



issue 33

may 2005

a forum for people struggling with faith and church issues

values being real
supports faith stage transition
respects and validates the journeys of others
allows questions and doubts
lets God defend God

“Power is a very real issue for the church. What’s more, it is a dangerous issue in the church, precisely because it is all too often unrecognised”¹. That power can be healthy or unhealthy, used well or abused, overt or subtle. The effects of power are often evidenced in spiritual confusion, distorted faith paradigms and the stifling of personal and spiritual growth and freedom. Many give up on faith altogether. The following is one perspective on the power dynamic in the expression of faith.

¹ Paul Beasley-Murray, *Power For God’s Sake* (Paternoster Press, UK 1998) p 10

QUICK-FIX JESUS

The power the institutional church and traditional religion has over its followers is undeniable. As a believer, one is faced with a plethora of expectations. Whether these be expectations the believer places on God or on themselves and others, the power these expectations very often mould and form one’s faith. Failing to comply with the status quo is seen as dangerous, while in my opinion, ‘harmonious’ living often looks like resignation.

The expectations are often created and communicated through the songs we sing in congregational church. Music is a very powerful tool that is used in church to inspire and unite. However, it is important to remember a lot of our theology and ideas about ‘how God works’ is shaped and informed by the words of the songs we sing. This not too subtle ‘propaganda’ often reflects an immaturity of thought and a simplistic desire to create a God who will protect us from life rather than living it with us. These choruses are very powerful, working their way like mantras into the minds of unsuspecting Christians who are all too happy to accept the ‘promises’ but are all too often unprepared to deal with the consequences when life doesn’t match up.

I was reminded of this last week I spent a few nights at a well-known Christian holiday park. I was staying there with a school group passing through on a field trip. The accommodation and facilities were fantastic, the staff extremely helpful and the costs very reasonable. It was during our stay that 200 intermediate aged students arrived to experience “Kid’s Camp”. Apart from the annoyingly brash behaviour of a few of these young people, their arrival did not impact much on our trip. In fact, their presence went by almost unnoticed.

On one night I was walking to the kitchen and I stopped by the hall to listen to what the “Kid’s Camp” crew were getting up to. I stood in the dark listening through the door to what was being said and sung. Of course, they had a crash hot worship band in action, an entertaining speaker and a lot of hyped up pre-teens riding the emotional roller coaster so many Christian leaders like to whip up on these occasions. It was when the singing began that I really started thinking...

The worship band counted in and lurched into the old teen classic, “Jesus got heaps of lambs”. Now, apart from butchering the English language, the songs lyrics cut

crisply into the night, illuminating to me their inherent danger and over wrought simplicity:

"I was lost but now I'm found, no more walking on stony ground"

Here I was listening to 200 young people claiming that with Christ, there will be no more stony ground. I felt sad. I thought back to my own youth and the huge promises Christian songs had made to me.

No more stony ground. That would have been nice.

"Jesus is the rock, and he rolls my blues away" (...and then the walls come crashing down.)

This quick-fix Jesus being sung about had become so foreign to me. Almost mythical....

I know from my own experiences that this type of charismatic propaganda had set me up for a fall. When I was younger, I wanted to believe those things. I *did* believe those things - unfortunately to the detriment of truth and honesty.

As a teenager, this form of collective ignorance in regard to the nature of faith and Christ put me into an impossible bind. When the stony ground came, I was left with only two alternatives: either God had abandoned me, or I had abandoned God. Fortunately, neither one was true. However before I discovered that, I was devastated. I had never felt so lonely, betrayed and ostracised - and what made it worse was that it was my God who I thought was

rejecting me. I believe this damaged me more than the actual crisis I was living through.

Why does our Christian culture perpetuate such myths? Is it an unspoken desire to mould God into an ethereal security blanket?

By encouraging Christians to believe the in the quick-fix Christianity recklessly perpetuated by the "Jesus got heaps of Lambs" school of thought, we actually prepare ourselves for more stony ground than we could imagine.

After a long time of struggling, I remember one time telling a friend I was considering going to a counsellor. He went very quiet and then challenged me:

"Isn't Jesus the greatest counsellor? You need more faith. Tell Him your problems and He will heal you, not a counsellor. You are putting your faith in man, not God."

He was wrong. Jesus is not interested in keeping us away from the stony ground or rolling our blues away. The Christ I went on to discover was a Christ who preferred process and journey. It was in my honesty and self-evaluation that I finally discovered truth about myself and God.

I don't wish stony ground on anyone, but sometimes it comes. However, with a little less myth and a little more preparation, perhaps it might not have been so painful.

Submitted by J.W.

Courageous faith (excerpt from Dangerous Wonder by Mike Yaconelli)

Curiosity requires courage. You must be willing to ask questions even when they threaten everyone around you. Faith is more than believing, it is an act of courage, a bold grasping of God's truth.

Faith is a wrestling match with God, an intense struggle with truth in an attempt to squeeze every bit of knowledge out of it. Curiosity is the shape of our hunger for God. We question God without apology, we march into the presence of God bringing out armful of questions - without fear - because God is not afraid of them. People are afraid. Institutions are afraid. But God is not.

open dialogue – a space for reader response

The following is an open letter to Peter Lineham. I share with Peter an evangelical faith, which has had a common link through one of the interdenominational organisations, with which Peter has been closely associated. To my knowledge Peter and I have not met, although we have a number of friends and acquaintances in common.

Dear Peter

I have thought much about your story in the April 2005 edition of *Spirited Exchanges* and have probably thought too many times how I would write this letter. In doing so and delaying putting pen to paper, there is a real risk of missing my most immediate reactions on reading your story.

At a very fundamental level, I am grateful for you telling your story and wish to respond by saying thanks and, in turn, be encouraging of you.

I had two reactions:

- I was compelled to “sit up” and read (and listen carefully to) your story. Here is an evangelical speaking in evangelical terms wanting to respond in a way consistent with an evangelical approach. I too believe my faith needs to be scripturally based and tangible to the realities around me. It’s all too easy – and I am guilty of this – to retreat from the challenge of homosexuality with what I fear is more dogma and inherited thinking rather than moving forward with Christ-like understanding.

Avoiding the issue is not helpful for the church. While we can find temporary comfort in avoidance, we risk leaving many hurt, or at best confused. And some of the most hurt and confused are our kids.

So my first thought was one of thanks to you for raising a still-controversial matter for the Christian community in a way that I can engage with –

particularly given my own uncertainty over the homosexual debate.

- My second thought – and real catalyst for this letter – was my keenness to encourage you to raise the issue of homosexuality – especially with evangelicals – and to encourage you to stick within the church. All too painfully in my own church experience and through what I have read in the editions of *Spirited Exchanges*, the only apparent option for many such as yourself has seemed to be one of leaving.

Don’t – hang in there if you can - despite the pain and platitudes and be encouraged that others such as myself will listen actively.

Peter, for my generation, your thinking was challenging and authoritative. Perhaps in a way you may least expect, through your personal story, your thinking and words remain challenging and may well help us all to an authoritative understanding on an issue we have found too easy to retreat from.

Thank you for your willingness to tell your story. I hope in some way you are encouraged to remain within your church and to urge us all to find an evangelical response to homosexuality. We have been paralysed over this matter for too long.

Yours in Christ,

Bruce Robertson

Wellington

Mercy and Truth

I read Peter Lineham’s story with interest, commiseration and frustration.

I know many people who would call themselves gay, or same-sex attracted. Most of these people are Christians. I have heard hundreds of accounts of experiences of gay people in “conservative” churches whose members have had no understanding (or very little) of homosexuality and what it feels like to come to a dawning understanding (early or later) that you are attracted to the same sex. A discovery that is made doubly worse when you know that what you have found yourself to be is a stigma to your community of faith and apparently an “abomination” in God’s eyes – especially when you genuinely love God and want to serve and know Him, and also want very much to belong. The rejection and confusion can be traumatic

for someone still struggling to come to terms with his or her discovery.

Peter did not simply leave, or attempt to dissemble. He had the integrity to front up to Christian co-workers, some of whom he knew would relieve him of his responsibilities or at least cool towards him. He went public. He has been upfront about where he is in the process of integrating his love for God and his understanding of himself. That sort of public transparency and vulnerability takes courage and deserves to be treated with respect.

Typically people who find themselves in his position do one of two things – they move towards a theology and community of believers which will allow them to be both practising gay and Christian, or they leave the faith altogether, because they know no way to reconcile

what they are, with what they know of God and no way they know of stopping the attraction. Often they join the more “liberal” branch of the church in which gay relationships are acceptable, or join the gay-specific Metropolitan Community Churches.

In my opinion the response of both these major streams of the church misses the mark – hence the “frustration” in the first paragraph. What has got lost these days in the stand-off between “conservative,” and “liberal” church/gay Christian” is any meaningful discussion of the third option, change - because it is too complex, or too divisive, too hard, too controversial, and mainly, simply outside anyone’s experience.

My husband and I¹ have researched homosexuality for 17 years, and in the process worked non-selectively through more than 3000 research papers (scientific/sociological/psychological), books and publications on homosexuality and written 3 books on the subject – each a substantial research effort in its own right. What is clear from the masses of statistics and surveys is that sexual orientation is very malleable and that no-one is born homosexual, or heterosexual either. An enormous amount of change goes on: people can slide up and down the continuum, either way over years, or even over a relatively short time. In other words, our “sexual orientation” is definitely not set in concrete. It is something we acquire – sometimes shakily – from earliest years over several decades. Without going into a discussion of how we actually acquire our *heterosexual* orientation (which is a complex process) what we can say is that it is “learned” (absorbed osmotically) over years and has a number of well delineated stages. In a similar way homosexual orientation is learned and the learning blocks can also be clearly identified. We have found no evidence that homosexuality is biologically hard-wired: hormonal, a result of brain microstructure, or directly genetic – though efforts to find the link continue and are usually misreported in the media.

There are some people with a homosexual orientation (or what I much prefer to call a homo-emotional orientation which our sexual drive naturally enough engages), who cannot find in the Christian scriptures any mandate to sexually express their strong drive to connect with others of the same sex. They do not see God as a punishing figure, nor do they have “internalised homophobia”, but they do not want to continue to have homo-emotional/sexual drives. They set about the process – usually a long and gradual one – within a supportive and knowledgeable network, of unravelling the contributing factors, of making up gender deficits other ways than through same-sex sexual relationships and of acquiring (learning) heterosexuality.

Many people react angrily to this option, perhaps because they believe it makes people with same sex attraction look deficient when they have already spent a

life-time feeling “different”, and not “belonging. Some have made such a huge investment – and a courageous and costly one – in taking on a gay identity that the possibility of change is too painful to even contemplate.

Many people with same-sex attraction are driven out of the faith, or over to accepting churches because of the rejection they experience in conservative churches. The conservative church (and I speak in stereotypes) badly needs to understand that homosexuality smells no worse to God than a great many other heterosexual sins and shortcomings. The Romans 1 list makes that point, and other New Testament mentions of homosexuality merely place it in the context of other sins. In the Old Testament an adjective commonly used to describe homosexuality is also used of many other things, including – wait for it – love of money, greed for gain, failure to keep promises, pride and haughtiness, deceit and lying, thoughts of harm to another, partiality, meaningless and hypocritical prayers – all of which heterosexual Christians do on a fairly regular basis.

But, the wholesale acceptance of homosexuality as God’s good gift to these individuals by churches at the liberal end of the spectrum is the equal but opposite error in my opinion. It looks like love but isn’t. It’s a false compassion coming from a lack of understanding or acknowledgement of either the roots or redemption of homosexuality and fallen heterosexuality - a lack of understanding that it shares, in general, with the conservative church. No doubt acceptance without understanding is better than rejection without understanding.

I would like to quote excerpts from a statement by a retired physician and psychiatrist², and practicing Anglican, working in London:

“The lack of understanding of homosexuality and the lack of spiritual power has led the church to advocate tolerance – assiduously avoiding the category of ‘sin’ but therefore contributing to the polarisation of the evangelical wing, which despite a strong theology of ‘sin’, has assiduously avoided the possibility of change.

“The selective listening of the church, excluding the voice and experiences of those who have a homosexual attraction but for whom homosexual practice is not their choice, has increased the polarization. It has allowed other voices to go unchallenged. It has caused confusion and frustration, encouraging an oversimplification of the issues, and it has reduced the basic tenets of our faith to mere theory and contention – denying believers the healing and restoration they expect to find in Christ.

“If the church seeks “to encourage dialogue with all people who have a homosexual orientation and listen to their experience, then the church must elicit and include the contribution of those who are looking for and have reached a place of real change. This is a matter of basic integrity. **Briar Whitehead**

¹ Dr NE Whitehead has a PhD in biochemistry and has spent 35 years working as a research scientist in NZ and overseas. Briar is a journalist and writer

² Dr Lisa Guinness, in comments on the schism in the Church of England over the issue of homosexuality

spirited exchanges newsletter...

- there is space in each issue of the newsletter for open conversation from readers about previous articles. They may be in the form of your own story, a broadening or different view of the issues raised, or pointers to other resources. We ask for the same guidelines that are followed in Spirited Exchanges groups:
 - * we are not trying to produce one answer that everyone must adhere to.
There is freedom for differing views and opinions
 - * each person is free to share his/her own view even if that is different to others or 'heretical' from some people's perspective.
 - * we ask for respect for each person's opinions
 - * we let God defend God
- **upcoming topics include:** mental health and faith, doubt, and faith stages. There are also a number of other slants on the misuse of power if anyone is interested in writing further about that. If you would like to contribute to any of these topics please email: spiritex@central.org.nz

Spirited Exchanges website www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz

If you have any problems with our website, or have any comments or suggestions regarding the site, please email the web administrator on web@spiritedexchanges.org.nz. We would be pleased to hear from you.

Thank you to all those who have responded to our request for a subscription. We are very appreciative. We will not issue receipts unless specifically asked for.

And a reminder to all those who would still like to respond:

Did you know that this newsletter:

Is distributed to over 425 households each month
Of which 100 are sent electronically
To 9 countries
For 10 issues per year
Takes 20 - 25 hours on average each month to produce
And costs around \$3,000 per year to publish

Which is why we would like you to pay a subscription of \$10 per year to help us cover costs.

Subscriptions can be paid by cheque to Spirited Exchanges, PO Box 11551, Wellington or via internet banking or direct credit to 03-0502-0169965-00 Please reference to Spirited Exchanges.

Spirited Exchanges Facilitator Training Weekend June 24 – 26

A number of people have expressed interest in running a Spirited Exchanges group. In order to enable this to happen we are developing a training weekend free of charge. Accommodation will be provided though you will have to get yourselves to Wellington and pay for some meals.

By the end of this weekend we hope you will understand:

- what the ethos and aims of Spirited Exchanges are
- more about faith development and journey – yours and others
- why people leave churches and the resultant issues
- the skills needed to facilitate a group
- your own readiness to lead such a group

There has been considerable response to this weekend. If you have not yet indicated your interest but would still like to do so, please email: jenny@central.org.nz within the next week.

Book Review

A Generous Orthodoxy by Brian D. McLaren
Published by Youth Specialities, Zondervan 2004

The sub-title says it all really. *Why I am a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/calvinist, anabaptist/anglican, methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished, Christian.*

In the title of this book Brian McLaren pays conscious tribute to G. K. Chesterton's classic *Orthodoxy*. Like Chesterton, McLaren isn't a theologian or a biblical scholar but a thinker, and a lover of words who sees orthodoxy not as 'heavy, humdrum and safe ... [but as] one whirling adventure' (Chesterton's words). He's also described as a pastor and a leader in the emergent church movement.

McLaren begins his introduction by addressing his potential readers: people on the inside and the outside of the Christian faith, people who have left, people looking for a reason not to leave, church leaders and beginning believers. He tells them all that his goal in this book is 'to find a way to embrace the good in many traditions and historic streams of the Christian faith and to integrate them, yielding a new, generous, emergent approach that is greater than the sum of its parts.' His point, as he makes clear throughout the book, is that new discoveries do not (or need not) cancel out older learning but transcend and embrace it, as a tree grows by adding new growth rings.

McLaren begins Chapter 0 with a warning that it is 'for Mature Audiences only'. He admits that for some the very phrase *generous orthodoxy* is oxymoronic. Orthodoxy, for many people, is anything but generous, being rather a club to batter people with. Nevertheless he persists in hoping for a kind of orthodoxy (right belief) which results in and also grows out of orthopraxy (right behaviour). After all what is the value of a right understanding of the Trinity, for example, that doesn't result in loving, honouring and serving the Trinity?

After the Introduction and Chapter 0, the first section of the book explains *Why I am a Christian*. The chapter titles intrigue: *the Seven Jesuses I have known; Jesus and God B; Would Jesus be a Christian? Jesus: Saviour of What?*

The following chapters describe *The kind of Christian I am*. They address the different themes of historic and contemporary Christian faith, affirming what each has added to the richness of the feast we can be nourished by and enjoy. There were some surprises there for me – the account of the beginning of the fundamentalist movement for example. The chapter on emergence puts forward liberating new ideas carried by powerful metaphors.

I like the tone of this book. It's personal, thoughtful, relaxed and lively. It's not preachy. McLaren recognizes that many of his readers won't like some or even a lot of what he is saying. He puts forward his views with passion, yet with respect for different perspectives. The feeling of this book is not of listening to a lecture, still less a diatribe, but of participating in a conversation.

A quote from the last chapter gives a taste of the book:

“To be a Christian in a generously orthodox way is not to claim to have the truth captured, stuffed and mounted on the wall. It is rather to be in a loving (ethical) community of people who are seeking the truth (doctrine) on the road of mission ... and who have been launched on the quest by Jesus, who, with us, guides us still. Do we have it? Have we taken hold of it? Not fully, not yet, of course not. But we keep seeking. We're finding enough to keep us going. But we're not finished. That to me is orthodoxy – a way of seeing and seeking, a way of living, a way of thinking and loving and learning that helps what we believe become more true over time, more resonant with the infinite glory that is God.”

Recommended.

To pursue the conversation visit Brian McLaren's website www.anewkindofchristian.com

There's a thoughtful critique of aspects of the book available along with McLaren's response to the critique.

See also www.emergentvillage.org

Adrienne Thompson

For any contributions to, or comments you would like to make about the newsletter or if you would like to come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: **Jenny McIntosh** at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington or on email: spiritex@central.org.nz or jenny@central.org.nz For Alan Jamieson: alan@central.org.nz or aj@paradise.net.nz
Website: www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz