

## Editorial

### Lina Toth

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It is my joy and privilege to offer to the readers this ‘Scottish’ issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*. Characterised not by a common theme, but a common context, this collection of articles provides an insight into some of the questions currently occupying the minds of Baptists living and working in Scotland.

Once the land of the Reformed kirk and Calvinist discipline, today Scotland is characterised by a highly secular and multicultural population, only one third of whom would identify as Christian in some way.<sup>1</sup> As in many other parts of Europe, Baptists here represent a small and gradually declining minority. Whilst new opportunities for Baptist ministry and mission are opening, such as chaplaincy or youth and community work, these are taking place in the context of rapid and pervasive social, cultural, and religious changes. Making sense of ourselves — as people of faith, and as Baptists — involves making use of a number of interpretive tools: turning to scriptural resources; paying attention to various episodes of Christian history; taking another look at doctrinal matters; reflecting on practice; and engaging with resources outside theology. In one way or another, all the articles in this issue are attempts at ‘reading’: the reading of Scripture, yes, but also history and tradition, our systematic theologies, and, of course, the reading of practice in its particular expressions, at times in conversation with other disciplines.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Williams, ‘Just one in three Scots now identify as a Christian’, *The Herald*, 9 March 2022 <<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/homenews/19978556.just-one-three-scots-now-identify-christian/>> (based on a YouGov survey sponsored by the Humanist Society Scotland). The information from the latest Scottish census, which usually takes place every ten years, would provide more precise information and figures. It was last carried out in 2022 and the results are still forthcoming.

We start, as many Baptists would, with the Bible and its interpretation. Paulus de Jong offers arguments against the common replacement theology associated with the Christian reading of the Gospel of John, particularly in relation to the Mosaic *torah*. Making the case for the retainment, reinterpretation, relativisation, or diversification of the ritual practices and institutions of the *torah*, de Jong sees fruitful implications in this approach both for the Jewish-Christian dialogue and for any Christian endeavours to draw closer to the world of the New Testament by taking part in some Jewish practices.

However, in the course of Christian history, these Jewish practices often have been not only suspect, but vehemently despised and demonised. Ian Birch draws attention to John Chrysostom's *Homilies Against the Jews* as one of the starkest and most troubling examples of antisemitism among Christian theologians. This makes for an extremely disturbing read, and serves as a very serious warning of how easily Scripture and rhetorical brilliance can be used for the most dangerous distortions of the witness of Scripture and the Christian Way.

The wrongness of the antisemitic lens should be a clear-cut case today<sup>2</sup> — or so one would want to hope — but what about a larger discussion of the role of Scripture in moral discernment? Marion Carson reads the narrative of Abraham and Sarah with just this question in mind. Carson underlines the role that cultural assumptions play in ethics — in Abraham and Sarah's as much as in ours. She also challenges an unquestioning embrace of what is perceived to be divine guidance, and a dangerously narrow, foundationalist, reading of Scripture which disregards uncomfortable contradictions and complexities.

Amanda Quick takes us into a more personal area of discernment, in the context of one's midlife. Looking for resources which would resonate with her own Baptist tradition, she starts with the Bible itself, but finds it necessary to then look for other sources, such as an imaginative contemplation of Ignatian exercises and discernment practised in a small group setting. Nothing in such a discernment

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<sup>2</sup> The publication process of this issue of *JEBs* was too advanced to engage in any reflection on the conflict which broke out in Israel and Gaza in October 2023.

process can be guaranteed, but as Quick's own story so far testifies, it can lead to deepened bonds with others as well as a new appreciation for the journey of faith and all it entails.

Moving on to the level of the communal and theological, what kind of discernment is needed when churches are forced to (rapidly) reconfigure their common life, such as in the face of Covid-19 lockdowns? In Scotland, as in much of the rest of the world, this experience revealed some interesting layers of implicit theology operating within various Christian communities. Steve Holmes, however, argues that for Baptists at least, it is their ecclesiology that shapes, or should shape, their approach to the Eucharist (or Communion, or the Lord's Supper — the terms themselves say something about our theological leanings as well as our contexts!). Being together physically may be the most desirable expression of being present to and for each other, but Holmes makes the case for the theological validity of an online Eucharist as a practice for sub-optimal circumstances.

Whilst the experience of the pandemic has been described as traumatic in a variety of ways, Roz Lawson looks at the deeply profound experience of trauma, which she explores in relationship to the practice of friendship. Taking the real-life story of Brian Keenan and John McCarthy, who were taken as hostages during the Lebanese Civil War, Lawson provides a study of Keenan's autobiographical book *An Evil Cradling* and the friendship between these two very different men, which blossomed in the midst of their captivity. Drawing on a variety of literature and disciplines, she then broadens the conversation to consider the healing power of friendship for trauma sufferers in the context of Christian communities.

The theme of suffering is also taken up by Alistair Cuthbert, as he considers divine omnipotence in kenotic terms. Engaging with the work of one of the most prominent contemporary Baptist theologians, Paul S. Fiddes, Cuthbert discusses Fiddes' notion of kenosis as God's suffering love, and then turns to a nineteenth-century Danish Lutheran theologian Hans Lassen Martensen, in whom he finds a corrective contribution to Fiddes' kenotic theology. Martensen provides Cuthbert with a Christology which emphasises God's kenotic self-limitation as

well as the elevation of humanity into sharing in the divine life. In the now-but-not-yet world, kenotic love would then be understood as one of the expressions, rather than the only mode, of divine omnipotence.

How do our theologies of kenotic love play out in our practice? Laura Gilmour explores just this question in her auto-ethnographical reflection. She looks at palliative care chaplaincy and specifically, caring for a patient in the process of assisted dying — which is far from being a theoretical issue, as the Assisted Dying Bill may well soon be brought into law by the Scottish Parliament. What kind of love, she asks, can a chaplain provide in accompanying the patient at the end of their life's journey? It moves Gilmour to conclude that, kenotically speaking, it involves putting the need for *being there* for the patient above one's personal convictions or principles, whilst also being able to lament all that is not life-giving and life-affirming.

Steve Younger opens a window into another area of chaplaincy available in Scotland: namely, chaplaincy in the context of Scottish non-denominational schools. Having emerged as an activity of a local parish minister, deeply rooted in Reformed Christian tradition, school chaplaincy finds itself today in a pluralistic context, navigating highly contested areas, whether these be questions around gender and sexuality, or freedom of speech. Recognising the weak theological foundations of Scottish School chaplaincy — 'a ministry role in search of a theology', as he puts it — Younger offers the biblical and theological motif, or image, of an ambassador.

While chaplaincy work can easily be embraced as a type of ministry, what about people's ordinary jobs and projects? In the final article of this *JESB* issue, Stuart Weir comes back to the Bible in order to consider an eschatology of work in conversation with two Matthean parables. The goodness (or otherwise) of any working project, Weir argues, can be determined in light of Christ's *parousia*, and his suggested criteria provide a lens to reconsider the contribution of our work to the kingdom and its relationships.

I trust that readers of this journal will be stimulated by these contributions and the various connections between the themes they explore. Some of the topics, particularly those relating to practice, may

not be as prominent in other contexts and countries. However, there will be plenty of parallels to and contrasts with familiar issues and situations. Hopefully this brief visit to Scotland will have stimulated some further questions about our use of Scripture, practices of discernment, thinking about and living through suffering, and engaging in the work of the kingdom.