

Editorial



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and
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About four years ago the University of Gloucestershire presented Bible Society with a significant and exciting opportunity when they invited us to become involved with them in setting up a research centre for 'Bible and Spirituality'. We want to involve you in some of the outcomes, because we recognise that already they are significant for mission today.

Clearly our passion is for the Bible! However, over the last decade we have also recognised the key role of 'spirituality' for our work. Within the Church our response to this is seen, for example, in the provision of 'lectio divina' materials and our involvement with *Renovare* which has contributed to our very significant suite of *lyfe* materials as well as events, particularly at Lee Abbey.¹

Even more significantly we recognise the role of 'spirituality' in our 'advocacy for the Bible in the culture'. Research has emphasised the shift from religious institutional participation towards more free floating 'spiritual engagement' by many people. Spirituality is part of the atmosphere of our own culture. So seeking to understand this and how we can open up, or better still enable people who are involved with it to open up the Bible for such people, is a vital challenge for us.

To do this we need to understand more deeply what we mean by 'spirituality'. That is one of the tasks for this Centre. But, rather surprisingly, an even deeper aspect of the challenge is to understand the spirituality within the Bible and how to release its potential to speak authentically to the spiritualities of our times. The reason for this is that over many decades among the guild of scholars there has been a reluctance to mine Scripture for such an agenda.

This means that the task the Centre has chosen is both radical and innovative. It requires courage and experimentation to release the potential of the Bible to speak into the minds and hearts of people who are open to 'spirituality', as well as discernment to learn from the Bible how to critique contemporary understandings of spirituality. While the Bible has always played a part in Christian spirituality, 'biblical spirituality' as a distinctive study within theology and biblical studies is newer. The project has identified an international community that is committed to developing it, and has so far produced two volumes of essays, both following Symposia at the University of Gloucestershire supported by Bible Society.²

There is no one way of doing 'biblical spirituality'. It can in principle embrace all the aspects of biblical study and spirituality. The concept is at the same time a question: what is involved in our use of Scripture in the forming of the Christian life? Answers to the question will ultimately be experimental, acts of spirituality in themselves. This collection of essays is experimental in that sense, and consists of a variety of attempts to demonstrate what our use of the Bible might mean for our thought and practice. These include in different degrees elements of reflection on the nature of the task, and the actual practice of it.

Andrew Lincoln sets the scene with a discussion of the nature of spirituality and its relation to biblical study. He shows that spirituality remains a vigorous concept in an age that thinks of itself as post-religious, expressed in a desire for meaning beyond materialism. Drawing on the work of Charles Taylor, Andrew argues that modern secularism, with its exclusive humanism is a

'constructed reality' that has developed in 'a dialectical relationship with the Christian tradition'.³ Believers and unbelievers thus share what can be thought of as a desire for fullness of life, which is not limited to some 'spiritual' sphere, but belongs to all parts of it. Scholars who are doing 'biblical spirituality' have in view the relationship between use of the Bible and the formation, or transformation, of the person.

The question posed by biblical spirituality can divide into a number of different questions. Is there some unified 'biblical spirituality', or are there many? Are we thinking, for example, of the 'spiritualities' of the biblical writers? Or is biblical spirituality essentially a question about the reader, and does it take place when the reader engages the text? How much of what forms part of the biblical writers' world and background assumptions should the reader expect to share? When we raise these and other questions it is apparent that the project of biblical spirituality does not elide but sits alongside the more familiar approaches to biblical study, including the critical and hermeneutical.

Accordingly, Richard Briggs approaches the topic from the point of view of the reader. He proposes a close connection between the character of the reader and their capacity to see what the text may be saying. His perspective on the role of the reader in spiritual reading is closely related to virtues such as wisdom, humility and obedience.

The Old Testament raises the hard question of what role it can have in the spiritual life and formation of Christians. Gordon McConville considers the book of Joshua. How can a book that has undeniably played a part in Christian spirituality also appear to advocate extremes of violence against 'the other'? Gordon argues for close attention to the tendency of the text as a whole, its 'ultimate semantic authority', coupled with a critical reading of its uses in historical Christian interpretation, and an imaginative re-application of its motif of 'crossing' in the light of transformative moves towards reconciliation across the world's hostile divides.

Turning to the New Testament, Dorothy Lee considers what has been called the 'spiritual Gospel' of John. She wants Christians to rediscover the resources of the Bible for spiritual experience, asking, 'what kind of spirituality is the reader invited, through the narrative, to experience?' Dorothy shows how John's framework for spirituality consists in the inner relationship of the Triune God, and 'between the divine Spirit and the human spirit'. The Fourth Gospel's spirituality is embodied, with its sacramental and eucharistic undertones, because 'the Word becomes flesh' (1.14). It is also relational (as already noted), and life-giving, where 'eternal life' means 'transforming life is available in the here-and-now'.

Edith Humphrey also takes John 1.1 as her starting-point, and develops the relational, or corporate, character of Christian spirituality. She highlights the webs of connectedness that compose our identities, though often obscured by modern individualistic assumptions, but always implicit in the biblical texts.

She pursues this by considering texts in 2 Peter 1–2, Ephesians and Hebrews, under the headings 'receiving together' (2 Pet), 'praying together' (Eph) and 'giving glory together' (Heb). Edith argues that the writers see spiritual experience and growth not as functions of the individual but of the corporate life. Strikingly, she says: 'there is no such thing as private prayer' – even when we are physically alone. Our supreme calling is to become a 'worshipping humanity'.

The final two essays extend the domain of spirituality to the realms of politics and ecclesiology. Michael Gorman addresses the book of Revelation, another forbidding book that uses violent imagery. He stresses its spiritual basis in the vision of God (1.10–20), so continuing the theme of corporate worship and the goal of the formation of a people. Revelation is prophetic, calling to faithfulness to Christ in contrast to the many powerful alternative bids for the allegiance of God's people, whether ancient or modern. Faithfulness to Christ is by its character public: worship and spirituality 'are always and everywhere forms of political activity'. Faithfulness entails witness, both prophetic and 'evangelical'. The final word of Revelation is one of hope and salvation.

Philip Esler also situates his essay in an understanding of the New Testament in its world, with inferences for the Church facing the contemporary world, specifically the challenges of postmodernity. He aims to show how historical forms of enquiry into the New Testament can yield results for an understanding of what it can mean to be 'alive in Christ'. Writing primarily in a Roman Catholic context (but with evident implications for other churches too), Philip argues for a 'bottom up' ecclesiology. Connecting with Roman Catholic encyclicals, Martin Buber's notion of 'I and You', recent work on dialogue, and a development in social identity theory called 'psychological group formation', Philip finds that Paul's approach to leadership in relation to the Corinthians 'is based in genuine dialogue and indeed communion between him and the Corinthians'.

This brief overview has revealed several common themes, among them the centrality of the Church's worship to its life and identity, the formation of a community that testifies by its witness to the lordship of Christ in the world. These essays make a case for the intrinsic connection between Christian use of the Bible, with all the resources of biblical study, the transformation of the life, and our critical, compassionate and perhaps costly engagement as Christians with the world. We hope that in reading them you will be stimulated to explore contemporary spirituality more broadly and deeply for yourself and will find new ways of reading and sharing Scripture with your congregations and beyond, reconnecting the Bible with our culture through the shared space of spirituality.

NOTES

1. *The Poverty and Justice and The Freedom Bibles* are other expressions of this concern to relate the Bible to what are essentially 'spiritual' topics.

2. PGR de Villiers and LK Pieterse (eds.), *The Spirit That Inspires: Perspectives on Biblical Spirituality* (Acta Theologica Supplementum 15; Bloemfontein: University of the Free State Press, 2011), and AT Lincoln, JG McConville and LK Pieterse (eds.), *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013). Lloyd Pieterse played an important part in the development of the project, but has unfortunately been unable to contribute to this issue due to unforeseen circumstances.

3. He has explored this at greater length in *The Spirit That Inspires*, pp. 61–80.