

# The Lydia Question

- a fresh look at God's calling



Lynn Green - General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2013

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# Commendation and Introduction

I would like to commend this collection of excellent Bible studies and personal stories that explore women in leadership. As Baptists, we have been at the forefront of recognising and releasing the gifts of women leaders in the past and we don't want to lose this prophetic edge today. This resource is designed to give individuals and groups the opportunity to read and reflect on Biblical passages together and also offers suggestions for worship and prayer for small groups. I hope and pray that the result of engaging with these studies will be that many more women and men will be inspired to be all that God created them to be and feel free to be able to respond to God's call, wherever that may lead.

**Lynn Green**

General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain

## Introduction

These studies are an invitation to explore together some important issues relating to ministry and gender. It may be that this is the first time you have ever done any serious study on this subject, or it may be that you have looked at these biblical passages and themes many times. You may know exactly what you think already, or you may be wanting to work out what a 'biblical' view of leadership might look like.

Some might think that the issue of women in leadership in Baptist churches is long-settled. After all, women have been serving as pastors of Baptist churches since the 1920s, and continue to do so today. And there exists a seemingly 'thoroughly Baptist compromise' which allows those congregations who choose not to call a woman on theological grounds to continue as members of the Union, exercising the freedom enshrined in the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle which states that 'each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws,' allowing our existing variety of practices to continue unchallenged.

On the one hand we have had female Presidents of the Union, a female General Secretary, a female Deputy General Secretary, and female Regional Ministers. *The Baptist Times* commented as early as 1901, 'that women are not yet permitted to take their proper share in the life and work of the church is, to our thinking, a relic of barbarism'. And yet on the other hand, we have many churches who are in membership with the Baptist Union who would not call a woman to pastoral leadership.

The conviction of these Bible studies is that this is first and foremost a **gospel** issue, and that at the heart of our decision on women in leadership lies our understanding of what it means to proclaim Christ as good news for all people. Our plea is that all those who work through these studies do so with an open mind, ready to encounter afresh the living Christ who continually speaks to us in new ways, through the ancient words of scripture.

The first study '*Why and how should we read the Bible*' is a look at what the Bible is, and what we think we're doing when we read it. This might seem very basic to some, but the discussion of women in leadership often begins with what we think certain passages of scripture are saying, and so spending some time with what we think the Bible is, and how we are going to read it responsibly together, is an important starting point for any discussion of the 'difficult passages'.

The second study, '*Restoring Eden*' invites us to spend some time considering the broken and restored relationships between men and women that we find in scripture, and considering the way in which relationships in our own world are similarly broken, but can be restored through a relationship with Christ Jesus. The third study, '*From Babel to Pentecost*' looks at the difficulties men and women can have in communicating with each other. The fourth study, '*Pink for girls, blue for boys?*' looks at the roles and stereotypes that exist for women and men, and invites us to consider how these might diminish those who are pressured to conform.

The fifth study then explores the '*Difficult passages*' which are often cited when the issue of women in leadership is discussed<sup>1</sup>. The sixth and final study looks at some '*Positive biblical images of women*' and considers some of the female role models for leadership that are present in the Bible.

Interspersed through the studies you will find some 'Stories from the Road', which offer some real-life stories told by women and men who have wrestled with the issue of whether women are called by God to roles of leadership. These need to be heard alongside our engagement with scripture in order to remind us that as a gospel issue we are seeking to release as many of the gifts of God given to the people of God into the mission of God.

These studies have been produced to be used alongside *The Story of Women in Ministry in the Baptist Union of Great Britain*<sup>2</sup>, (Didcot: BUGB Publications, 2011).

Women's Justice Working Group

April 2014

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1 See also, *A Biblical Basis for Affirming Women in Ministry - The Baptist Ministers' Journal* 296 (October 2006): 8-13; and *The Baptist Ministers' Journal* 297 (January 2007): 10-15

2 Available to order from the Baptist Union online shop at: [www.baptist.org.uk/onlineshop](http://www.baptist.org.uk/onlineshop)

# Why and how should we read the Bible?

## Worship

### *The boy Jesus at the temple*

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.'

'Why were you searching for me?' he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?' [or about my Father's business] But they didn't understand what he was saying to them.

*Luke 2: 41-49*

## Down to business

Sometimes, in fact, most of the time, it is incredibly easy to get swept up in the lists, expectations, aspirations of our living spaces.

Mary and Joseph were just doing what they needed to do; catching up with relatives, joining in with the historical journey of their people and introducing their son to the customary heart of their family identity.

Jesus challenged expectation and, instead of following the flow of Mary and Joseph's Passover traditions, insisted on being 'about his Father's business.' He did this by wrestling with the questions that scripture presented. He did this by discussing those questions with others who also wrestled. He did this by spending time with the literature that had shaped thinking in his community.

As we prepare to be about God's business together through wrestling with and examining the words that shape our community we need to put aside distracting expectations of what we have always done and be free to engage with the Bible as the twelve year old Jesus did.

## Prayer

God of wisdom and truth

Quieten our hearts as they struggle with the busyness of life.

Open our minds to discern your mind.

Free our will and allow us to embark on your 'business.'

Amen

One of the difficulties which people face when coming to a series of Bible studies on a topic such as women in leadership, is that we all bring different expectations with us as to what we are hoping the Bible will do when we read it. So, before we start looking at some specific passages, it is a good idea to spend some time thinking about why and how we should read it. But there's also a more fundamental question which it might be useful for us to explore first, and this is the question, of '**what on earth is the Bible?**'

In response to this question all sorts of phrases get thrown around, particularly by Christians. Some will say that it is 'the inspired word of God', others that it is 'an infallible book', yet others might suggest that it is 'the sacred scriptures of the Christian religion', or that it is 'the Holy Book', or 'the Good Book'. All of which are quite grand claims, and whilst it is fairly easy to see what they're getting at, these descriptions of the Bible don't really tell us what the Bible actually *is*, they just tell us what some people think about it. In reality, for someone to say that the Bible is inspired, or sacred, or holy, or infallible, is actually just them telling us their opinion *about* the Bible. Someone else could just as easily say it's a load of rubbish, or a pack of lies, or a dangerous and subversive document. These are all opinions *about* the Bible, but they don't get us really any closer to actually understanding what the Bible *is*.

In this opening section, hopefully we can begin to discover together something about what the Bible actually is, so that when we come to consider what our *own* opinion of it is going to be we are able to do so from a position of informed knowledge. So, back to our question: '**What on earth is the Bible?**'

Well, the first thing to say is that it is not a book. It's more like a library of books, at least 66 of them, although some of the long ones might actually themselves be a combination of other separate documents that have been edited together. These books were written over a long period of time, and many of them have been through various stages of editing or re-writing along the way. The Bible falls into two sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament, and what we call the Old Testament is a collection of 39 books written by the Jews over the thousand years or so leading up to the birth of Jesus. The New Testament, on the other hand, is a shorter collection of documents written by the early Christians over an approximately fifty year period between 50AD and 100AD.

As with any ancient documents, the best way to understand the books of the Bible is to read them with an eye on the context within which they were first written. And one of the big problems people sometimes hit up against when they come to read the Bible, is that all too often we approach it as if it were directly written for us, here, today. And the problem with this, of course, is that the Bible wasn't written for us, here and now, at all. It was written for the ancient Jews, in the case of the Old Testament, or for the early Christians, in the case of the New Testament. This isn't to say it has no relevance for today, or that people today shouldn't read it. But we do need to know what we're doing when we read it, or else we've got a recipe for massive misunderstanding on our hands.

Let's take an example from the world of English Literature: let's say we're studying Shakespeare. We're only going to get the best out of his plays if we know something about when Shakespeare was writing, and who he was writing to. We need to know what his political, social and religious context was because he constructed his plays for a specific group of people, and used his writings to address issues of relevance to the lives of those people who would be coming to see them performed. Even when he was re-telling events from the distant past, he re-told them in ways that were of relevance to his audience. If you were to read Macbeth as if it were a historical account of 11th Century Scottish history you would be completely missing the point of the play, not to mention getting a badly skewed view of history! And it's exactly the same with the Bible. Each of the biblical books was written with an intended audience, or readership, in mind, and even if the book is re-telling events from the distant past, it re-tells these stories in ways that are of interest and relevance to the people for whom the book was written.

So, who was the Bible written for? And what do we need to know about them if the Bible is to become meaningful and relevant to us today?

Well, the Old Testament, or the Jewish Scriptures as it is sometimes called, is a collection of documents which give voice to the ancient Jewish quest to understand their lives in relation to their God. The Jewish people had had something of a roller-coaster of an existence in the time during which the Old Testament books took shape. From slavery in Egypt, to wandering through the wilderness of Sinai for 40 years. From possession of their own land, with their own king and their own temple, to hostile occupation under the Assyrians and then to exile in Babylon. From a triumphant return to their land, and the restoration of their monarchy, to occupation once again under the Greeks and then the Romans. And the books of the Old Testament reflect something of this rollercoaster. There are triumphant texts, giving God thanks for good things, and for military victories, and there are mournful texts, asking where God is in the midst of death, difficulty, and disaster. There are historical texts, law codes, books of poetry, and extended explorations in story form of what it means to be human in the first place. All written against a backdrop of the joys and sorrows of human existence. And it is perhaps in this way that these books of the Old Testament can most readily and helpfully speak to us today. There are times when we might want to give thanks for the good things in our lives, and there are times when we might want to scream and shout at the terrible things that happen to us and in our world. And both these ends of the spectrum, and just about everything in between, can be found in the record of the ancient Israelite attempt to understand and puzzle out their relationship with their God in the midst of all the complexities of life.

The Psalms are a great place to start, because the whole spectrum of human experience can be found reflected in them. The Psalms were the songbook of the early Israelites, and they are the hymns and songs sung by the Jews in their temple, in their synagogues, and in their homes. Here's just a few examples. King David had committed adultery with the beautiful woman Bathsheba, and had ordered her faithful husband to the front of the battle to be killed in order to hide the fact that David had made Bathsheba pregnant. When he was finally confronted with his terrible actions and realised the awfulness of what he had done, he wrote:

Have mercy on me, O God,  
because of your unfailing love.  
Because of your great compassion,  
blot out the stain of my sins.  
Wash me clean from my guilt.  
Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.  
Oh, give me back my joy again  
Create in me a clean heart, O God.  
Renew a right spirit within me

*Psalms 51: 1-2, 7, 8, 10 NLT*

Those who find themselves caught in moral failure today might offer these same words of ancient confession and repentance to God as part of their own journey towards forgiveness and restoration.

And then there's the famous Psalm written by the Jews in Exile in Babylon, with their Babylonian captors tormenting them in their weakness:

Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept  
as we thought of Jerusalem.  
We put away our lyres,  
hanging them on the branches of the willow trees.  
For there our captors demanded a song of us.  
Our tormentors requested a joyful hymn:  
"Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!"  
But how can we sing the songs of the Lord  
whilst in a foreign land

*Psalm 137: 1-4*

These verses have been re-sung by people in captivity ever since and the musical version many of us know so well finds its origins in the Black African experience of Slavery in America. But this well-known Psalm has a little-known ending which doesn't make it into the popular song, and it is one of the most shocking verses in the Bible:

Happy is the one who takes your babies  
and smashes them against the rocks!

*Psalm 137: 9*

Here the Israelites in exile give full voice to their anger and frustration and hatred of the Babylonians. Not for them some stiff British upper lip, but rather an honest recognition of the awful depths of their emotions as a people dispossessed from the homes and their land. What would it be like for us if we took our own deep, dark hatreds at the wrongs done to us, and if we found a way of being honest about them with one another and before God? What measure of healing and wholeness might be opened up to us if we joined our voices with the authors of this Psalm in giving expression to the hidden depths of our hearts rather than suppressing and concealing those aspects of our humanity that we are afraid to face up to?

The issue of women in leadership can stir some deep emotions amongst both men and women, and the issue of sexuality is inherently part of this discussion. Learning to share together in honesty our emotional responses to these issues will be an important part of being open to the transforming and healing breath of God's Spirit.

But what about those times in life where we are happy, joyful, on top of the world, crying out to give praise and thanks for the simple pleasure of being alive? Surely nothing tops this poem from the Psalms?

The heavens tell of the glory of God.  
The skies display his marvellous craftsmanship.  
Day after day they continue to speak;  
night after night they make him known.  
They speak without a sound or a word;  
their voice is silent in the skies;  
yet their message has gone out to all the earth,  
and their words to all the world.

*Psalm 19: 1-4*

There can be deep joy in exploring scripture together, as we realise that God has not yet finished speaking to us, and as he continues to open our minds to the wonders of his creation. There was a strand of hope running through the Jewish scriptures that God hadn't yet finished with humans, that there was more to come, more to discover, in terms of the relationship between God and humanity. And so we find the Jews speaking of their hope that a Messiah would be sent from God, who would in some way teach them more about what it meant to be God's people.

The New Testament was written by some Jews who believed that Jesus, born in Bethlehem, was this Messiah sent from God. Many Jews had expected the Messiah to come as a great warrior, to overthrow the Romans and re-establish the true monarchy of Israel. But Jesus didn't do any of these things. Rather, after a humble birth into poverty, and an inconspicuous early life, he suddenly began a whirlwind three years of teaching, storytelling and faith healing, which brought him into conflict with the Romans and ended in his execution on a cross whilst only in his mid 30s. And by all rights the story should have ended there. But those who had been Jesus' followers suddenly started to give testimony, even under torture or threat of execution themselves, that Jesus had risen from the grave, and had defeated the power of death itself.

The New Testament, then, is the writings of those who believed that Jesus was the one in whom God was revealed in a new way. Not as a mighty warrior, or as a distant creator, but as a human being who goes through the best and the worst that human life can offer, who dies as all of us must die but for whom death and suffering are not the last word. The testimony of the books that make up the New Testament is that Jesus is encountered not as a dead teacher of ancient wisdom, but as a living presence, with people by the power of his Spirit, transforming their lives, and offering new life and hope.

Many of us who read the New Testament today would say that we continue to encounter Jesus in this way, and that through reading the stories of his life, his teachings and his miracles, we find that his Spirit is active in our lives as well, bringing to us the good news of our lives transformed, restored and renewed. So, if we turn to the New Testament to encounter this Jesus for ourselves, what will we find?

Well, firstly there's four different accounts, or biographies, of the life of Jesus. These are known as the Gospels, and have the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The precise relationship between these four biographies of Jesus is quite complex, because in some places they are very similar, while in others they tell the story of his life in quite different ways. But this diversity has a ring of truth about it, as they were written between thirty and sixty years after Jesus' death to put down in writing some of the stories that people were telling each other about his life.

Then there is the book we call The Acts of The Apostles, which tells us the story of the early church in the thirty years or so from the end of Jesus' earthly life. In the book of Acts we meet a man called Paul, who started off as a Jewish Pharisee determined to wipe out this new Jewish sect who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. But who, after a mystical encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, became convinced that Jesus was still alive, and travelled the Roman Empire planting churches, and telling others that Jesus could be good news for their lives too. It is this Paul who wrote quite a lot of the letters that make up much of the rest of the New Testament.

Paul's letters were written mainly to help the people in the churches he had established, as they tried to work out what it meant to live as Christians who worshipped Jesus, in the midst of the Roman Empire which insisted that its citizens worshipped the Emperor. And so we find in Paul's writings some of the most counter-cultural, dangerously subversive advice we are ever likely to read. For example, in a context where it was not only legal but expected that one human could own another in slavery, where women were constitutionally a second class of human being, and where racism was endemic and systematised, Paul boldly wrote to the church in Galatia, at the heart of the empire:

There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.

For you are all Christians – you are one in Christ Jesus.

*Galatians 3: 28*

And in this stark assertion of human equality, Paul set out his vision for a new understanding of what it means to be human: all are one in Christ Jesus. And those of us who read this as scripture should therefore be at the forefront of the battle against racism, sexism and social inequality. It is surely one of the great tragedies of Christian history that all too often the church has become complicit in the maintenance of the status quo, that it has failed to take a stand against slavery, racism and sexism, and that it has then sought to justify this by taking certain verses of the Bible which were written to very specific contexts, and treating them as if they could be equally applied in all places and in all contexts. That isn't the way the Bible was written to be read, and so we shouldn't do it!

And then there is the Book of Revelation. This final book of the Bible has been the subject of so much controversy and speculation that many Christians stay right away from it. Which is a tragedy, because it has so much to offer those of us who might read it today. In a nutshell, it is written as if it were the record of a dream, or a vision, and it invites those who read it to imaginatively enter its visionary world, to travel in their minds up to heaven, and to learn to see the earth differently. When viewed from Revelation's heavenly perspective, the world looks very different: Martyrdom is not defeat, it is victory; the Roman Empire is not a beautiful empire of peace and prosperity, it is a violent beast and a corrupt prostitute; the Emperor on the throne in Rome is not divine and all powerful, only God on the throne in heaven has that power. And those of us who dare to read Revelation today run the risk that our own view of the world might also be transformed. What if the empires of our own day, empires of materialism, global capitalism and consumerism, what if these are not the beautiful edifices of peace and prosperity that they tell us they are? What if we come to realise that our benefits are bought at the expense of destruction, oppression and corruption on a global scale? What if the beast and the prostitute of Revelation are still alive and flourishing in our own world, trampling the nations and corrupting those who share in their pleasures? What might it mean for us to live as those who have seen the world as heaven sees it? These are the dangerous, subversive questions that the Bible poses for us, if we dare to take the risk, and read it, and allow it to engage with our own lives.

As Baptists, we believe that scripture is most faithfully interpreted when we encounter it together as a community. We believe that biblical interpretation isn't some game in which we seek to crack the code of scripture to get out of the text the one true meaning which we can then use forevermore. Far from it, biblical interpretation is a conversation: it's a conversation with the text of scripture, it's a conversation with God and it's a conversation with one another. And as in any conversation, there are the change of mind moments, there are the backwards and forwards moments, there are the 'oh, I see what you mean' moments, there are the 'I hadn't thought of it that way before' moments, and there are the 'No, I don't think so' moments.

### The Baptist Union of Great Britain Declaration of Principle

The Basis of the Baptist Union is:

- 1 That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer his laws.
- 2 That Christian baptism is the immersion in water into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day'.
- 3 That it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.

[www.baptist.org.uk/declarationofprinciple](http://www.baptist.org.uk/declarationofprinciple)

Just as the Declaration of Principle (to which all churches in the Baptist Union of Great Britain have assented) refrains from spelling out all the details of what Baptists must believe, so those of us who attend Baptist churches don't need to get embroiled in 'interpretation wars' as we work together at having a conversation with scripture and seeking to hear what Christ is saying to us, here, today. And we also need to recognise the provisionality of whatever it is that we think we hear; it might indeed be the right word for us today but that doesn't mean that the same will be true for others elsewhere or even for us at a different time, or in a different place. After all, I'm sure we've all had the experience of changing our mind over an interpretation of scripture, or of hearing a familiar text speaking to us in a new way that didn't seem to be there last time we read it. Biblical interpretation is a conversation, not a code-cracking exercise, and none of us, including and especially those of us who stand at the front and preach sermons, has got a monopoly on the 'right' way to read the text. We all need to hear from each other, and we all need to be accountable to each other as we seek to discern what Christ is saying to us through the scriptures.

So how do we decide what Jesus is saying to us, here, today, when we encounter the words he spoke originally to a different group of people, in a different country and culture, and in a different time? Or, to put it another way, how are we to interpret the Bible? Who is to decide what it means? If we were a different type of church, the man at the top would tell us all what it meant. But that isn't our way. As Baptist Christians, we interpret the scriptures together, and we do it Christologically.

What this means is that we read the scriptures in the light of the revelation of Christ, and that we are accountable to each other as we do so. However, our rejection of one person at the top telling us what to believe doesn't mean that we are free to interpret at an individualistic level either. We're not in a position to simply say that whatever you, or I, think the Bible means is fine. All too often we have got ourselves into some kind of strange mindset where it is no longer appropriate to challenge what anyone else thinks, and where 'well, it's just what I think' becomes the final clinching argument that resolves a debate. The problem here is that some of what some people 'just think' is nonsense, or worse dangerous, or oppressive, and we need to be free to challenge them to re-think. But by the same token, some of what we 'just think' is nonsense, or worse, and we need others to be free to challenge us to re-think as well. We all do - that is why we need each other when we come to read and interpret the Bible. And this is why 'me-and-my-Bible' and 'what I think Jesus is saying to me' simply isn't enough. We need each other, and we need to be accountable to each other in what it is that we think we hear Jesus saying to us through scripture. And our core test of whether what we are hearing together has validity must surely be the test of weighing it against the revelation of God in Christ.

So when we come to read the scriptures together we need to ask ourselves an important question: Is what we think we hear the scriptures saying consonant or dissonant with the life and teaching of Jesus? To put it another way, is what we are hearing something that we can imagine Jesus saying? If so, then fine. But if not, we may be hearing wrong, however right it may feel. This is the Baptist way of reading the Bible: We do so together, in community, accountable to one another for what we think we hear, ready to challenge one another and to enter into a conversation with the text, with one another, and with God; ready sometimes even to argue with the text, with one another, and with God. And we believe that as we do this together we will hear what Christ is saying to us today, here, in this place. It has been said that it is the Spirit 'which brings the words of life to life', it is the Spirit who inspires our reading and guides us into the mind of Christ. And in all of this we need humility as we remember that none of us has a monopoly on truth.



What might it mean to claim that the Bible is 'true'?

What might it mean to claim that the Bible is 'inspired'?

What do you think is the importance of context in reading the Bible today?

What message do you think the Bible speaks to people in today's world?

## The Revd Anne Carter

Retired Minister of Shaw: Holy Trinity LEP and Toothill LEP, Swindon

I was once adamantly against women in ministry! I was brought up in a Brethren Church, where I was surrounded by men who held significant roles in the church, and women who did very little, except for wearing hats, pouring the tea and teaching the children. When I grew too old for the Sunday school, at the tender age of eleven (in the days before Child Protection legislation), I was immediately catapulted into teaching a class of seven year-old children on my own, every week.



When I was married, I became a member of a Baptist church, and encountered women Deacons for the first time. They did not lead worship as the men did, however. Over time, there was a gradual shift in the culture, and women became more visible in church life. Then, one day, a young woman declared that she felt 'Called' to the Baptist ministry, which caused a major crisis.

The church was initially deeply concerned by this request, since many did not see this as a role that was open to women. Our minister wisely invited the Revd David Richardson to come and lead three Bible studies on 'Women in the Church'. David explained that his agenda was not to tell us 'what to think', but to explain how he understood the Scriptures and leave us to decide for ourselves what each of us believed. As he explored the scriptures, especially some of Paul's letters, he showed a different perspective. That some women had been leaders in the early church, that the church had long ago changed its thinking about slavery as culture and so, maybe, there was the possibility of rethinking our views about women in ministry as well. This experience was an absolute revelation to me. At some levels it excited me, but at the same time I wondered how much more of scripture I might have misinterpreted. I did not know what to think. I felt shaken to the core of my being.

I was fortunate to have a wise friend, whose own journey into ministry had temporarily distanced our relationship. Now the Revd Vivienne O'Brien, she understood my dilemma and supported me whilst I struggled to regain the solid ground of my faith. I gradually came to recognise the truth of what Viv and David had taught me. For a while I continued to work as a voluntary counsellor, and then one day I was attracted by an advertisement for a 'Pastoral Support Worker' at Purley Baptist Church. My qualifications closely matched the job spec, but when I received the application form, I discovered that the title of the job was actually 'Associate Minister'. That shook me too, but I applied. I was told that I was a strong candidate, but the person they had finally selected was additionally theologically trained. The interviewing panel encouraged me to explore the possibility of formal training!

I visited two colleges. At the first college, I was told not to expect to enter paid ministry, because I was married and especially since his job meant that I might have a more limited geographical availability! (This was in 2000, and I trust it would never happen today.) I went to the other one.

I enjoyed my time at Regent's Park College. I discovered that there was a shortage of suitable openings for students and I took up my first placement thankfully. Much later, I was told that this church had been 'expected to close before Christmas!' The church grew, however, and at the end of my course, the members called me to be their minister. I worked with them for six years. Since then I have also ministered in a Local Ecumenical Partnership, with responsibility for two churches in the group. More recently I have retired from that position and am seeing God open up new opportunities through [StrengthsNet.org.uk](http://StrengthsNet.org.uk).

# Restoring Eden

## Introduction

The opening chapters of the book of Genesis provide an insight into both the best and the worst of male / female relationships. It all starts so well, with the creation of humankind in the image of God; male and female together declared good and blessed by God (Gen 1: 26-28). The relationship between man, woman, God and creation has openness and freedom of communication at its heart, with God conversing freely with those he has created, and the man and the woman sharing life equally. But it isn't long before the relationship is corrupted, and the equality of the first chapter is consigned to half-remembered ideals of a long-lost and inaccessible Eden. By the end of the fourth chapter, humanity is seen to be alienated from God and at war with creation, woman is alienated from man and sibling murder has taken place. By the end of chapter eleven, all freedom of communication and relationship has ceased, and humanity is starting to look frighteningly familiar. Division, hatred and power have disrupted and distorted God's intent in creation, and we still live with the consequences.

## Worship

### *Prayer/liturgy*

Leader: Loving God, open our eyes and enable us to meet with you and with each other.

All: You know us all by name help us to know you more.

Leader: Comforting God, allow us to be in your presence so we may rest.

All: You are familiar with all our ways enable us to become more familiar with yours.

Leader: Awesome God, reveal your glory to us.

All: You are our source and our light, show us compassion.

Leader: Merciful God, fill our thinking and doing with your grace, hold us in safety.

All: You are our protector may we be active in protecting each other.

Leader: Holy, holy, holy Lord, lead us and help us as we journey together

Amen

## Relationship broken

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" ... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them

*Genesis 1: 26-28*

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

*Genesis 3: 7-13*



What causes relationships between people to become broken?

What kinds of broken relationship are you aware of?

Give an example of when you have felt that you weren't understood.

What makes it difficult for men and women to hear what each another are saying?

Where can you see examples of lack of understanding between men and women in today's society?

Where can you see examples of lack of understanding between men and women in the church?

## Prayers

Offer prayers of confession for our own complicity in the destruction of relationships between people, and of intercession for situations where relationships are distorted and communication is disrupted.

Break a loaf of bread as a symbol of our participation in brokenness, and share the bread as a symbol of Christ's sharing in our brokenness.

## Relationship restored

The church, as the people of God, is called to be part of the in-breaking and transforming kingdom of God. We are a Gospel people, and through our witness to the good news of Jesus we have a part to play in the reconciliation and restoration of God's creation. To put it another way, we have a part to play in Christ's reversal of the disrupted relationships that exist between humans, and between humans and God.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. *Galatians 3:25-29*



Why does Paul specifically name the barriers of race, slavery and gender?

What does it mean for men and women to be 'one in Christ Jesus'?

What examples can you give of the breaking down of barriers between women and men within the church?

What does the reality of restored relationships and broken down barriers in Christ mean for women in the life of the church?

### Closing prayer

God who saves,

Enable this community to move forward together,

Grant us the will to encourage, support and listen to you and to each other.

Give us the courage to question injustice and to repair relationships.

God our Creator and Parent,

Jesus our Saviour and Lord,

Holy Spirit our Comforter and Guide,

Be with us now and always.

Amen

## The Revd Barbara Carpenter

### Minister of Stoke St Gregory Baptist Church, Somerset

I was brought up in an Anglican church, whose leadership then was exclusively male. In my teens, however, I joined the local Baptist youth club. I first preached aged seventeen, during a youth service, and I recall it was an utter disaster. I certainly never dreamed of being a minister: because ministers were *male*. I taught in Sunday school, and I was a Brigade officer.



After we were married, we moved house, and joined another Baptist church, where I became coordinator of the pastoral care team. After a while, I began to appreciate the Retreat Movement, and I led quiet days, and became a spiritual director. God led me into an active healing ministry, and I occasionally led worship, but I still did not consider myself a preacher, far less a minister.

God spoke to me personally on a guided retreat. I was led to reflect on the Annunciation, and as I read the familiar passage, I knew that I was being called to say "Yes" to God, in some way. I had a deep conviction that God was calling me into the Baptist ministry. Once back home, I consulted my minister, who laughed. I went away feeling that I was being totally ridiculous and that maybe it was all in my imagination after all.

I had completely lost confidence in the 'Call', but I studied for a distance-learning theology degree, to increase my knowledge. Then came a series of Holy Week Bible studies, during which, three people, quite independently, came to tell me that they believed that I should candidate for the Baptist ministry. When I read the story of Peter, denying Jesus three times, the Holy Spirit spoke powerfully to me once more.

I set out on my journey through selection: meeting the Church Secretary, and then Deacons, and telling my story to the Church Meeting. I still claimed that 'preaching was not my thing', and so I was doubtful about the outcome. I went to consult the staff at the Bristol Baptist College who made me welcome and listened carefully to my story. The Revd Dr Ruth Gouldbourne explained to me that women very often preach differently from men, in completely fresh styles, and she recommended some books. Amongst them was *Silence in Heaven: a Book of Women's Preaching*, edited by Susan Durber and Heather Walton.

It was time to appear before the Association Ministerial Recommendation Committee. I knew them all well, because I had previously served on the group. I was unprepared for the way that interview went. It seemed very different from the way we had interviewed previous candidates. When they told me that I was to "Go away, get some more experience, and come back later", I was not altogether surprised. My confidence had been undermined yet again, but a couple of the committee privately got in touch with me after that interview, and offered their ongoing support, trusting that I would, indeed, return.

That advice turned out to be a turning point, because I spent the next few months working with Chard Baptist Church, and the Revds Peter and Kathryn Morgan. Here I discovered two quality role models, bags of encouragement, and the opportunity to preach and lead worship in a supportive atmosphere; and 'I flew'! It was a rich and formative experience, and after that, I did not look back.

Several years later, having completed my congregation-based college course, and the first few years of ministry, I returned to the Association Ministerial Recommendation Committee for my 'exit interview'. This time, I found myself questioned about my style of leadership. I thought it was unlikely that a man would have been asked the question in the same way, but today I know for sure that I am 'Called'.

I can even laugh, when I attend the Association ministers' conferences together with my husband, as minister and minister's spouse, when people assume that he is the minister and I am 'the minister's wife'! *I can laugh now, but it is very important that other women, who are 'Called' by God into ministry, are not discouraged if they have similar experiences to those that almost caused me to lose confidence in my Call.*

## The Revd Ian Bell

### Minister of Calahonda Baptist Church, Spain

I was converted at the age of fifteen and worshipped in a large Baptist church. It was an excellent church. However, I found myself quite disturbed by the imbalance of gender roles. It seemed to be a waste of women's gifts and talents. I noticed that the church women were engaged in teaching in Sunday School, in arranging the flowers, and with making cups of tea and coffee but were not allowed to preach and at that time could not be elected a Deacon.



On one particular occasion I noticed a woman, who held a very responsible post in industry, pouring the tea. I felt very uncomfortable so I took the teapot off her and poured the tea. I received some very strange looks. Also, we had a number of women on the mission field and so I asked leaders in the church why the church was sending women out to the mission field, but would not allow them to preach in our church. I was told that the reason was that, "men are not responding to the Call of God and therefore God sometimes has to make do with second best!" Sadly, for many years I was happy with this explanation.

In the late 1980s, I was Called into ministry. I was warned that when I went to study at Regent's Park College, I would come into contact with some dangerously liberal women students, and that I was to take special care not to 'drift', theologically. In the event, I discovered that the women I encountered were not liberal at all. They were very gifted but had had to overcome considerable prejudice in order to enter the ministry. What is more, when they left College, they were called to minister in struggling Baptist causes, whilst we men were often called to larger congregations. It all seemed so unjust.

All this forced me to go back to my Bible and develop a more consistent theology of ministry. I now am completely convinced that the Bible teaches that women have an equal role to play in the leadership of churches. When challenged, I do not apologise for my views. I believe we need to tackle gender discrimination 'head on'.

For example, I was pastor of a Suffolk church for nine years, near to an US Air Force base. Some of the Americans who worshipped with us were conservative and objected to women being in any leadership role whatsoever. After a Sunday service, an NCO challenged me about my sermon, which had affirmed the role of women leaders. 'Tongue in cheek', I beckoned over a woman Major, in order to consult her on the subject. Immediately the young NCO stood to attention and was heard to say: "Yes Ma'am", "no Ma'am"! Later I mischievously pointed out the inconsistency of his views.

A few years later when I registered for an MA in theology, I found to my dismay that most of the options were already over-subscribed. I was left with a module called, *Christian Feminism*. I reluctantly registered for this course and was the only man. I can honestly say that the experience deepened my understanding of God.

The current debate surrounding the shortage of women in leadership roles within the Baptist Union of Great Britain is of course a matter of justice. However, if things are going to change we need to encourage our congregations to look again at the teaching on the subject. It will of course take many years to change attitudes; in the meanwhile, I would encourage women who sense a Call to ministry not give up but keep pressing - don't allow yourself to be discouraged.

# From Babel to Pentecost

## Introduction

The story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 explains the culmination of the fragmentation of humanity. From one language to many languages, from one family to many nations, from one global context to disconnected communities. At Babel the universal consequences of the fragmentation which began in the garden of Eden become fully clear.

At the heart of the story is an attempt to elevate human knowledge and power at the expense of the worship of God. However, the tower-builders soon discover that the idolatrous displacement of God does not come without its cost. The attempt by humans to 'make a name for themselves' (Genesis 11: 4) undermines once more the creation ideal of God at one with the whole of humanity.

The desire to replace the worship of God with the ascendancy of human knowledge and power is a problem which it seems God alone can perceive. The great irony is that the best that humans have managed to construct is too small for God even to see, and that even the greatest project of humanity falls vastly short of divinity.

The confusion of language which follows is the inevitable consequence of the attempt to displace God and worship self. The tower is abandoned, and the people scatter. Human relationships from here on are marked by confusion, tension, inequality, misunderstanding and, perhaps worst of all, fear.

## Worship

### *Prayer/liturgy*

Leader: Restoring God

When we are lost in wastelands of bitter silence

All: Be the insistent still small voice

Leader: When we plummet into the shameful abyss of hurried denials

All: Be the breath of life that restores us

Leader: When we are overwhelmed by the volume of our busy lives

All: Be the voice that that breaks through like thunder

Leader: When we are blinded by the murk of our pride

All: Be the pillar of fire that is unmistakable.

Leader: When the difficult road makes us long to return to past slavery

All: Be the vision that inspires us to continue.

Leader: Lord, let us hear your voice, feel your breath, see your works

Amen

### Disrupted communication:

- 1 A volunteer is asked to tell the group about something interesting that happened to them recently. As they are talking, another member of the group talks quietly and insistently into their ear about something else.  
Ask the volunteer how it felt to be trying to communicate with the others when their communication was being disrupted?
- 2 Look at newspapers to identify examples of news items involving a breakdown of communication.
- 3 How would you explain the difference between good communication and bad communication?

### Babel: humanity fragmented

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. **Genesis 11: 1-9**

Ask the group to discuss the following questions, and to write their answers on strips of paper-chain paper:



- What emotions do we experience when we hear stories of fragmented relationships?
- Who or what do people worship today?
- What are the consequences of these attempts to build 'towers of Babel' in our world?
- In what ways do men and women use knowledge and power to diminish and divide humanity?
- How can language be used to exercise power between women and men?
- Can you think of an example of a time when someone else's use of power made you fearful?

### Prayers

Make a paper chain with the strips of paper on which the group have written.

Offer prayers of confession for where we have displaced God from the centre of our lives and communities, and sought to use power for our own ends. Pray for those who are experiencing the misuse of power against them.

## A voice from the past

'Many doors which are at present closed against women will certainly be thrown open. I regard the liberation of woman from the bonds of prejudice, the growth of the power to serve at the call of new responsibilities, and the gift of her intellect, intuition and moral earnestness as the most helpful features of our time... Only at its peril can the Church make itself the last ditch of prejudice in this respect or forget that its problems will be best served by men and women working together ... Does anyone think that women... can be permanently excluded from the highest service in the Church? The danger is lest they should lose patience with the Church as an institution and live their lives elsewhere.'

John Howard Shakespeare, 1918. Shakespeare was General Secretary of BUGB 1898-1925

## Pentecost: humanity restored

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus lead to the exciting events of Pentecost which mark a dramatic reversal of the bleak consequences of Babel. Where Babel left humans scattered and divided, the coming of the Spirit of Jesus at Pentecost creates the possibility for a new kind of human community. This new community is one where true communication and understanding are suddenly once again possible through the unity brought about by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

If humanity completed its fragmentation at Babel, it begins its restoration at Pentecost. Whereas the unity sought by humans at Babel was self-focussed, the unity gifted by the Spirit at Pentecost is God-focussed. The disruption of communication which followed Babel is reversed in the gift of understanding between people groups experienced at Pentecost.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs -- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.'

**Acts 2: 1-18**

'Only a generation ago it was commonplace to use the word 'men' as an inclusive word, automatically meaning 'men and women'. It is rarely, however, used this way today outside the churches. Politicians no longer talk about men's votes if they are referring to both women and men. If we mention a Scotsman or an Englishman we mean just that, and we have to change the word if we mean a woman. But the churches have been slow to change. Sometimes too, when change has been asked for, it has not only been seen as unnecessary but has also been seen as a source of ridicule.'

*Ruth Matthews, 1986*

Whether in extempore prayer, liturgy, Bible text, song and hymn lyrics or the divine name, exclusive language is frequently used in ways that reinforce the exclusion of women from full participation in church life. Ruth Matthews continues:

'Our relationships with each other and with God... need language in which to be expressed and it seems to me important that we take as much care as possible to use language in a way that will all the time continue to deepen our faith, enable us better to share it with others, and help us to build each other up in Christian partnership.'

*Ruth Matthews, 1986*



How can language be used to include and empower?

What examples can you think of where the church has lived out the reality of the new community of the Spirit?

What are the implications for women and men of the outpouring of the Spirit on 'all flesh' (Acts 2: 17-18)?

Share a story of a time when the church empowered you to use your gifts.

'What does this mean' (Acts 2: 12) in practice for the church to become the place where the restored humanity of Pentecost becomes reality?

How does all this affect our understanding of God's calling of women to leadership and ministry?

### Closing Prayer

Invite the group to break apart the paper-chain, as a symbol before God of their willingness to share with him in the creation of the 'restored humanity' of Pentecost.

Read this together quietly, (or you may want to sing it, encouraging harmonies to develop)

Teach us, good Lord, to serve the need of others,

Help us to give and not to count the cost,

Unite us all to live as sisters, brothers;

Defeat our Babel with your Pentecost

*Baptist Praise and Worship 641, Fred Kaan, 1929*

Spirit of God, who loves to break the chains that bind us,  
Breathe life into each of our hearts, in this moment.  
As we hold before you these broken chains,  
May we hear you calling us to a new place of freedom  
Where each of your children, male and female,  
Find acceptance and fulfilment in the unity that you are still creating.  
Lead us from fear to love,  
Lead us from pride to humility,  
Lead us from possessiveness to faithfulness  
Lead us from competition to worship you, our maker and lover of all.

(Lay down the chains)

Amen

## The Revd Sheila Martin

### Retired Regional Minister for the Eastern Baptist Association

I have always been bossy and pushy (otherwise known as a natural leader), so in one sense, it is not surprising to find myself in ministry today. When I married David, and joined a Baptist church for the first time, however, I would never have dreamed of such a thing. On Sunday mornings I taught the children, and sometimes I would speak to the congregation about what we had done together.



I was not comfortable with the idea of preaching, because the Bible says that, 'Women should be silent in the churches,' (1 Cor 14: 34), so when my minister encouraged me to consider ministry, I was completely amazed. He said, "You are already speaking in church!" He lent me books, like Michael Green's *To Corinth with Love*, which suggests a different way of looking at the particular Bible passage. When the congregation listened to my first attempts at preaching, some of the people that I most respected began to tell me that God might be *Calling me to be a minister*, and I was really shocked that they could be so unbiblical! I prayed about it a lot, and shouted at God. I was still not absolutely sure, even when I passed through each stage of the ministerial selection process. But by the time I was finally accepted into College, I had got the message.

Two disturbing incidents stand out after that time. At the next church meeting it was announced that I was going to become a minister, and that I was now on my way to college. The church had previously contributed to the cost of training for a young man who had preceded me, but one woman stood up at this church meeting and said that she would not want to support me, because, "She's got a husband". It was really hurtful.

One particular morning in college, I approached a lecture room, with my arms full of theology books, only to find a tall male student blocking my way, "arms akimbo". He said, "Why are you here? And why are you taking a college place away from a 'man of God'?"

I wish I had had the right words then, but I didn't. I managed better with the only lecturer, who always greeted our mixed class with, "Good morning, *gentlemen*". I challenged him directly, and let him know that in my opinion, 'he wasn't one!'

## The Revd Michele Mahon

### Lesoco College Chaplain

I was formerly the Youth Pastor at Westbourne Park Baptist Church, and now I have moved with my husband Dave to serve at Brockley Baptist Church. He graduated from Spurgeon's College in the summer of 2012 and was called as Pastor here in October of that same year. Although Dave is employed, I assist within the church and community as a volunteer minister.



We are part of a team of three College Chaplains at the recently merged Lewisham and Southwark Colleges. Our role within the college is to work in partnership with the College to enable and support all staff and students in their complex lives, provide encouragement when things are difficult, challenge injustice where appropriate, facilitate worship and provide opportunities to engage with a God who loves them at every stage of their lives. We are there to strengthen the bonds of community and encourage relevant expressions of faith within the college environment, all the while affirming the Christians within the College community as they shine brighter and love deeper.

So we have lots of one-to-one chats, short conversations by people's work stations, facilitate prayer meetings, contribute to staff meetings, and eat lunch with students with special needs, who appear to be socially excluded in some public spaces. I especially enjoy being able to share staff and students' burdens one-to-one and join them in going before God in prayer. There have been many significant breakthroughs we have experienced, and I consider this a great privilege.

One of the goals we are working towards is expanding the team to include a white female and male Chaplain. Our challenges include lovingly and actively resisting a secular mindset which pervades many academic communities, and competing with other college staff for limited resources in order to provide an effective ministry. We pray this prayer with all our hearts – 'May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.' **Romans 5:13**

# Pink for girls, blue for boys?

## Introduction

Society is full of stereotypes: men are like 'this' and women are like 'that', girls like pink and boys like blue, men are from Mars and women are from Venus... From birth we are all shaped into certain roles, attitudes and ways of being. For example, a recent trip to a local supermarket was very revealing. The dressing up clothes for children encouraged little boys to dress up as a doctor, a fireman and a soldier, whereas the costumes for little girls were a nurse, a beautician, and a princess. These stereotypes, whilst initially appearing innocent and fun, can on further reflection be potentially oppressive. Women are excluded from being doctors, fire'men' and soldiers, and are offered instead the role model of beautician and 'fairy-tale princess', which is not even a career option! The message little girls hear is that the worst thing in the world is an ugly princess. Whilst an ugly male frog-prince may be transformed by the kiss of a beautiful woman, the same is not true the other way around.

The effects of being shaped by such images are deep and lasting: they narrow expectations for what a girl can achieve in life, and they build other expectations that will never be fulfilled. This has serious consequences for relationships between men and women in terms of how they relate to one another and the expectations they take with them into adulthood.

All of us are constantly bombarded with images which reinforce the stereotypes of childhood. From adverts to documentaries, from reality TV to Hollywood blockbusters, our lives are dominated by images designed to sell us an impossible ideal. The advertising industry is built on this basis, with the beautiful model on the billboard, airbrushed to perfection, held before us as an unachievable dream, realisable through the latest product.

As Christians, how can we resist and counteract the destructive influence of these deceptive representations of humanity which were born in a fallen Eden and reinforced at the rejection of God at Babel?

**'Men are from Mars, women are from Venus' – aren't they?**

Which of the following characteristics are stereotypically male, and which are stereotypically female?

	Male	Female
Caring		
Administration		
Strategy		
Relationship		
Sport		
Worship		
Befriending		
Welcoming		
Organising		
Teaching		
Listening		
Leading		
Decision-making		
Decisive		
Creative		
Emotional		



How would you define 'male'?

How would you define 'female'?

**Worship**

**Prayer/Liturgy**

**Reader 1 (not the group leader):**

Servant king,

Challenge our expectations as you wash our feet, readying us for being in your presence. *(Pause)*

**Reader 2:**

Restorer,

Forgive us for questioning the need for us to be renewed by you. *(Pause)*

**Reader3:**

Perfect Saviour,

Stay close to us and heal the embarrassment we hold about our own imperfection. *(Pause)*

**Leader:**

True God,

Allow us to see with your eyes and act with your wisdom.

Amen

## Well, Well, Well!

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?"

Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

*John 4: 5-30*

The woman of Samaria, as is so often the way with women of the world, gets something of a bad press. The story of her encounter with Jesus is frequently cited as an example of how Jesus goes beyond social convention to reach even a woman in Samaria. And yet, when we stop and read the passage from the woman's perspective, another picture begins to emerge. Consider what we know of the woman. Firstly she is a Samaritan, she has been born into the 'wrong' ethnic group. Secondly she is collecting her own water, she is of the 'wrong' social class. Thirdly she has been married five times and is currently with one who is not her husband, she has been passed from man to man as a piece of property to be used and abused by successive owners. This is a woman who, from birth, has been despised, reviled and rejected. However, in her encounter with Jesus, the stereotypes of her background begin to crumble. She is engaged by Jesus in conversation as an equal, and from that moment, things begin to change. She asks him for the 'living water', and recognises that he is a prophet. She shows herself to be a person of faith who is awaiting the Messiah, and when she realises that Jesus is the one, she takes the initiative and preaches the Messiah to her people, leading many to him. Her life after meeting Jesus by the well is utterly transformed, and so is her place in society. The stereotypes that the world had put on her could not withstand Jesus' liberating presence.

Some people find clown masks very frightening, because they hide what is going on underneath. In different ways, we each of us wear masks, and these hide what is going on within us. For some of us there will be masks about being 'this kind of man' or 'that kind of woman'. But the reality is that the masks we wear often cause us to be afraid of each other. Perhaps if we took off our masks, we would have no need of fear. However, taking off our masks is a risk, because it reveals what we are like on the inside. What if, deep inside, I'm not really 'that kind of man', or 'that kind of woman' at all?

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

*1 John 4: 18*

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.

*Romans 8: 15*

If perfect love casts out all fear, we ought not to have to be afraid of one another. We ought to be able to be honest and true to who God has created us to be, without needing to mask that from others. We ought not to keep having to fit ourselves into roles and stereotypes. Men shouldn't have to fear that women are taking over the world, and women shouldn't have to fear that men are going to be violent towards them.



What ways can you think of where we have pressures put on us to be a 'certain type of person'?

The stereotypes we are often asked to fit into can end up diminishing us as people, because they close everything down, and tell us we can 'only do this' or 'only do that'. This is as diminishing for men as it is for women! What of the man who doesn't like football? What of the woman who doesn't like makeup and fashion? Think of the words used to describe such people? A boy-ish woman is a 'tomboy', a girl-ish man is a... 'cissy'?



Discuss the different terms that we use to describe men and women who don't conform to their gender stereotypes.

What do these terms tell us about the way society constructs gender stereotypes?

If, in Christ, we are called to be free from slavery, then that freedom must surely apply in terms of freedom from enslavement to gender stereotypes that keep us from being fully human. This is about freedom for men and women alike, as both are diminished by the expectations of society to be a certain type of man, or a certain type of woman. This isn't simply about women, it is about what it means for all of us to be fully valued as who we have been created to be. If men are required to 'do things a certain way', they are no more free than women who are similarly required to 'do things a certain way'.



How do you react to the following male stereotypes? Are they positive or negative?

Men struggle to show emotion

Men can be friends, but must never touch each other, except on the football or rugby field.

Men struggle to speak to each other about 'deep' issues

Men must be authoritative

'Just wait till your father gets home!'

The man must be the 'bread-winner' in the family

If these stereotypes remain in place and aren't unmasked, it leaves men feeling they must do these things, and if it becomes clear that the woman can do this stuff too, it can leave men unsure what their role is, leading to the idea that modern women are stopping 'men being men'.



Do you think that the recent 'rediscovery' of men's groups, men's breakfasts, men's curry nights and so on are a good thing? Are they about enabling men to establish good and godly relationships with one another, or do they perpetuate unhelpful gender stereotypes?

Do you think that women-only groups are a good thing? Or do they perpetuate unhelpful gender stereotypes?

How can we as Christian churches discover ways of being real before God about who we have been created to be?

What positive gender roles can we model to a world which is deeply fragmented on gender grounds?

### Closing Prayer

Lord God,

In the image of you we were created; male and female, you created us.

Where the world has divided us to be less than the image of you; through false expectations, pressure of socially acceptable roles, and the belittling of the other we ask that you restore our wholeness.

Where we have been broken into separate strands we pray that you will un-break us to become again the image of you, female and male, each unique but each vital to the whole.

In your mercy heal your people

Amen.

## The Revd Lynn Green

### General Secretary of Baptist Union of Great Britain

The Revd Lynn Green was Minister and Team Leader at Wokingham Baptist Church, which has a membership of nearly two hundred. Lynn joined the church as a part-time associate minister when she left college. Having already been married for eight years by this time, Lynn and her husband were hoping to start a family at some point but Lynn felt that it was important to gain ministry experience first. After three years at Wokingham Lynn was indeed pregnant with their first child.



When the serving Team Leader moved on to another pastorate, the church began to seek his replacement, assuming that it would be another male minister. As they conversed with various potential candidates, however, some members began to recognise that Lynn had the gifting necessary to take the church forwards.

Lynn takes up her story as she recalls people's reactions to the possibility of a woman Team Leader:

The very suggestion of a female leader was highly challenging for some of the church members. "How would a part-time woman cope with the role?", they asked. "How could a part-time woman possibly lead a team which would include a full-time man?" "Could, or should, a woman lead a man?" These emotive questions were expressed by some at our church meetings but, in hindsight, much was left unspoken and lay under the surface. Despite lots of positive support from many, there remained a minority undercurrent even after I was appointed to the role.

Stuart and I had always wanted two children, but my second pregnancy took us all by surprise! We discovered I was pregnant just as the church were at the point of calling me to lead the Staff Team; but the Church Meeting went ahead and appointed me anyway! My only regret, with hindsight, is that I curtailed my maternity leave, and returned after only four months. I increased my working hours to 70% of full-time when I became Team Leader, but it has always been vital for me to safeguard our family time. I am the only one who can be a wife to my husband and a mother to my children. I am fortunate that, with the support of the church, I have normally been able to be there to pick the children up from school, and for our Saturday leisure activities.

Two months after I finally became Team Leader, my new full-time male colleague arrived. The Staff Team experienced considerable flux for a while, and the 'undercurrents' and resistance continued to rumble in the church. In the end a few people departed to other churches, but I have always realised that my gender was something that I could not do anything about! I worked at helping the church community to recognise that differences of opinion might not be necessarily 'right or wrong'. We are called to love one another despite our differences. I continued to teach that, no matter what the cost, the community should be gracious and open. These were difficult months, but we all grew as a church, and I found that I was increasingly accepted as the Team Leader.

All this was a significant personal challenge, and at times, I did suffer from loss of confidence. Becoming '40' was a significant moment for me, and I made the most of my 'coming of age' amongst the church people! After eleven years' ministry experience I was no longer the 'young lady assistant minister' who arrived straight from college!

Our church grew through these challenges. It was, and remains, a mission-hearted church, with an inclusive spirit. We became more relational. As Team Leader, I tried to make sure that all the staff were involved and encouraged, whatever their role, be it minister, youth specialist, etc. Everyone had a voice. We worked as a collaborative team, meeting and praying together, supporting each other's projects. The church commended five people for ministry in these years. I believe that we should trust people to use their gifts, and the Team supported church members in discipleship and mission, listening for the voice of the Spirit, as people were inspired to share their faith within the local community and beyond.

In 2010 I moved on from Wokingham Baptist Church and became part of the Southern Counties Baptist Association Regional Team. This was possible because the Regional Team Leader and Trustees were able to think outside the box to create a part-time, flexible role that enabled me to minister in a way that worked with my family commitments. The opportunity to work with many different churches and leaders was a huge privilege and it was also good to be part of such a great regional team too! A few years later, whilst happily fulfilling this ministry, I was encouraged by others to allow my name to go forward as part of the discernment involved in appointing a new General Secretary. This did not seem to be a role that I could fulfill given my family responsibilities, and I said as much from the outset! But because of a deep sense of wanting to be obedient to God's call I found myself drawn into the process nevertheless. There were many moving moments along the way, but for me the most moving of all was the final vote at the Assembly – no votes were cast against. That seemed a very significant moment of our journey as a Union and I felt incredibly humbled to be the one who was able to walk through this 'open door' on behalf of many other women and men who had gone before and had glimpsed at a vision of what could be. My predecessor, John Shakespeare would be proud!

### **The Revd Dr Mary Cotes**

#### **Former Ecumenical Moderator of Churches Together in Milton Keynes**

I was attending the first meeting of a management group to oversee a new ecumenical university chaplaincy post. When the other prospective members of the group arrived, I realised that I was the only woman in the room, and unlike others, I was not wearing a dog collar. Before the meeting properly began, we stood around drinking coffee. I found myself standing next to the Chair. He suggested that we take the opportunity to introduce ourselves, going round the circle, and explaining our roles.

When it came to my opportunity to speak, the Chair put his arm around me, saying, "Hello, dear. You must be the undergraduate representative!"

I replied, "No, I am Reverend-Doctor-Mary-Cotes."

He winked, and said, "Well, aren't you a clever girl, then!"

I do wonder how old a woman has to be before she is called a *woman*.

## The Revd Mary Taylor

### Regional Minister in the Yorkshire Baptist Association

Before taking up the post of Regional Minister in November 2013, I was a paid minister at Wakefield Baptist Church (WBC) from December 1999. The church had 100 members with a wider functioning church community of around 200. My path into ministry was similar to other women of my age in that I moved into lay leadership roles as my children grew up and then into ministerial training. I started my progress to being ordained and fully accredited with part time academic study, first at the Church Army College in Sheffield and then at Luther King House, where I began the weekend Faith in Living Course. Being able to pursue one or two modules at a time enabled me to combine parenting, work and study in a way that made ministerial training attainable in my personal situation.



Having been appointed as a pastor to the largest of three congregations in Wakefield Baptist Church, I then applied for ministerial recognition through the Yorkshire Baptist Association. I continued in my existing post as a curious hybrid of lay-pastor and student minister, which was unusual at the time, although much less so now. And in my final year of studies in Manchester I became the sole minister at WBC, when the senior minister moved on. On finishing studies and beginning as a newly-accredited minister my calling to WBC was re-affirmed by the church.

After a year on my own, we called another minister. I worked as Team Leader, with one full-time woman minister, Revd Kezia Robinson, and a student minister, Andy Amoss. I was the oldest in the team, but all of us were young in terms of years of ministerial experience. Kezia and I had actually both begun our training together. I very much enjoyed working with younger colleagues, and I also enjoyed the look of surprise on people's faces as they realised that there were two women ministers in post in our church. My experience has been that folk from beyond the church, in schools or local government etc, are pleasantly surprised. It is from within Christian circles that questioning and occasional condemnation arises.

When the church appointed a second woman minister, one negative comment that remains in my mind was, 'What does Kezia have that Mary doesn't?' There was a clear implication that women are one-dimensional and only have a limited gifting to offer in ministry. In fact what we discovered was the complementarity of our gifting. My role was towards the health of the community its growth, spiritual vigour and healthy functioning. Kezia contributed a vision to exhort, pioneer and innovate amongst us, encouraging us to look beyond ourselves, out to those around us and especially on the margins. As two women in ministry together we were modelling the Celtic picture of abbot and the bishop: the one, a pastor/teacher and the other, an apostle/evangelist.

The church began to step out of its comfort zone in ways that would not have happened under my sole pastorship but which were birthed through Kezia's ministry. In January 2009, we began a project working with homeless people, and by the time I left we were embarking on our second three-year contract to provide emergency accommodation in cold weather. I think it is possible that women, who do not generally occupy the major positions of power, can be more free to empathise with the powerless and indeed relinquish a level of control in the exercise of ministry towards them. Having two women ministers and other key women players in the night shelter may have encouraged this development.



I have no doubt that this engagement took Wakefield Baptist Church a long way in its journey of compassion towards those on the margins. My own call and gifting was tested, steering the church community through difficult times, through disputes and disenchantment which arose through the church engaging with the homeless community.

Although there was struggle, and a few people felt unable to journey further with us, I believe that my own ministry contributed to a growing maturity in our personal and corporate discipleship.

WBC is especially diverse, crossing spectrums of age, race, and economic background, and includes those often at the edges or rejected from conventional church community, including asylum seekers, homeless people and gays/lesbians. It was a difficult but wonderful church to lead. Over my time there

I have become increasingly strongly committed to learning and practising more of the disciplines of active and transformative peacemaking within and beyond the church community. This is in order that we develop maturity in relationships, decision-making and handling conflict as part of a gospel lifestyle. I believe strongly in a vision of building healthy church communities through good practice and justice in our corporate life. I would say that this commitment also comes in part from my observations of gender and other inequalities by which society and church are spoiled and become so much less than God intended.



I sought to teach, model and implement the disciplines of justice so that they became a fundamental part of our being, through the way we conducted our church meetings, our ways of speaking of one another, our methods for handling disputes and the training we offered for marriage and partnership. Although this is by no means only a female perspective I feel that, as a woman, I have consciously chosen to look for ways of dealing with conflict and of making decisions that do not favour the concentration or abuse of power in limited hands.

My style of ministry is fundamentally collaborative. I am by no means the stereotypical 'strong' leader who is seen as invulnerable. In fact I would tend to deliberately practise a vulnerability that I believe encourages others who feel weak. This may well mean a few members at Wakefield felt less secure, wanting to be more strongly led, and because of this became more critical. To some extent I would say this is also about searching to be true to myself as a woman rather than trying to merely copy leadership as I have experienced it from men.

My own way of working is also distinctively incremental. What I believe I hold is a sense of the feel and style and spirit of true Christian community, drawn from a vision of the Kingdom. Rather than having a grand plan, I work towards all my plans and actions consistently building this vision from the bottom up. The church vision of helping people follow Jesus in his spirituality, mission, justice and welcome was articulated and agreed by the community several years ago but this is a continuing journey of being challenged in different areas, making changes and taking risks. This incremental, organic approach is another way I suspect my ministry as a woman was experienced in a different way by the church. A common picture of leadership emphasizes strategy, goals and objectives. The more incremental style is less easy to grasp and articulate but none the less effective in its place. What was happening in the church was exciting but messy; like any living organism it was not static but hopefully growing and maturing over time and, however imperfectly, bearing witness to Jesus.

This is not to say there is one style of ministry which is male, another female, but that in being true to myself I had to shake off certain predominant models which came from only observing men in ministry. I had to develop my own way of being. Having now left Wakefield Baptist Church I see that my ministry at WBC was one that unfolded gradually but fruitfully. Some of the most exciting developments came just as I was leaving and in my last year there as we began to reap a harvest of evangelistic opportunity amongst the asylum seekers we have been working with for over 10 years. Some things can only be judged in the longer term. One thing I celebrate is that a generation of children and many newcomers to Wakefield Baptist have been able to grow up in a community where equality of gender roles and respect for the gifts of all can be taken for granted.

# Dealing with the 'difficult' passages

## Introduction

The apostle Paul has often been accused of wanting to restrict the ministry of women, based on the way some people have read some of the things he said in some of his letters. Whilst it is true that there are three key 'difficult' passages that need consideration in any biblically-based discussion of women in ministry, these need to be set alongside his many other comments where he is clearly commending women as church leaders. We will come onto these positive comments in the next session, but for now we will take time to look carefully at how the three 'difficult' passages functioned within their original context, before asking the important question of how they can speak to us today.

## Opening Worship

### Reading:

The Lord says:

'These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.

Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.'

*Isaiah 29: 13-14*

### Prayer:

Holy Lord

We are sorry that we have approached you on our terms, relying on our own knowledge and words.

[quiet]

Forgive us and amaze us with visions filled with your wisdom

Amen

### Reading:

Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'

At this the man's face fell. He went away sad because he had great wealth.

*Mark 10: 21-22*

### Prayer:

Jesus,

For the times we greet you, eager to do right, but falling short because of our need for human security, we are sorry.

(quiet)

When we are bewildered by feelings of our own insecurity, give us the confidence to follow you.

Amen

### Reading:

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;

and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

*Isaiah 55: 1*

### Prayer:

Loving God,

We come to you, empty handed, hungry and thirsty for you.

Nurture us with your love, wisdom and inspiration.

Amen.

### 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16

Central to any debate about this passage is the conclusion reached concerning Paul's use of the word 'head' in verse 3. In modern usage, 'head' implies a sense of authority, as is seen in the sentence: 'He was promoted to become the head of the company.' However, in Paul's time 'head' did not automatically imply a sense of authority. Anatomically, people were not understood as thinking with their heads – rather, conscious and emotive thought were understood to originate in the breast or the stomach (Gen 6: 5 and Gen 43: 30 KJV). The head was the place through which nourishment entered the body (Eph 4: 15-16; Col 2: 19) and from which speech flowed, and in this way it was frequently seen as the source or origin of life and relationship. Therefore the head was not seen as directing the body in the way in which we would understand it today, and we need to be careful not to impose our modern perspective upon Paul's usage.



What is meant by the modern phrases: 'I knew in the pit of my stomach that something was wrong', 'I love you from the bottom of my heart', 'heads up', 'head over heels', 'head in the sand'?

If it is unlikely that Paul was intending his use of 'head' to indicate a relationship of authority, what did he mean when he said that, 'Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ'? Paul appears to have in mind the understanding of 'head' as *source and origin*, something which becomes clearer in verses 8 and 12 where he speaks twice more of man as the source of woman.

Paul is obviously here drawing on the story of creation, where woman originated from man, just as Paul would see the Son originating from the Father, and all creation originating from the Son. See Col 2: 15-18 for a passage where Paul spells out clearly his understanding of Christ as the source of creation, and as the head, or source, of the church. Paul is putting forward here, not an argument for authority, but a series of three analogous relationships to try and explain to the Corinthian church that man and woman relate to each other as the head relates to the body, as the Father relates to the Son, and as the Son relates to humanity. His point is that just as humanity found its source in Christ, and Christ found his source in God, so woman finds her source in man, as is evidenced in the order of creation (Gen 2: 21-23). This passage needs to be read alongside Gen 1: 26-27, where male and female are both created in the image of God. To argue on the basis of the Genesis 2 creation account that woman is an inferior helper to man would be to take it out of context: Woman is created in the image of God just as man is.



What are the implications of believing that women and men are together created in the image of God?

Paul is not here suggesting an ordering based on dominating authority, with superior and subordinate. Rather, he is likening the relationship of man and woman, with that of Christ and humanity, and of God and Christ. The relationship between the Father and the Son functions, in Paul's mind, as an image for the way in which Christ and humanity, and man and woman, relate to each other. This relationship is not one of subordination, but is rather a relationship of interdependence and unity.

Some have argued that there is an inherent subordination in the relationship between the Father and the Son, and that this provides a model for a relationship of subordination between man and woman. This is not a new argument, as discussions on the power relationships within the Trinity occupied the minds of many of the early church fathers. The orthodox position (as argued by Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, Basil, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Eusebius ) was that the Son and the Father are coequal, rather than superior and subordinate. Scriptural backing for this position can be found in a number of key texts (John 1: 1-3; 10: 30; 14: 9, 11; 16: 15; 17: 11, 21), and John Chrysostom (Archbishop of Constantinople AD 398-404) used the word 'heretic' to describe those who would seek to understand 'head' in terms of authority, preferring instead to see headship as denoting origin and source. If, therefore, it is not appropriate to try and understand the Father-Son relationship in terms of a divinely ordained hierarchy, neither is it appropriate to extrapolate from this to see unequal submission as part of the natural order of male-female relationships. Paul actually speaks of mutual submission as integral to his understanding of Christian marriage (Eph 5: 22-33; Col 3: 18).



What are the practical implications of 'mutual submission' between men and women?

The broader context of 1 Cor 11:3 is a passage which is primarily concerned with hairstyles and propriety in worship, and an obvious link can be seen between Paul's discussion of head-coverings and hairstyles, and the relationship of 'head'-ship that he has proposed between Christ, man, woman, and God.

To understand Paul's logic here, it is necessary to realise that Paul was writing to a specific situation, and was therefore using the arguments which he thought would best convince the intended recipients of his letter. His logic may seem convoluted to the modern reader, because we are reading his words in a context far removed from that of the original recipients.



Does it matter what clothes we wear to church? Why?

It is important to note that Paul refrains from giving instructions as to how women should dress, and neither does he argue that woman is subordinate to man. Rather, he draws supporting arguments from creation and nature to convince the Corinthian Christians that, for the sake of propriety, certain head-coverings were appropriate in worship and some were not. Paul's statement in verse 10, 'because of the angels' most likely refers to the angels who will be judged by the believers (1 Corinthians 6.3). If this is the case, then Paul's concern here is that propriety not be breached in such a serious matter. In Jewish custom, a woman's head covering was indicative of her commitment to her husband, and in Roman culture, women would cover their heads for worship, whereas Greek women would not. Women's hairstyles could also make both social and sexual statements, and in the cosmopolitan city of Corinth, where class conflict and sexual politics were rife, it is easy to see why Paul was concerned that this should not become a controversial issue in the church (See 1 Cor 11: 21-22 for an example of how Paul is concerned about class conflict in the church). However, as is clear from verse 16, Paul is not here seeking to make a grand theological point. Rather, he is concerned to avoid controversy and preserve propriety.



What examples can you think of where certain styles of clothing might either help or hinder the witness of the gospel?

Overall, then, 1 Cor 11: 2-16 does not lend itself to an understanding of male authority. It recognises that the male-female relationship parallels those between God and Christ, and between Christ and humanity, in terms of interdependence and unity. Paul is using this parallel to make an intensely pastoral point about propriety in public worship, and his intention in writing was not to deal with gender issues, but to provide pastoral instruction in a specific context. Paul's priorities were love, unity and good witness (See 1 Cor 10: 32-33; 14: 40), and whilst the freedom of Galatians 3: 28 may be his ideal, this freedom didn't mean that the believers were free to throw off all customs to the detriment of the church's unity and public witness.



What customs might we need to hang on to, and what customs might we need to lose, in the interest of church unity and public witness?

## 1 Corinthians 14: 33b-36

This passage is problematic because, at first glance, Paul seems to contradict what he said in 1 Cor 11: 4-5. In the earlier passage, Paul clearly expected that women would pray and prophesy in public worship, and his concern was that they should do so with propriety and decorum, whereas a superficial reading of 14: 34 appears to say that women should be silent in church. The key to solving this is found in 14: 35, where Paul says that if women desire to know anything, they should ask their husbands at home. Paul is actually only restricting women from the shameful public asking of questions.



What do you think of the idea of people being encouraged to frequently interrupt worship, or the sermon, to ask questions about what is going on?

One of the problems in the early church, and particularly the church in Corinth, was that of order and propriety in worship. In so many ways, the post-Pentecost community of Christian believers had broken down barriers of race, class and gender; but the danger of this freedom was that it ran the risk of breaking down into anarchy, which would seriously hinder the witness of the church. In the Corinthian cultural situation, women would traditionally have received little formal education, and would have been restricted in their access to temple worship. In the new Christian community, they suddenly found themselves, for the first time, being given liberation from these restrictions, and being allowed equal access with men to worship services. The problem seems to have been that they didn't know how to handle that freedom appropriately.



In the past, churches founded many schools and colleges to educate people. What examples can you think of where churches are involved in education today?

It was common practise in worship to interrupt the speaker to ask a question of clarification, or to make a relevant point. Which was fine as long as the question was appropriate and useful. The problem was that the granting of equal participation in worship to uneducated women, could so easily have led to them disrupting services by continually asking inappropriate questions. So to avoid this and preserve propriety and order, Paul proposes both short-term and long-term solutions to the problem. The short-term solution is that women should keep quiet in worship, and refrain from asking uneducated and disruptive questions. The long-term solution is that women should receive education in the form of private tuition from their husbands. These solutions were actually more progressive than restrictive, as Paul is not doubting the abilities of women to learn, and he is opening the door for them to receive an education that would otherwise not be available to them. However, until that long-term solution paid dividends, Paul was concerned to preserve dignity and propriety in public worship. Paul's concern that women 'should be subordinate, as the law says' (v34) reflects his concern that the practise of the church in worship should not bring the church into disrepute with those who he was concerned to reach with the gospel of Christ. This passage is a further example of Paul tempering the freedoms of Galatians 3: 28 with a concern for love, unity, and good witness.



What freedoms might we be called to set aside for the sake of love, unity, and good witness?

## 1 Timothy 2: 8-15

The wider context for this passage is that Paul is giving the congregation at Ephesus some instruction concerning public prayer. Paul is, as always, concerned that worship be conducted with order and in an appropriate manner, and is writing to offset various abuses which were creeping into the worship of the Ephesian church. In verse 8 Paul addresses the men, who seem to have been bringing conflict into church, and in verses 9-10 he turns his attention to the dress-code for women in the church. It seems that some (clearly wealthy) women had been coming to church arrayed in all their finery. Paul's concern is that in a congregation where class barriers had been removed (Gal 3: 28; Eph 2: 14-15; Col 3: 11), the door wasn't opened for division and resentment to creep in between the haves and the have-nots. Hence Paul instructs the women in the church not to dress ostentatiously.



What examples can you think of where there is a gap between the rich and the poor in church life?

When considering 1 Tim 2: 11-15, it needs to be remembered that Paul was writing to a very specific social situation, and that he was not setting out to write systematic theology. His instructions in this passage come as a pastoral response to a specific pastoral problem. Paul is concerned that false teaching has been gaining a foothold in the Ephesian church (1 Tim 1: 4-7, 20; 6: 3-5; 2 Tim 2: 17-18), and he wants to ensure that all avenues for the heresy to be taught are closed.



What avenues still exist today for 'false teaching' to creep into church life?

What can be done to help congregations be discerning of what they are told?

As was discussed above, most women in Paul's time would have lacked formal education, and therefore they would have been at greater risk of being drawn into the false teaching than the educated men in the church. It is easy to see why, if women had been taking advantage of the new freedoms that were theirs in Christ by beginning to share in the teaching of the church, Paul would be concerned that this might open the door to propagating the false teaching that he was so anxious to refute. In addition, having women assuming teaching roles, even if they were fulfilled competently, would fly in the face of what was acceptable in terms of cultural standards at the time. As has already been seen, one of Paul's overriding concerns was that the public witness of the church not be harmed (1 Tim 3: 2, 7, 10; 5: 7, 10, 14; 6: 1; Tit 1: 6; 2: 1-5, 8, 10). For the church to have women in teaching roles would certainly have negatively affected the extent to which the male-orientated society of his day, would be prepared to listen to the message the church was seeking to proclaim.



Is it appropriate for us today to have some control over who we allow to teach in church?

On what basis might such decisions be taken?

In the face of these two concerns: that the church's witness not be harmed, and that uneducated women not be given teaching responsibility in a congregation facing the difficulties of false teaching, it is easy to see why Paul proposes the solutions that he does. As with 1 Corinthians 14: 33b-36, Paul proposes both short-term and a long-term solutions. The short-term solution is that women should not take up positions of teaching authority in the church. Whilst the long-term solution is that women should be educated (v11).

Here Paul is again affirming the ability of women to learn, something which in terms of the prevailing society's attitude to women can be seen as progressive. Too much should not be read into Paul's instruction that the women are to learn in silence and in full submission, because this was the demeanour that was expected of all students. Paul has in mind here the public witness of the church: If they were going to fly in the face of prevailing culture by educating women, then this needed to be done with utmost regard to received custom.



Who are the educationally disadvantaged in our culture?

Should the church be involved in helping to lift people out of educational poverty?

As in his discussion concerning head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11: 7-11, Paul turns once again to the creation story for supporting arguments to bolster his advice. As in 1 Corinthians, Paul's argument from creation is confusing for a 21st Century reader. Paul's analogy with the creation story is set out in verse 13.

In Genesis 2: 18 man is described as being alone and this is stated as "not good," so the Lord creates woman to be his partner. Paul seems to be making the point that it is similarly not good for men to be alone in worship, as would traditionally have been the case in pagan worship, and that the inclusion of women as partners with men in the worship of Christ is a parallel to the creation of woman to be a partner of man in Genesis 2.



Do you think men and women should be separated in worship?

Clearly, however, it is also central to his point that Eve was deceived first, and then led Adam astray (1 Tim 2: 14). The question is whether Paul is saying that all women are inherently more easy to deceive than men, and that therefore no woman is ever fit to teach. Or whether Paul is using the story of Eve to illustrate the particular situation facing the women in the church in Ephesus. In the light of the discussion above concerning the lack of education of the women in Ephesus, and therefore their particular susceptibility to the false teaching in that church, it is most likely that Paul was simply drawing an analogy between the Ephesian situation and the story of Eve, rather than mandating a generic principle for all time.

In summary, 1 Timothy 2: 8-15 contains Paul's specific response to a specific cultural situation. He is concerned to stem the tide of false teaching, and therefore instructs that uneducated women should not participate in teaching for fear they may unwittingly participate in the heresy. He is also concerned that the witness of the church not be harmed, and that to have women teaching, however competently, would compromise this. He affirms that women should be educated, and is therefore setting in place a long-term strategy so that the short-term restrictions can be lifted in due course. In this way, Paul can be seen to be working towards the fulfilment of Galatians 3: 28 in the new Christian community, whilst at the same time balancing his concerns for unity and good witness.

## Conclusion

Paul says, when answering the question of whether Christians should eat food which has been offered to idols, 'take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak' (1 Corinthians 8: 9). Paul also says, when addressing the issue of freedom in Christ, "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial' (1 Corinthians 6: 12; 10: 23). It seems that Paul, the idealistic champion of Christian freedom and equality in Galatians 3: 28, is also something of a pragmatist. It's as if he has caught this wonderful grand vision of the way it should be in the new Christian community, but then has to come back down to earth and start to think through the practical implications of the transition from law to grace. Hence Paul welcomes the freedom of women to minister in his churches, except where it is exercised in such a way as to compromise the church's unity and public witness. Of his own ministry, Paul says, 'though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them... I have become all things to all people, so that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel' (1 Corinthians 9: 19, 22-23). It seems that he expects no less of those in his congregations.



What might it mean in practice for us to make ourselves 'slaves to all'?

The passages where Paul asks women to set aside their freedom in Christ for the sake of the unity and witness of the church remain a challenge to the contemporary Christian. In Western culture it is no longer harmful to the proclamation of the gospel for women to minister in church; in fact the converse is probably true.



Can you think of situations around the world today where allowing a woman to preach would actively harm the cause of the gospel?

What should the church's response in such situations be?

It could be said that those who persist in seeking to restrict the ministry of women actually alienate the church from the culture to which it is called to minister, in much the same way as allowing women to minister in Ephesus would have done two thousand years ago.



Do you agree with this statement? Why?

What freedoms are ours in Christ, which we are being called to set aside for the sake of the gospel?

What freedoms do we have which might affect the public witness of the church?

## Closing Worship

### Reading:

This is what the Lord says:

'Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.

Blessed are those who do this- who hold it fast, those who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keep their hands from doing any evil.'

Let no foreigners who have bound themselves to the Lord say,

'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.'

And let no eunuch complain,

'I am only a dry tree.'

For this is what the Lord says:

'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, and choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant - to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.

And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant - these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my houses of prayer.

Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.'

The sovereign Lord declares - he who gathers the exiles of Israel: 'I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.'

*Isaiah 56*

### Prayer:

Holy, holy, holy Lord

Fill us with your wisdom; our hearts, our minds, our actions.

Use us to encourage those who feel trampled, lost, and without a place so they are renewed and know they are truly accepted by you.

Let us see the beauty of your people with your eyes and not through the shroud of human assumption.

Restoring God, walk with us and guide us and, as we leave one another, bind us all closer to you.

Amen.

## The Revd Catriona Gorton

### Minister of Hillhead Baptist Church, Glasgow

My sense of God's Call to ordained Baptist ministry was without doubt the most profound religious experience of my life. Had it not been so, I do not believe that I would be in the Baptist ministry today. I have encountered many obstacles along the way, most of which were blatant gender-discrimination.

When I first approached my home church, the Minister and the Deacons were extremely supportive and encouraging. However, there were a few ex-Brethren and ex-Anglican members in the church who were adamantly opposed to women's ministry. They influenced other people, and it soon became clear that the church meeting might not recommend me to the Ministerial Recognition Committee of the Association. At this point, the Association Superintendent said that he would accept a vote in my favour of fifty one per cent and that, if the worst happened, I should move to another church, and begin the process again in two years. I was very shocked by this because I knew that Baptists had been ordaining women for decades and hadn't anticipated it being an issue. Clearly, had I been a man, this would not have been the case. In the event, the vote was in my favour, although one person did walk out of the meeting, because she was not going to vote against her husband, who was adamantly opposed to women's ministry. At that time the church was quite clear that it would not call a woman minister – which caused me to feel further undermined and unsupported - but to be fair, a decade later is open to the possibility of calling a woman to be their minister.

I sailed through Ministerial Recognition, with a unanimous endorsement of my call, and from there went to Northern Baptist College, where I had a wonderful time growing in theological understanding and beginning to develop as a minister. I flourished in an atmosphere of affirmation and support, worked well in my various placements and really looked forward to entering ordained ministry. When we moved into our final year and began the process of settlement, the Principal warned us that the married men with families would almost certainly settle first, and that the single man and myself would probably take longer; but he assured us that it would happen. By the end of our college year, I was the only person yet unsettled, and I was once more faced by the largely uninformed theological conflict that had challenged my original application. It was only the overwhelming conviction of my initial Call and the generous support of Association and College personnel that prevented me abandoning my Call and returning to secular employment at this point.

My name went to several churches and I often never discovered the reason why they were not interested in me. Before finally settling, I met several churches and 'preached with a view' at three, each of which I believe God had called me to serve - albeit that the 'divine plan A' was not recognised. The first church was split down the middle and had some internal issues to resolve, but it was clear that, for some of the members, gender was a factor in their 'no' vote. After a long wait, I honestly believed I had found the right church. I had a superb weekend when 'preaching with a view', and I had already made good friends with the leaders. When it came to the church meeting, however, two or three anti-women's ministry campaigners swayed the confidence of the people, and I was right back where I had started.

These discriminatory experiences were immensely painful and I was very close to giving up. I was really saddened, particularly because outside of the church I had held equal responsibility with men and had been respected and affirmed for my abilities as a professional engineer working in risk assessment for hazardous industries. By now, I had first class honours degrees in both engineering and theology, and was passionate about fulfilling my Call to work with a local church in their mission for the Kingdom of God but it seemed that no one was going to allow me to do so.



Finally, and having told myself this was definitely the last time, I agreed to 'preach with a view' and was called by a small church community willing to risk calling a woman: it has been a good experience! Five years later, however, I found myself once more on the move, and sexism raised its ugly head again. I was invited to meet the Deacons of a church, and all was fine, until I checked that the church really would invite a woman into the pulpit. They admitted that there were a few 'anti-women' members, and they could not be sure of their influence. I was not prepared to 'preach with a view', and to be knocked back again. They needed to get their church life resolved, rather than put a woman through the pain of rejection on grounds of gender.

Another church seriously considered me, but I had a phone call from their Moderator, saying that sadly, after further discussion, the church could not proceed, because they felt they "really needed a man."

I am caught up in the web of ambivalence in our BUGB life. Many women ministers contribute greatly to the life of the BUGB these days and I have been privileged to serve in an area where I can count many women among my colleagues. There have been many friends in the BUGB, amongst them many men, who have encouraged and supported me through the pain of rejection after rejection. I live with the knowledge that my previous professional success as an engineer and my hard won academic qualifications are often considered to be a disadvantage for my suitability in a church. It is apparently not considered quite right for a woman minister to be confident about her professional or academic skills but, ironically, this life-experience would have been admired in a man who was answering the Call into the Baptist ordained ministry, to lead and to teach God's people.



At the time of writing the initial draft of this paper I was soon to 'preach with a view' at a possible new pastorate – a prospect exciting and daunting in almost equal measure. On the one hand, I was terrified of yet another rejection because I am a woman. On the other, I had been surprised and delighted by the approach of this church who took the trouble to check out, via their moderator, what support is available for women ministers in their area. I subsequently enjoyed a rewarding weekend exploring a possible call to Hillhead Baptist

Church and was delighted to receive an almost unanimous call (98% in favour) to become their new minister – and this is a Baptist church in Scotland! Since I first shared my story, nearly five years ago, I have been exercising a rewarding and challenging ministry in Scotland, serving my own congregation and participating in the work of both BUGB and BUS.

It would be easy to dwell on the negatives – and they absolutely must be heard and challenged – but there are glimpses of God's redeeming grace at work. I hope in allowing my story to be told that other women called by God to ordained Baptist ministry will experience more of the grace and less of the grot than I have.

## The Revd Nigel Coles

### Regional Minister for the West of England Baptist Association

I began training for the Baptist ministry, fully open and accepting that women had an important part to play in running the local church. Looking back, however, I was still ambivalent about their potential ministerial roles, because of those key verses written by Paul, which talk about women's place within the early church, and I certainly did not expect them to take up team leaders' positions!

There were two excellent women training in our year at college. I was happy for them to be training for ministry, provided they were not thinking of becoming senior pastors. I rather assumed that they would join in team ministries in larger churches. One of them was going to work abroad with the BMS, and that seemed a perfectly suitable Calling. The other person became a good friend, and as I realised just how gifted she was, I began to think more deeply about this. I read various books, which suggested different ways of understanding the problematic biblical verses.

In the summer I was responsible for appointing a three-person leadership team for a student mission. I chose to invite my female friend because she was an extremely gifted preacher and communicator, and I also invited one of the male students. At this point I discovered that some of my male colleagues refused to work alongside my friend on the mission. Further more, in those days, there was some unease out in the churches about women's preaching.

I think that these negative responses, to one particular highly talented and spiritual person, helped crystallise my previously growing conviction; her call to Ministry had no accompanying ceiling. The Revd Anne Wilkinson-Hayes was to become one of the first women Ministers to work in the national resource centre in Didcot, helping to inspire and support the mission of the BUGB churches, before accepting a Call to work as a Regional Minister in Australia.



# Positive biblical images of women

## Introduction

Take a minute to consider the following questions, and then share your answers:



Who are you?

How would you describe yourself?

What has changed for you through these sessions?

## Opening Worship

Today we give you thanks for:

Eve, the first woman to discover the pain of giving birth to new life and we pray for all those women struggling to bring to birth their hopes for a more equal world.

Sarah, who laughed at the thought of the wasted years and we pray for all those women who have been overlooked and left unfulfilled because their gifts and creativity were unwelcome.

Hagar, used for the child she would provide, and we pray for all those women who are used and then discarded as if they were less than human.

Leah, the invisible and Rachel, the loved one, and we pray for those women around the world who must compete for their share and place in their household.

Dinah, abused by men, within and without her family, and we pray for women around the world who live in fear within their family.

Rahab, sassy, streetwise and selling herself to survive in the city, and we pray for women who must sell their bodies to provide a living all over the world.

Miriam, sister and leader, and we pray for women who are in government, national and local.

Deborah, warrior and wise woman, and we pray for women in our armed forces, police and fire services.

Hannah, true to her word, willing to offer you her most precious - we pray for women who are in full-time ministry, offering you their hopes for new life.

Ruth and Naomi, deep, loving friends - we pray for those women who share the journey seeking justice, working for wholeness in human relationships and building loving, safe homes.

Here are only a few of the women of the bible, named and often overlooked, but representing so many others around this world.

We could thank you too for Elizabeth, Mary and Anna, who were there at the beginning and wondered at how vulnerable God could be. Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary, who were friends on the road to the cross and stayed with Jesus to the end. Dorcas, Lydia, and Phoebe in the early church, breaking down barriers faithfully offering their service to build up the church. So many women, part of your story of salvation for this world, and today we acknowledge the women around the world still using their creativity and ingenuity in your service, in their business, home and community.

Today we acknowledge the gifts of your kingdom so often overlooked. May your kingdom grow so that all our contributions in life are affirmed, strength honoured and gifts celebrated.

So may your kingdom come amongst us. Amen

### *Galatians 3:26-29*

'in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.' ***Galatians 3:26-29***

Paul's grand statement to the Galatian church of the value-base of the new community of Christ's people is a natural starting point for this discussion of women in ministry.

Paul has just outlined his doctrine of justification by faith (Gal 3: 1-14), and has explained Christian freedom from the law (Gal 3: 15-25). He then goes on to spell out the implications for Christian believers of their being justified by faith and not by the law.

He says that those who are 'in Christ' (Gal 3: 26), those who have been 'baptised into Christ' (Gal 3: 27), have been brought into a series of new relationships. They have new relationships spiritually, racially, socially, economically, and sexually.

For Paul the old, law-based, divisions in humanity have been rendered inapplicable to those who are in Christ (see also 1 Cor 12: 13, Eph 2: 14-15 and Col 3: 11). Paul envisages a new humanity coming into being through Christ, in which all persons are equal in the sight of God.



Can you think of examples of ways in which the Church has distinguished one person from another using divisions based on race, class, or gender?

### *Galatians 5: 13*

'you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.' ***Galatians 5: 13***



Why do you think Paul asks his readers to 'become slaves to one another'?  
What does it mean for the people of Christ today to be 'one in Christ Jesus'?

## Women ministering in the Bible

The Old Testament contains a number of examples of women fulfilling significant leadership roles. Miriam the Prophetess is listed alongside Aaron and Moses as one sent to lead Israel (Exodus 15: 20-21; Micah 6: 4). Deborah is described as a judge of Israel, and her military and spiritual authority are clear to see (Judges 4: 4-10). Huldah the prophetess provided divine instruction to Josiah, the king of Judah (2 Kings 22: 14-20).

In the gospels, Jesus is seen as accepting and affirming women (Matthew 8: 14-15; 9: 18-26; Luke 13: 11-17), teaching them and including them among his disciples (Matthew 27: 55-56; Luke 8: 1-3; 10: 38-42; Acts 1: 14). Women also participated in the proclamation of the gospel (Luke 1: 5 - 2: 40; John 4: 39; Matt 28: 1-10), and there are seventeen named women in the gospels.

Too much significance should not be attached to the fact that women are not named among the twelve disciples, as it would have been culturally impossible to have women as part of such an intimate group of men. What is significant and remarkable in the gospels is the extent to which women were included in the life and ministry of Jesus, and the roles they are given at key points in the story. This pattern continues in Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, where he includes miraculous stories about women (Acts 9: 32-42; 16: 16-18), and portrays women as patrons (Tabitha in Acts 9: 36, 39 and Lydia in Acts 16: 15), church hosts (Acts 12: 12), and prophets (Acts 2: 17-18; 21: 9).

In Paul's life and ministry as recorded in the New Testament, twelve women are named as Paul's co-workers in ministry (Acts 16: 14-15, 40; Romans 16: 1-16; 1 Corinthians 1: 11; Philippians 4: 2-3; Colossians 4: 15). It needs to be remembered that Paul's context is one where most people were functionally illiterate, and that those with sufficient education to teach and lead were almost always men. Hence, to have this number of women working alongside him marks Paul as highly progressive in terms of the standards of his day.

In Romans 16: 1-2, Paul commends Phoebe, the bearer of his letter and a deacon of the church in Cenchreae, as someone the Romans may trust to explain the letter to them. Later in the same passage Paul also mentions Prisca, who ministered alongside her husband. (Romans 16: 3. See also Acts 18: 26; 1 Corinthians 16: 19; 2 Timothy 4: 19). Paul also mentions the two women Tryphaena and Tryphosa who are described as workers in the Lord (Romans 16: 12), and Junia who he includes as one of the apostles (Romans 16: 17). In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul speaks of Euodia and Syntyche as his co-workers (Philippians 4: 2-3). Paul also expects that women will fulfil the role of prophet (1 Corinthians 11: 5), which he ranks second only to the role of apostle (1 Corinthians 12: 28). It appears that Paul took seriously his statement of Galatians 3: 28, that in Christ there is no longer male and female, and that he welcomed the ministry of women in the normal course of his pastoral practise.



What examples of women in positions of leadership have you encountered, both within and beyond the church?

How do you feel about being part of an organisation which has a female leader?

## Closing worship

Name and give thanks for women who have helped you grow in your faith. (*Write their names on post it notes and place them before the group, whilst an appropriate piece of music is played*)

*Link arms*

Jesus, who was nurtured and encouraged in faith by the quietly pondering mother,

We thank you for those significant women who have influenced us for good and shown us the way of faith. We acknowledge too, those who were unable to share their gift with others.

Where we have forgotten their names, forgive us.

Where we have refused to receive their gifts, challenge us.

Jesus, today, help us also to ponder those who went with you on the way of the cross,

And, like the women, to remain with you to the end.

Increase our love and diminish our indifference to the possibility of others gifts.

Jesus, help us to discern your calling,

In our own lives and in the lives of each of your children.

For the sake of your good news.

Amen

## The Revd Charmaine Howard

### Minister of Northolt Park Baptist Church, London

In July 2008 I was invited to be minister at Northolt Park Baptist Church (NPBC) in West London. This was my first pastorate after ministerial training at Regent's Park College in Oxford. I felt particularly called to minister in this church at this particular time. I recognised in the church members a deep sense of hurt and brokenness. I understood their pain and was amazed that God was calling me to a church full of people who were just like me – broken people in need of love and healing. As I spoke with the church and listened to their story of a series of pastorates that had promised so much, and indeed had given much, yet had gone terribly wrong, I realised the enormity of the task ahead. I understood that, with God's help and our determination, we would cross the spiritual desert that threatened to engulf us.



My first three months at NPBC was spent listening to each individual relay their stories and hopes for the church. The overriding need expressed by almost every church member was the need for relationship. The members had worked hard to keep the church open. Each person performing tasks that needed to be done, but not really communicating with each other. The church comprised individuals who were not in relationship with each other. The members expressed the need to develop relationship with each other, to know each other and be able to provide real and meaningful fellowship, accountability and support for each other.

At the same time they articulated a need to develop our relationship with God, to speak to God, and to listen to God's voice. They wanted to develop communion with God – co-united with God – so that our church would walk in step with God, placing our energies where God had already begun to work. The vision I received was one of a praying church, a church that communicates with God on all levels. This included studying our Bibles, gaining better understanding of our Christian heritage and increasing our knowledge of our God who speaks daily into our lives.

Finally, the members unanimously wanted to develop relationship with the local community. The previous pastors had developed relationships on a one-to-one level and these had been successful. However, as the pastor left so the relationships had severed and the church members now 'survived' in isolation.

I saw my role as enabling and empowering our church to realise this vision of God's church here in Northolt. However, I knew that for the church to be 'spiritually alive' and robust in faith every member must play his/her part. I identified six areas of ministry that I thought were essential to the development and growth of our church and I asked our church officers and deacons to share responsibility for those areas with me. I was to be the 'scaffold' for each area of ministry, until others were confident and spiritually and emotionally strong enough to continue unaided.

The first task was to help individuals to find new spiritual energy. We recognised that it is only through prayer that we gain our strength, energy and the capacity to grow and give. So as a church we prayed. Each Thursday we prayed. We allocated specific times of the day to each person and, wherever we were at that time, we prayed. We continued and developed our Sunday Evening Prayers and experimented with creative ways to pray – including the use of a Labyrinth. We ensured that each term we included time for the whole church to participate in prayer activities in addition to weekly devotions. We asked a group of people to take responsibility for the prayer activities and events.

We continued to develop our relationship with God by focusing on Teaching and Discipleship. As disciples of Jesus we wanted to study and know what that involved. We began by developing a teaching format in the form of seasonal courses – for instance Lent or Advent. We expanded this to include blocked series of teaching each term.

We realised that we needed to develop strategies for reading and understanding our Bibles. Our church Secretary, Antony Billington, is on the staff of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, and he agreed to plan and teach these series for us each term.

In addition we continue our weekly small group meetings as these provide the opportunity to develop personal relationships, read and discuss Scripture and to grow together in faith.

Relationships develop naturally where people are together having fun! So we plan social events where we eat, talk and share and just enjoy being together! We now look forward to our church outings with excited anticipation!

As a church we believed that our Children and Youth Ministry was the area in which we were weakest. So when we surveyed the local community to ascertain how we can provide real help and support, we were dismayed to find that 90% of the people surveyed wanted us to provide clubs and activities for youth and children. Last summer we ran a Holiday Club as a trial to test the need. We expected about twenty children to attend the morning sessions. We were overwhelmed with the response. During the week we had over fifty children attending and others had to be turned away. Parents and Carers were very positive and wanted us to make this a regular event. We invited the families to come to a BBQ on Sunday and we were surprised that so many came, and those who were not able to come apologised.

This Christmas we were again amazed that over sixty children braved the ice and snow to attend our Christmas event and a further forty apologised for being unable to come. We believe now that this is an area of our church in which God is at work and we plan to join God's work by organising regular children and youth clubs and activities.

I am so conscious that this is a shared journey and I am privileged to pastor so many beautiful Christians. I get such a rush of pure joyous energy from seeing our people grow in confidence, faith and love. We still have a lot of work to do and sometimes it feels like such an uphill struggle. But the thing that keeps us going is the knowledge that God has called us to serve in this place – and together, we can.

## The Revd Sarah Parry

### Formerly Moderator of Ministry Executive, Baptist Union Great Britain

Sarah Parry was ordained in 1992. She has been a minister for over 20 years. During her second pastorate, working with the members of Shoreditch Tabernacle, Sarah developed a particular interest in the use of church buildings in inner cities. She graphically describes the almost over-whelming challenge of renewing a tired church plant, and creating a centre for mission in a very disadvantaged part of the capital city.



Shoreditch Tabernacle Baptist Church and its historic mission school lie in the heart of East End London. Bordering Spitalfields to the south, and Bethnal Green to the east, its past is inter-woven with the social history of the area. Most significantly, Shoreditch lies outside the city wall, historically where the dispossessed and dissenters lived. It's the place where the earliest theatres opened and where immigrant communities set up homes and businesses.

In the nineteenth century the square mile of Shoreditch alone contained more than 300 licensed public houses servicing notorious slums. The Tab, meanwhile, educated children, supported women and ran clubs for men, propounded fresh air and exercise for all, not only preaching good news but addressing the harshest consequences of poverty and deprivation.

By the mid-twentieth century significant changes were affecting the church. In World War II an incendiary bomb set fire to the roof of the main lecture hall. A bomb, exploding nearby, made the church unsafe for use. After the war it was demolished, and a 1960s building replaced it, but the resources poured into the new church meant that the church school, with its leaking roof, was neglected. Meanwhile the great eastern emigration began. As slums were cleared people moved out, mostly to East London, leaving the congregation decimated.

Sarah takes up the story, as she recalls her first visit in 2001 to the 1960s church and the Victorian church school:

"There was a door at the end of the corridor in this sprawling church building, but getting to it wasn't going to be easy. Much later, obstacles overcome, the caretaker and I forced the door open to find a sunless room filled with – well, what was it filled with? Strange piles that looked suspiciously like a massive heap of old shoes, a collection of doors and rotting Victorian exercise equipment. The parquet floor had been ripped up at some point and the window boarded in. Everything was dirty, untouched and useless. The room next door to it also had its window boarded over and, worryingly, it was in use as a Sunday School room.

Exhausted, filthy and depressed, I wondered how the church had kept going all these years, never turning anything out in a building that was deteriorating with every passing year. What I needed was a long hot bath; what the church might need was a whole lot more complicated.

In 2001, around the time I began my ministry at the Tab, some people were asking whether there was in fact anything on the site left worth saving. I had questions too. What on earth was I doing here? Would my ministry see the final burial of this church? I knew from the way colleagues questioned me curiously about Shoreditch that they believed I was making a foolish mistake in leaving leafy Hertfordshire for inner city Tower Hamlets. I knew from the regional minister that not many ministers, at least, none of sane mind, would be interested in Shoreditch Tab. I knew from my own uncertainty that I thought they could be right. Nevertheless here we were: one minister and one congregation - apparently ready for anything.

If Shoreditch Tabernacle was to survive, one thing was certain: it needed hope - a vision for the future where things might not only be bearable but positively good. Inseparable from this vision would be the necessity to make decisions and follow them through. What could this small multi-cultural congregation do, burdened with semi derelict buildings and no money in the bank account?

Should they accept that the life span of the Shoreditch Tab had come to an end? There was no dishonour in that. Was it time to consolidate, sell the old school for cash and invest for the future? That was the low risk option. Was it time to reverse the culture of neglect and re-imagine the church's mission purpose for 21st century Shoreditch? This was the courageous option the church took.

The church community dared to hope that this church and community site could be resurrected and this inspired me. And they were prepared, in theory at any rate, to work and pray together. The restoration of the buildings became a symbol of the restorative aims the people in the building owned for themselves and their community. In short, they dared to have faith.

Jesus at Nazareth speaks of hope; his vision is to 'bring good news to the poor... release to the captives... sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free' (see Luke 4:18). These words powerfully articulate the transformation of communities in the kingdom of God. Jesus' reading comes from Isaiah and in Isaiah, rather than in Luke, it goes on to say, 'they shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations' (Isaiah 61: 4).

Who are they who are going to do all this building? They are the blind, the poor and the captives who have experienced God's liberation. They are the builders - the once broken people. To those of us at the Tab who felt inadequate to the task, this was enormously encouraging. For those of us who felt uncomfortable with the risks taken and the daily uncertainty of the future, this was a comfort.

One restoration project is usually enough for any one group or individual. Living on a roller coaster, which is what it felt like for several years, is not always exhilarating. There were some appalling times tossed in with the wonderful moments. Early on I despaired as the first of a long line of skips was filled with clutter on Saturday by one half of the congregation, only to be faithfully emptied and the clutter returned to church on Sunday by the other half. Change comes slowly. Persistence is valuable.

Contrast this with the delight and prayers of thankfulness when our Heritage Lottery grant was funded, or extraordinary meetings with architects and site managers when the impossible became improbably achievable. I can identify with the disciples in the stormy seas yelling at Jesus to wake up and do something and their amazement at what happened when he did.

Today, Shoreditch Tabernacle and the Tab Centre are places of transformation. Opened in 2005, the Tab Centre is situated in a now stunningly beautiful building which runs, or partners with, a diversity of projects to address poverty and deprivation and to celebrate life and living. We have spent nearly £2million and the church is debt free. The founding principles of the transformed school have been kept but are innovatively reinterpreted for modern day Shoreditch.

Members of the spirituality group relax in the reception lounge and consider the pros and cons of installing some new media equipment. Volunteers in the kitchen have adapted to the high-tech equipment in the kitchen while I'm still working out how to make coffee. People stream through the halls and rooms; whoever comes in is welcomed, whether they are sex workers or film stars. It is not that times are trouble free, but there is a new confidence born as the extremes of poverty and neglect died. We try to keep in mind the story Jesus tells of the banquet to which all are invited, especially those who are not used to being welcomed.

One of our most successful projects is with women prisoners as they are transitioning through imprisonment to release after long sentences. Coming out of prison can be a lonely and depressing experience, leaving women emotionally vulnerable and likely to re-offend.

Typically these women have experienced poverty and exploitation which affects them and their children, perpetuating cycles of abuse and crime. We are able to help a small number with volunteering and paid work, providing support for them and their families over several years.

Just recently one of the women told me she had passed her first accounting exam and has a new job in the finance team of a national charity. She told me how much difference the support of people at the Tab had made to her life. We laughed and danced for joy.

As we talked in the sunlight, I realised we were in the same room that I had first seen in darkness, piled high with discarded shoes and unwanted doors. It had been a place of despair. How could this possibly be the same room? It was as though resurrection had entered the fabric of the walls of the room, leapt into our joined hands and shared our laughter.”



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