

# Report on Bible and Practical Theology Symposium

An event organised by the BIAPT Bible and Practical Theology special interest group  
Monday 21<sup>st</sup> – Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2012, Woodbrooke Study Centre, Birmingham

## Delegates

Paul Ballard, Christopher Balraj, Zoe Bennett, Melody Briggs, Richard Briggs, John Caperon, Kevin Ellis, John Falcone, Cheryl Hunt, Mike Jones, Nick Ladd, David McMillan, Andrew Rogers, Vera Sinton, Victoria Slater, Peter Stevenson, Andrew Village, Margaret Whipp, Mary Witts

## Background

The Bible and Practical Theology special interest group met for the first time at the BIAPT conference in July 2011. At that short meeting there was general agreement with the view that the 'relationship between the Bible and practical theology is an uneasy one' (Elaine Graham). Various reasons were offered for this state of affairs, and a strong feeling was expressed that there needed to be greater 'permission' to use the Bible in practical theology (PT) and for the Bible to have a more significant role. We also spent some time mapping out the various domains of Bible / PT, as follows:

- Bible in Pastoral Practice project
- Biblical Studies initiatives (e.g. use and influence seminar group at BNTS, reception history, SBL Consultation on Bible and Pastoral Theology)
- Scriptural Reasoning
- Contextual Bible Study
- Ordinary hermeneutics (i.e. studies of how ordinary Christians read the Bible)
- Preaching (i.e. theological reflection upon the practice of)
- Lectio divina / spiritual reading
- Exemplars of good practice
- Bible and theological reflection

The final domain, Bible and theological reflection, was uppermost in the minds of most contributors. This was probably due to many present having practitioner and educational roles that require the demonstration and/or teaching of good practice. It was also mooted that we hold a symposium to address some of issues raised so far, and so we did.

## The Symposium

We met in May 2012 in Birmingham at the Woodbrooke Study Centre for 25 hours. There were 19 of us from different church backgrounds and theological traditions. Most of us were practical theologians of varying hues, but a few biblical scholars were present and they were most welcome.

The convenors had spent some time thinking about the format, and so each delegate was asked to provide a brief autobiography of 'The Bible and I'. In addition most delegates provided in advance a short paper relating to their interests in Bible and PT. Immediately evident was that the Bible / PT interface 'matters to us' and that there was unease about the 'uneasy relationship'. Some described the Bible as 'the elephant in the room' and even 'the unwanted elephant in the room'. We worked hard prior to the symposium, in that we had 100 pages of submissions to read, and on the first day had 10 delegates summarise the critical issues in their papers, provoking much discussion amongst the group. The aim of the event was to provide a space for delegates to explore together critical issues arising from their own context of Bible and practical theology. The opportunity to do so was warmly received by the group. A brief summary of the two days follows.

### Day 1

All the delegates brought something of their biography to the discussion, but John Caperon, Kevin Ellis and Zoe Bennett specifically engaged with their own story and experiences. John's journey into literature, priesthood and theology has led him thus far to ask 'How can this inheritance of the Scriptures – alongside our other faith sources – inform our thinking and living?' Out of his pastoral and academic experience,

Kevin spoke of his driving question, which was ‘How is the Bible to make sense or be meaningful pastorally with, for and by those who have little knowledge of its contents?’ He then described some developing strategies for making sense of the Bible for those both within and without the local congregation. Zoe spoke movingly of three situations that had been formative for her relationship to the Bible, and the reflections these had provoked – our changing relationship to the Bible and revelation over time, violence in the Bible and its interpretation, and unexpected subversions of academic authority.

All the delegates would probably say they were doing hermeneutics in some way in their papers. Three papers by Andrew Rogers, Andrew Village and Richard Briggs all addressed hermeneutical issues directly. Andrew Rogers spoke about his study of congregational hermeneutics and how it had provoked an argument for hermeneutical education in the church being cast in terms of developing readerly virtues, as a necessary element of Christian discipleship. Andrew Village told us about a number of fascinating quantitative studies he has conducted on biblical interpretation, identifying some of the factors that do or don’t shape interpretation such as tradition, gender, age and education. Sobering conclusions for theological education in the church and academy were also noted. Richard’s paper was a very thought-provoking reflection on hermeneutics in practical theology from the perspective of a biblical scholar. The proffered short answer to ‘How should we use the Bible in practical theology?’ was tentatively given as ‘pursue Scripture on its own theologically-defined terms, and in the process our “practical questions” are taken up and subsumed into categories with which Scripture wants us to work’. More provocatively and simply, Richard suggested the route to relevance is initially what looks like irrelevance.

John Falcone and Victoria Slater dealt with more stand-alone topics within the symposium theme. John drew on his studies of Matthew’s Gospel to argue that a ‘proper contemporary apprenticeship in Biblical interpretation’ can be warranted through foundational documents such as Matthew’s Gospel in conversation with developments in critical pedagogy and performance theory. This led to reflection on how religious apprenticeship / discipleship can be ‘simultaneously faithful, creative and critical’. Victoria reported on a recently published project with the striking title ‘On not using the Bible in Theological Reflection’. Based on an action learning event with practitioners in pastoral ministry, she concluded that for many, particularly for those with responsibilities outside of the church context, the project highlighted how problematic engagement with Scripture can be. It also raised the question of where and how people can genuinely explore such issues.

Peter Stevenson and Nick Ladd both addressed the issue of Scripture’s authority in relation to practical theology methodology. Peter argued that for theological reflection to be sufficiently theological, more explicit engagement with Scripture is required. His paper went on to explore some hesitations within the PT constituency about a more visible role for the Bible in theological reflection. Questioning the predominance of correlational method, Peter drew on Hans Frei’s typology to propose a form of practical theology understood as *faith seeking understanding*. Nick directly addressed the problematic relationship of evangelicals to practical theology, especially regarding the Bible, a theme touched on by a number of other papers. Also critiquing correlative method, Nick saw such an approach as privileging the hermeneutic of the context over the hermeneutic of the text. He wanted to see evangelicals moving away from the traditional applied theology model and suggested that, to allow for a more nuanced approach to the authority of Scripture, ‘differentiation’ might be preferred to the language of dialogue and conversation.

## Day 2

The agenda for the second day was generated on the first from the group as a whole.

It seemed strange to have a symposium about the Bible without reading the Bible together, so that is what we did at the start of Day 2 for an extended period of time. The question to frame our Bible reading was ‘(How) does the Bible itself shape theological reflection?’ (or ‘a reflection on reflection’), and delegates had been encouraged to suggest passages prior to the day. After some friendly group negotiation, small groups chose to reflect on the passages Genesis 32:22-32 (Jacob wrestles at Peniel), Exodus 28:29-30 (Urim and Thummim), Jeremiah (described as ‘the hub of Scripture’) and James 1:19-27 (hearers and doers of the word).

For most delegates, this session was the highlight of the symposium. Why? We rarely read the Bible together as academics / practitioners and this was a great opportunity to do so. There was also plenty of time. The question was difficult and new for most, but also rather irresistible once posed. In sum, I think we enjoyed listening to Scripture with each other. The Genesis group started by asking if 'wrestling' had become a cliché in theological reflection, but a good while later had recognised the depths of the passage to resist overly neat usage. The Exodus group revelled in their 'obscure' choice and engaged in some venturesome hermeneutics to explore the place of 'serendipity and intuition' in the use of Scripture in practical theology (see Margaret Whipp's summary in *Practical Theology* journal 5:3, pp341-344). The Jeremiah group were excited by identifying the prophet as a practical theologian. They found the dynamic of theological reflection embedded in Scripture as Jeremiah wrestled with understanding God's presence in his contemporary situation in the light of the (Deuteronomic?) tradition. The group understood this to suggest engagement in the same process today; to be, like Jeremiah, partisan, involved and finding answers that are partial and untidy. The James group noted the significance of the context, the role of the text in spiritual formation and the assumed practical nature of religion. This group also commented on the unusual process of reading together, particularly the challenge of finding their voices, due to an awareness of coming from different traditions. One member found the process as challenging and valuable as comments on the text itself.

In the final session we addressed a range of emerging issues and debates, including 'Detoxifying the Bible', 'Revelation, Bible and practical theology', 'Spirituality, Bible and practical theology', 'Avenues for empirical study of the Bible', and '1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> ... 100<sup>th</sup> naivete'.

### **Where to now?**

'Where to now?' was the gist of our last agenda setting discussion at the symposium. The symposium aim appeared to have been met, in that delegates had experienced it as a space to open up critical issues in the Bible / PT interface. The language of 'opening up' also makes clear that this discussion is ongoing, developing, and looking for further clarity. It certainly seemed to be meeting a felt need within the BIAPT constituency. We hope that the symposium will turn out to be a milestone in terms of integrating serious biblical study with the work of practical theologians in BIAPT.

A strong message from the symposium was 'We must read the Bible together again'. This we did at the special interest group session at the BIAPT 2012 summer conference in Chester, reading Ecclesiastes 1 and 12. We asked ourselves the questions 'What do these passages mean for this current context which we share?' and 'How has engaging with Ecclesiastes provided insight into the process of theological reflection?' This provoked a similarly rich reading experience together. We plan to hold a SIG session at the 2013 BIAPT conference in York and currently the programme is open.

We also looked at disseminating our discussion more widely. This report has been written rather later than anticipated, which is to be regretted; however, it is here now. Margaret's Whipp's piece in *Practical Theology* journal (5:3, pp341-344) is worth reading alongside this report. We decided not to make the symposium papers more widely available as some were already for future publication, and many were written in a personal style designed for discussion in the particular symposium context. Articles for dissemination in journals were discussed as part of the longer term plan for the special interest group. A Facebook page has been set up for the group, which will enable more immediate updates on Bible and Practical Theology news and events (see link below).

On a personal note, there were three things the symposium convenors (Andrew and Zoe) found particularly valuable and refreshing about the time together. Firstly, it was personal – our own experiences and commitments were not bracketed out. Secondly, we actually read the Bible together and loved doing so. Thirdly, we did not avoid difficult problems – either problems involved in using the Bible for some, or problems involved in demoting its authority for others. To borrow Margaret Whipp's characterisation, we look forward to many more 'scintillating' and 'sparkling' conversations together.

**Andrew Rogers and Zoe Bennett, Symposium Convenors, February 2013**

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