

# BOOK REVIEWS

## RED, WHITE, BLUE ... AND BROWN: CITIZENS, PATRIOTS AND THE PRIME MINISTER

Stephen Backhouse  
(London: Theos, 2007)  
ISBN 978-0-9554453-2-3  
66 pages; rrp £10

At last the politicians have realised that something must be done. Decades of consumerist thinking, hypermobility and immigration have left us wondering who we are. Politicians and social commentators alike have all been clear that our culture must remain open to challenge and change, but they have been less clear how one maintains social cohesion in the new situation.

Into this vacuum pitches a new prime minister proposing that we establish a set of British values. It is a brave thing to do.

Stephen Backhouse provides us with a concise and careful analysis of patriotism and nationalism and their potential to elicit different forms of social cohesion. For him the primary test of a good culture is in the health of civil society, those myriad groups of voluntary and other associations through which people work on collective goals, negotiate their common life and build community. The USA is often held up as a model society in terms of citizenship and it certainly has embraced public statements of value, together with rituals defining membership, but the Theos report notes that this is not associated with the revival of civil society in the way that both Backhouse and Gordon Brown apparently desire.

Instead, Backhouse proposes that we take another look at the biblical injunction to love your neighbour as yourself

and uses the story of the Good Samaritan to insist that this should move us beyond simple concern for those like us or for geographical neighbours, through to a broad and deep motivation to reach across the social diversity that we find ourselves in today. As I read this it seemed so obvious really. Here was a beautifully simple idea, originating from the Christian faith, but of genuinely broad appeal. Very few people would want to deny this and it was so much better than trying to deal with the potentially vicious and divisive ideas of patriotism and nationalism.

This report is necessarily short, but it raises lots of questions that might benefit from further exploration. British culture has never defined itself, even refusing to establish a written constitution. One of the strengths of this has been to build on the experience of the past and to remain open to change in the future. Our history has been what has defined us to a great degree. The movement of peoples has many positive attributes in terms of promoting intercultural understanding but it necessarily erases the sense of common history. In that context there is obviously a temptation to define our values and make them known among the people. The difficulty is that such a process might feel like a propaganda campaign and yet another attempt to manipulate people. It might also be helpful to take a more careful look at the processes that have led to the dissolution of our common cultural consensus, with particular relation to the market. During this late capitalist period we seem to have accepted the wholesale plundering of the earth and

the disintegration of local community with scarcely a murmur. Pacified by retail therapy we have lived as if we needed nothing more than the market to coordinate our common life. Human behaviour in the past few decades may go down as the most shamelessly self-interested and destructive period of human history. We desperately need a recovery of vision and value, but where will it come from? Is this really the domain of the politician? In most societies the concept of 'values' has merged with 'beliefs' and faith communities have played a major role in their establishment. This, of course, is the other story about British culture in the past. The Church played a major role in the maintenance of social cohesion, not always helpfully one needs to add, but it was there and the Christian story was part and parcel of the deep thinking of the people and its institutions. This Theos report reminds us of our Christian heritage in a most constructive and winsome manner.

Chris Sunderland

## THE UBS GREEK NEW TESTAMENT: A READER'S EDITION

Barbara Aland et al. (eds.)  
(Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007)  
ISBN 978-3-438-05150-9  
732 pages

To be excited by an edition of the Greek Text of the New Testament, may seem to be going 'over the top'; nevertheless, that is how this new presentation of the Greek New Testament affects me. I consider that this version will stimulate many

of us who are reluctant to keep up our NT Greek either because we are not very good at it or because we have too little time to work it all out, to renew our enthusiasm and to enrich both our understanding and preaching.

So what is special about this approach? First, the Greek text is very clear and readable, which reduces the potential confusion of many texts. Secondly, the normal textual critical apparatus at the bottom of each page has been removed. While this limits its scholarly value somewhat, for most busy ministers anything of consequence will be picked up through commentaries and anyway can be tracked in other editions of the Greek text.

The real genius of this edition is the running dictionary, compiled by Barclay Newman, which replaces the textual variants. Any word which occurs less than 30 times is listed at the bottom of the page, with parsing and an appropriate meaning. So we don't have to look up so many words in a dictionary and thereby lose the flow of the text and become frustrated by the effort. What is more, we can be confident that we have actually found the right word and the right meaning! Working this way increases the reader's confidence, competence and even enjoyment!

Those words which occur more than 30 times can be found in a straightforward (and much shorter) dictionary at the back, thus facilitating easy location of frequent words which the reader may have forgotten.

While I have presented my assessment from the 'mature' minister's

perspective, there are similar, if not greater benefits, for those who are in the process of learning Greek. While the purists may regret that the student no longer has to work out each parsing for themselves, my own assessment is that the extra facility this approach will provide will encourage students to go further than they might otherwise do. I hope those who have the opportunity to teach Greek to others will follow my view and commend it as the text of choice. I agree with Dr Philip Towner, Director of translation Services for the United Bible Societies, 'To master the skill of reading the Greek New Testament there is simply no substitute for linear and sustained reading. This tool will aid the student and the scholar in achieving this goal.'

It will not take the hard work out of learning the basics of the language, but it should stimulate and reward students with a quicker fluency and therefore appreciation of the New Testament in Greek. I really believe that this version can help to reverse the trend away from wanting to handle the New Testament in the original language.

This is a rich resource not to be overlooked. Please, if you know any Greek at all give it a go – I don't think you will regret this purchase and I am sure our congregations will reap the benefit.

This is available from [www.bibleresources.org.uk](http://www.bibleresources.org.uk) for the special price of £29.99. Don't miss out.

David Spriggs