

Editorial

Toivo Pilli

Toivo Pilli is Director of Baptist Studies at IBTS Amsterdam, and the Editor of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*.

pilli@ibts.eu

This issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* includes five articles that invite readers to reflect on theology, spirituality, and history from a Baptist perspective. It was not difficult to decide which of them should be the opening text: Ruth Gouldbourne's fundamentally important study — or essay, if you prefer — touches on the question of good and bad theology. The author goes beyond personal preferences in her analysis and argues that one challenge is to avoid doing theology that claims absolute truth in order to silence or exclude other voices. 'A theology that recognises its own position, claims its validity as a perspective from which to do theology, and also makes room for other voices and contexts is [...] a theology that offers genuine possibility and vitality of discourse.' This is a helpful criterion for everyone who is engaged in a serious attempt to think and speak theologically. The author is convinced that distinguishing between better and worse theologies, and striving towards creative and productive ways of doing theology, 'matters academically, ecclesially, and in the political and ethical life of the world.' This article sets the background, the canvas, for the rest of the texts that bring their own shades of colour to the issue.

Tim Noble's article focuses on the challenges of transformative mission through an examination of the four gospel accounts of the resurrection experiences of Mary Magdalene. Even though the stories have different emphases, they all require imagination to envisage the transformed life in Christ, 'and the only response to that is to share it with others, to bring them to a new way of seeing'. Here, a new aspect of being a missionary opens up: making oneself redundant. The mission itself goes on. And yet, for the individual missionary, the ultimate aim is to hear that people have reached their own personal and transformative encounter with the risen Lord, as the Samaritans say in the Gospel of

John, chapter 4. Noble concludes, ‘There can be no greater complement to the missionary than this, and this is the story of Mary Magdalene, the first missionary of the risen Lord.’

Mission, or more specifically ‘evangelism’, is the subject of the article by Nicholas DiMauro. He approaches his topic from a slightly unexpected angle, at least for a reader in a baptistic tradition: contemplative spirituality and centring prayer. DiMauro argues that the practice of centring prayer can rebalance ‘personal devotion with the believer’s call to mediate God to others’. He argues that centring prayer ‘could enrich the spiritual lives of Baptists and offer a meaningful avenue for connection to those outside the faith’ — especially New Age practitioners.

It is significant that this issue of *JES* includes an article by Linda Aadne, a recent PhD graduate of IBTS Amsterdam. She analyses how the debate on baptismal theology in the mid-twentieth century influenced Nils Engelsen, a Norwegian Baptist theologian. The debate was ignited largely by two Swiss theologians: Emil Brunner, who focused on the divine-human encounter, and Karl Barth, who based his views on Christology. Both were critical of infant baptism. Engelsen found much in common between Brunner’s and Barth’s theologies and his own convictions. Nevertheless, he emphasised that baptism is a relational symbol, adding to his views a touch of ‘sacramental realism’. He offers ‘a constructive alternative to both sacramental objectivism and revivalist subjectivism’. Engelsen was seeking a way forward in discussions about baptismal theology in a context where infant baptism remained culturally predominant in the Norwegian Lutheran society. Aadne’s article is not only an interesting piece of historical research but also illuminates how theological conversation across different Christian traditions can work constructively in a Baptist context.

The last article in this sequence is also historical, exploring the story of Estonian Baptist theological education from 1922 to 1989, from the establishment of the theological seminary, through years under atheistic restrictions, and until its reopening after the pressures of the Soviet regime. The authors, Toivo Pilli and Merlin Kontus, argue that theological education was and is part of Estonian Baptist identity,

although this commitment has taken different forms throughout history — from individual learning and reading to more formal forms of education. The article discusses another learning context that emerged during the Soviet period: friendship circles that did not follow any formal curriculum or programme. Instead, participants gave short presentations, used whatever literature was available, and in this way shaped the topics that were discussed. Personal relationships and learning experiences were equally important.

This volume of *JEBS* also contains a book review section in which both IBTS lecturers and research students provide short analytical summaries of recent literature, illuminating some developments in wider theological and more specifically in baptistic research. This is a helpful tool for everyone interested in selecting literature from the mass of publications: somebody has already done the initial ‘sifting’ and provided some guidance about the publications reviewed. This is useful both for researchers and for the general audience interested in fresh insights into theology and baptistic thought.