

Editorial

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In *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the power of the White Witch over Narnia is summed up in Mr. Tumnus's explanation to Lucy that 'she makes it always winter'. The curse, of course, is that Narnia always exists in a kind of deadness. It is always cold, never with the celebration of Christmas. There is no spring to enjoy the greening of creation, no summer to bask in creation's brightness.

Since at least the early 1990s, there has been talk of an 'ecumenical winter'.¹ It is a phrase that is still used to describe the state of ecumenical affairs, though less so than in previous years. One begins to wonder if it will be always winter and never Christmas in the world of ecumenism.

It is hoped that this issue of *JESBS* shows that this will not be the case. While ecumenical activity may not have the singular focus it once had, the scholarly work in this issue shows that ecumenism is alive and well, though, to shift the metaphor, we have to be attuned to its harmony and ready for its challenge. It may be that we have to listen for the nuances of translating the gospel message into various languages and cultures. For this, Rosa Hunt is helpful in showing how language itself is a 'spiritual force', using the example of Welsh- and English-speaking congregations in Wales. Her ecumenical challenge to the reader is to surrender the desire to control a narrative or situation and embrace the multivalent nature of our understanding of the Christian faith.

¹ There were several shorter works in the early 1990s that contained the term. See Emilio Castro, *The Ecumenical Winter?* (Indianapolis, IN: Council on Church Unity, 1992); S. Mark Heim, 'Montreal to Compostela: Pilgrimage in Ecumenical Winter', *Christian Century*, 109 (1992), 333–335; Carl J. Peter, 'A Role Model in an Ecumenical Winter', *Worship*, 66 (1992), 2–10.

We may also to listen for those tones of the past that we find worthy of repeating today. Steve Harmon is helpful here in his investigation of Neville Callam's ecumenical contributions. Harmon understands Callam's ecumenism as one founded on Baptist principles of ecclesial interdependence which avoids theological or practical imperialism. The ecumenical challenge is to follow such an example of allowing the other to remain the other while still claiming them as a brother or sister.

There are also the dissonant tones that we find in the melody, seen in the internal disagreements that we often experience in the church. Andy Goodliff suggests a way forward through those situations. Drawing on the Baptist Union of Great Britain's Declaration of Principle, he outlines several virtues that are needed in faithfully handling the difficulties of disagreement: humility, patience, baptismal grace, love, and peace. The ecumenical challenge Goodliff offers is to focus on our own character in approaching the other, in order to ensure that we deal with them as a fellow image-bearer worthy of love rather than an enemy to be overcome.

Continuing the theme of dissonant tones: if Goodliff exhorts people to focus on Christian virtue within disagreements, Helen Paynter shows a way for those who have such a character to put their virtues into practice. She identifies self-criticism, the humble admission of personal limitations, the willingness to find virtue in the other, the need for compassionate listening, and the acknowledgement that God is not on our side all of the time as needed practices for dealing with disagreement. She then uses the example of critical race theory to put her suggestions to the test. Paynter's fundamental ecumenical challenge is to pursue humility and recognise the independence of God in our disagreements.

Uwe Swarat examines a familiar tune in Baptist history, namely the various understandings of the Lord's Supper. After a brief description of the Zwinglian and Reformed views of the Supper, Swarat details his view of the eucharist as both a human act and a divine act, or, as he calls it, a 'work of grace and of faith in one'. Swarat's ecumenical challenge is to hold these two works together, and so understand the communion table as a place where believers meet with God and one

another, for, at the table, according to Swarat, God ‘seals for us each time anew the union between God and ourselves and between the disciples among themselves’.

Christopher Schelin zeroes in on one part of the melody: the relationship between Baptists and Pentecostals. Arguing from early English Baptist history, Schelin argues that there is considerable overlap between what are today considered Pentecostal beliefs and practices and those of the early Baptists, including the laying on of hands, Spirit-empowered and Spirit-focused worship, and divine healing. Schelin’s ecumenical challenge is to see points of convergence between ourselves and the other, that we might find common ground on which to stand and walk together.

Finally, my own article seeks to identify a unifying theme in the music — something shared in common by all believers and which can bind our ecumenical activities. To do so, I look at the example of John Ryland Jr and how he practised catholicity, concluding that his catholicity was rooted in a shared experience of Christ. The ecumenical challenge stemming from Ryland’s example is to be content with the image of Christ that we find in the other.

While there is an unquestioned diversity of perspectives contained in this issue, there is a throughline that unites the articles contained herein: desire. There is a desire for unity seen in these articles. It is expressed in different ways, and it takes a variety of shapes, but the thing that unites these articles is the desire to see Jesus’s prayer in John 17 answered.

Perhaps the existence of this desire is all that we may ask in this extended winter. Indeed, desire is appropriate in winter: in winter, we long for the spring, for fresh growth, for new sprouts, for warmth, for longer days, for the green of spring and the freedom of summer.

But it may be that we can go further than that and try to find our own way towards spring. To do so, let us return to the first words of Jesus to his disciples: follow me.

That is the vocation of a disciple: to follow Jesus. Whoever is following Jesus is, by definition, a disciple, and if a person is a disciple,

then we ought to be united to them in some way. This, of course, involves some agreement as to doctrine, not the least of which concerns ‘Who is Jesus?’ This question, however, has largely been settled within Christianity for many centuries. The fundamental question of ecumenism, then, is not doctrinal but practical: who is following Jesus? Who is being the hands and feet of Jesus in the world?

This need not be as difficult as we sometimes make it. Imagine Jesus says to two people in the first century, ‘Follow me’. They both do so and find themselves walking behind Jesus, literally following him. One says to the other, ‘So what do you think about the nature of salvation?’ The other says, ‘I am not sure. What do you think?’ The first explains how they understand salvation. The second says, ‘I am not sure that I agree with all of that.’

Mind you, the two people are steadily following Jesus the entire time. Shall the second person stop following Jesus because they disagree with the first? No. The call that they answered was ‘follow me’, not ‘agree with other people who follow me’.

We return, then, to desire. Do we want to follow Jesus with people with whom we disagree? Do we desire to have fellowship with Jesus and with people that we may have a hard time understanding?

Unlike the winter that we all experience, this ecumenical winter can be ended simply by desire. Do we want it to end? It is hoped that this issue of *JEB*S not only demonstrates that the desire is alive and well but that there are concrete ways of expressing that desire which will enable Baptists and others to pursue the unity for which Jesus prayed.