

a recovering service-user with his tongue firmly in his cheek announced at the top of his voice to a group of staff standing nearby, ‘you need to allocate a room here for Chaplain Jez – he hears God speaking to him!’ Once the laughter had died down, I realised that I had learnt more about this particular man. I had never spoken to him about ‘hearing’ from God. There was obviously some sort of understanding of religious language. Was it past or recent? I had been given another lead by the Spirit of God and one that I am following up slowly and gently at this time.

Presently I am thinking through with my chaplaincy colleagues how best to be accountable to our NHS employer for the things that we do and say during the course of our work. While confidentiality is paramount, we are looking to find ways of recording anonymised, qualitative data relating to each of our shifts. After all, as chaplains we are employed to undertake a professional role and, while our work might not fit neatly into any standard NHS reporting systems, for chaplains to have integrity and our role to be valued, it’s important that we find ways of being accountable to management from our position ‘on the edge’. After all, there’s no such thing as a free lunch!

Truth that Never Dies: The Dr G R Beasley-Murray Memorial Lectures, 2002-2012

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Throughout much of the first decade of the 21st century, a feature of the annual Baptist Assembly of the Baptist Union of Great Britain & BMS World Mission was the Dr G R Beasley-Murray Memorial Lecture, honouring the memory of this celebrated British New Testament scholar, particularly associated here with Spurgeon’s College, London, even if latterly much of his work was conducted in the United States. He was a central figure in the British Baptist scene, having served as Principal of Spurgeon’s College from 1958-1973, following two pastorates in Ilford and Cambridge, and a stint as New Testament tutor there, but it was

as an internationally recognized New Testament scholar that his reputation now lies. It was in Louisville, Kentucky, where he completed his monumental *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (1986), and most Baptist ministerial students will be grateful for his *Baptism in the New Testament*, (1962) which remains a seminal work. His *Word Commentary* contribution was a one volume book on John's Gospel (1987), and that too remains one of the most helpful of commentaries, both on John (if superseded by some more recent scholarship), and in that series. That Beasley-Murray contributed to this series with John's Gospel was no surprise, for he had translated Bultmann's commentary earlier in his career. It was also no surprise that Spurgeon's College celebrated their illustrious son (for he both trained and, of course, taught there) with the lecture series that is now published for a wider audience.

It was entirely appropriate that the first lecture be given by George Beasley-Murray's son, Paul – himself a former Principal of the college, pastor of Baptist churches in Cheshire (Altrincham) and Essex (Chelmsford), and Chair of the Board of Ministry Today UK. His own contribution is the most biographical of the lectures, and reflects his own biography of his father, *Fearless for Truth*. His lecture celebrates Beasley-Murray's single-minded search for truth, finding it in Christ, first, but then wherever the scholarly trail led him. He was not afraid to rattle Evangelical cages if the truth led him there! Eyebrows were raised when he translated Bultmann's commentary on John's Gospel (1971), a task he took on because he recognised Bultmann's contribution to New Testament scholarship, even if he disagreed with much of his conclusions. Such courage, Paul Beasley-Murray asserts (drawing on F F Bruce's observations), opened up Evangelicals to wider scholarship and created the context now, half a century later, where Evangelical New Testament scholarship is of the highest order, and taken with utmost seriousness in the academy (a situation that did not pertain in the 1950s and 60s). This chapter also explores Beasley-Murray's contribution to the life of the Baptist Union and the wider ecumenical scene, especially those fevered times in 1974 where Christological orthodoxy seemed at stake: Beasley-Murray was fearless in asserting the full divinity and humanity of Christ.

It is important that Paul Beasley-Murray opens the book with this lecture, because it sets the scene for the themes that follow:

Anthony R Cross, our best researcher and writer on baptism today, gave the second lecture on *Faith-Baptism: The Key to Evangelical Baptist Sacramentalism*; Michael Quicke in what is perhaps the most hagiographical of the lectures, on preaching and Liszt; Mark Hopkins on The Downgrade Controversy; and John E Colwell's chapter on ecumenism. These reflect most closely George Beasley-Murray's concerns and contribution. Other chapters are more loosely connected with him: David Coffey on a Missionary Union and Ruth Gouldbourne's chapter on ministerial formation clearly have links with his work as evangelist and theological educator, but interact with him less closely. These lectures, now chapters (some revised somewhat since their original delivery), are a mixed bag, but no worse for it.

There are, perhaps, two kinds of lectures in this collection. Some serve primarily as essays upon George's work, and accordingly tend to the hagiographical. Michael Quicke's curious, but interesting, lecture of 2004 is the most obvious. John Colwell's too, but with an altogether different order of theological rigour present. Others tend to use the invitation to deliver a lecture to explore something that is only tangentially associated with him, and I would include Bruce Milne's *New Humanity Church* (the 2005 lecture delivered at the centennial BWA Congress that became the context for the lecture that year), a biblical model for mission which, while he recognises himself is not so theologically novel, is part exegesis and part sermon. The following year David Coffey picked up the baton in what is the least academic of these lectures and is more manifesto than lecture, as he writes about a Missionary Union. I regret the slip of terminology on page 108 where he states a minister "begins to receive a salary". He does not, for he receives a stipend, which is a different thing, and legally significant if ministers are to continue to be released to serve God first rather than their 'managers', as deacons seem often now to be construed.

Mark Hopkins makes a significant contribution to scholarship in his discussion of the Downgrade Controversy of 1887-88. It reflects the similar storm over Michael Taylor's 1974 Presidential address, in which George Beasley-Murray was so much involved as he defended the historic doctrine of the full deity of Christ.

I found myself agreeing with almost everything John Colwell writes on Baptists and ecumenism, as also Stephen Holmes on

preaching in an age when so much confidence has been lost in the power of the Word to change lives.

I am in the process of completing a book on ministerial formation, and while I agree with much of Ruth Gouldbourne's content, I found her title *In Praise of Incompetence* curiously off-putting. I know what she means about having the grace to fail, and I know she takes more seriously than most ministers that "being skilled and competent matters" (p.178), but I find too much careless incompetence in ministry is the real issue, not a reliance upon skills rather than the Holy Spirit. This was, however, one of the most stimulating of the chapters, and the fact that it got under my skin is testament to its depth and interest.

Brian Stanley, the historian of the BMS, writes on the need for a recovery of a vision for mission, and in the final lecture, of 2012, Nigel Wright returns to the greatest controversy that George Beasley-Murray encountered in his dealings with the Baptist Union of Great Britain: the Michael Taylor affair. He does so, not to pick over dry old bones, but rather to argue that Beasley-Murray was right to "insist that the Union reaffirm its position in strong and unambiguous terms." (p.213). Reflecting on Taylor's more recent utterances on this and other dogmatic issues, only deepens Wright's convictions that he was wrong then, and more so now. However, where others called for his resignation (and might have rejoiced in his head too!), Wright acknowledges that Taylor remains an accredited minister, and affirms this, noting that "The Baptist Union has shown itself to be firmly committed to Christian orthodoxy, but not at the cost of an inquisitorial spirit." Amen to that, I say, as a new wave of demands that anything other than a conservative account be disallowed amongst Baptists. Wright strongly argues for freedom as a basic Baptist value, but not freedom to do simply as we please. Here the balance between affirmation and tolerance is vital, and Baptists would do well to play close attention to this as they debate again human sexuality.

These lectures, now written for a wider audience than their first outing, deserve a wide readership among Baptists, not just in honour of one of Baptist 'saints' (if we have such, surely George Beasley-Murray would be among them), but more importantly because the issues with which he was concerned half a century ago remain at the heart of our concerns today.

I wonder what George Beasley-Murray would make of the Baptist scene half a century hence, or indeed, the world of evangelical scholarship that he did so much to legitimise, winning the serious attention of scholars, evangelical or not. I think he would be encouraged by the state of evangelical scholarship, and would rejoice that so much of the biblical research conducted today is done by those who would share his churchmanship. For every obscurantist who imposes the theology of their particular evangelical tribe upon the text of Scripture, there are many who, like Beasley-Murray, pursue the truth where it leads them, confident that, if all truth is God's truth, they have little to fear.

I think he would not have been too disappointed by the sacramental turn amongst Baptists when it comes to our understanding of baptism. He was partly responsible for it, and to see many ministers taking baptism seriously as the indispensable commitment to serious discipleship that it surely is, would have heartened him. He had a concern for the training of ministers, but saw that every believer in the gathered community of the church was set apart for witness and service through baptism as the foundational ordinance of Christ. I would have loved to read his engagement with this sacramental turn.

Am I imposing too many of my own convictions upon him if I were to suggest that he would be dismayed at the seeming ineffectual state of so much evangelism in our churches? He was most certainly an evangelist, and with confidence in the gospel itself, and its transformative power by the Holy Spirit, I suspect that he might have had little time for the technocratic turn: the way we look for packages and schemes to embody the gospel, with a concurrent over-emphasis on the medium and under-emphasis upon the message.

I am more certain that he would have found the shallowness of much of our denominational debate and corporate discernment deeply disturbing. He would be calling for serious engagement with the controversies of our age, not least human sexuality. Being a man of his times, and a creature of his culture, I guess he would have found the way in which the societal attitude towards homosexuality has undergone a complete reversal both bemusing and concerning. In Beasley-Murray's day, homosexual acts were de-criminalised, but he did not live to see same-sex marriage introduced to the statute books, nor the voicing of traditional

Christian ethical stances towards same-sex relationships by one employee to another become a matter of dismissal for gross misconduct. He would, however, as I have suggested earlier, had much to offer in his way of approaching denominational unity at a time of deep divisions. On the other hand, I think he would have seen that our current controversies are significantly less important than those he battled with in the mid seventies: to confuse the two is a serious category error.

Lastly, I think he would have rejoiced to see his old college such a vibrant and multicultural community, in which, if he were to enter the front door today, much would be familiar, from the commitment to form ministers able to lead the churches in their day, to the need to challenge every student to pursue serious study and scholarship. The chapters of this book, and the lectures from which they sprang, are evidence that such encouragement bears its own fruit. I think George Beasley-Murray would have been delighted to read them, engage with them, and, yes, challenge them too.

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