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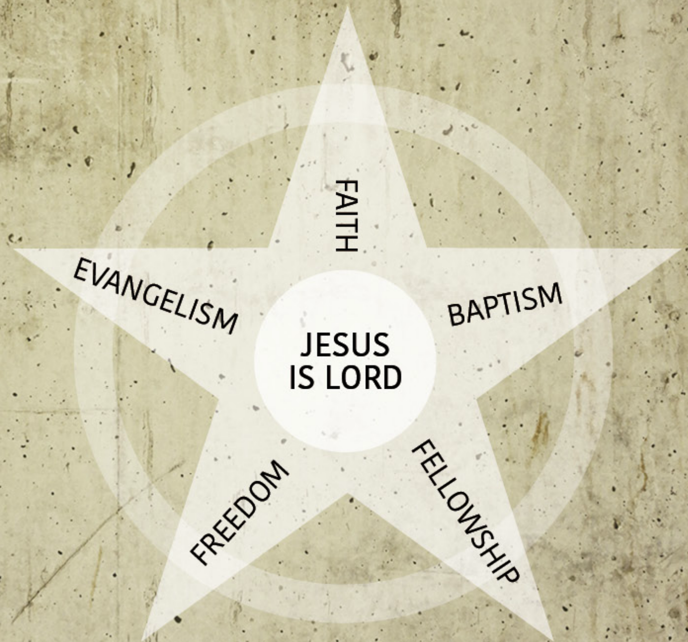

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Editorial

Steve Holmes

Every Baptist who engages in theological research will, repeatedly, have to face the question ‘why can’t we just read the Bible?’ Sometimes it will arise from our own research: as we reflect on research methodologies that cohere adequately with our Baptists commitments, this question will strike us with some force. Sometimes it comes from outside: a supportive but puzzled church member, perhaps, who cannot understand why we give so much time and effort to things that seem to them to be peripheral, or an angry controversialist, convinced that his (usually…) understanding of the Biblical teaching on this or that issue is self-evidently correct, dismissing every attempt to broaden the question.

It is a question we need to face—probably one we need to face repeatedly throughout our intellectual journey. The Baptist movement begins in principled rejection of ecumenical tradition on the basis of a reading of scripture; as we become inculturated into contemporary post-liberal academic theology, with its assertions and assumptions that the historic community gives weight to long-standing ecumenical principles, we will need to come back to that original genius repeatedly, to test ourselves against it, to check we have not been seduced into selling our birthright for a bowl of soup (or perhaps, given the nature of academic writing, of alphabet spaghetti…).

Readers of a certain sort of contemporary spirituality will probably have heard of Paul Ricoeur’s concept of ‘second naïveté’, which seems to be regularly invoked in discussions of the journey of faith in later life, rather too often by people whose lack of engagement with Ricouer’s writings is painfully obvious. It is not, in fact, an important term for Ricoeur (his uses of it number in single figures, even if we include the synonym ‘post-critical naïveté’, and it seems clear that he abandons it as inadequate as his thoughts develop in favour of terms like ‘appropriation,’ ‘phronesis,’ and ‘narrative identity’), although there are serious arguments that it is a more important concept for his hermeneutical theory than this paucity of references would suggest.

Properly understood, however, it might be a useful lens to think about how we do Baptist theology.

Ricoeur's fundamental account of modernity proposes two central impulses, a 'willingness to listen', and a 'willingness to suspect'. There is, that is, in modernity an openness to new ideas, which will not be automatically dismissed as heretical or similar; at the same time (probably necessarily) there is a commitment to the examination and critique of ideas. His primary concern is a lack of balance between these two: those who exemplify the suspicious pole include Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud; the phenomenologist of religion Gerhard van der Leeuw is his foremost example of the willingness to listen early on, replaced in the 1970s by Gadamer. It is probably not controversial to suggest that van der Leeuw does not have quite the cultural influence of the three he names as 'masters of suspicion,' and, whilst Gadamer remains significant within academic hermeneutics, he is still a relatively minor figure in the broader culture.

For Ricoeur, the overbearing supremacy of the critical willingness is most obvious in our religious reflection: as Matthew Arnold once did, looking out of a window at 'Dover Beach', he laments the 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' as the 'sea of faith' recedes from the shores of our culture. Arnold had no solution other than human companionship; Ricoeur, by contrast, essays a way forward. Whatever we term it, there has to be some sort of reconstruction beyond criticism, or else we are left only with despair.

For Ricoeur, the engagement with criticism is a series of 'detours,' but they are necessary detours: how can we know that a particular route is a dead end unless we have travelled it? But Ricoeur invites us to believe—to have faith—that, having explored all the dead ends, we will discover that a relatively straight path was the right one all along—this is our second naïveté.

The three essays in this edition of the journal exemplify this approach. Mark Whiting takes us through the history of critical research on the psalms to invite us to re-engage with (what he terms) 'pre-critical' readings. Gunkel and Mowinckel ask questions that cannot be evaded—what if the best way to understand the psalter is like this?—but an intellectually serious engagement will lead us back to a

consideration of the canon and to christological readings. The critical detours are in fact dead ends—we have been far enough down them to know that—and, because we have investigated the alternative routes, we can return to more traditional readings, confident that we are not merely surrendering to a hegemony, but instead taking the only viable path left.

Philip Fellows examines Nigel Wright's use of tradition. Wright's work demands more serious attention than it has yet been given, and this is a welcome addition to the secondary literature. How should Baptists critically appropriate the tradition? Wright's implicit proposals are explored and largely welcomed in this essay, but the conclusion is we need to press further, and particularly to attend more to the tradition. We might paraphrase, 'a second naïveté is required'…

Alan Kerry takes us right back to the question, 'why can't we just read the Bible?' Is all our theological work in fact an improper attempt to 'know good and evil', and so to eat the forbidden fruit? Exegesis of Genesis suggests not, and a discriminating survey of recent research methods in theology gives substance to this claim. Ricoeur's 'first naïveté'—'blind tradition'—is rejected on solid exegetical grounds, but so are a series of simply critical approaches; what is needed is a critically informed method that nonetheless takes scripture (and dogma) seriously—a 'second naïveté'.