as well as adults.

What connection do you see between word and image in these books?

I see a rich connection. Some years ago, I supervised an excellent dissertation by David Shaw (who is now a colleague) that showed me an integrated way of seeing word and image in children's Bibles. May the word keep generating stirring mental and emotional pictures for us. Once again, Sally Rowe has produced incredibly generative illustrations. Many of them are going to be in my mind when I next teach 1 Peter, and will help me hold the wood and the trees together as we're diving into the detail of the Greek text.

What was hard about producing a book such as this?

Having commented on how many children's Bibles bypass the epistles, I now have a practical

understanding as to why they do! Producing a responsible paraphrase is a demanding task. Whereas with Mark's Gospel I was summarising a longer text, my version of 1 Peter is longer than the original. Responsible expansion is perhaps the preacher's regular task, but doing so in print, and for children, feels like a weighty challenge. I hope readers will think I've succeeded.

What, for you, would make this book worthwhile?

First, if children read it. Second, if they understand it. Third, if they love Jesus and follow him more keenly in light of it. Again, in this book, each section includes some explanatory notes and a prayer. I hope they will help children be increasingly prayerful. In years ahead, I'd love to meet people who treasure 1 Peter because they first read it here.

Do you have any plans for a third book of this kind?

Ah, yes, I think I do! Ephesians, perhaps? I'd like to look there next, I think.

Matthew Sleeman lectures in New Testament and Greek at Oak Hill College

*For David Shaw's work, see:
<https://bit.ly/2WFTSpm>*



Judging by numbers

‘Whenever I get together with other vicars, one of their first questions is, How big are your congregations?’ Fiona Gibson asks why rural ministry is often judged by numbers

After spending all of my pre-ordination life, and my curacy, in large suburban or town churches, I was surprised, to say the least, to find that God called me to serve my first incumbency in a rural benefice of three parishes. Each of the villages is small. The combined population of the three is about 2,100. The church congregations are even smaller. The combined electoral rolls are 112. Average Sunday attendances at the churches in 2018 were 15, 19 and 27. Tiny, by most measures. In the larger churches of which I used to be part there were more people on the PCC than I now have in the congregation on a ‘normal’ Sunday in some of the villages.

To some people, the obvious answer would be to close two of the three churches and make the three parishes into one. Indeed, one person in one of the three villages (who doesn’t come to church) suggests that to me regularly. Before I came to be a rural vicar, I might have thought the same.

Now, nearly five years in, I find that a hurtful suggestion. I find it hurtful because it seems to chime in with an attitude which seems to suggest small = failing, large = successful = God is pleased. Now small can mean failing. But so can

large. And large can mean successful. But so can small. It depends on the criteria you’re using to make your judgment.

Whenever I get together with other vicars, one of the first questions they ask is, ‘How big are your congregations?’ Immediately, I feel the need to start justifying myself, in the way I did when my children were tiny and I took them to the clinic to be weighed. ‘Oh, er, well, not that big really...’ I trail off into silence as I feel myself, my ministry, and the people I serve judged by numbers.

When did we get to the point where raw size equals success? And what does God think about it?

Where, in the talk of small = failing, large = successful, is the thinking about how God chooses the weak to shame the strong? About how God chose the lowly things, and the despised things, and the things that are not?

Which son of Jesse did God choose to be king? The youngest, the smallest, the overlooked one. Which woman did God choose to bear his incarnate Son? One who was so poor she could only offer the least sacrifice at the

temple. Which people did God choose to be his own? The fewest of all peoples. The weak. The lowly. The despised. We small, rural churches often feel like the weak, the lowly, sometimes even the despised.

So much of the Church of England comprises small, rural parishes, and yet if you have a conversation with an ordinand they won't often talk about seeing their future ministry (or even some portion of their ministry) as being in rural, multi-parish benefices. Yet in 2015, a General Synod study, *Released for Mission, Growing the Rural Church*, showed that 66 per cent of all Church of England parishes are in rural areas, and 65 per cent of church buildings are in rural areas. Some 67 per cent of deaneries are in rural areas, and 40 per cent of those who attend Church of England services on a Sunday attend rural parish churches.

Statistically, most Church of England clergy are therefore likely to serve in small, rural churches for at least part of their ministry. This shows that the Church of England is not dead; it's just that some of its life is in places we often pass by at speed on our way to somewhere else.

How can sending parishes and training institutions help candidates for Church of England ministry prepare for and embrace that reality? How can we assist candidates for ministry in all denominations to prepare for small, faithful, and hidden ministry – and to see that as just as much of a privilege as serving in a large, 'flagship' church?

What challenges can the small and the weak, rural or urban, offer to the large and the strong?

We do 'inter-generational' brilliantly. One of the most moving relationships in our churches is between a teenage girl and a woman in her 90s who has never married or had children of her own. They love one another. They actively seek each other out after church and chat for ages, sharing stories, sharing lives. I'm not saying that could never happen in a large church, but I suspect it would be considerably harder, as they would have found it harder to find one another. They would most likely have stuck with their own age groups.

We do 'one-anothering' brilliantly, because we know one another deeply. Some of the relationships in our village churches go back generations. People know one another's stories, and we are ever ready with a casserole, a cake, and

a hug. And we can, and do, easily notice and welcome new people to our services.

We know that church is not something we go to on a Sunday, but somewhere we gather to grow, and where we all have a part to play. In the larger churches I was part of until 2014, one of the greatest frustrations was that 20 per cent of the people seemed to do 80 per cent of the work. That doesn't happen in my small churches. We all muck in.

We know our neighbours and communities really well. We're part of them. We serve them. In our villages, those who attend church on Sundays are deeply embedded in the Monday-Saturday life of the community as well – in an entirely natural way. They serve as parish councillors, they are school governors, they play in the village cricket team, drink in the village pub, run the village walking groups, organise the village lunches for the elderly, run the Brownies, sit on the village hall committee, and mow the grass in the churchyard.

When time permits, I walk rather than drive from the vicarage to the post office (in the next village) and on the way I have conversations with the bereaved, the lonely, those who want to get married, the parents at the school gate, and many more. In some ways that makes evangelism so much easier, especially for me as the vicar, because I already have a natural relationship with those who live in the villages. Even those who don't come to church will introduce me to friends in the pub with the words, 'This is Fiona. She's our vicar.'

As small churches, we can be less overwhelming for those who are living with mental illness, or who have been recently bereaved, who want to come to church and worship God, but who need somewhere quiet to do so.

And, yes, we want to grow, of course we do. In faith, hope, love. In wisdom and understanding. In prayer and mission. And, as God gives the growth, in numbers too. But we will never be large in the world's eyes. And I try not to get too stressed about that.

After all, not everything that counts can be numbered.

Fiona Gibson is the Vicar of the Benefice of Cople, Moggerhanger and Willington, Bedfordshire

KING OF THE WORLD KING OF ASSYRIA



The British Museum staged a spectacular exhibition earlier this year on Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria. Shedding light on the ancient world, it also helps us enter the hope and pain of the Old Testament more imaginatively, says Eric Ortlund

The British Museum's recent exhibition, *I Am Ashurbanipal*, showcased the museum's numerous holdings from the last great king of the Neo-Assyrian empire. (The empire is called 'Neo-Assyrian' because both Assyria and Babylon had enjoyed earlier periods of dominance in the ancient Middle East, but Assyria regained dominance from around 900-612 BC).

The exhibition was both well attended and well reviewed, and for good reason; even at the distance of thousands of years, Assyria impresses, sometimes in troubling ways. Jonathan Jones, writing for the *Guardian*, aptly stated that 'Assyrian art makes up in tough energy what it lacks in human tenderness. It is an art of war – all muscle, movement, impact.'

Even more striking was the fact that although Ashurbanipal ruled over one of the greatest empires of the ancient world, and enjoyed some years of peace and stability, Assyria was in ruins not 20 years after his death around 627 BC. In many ways, Ashurbanipal's tenure as sovereign was successful; but the king who styled himself 'the great king, king of the four corners of the world, king of the universe' (modesty was not a virtue greatly prized by Mesopotamians!), was actually presiding over the end of his empire.

Left: A relief of Ashurbanipal hunting lions on horseback (Nineveh, Assyria, 645-635 BC).

Right: A cuneiform clay tablet from the library of Ashurbanipal.

The exhibition was not intended to relate Ashurbanipal to the Bible, nor need it have done; Assyria is worthy of interest in its own right. But exploring the artefacts left by Assyria's last great king helps us appreciate the sometimes terrifying world ancient Israelites lived in, and will give colour and heft to a number of biblical passages.

The warrior-scholar

Just as with every Assyrian king, a major part of Ashurbanipal's 40-year rule (668-627 BC) was spent on the battlefield. He boasts at length about his battles against Egypt and Nubia, in which he managed to bring Egypt under Assyrian control, plundering Thebes in the process. He also speaks of his defeat of a coalition of the Medes and Persians with the Cimmerians (an Indo-European group north of Turkey). These victories allowed Ashurbanipal to spend the latter years of his tenure reigning over

an empire that stretched from Egypt to north of modern-day Turkey, and extended from Cyprus in the west to Iran in the east.

In narrating these events, Ashurbanipal's scribes speak of their lord as 'the prince without rival', who 'made to bow to his feet all rulers' of the world and 'imposed the yoke of his overlordship' from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf (what they termed the 'Upper Sea' and 'Lower Sea'). None of these wars were defensive, of course; Ashurbanipal was maintaining and expanding the empire his fathers had won.

He also continued the extraordinary cruelty his predecessors showed to anyone resisting Assyrian rule. Assyrian reliefs of battles frequently show victims being flayed alive, impaled on poles, and executed in other inventive ways. (In some ways, the only thing more shocking than Assyrian violence is their openness about it.)



Somewhat unusually for an Assyrian king, however, Ashurbanipal was as devoted to scholarly pursuits as he was military. He claims that the study of mathematics, reading, and oil divination (predicting the future from the shape of drops of oil in water) occupied him in his youth.

He also boasts of being able to read Sumerian, Akkadian, and Aramaic. This is no mean accomplishment: Sumerian logograms are picture-based symbols representing entire words, while Akkadian is 'syllabic', in the sense that each cuneiform symbol represents a syllable instead of a letter. This makes both languages exponentially more difficult to learn. Imagine if the hundreds of syllables possible in English were represented not by our 26-letter alphabet, but each one by its own symbol! This perspective also helps us to appreciate the breakthrough represented by the invention of an alphabet, as used by Aramaic, which is a Semitic language of merely normal difficulty.

In fact, in addition to a sense of Assyrian brutality and violence, the dominant impression of Assyria given by the exhibition was sophistication. Stone etchings of the king in battle were as massive as they were detailed; the clay tablets written in Akkadian showed a similar hard-won precision. When faced with Assyrian cruelty, one unconsciously expects its perpetrators to be barbaric and small-minded; it is a continual surprise to realise this violence was committed by educated intellectuals.

Ashurbanipal's best-known intellectual achievement is his

library of some 30,000 clay tablets, which included hymns and prayers, administrative documents, letters and contracts, as well as medical, mathematical, ritual, and divinatory texts. (Fortunately, clay survived the fire of Nineveh's burning in 612 BC far better than paper would have!)

The magical texts are (for me) among the most interesting; for all their military might, Mesopotamians were very superstitious. They saw predictions of the future in such wildly diverse phenomena as lunar eclipses, the flight of birds, the shape of sheep livers, the way in which the horses in the king's chariot ran, or the way a handful of arrows would fall to the ground. Ridiculous as this might seem to us, the Mesopotamians thought of the human and divine realms as a closed system, such that the divine will is reflected in happenstance events on earth. In fact, it was the practice of Ashurbanipal's grandfather Sennacherib (known from Isaiah 36-37) to bring trains of sheep and diviners with him. Sheep livers would be inspected before each battle, giving Sennacherib the most propitious places and times to fight.

Ashurbanipal was proud of both his military and academic achievements. He is portrayed in his lion hunts with a writing stylus in his belt; another relief shows him relaxing in a garden with his wife, while the head of a defeated Elamite king hangs from a nearby tree!

Assyria's downfall

In many ways, Ashurbanipal enjoyed a successful reign. But the cracks in his empire started to show after

a war with the city of Babylon. Ashurbanipal's father Esarhaddon had designated him as King of Assyria, but installed his brother, Shamash-shum-ukin, as King of Babylon. The city had been a problem in Sennacherib's day, and Esarhaddon wanted a stable empire for his sons.

The peace held for 17 years before Babylon rebelled. After a nearly four year siege (652-48), Babylon fell to the Assyrians; and although no one challenged Ashurbanipal after this, his victory over his final competitor ruined him. Assyria had over-extended itself. Devastated countries could not provide sufficient tribute to fund the empire, and fresh troops were in short supply. A combination of drought and population increase in the peoples under Assyrian control further weakened the empire; some estimates put inflation at 120% during this time.

Although there were no wars in the latter years of Ashurbanipal's reign, not two decades passed after his death before his capital city, Nineveh, was in flames (612 BC) and Babylon emerged as a dominant power. Assyria remained populated, but continued in a primitive state. In a profound irony, when the Parthians conquered Assyria in the first century, they forced the Assyrian king to convert to Judaism!

Through the lens of Isaiah

It can be easy for modern Christians to let the name 'Assyria' pass by without much thought when the Bible is read. Ashurbanipal himself, unlike Sennacherib, is mentioned only once



Above: Tablets from Ashurbanipal's Library on display at the British Museum.

in the Old Testament (in Ezra 4:10, spelled as 'Asenappar'). But even this brief survey should convey the terror the Assyrians inspired among ancient Israelites, as well as the utter stupidity of trying to make a treaty with the monster, as Ahab did with Tiglath-Pileser in 2 Kings 16:7-10. The results of this treaty were disastrous; Tiglath-Pileser exiled significant parts of the north of Israel, and left Samaria a rump state.

This illustrates a common prophetic theme: when God's people worship the gods of the surrounding cultures, or try to make treaties with them, God tragically gives his own people

in slavery to the surrounding culture. Jeremiah crystallizes this when he says: 'As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve foreigners in a land that is not yours' (Jeremiah 5:19). This theme is no less relevant for God's people today.

But perhaps most striking is the way Isaiah demolishes Assyrian pride decades before Ashurbanipal ruled, when the empire seemed unassailable. His attitude toward Assyria is summed up in a single verse: 'Don't be afraid... because of the words you have heard, with which the boys of the king of Assyria have reviled me' (Isaiah 37:6). The word 'boys' could be translated as 'flunkeys'. Assyrian fierceness

and pride are on full display in the speech of Isaiah 36:4-20, and in the monologue of Isaiah 10:8-14; Isaiah is not unrealistic about Assyria, and the poetry of those passages vividly evoke the 'muscle, movement, and impact' of the Assyrian empire. Isaiah is also shockingly clear that God will use this evil empire to punish the sins of his own people.

But Isaiah is simultaneously completely unimpressed with Assyria: they are flesh, not spirit (see Isaiah 31:3), and will pass away very soon (Isaiah 31:8), not even lifting a finger against Zion (Isaiah 37:33). In fact, in a passage read every Christmas, the Davidic son to be born (Isaiah 9:6) will be the means by which God breaks the yoke of the oppressor. Assyrian kings frequently speak of 'imposing their yoke' on defeated peoples – but God insults Assyria by breaking that yoke through a baby!

But it is not all defeat and insults: a beautiful passage describing Egypt's restoration (Isaiah 19:16-25) ends by including Assyria as an equal-status member of God's people (Isaiah 19:23-25). What other God could so effortlessly defeat Assyria – and what other God would graciously include Assyria in his restoration of all things?

I Am Ashurbanipal skillfully displayed the might and achievements of a long-dead king. Reflecting on the reign of that king, with Isaiah's prophetic perspective, helps us better appreciate the position of God's people in a fallen world, someday to receive the promise of complete restoration.

Eric Ortlund lectures in Old Testament and Biblical Hebrew at Oak Hill

The new Gnosticism?



Is transgenderism a new form of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, in which transgender people believe the ‘real me’ is trapped inside the wrong body? Michael Hayden weighs the merits of a recent debate, and calls for a theologically informed response to an issue that is right at the top of the cultural agenda

In Neal Shusterman’s dystopian trilogy, *Arc of a Scythe*, the world is ruled by the Thunderhead, an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, cloud-based artificial intelligence. Reflecting on its relationship with humanity, the Thunderhead concludes that it is necessary to maintain a non-physical existence in order to maintain its purity.

The Thunderhead may be able to maintain purity by eschewing physicality, but for the rest of us that isn’t an option. We are embodied creatures, whether we like it or not. And we need only look at recent debates both in wider culture and within the church to see the difficulty we have had coming to terms with our embodied reality: from Caitlin Jenner to gendered pronouns to gendered bathrooms to transgender children, gender is right at the top of the cultural agenda. And this is reflected in the theological agenda of the church, with debates raging over same sex marriage and, in the Church of England

specifically, the December 2018 House of Bishops’ Pastoral Guidance on transgender affirmation services.

The Lynas-Higton debate

This difficulty can be seen in a recent intra-church debate. In November 2018, the Evangelical Alliance, under the lead authorship of Peter Lynas, issued a resource entitled *Transformed: A Brief Biblical and Pastoral Introduction to Understanding Transgender in a Changing Culture*. In setting the transgender movement in context, the resource expresses many concerns about transgenderism. One of the most serious of these concerns is that transgender activists espouse a Gnostic anthropology. Gnosticism, it says, ‘is a complex concept claiming special access based on secret knowledge, but it fundamentally sees matter and bodies as fallen and inferior. We can see this idea reflected



in statements from transgender people around the idea of a “real me” trapped inside the wrong body – the view that the inner self is paramount and one is free to shape their body to reflect their inner self.’

The charge centres on a supposed separation of the soul from the body, with the soul being accorded ontological primacy as the ‘real me’, and the body relegated to functioning as a mere disposable container. Given the (sometimes drastic) action to which transgender people will resort in order to make their outer bodies match what they have ‘discovered’ is their inner reality, the charge of Gnosticism would, on the surface, appear credible.

Someone who is unconvinced, however, is Professor Mike Higton, of the University of Durham. Higton, in a six-part excoriating blog series, expresses many grave concerns with the *Transformed* resource, dismissing the charge of Gnosticism as ‘nonsense’, saying that it is ‘in the end a nasty little bit of historical name-calling, which enables people in this debate implicitly to label those they disagree with as heretics, and it has no credible historical or conceptual basis behind it.’

Higton’s answer to the Gnostic charge is twofold. Firstly, Gnosticism as historically understood resulted in a hatred for the material. Higton argues this bears no relation to modern transgender ideology, which shows ‘a rich and



pervasive concern with bodies... It is just plain odd to think that this is a context in which the body is regarded as unimportant.' Secondly, those who charge transgender theologians with a soul-body dualism are just as guilty of a dualism themselves, namely a mind-body dualism, in which the body is given ontological priority over the mind.

What are we to make of this?

How do we come to terms with the strong views in this debate? Does the charge of Gnosticism made by *Transformed* land? Or are Higton's criticisms fair? The truth, I think, is to be found somewhere in the middle.

The authors of *Transformed* rightly question what anthropology lies behind transgender theology; questions which aren't often addressed by transgender activists. We need to ask exactly what it is about transgenderism that is causing these authors to reach an answer of Gnosticism. And we can't get around the fact that there is some level of soul-body dualism at the heart of it, even if it is not as strong as often made out.

Higton is right to point out that transgenderism does not tend to exhibit the strong hatred of the flesh which one would expect of historical Gnosticism. Transgender people are obviously deeply concerned with their bodies. However, it is difficult to move from that to a position where transgender people love the bodies in which they were born. Does someone really love their body if they are willing to take strong chemicals to radically alter its hormonal makeup, and then undergo drastic surgery to chop parts off and add parts on? If anything, said person loves their body for what it could be, rather than for what it is.

Higton rightly says that Gnosticism was about much more than hatred of the flesh. It was a complex movement which bound up all sorts of views around creation, eschatology, epistemology, and the very nature of God. This theological complexity is apparently missing from the pages of *Transformed*. However, transgender theology is also about much more than wanting to change one's body to match an inner reality.

There are also ideas of coming to a moment of self-realisation (or gnosis?). Questions are raised about the nature of God: What sort of God could make such a

mistake as to give me the wrong body, forcing me to take drastic action to recreate myself in accordance with my discovered inner reality? It's hard not to see some parallels with the fallible Gnostic demiurge. However, we should be careful of pushing these parallels too far; a fallible God need not result in the hierarchies of divinity seen in Gnosticism.

So Higton may be correct in arguing that the Evangelical Alliance authors were too hasty in rushing to charges of Gnosticism, resulting in a lack of historical nuance in their comparison. But Higton himself was too quick to dismiss the comparison, leading him to miss the substance behind what the authors of *Transformed* (and other writers who have made similar charges) were trying to argue. Transgenderism may not unequivocally equal Gnosticism, but there are at least parallels.

Recognising the issues

As we have seen, the transgender question is right at the top of the cultural and theological agenda. Therefore, we need to take time to seriously consider the true nature of the question we face. Whether we are talking with a person who is themselves transgender, or someone who arguing in favour of it, we need to recognise the position and its implications.

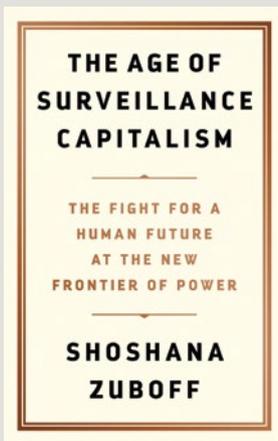
Even if we conclude that it's unhelpful to read across from Gnosticism to transgenderism in an unequivocal manner, even weak parallels between the two would raise all sorts of issues: the nature of creation; what it means to be an embodied creature; the nature of God; our eschatological expectations; creaturely freedom; and the relationship between the soul and the body, among others. Even if our interlocutor doesn't have a classically Gnostic view on these issues, it's helpful to recognise that these questions may well be beneath the surface.

Transgenderism may or may not be the new Gnosticism, but it is an important issue, and a historically informed view will aid us as we seek to respond to it.

Michael Hayden is an ordinand, studying for an MA at Oak Hill College

BOOKS

Chris Green has been reading an important new book which asks questions about the disturbing new world of Google, Facebook, Microsoft and Amazon. 'As a direct consequence, I've tried to stop using Google as much as possible,' he says



The Age of Surveillance Capitalism

Shoshana Zuboff
London: Profile Books,
2019

Let's get spooked. Your phone tracked every step you took today, and that information has been stored, analysed, and sold. When you met your friend for coffee, that proximity was noted. Knowing your common interests, when you met, the probability of your conversation could be calculated.

In all likelihood, in your Terms and Conditions, you've allowed your phone, your watch, to 'listen' to everything. Those conversations have also been stored, analysed and sold, multiple times already. If you're reading this online, that's noted too.

It's called 'digital surplus', and it's hugely valuable.

Why does your new fridge have internet connectivity? Who could possibly benefit from knowing when you're running out of milk? What did the unreadable contract for your new thermostat permit, apart from allowing you to switch on the heating remotely?

These are the disturbing kind of questions provoked by Shoshana Zuboff's 's new book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. Zuboff is a professor at Harvard Business School.

Let's get the lit.crit. out the way. It's not that well written. I found it repetitive, shrill, and the clever-clever use of words just too annoying. I reckon it's about twice as long as it needs to be, and a good editor should have pared it back. Its historical parallels are overused, and not well-rounded. It's conclusions, though alarming, have slight practical application. We're not told what we're to do to fight back.

All of which is a real shame, because the book is hugely important, and the threat of a form of accidental totalitarianism is real. 'Accidental' is my word, but if you've looked at Mark Zuckerberg recently you'll have seen the face of a man who knows he's opened Pandora's box and has not

The book is hugely important, and the threat of a form of accidental totalitarianism is real. 'Accidental' is my word, but if you've looked at Mark Zuckerberg recently you'll have seen the face of a man who knows he's opened Pandora's box and has not the faintest idea about how to close it again

the faintest idea about how to close it again.

The book is part history, part philosophy, part economics, part politics, part plea for the future, so no short review can hope to respond. I'd urge you to read it as soon as it's in paperback. As a direct consequence, I've tried to stop using Google as much as possible.

Zuboff argues that we have entered a new mutation of capitalism, beyond industrialisation. Physical factories make and sell physical products, but the big data companies (she repeatedly eyeballs Google, Facebook, Microsoft and Amazon) rapaciously sell information about us – unimaginably vast data sets, which can be interrogated at an invasively personal level. Such as, whether you go to the gym, and selling that information to your health insurance company to determine your premium, but also to determine and shape societal trends. Elections and referendums, anyone?

(Why not Apple, by the way? Zuboff's case is economic: Apple makes its profits by selling expensive kit, and retaining the vast data which they still vow not to sell or even assemble in totality; Google, Amazon and Facebook's profits come from selling your data that you give for using a free product. Zuboff is wary of Apple, but says that at the moment they are holding firm.)

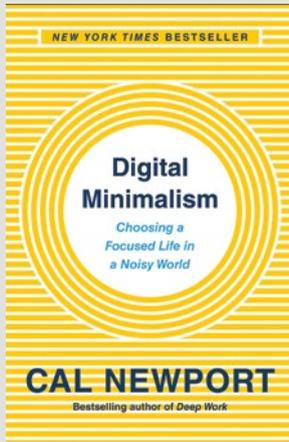
Furthermore, these companies operate blisteringly fast in areas where the painstaking work of writing laws simply cannot compete, and that ensures that while a vast amount is known about us, what that is, who

knows it, and what it's used for, is opaque, and outside the rule of law. It also ensures that we simply don't have the language to describe the problem. So who is to hold them to account, and how? Recently, we've all had to endure the pain of making our churches GDPR compliant, so does it encourage you that GDPR is one of Zuboff's few rays of hope, and a model from the EU to the US? Thought not.

This is worrying stuff, and even if her analysis is wonky and her conclusions flawed (which is true of any book, really), the areas she's looking at are ones we Christians are way behind in thinking about. Yes, if you're a free-marketeer you'll find her left-leaning inclinations irritating. But you'll need to come up with an alternative, because Google unfettered is scary. And if you thought that word 'totalitarianism' was strong, read the section on Xi Jinping's China, and its use of surveillance. You'll pray for our brothers and sisters there with new focus.

How do we think? Well, we can try piecemeal economics, legislation or political philosophy. That would be a start. But we can also go to another level, because Zuboff deals with the bigger narrative arcs of human longing and meaning. Even in the first paragraph, she opens her case. Will we be at home in our new digital future? Will we be in control, or its pawns? As she puts it, 'Home or exile? Lord or subject? Master or slave?' Although theology doesn't figure in her thinking, we would want to lean hard into those, wouldn't we?

And we need to, fast.



Digital Minimalism

Cal Newport

New York: Portfolio/Penguin,
2019

On a personal level, you could do worse than a detox, and Cal Newport makes a persuasive and helpful case. You might remember Newport from his previous book, *Deep Work*, which argued persuasively for the importance of solid blocks of uninterrupted time for – just thinking. Sitting with a pad and a pen, or on screen if you have the self control, or going for a run or a long walk; they're all ways in which our brains seem to disengage from their craving for the shiny new attention grabber, and instead do their harder work of creating, connecting, considering.

You know what I mean: that hour and a half of sermon prep that finally delivers the moment of understanding and focus. If you're like me, you've discovered it's worth staying in your chair until you get it, and that there's

no point trying to get another one after that because your brain goes on strike.

Digital Minimalism argues that our brains need certain conditions to do that work, and that chief among them is lack of distraction. The problem is that our digital age thrives on (Zuboff would argue, requires and commodifies) that distraction. So Newport provides a route through a digital deep cleanse, which re-educates our brains away from distraction, and reminds our conscious selves of the calm and quiet we have lost.

Newport is not saying 'no' to any digital presence – if you want the strong case for that, read *Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* by Jaron Lanier (Vintage, 2019) – but he is strong and clear on the way we have been bamboozled into giving away our attention, and thus our capacity for thought.

The way through to Dan Strange's concept of 'subversive fulfilment' is almost too easy, isn't it? 'Social' media, that is anti social; relationship apps that can't deliver real relationships without a filter; 'productivity' apps whose very design stops us being productive; 'reminders' that stop our train of thought. Phones, designed for communication, delivering isolation through headphones.

The very word 'iPhone' encapsulates the contradiction. What we hold in our hands is a physical and digital form of the age-old need for love, meaning, purpose, understanding, hope, and the simultaneous inability of the created order, under the fall, of

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delivering them. So our alternate path must be to use fallen creation's goods, but in line with gospel ends.

Now, digital media, no matter how 'virtual', are still part of creation and subject to its king. So we can use them as tools. Our church plans the services using a programme the team have on their phones, and it's brilliant. I'm not a Luddite.

But perhaps I am, a bit. Because it's not just that human beings don't require a digital context to thrive;

I think church requires a non-digital experience to exist. That's important, because it's easy to imagine 20 people staring at screens in their bedrooms. Could that be 'virtual' church? Certainly they can learn together, pray together, even sing together. What's missing?

The physical presence.

I can't baptise anyone online. I can't eat with you online. (If you think it's 'almost the same', it is – in the same way that distant lovers kissing over Skype is 'almost the same'.) We are made and saved for full, rounded – by which I mean 'embodied' – present relationships, with tears and laughter, hugs and songs. Prayers and praise. We break bread and drink wine, pour water, walk beside brides and after coffins. We are physical beings, and that is good and part of redemption.

Newport would want us to switch off more, and work and relate better. We can do that. But that's too individualist.

Zuboff argues that we need to wake up to the threats from near-total surveillance. I think she's right, but we know our only security is to start from the absolute and perfect surveillance of a good God. In that context we can realise how fragmentary, illusory and partial is the knowledge of Big Data, how accountable to him they are, and then to do the one thing that they can never see, control or sell.

Secure in his total and loving surveillance, we pray.

*Chris Green is the Vicar of St James, Muswell Hill, and the author of several books, most recently, *The Message of the Church**





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Over my forty years of pastoral ministry, I've come to the conclusion that ministers need more comprehensive and exacting theological education today than when I came into the work. I've been an admirer and a beneficiary of the ministry of Oak Hill for years, and often cite it as a model for effective and faithful theological education.

Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City

A portrait of Tim Keller, a middle-aged man with glasses, wearing a blue button-down shirt and a dark blazer. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred city street with buildings.

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