

Editorial

The current issue of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* focuses on the general topic of relations, discussing Christian perception and creative interpretation of the arts and dealing with a variety of relations in an ecclesiological context. The volume reflects IBTSC academic and conference activities in 2019. Ken Roxburgh's article about slavery and racism in a Southern Baptist context is based on a Hughey Lecture, which he delivered in Amsterdam in January 2019. The 'Arts and Mission' Conference in Bromma, Sweden, in June 2019, organised by the European Baptist Federation and IBTSC, was a fruitful and inspiring forum for several discussions, and some of the papers have found their way into this volume. I am also very pleased to mention that this issue represents a wide international spectrum of authors, as well as providing a forum for the work of younger scholars who are pursuing their research journey at IBTSC. Their topics of interest range from inclusion of persons with learning disabilities in local church life to theological analysis of 'ethnography and ecclesiology'.

Matt Edminster has undertaken a challenging task of discussing 'relational ontology', especially in a Free Church setting. He argues: '...it is incumbent upon the congregation not simply to reflect on what they *do* when they come together, but also on what they *are* when they are gathered in the name of Christ'. The author considers the church as a 'relational subject', and he uses both theological and sociological tools to explore this somewhat elusive reality. Whatever position the reader will take while reading the article, the author has managed to emphasise the central role of relations in baptistic understanding of *ecclesia*.

The following four contributions expand the conversation into the area of arts, both visual and verbal. In many Baptist communities there is a tendency to resist non-verbal forms of communication. However, Richard Kidd, in conversation with voices from the Bible and from wider culture, argues in his article that it is time to ask if this pattern still serves Baptists well, especially as 'visual cultures' have gained momentum. The art of seeing may clear the way for a 'more than' we might otherwise miss. Graham Sparkes poses the question of whether Protestantism might have an even more complicated relationship with the visual. Being afraid of falling into the trap of idolatry, some Protestant traditions, especially Calvinism, have been extremely cautious about using images for devotion or worship; 'the infinite surely cannot be imagined in the way we might represent in paint something we can see'. Sparkes asks: 'Could it be that this truth is exactly what abstract artists have also wanted to recognise in imaginative and

creative ways?’ He argues, using Piet Mondrian and Mark Rothko as examples, that this, indeed, might be the case. These artists offer us space to contemplate what is transcendent, refusing to give images that are too easily controlled or defined. Could it be that the Reformed reluctance towards images has played a part in the emergence of abstract art?

Denis Kondyuk, using films by Terrence Malick and Andrey Zvyagintsev, turns to the relationships between theology and movie-aesthetics. Kondyuk’s interpretation assumes the use of Christological reading of reality in film analysis, and he sees the dramatic and aesthetical environment of film as a framework for revelation. Experience of God in a film, sometimes a sudden and unexpected event, creates a space for mirroring our human identity and challenging our perception of God. It can be an experience of being ‘seen’ rather than coming to view ‘the other’.

Lon Graham, in turn, moves from the visual to the verbal, and draws the reader’s attention to the narrative of grief in the poems of John Ryland Jr. Opening a window onto the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the author allows us to see into the emotions and personal spirituality of this famous preacher and theologian. This chapter of Ryland’s life has not been researched in depth before, as, after his first wife’s death, he seemed to continue his public ministry undisturbed. In the poems, however, he appears ‘less as a churchman, pastor, and denominational leader, and more as an ordinary, struggling man, whose theology served both to wound and soothe his soul’.

Ken Roxburgh, professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Samford University, and guest speaker at IBTSC Hughey Lectures 2019, has published an article titled ‘Baptists and Race in the American South’. This piece of research turns the trajectory of this volume towards relational matters in Baptist communities. Roxburgh skilfully tells the story of Alabaman and other Southern Baptists who, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, struggled to discern the will of Christ in a cultural context where slavery or racism was an everyday reality. The author explores biblical hermeneutics as well as political and congregational decisions, and he concludes with a sobering notion that ‘the current context of America and of White Evangelicalism would suggest that racism is alive and well’. There is a long road ahead, ‘to begin to ... seek forgiveness and reconciliation through genuine repentance’.

The next author, Israel Olofinjana, scrutinises another aspect: his analysis of African and European Christian relations helps us to understand better the phenomenon of ‘reverse mission’ in the United Kingdom, especially in the Baptist communities, often known as Baptists Together. Olofinjana illustrates his article with several examples of mission activities

carried out by African migrants. Their presence has opened new avenues in mission and church planting, enhanced theological discussion, as well as highlighting several social and racial justice issues. A helpful short ‘excursus’ also sheds light onto Asian and African migrants’ presence in the historical or mainline churches in Britain.

The last three articles in this issue of *JEBS* have doctrinal and/or practical emphases and, needless to say, the doctrinal and the practical are often closely intertwined. Ross Hamilton engages with the case of Dumbarton Baptist Church’s vision of making church more accessible for people with learning disability. Hamilton offers the background to the problem, which is envisaged not only as social, but also as theological, and includes discussion on the biblical position of human dignity, exploration of the message of the Sermon on the Mount as the basis of ethical practice, and conversation about otherness and diversity. On the last pages of the article the author presents some suggestions for future practice. The volume concludes with articles by Roger Jasper and by Kegan Chandler, which highlight theological issues and the inevitable but difficult task of interpretation. Jasper, in conversation with Paul Fiddes and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, asks: How can we discern the nature of relations between theology and social science, ecclesiology and ethnography? Theology – ecclesiology – which is disconnected from social reality leaves our understanding of the church and its calling aloof ‘in the sky’. And ecclesiology, which is content with the descriptive task only, runs the risk of passively adopting an essentially naturalistic view of the world. The author seeks a balance, integrating ecclesiology and ethnography, in the incarnational reality of Christ and in the doctrine of the Trinity. Chandler’s text reminds the reader that theological discussions also have a historical dimension. And in history the answers have not always been the same as one might assume today, including in matters of Trinity and Christology. Chandler discusses the unorthodox Christological views of Matthew Caffyn, a seventeenth-century General Baptist. He argues that Caffyn’s place in the Baptist tradition must be revisited, as this historical figure does not represent an unexpected aberration but rather expresses the wider General Baptist views and practices of the seventeenth century. These views were influenced by commitment to being spiritual and by an atmosphere of tolerance within the believers’ community, which also meant freedom of biblical interpretation. The article argues that unorthodox Christological leanings, and even a tendency towards unitarianism among early Baptists, was not just a sign of ‘enlightenment rationalism’ – its roots were in ‘primitivism and a fervent worry over the Scriptures’. Perhaps, in his own time, Caffyn was much less unorthodox than the present-day criteria might presuppose.

Journal of European Baptist Studies is aiming to advance discussion in areas which are challenging and inspiring for Baptist scholars today. As one of my colleagues said recently, “Theology is everywhere.” It is a joy to introduce this issue of *JEBS*, where scholars from different countries have taken seriously the task of finding theology, sometimes in unexpected places.

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