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EDITORIAL

These days there is a lot more to read (blogs, postings, substacks) and to hear (podcasts, online seminars). So much so that it feels we are a consumer society in intellectual and even spiritual matters, constantly offered stuff to take in. In that case offering up five articles and twelve reviews in this issue of SBET is done with the prayer that there will be a number of things that will not just be consumed, but which will be of benefit for the productivity of its readers. Now this is only a metaphor, and we do better not always to be thinking in real terms of ‘product’ and ‘efficiency’. And yet, while there’s nothing inherently wrong about ‘theological journal as entertainment’, we would wish any *delectare* to be accompanied by *prodesse*, edification taken along with pleasure, as old Augustine wrote many years back (in *On Christian Doctrine* IV). This means not only a more relaxed form of working, but one in which God might also take pleasure.

So as you pick up or click on this issue you might ask “what’s in it for you?” (literally) What’s my calling, ministry, particular creative ‘hobby’ that might well benefit from some perusing of these pages? We’ve considered: one way to push this beyond being a mere rhetorical question could be to set up an online presence where readers can make suggestions and criticisms, or feedback of whatever kind. But for now, the rhetorical question is posed here, to help you reflect a minute. For beyond your or my particular, individual calling to think and communicate in the name of the Evangel is our common task. And what is that? Possibly...the renewal of church numbers, of church life, of sound doctrine, of spiritual experience, of the alleviation of poverty in our land, of helping folk to feel more hope than despair, to see Christ worshipped, or at least acknowledged, to instil something of the fear of the Lord/ the mystery of God/ the love of Christ...

As we quickly realise there might not be complete unanimity on what is the one thing needful for ‘the Church’ right now. In late August Rev Dr Bruce Ritchie and myself, with the sterling assistance of a team at HTC and Dingwall Free Church, ran a small-to-medium conference called ‘Going Forward’ which gave eight practitioners (some, but not all, ‘ministers’, from a range of Protestant denominations) the opportunity to inspire the eighty or so of us attending to think about: what is ‘working’, what might work for churches to grow and people to encounter God in Jesus Christ, and what we needed to do to ‘get there’. On the whole there was less hype than hope, more a trumpet call to advance than to retreat. The call was not shrill, but it was fairly certain in its sound.

But perhaps, on reflection, there were more stories and analysis of the state of the church and society than there was actual ‘theology’. And a good thing too, might be the echo. Surely it’s more about models for growth (widely understood as both depth as well as width) and a lot of revived prayer. No need to tire the mind with theological cleverness or re-inventing the wheel. And it depends what you mean by ‘theology’, and isn’t everyone a theologian these days? And yet...

Not all denominations are the same, but they can all share this tendency to some degree or other: some sort of ‘Programme Pelagianism’, where we dream up a plan concocted from Leadership books and wisdom gleaned from our and our peers’ previous trials and errors...then we ask for a blessing, like a garnish on top. Then there is iron-caged-bureaucratic Weberianism at the heart of the church structures, repelled by the equal and opposite force of spiritualising and spontaneous contrarianism holding to a delayed-eschatology of tarrying Revival. What about collective contemplation and thinking through the fundamentals of grace in God’s economy,...well, not so much.

As a grumpy old-timer I lament the streamlining of theology departments (even seminaries) where biblical studies, church history and dogmatics are reduced to a minimum, in the name of interdisciplinarity or usefulness. In some ways ‘you’ve only got yourself to blame’ is accurate: the traditional fare can be as dry as the dust on the pages of [insert Reformed theologian] or wacky and superficial [insert trendy guru], made in the image of what matters to us in our present time and place. Things have swung to the point where ministry and missionary seem to be held up like mirrors to society, like the youth worker keeping cooler than his kids, or like the sport(s) manager watching endless videos of the forthcoming opposition to the detriment of his own squad training. ‘Play your own game!’ (or, biblically: ‘Play the man!’ (1 Cor 16:13), meaning acting with courage and faith, rather than focussing on the opponent, real or imagined. In short, theology is more than apologetics and certainly more than polemics, but it needs to be lively and ever-fresh and challenging to ourselves. Let those who have an ear...and a keyboard—contribute!

One note of a formal’ nature: keen-eyed readers will notice that the last issue contained a review of Elizabeth Oldfield’s *Fully Alive: Tending to the Soul in Turbulent Times*, and that in this issue there is a second review. Its insights were sufficiently different from those of the previous review, such that we thought it worth publishing here.

Mark W. Elliott
HTC, Dingwall, Oct 2025