

A WORD AND SPIRIT  
MAINSTREAM  
NETWORK

**Magazine Issue 68 – September 2000**

*Issue Theme: Getting Connected*

# Getting Connected

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# INTRODUCTION -

## mending the nets

The kingdom is like a net that catches all kinds of fish – some good, some bad. Reapplying the picture it might suggest that the Spirit is saying to us, the mesh of the net has become frayed, and fish are escaping. Could it be that there is a connection between our effectiveness in mission and the quality of relationship between our church communities? Our September edition explores this question.

I've just returned from our local *district* meeting. Only item: the future of the district. It was an interesting meeting. It was well led with plenty of interaction and freedom to comment. This is what our particular tradition of doing church has loved in the past. But for me the very word, "district" conjures up – how shall we put it? – less than helpful images! Formal meetings in the fading décor of an oppressive Victorian room of some Baptist church that's struggling to keep its doors open - meaningless elections of the only nominee to the exalted post of District Home Mission secretary - bum-numbing chairs - the thought that you're missing the European Cup Final. What is it about Christians that we always manage to organise meetings on the one night when a good match is on TV – Baptist ministers don't have Sky...do they? Okay perhaps this is all a bit over the top. Only just however!

Now it's all about *clusters*. Sounds like one of those cereals that you look at while you go down aisle 6 at Tesco's. You resist the temptation to put it into your trolley because the gram cost price is too high compared with the endless oats of economy muesli! Well if it *is* like "Clusters" it's worth a taste. I sense that with the permission that *Relating & Resourcing* has given, a few more of us are finding enriching and meaningful relationships in groups, networks, clusters – call them what you will.

The pages that follow contain some stories of what is going on around the country in these new or not so new groupings. Steve Rowley's tells us about a fraternal that has progressed in terms of relationship and mutual sharing of resources. Rob's story is about an old structure being infused with new energy. Steve Gordon shares the perspective of a missionary appointed by a network and how he sees the connection between networking and effective mission. Kathryn paints a picture of a new atmosphere and energy generated by appropriate networking. Derek has supplied guidance on how he sees clustering developing from his national perspective. I've recently had a sabbatical during which I tried to develop a theology of networking, getting a handle on our fragmented church and social context. No doubt you have your own tale to tell. I hope listening to other people's stories will keep you making the connections.

Of course there's nothing new under the sun. It's all been done before, but we have to find a way that fits the changing styles and preferences of today's more informal culture. A key factor that determines where people seek a sense of connectedness is to do with one's personal preference on the spectrum of the formal and informal, of the relational and institutional. My prayer is that God may continue to breathe life into our churches and us as we re-discover afresh the energy of getting connected in meaningful ways – the energy of synergy. It's time to mend the nets. And to keep our thinking alive, I've included a few book reviews. I always enjoy other people's recommendations. So give some of these a try.

Stephen Ibbotson - Leeds

### **The low down on...**

**Derek Allan** is currently Head of the Baptist Union Department for Research and Training in Mission. This followed a ministry in Redcar during which time two congregations were started in the area.

**Steve Rowley**, besides helping to run the South Manchester meeting of ministers he describes in his article, is the pastor of the church at Bramhall.

**Kathryn Morgan** as well as being married to Peter, works in team ministry with him at Chard in Somerset. She is also Moderator of the Baptist Union's Mission Executive.

**Steve Gordon** after completing training on the Spurgeon's Church Planting and Evangelism course has taken up a post of Mission Enabler western region of London.

**Rob Parkinson** is in ministry at Lumb in the Rossendale valley in Lancashire. He is involved with Mainstream North as well as the local gathering – dare one say "fraternal" - of ministers.

**Roger Standing** heads up the team ministry at a church in Croydon. He is also involved in the Mainstream Word and Spirit network in south London, as well as on Mainstream's leadership team.

**Lisa Holmes** is part a team ministry at Skipton in Yorkshire. She is also involved in both Mainstream North and part of the leadership team of Mainstream.

**Elaine Crutchley** is Child and Adolescent Consultant Psychiatrist based in Guildford where she also acts as the Medical Director of the hospital trust. She is part of the church at Bookham in Surrey.

**Stephen Ibbotson** is the pastor of a network of congregations that make up Sharing Life in north Leeds. He is also involved with Mainstream North and the Mainstream leadership team.



## in national perspective

There is nothing basically new about clustering, and even groups of Baptist churches have been known to work together for various purposes. The fact that this has been done before, though without the label **clustering**, should be

comforting to those who are venturing nervously to establish clusters. It has already been proved to work!

What is new is the context. When the report *Relating & Resourcing* commended the concept of clustering as a way of recovering meaningful relationships between churches, it was suddenly on the agenda. The dearly held principle of the independence of the local church is one of the core issues here. Baptists are quick to assert this principle, both in theory and practice. The complementary principle of the interdependence of local churches has tended to receive less attention, yet the two are of equal importance. Perhaps a cluster could be likened to a sort of 'house group for churches'. In the same way as the introduction of house groups was helpful in breaking down the walls

between individual Christians, so clustering might just do this on an inter-church basis.

### Forming Clusters

The business of forming clusters is a somewhat messy one. The direction is **bottom up**, with no one suggesting dictation from Associations or from Didcot. The whole purpose is fellowship in mission, so churches seeking to cluster need to ask themselves the simple question: "Who are our natural partners in mission?" Some clusters were already in existence before *Relating and Resourcing* arrived and they can perhaps act as models. Others are now coming into existence and it is really a function of

the local leadership in consultation with leaders in the Association to get on with forming clusters, where this has not already happened.

The most commonly asked questions are these:

1. *Should a church cluster exclusively with others of a similar theological outlook, or with those nearest geographically?* The answer is that whichever approach is more likely to promote mission in a given area is right.
2. *What about clustering ecumenically?* The same answer applies. If a Baptist church is heavily committed to other churches in the town and working with them in mission, that arrangement may take priority over a Baptist cluster. Which leads to the next question ...
3. *Can a church be in two clusters?* And the answer is yes, though one will be the primary focus for mission. Where a church is finding its main focus in an ecumenical cluster it would still be important to maintain connections with the nearest Baptist cluster as well. On a different tack, it may be that youth work could best be done in one cluster and other work in another. Clusters are essentially light and provisional structures and the guiding principle remains what will best serve mission.
4. *What about the BMS link groups?* If a link grouping can be incorporated in a cluster or made the basis of a cluster then that is

obviously an advantage. Many churches will find that this is the case, but many won't.

### **Doing things better**

The main justification for clustering is to enable the local church to do some things better than it could alone and to do some things that it would not otherwise even attempt. Examples that come to mind include:

1. **Seeker events**, or seeker-friendly events can be done at cluster level and may be repeated in one or two more venues if the gifts and talents within a cluster are harnessed. Thus a smaller church that would feel unable to attempt a seeker type event might be able to benefit by drawing on the cluster's abilities
2. **Large-scale evangelism**. It would be feasible for the forces of a cluster of churches to be pooled in order to knock on every door in an estate or village in the case of a weekend, if this was thought a good strategy.
3. **An office** run for a cluster of churches and being able to afford good equipment could be a major help to each church.
4. **Training events**. Although the Associations would naturally take a lead in training in their new areas, training events, say in evangelism, or for preachers or house-group leaders, could easily be done at cluster level.
5. **Times of interregnum**. It would be natural for preachers,

ministers and others from a cluster to contribute in a time of interregnum, but it might also be a creative approach if a church seeking settlement were to heed the insights and comments of its fellow cluster members about itself and its own needs. Sometimes our best friends can speak the kind of wisdom we need to hear. It might even be that a church seeking settlement would invite others from the cluster to share in the process of discerning whom the Lord might be calling.

### The Companion

One constructive and creative partnership in mission could be modelled on an approach pioneered by the ecumenical *Building Bridges of Hope* project. In summary, it would involve a 'companion' from another church in the cluster sitting in on leadership and mission meetings, armed with a prepared list of questions. He or she would also have the role of reflecting to the leadership team how they perceive progress. The companion would in

the role of critical friend rather than expert, but would have received a little training and briefing. The pilot churches within the *Building Bridges of Hope* experiment reported unanimously that the very presence of a 'companion' was a very effective stimulus to mission. Taking the idea further, if the companions were to compare notes periodically they might be very useful in developing joint activities across the cluster.

Although most of the headlines and the debate about the BUGB reform process has centred inevitably upon changes at Association level, the real success of the reformed Union might well lie with clustering. Baptists are at their best when engaged in mission and doing so together with an openness both to the Lord and to each other. Inevitably, there will be clusters that become ossified in procedure and take on the mantle and trappings of micro Associations. Don't let yours be one of them!

Derek Allan - Didcot

### BUMPER STICKERS IN BIBLE TIMES

I'D RATHER BE  
DANCING

HERODIAS'S DAUGHTER  
(MARK 6:22)

I'D RATHER BE  
HUNTING

NIMROD (GENESIS 10:9)

I'D RATHER BE  
JOGGING

AHIMAAZ (2 SAMUEL 18:19-27)



## **the foundation of relationship**

At one point, I thought only nuts or serious diseases went in clusters, but then our local Baptist Fraternal suddenly became a cluster. It's reasonable to ask if this was merely a change in name, and the honest

answer is that to all intents and purposes, the format of our meetings and the nature of our co-operation hasn't altered a great deal. Many of us also have local interdenominational groups that are far better placed for co-operation at a whole-church level.

We are extremely fortunate to have over twenty churches in a fairly tight geographical area, where at least the pastors and leaders share a renewal outlook as expressed in Mainstream who can support each other in the struggles of church life with confidence and trust. This shared theological basis has been very important to us in developing a liberty in praise, prayer and ministry to each other, that can be given and received without reservation. The main thrust of our meetings has always been to talk, worship and pray together, and minister to each other in our various needs. We have evenings of leaders and partners two or three times a year so we can at least meet the other half of each "team", and our regular meetings

often include sharing of personal or family needs. Within the group, some closer relationships have developed - usually on the golf course - which have been a significant means of support through hard times for some. We have recently started to circulate very brief notes of needs expressed at the meetings so that we can continue to pray for, and contact each other between times.

I suppose we have to say that it is still as difficult as ever to move the sense of belonging and mutual support we feel, out of the meetings of church leaders, into any realistic consciousness in the churches. We have always felt that Districts are too big to affect local church life, but

clusters don't seem wonderfully better! We have had pastors, elders and deacons evenings that have partially succeeded in developing a wider experience of this fellowship, but numbers up to 100 make close friendship and ministry difficult to maintain on the basis of three meetings a year. Maybe this raises the question about the "normal" life of a cluster. Perhaps it is totally unrealistic to expect a number of churches to be constantly in a close relationship together - how many of us achieve that between individuals to any depth in ONE church?! Should we not be aiming to develop a close, confident relationship between leaders that can be readily communicated to the churches, maybe through a regular pulpit swap? This can then be used on a "we can trust this lot" basis for occasional multi-church activities.

The closest we have come to involving substantial numbers from the churches was a series of "Times of Refreshing" meetings during the Toronto time a few years ago. The meetings were organised by a small group of us but led by a larger group. Because of the relationships we share in the group, most of us could freely express our differing reservations and concerns, yet still confidently promote the meetings, knowing that we could trust whoever was leading.

On a very practical level, smaller churches have benefited incredibly

from being involved in parts of the programmes of the larger churches, which it would have been impossible to organise themselves. We have drawn on each expertise of others in *anything*, from Puppet ministry to Youth Alpha as well as leading worship and preaching. We have also run "share schemes" to help with specific church financial needs, and partnerships at different levels have developed between inner-city and suburban churches. These partnerships have included borrowing personnel to lead, provide music, preach, be treasurer, run kids groups or act as unofficial moderator as well as the more public shared days out and services.

Personally, most of the time, cluster means the fraternal - the friendship, fellowship, support and safety net it provides. It is wonderful to know that I have a number of people I could call on in a pastoral emergency who would pray for me and advise me with wisdom and love. I have only ever used these contacts once in such a situation, but I felt so uplifted and supported when I called the busy pastor of a large church and he simply said, "Come and talk to me. Come now." We have a lot of work to do to make clusters effective at a church level, but a well-oiled fraternal has to be a good start!

Steve Rowley - South Manchester

# From fraternal to cluster



*You are attending the ministers' fraternal. The meeting seems to be about reading minutes and getting through tedious business items. Furtive glances at your watch confirm that too much time has already elapsed. You notice that others also*

*seem anxious about timekeeping yet nothing on the agenda ever gives. You start to think you could attend this meeting once a month for the rest of your life and still not really know the other people in the group. You wonder whether anything is gained by meeting in this way. So would we be better off without the fraternal or might it be transformed into a basis for a lively and vital cluster of ministers and churches?*

In Rossendale we have inherited fairly traditional structures for relating. There are ten Baptist churches within seven or eight miles of each other. Most were established in or before the nineteenth century. All have been influenced to some extent by evangelical and charismatic renewal. Even so the general ethos of church life owes much to the past. We are organised as a federation (one of three in the East Lancs District of the NorthWestern Baptist Association). The ministers' fraternal lies at the heart of our organisation. It meets monthly and has become key to the development of more meaningful

clustering among the churches of the Rossendale Valley.

If the formal, old-style meeting structure ever existed at the Rossendale fraternal it is now pretty much gone. We are making adjustments to the way we conduct ourselves, concentrating more on interpersonal sharing, general fooling around, and praying for one another. We still deal with various business items but a genuine care for each other and a willingness to bear one-another's burdens exists and is growing.

We are learning, I think, that no amount of structural change will turn a meeting of professionals into a community of friends. It requires the will and co-operation of every participant. We are trying to foster such will and have engaged in frank discussions about what we want out of the fraternal, how it might better meet our needs. I have been surprised in such discussion how much we are in harmony with each other and how willing everyone seems to be to make the necessary changes of approach and attitude. We recognise that in the very best clusters people can hide or project a false image of themselves or participate at only a surface level. This remains as much a danger for us as for anyone else. As we encourage deeper participation we are aware that the closeness of any group will always depend on the level of desire for fellowship and friendship among its members.

It strikes me that successful clusters have a life beyond their meetings. Friendships are built and in the daily run of events members of the group find cause to talk with each other, to help and be available to each other. Vital to this is the role of facilitators: individuals who take it upon themselves to make a few phone calls and keep in touch with members of the group and keep the fellowship growing and improving between the meetings. We are fortunate, in Rossendale, to have a few such people without whom, I feel, the cluster would be only half as valuable as it is.

Still, there are certain kinds of discussion we occasionally engage in that militate against developing close ties of mutual trust. Inevitably when pastors meet they talk about their ministries, their churches' programmes, their successes and their failures. This is well and good. Yet it can soon degenerate into competitiveness on the one hand and sour grapes on the other. I am learning that whenever I boast about my own ministry or church I put others on the defensive forcing the more introverted into their shells and provoking the others into a kind of church beauty contest (anything you or your church can do, we can do better). When I complain about the failings of others I tempt my hearers never to trust me with their secrets and their failings. Clustering for the purpose of boasting or blaming is particularly unattractive and I'm pleased to say we only occasionally fall into it in Rossendale.

As a fraternal we organise a number of events and initiatives to promote the fellowship and mission of our cluster of churches. These include combined services of worship, combined deacons' meetings, an annual pulpit exchange and a church-planting project. Most have a long-standing history and we are simply attempting to utilise them with renewed vigour.

We have increased the number of combined worship services from one to two a year and have made them more celebratory. The meetings have improved as a result and this is

reflected in greater enthusiasm and increased attendance. Over two-hundred can be expected to attend and in Rossendale on a Sunday night, that's not bad!

Our joint deacons' meetings could use more attention yet. We are trying to make them more relevant to the needs of our leadership teams and have been devoting much of the time within the meetings to sharing and prayer. Often this is good. Sometimes the sharing of news becomes a little competitive and unhelpful to the forging of co-operative links. The meetings also have a tendency to slip back into a traditional mould. Just when you think you've reached the twenty-first century you turn up to a meeting that feels as if its being conducted in 1945. I can't help thinking that these meetings could be a real powerhouse and an immense benefit to the life of our churches and I hope that in the near future they will become so.

Perhaps the most exciting and promising aspect of our life together in Rossendale is the church-planting project for the village of Weir. The Baptist churches of Rossendale, with help from many others in the district, have banded together to re-establish a church in a village that currently has none. The work has

qualified for a home mission grant and we are now seeking a church-planting pastor to lead it. We still have a long way to go before the church-plant is up and running but we have made great progress. The joy of working together with others for the purpose of mission more than compensates for the various difficulties and setbacks we have encountered on the way.

If you were to ask the members of our churches what they thought about the Rossendale cluster of Baptist churches you would get a range of answers. Doubtless, some would say 'cluster, what cluster?' Some see our churches as hopelessly independent - others rejoice in the strength of fellowship between them. Some are delighted to join together, others see little value in it. Some think it best to ditch the past and start again. Others, like me, believe the old structures can be renewed. There are still days when I wonder whether the culture of our churches will ever make it to the 21st century. Yet, by and large, I am thankful for inherited structures that have stood the test of time and are proving amenable to change as we develop patterns of relating that appeal to a new generation.

Rob Parkinson – Lumb, Lancashire

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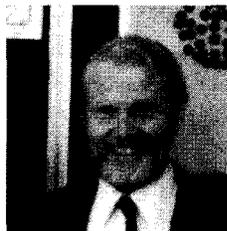
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Glen Marshall



Roger Forster



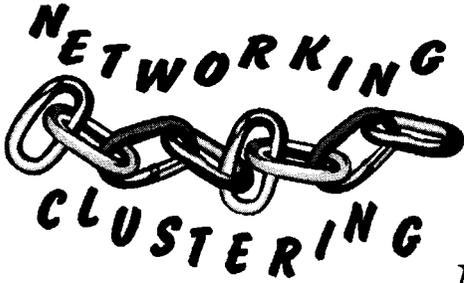
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Tim Edworthy  
(Wellington Square Baptist Church).

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William Shaw  
(Barnsley Baptist Church)



# THE POWER OF NETWORKING AND CLUSTERING

*Networking and clustering are two of the most effective tools known to us in our current climate of general decline in our churches and are very much linked together in the eventual outworking of mission. Many of our churches will give testimony to the enormous encouragement and support that networking brings. In my experience I wholeheartedly and passionately believe in co-mission within the body of Christ.*

## **Personal journey to networking**

My first experiences of supporting another church was in 1991 when, having returned from a partnership mission in the USA, I was asked by my local church, South Hanwell Baptist, whether I would be prepared to help Acton Baptist who were about to lose all their children and youth workers. This was a church where the average age was 65 plus and the young people were in their forties! We were the closest church able to help, even though we were approximately four miles away with three London "villages" and two other Baptist churches in between. Together with a colleague we helped the Sunday school to continue and developed its youth work. My

involvement was for a period of two years. Such was the sense of call that eventually we settled in the church and became involved in the leadership and life of the church from 1994 onwards.

## **Networking in action**

On reflection it is interesting that a request given through a network of churches started a journey for me that hasn't yet stopped. Soon after I found myself responding to my call to enter into full time Christian ministry. During my four years at Spurgeon's I worked in Acton as the student assistant Minister as part of my training and settled in Acton Baptist. Now as the Assistant Minister with limited responsibility, I

have now been released to work among 30 churches as a Mission Enabler within the London Baptist Association, Western Region. This in itself is an example of churches agreeing on a course of action through an existing network to provide a resource for mission within the region. This network of churches contributes about two-thirds towards my stipend.

### **The motivation to network**

From these personal experiences the power of networking is released through a process of discussion and agreement in which particular needs and concerns are identified, and responses formulated for individuals or churches to work together. Some of the motivations for networks to form are as follows.

- *Response to local features in community* - For instance in our area, with London Heathrow airport affecting the working patterns of the community, many people are unable to go to church in the normal way. Further due to the employment of many different ethnic groups, cross-cultural mission needs to be considered. Therefore the churches around the airport could review what would be relevant. This suggests the need for networking between London Airport Chaplaincy and local churches in the Heathrow area on an ecumenical basis to develop more effective patterns of ministry and mission.
- *Shared theological viewpoint* - Usually churches relate on this basis: charismatic evangelicals, orthodox traditions. Thus churches come together for mutual encouragement and support, affirming one another's identity and conviction.
- *Shared vision for locality* - Churches tend to have a heightened awareness of each other, and initiatives are worked on together. For example in Acton we have had central Alphas, ecumenical Action Groups reviewing areas of ministry such as outreach, prayer, youth work, and social action. Projects embarked on were town-wide with results and recommendations fed back into the churches through church leaders and a magazine.
- *Shared personnel / resources* - youth worker, mission enabler.
- *Events* – Training, worship or outreach events e.g. "On the Move" barbecue mission. This is a broad-based initiative in which local churches co-operate together to hold a barbecue in a prominent area in the local community, offering free food and creating an environment where people can talk, be prayed for and hear team members share their own experience of Jesus Christ. It has had amazing results as people are impressed by the presence and generosity of "the church".
- *Church Planting* – sharing resources, personnel, buildings.

## **Networking Fundamental to Mission**

Taking my own work of a mission-enabler as an example of the fruit of networking, the work I am involved in falls into four categories.

- **Equipping:** offering and providing training from specialist organisations.
- **Resourcing:** co-ordinating mission resources and making them available within the churches.
- **Developing:** helping churches to develop manageable and effective mission strategies.
- **Networking:** much of my time is spent engaged in this to develop the work and is of fundamental importance. Getting to know leaderships of the churches; sharing ideas for mission and outreach; developing relationships with and between key individuals and ministries and enabling churches to share vision. Winning the trust of the pastor and the leadership is essential to take an initiative forward. Once such contact is established, introducing other individuals or ministries to leaderships or churches becomes easier.

### **Raising the profile of those who can help!**

This brings me to the networking that needs to be done among the many individuals and ministries that are already in our churches. They are in some cases under-used, but are a huge hidden skill and gift-base crying out to be used. One such

person that I've come across is Martin Durham. I've known him for years, having met him on the streets late one Friday night in Ealing Broadway. Every Friday night for the last three years he and a team would witness to all the pub and club goers and the many Muslim workers in the area. Here was someone who could provide invaluable training for our churches or for teams for summer missions to West London's many fairs, fetes, carnivals and shows that take place every year. Networking is more than relating because its aim is to make sure we are bringing the right gifts and skills to bear in any given situation. This was demonstrated in one of our churches where a team of people worked for 6-12 months. The church in question employed the team to do a community survey and an internal church audit. A team of preachers who worked with small groups in the church for three months followed this, a work that continues from time to time. The church has been encouraged, helped to determine a mission strategy and is now looking to the future with the possibility of receiving training on relational evangelism.

### **Some obstacles to clustering and networking**

- Lack of vision.
- Too much emphasis on independence.
- Lack of confidence - churches feel they are too small with too many pressures and they feel overwhelmed.
- Failure to identify and release peoples gifts and skills.

- Exclusion of lay ministries through clergy domination.
- Maintenance mind-set rather than mission mind-set.

**The benefits for mission**

The benefit of networking and clustering is that people are mobilised to use their gifts. The local church has the opportunity to carry out early church patterns of ministry for example:

- Commissioning through the laying on of hands.
- Such commissioning encourages the local church receiving help to be active in mission and discipling – and effective in it we hope!
- The release and receiving of gifts.
- Increased confidence.
- Individuals and churches get involved in mission.

**Implications for Mission**

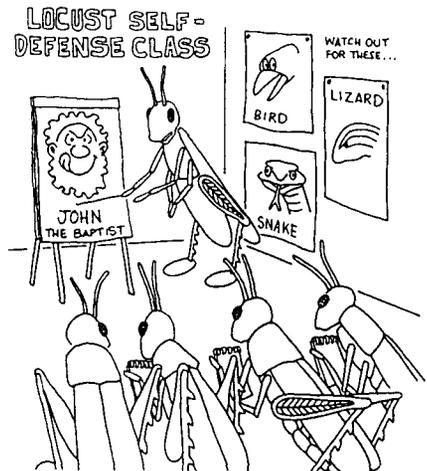
Networking therefore has positive implications for the mission of the Church. It increases the accessibility for training, regarding

church planting, evangelism, cross-cultural mission, etc. It helps with the consideration of new areas and opportunities for mission in consultation with local churches. Through the provision of consultative processes, local churches receive necessary resources and help for their own local mission situation. Networking gradually changes the mindset of leaders, because it provides them with the opportunity to gain an overview of local missions and initiatives, freeing them from the tendency to think parochially. So it should eventually lead churches to release teams or individuals to work alongside a church for a given time. It is important that efforts are tangible and practical at ground level. The implication of all this will be the strengthening of the churches in unity and purpose in the fulfilment of completing the Great Commission.

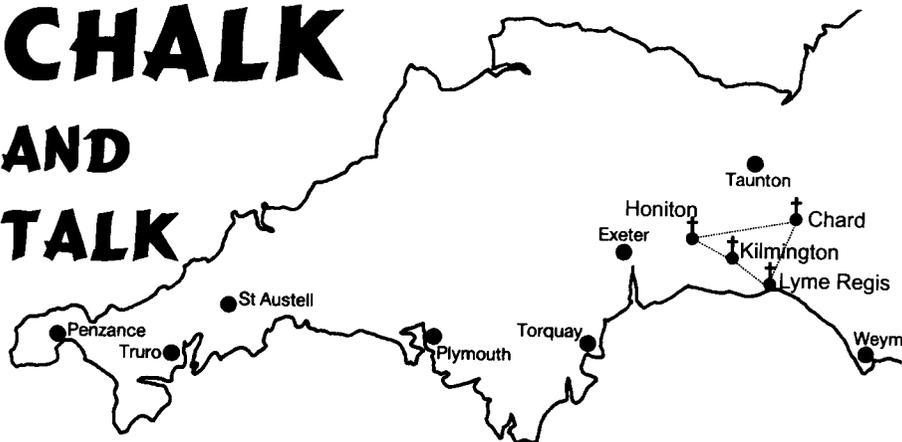
Steve Gordon - Acton

"HUMANS GENERALLY AREN'T A THREAT, BUT THERE IS THIS ONE EXCEPTION..." SEE MATTHEW 3:4.

*J. Allaw*



# CHALK AND TALK



## ... AND A LOT ELSE

"What's happening in the Autumn?" "Shall I see you at DriveThru?" "That was a really good afternoon." "Why doesn't CHALK come together more often?" These were some of the comments addressed to me by various people across the age spectrum from five congregations at the end of our latest *cluster* event. I hope my grin wasn't too obvious as I reflected inwardly that four years ago the five ministers who met together for the first time wondered if their respective churches would ever come to see the value of *clustering*!

The story began when the Baptist minister in the village of Kilmington, East Devon contacted the Baptist ministers in the three towns within about 30 minutes driving time, inviting them to meet. Having shared the vision of joining together for the purposes of mission into our area and also for meaningful sharing between the ministers, we began meeting monthly and planned our first joint outreach enterprise. Thus CHALK was born, informally linking the Baptist churches of Chard, Honiton, Lyme Regis and Kilmington.

Despite a shaky start, and changes of ministers in two churches including the person with the original vision, we became convinced of the rightness of the arrangement. The ministers were the first people to feel the benefit. An agreement to be open and honest, and prayerful for each other brought a level of sharing, support, and mutual accountability which none had found in the larger ministers' fellowships in the Associations, or in our ecumenical groups. This has helped three of the ministers through

probationary periods, given support during the inevitable low times of ministry, and allowed reflection on tricky pastoral situations. Exchanges of pulpits have taken place regularly, and the five congregations now enjoy a sense of friendship with each minister.

The challenge of mission is always on the agenda. We listen to and advise one another on involvement in our individual communities, but we also pool the resources of people and money to do some things that have proved difficult alone. Thus people from two of our churches started and now run a pregnancy crisis centre. Groups have gone into local schools in the four towns for a week at a time. Together we have provided training for our youth and children's workers, as well as helpful leaders' days for deacons, house-group leaders and others.

Out of our shared concern for teenagers in this rural part of England, came DriveThru, now three years old. This has developed into a *cluster* of its own, made up of three of the CHALK churches and three others. DriveThru puts on a bi-monthly youth event, encouraging teens in sharing their faith with their peers. The Western Association is now giving DriveThru some financial support to cover the cost of including small village churches where there may be only one or two teenagers. This autumn will see the first special event for primary-aged children.

If you were to ask the proverbial average person in the pew about CHALK, you would probably hear an enthusiastic description of some of the joint celebrations put on four or more times each year. Several of these have been in a Guildhall with good facilities, others outdoors on the sea front, others using larger church buildings, sometimes with a supper included. Invited guest speakers, BMS Action Teams, Christian theatre groups, along with much local talent in music, drama and dance have made these memorable evenings to which people are inviting guests who are not church goers. Each of the churches in our *cluster* is committed to regular small group or 'cell' life, and gathers as a 'congregation', but now together we are able to add a 'celebration' level. This is providing fresh evangelistic opportunities for us all.

The experience of *clustering* has taught us that by giving away time and gifting, as well as some of the sacred cows of individuality, we have gained much more in return. Importantly, in working out Kingdom values together, we are finding new ways of being involved in God's mission. The process has been slow and that there is much more to be developed. This may be due to the slow pace of the West Country, but also it has to do with building something based on relationships and not on structures. When asked by other churches about the working of our *cluster*, we can only suggest that the starting point is a common

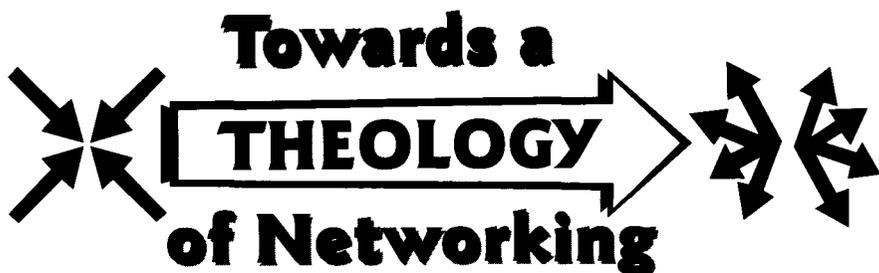
vision to serve God in a geographic locality or particular task, followed by a commitment to forming relationships and the sharing of resources. As yet, we are unclear about how we and other clusters will fit into the new South West Regional Association, but we hope for an

arrangement which will inform, encourage and resource our mission task whilst allowing our relating to continue and flourish, for the sake of God's Kingdom.

Kathryn Morgan - Chard

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## **Towards a THEOLOGY of Networking**

The days of neatly ordered churchmanship have long since receded over the horizon behind us. Post-denominationalism is the new order. Loyalty to the institutions bequeathed to us has been eroded. Denominations were formed within the era of Christendom when the main issue at stake was "What is true Church?" This has not been the question for generations. When someone chooses a church to go to – that is if they have been a Christian for some time - choices are made not on matters of churchmanship but of style, feel, ethos as well as the straight issues of theology. Now it's a matter of mix and match, personal preferences and what "feels" right. It's almost certainly not sufficient to bemoan this as consumerism run rampant in church life.

It gets even more complicated when we turn from the personal agenda to the scene of inter-church relations. Not only are there the "vertical" lines of national denominational allegiance that remain to a greater or lesser extent, but the horizontal lines of local networks: of Churches Together groupings and other networks formed around a theology, a movement, or a hoped-

for "move of God". Look at any area of our country and you will find a mish-mash of these different connections, ranging from the strong and coherent, to the loose and unproductive, from the highly formal and organised, to the totally laid back and informal. You can't map many of these networks, for as soon as you have drawn the map it's changed on the ground.

In this kaleidoscopic context two things are necessary. First we need to understand the fluid even chaotic nature of our church context and work with a theological model of the Church that takes account of this fragmentation of church life - a reflection of our fragmented society. But second we need a theology and practice that expresses the fundamental unity that Christ came to achieve. Such a theology might save us from easily dismissing people's church preferences as "consumerism", while at the same time developing a critique of this trend where we opt for a nice cosy church with "people like us" (PLU's).

But where to find such a theology? What is its starting point? As I have reflected on this from years of being involved in networking and in establishing new churches of very different characters, I have been driven to sketch answers from two vantage points. The first, which I touch on in passing, is from our specifically Christian understanding of God as Trinitarian community of Father, Son and Spirit. From here we should expect a world created by him to provide evidence of *both* the one and the many, *both* unity and diversity, *both* harmony and polyphony, and all this in some kind of balanced tension. But any theology that only has this as its starting point can become rarefied and speculative - ideal in theory but of questionable relevance practically in the world we experience day by day. I need an ideal to help lift my eyes beyond of messiness of church

life, but I also need another vantagepoint, one that is earthier and takes full account of life as it is.

Therefore I have reassessed "the tribes of Israel" as a theological metaphor to cast light on our own experience. The value of a metaphor is not found in its precise match with our present context - metaphors rarely provide that - but in its playful and even ill-fitting ability to illuminate dimensions of our experience that we would otherwise miss. The tribes were the all too earthy form that Israel took as the people were formed and entered the Promised Land. They were certainly messy, at times incoherent and even anarchic. But they permitted freedom, responsibility and a dispersal of power throughout the land. They were the form of social organisation that resulted from God's deliverance of Israel from the pain, power and oppression of Empire. They embodied a suspicion of how power works in human communities. The Old Testament testifies clearly that the tribal form of Israel was God's preferred way of working. When they demanded a king, Samuel warned Israel that it would inevitably open the door to a grasping kingship that would "take...take... take...take...take...take" (1 Samuel 8:11-18). Kings might be effective but they would oppress and crush. Samuel is the voice of Israel's more authentic calling and character - its core identity in the exodus tradition of the slaves whose cry of pain is heard by God.

But tribes and tribalism have got a bad press today. They are terms of suspicion and even disparagement. They conjure up pictures of English Euro football thugs, of genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo, of machete warfare between Hutu and Tutsi etc. But they happen to be helpful pictures to understand the fluid and fragmentary nature of modern society. There's a brilliant book by the French sociologist and cultural analyst, Maffesoli, who says we live in *The Time of the Tribes*. "Tribes", cultural and social micro groups that exist all around us, determine people's identity and style of living. We all live our daily lives relating within such "tribes".

And it is here in the metaphor of "tribe" that we have a rich and widespread vein of theological material upon which to draw. It's there in Genesis as the promise is given to Jacob, who is of course *the* ancestor of Israel. Under God's blessing he will become "a community of peoples ...so that you take possession of the land where you now live as an alien" (Genesis 28:3-4). The tribes were part of God's purpose to spread his people throughout the land and make it his Kingdom. Notice, not a community of people but a community of *peoples*, the tribes of Jacob/Israel. But it's interesting to see that tribes weren't just confined to the time before the rise of the kings. The prophets keep the vision of the tribes alive as they return to this memory of their tribal origins, to help future generations understand God's

purpose for the restoration of Israel. Thus God's servant is to begin with the "small thing" of restoring "the tribes of Jacob", to then move on to the task of being "a light for the Gentiles" (Isaiah 49:6) We have been blind to this use of "tribe". Maybe it's because in our development as societies we have thought of ourselves as moving in evolutionary progression from tribe, to kingdom, then to nation-state...and to European super-state (?). But today, as we experience what sociologists call globalisation, one of its ironic features is a resurgence of localism in the form of these "tribes".

So tribes were okay, even good and blessed by God, but their weakness was also confronted. The struggle was to hold on to a sense of being "all Israel" as each tribe, clan and family did their own thing. Deborah expressed her frustration with the parochialism of some of the tribes (Judges 5:16-17). Moses sets out the classic statement that confronted the sin of self-interested parochialism (Numbers 32). The self-centred agenda of Reuben and Gad called forth the proverbial judgement "your sin will find you out". Returning to the positive vision of the scriptures, Psalm 122 is a beautiful and practical expression of the tribes coming together for the peace of Jerusalem. Finally of course, Jesus recaptured the imagery in his movement of the restoration of Israel as he chose the twelve in what was an act of unmistakable prophetic symbolism.

He re-instituted the tribes not to become a new closed nation but to bless the peoples of the earth! And the door burst open at Pentecost as each heard the wonders of God in their own tongue – a new unity that gathered up human diversity that awaits the *tribal* form of the New Jerusalem envisaged in Revelation 21 as the kings brings their splendour into it.

A short article of this kind cannot do justice to these rich themes, the subtle use and re-use of these traditions within the bible, and it certainly does not permit setting out the evidence. However, in our day of cultural fragmentation, there are resources here to help us understand our social context as well as our experience of fragmented church life, with its constant swirl of new networks and forms of church life being established. We are part of a tribe - the Baptist tribe. A tribe made up of its own sub-tribes. Not all Baptists relate well to all other Baptists. This article appears in the Mainstream tribal magazine. Mainstream stands for certain values, emphases, style and ethos. Some are at the heart of it; others dip their toe in from time to time. So denominations are fragmented themselves into different theological groupings, interest and cultural groups, those that desire informality and those that want formality etc etc. Denominations are not only fragmented within themselves, they also vary in the degree to which they cohere. We are part of a denomination that is

sometimes understood as making a principle out of an absence of coherence- we state our belief in the autonomy of the local church. We struggle with a sense of being part of “all-Israel” because we give so much emphasis to the local church, the local clan.

I suggest that this dialectic of “tribe and all-Israel” will provide rich soil to nurture our clustering while holding on to the catholicity of the Church. So what practical pointers can be drawn from this theological material? Here are a few things, many of which are already being worked at by dedicated people.

- We must dare to believe that God’s creative Spirit is at work in this fragmented pattern of Church life. We are too negative when we dismiss it as merely a spiritual form of consumerism. Of course there is consumerism in all this. But this pattern of dispersed and varied communities of faith networking with their own kind is an expression of God’s own nature as the One and the Many, and of his way of working in Israel through the tribes, and through his Church.
- We should lovingly challenge attitudes and practices of self-centred, independent minded parochialism as we find them in our leaderships, our churches and ourselves. At the same time we must model and teach that relating and resourcing one

another is a high priority in our ministry.

- The permission given in *Relating and Resourcing* to cluster must be worked out at regional and local level. The theology developed here means that a diversity of networks should be positively encouraged and not grudgingly permitted. Names of groupings should reflect the new reality. Where it is known that our church leaders are networking in different groupings, we should not give the impression that one is the proper or official meeting, and the other is cast into the role of a competitive Johnny-come-lately. Can our Regional Ministers and teams give a strong lead on this? The use of language and the need for mutual respect is all-important.
- We need imaginative ways of expressing that we are part of all-Israel. Ultimately of course this has to be expressed ecumenically. But we need to think imaginatively as a denomination both nationally and regionally. The work done in recent years on The Baptist Assembly is a good example of such imaginative attempts. All our church leaders should be challenged to relate beyond my own preferred grouping. Can we claim the Kingdom of Christ is in our hearts if we do not express a willingness

to embrace diversity and affirm my brother or sister who is very different from me?

- Any Mainstream grouping must be open and welcoming, rather than giving the impression of a closed-shop with a spiritually elitist atmosphere, to which only the people with the right outlook get invited. In the north our Mainstream theology days have helped bridge *perceived* theological divides. This is healthy.
- Regional associations, with direct involvement of every local church, are surely the way ahead, rather than representative councils. They will need imaginative and not business-based ways of working, to connect all the churches, a vibrant sense of fellowship where mutual concern and interest is fostered.
- Clusters and groups should be encouraged to relate beyond themselves to other individual leaders and churches, and other networks. Competitiveness must die and joint venturing and liaison must become the norm.

Stephen Ibbotson - Leeds

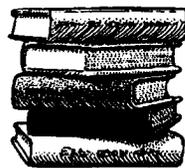
## *For Your Bookshelf*

### **Narratives of a Vulnerable God – William C. Placher – Westminster, John Knox Press**

My brain hurts! But like they say, “No pain, no gain.” Make no mistakes, this book is theology and it is not the easiest of reads, yet it is one of the most exciting books I have picked up in a long time. Placher’s thesis is simple; our understanding of God was historically hi-jacked when God’s divine perfection was defined in terms of his power rather than his love. If the incarnate Jesus is the full revelation of God to us, and he “emptied himself of all but love,” how can anything else – for instance his omnipotence - be an essential characteristic of his divinity that, as the Word made flesh, he perfectly represents? Like Jesus says in John 14:9, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” Interesting point eh? Placher writes,

Yet most Christians so take for granted the traditional models of divine omnipotence that they fail to notice just what a radical idea of God the gospel proposes.

Now, Placher does not want to diminish God’s power. Jesus did heal and perform miracles, but God’s power can only be understood within the context of his love, which constrains it. Jesus did not come to reveal God’s power, might and victory – he came to reveal his love!



Indeed, Jesus is most fully expressing the heart of God and accomplishing his work as saviour of the world as he dies, powerless, on the cross. Here he most completely manifests his divinity.

In Jesus, then, God acts out of love and risks suffering. The Gospels are therefore the narratives of a vulnerable God. The rest of the book explores this idea. What is God’s relationship to time as the eternal God? To love and be vulnerable, God must stand within time and be touched by events, not existing in some armour-plated impassability outside and above it all. Then there is the Trinity, modelling for us as it does relationships of mutuality, equality and love. Plus, what about the gospels themselves, all four of them? What does it mean for the Scriptures to contain diversity, let multiple voices speak, leave ambiguities in place and not attempt to impose a neat master narrative?

Finally Placher applies his ideas to the life of the church. How can it be that the community that follows this vulnerable God who identifies himself with outsiders, so often ends up on the side of the oppressor? With this in mind he explores women’s issues, suffering and our multi-faith context, asking the question what it means to be faithful to Jesus who excludes no one.

Like I said, this is not an easy or a comfortable read either. Parts of it

are boring and parts of it are addressing issues with which I can't identify. However, it made me think, challenged my understanding and engaged my heart. It took me closer to Jesus – and that's pretty special!

*Roger Standing – Croydon*



## **The Case for Christ – a journalist's personal investigation of the evidence for Jesus**

**Lee Strobel, Harper Collins  
/Zondervan**

To be honest, having read many books on apologetics over the years, I surprised myself with my reaction to this one! I thought it was excellent - thorough in its approach to all the issues surrounding the person of Jesus, readable in its style and presentation, honest about all the issues, not trying to fudge over unclear or difficult texts and incredibly informative.

Lee Strobel is currently on the staff of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago but prior to this he was trained at Yale Law School, becoming a journalist and legal affairs editor for the Chicago Tribune. He was an atheist and sceptic not easily convinced by any truth, least of all spiritual truth. Though this book was written some years after his conversion, in effect it traces the path of strenuous investigation that led him to the point of acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

He visits experts in science, archaeology, psychology and history and questions them about the issues related to their particular area of

expertise. For example he investigates in detail the historicity of the gospels; he looks into all the common arguments against the resurrection including the possibility of the resurrection being a hallucination and Jesus deluded; he questions the evidence for Jesus actual existence etc. Although a number of books have been written on these subjects he researches them with a meticulousness and tenacity that is rarely seen. However, he writes in an almost conversational style that allows difficult issues to become accessible even to people who have little or no prior knowledge of these disciplines.

If there is any criticism I have heard it is only that those interviewed are themselves convinced of the reality of Jesus - therefore biased. However because of the style of questioning any weaknesses are shown up and to my mind the book retains a convincing objectivity.

I have used this book for preaching apologetically and had excellent feedback from non-believers. I have also sold many copies of the book to those who want to have a surer foundation for their faith! I gave a copy to my brother and his wife - they read the book rapidly finding it very helpful for many of their questions. For my brother it has been part of his journey to a real relationship with God - for his wife it allowed her for the first time to know that Jesus was a real historical person and from there to move on to knowing him. I can't think of a better commendation than that! *Lisa Holmes – Skipton*

## **Face to Face with God - Trevor Dennis – London, SPCK**

I read this book's predecessor "Looking God in the Eye" (1998) and had found my imagination fired up by Trevor Dennis's powerful re-telling of the Genesis stories. Its successor picks up where "Looking God in the Eye" left off and narrates four stories of Moses, the man whose relationship with God was perhaps deeper than any other until we read of Jesus' relationship with his Father in the gospels. The climax of the book is the awe-inspiring account of the encounter between Job and God. Between these two powerful narratives is the tongue in cheek, almost mischievous account of the meeting of Manoah's wife with the messenger from YHWH.

Dennis has the ability to pull aside all the reverential clutter that we have unwittingly laid on these narratives and expose their power, their vitality, their sheer courage in portraying God and these characters struggling to reach an intimacy in relationship which seems far removed from some of the ways in which we approach God. He has retranslated the Hebrew so that we can reconnect to the nuances, which are often overlooked in the service of a good translation. Suddenly we can appreciate humour, passion, anger, and the joy of intimacy, the awesome holiness. There is no false sense of piety in these stories. God is at times unreasonable, certainly inexplicable, but never immutable. This may challenge many, but I found myself moved by

the picture of a God who so commits himself to relationship with human beings that He himself is changed in these encounters. I marvelled at the story in Exodus 32 when Moses soothes the face of YHWH to soften God's rage with his people's infidelity.

In the book of Job the greatest mystery of all is tackled. Our language speaks of the patience of Job. The Job of this story, however, is far from patient. He flings his accusations at God. He puts God in the dock and tells him in no uncertain manner that he is the innocent, and it is God who needs to defend himself. God responds in magnificent poetry that brings Job to the point where he sees God and knows his own inadequacy. But he is not belittled. "This bright vision of God has restored his dignity. He turns his back not on himself, but on his ash heap, his isolation, his shame".

I would recommend this book if you feel your view of God has become too cosy. Encountering God is not comfortable and the God of these stories will have to take centre stage in my life.

*Elaine Crutchley – Guildford*



## **Why do they do that?**

**Nick Pollard**

**Oxford, Lion Publishing**

Nick Pollard is a specialist in sixth form moral and religious education and this book is based on his experience working with teenagers

in schools and colleges. It examines issues associated with today's youth culture. Chapters cover the use of drugs, the soaring rate of self-harm, eating disorders, sexual activity, etc. Many books have been written on this topic but I found Nick's approach to be stimulating and challenging. The reader is encouraged to look beyond some of the superficial explanations for adolescent behaviour such as peer pressure, self-image and boredom. His personal knowledge of so many young people's dilemmas and problems is combined with an understanding of the development of Western thinking. In this way he sets these issues in the context of a post-Christian society in which beliefs in absolutes have been rejected, and scientific determinism has eliminated the belief in free will and hence responsibility for one's actions. He demonstrates how self-image is now derived from the temporary icons created by society rather than from a belief in the absolutes associated with a faith in God.

The final chapter is a challenge to the reader to the needs of today's teenagers and those of the generations to follow. The task is twofold. The first part is to get alongside teenagers, to listen, and to begin to question the basis of their beliefs and choices. Secondly, Christians need to engage with our society so that belief in a Creator and Father God can replace the nihilism of post-modernism.

This is a book which will set you thinking, whether you are a parent, pastor, someone who works with young people, or are just wanting to understand the issues which face teenagers today. The analysis is lucid and pertinent. The only criticism would be that the final chapter is too brief to do justice to the challenges he outlines in it. When will you be writing the sequel, Nick?

*Elaine Crutchley*

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## **The Challenge of Jesus** **N. T. Wright – London, SPCK**

Some of us are excited by the work of Tom Wright. His magisterial book, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, is a must for anyone who wants to take the biblical witness to Jesus seriously in preaching, discipleship and ministry. The trouble is, that unless you're a church leader who revels in theological argument, it's long and could be considered heavy. This book provides an introduction to the thinking of one of the most exciting and important writers on the New Testament in our generation.

It summarises the content of his longer book in digestible form and gives an indication of where his overall project is heading. More than this he outlines the implications of his understanding of the historical Jesus for what it means to be a Christian and engage in mission in post-modern times. Wrightoholics will recognise familiar themes.

Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom is proclaiming the end of exile. Jesus acts as prophet and as Israel's Messiah in word and symbolic action. He calls people to be part of renewed Israel, inaugurated in his ministry, to be salt and light of the earth. The climax in Jerusalem enacts God's judgement on an Israel bent on national self-preservation rather than its true calling as God's servant for the world. Jesus goes further, taking on himself the judgement that he prophesied would later fall on Jerusalem at the hands of Rome. He confronted and overcame the real enemy, the Satan, by the way of love and peace that he had taught so vigorously. The vindication of the "son of man" would see evil defeated, true Israel rescued and the establishment of a worldwide kingdom. This book also helps to look ahead to future volumes that he plans to publish in his massive series on the origins of Christianity. Jesus did not think of himself as God, the second person of the Trinity. Rather true Christology arises out of Jesus' understanding of Messianic embodiment, that in his own life, death and vindication, God was personally returning to Zion as the covenant Lord. Later Trinitarian thought is a consistent but later development of this root. The resurrection is an event in which Jesus was raised bodily to a new sort of life, and so a new age dawns. It drove early Christians to believe that Jesus had done what, according

to the Scriptures, only Israel's God could accomplish.

The picture he paints is familiar and yet strangely recast, disconcerting if you want to hold to tired and well-worn formulae of evangelical gospel preaching. It demands that we think afresh about what we mean by the gospel and how we think of Jesus. Jesus was not primarily the preacher of eternal religious and spiritual truths, a message of individual eternal salvation for life after death, but the inaugurator of the new age, a public movement that challenged the world-view and political stances of his day with God's radically alternative agenda for Israel and the world. This Jesus demands that we think anew what it means to live as Christians in our own day. The final chapters apply this to post-modern culture and how to live as a disciple today, with especially helpful insights relating faith to the world of work

If you love the Jesus of the Gospels and want to understand him better, and have not read any Tom Wright before, this book is a must, before you go on to his longer works. Even if you disagree with his conclusions you will have learnt a lot along the way, and you will have been magnetised once again by our Lord, and your preaching of Jesus and the gospel will have changed, at very least a little!

Stephen Ibbotson – Leeds