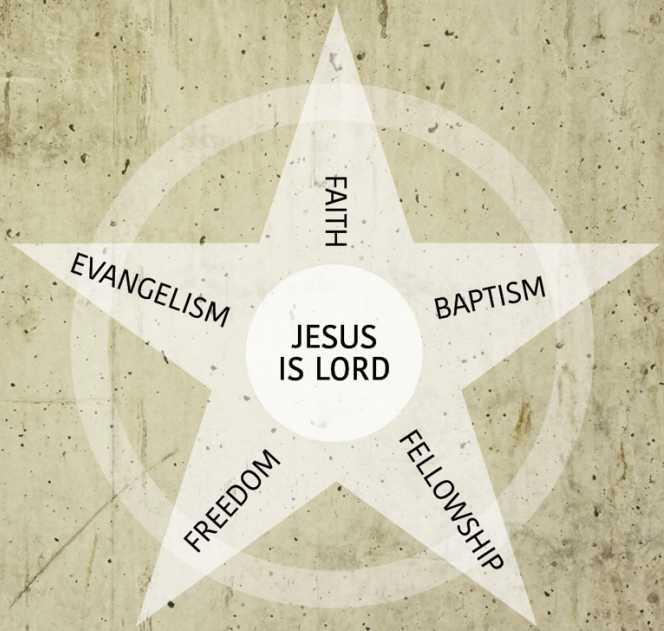
ISSN 2634-0275

Journal of Baptist Theology *in context*



Issue 12 (2025)

Table of Contents

Editorial

Sally Nelson

One of the drivers in starting the *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context* was (a) to provide a hospitable place to publish Baptist scholarship, providing help for new scholars where needed; and (b) to give a voice to some of the scholarship and deep theological reflection on our ministries and other contemporary engagement that many engage in as part of their pastor-scholar vocation. *JBTC* is not a dry, abstracted offering but is alive with real theology rooted in real lives, and shot through with a baptistic hermeneutic (and what is that? I can hear you say – and in a way, that's the point of it all).

In our common Baptist life, theology is often squeezed out to make room for pragmatic solutions in the here and now. This journal's contents argue persuasively that we need both. We must, of course, respond vigorously to the diminished Christian content of contemporary culture, but we must do it both with practical mission and projects and with deep theological engagement. Thin theology results in thin ecclesiology and thin missiology, and if we do not encourage Baptist theologians we will be left with a thin ministry lacking the theological resilience to survive the challenges of the twenty-first century.

In this vein, I would draw your attention to the continuing and holding power of the immediate post-WW2 theologians. Those scholars who reflected on this lamentable era of the twentieth century developed a corpus of work that has grounded theological thinking for decades, and allowed us to reimagine a Christology and ecclesiology fit for the tectonic shifts of the modern and post-Christendom world. The excellent discussion between Craig Gardiner, Tim Judson, and Andy Goodliff of Bonhoeffer and his enduring legacy, so much of which can speak to and invigorate us today exemplifies this reservoir of

theological riches. Bonhoeffer's challenges are ones that we hope we will never face, but we do contemplate a world that challenges our faith in a different way. Let us embrace his faithful theology and put it to work among us.

Our other article in this issue deals with the perennial challenge of the concept of equality. Michael Thomas is provocative in his analysis and draws on an extensive range of ethical and philosophical thinkers to make his case. You may be incensed, or you may agree: either way, this is a thoughtful and well-researched article that deserves to be read.

The Bible enjoins us not to stop meeting together. Baptist modes of associating and connecting have changed irrevocably and this has been accelerated by Covid. Opportunities to meet and talk theologically are less abundant than in the past and may be geographically constrained. We can, however, benefit from one another's work, thinking and application. Read on!

Equality: can it bear the weight placed upon it?

G. Michael Thomas

Equality, with its obverse, anti-discrimination, is one of the most influential ideas in the world. It is regarded as a necessary expression of justice and enshrined in national and international law. Amartya Sen's assessment is that 'there has…been an extraordinary consensus on [equality's] importance in the post-Enlightenment world…every normative theory of social justice that has received support and advocacy in recent times seems to demand equality of *something*'.[1] Churches have embraced it. Accordingly in 2022 the Baptist Union launched its *I Am Because You Are* equality and diversity resource. 'Engaging with the resource is mandatory for the majority of accredited ministers'.[2]

The widespread recognition of its importance is matched by general confession that it is not easy to say what equality means. Ronald Dworkin states, 'Equality is a contested concept: people who praise or disparage it disagree about what it is they are praising or disparaging. The correct account of equality is itself a difficult philosophical issue'.[3]

Peter Westen has pointed out the pervasive lack of precision in the use of the term: 'people fallaciously infer one equality from another…The most likely reason is that they are making the "category mistake" of confusing equality in mathematics with equality elsewhere…The effect

---

[1] Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Penguin, 2009), 291. Cp. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 33, 'the abstract principle that has most shaped the political conceptions of the modern world, *equality*.'
[2] Baptists Together (n.d.), *Equality and Diversity Training*, retrieved 23 September 2024 from https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/379594/Equality_and_Diversity.aspx
[3] Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: the theory and practice of equality* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2.

is to give advocates of equality an underserved rhetorical advantage…The category mistake enables such advocates to move from an existing equality to a desired equality without having to make an independent case'.[4] More bluntly, George Orwell included 'equality' among 'words used in variable meanings' in political discourse, and belonging in 'a catalogue of swindles and perversions'.[5] Similarly Oliver O'Donovan, 'equality arguments become the politician's alchemy, producing the gold of judgment from the straw of non-committal stances. They create the illusion of settling questions justly without needing to determine the truth of them'.[6]

There is much within their faith that predisposes Christians to view positively the power of egalitarianism in modern society, regarding it as at least consistent with, if not an expression of, the kingdom of God. As Groothuis claims 'secular culture got it right'.[7] Hence the readiness of Christian churches to adopt with little or no modification the prevailing equality rules, and models of training and assessment. It is the contention of this article that current equality theory and practice lacks a theoretical basis adequate enough to justify its fundamental concepts or ensure its rational and consistent application; and that an appreciation of how a Christian understanding of equality differs from prevalent notions is important if Christians are to live and contribute faithfully in the current intellectual and social context. In the process it will be shown that secular equality theory tends, albeit inconsistently, to treat equality as an abstract principle which is able to determine absolutely the shape of social order and human relations, overruling all

---

[4] Peter Westen, *Speaking of Equality: an analysis of the rhetorical force of "equality" in moral and legal discourse* (Princeton: Princton University Press, 1990), 264-65.
[5] Orwell, George, *Politics and the English Language* (Mumbai: Sanage, 2020), Kindle, 11-12. First published 1946.
[6] O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 33.
[7] Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, 'Equal in Being, Unequal in Role: exploring the logic of woman's subordination' in *Discovering Biblical Equality: complementarity without hierarchy* edited by Pierce, Ronald W., Groothuis, Rebecca Merrill and Fee, Gordon D. (2nd Ed.; Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 306.

other considerations, while the kind of egalitarianism proposed in the gospel does not aspire to function in this absolute way.

1. History of the Idea

The place equality currently occupies is generally considered to be a product of the Enlightenment.[8] After years of violent conflict between different versions of Christianity, there developed from the mid-17th century a project to identify and rationally elaborate certain principles to act as a basis for society that all reasonable people could accept, without the need to appeal to authority, tradition or religion. While many Enlightenment thinkers consciously retained elements of Christian faith, confidence in reason was the dominant feature of the movement. Equality was one of the principles identified as being capable of rational elaboration to provide a basis for social and political relations.[9]

John Locke in his 1689 *Two Treatises of Government* used the idea to justify forms of government deriving their authority from the people: all people are originally or naturally in a 'state…of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction are reciprocal…without subordination or subjection'. However, people considered it advantageous, for the defence of their rights to life and property, to form themselves into 'politic societies'. Doing so 'puts an end to the state of nature', and modifies the original equality, for government entails a measure of

---

[8] Paul Sagar, *Basic Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 9, '…throughout the vast majority of human history, the vast majority of people *have not* held basic equality to be true.' However, Darrin M.McMahon, *Equality: the history of an elusive idea* (London: Ithaka, 2024), Kindle, ch.4, points out that there is a longer history. He refers to ancient Greek thought, and claims (ch.5) that when the sixth century pope Gregory the Great wrote, "All men are created equal by nature", 'he was summing up centuries of Christian reflection'.

[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Beyond Virtue: a study in moral theory* (3rd Ed.; London: Bloomsbury (2014), 136, '…the Enlightenment project of discovering new rational secular foundations for morality.' Cp. Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 1-17.

authority and subjection. However, government must be aware that its power ultimately originates in the will of naturally equal persons.[10]

Locke's influential work was reflected in the 1776 American *Declaration of Independence*[11] and 1789 French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,*[12] the former commencing, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men'. The French *Declaration* used similar language.

In the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries egalitarian thought influenced anti-slavery movements, the rise of democracy, socialism, communism and anarchism, the establishment of the welfare state, decolonization and movements for women's, racial, homosexual, trans, disability, child and animal rights.

The United Nations 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 1, states, 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'.[13] The UN espousal of equal rights principles, considered as universal, self-evident and independent of religion, culture, history or tradition, laid a basis for a secular world order. It represents the high-water mark of the Enlightenment and has acted as a model for many

[10] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government,* 1764 edn., II.II.4, in *The Essential John Locke Collection* (Delhi: Grapevine, 2023), Kindle.
[11] National Archives (27 August 2024) *Declaration of Independence, a transcription,* https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript
[12] Article 1, 'Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.' Elysee (14 December 2022), *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, https://www.elysee.fr/en/french-presidency/the-declaration-of-the-rights-of-man-and-of-the-citizen
[13] Francesca Klug, *Values for a Godless Age: the story of the UK's new bill of rights* (London: Penguin, 2000), gives the full text, 227-34.

other such statements,[14] which in turn have been incorporated into national legislation.

Francesca Klug advised the Blair government on the framing of the 1998 Human Rights Act, which incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law. She sets this step against a background of multiculturalism and the decline of Christianity in the West, writing of the role equal rights can play in providing a broadly agreed basis for a tolerant, pluralist society, fulfilling the Enlightenment project[15] 'to establish a set of common values that are not intended to be exclusive to one religion or nation'.[16] 'In a country where there is no one unifying religious or ethical world-view, human rights values have an as yet untapped potential to bind and cement a diverse society. They are, I suggest, values for a 'godless age'.'[17]

2. Problems

In spite of the steady progress and current dominance of egalitarian thought, serious questions remain, indicating that equality remains an 'elusive idea', 'complicated area' and 'unclear notion'.[18]

---

[14] Gertrud Lenzer, 'Children's Studies and the Human Rights of Children', 207-225 in *Children as Equals: exploring the rights of the child,* edited by Kathleen Alaimo and Brian Klug (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002)*,* lists a selection on p.217.
[15] Klug, *Values,* 68-9.
[16] Klug, *Values*, 200.
[17] Klug, *Values*, 18. Cp. Roger Trigg, *Equality, Freedom and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 133. 'The Language of equality, non-discrimination, and human rights in general fills the vacuum left, at least in Europe, by the decay of institutional Christianity.'
[18] McMahon, *Equality: the history of an elusive idea. Your Rights at Work: a TUC guide* (5th Ed; London: Kogan Page, 2016), 149, 'The principles behind the law on discrimination are easy to state. In practice, however, this is a complicated area of law.' Kai Nielsen, *Equality and Liberty: a defense of radical egalitarianism* (Totowa: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985), 5, 'As everybody knows, equality and egalitarianism are unclear notions.'

2.1 Basis of Equality

Locke's acceptance of the Christian insight that humans' worth and equality derive from their creation by God[19] was reflected in the Declaration of Independence's use of 'created equal…endowed by their Creator'. The abandonment of such language in 20th and 21st century charters leaves equality lacking a foundation. This lack is crucial, for the logic of equality runs as follows: treating people equally is a moral consequence of their essential equality; all are equal, therefore all should be treated equally; 'descriptive' equality demands 'prescriptive' equality.[20] While some like John Rawls have attempted to define a basis for equality in terms of human capacities, without reference to a transcendent nature or purpose,[21] it is now widely accepted that no characteristic of human beings is sufficiently universal and significant to provide such a basis. Nielsen asks, 'Instead of putting out "All people are of equal worth regardless of merit" as some kind of mysterious truth-claim which appears in fact to be at least groundless and at worse false, would it not have been clearer and less evasive of the human-rights advocate simply to remark that he starts with…a commitment to the treatment of all people as beings who are to have quite unforfeitably an equality of concern and respect'.[22]

---

[19] Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian foundations of John Locke's political thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Kindle, 3.xii, 'Locke's equality claims are not separable from the theological content that shapes and organizes them.' Locke grounded the equality of man in the image of God consisting in man's nature as 'a corporeal rational being' capable of abstract thought (Locke, *Government*, II.II.5). 'for wherein soever else the image of God consisted, the intellectual nature was certainly a part of it.' I.IV.30.

[20] Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, ch.3. viii, discusses the logic of the movement from 'is' to 'ought' in Locke's equality doctrine.

[21] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* (Rev. Ed.; Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 441-45: Equality applies to 'the moral persons who are entitled to justice. Moral persons are distinguished by two features: first they are capable of having…a conception of their good (as expressed by a rational plan of life); and second they are capable of having a sense of justice…at least to a certain minimum degree.' He seeks to address the problem that 'There is no natural feature with respect to which all human beings are equal, that is, which everyone has…to the same degree,' by appealing to the idea of a 'range concept'.

[22] Nielsen, *Equality and Liberty,* 23.

According to Nielsen[23] and Sagar[24] equality has to be accepted as an axiom or basic commitment for which no rational basis can be provided. Sagar[25] even describes it as a necessary 'fiction', which can only be defended in such relative terms as, "'in this context, where the available historical and psychological materials have been put together in this particular way, and now issue in this kind of practice, with people having this kind of robust disposition to treat each other in terms of basic egalitarianism, we have constructed matters such that each person is accorded the status of an equal, and for us now and around here, that is what they count as"'.[26] It hardly seems satisfactory that the equality project should rest on such avowedly ethically-subjective, relativistic and fictional foundations. If we cannot know what the nature of our equality is, how can we reliably build moral and legal obligations upon it?[27]

2.2 Opportunity or Outcome

There is a conflict between equality of opportunity and of outcome. The former leads to meritocracy, which smooths the rise to the top of the strong. It is characterized by Tawney as 'equal opportunities to become unequal'.[28] On the other hand, equality of outcome requires such extensive interventions, including 'positive discrimination', as to override the kind of equal competition envisaged in equal opportunities.[29] Advocates of 'luck equality' or 'radical equality of opportunity'[30] argue that for opportunities to be truly equal the

---

[23] Nielsen, *Equality and Liberty,* 16-38.
[24] Sagar, *Basic Equality*, 11-15, 47-59.
[25] Sagar, *Basic Equality*, 85-114.
[26] Sagar, *Basic Equality*, 26.
[27] Westen, *Speaking of Equality*, 280, 'The statement "all men are created equal" is incomplete without a specification of the descriptive or prescriptive respect in which they are allegedly equal.'
[28] R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (4th Ed.; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1952), 103.
[29] Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 108, 'Equal outcomes can be secured only by departing from equal opportunity, so as to impose equal success rates for all groups.'
[30] For example, Shlomi Segall in *Equality of Opportunity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

conditions of all must first be equalized to counteract the effects of 'bad luck' first. For example, equal opportunity of university admission requires prior equally good schooling. Since family life and genetic inheritance are key factors in the physical and mental development of each person, such interventions can only be partial, and many possible interventions might be considered infringements of liberty. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's paradox has to be confronted: 'in the life of society, liberty and equality are mutually exclusive, even hostile concepts. Liberty, by its very nature, undermines social equality, and equality suppresses liberty'.[31] Some sort of non-absolutist compromise, in which some levelling is accompanied by an acceptance that full equality is an unobtainable goal, seems inevitable.

2.3 Group Identities

Since 2010, UK equality law has relied heavily on the notion of protected characteristics, of which there are now nine in UK law: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.[32.] In this context it has become common to use the rather odd plural, 'equalities'. With equality legislated for as if it consisted of a range of distinct 'equalities', conflicts between different 'equalities' have arisen.[33] Currently there is acrimonious debate between 'gender-critical' feminists and advocates of trans rights, and a history of conflict between those asserting their equal right to 'religion or belief' and others asserting other rights. While all 'equalities' might be equal in

---

[31] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Centre (n.d.), retrieved 01 October 2024, from *A Reflection on the Vendée Uprising 25 September 1993,* https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/reflection-vendee-uprising#:~:text=But%20in%20the%20life%20of%20society,%20liberty%20and%20equality%20are

[32] *Your Rights,* 149.

[33] O'Donovan speaks of the way 'the drift from a claim about the equality of persons to a claim about the equality of classes produces some of the more laughable examples of political prudery current today, such as the expectation that women and men must be equally represented in every trade or profession', *Ways of Judgment*, 51.

theory, the courts are left to determine which 'equalities' are to be more equal than others, and in what circumstances.[34]

2.4 Qualifications

Some of the above difficulties are aspects of the wider problem of the plethora of exceptions and qualifications that seem necessary in equality theory and practice. The simple idea that everyone should be treated equally because everyone is equal soon runs into difficulties. For even though humans might be substantially the same, the differences between them are not insignificant.

It is nevertheless common to find it claimed or implied that equality demands absolutely the same treatment for everyone. Alan Wilson, advocating same sex marriage, writes, in a chapter entitled 'Equality or bust', 'Equality demands…equal access to the same benefits for all . . . equality cannot be qualified…you cannot have too much or too little equality'.[35] At the very same moment as making the claim that equality must be unqualified, Wilson concedes that equality is 'not sameness', and goes on to say that equality 'acknowledges the difference between things'.[36] It is hard to see how these two conceptions can be reconciled.

This sort of inconsistency appears at the highest level. The UN Declaration Article 2 asserts equal rights for all 'without distinction of any kind'. However, Article 29.2 states, 'In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of [protecting others] and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society'. No explanation is given as to how the

[34] Trigg, *Equality, Freedom, and Religion,* explores the tensions around equality of religion and belief.
[35] Alan Wilson, *More Perfect Union? Understanding same-sex marriage* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014), 50-51.
[36] Wilson, *More Perfect*, 54.

absolute 'without distinction' can coexist with the vastly qualified 'such limitations'.

In fact, there were always qualifications made in the pursuit of equality.[37] John Locke explained, 'Though I have said above…That all men by nature are equal, I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of equality'.[38] He specifies that his concern is with natural political equality, not with other natural inequalities such as husbands' authority over wives and parents' over children.[39] J. J. Rousseau, whose *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* is regarded as one of the most influential works on political equality of the 18th century, argued for different roles for men and women on the basis of natural differences. Rousseau recognized 'two kinds of inequality…one which I call natural or physical, because it is established by nature and consists in the difference of age, health, bodily strength and qualities of mind or soul. The other kind may be called moral or political authority'.[40] He maintained that 'where sex is concerned, man and woman are unlike; each is the complement of the other…it is perhaps one of the greatest marvels how nature has contrived to make two beings so like and so different'.[41] Rousseau pioneeringly applied the same logic of natural difference to the education of children.[42]

---

[37] McMahon, *Equality*, 'Manifold exclusions had always been central to…the republican tradition . . . A world where all men were created equal was a world where some nations prospered and other nations lagged behind…where men presided over women and masters over slaves, and where natural aristocrats vied to replace the aristocrats of old', Ch.6.

[38] II.VI.54.

[39] II.I.2, II.VI.55, II.VII.82. Waldron repeatedly alleges inconsistency between Locke's views on equality and on the subjection of wives to husbands, e.g. *God, Locke, and Equality*, ch.2, sections 1,3 and 4. Ch.2.3 'It's pretty obvious that this position on marital authority sits uneasily with any principle of basic human equality.' It is clear that Locke was both aware of the possibility of this charge, and careful to explain why he considered it invalid.

[40] In Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, 32-56 in *Equality* edited by David Johnston (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 32-33.

[41] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education*, 57-64 in *Equality,* 57.

[42] 'They are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man.' 'Nature intends that children shall be children before they are

In the 21st century, though laws and attitudes regarding gender equality have shifted, it is still generally accepted that criminals do not have an equal right to liberty, murderous attackers can be resisted in disregard of any equal right to life, non-citizens are not equal with citizens in terms of access to state benefits *etc*. Typical of the way the principle of equality is restricted is the statement on the Baptist Union website on Baptist identity: 'Equality of status, however, does not mean that all have the same role'.[43] A more ancient example may be sourced from the apostle Paul. The only passage in the New Testament where the term equality, *isotēs*, is referred directly to human relationships, is 2 Corinthians 8.13,14. When appealing for famine relief, Paul says, 'your plenty will supply what they need…Then there will be equality', quoting Exodus 16.18: "'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little'". This not the absolute equality of all having the same wealth, but the qualified equality of all having enough.

Limitations and exceptions are particularly stark in the sphere of person-to-person relationships. No-one thinks he is required to treat every child equally to his own children, every woman equally to his own wife, all members of all churches equally to the members of his own church?[44] If equal treatment is a fundamental, universal, ethical obligation, why does it seem incapable of being applied to important contexts such as these?

Westen clarifies, 'The statement "all men are created equal" is incomplete without a specification of the descriptive or prescriptive respect in which they are allegedly equal'.[45] Rawls, similarly, states

men.' Rousseau, *Emile*, cited by Alaimo, Kathleen, 'Historical Roots of Children's Rights in Europe and the United States, 1-23 in *Children as Equal*s*,* 10.

[43] Baptists Together (n.d.), *Who Are Baptists?* Retrieved 03 October 2024 from https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220484/Who_are_Baptists.aspx

[44] Sagar, *Basic Equality*,110-12, concedes that one of the areas where we are best not to immerse ourselves in the fiction of equality is personal relationships, an exception he justifies on the ground that such things are not of 'fundamental value'.

[45] Westen, *Speaking of Equality*, 280.

'egalitarianism admits degrees'.[46] Indeed, recognising the need to make distinctions goes back to Plato and Aristotle, pointing out that equality among equals is desirable, but equality among unequals is not: 'justice seems to be equality, and it is, but not for everyone, only *for equals*. Justice also seems to be inequality, since indeed it is, but not for everyone, only *for unequals*. They disregard the "for whom", however, and judge badly'.[47]

3. Exceptional Children

3.1 Stephen Versus Mill

Different understandings of equality are illustrated by a 19th century debate between two penetrating thinkers. In 1873, journalist and future high court judge James Fitzjames Stephen set out, in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,*[48] some disagreements with the philosopher and member of parliament, John Stuart Mill.[49]

Stephen's view was that equality cannot and should not be achieved. In terms of social inequalities, 'To try to make men equal by altering social arrangements is like trying to make cards of equal value by shuffling the pack. Men are fundamentally unequal, and the inequality will show itself, arrange society as you like'. In terms of political equality, '…establish universal suffrage if you think it proper…You are still as far as ever from equality…The result of cutting [political power] up into little bits is simply that the man who can sweep the greatest number of them into one heap will govern the rest. The strongest man in some form or other will always rule…In a pure democracy the

---

[46] Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 471.
[47] Plato, *Republic*, 1-8 in Johnston, *Equality*; Aristotle, *Politics*, 9-17 in Johnston, *Equality*, 9.
[48] James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (New York: Holt and Williams, 1873), Legare Street Press Facsimile. On Stephen, see James A. Colaiaco, *James Fitzjames Stephen and the Crisis of Victorian Thought* (London: MacMillan, 1983), esp. 151-3.
[49] Alan Wolfe, *The Future of Liberalism* (New York: Knopf, 2009), Kindle, discusses this debate, ch.3, 'Three eminent Victorians'.

ruling men will be the wirepullers and their friends'.[50] Since inequality in some form or another is in the nature of things, the society that tries to improve itself by working with it will be stronger and more at ease with itself than the one that embarks on a never-ending campaign to abolish it. Better to shape the shoe to the foot than the foot to the shoe.[51]

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity disputes Mill's call for equality for women in his 1869 *On the Subjection of Women*. Basic to Stephen's case is that both he and Mill are avowedly committed to Utilitarian philosophy, which assesses the justice of any given measure solely by the criterion of 'utility' or 'expediency', in other words, whether it achieves the greatest benefit for the greatest number. Stephen accused Mill of abandoning his Utilitarianism when he came to argue for legal equality of the sexes, for in that cause he seemed to assert that 'justice involves the notion that a presumption is in all cases to be made in favour of equality quite irrespectively of any definite experience of its utility'.[52]

Mill did lay himself open to Stephen's charge of inconsistent Utilitarianism, in that he wrote about equality as if it were an overriding principle in its own right: 'the legal subordination of one sex to another is wrong in itself'; 'the social subordination of women…stands out an isolated fact in modern social institutions' in opposition to 'the progressive movement which is the boast of the modern world'.[53]

In fact, Mill also offered arguments from expediency, asserting that equal legal status would benefit women by giving them a measure of independence from abusive husbands, enable women to lead a fuller life, and improve the quality of companionship within marriage. Stephen agreed that some better legal protections could be given to

---

[50] Stephen *Liberty, Equality,* 240.
[51] Stephen *Liberty, Equality,* 209.
[52] Stephen *Liberty, Equality,* 199.
[53] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* (London: Penguin, 2006), 133, 153.

women but put forward considerations of expediency for maintaining legal inequality. He claimed that governing families would be rendered difficult or impossible, without the husband having final authority. He also predicted that the perception of marriage as a contract between legal equals would lead to a demand from men for easier divorce, leaving many women without means of support. The protectiveness that men naturally feel towards women would be eroded, since 'submission and protection are correlative', to be replaced by relations in which men exert physical strength to their own advantage.[54] Mill foresaw a world where gender equality would bring increased happiness and fulfilment; Stephen one of chaotic families, normalized divorce, increased male brutality and abandoned, single women struggling economically.

Beyond questions of Utilitarianism, Stephen understood Mill's position 'to involve the assertion, "That there are no inequalities between human beings of sufficient importance to influence…rights and duties". I say there are such differences'. Here again Stephen alleged inconsistency, because, while relying on a concept of equality that required all to be allocated the same 'rights and duties', Mill excepted children. 'Is not this a clear case of inequality of the strongest kind, and does it not…afford an instructive precedent in favour of the recognition by law of a marked natural distinction?'[55]

3.2 Exceptional Children in the 21st Century

Mill died in 1873, so could not answer Stephen. The 'instructive precedent' of child inequality remains. The Preamble to the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child begins by restating the UN Declaration's Article 1 and 2 assertions of 'the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family…everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth therein, without distinction of any kind'. The Convention then fails to implement its own Preamble

[54] Stephen, *Liberty, Equality,* 214-19, 237.
[55] Stephen, *Liberty, Equality*, 210.

because it does not grant children equal rights with adults. It does not give them the right to vote, it radically restricts their freedom by recognising (Article 5) 'the rights and duties of parents' and repeatedly puts the right to decide on 'the best interests of the child' into the hands of the state and parents.[56] Accepting the unequal treatment of children in this way not only produced a self-contradictory Convention but, as Stephen faulted Mill, undermines the logic of equality by accepting that being human does not in itself establish an entitlement to be treated in all respects the same as other humans.

The continuing force of the argument about children and equality is faced by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis.[57] She argues that those who justify differentiating gender roles on account of something inherent in our being (femaleness and maleness) thereby deny that men and women are equal in being. She recognises, however, that her argument is vulnerable to the critique that, if assigning different roles on the basis of inherent difference implies unequal being, then children must be unequal in being. Her defence is that children are an exception to the rule, because their difference of role is only temporary. Although temporariness of course has significance, it is difficult to see how it affects the logic of the argument. If 'equality of being requires same roles' is not true in the case of children, then it is not a universal truth: other exceptions cannot be ruled out, provided sufficient reason can be given.

The abundance of limitations, qualifications and exceptions in equality theory and practice, of which the case of children is a prime example, make it impossible to argue for universal equal treatment. The most that can be asserted is that equal cases require equal treatment, leaving

[56] The text of the Convention is reproduced in Alaimo and Klug, *Children as Equals,* 227-55.
[57] Groothuis, 'Equal in Being', 301-33.

the question of what is or is not an equal case to be determined by a wide range of considerations.[58]

4. Equal Concern

In recognising that the demand to 'treat everyone equally' is fraught with difficulties, the case is made rather for 'treating people as equals', or 'as having equal worth and dignity', or 'with equal concern'.[59] This adjustment seems at first sight to rescue equality from being applied in manifestly inappropriate ways. Nevertheless, the 'equal concern' interpretation faces at least two major challenges.

The first is that it does not accommodate all the exceptions, especially those entailing personal relationships. A claim that I should *have a concern* for all women and children equal to the concern I have for my own family is no more convincing than that I should *treat* all women and children equally to those of my own family. Equal concern is, in such cases, as inappropriate as equal treatment, unless it is made clear that the concern is to be equal qualitatively not quantitively: the same sort of concern but not the same degree of concern.

The second challenge is that rejecting 'equal treatment', leaves us without the prescriptive detail many expect equality to supply.[60] 'Equal treatment' might be clumsy or absurd, but it is measurable. 'Treating with equal concern' is not. Dworkin, who advocates 'equal concern' concedes: 'If equal concern does not mean that government must

---

[58] Tawney, *Equality*, 12, recommended assessing the legitimacy of an inequality by considering 'the principles upon which it reposes, the credentials to which it appeals, and the sphere of life which it embraces.'

[59] Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 1: 'Equal concern is the sovereign virtue of political community'; Nielsen, *Equality and Liberty*, 22: 'an equality of concern and respect'; Groothuis, 'Equal in Being', 306: 'equality of consideration.'

[60] Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 444, criticizes the 'equality of consideration' position, which he regards as characteristic of those who can find no essential basis for equality and so advocate it as 'a purely procedural principle': 'Equality of consideration puts no restrictions on what grounds may be offered to justify inequalities.'

insure that everyone has the same wealth, no matter what, then what does it mean? There is no straightforward or uncontroversial answer'.[61] Similarly Nielsen, 'In treating with equal respect a baby, a young person, or an enfeebled old man out of his mind on his death-bed we do not treat them equally, i.e., identically or uniformly, but with some kind of not very clearly defined proportional equality. (It is difficult to say what we mean here)'.[62] 'Equal concern' involves accepting what egalitarians often seem loath to concede, that few questions about social relations can be answered simply by an appeal to equality, for, as Sen points out, 'equality is itself not the only value with which a theory of justice need be concerned'.[63]

Sometimes a simple pragmatic action, such as providing a ramp for wheelchair access, may overcome inequality, but often complex value judgments are unavoidable. To properly take into account both sameness and difference requires a frame of reference by which the significance of the innumerable possible differences between people is assessed. A broad ethical framework is needed. As Iain Benson explains, 'in the discussions about immigration or the nature of marriage or issues like abortion, different viewpoints on morality are prior to the application of abstract principles such as "equality"'.[64]

5. Jesus and Equality

We now turn to the biblical material[65] limiting ourselves to the ministry of Jeus, as constituting the core of Christian belief.

---

[61] Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 2.
[62] Nielsen, *Equality and Liberty*, 48.
[63] Sen, *Idea of Justice,* 298.
[64] Iain T. Benson, 'The Necessity for a Contextual Analysis for Equality and Non-Discrimination', ch.5 in *Equality and Non-discrimination: Catholic roots, current challenges* edited by Jane F Adolphe, Robert L. Fastiggi and Michael A. Vacca (Eugene: Pickwick, 2019), Kindle.
[65] A brief survey of material from the whole Bible relevant to the issue of equality can be found in John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan and

5.1 Jesus' Egalitarianism

A strong egalitarian impetus is evident in the ministry of Jesus. He encouraged women to go beyond accepted social roles to learn from and witness to him.[66] Infants were welcomed and blessed in spite of the disciples' reluctance. Gentiles were held up as examples of faith and God's blessing, in the face of Jewish exclusivism. Tax collectors and sinners were befriended, scandalizing the Pharisees. Lepers were de-stigmatized by Jesus' touch. Jesus' model of servant leadership redefined the exercise of power. He insisted on the obligation of the rich to the poor. The fact that his words and actions provoked reactions of surprise or anger emphasizes how radical this equalising impetus was.

5.2 Limits

Although radical, it is not possible to characterise Jesus' moves towards equality as absolute, but rather to recognise that they were conditioned by various considerations alongside equality. He did not include women among the Twelve. It is not necessary to determine whether this was a matter of a permissible compromise with existing social norms, or whether some more significant motivation was operating,[67] to be able to conclude that there were considerations, whatever they were, that held Jesus back from practising absolute equality in this instance. Jesus blessed infants on the initiative of their mothers, thus recognising the inequality between parents and children.

Scott, 1984), 144-52. See also Robert L., Fastiggi, 'Human Equality and Non-Discrimination in Light of Catholic Theology and Magisterial Teachings', ch.1 in *Equality and Non-discrimination*; and O'Donovan, *Way of Judgment*, 31-51.

[66] On Jesus and women in the Gospels, see James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 79-114; Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: what the Bible says about a woman's place in church and family* (2nd. Ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 79-118; Aida Besançon Spencer, 'Jesus' Treatment of Women in the Gospels', 1126-41 in *Biblical Equality;* Tom Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: engaging with contemporary issues* (London: SPCK, 2014), 70-71.

[67] Spencer, '*Jesus' Treatment*', 136, claims, 'The twelve, who represent the twelve tribes, do so because they also represent the twelve patriarchs. Thus, the twelve could not have been other than Jewish free males.'

Jesus defended his welcoming of 'tax collectors and sinners' by explaining, I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance':[68] there is no question here of promoting all lifestyles as equally valid. In making it clear that Gentiles have a place in the love of God, he did not deny Israel's status as the chosen people and his own calling as primarily 'to the lost sheep of Israel'.[69] In answering a centurion's request to heal his *doulos,*[70] he praised his faith without expressing disapproval over his ownership of a slave. In modelling servant-leadership he did not cease to exercise authority over his disciples. While perhaps the most sweeping of Jesus' equalising statements are those addressed to wealth, we lack grounds to assert that they imply that only an exact parity of wealth is acceptable.

It seems, then, that Jesus stood for a kind of equality, but that it was not an equality that treated everyone the same. Distinctions of age, gender, ethnicity, lifestyle, authority and social status were not allowed to override the essential humanity of all people, but nor were those distinctions treated as invalid. The recognition that the teaching and practice of Jesus had room for both radical equality and significant difference may provide a basis for claiming that the recognition of both equality and difference in the early church, as apparent in the epistles, represents substantial continuity with, rather than departure from, the ministry of Jesus.

5.3 Redemptive Trajectory?

William J. Webb has argued that drawing ethical guidance from the Bible requires an appreciation of its redemptive movement, a trajectory within the Bible which may point towards a practice superior to that found in the Bible overtly.[71] Webb's 16 scriptural criteria for

---

[68] Luke 5.32.
[69] Matthew 15.24.
[70] Luke 7.2.
[71] William J. Webb, *Slaves Women & Homosexuals: exploring the hermeneutics of cultural analysis*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001). Cp. I. Howard Marshall, 'Mutual love and submission in marriage', 186-204 in *Biblical Equality*, 'We must go beyond the letter of Scripture when

determining whether there is a warrant for 'movement' in relation to particular issues should guard against a cavalier application of his principle, but his appeal to a somewhat nebulous 'spirit of Scripture'[72] may tempt users of his hermeneutic to derive abstract ideas like freedom (with reference for example to slavery) or equality (with reference for example to gender), or inclusion, diversity or tolerance, from the Bible, cut them loose from the presuppositions of the original contexts and shape them in the image of contemporary attitudes.

The idea of a trajectory might encourage the assumption that an idea is always at its best when pushed to its furthest, that is, its most extreme, application, loosed from the restraint of a range of other appropriate considerations. Webb's method is helpful in its appreciation that seeds found in Scripture may be able to grow into mature plants almost beyond recognition in new cultural contexts. In applying it, the important ethical distinction between 'the ideal', which may allow judicious compromise within existing structures, and 'the obligatory', which cannot be compromised without unfaithfulness, must always be borne in mind. It would be problematic for a Christian understanding of the person and authority of Christ, and revelation through him, if it were used in a way that implied that Jesus failed either to fully grasp, or live up to, an obligatory ethical imperative, such as respecting basic equality. Christian theology must assert that the kind of equality Jesus practised is the equality that is binding upon his followers, one that involves a radical reappraisal of traditional attitudes, without demanding sameness or the abolition of every uneven distribution of power, resources or praise. Such equality has ample scope for finding new expressions in ever-changing cultural contexts.

---

the trajectory of scriptural teaching takes us further than what Scripture explicitly say.' 201.

[72] William J. Webb, 'A redemptive-movement hermeneutic: the slavery analogy' in *Biblical Equality*, 'Christians should have an ethical obligation based on the spirit of Scripture…to abolish slavery rather than simply…to treat slaves well.' 394-95.

6. Ethical Framework Needed

Neither in the ministry of Jesus nor in the secular tradition is it possible to find a concept of equality that is capable, in and of itself, of determining right human relationships, even though it is common to speak as though such a concept exists. An ethical framework, within which the commitment to equality can sit, and which can give guidance as to how it should be practised, is therefore indispensable. As O'Donovan has pointed out, it is one thing to subscribe to the 'general norm that we should treat all persons at all times according to their infinite and equal worth', but, 'as for the specific norms of equalization that give shape to the general requirement….' we need to know 'how we may discern them'.[73]

6.1 Secular Tradition

Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that the Enlightenment failed to devise a credible ethical system.[74] He maintains that early Enlightenment thinkers took over, broadly, the ethical content of the Christian tradition, while seeking to give it a new rational justification. According to MacIntyre the justifications offered by Hume, Kant and Utilitarianism were inadequate and in conflict, while the old ethical content became increasingly open to question.[75] Equal human rights were never provided with an adequate basis, prompting MacIntyre's claim that they are as fictional as unicorns and witches.[76] Nietzsche

---

[73] O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 41.

[74], 'The project of providing a rational vindication of morality had decisively failed . . . the failure of philosophy to provide what religion could no longer furnish was an important cause of philosophy losing its central cultural role,' MacIntyre*, After Virtue*, 58.

[75] MacIntyre*, After Virtue,* 43-59.

[76] 'By 'rights' I do not mean those rights conferred by positive law or custom on specified classes of person; I mean those rights that are alleged to belong to human beings as such . . . whether negative or positive and however named they are supposed to attach equally to all individuals, whatever their sex, race, religion, talents or deserts, and to provide a ground for a variety of particular moral stances . . . the truth is plain: there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns . . . every attempt to give good reasons for believing that there *are* such rights has failed . . . Natural or human rights then are fictions…but fictions with highly specific properties .

proclaimed that no rational basis for ethics had been or could be discovered. God was dead; mankind needed the courage to acknowledge that the justification for conventional morality had died with him. Nietzsche's alternative of heroic self-assertion might be reprehensible, but MacIntyre maintains that his analysis of the state of ethics was correct.[77] Since Nietzsche, moral philosophy has retreated into relativism and 'emotivism'.[78] No possibility of reaching agreement in social ethics remains. Nielsen and Sagar's commitment to equality, while acknowledging philosophy's failure to provide a basis for it, as described earlier, serve as examples of such emotivism, relativism and fiction.

Klug does not share MacIntyre's negative assessment, believing that, in the absence of an ethical consensus, human rights can be our guide, with human dignity as an adequate basis for them. She concedes, however, that 'human rights values do not speak directly to many of the sexual and social issues'.[79] On top of this concession, it may be questioned whether 'human dignity' is really a rich enough concept to adequately inform moral judgements in the context of the huge scope and variety of human possibilities and dilemmas.

In the absence of a persuasive basis and interpretative ethical framework, the equal human rights project degenerates into a struggle for the rights of one's preferred group. What we get is what MacIntyre describes as the 'mock rationality of debate' concealing 'the

---

. . they purport to provide us with an objective and impersonal criterion, but they do not,' MacIntyre*, After Virtue,* 82-3.

[77] 'For it was Nietzsche's historic achievement to understand more clearly than any other philosopher . . . not only that what purported to be appeals to objectivity were in fact expressions of subjective will, but also the nature of the problems that this posed for moral philosophy,' MacIntyre*, After Virtue*, 132.

[78] 'Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude and feeling . . . moral judgments, being expressions of attitude or feeling, are neither true nor false; and agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none,' MacIntyre*, After Virtue*, 13-14.

[79] Klug, *Values*, 200, 'The idea of human rights as it is understood today does not require a belief in anything more than the dignity of each human person.'

arbitrariness of the will and power at work in its resolution', accompanied by 'the self-assertive shrillness of protest…the indignant self-righteousness of protest,' characteristic of our age.[80] If MacIntyre is right about the current state of ethics, the confusions, contradictions and conflicts in current theory and practice of equality are not to be wondered at, nor should any resolution of them be expected soon.

6.2 Christian Tradition

Within the Christian community, however, the possibility of an ethical framework in which equality can be located still exists. O'Donovan asserts, 'Morally significant equality…is a relation of relations. It supposes a description in which more than one person stands in a like relation to some other thing…the only relation which answers the point is that in which each human being stands to the creator'.[81] In Christian thought, equality and dignity are derived from the shared image of God[82] and the incarnation and the redemptive work of Christ for all humanity; humanity is seen not just as individuals but as community; human life is given a theocentric *telos* demanding an appropriate set of virtues; a long tradition of reflection on all aspects of human life is available, founded on a belief in special revelation and natural law and worked out in the community of the church.

7. Richard Hooker: Equality and Love

A search for a clearer understanding of equality than has emerged from the Enlightenment might start with the thought of Richard Hooker.[83]

---

[80] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 85.
[81] O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 41.
[82] On the image of God, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: the imago dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005). Middleton asserts that the image should be considered primarily as a calling to act as God's representative within creation, rather than as an attribute (as in the traditional interpretation, which tended to locate it primarily in human rationality).
[83] For Hooker, see Bradford Littlejohn, *Richard Hooker: a companion to his life and work*, (Eugene: Cascade, 2015).

Locke acknowledged his debt to Hooker's treatment of equality, giving it a specific application to government.[84] In his 1594 *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* Hooker had analysed various kinds of laws. Arguing that there are divine laws known to us naturally, he refers to the command to love our neighbour as ourselves, and explains,

> 'It is [men's] duty no less to love others than themselves. For seeing those things that are equal must needs have one measure…we all being of one, and the same nature…My desire therefore to be loved by my equals in nature as much as possibly may be, imposeth upon me a natural duty of bearing to them-ward fully the like affection. From which relation of equality between ourselves and them that are as ourselves…' natural reason has drawn several rules such as that we should do no harm, and abstain from violence.[85]

Hooker's treatment of equality is not extensive, but it is significant in exploring the nature of the obligation implied by the fundamental equality of all. To him, equality is a matter of common humanity, 'we all being of one, and the same nature'. The 'one measure' that the equality of shared humanity requires is love, the love that treats others as I desire them to treat me. Hooker's insight is liberating, for love by its very nature is free to consider context, weigh up a range of competing demands, and draw from a wider ethical framework, in determining how to express itself. It has no inner necessity to suspect that something has gone wrong if unlike cases call for unlike treatments and produce unlike outcomes. Love is a way of treating others as 'my equals in nature' which is demanding, but labours under no necessity to collapse equality into sameness, threatening the variety

---

[84] Locke, Government, II.II.5, says, 'This equality of men by nature, the judicious Hooker looks upon as so evident in itself, and beyond all question, that he makes it the foundation of that obligation to mutual love amongst men, on which he builds the duties they owe one another.' He then quotes the relevant passage from Hooker at length, cp. II.II.15.

[85] Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* edited by Arthur Stephen McGrade, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), I.VIII.7 (80).

and complementarity of human life. Hooker's interpretation of equality sits within Luke Bretherton's contemporary assertion that 'the character and form of a distinctively Christian vision of political life…are based on neighbour love'.[86] Furthermore, his promotion of divine law, natural and revealed, as well as his commitment to a gospel of grace, means that he has an ethical context within which equality-love must operate.

Hooker's views on the respective roles of men and women were typical of his age.[87] It could be argued that his view of equality was fundamentally defective, in that it did not compel him to dissent from generally held attitudes. However, it could be that his concept of equality-as-necessitating-love provides a powerful drive to re-examine traditional roles, even if he himself did not feel the force of that drive.

8. Conclusion and Application

The prevailing western equality narrative lacks both a credible basis and clear definition. It is insufficient of itself to determine the detailed outworking of roles, relationships and treatment, and lacks an adequate ethical frame of reference to supplement this insufficiency. The Christian faith offers a double basis for equality, by referring to the image of God and the person and work of Christ. With Hooker, the Christian notion of equality is best understood in terms of 'shared humanity' and the obligation that arises from it as 'Loving one's neighbour with the same kind of love with which one loves oneself', in other words as desire and effort towards their flourishing. Such love will have recourse to the full range of Christian faith and ethics, not

[86] Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: political theology and the case for democracy*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 22.
[87] Sykes, Stephen, 'Richard Hooker and the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood', 119-37 in *After Eve: women, theology and the Christian tradition* edited by Janet Martin Soskice (London: Marshall Pickering (1990), gives examples of Hooker's 'uncompromising expressions of female subordination', 122-4.

least in seeking to understand what constitutes flourishing. The outworking of equality so understood does not carry with it an impossible general obligation to treat everyone the same, or even with quantitatively equal concern, but rather with qualitatively equal love.

A Christian understanding of equality impels us to follow the pattern of Jesus in promoting the flourishing of the disadvantaged, seeking their fullest participation in church and society. However, it would not necessarily exclude practical considerations, for example in the case of disability, or moral considerations for example in the case of homosexuality.

The detailed implications of our conclusions, for church life and Christian engagement with society, are too deep and wide to explore in this article. However, one practical result for Baptists could be that our equality training might be revisited to identify where Christian principles may have been obscured or replaced by secular ones. Training might equip ministers and others to distinguish between the requirements of secular equality theory and the demands of Christian love. We might also ensure that existing and future projects to advance the cause of equality among us, with reference to characteristics such as gender, race, age, disability, sexuality or poverty, are grounded in a specifically Christian understanding of equality, free from imported presuppositions and securely tied to broader theological-ethical considerations.

Notes on Contributor

Michael Thomas is a retired Baptist minister.

Baptists and Bonhoeffer: A Conversation with Craig Gardiner, Tim Judson, and Andy Goodliff[88]

Craig Gardiner, Tim Judson, and Andy Goodliff

Andy: Welcome to a conversation about Baptists and Bonhoeffer. I am joined by Dr Craig Gardiner, who teaches at Cardiff Baptist College, and Dr Tim Judson, who teaches at Regent's Park College, Oxford. They are two Baptist pastor-theologians who have read a lot of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and have written about Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The background to this conversation is that British Baptists have been engaging with Bonhoeffer for a long time. I want to highlight two Baptist ministers in particular. Edwin H. Robertson,[89] who in the 1960s and into the 1970s was influential in making a lot of Bonhoeffer's works available in English,[90] as well as writing his own reflections on and biography of Bonhoeffer.[91]

And then from the 1980s up to the present day, there has been Dr Keith Clements, who, while he was teaching at Bristol Baptist College,[92] began to publish engagements with and dialogues with

---

[88] This is an edited transcript of the conversation that took place on the 18th December 2024.

[89] Robertson trained at Regent's Park College and then had ministries in Luton, St Albans, Yeovil, and London.

[90] *Rusty Swords* (Collins, 1965); *The Way to Freedom* (Collins, 1966) and *True Patriotism* (Collins, 1973) were a collection of Bonhoeffer's letters, lectures and notes which Robertson edited and introduced. In addition, was a separate volume *Christology* (Collins, 1966).

[91] Edwin Robertson, *The Shame and the Sacrifice; The Life and Teaching of Bonhoeffer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987) and *Bonhoeffer's Heritage: The Christian Way in a World without Religion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989).

[92] Clements also trained for ministry at Regent's and then had ministries in Cheshire and Bristol. Clements was Tutor in Doctrine at Bristol from 1977 to 1990, before going on to several different ecumenical positions.

Bonhoeffer, from the earliest being *Patriotism for Today* and then *What Freedom*? and then most recently *Appointments with Bonhoeffer.*[93] And so there has been a long history (we can talk about other names as well) of Baptists reading Bonhoeffer.[94]

This conversation is to reflect on why Bonhoeffer has been such a particular source of engagement for Baptists. Hopefully we'll tease some of that out as we talk.

Craig and Tim, who was Dietrich Bonhoeffer?

Tim: I'll start and then Craig can correct me. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran, a German, a pastor, a theologian. He was born in 1906 and died in 1945. He was an upper middle-class guy, one of a lot of siblings, including being a twin. He was an interesting character. He was into foraging mushrooms. He played pranks on his neighbours. He was also a very gifted musician, a keen sportsman, very close to his family. He had an interesting sort of spiritual development from the children's nanny, Maria and Käthe Horn, who were Moravian influenced, who raised them spiritually, as well as his mother, Paula. But they didn't really consider church to be something hugely important or significant. They found the church would be quite parochial, out of date, irrelevant, but there was a strong emphasis,

---

[93] Keith Clements, *Patriotism for Today: Dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Bristol: Bristol Baptist College, 1984), *What Freedom? The Persistent Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Bristol: Bristol Baptist College, 1990), *Bonhoeffer and Britian* (CCBI, 2006), *The SPCK Introduction to Bonhoeffer* (London: SPCK, 2010), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2015), and *Appointments with Bonhoeffer* (London: T & T Clark, 2022).

[94] Haddon Willmer, 'Costly Discipleship' in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* edited by John De Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Paul Ballard, 'Camus and Bonhoeffer: Living in a Godless World', *Theology* 78 (August 1972) and 'Bonhoeffer as Pastoral Theologian', *Theology* 94 (March 1991); and Sean Winter, 'Word and World: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Biblical Interpretation Today', *Pacifica* 25.2 (2012), "'Present-ing the Word": The Use and Abuse of Bonhoeffer on the Bible', *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Australasian Journal of Bonhoeffer Studies* 2.2 (2014), 19–35, and "'With Him I Believe": Keith Clements on Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Patriot and Ecumenist', *Bonhoeffer Legacy* (2017).

particularly from his mother, on a kind of Christian formation growing up.

He grew up towards the end of the liberal tradition within Germany. He was living in a particular area of Berlin that was very influenced by the arts and a lot of the liberals lived close, like Adolf von Harnack.[95] Bonhoeffer decided to become a theologian at quite a young age, which his family thought was a ridiculous idea because it was bourgeois and a waste of space. And he said, "In that case I'll reform it."

And I think in a lot of ways he did seek to reform the church. He was originally going to become a musician, but sensed a kind of calling to the life of a theologian. It's interesting now, because I think people often don't necessarily equate a calling with being a theologian. We often talk about having a calling as a minister or a pastor or whatever. Bonhoeffer, throughout most of his life was a pastor in different ways, some conventional, some illegal, but from a very early age, he had sensed a calling to become a theologian.

Craig: I don't want to do a kind of pop psychology on him, but there is a sense in which his home life was split between a fatherly figure who was scientific, who was a doctor and neurologist, and a mother who had much more of that spiritual side of things. And I don't like putting the scientific and the spiritual at odds with one another, but I think there was a tension within that. I think that somewhere in Bonhoeffer's life, it was as if he had a need to resolve that tension. When one of his brothers, Walter, died — he was killed in the First World War — the family had a year of hiatus in which his mother moved next door, and all family activities ceased. It's at this same time that he moved out of the room that he shared with his twin sister, Sabine. I wonder if it is that sense of fragmentation in family life that leads Bonhoeffer to long for community, to seek out a place where

[95] A prominent liberal Lutheran church historian of early Christianity.

people connect and belong. And in part, that's bringing together those worlds of science and of faith. Later in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, very famously, he writes about a 'religionless Christianity'. He writes about 'a world come of age'.[96] And it's very much about how we bring together these two worlds that I have inhabited in my early family life, and how do I talk to my brothers who have gone off into those kinds of careers. How do I say to them, 'I was called. I am called. The church that has been, can be reformed'. So later on in his life, just before he goes to lead the seminary at Finkenwalde for the Confessing church, he writes to his brother Karl-Friedrich and says, what we need is a new monasticism, not like the old monasticism, but one which is solidly rooted in uncompromising engagement with the Sermon in the Mount, but works into a worldly engagement.[97] And I think that's what he's doing in this and all his life is trying to bring those worlds together.

Andy: I guess Bonhoeffer is remembered for his theological works and because of what happens to him in the Second World War, which we will come to in a moment.

But it's interesting Craig that you just talked about the fragmentary parts of his life, because one of the things that I'm aware of is that he spent time in Barcelona, he spent time in London, he spent time in Harlem in New York. And then obviously comes back to Germany. So is there perhaps a rootlessness or maybe it was just job opportunities. He's travelling, in his 20s into his early 30s, around different places, which all feed into his theological work of being a pastor and then the choices that he makes at the beginning of what became the Second World War.

---

[96] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*. DBW Vol 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 482.
[97] Letter to Karl Friedrich, dated January 14, 1935, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933-35*. DBW Vol13 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 285.

Craig: Yes, so part of that is where Tim was talking about those sense of vocations. He had a strong sense of vocation to the pastorate, but he trained as a theologian. He did a doctorate — don't listen to this, anyone who's keen to do one — but it was all done and dusted by the time he was 21. At that point he was too young to be ordained as a pastor, so some of it wasn't so much job opportunities, as you must do something between now and when you're old enough to be ordained.

And I think his best friend, Eberhard Bethge, famously breaks down his biography[98] into three sections. The first section is being a theologian where he writes and articulates those early foundations of what the theology is going to be for the rest of his life. And then he has a — it's not a road to Damascus experience — but he does have a time when he says at that point, I was consciously Christian, in a personal devotional sense rather than merely an academic sense. Bethge sees that as a crucial move between being a theologian and becoming a Christian, but one does not negate the other, which is good news for some of us. And then finally, when, because of the conditions of Germany at the time under the Nazis, when he's unable to either teach and write as an academic or pastor within the Confessing church, when those two opportunities are banned, he becomes what Bethge calls 'a man for his time', a contemporary kind of human being. And all of that is again about how you hold the fragments of your life together when the context is so rapidly changing.

When he was writing the early drafts of *Ethics*, he asks what hope do we have of writing a magnum opus? Because he knows our lives are now but fragments. And different scholars have spent many hours writing on what holds it all together, Christology as a key theme, and there's the longing for community I've mentioned. I have a penchant for his idea of a vicarious responsibility — how you live responsibly in the world. But all of that is asking, what is it that holds the different

[98] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000 [1970]).

fragments of this man's life together, both his sense of vocation, as a theologian, as a pastor and even maybe as a musician, too. I think later in life, he becomes reconciled that the two, the music and the theology, just like the family of science and faith, need not be at odds. All of that is a focus on how do we hold these different fragments together?

Andy: And there's this big moment in his life where he could have stayed in America, sat out the coming war, but he decides to go back to Germany. I wonder whether you might speak to that decision.

Tim: This was after his second visit to America. He went to America for a year for a kind of research fellowship in 1930 to 1931. Reggie Williams, who's an African American Baptist and Bonhoeffer scholar, makes a very good case that, among Bonhoeffer's experiences during that first visit of experiencing Christian pacifism through his friend, Jean Lasserre, and also experiencing something of the kind of social justice dynamic of people like Paul Lehmann who he meets,[99] that really the main sort of formative experience that Bonhoeffer has is his experience within the African-American church, the Abyssinian Baptist Church,[100] where in contrast to the kind of the white churches and the white sermons that he experiences, he finds the black church seem to be living as a gospel community that take sin and salvation seriously and the Bible seriously.

But it's through his experience at Union Theological seminary that he gets this opportunity to go back later in 1939, just as everything starts kicking off in Germany and he's really worried about being conscripted because, through his theological thinking at this point later in life, he's really wondering what's going be happening to him. He wants to get a bit of space really, and so he goes to America, gets this opportunity, but it's turmoil for him. I mean, he writes in his journals about the fact

---

[99] Lasserre and Lehmann were both students at Union Theology Seminary at the same time as Bonhoeffer.

[100] Reggie Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2016).

that he's reading his Bible verses, Moravian watchwords every day,[101] and finding them really helpful, but sensing just such an unease in his gut, in his visceral being with what's happening and his reflections there are very, very open, very poignant. And he has what I think would be called a charismatic experience, really.

He's very wary of the way in which human intuition can sometimes be a bit presumptuous regarding our discernment, that we claim to have heard from God or that God has revealed himself in a way that is beyond the word of God revealed in Christ as attested to in the scriptures. But he is reading his watchwords and he suddenly has this moment where something just jumps out from the Bible to him, when Paul asks Timothy to 'come before winter' (2 Tim 4.21) and he hears that as a word from God, as in, 'Come back to Germany before winter'. And he takes that and it's a little bit sensational in the sense that he doesn't have those experiences very often or at least we don't think he does, but he has this real experience from his daily devotion to the scriptures, a disciplined reading of prayer and the Bible and meditation, and he really senses that Christ by the Spirit through the Scriptures is speaking to him, and he goes back to Germany.

Some people have suggested that it's such a shame because Bonhoeffer was a sharp mind. He was just an absolute genius and creative and some people think, 'oh, what a waste for him to go back'. But then other people would suggest that it wouldn't have been that big of a deal if his story didn't pan out the way it did, in a manner that is frankly more inspiring than most theologians.

So he goes back to Germany and agrees to lead a theological seminary in Finkenwalde.

Craig: It's interesting that Andy said that Bonhoeffer is known for his theological writing, but I think he's probably more known for his

[101] Moravian Watchwords (*Losungen*) were a set of daily devotional bible readings that Bonhoeffer used.

biography. That's what captures people often straight away. And certainly, when I teach this in university, quite often it's difficult to get people away from the story and into the theology because they get fascinated by the events of his life.

One of the things in that story, is how he's apprehensive about being conscripted into the army. The reason why he is concerned is not because he's fearful for himself, but because if he refuses to fight, then all his friends might also come under suspicion of being pacifists which was not an acceptable position under the Nazi Regime. So the decision is never about weighing up matters of his personal safety, but about the possible repercussions does this have for others? And that's why, again, I think he comes back to Germany from America, because he feels he can't take part in the rebuilding of my nation if he is not there at its most critical moment.

Andy: We will move this on to the theology in a moment, I wonder whether we might finish the story. So, he ends up in prison. Take us through the final years of his life.

Tim: What a lot of people maybe don't realise is that he was not arrested for an attempt on Hitler's life. He was arrested because he was involved in the illegal smuggling of Jewish people out of Germany. Something called Operation Seven, which I think actually involved smuggling 14, originally seven, people being illegally smuggled out of Germany, and the documents that implicated him in that initiative were discovered after an attempt on Hitler's life. It was those documents, I believe, that implicated him, in this attempt to get some people out of Germany. He was arrested because he was seeking to save lives, not primarily because of his involvement in a conspiracy against Hitler.

So another example of Bonhoeffer living out of a sense of responsibility to and for and with others, which is why he got arrested. It was after a later attempt on Hitler's life that then led to some findings that implicated Bonhoeffer in that, which led to his execution

at Flossenburg concentration camp on the 9th of April 1945, just a couple of weeks before it was liberated by Allied Forces. And what is really interesting about Bonhoeffer again, which a lot of people don't know, is that while he was in Tegel prison in Berlin, an opportunity that arose for him to escape. One of the prison guards whom he become quite good friends with, who would sort of smuggle various things in or out for him to friends and family, like letters and things like that, offered to help him escape. There arose this opportunity for him, and they had planned it, but then they found out that Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, was going to be implicated or his fate would be worsened if Bonhoeffer had escaped. So, Bonhoeffer made the choice to not take his own freedom for the sake of limiting the impact that could have on someone who he cared for. Staggering, staggering prospects. Not only did he return to German to the danger and the turmoil of that, and the precarious nature of being someone who is committed primarily in his allegiance to Jesus Christ, but also when he gets arrested and put in prison, he has an opportunity to escape and to go and hide, but he doesn't because of the impact that might have on those who he cares for, and then that leads to his eventual execution.

Andy: Craig, I think you're right. His life is remembered partly because of his circumstances. And he's remembered as a martyr. You can find his statue alongside other modern martyrs above the Western entrance to Westminster Abbey.[102] But I guess what makes his life more than just an example of Christian 'sainthood' is that, and this goes back to your earlier point, is he wrote so much of theology quite early on. Now, most of theologians might not get round to writing until their late 20s, if not later than that, but he published a number of works, bigger and smaller ones,[103] which means that he's not just a martyr

[102] https://www.westminster-abbey.org/history/explore-our-history/modern-martyrs/.
[103] *Sanctorum Communio* (1930), *Act and Being* (1931), *Discipleship* (1937), *Life Together* (1939) and *The Prayer Book of the Bible* (1940).

whose life is exemplary in some ways. He's a theological voice that continues to speak.

I want to ask you both, how did you both get into reading Bonhoeffer? Was it that someone said you must read this or was it you just accidentally came across him? Craig, can you remember reading Bonhoeffer for the first time?

Craig: I can, and it was somebody who said you must read this, but it wasn't because they were all excited necessarily. It was a third-year module in university in 20th century theology, and the tutor had this wonderful pedagogical technique of saying, here are ten people and there are 20 people in the class, so everybody pair off and come back with a presentation, and I got handed Bonhoeffer, and it was completely random.

From that, though, I did the presentation, then I wrote an essay on that for my end of year essay. Then I started a Master's course and I did another essay on Bonhoeffer and then I ended up doing my dissertation on Bonhoeffer. And by then, I got the bug of thinking this is fascinating, but I've only scratched the surface, so I ended up doing another three years for a PhD. This was not a PhD on Bonhoeffer as such, but it was a PhD that heavily engaged using Bonhoeffer to kind of help shape my own thinking on a couple of things.

One of the reasons for his legacy is books like *Discipleship*[104] and *Life Together* are easily read as devotionals for an average Christian who might not want to go and delve into something like *Sanctorum Communio*, the early academic thesis. And so, Bonhoeffer again, manages to hold those two sides together. He has the academic foundations, and its robust, *and* you can see the scholarship bubbling through *Life Together* and *Discipleship*. But you don't need to go and read the deeper theology to appreciate what's going on in those books.

[104] Some English translations have the title *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Andy: Tim, likewise, how did you get into Bonhoeffer? What was the first Bonhoeffer that you read? What's your story of finding him as a voice and a life?

Tim: I was living in Wolverhampton. This was before I trained as a Baptist minister. I was leading an ecumenical pioneering ministry and *Discipleship* was doing the rounds and I was told you should read this. And I read it, and I thought, oh, yes, this is good. I found it an inspiring devotional text.

At that point I'd had no kind of theological education. To be honest, I wasn't much of a thinker. I was more of a kind of activist. I found *Discipleship* helpful. I found it inspiring.

And then I went to Bristol Baptist College to train for ministry, and I remember vividly in my first year being shown around the library and seeing all of Bonhoeffer 's works — all 16 volumes plus the 17th volume with the supplementary material — and thinking he wrote a lot.[105]

And that was that. We had a little session on different spiritualities, where in one session we looked at *Life Together* and Bonhoeffer's understanding of community, and it sounded interesting. I think the implications of what he was saying, hadn't really gone into me in the sense of making me think about what that meant for how I lived. It was just ideas. Ideas isolated from experience; I suppose.

And it was when I started my PhD thesis and I was doing about the place of lament in the church, particularly for the Western church today. I'd been influenced a lot by Karl Barth and a lot by Black theology. Barth in volume four of *Church Dogmatics* refers to Bonhoeffer quite a few times and basically just regurgitates what Bonhoeffer says in certain parts. James Cone, the father of Black theology, in one of his books, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*,[106] talks

---

[105] *The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Series*, 17 Volumes (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996-2014).
[106] James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).

about how Bonhoeffer was a standout exemplar of Christian courage and solidarity in relation to the black experience in America and contrasts him to Reinhold Niebuhr, who was a very well-respected ethicist.

And it was through reading both Barth and Cone and the ideas that they were bringing and bits about Bonhoeffer 's life, that made me think maybe I should read a bit of Bonhoeffer. It was my supervisor Jon Coutts, who was sort of transitioning from being a Barth scholar[107] to a Bonhoeffer scholar, who sat down with me, and we read a few essays from *Ethics*. And something just suddenly like clicked in me and I thought, oh my goodness, I think this guy believes that God and the world are way more real than I think they are. And I started reading and I read a few things over again and what was what was wonderful for me was a sense that in which Bonhoeffer is helping me make sense of a lot of things theologically, but it was also really opening up Christian faith and church and the world and God in a way that made me just filled with such wonder, which I was longing for and I think theology should do that, but often it just doesn't. And so that really is how I kind of got into Bonhoeffer and he's been a fellow pilgrim along the way ever since.

Andy: Have you read all 17 volumes?

Tim: (*laughing*) I've read everything.

Andy: Craig, your PhD was published as *Melodies of a New Monasticism: Bonhoeffer's Vision, Iona's Witness.*[108] What part does Bonhoeffer play in what you are wanting to say in that piece of work?

Craig: Tim mentioned about people's saying, 'oh, it's really sad that he died so young and three weeks off from liberation from the Allies into

[107] Jon Coutts, *A Shared Mercy: Karl Barth on Forgiveness and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016).
[108] Craig Gardiner, *Melodies of a New Monasticism: Bonhoeffer's Vision, Iona's Witness* (London: SCM, 2018).

Flossenbürg'. And that is true, but it has led to then, to a huge Bonhoeffer industry of people saying, well, he could have gone this way or that way. The Bonhoeffer, certainly in English language, that appeared in the 1960s, stirred a lot of interest,[109] but then it was subject to a lot of subsequent revision, because when you saw something like the prison letters in isolation, without any connection with the earlier academic theology, they pointed you in a direction which might have not been where Bonhoeffer would have gone.

I guess I got fascinated by Bonhoeffer's theology of community. I was intrigued by what that it might mean for a growing number of people seeking out a new monasticism, where they try and live by a common rule of life, without necessarily taking vows or living in an enclosed community or something like that. Bonhoeffer became the launchpad for thinking about, what a new monasticism might look like and what kind of theology would they need. And so, while it began with Bonhoeffer's theology, it moved to explore the kind of people who might be implementing this. The example that drew me further in was the Iona Community. So it became a book on, Bonhoeffer's vision but Iona's practice.[110] I brought Bonhoeffer and Iona together, not seeking to say this is the only way to imagine a new monasticism today, but as one example of what how Bonhoeffer's theology might have been developed, had he survived?

And so that's where I got to with the PhD, and then with the book tried to ask, how good a theological guide is Bonhoeffer to all the new monasticisms that are popping up today?

Andy: So that's *Melodies of a New Monasticism*, which I recommend to you to go and read. Tim, your book is *Awake in Gethsemane: Bonhoeffer and the Witness of Christian Lament*.[111] You said that you were doing some

[109] Most famously John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963).
[110] Craig has been a member of the Iona Community since 2012.
[111] Tim Judson, *Awake in Gethsemane: Bonhoeffer and the Witness of Christian Lament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2023).

work around Christian lament and then Bonhoeffer becomes the theologian that you use or reflect with. So how does Bonhoeffer help us think about Christian lament?

Tim: I think as somebody who would often lead worship, would preach, would be involved in a various streams of churches, I think I became quite concerned about the way in which there was often a real emphasis on, you know, celebrating and being thankful and praising for all that God is and all that he's done in Jesus, in a way which just didn't seem to have the dexterity to be able to acknowledge or recognise to any extent or depth, suffering, sorrow in general, or just the struggles that we have in this kind of sinful world. Was there something that had necessarily changed within the diet and the postures within our Western churches, or was there something wrong, or underemphasised?

That sent me on a long journey, exploring biblical studies, liturgical theology, systematic theology as well as historical stuff, but I think some of the real concerns I had related to the way in which we live our life, what we believe and how we practise the Christian life in explicit Christian liturgical ways, but also just in life, how like, how do these things all connect? And Bonhoeffer it seemed to me was doing that. His theology was utterly inseparable from his ethics, which was utterly inseparable from his practices in life and his liturgical practices.

Bonhoeffer seems to come at things from quite a different angle. For example, for him, the whole of our assumptions about what is good and what is evil are the heart of human sinfulness, so it's not necessarily that we think this is good, this is bad, sorted. For him that judging in and of ourselves of what is good and what is bad is the heart of human sinfulness, which actually makes a heck of a lot of sense, because, you know, say a general election happens. One party wins and loads of Christians go, 'yay, hallelujah providence of God'. And then a load of other Christians go, 'oh, no, you know, the devil's got in here'. And that's because we are constantly judging what we think is good,

what we think is bad. And for Bonhoeffer, that's the heart of the fall, so to speak in terms of his doctrine of sin.

And so that leads to huge questions in terms of what we lament and how we understand lament. I mean, something happens and do we lament that or is lament partly saying, Lord, this seems awful, but help us to be faithful, help us to understand it.

And I suppose there are so many theological trump cards that people raise about why we don't or shouldn't lament. One of them is whether lament doubts the sovereignty of God or does that undermine our own need to confess sin? Or should we actually just be happy because of new life in Christ?

I try and reframe and debunk some of those things, but really, the kind of fulcrum of my whole project is centred around Gethsemane. Hence the title *Awake in Gethsemane.* And for Bonhoeffer, you see this plumbline idea throughout his whole work, where actually to be a Christian, to be truly human, is to actually share in the life of God in Christ, which is actually a life that is totally free from my own total absorption with myself, to actually be truly free for and with others in the world.

There's a quote from *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which I'll read, where he says,

> I discovered and I'm still discovering to this day that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. If one is completely renounced making something of one's self, whether it be a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader, a so-called priestly figure, a just or an unjust person, a sick or a healthy person, then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness, living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes, and failures, experiences and perplexities, then one takes seriously no longer one's own sufferings but rather the

> suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane, and I think that this is faith, this is *metanoia*, and this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian.[112]

I think he's just been really helpful for me, but not only to argue for the place of lament, but to say that actually we need to recognise that lament is something that fundamentally is our sharing in Christ's sufferings, which means that I don't lament if I feel like lamenting, I lament because I'm called to share in Christ's life, which means actually lamenting with and for others as well, not just for myself.

Andy: Bonhoeffer has been this theological voice within both of your theological thinking, but maybe in other ways as well. And both of you are Baptists, and we mentioned earlier how Bonhoeffer has been someone that Baptist in different ways have engaged with.

And so do you think there's something about Bonhoeffer's theology, maybe his life as well? He was a Lutheran not a Baptist. Why are Baptists reading Bonhoeffer? Is there something helpful there? What does Bonhoeffer have to say to us as Baptists?

Craig: I might begin by saying it's not what Bonhoeffer has to say to us as Baptists, but maybe what we as Baptists need to say to Bonhoeffer, because we need a conversation partner. I think that's what Bonhoeffer has been for me. I think maybe also for Tim and for others that you mentioned, like Keith Clements.

Bonhoeffer has proven to be a consistently good conversational partner. There is a point when you're doing research, particularly when you're doing research engaging with one particular theologian, and even more so when they have a fairly dynamic personal biography, where you need to become a bit disenchanted with the story and

---

[112] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Priso*n, 486.

become more critical of the theology. And you need to almost fall out of love with this person that has spent so much time in your head.

I think it's because I'm not trying to create little Baptist churches that are all Bonhoeffer-ian in nature.

It's because he offers such a deep place of conversation, that he forces me back to myself, to reflect on my own heart and mind. Bonhoeffer is like a really good spiritual director. He's not telling me what to do, but he is holding up a lens or a mirror to myself and saying, well, what do you think now?

When I was doing my research, one of my supervisors, Dr Karen Smith, would often look at what I'd written and say, 'well, you can't write that, that doesn't make sense.' And then we'd critique it. And the only way I could get to what I wanted to say was by standing up in her room and walking around and talking it out loud. Now that's maybe an external processor like me will do that. But for me, it's because Bonhoeffer is such a good conversational partner. He doesn't want to make me what he is, he wants me to become what God wants me to become. And I think that's why that's why he's still so important.

I think for Baptists, perhaps there is something in the radical side of his discipleship, and the earthed sense of his discipleship, that is attractive. That's not unique to Baptists, but I think that's why many Baptists have been drawn to him; because of that radical strand within our own history, and that sense of asking the question, 'who is Jesus Christ for us today'?[113]

For me, again, I have an interest in what it means to live in a covenanted life, what it means to live in good relationship with one another. Bonhoeffer's work on what it is to be a community who live together in Christ, is deeply theologically grounded, but it's also deeply, practically engaged. I am drawn to his work in *Life Together* and in

[113] This is a question Bonhoeffer famously asks, see *Letters and Papers From Prison*, 362.

Discipleship, because it is a reflection of how the community was learning and living together in Finkenwalde.

That sense of connecting theology and church life, and then connecting both of those to the world in which we live, and find Christ present, those are the things that I think are important for us as Baptists.

Andy: There is an emphasis in Bonhoeffer on Christology and on ecclesiology, which I guess would loom large for Baptists, our way of being church, our way that we follow Christ, and follow Christ in a strongly ecclesial sense, or at least ideally we do. And so I wonder if there's something there. The other thing we might say about Baptists is we are pragmatists and activists. One of the things that Neville Clark (a former Principal of what was then South Wales Baptist College), says, talking about infant blessing, but I think it's true of Baptism probably and the Lord's Supper and everything that we do, is that we have the practice, but we remain in search of a theology.[114] And I wonder if Bonhoeffer can help us sometimes with that theology.

Tim: Yes, I think to an extent. I mean, your comment makes me think of Helen Dare's phrase of us 'being on the way, but in the fray'.[115] Each thing that Bonhoeffer writes is within a context. *Discipleship*, which comes across as extremely radical and almost polemical at times, is written to encourage and strengthen his seminarians who are on the verge of being arrested or having their stipends taken away from them. He's wanting to really bolster them to stand fast in the faith. And later on, he reflects on what he wrote in *Discipleship* and says, actually, maybe it wasn't quite complete, I should have maybe thought a little bit more about the penultimate, which is kind of the earthly existence and maybe not be quite so absolute in what I said. He's writing theology

[114] Neville Clark, 'The Theology of Baptism' in *Christian Baptism* edited by Alec Gilmore (Lutterworth, 1959), 320-321.
[115] Helen Dare, *Always on the Way and in the Fray: Reading the Bible as Baptists* (Oxford: Whitley, 2014).

for a time trying to address certain things, so he's emphasizing something. He's foregrounding something.

I do think that all theology is contextual, and I think when we don't acknowledge that, we can open ourselves up to critique. I teach Christian doctrine and I think it's really important to recognise that all the great doctors of the church have had a particular context that has framed their imagination, and we as contemporary theologians have that as well, and I think sometimes we're not actually aware of that horizon and someone will have to come along later and say, oh, well, that was influenced by this horizon and that sort of thing. I think Bonhoeffer is really trying to write for a particular time.

Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran, and he is actually trying to redress a lot of Lutheranism that he considers to be pseudo-Lutheranism of the time, which has led the church into a particular direction that his really made it anaemic as far as its faithfulness goes. But Luther himself was a dissenter. He didn't want to become a new separate church, but the Lutheran Church kind of developed out of that. What's interesting is in Germany, in the 20th century, it was the state church. Bonhoeffer is really writing as a voice of dissent. When the Aryan paragraph comes out which says that Jewish believers have to be excluded from Christian churches, he is a voice of dissent and saying, how dare we go along with this? This is a matter of confession. And what he finds concerning is that you've got the liberals, who are kind of like, oh, well, you know, God could be at work in this, and we'll go along with that and maybe you know, God is it working in this sort of way, in a manner that Bonhoeffer considers to be really awful because this is fundamentally un-Christlike. But he's also really having a pop at the conservative evangelicals as well, because they're like, well, as long as you let us just, you know, do what we want in our worship services and don't bother us, we won't get involved with all of this politics stuff. And you can see this playing out today in a lot of the ways in which we think theologically.

As Baptists we see ourselves as separate from the state, but we are not utterly inseparable from state actions. I think Bonhoeffer offers a very compelling imaginative way of relating to the world in the sense that we are pilgrims for whom the world, as it is not fundamentally our home. There is something fundamentally wrong with this world as it is, but at the same time, it's the world that God created, and that God loves, and that God has reconciled in Christ. I think as Baptists, we are different potentially to Anabaptists in that respect, who may be accused of getting sometimes a bit lost in the idealism that leads them to back off from society for the sake of their own purity. Bonhoeffer is like, no, get your hands dirty for the sake of Christ. Not in a way which legitimises any of our actions, but in a way which constantly leaves us at the mercy of God's grace in a very broken yet beautiful world. I think that's one of the ways, in terms of dissent.

Also, finally what I thought, is that the sort of shape of our Union of churches at the moment, we have such a kaleidoscope, of dimensions of spirituality, of theology, of styles of worship. One of the things I find helpful with Bonhoeffer is he's got this way of having difference and particularity within different bodies, within the Baptist Union, or within different ecclesial traditions. He is very ecumenically focused.[116] But not in a way which necessarily says, that's fine and that's fine and whatever. He's got this sense of everything is rooted in the whole, which is Jesus Christ, but there might be little melodies or voices that will sound slightly different.[117] Maybe even dissonant, which are nevertheless rooted to Christ. I'm gesturing here at Craig's book where he uses this metaphor of polyphony that Bonhoeffer develops, as a musical term, that undoubtedly shapes much of Bonhoeffer's theological imagination.

I find it as somebody who's very kind of creative, imaginative, but yet also has learned to think on the more rational sort of end, I find that a

[116] See Clements, *Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest*.
[117] See Tim Judson, 'Baptist (Dis)Unity and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Socio-Doctrinal Understanding of the Church', *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context* 9 (June 2023): 5-29.

really helpful metaphor for understanding the Christian life, understanding Christian community, and understanding what it means to be a Baptist, in the sense that there are some different melodies within our union of churches, different emphases, different things that are foregrounded, which might seem kind of very independent from one another, but are actually dimensions of the whole, which is this work of God in Jesus Christ through the church. I find that really helpful because he makes connections but also allows tensions and conflicts. Bonhoeffer says in one essay in *Ethics* that the incarnation, the crucifixion, and their resurrection can only be unified in their conflict, and foregrounding one of those at the expense of the others means that we have an incomplete gospel really. I think that's really helpful for us as Baptists who can get a bit lost in our own sectarianisms sometimes.

Craig: I agree with what Tim's saying. Maybe another point to make is that Bonhoeffer held together this vocation of pastor and theologian. Sometimes within our Baptist Union life, we are a little bit suspicious of the academic thinkers, because perhaps they want to take longer before coming to a decision. I think it is important to ensure that we do have vocational theologians in the midst of our decision making and our discernment processes. Not that they discern better, but sometimes they might discern differently, and I think that can be helpful. I think we risk losing something when the discernment processes across the Union become smaller and with less time to deliberate.

As I said earlier, what I think Bonhoeffer does is constantly pushes us back into our own context. The question that haunts him throughout his life, but particularly in prison is, 'where is Christ for us today?' And I think that asks us to go back to that question again and again. How is Christ encountered in the different processes and structures and people of the Union. How do we find Christ in each of those? Tim's right, it's the whole of that, that is where we find God and limiting it to only one part or another perhaps limits the vision of what God is

doing in our midst. Bonhoeffer talks about God being 'the beyond in our midst'[118] and so it's about constantly looking for where is God going to and how we might we follow?

Andy: I think there's something there, the idea that Bonhoeffer is a pastor and a theologian, and he never lets one of those vocations go. He holds on to both. For Baptists, if we think most of those most of our people who end up doing theological work remain as pastors. And that's something about holding onto those twin vocations.

Craig: But there are three vocations here, because it's not just that he's a pastor and a theologian in his theology, but it's the fact that through no fault of his own, he's forced into not being able to be either and having to find another way of responding to God recognising that this 'next vocation' of a more worldly faith, in this-worldly Christianity, is equally a vocation that is honourable to God.

Andy: There's been a bit of a controversial reception history to Bonhoeffer, to the extent that one scholar has written a book called *The Battle for Bonhoeffer*.[119] How do we read Bonhoeffer well? Or are there multiple ways to reading in Bonhoeffer and that's okay?

Craig: There are multiple ways of reading Bonhoeffer but I'm not sure that it's always okay. So recently, there's a new film based on the life of Bonhoeffer that has received a fair degree of criticism for how it read Bonhoeffer. Just like when the conservative evangelical Eric Metaxas brought out a Bonhoeffer biography in 2010 and critics thought he was hijacking Bonhoeffer to make him into the patron saint of a particular brand of theology and Christian practice. That's a temptation for those on the religious right as much as it is for those on the more progressive left. For others who try to hold some ground in the middle, all you can do is engage with the primary and emerging

---

[118] A Letter to Bethge, 30th April, 1944 in Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers in Prison*, 367.
[119] Stephen R. Haynes, *The Battle for Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018). See also Haynes' earlier book *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (London: SCM, 2004).

scholarship. There is a seemingly endless stream of scholarship in Bonhoeffer research. New things are being discovered and reflected upon in different ways. We need to root ourselves in that scholarship and then ask who might Christ be to me in this particular place? How do I honour that Bonhoeffer question in my midst? That involves Christians doing an awful lot of listening to where God is already in the world, as much as it does the church telling people where they think God is to be encountered. And I think that's true to Bonhoeffer's vision as well.

There is a genuine risk. The Bonhoeffer family have recently issued a statement about that new movie and about how it betrays Bonhoeffer.[120] It is fraught with tensions and how we receive it. Like everything else, we are all circumscribed by our own contexts. The wider those contexts are, the wider our relationships are, the more consciously we will seek to engage with those we *know* are different to us. We must learn to do that with respect and openness and a willingness to allow them to genuinely be Christ to us. I think that is not only a part of good scholarship, but I think it honours Bonhoeffer's legacy well.

Andy: If people want to read some Bonhoeffer, a primary work, where should they start? And if they want to get perhaps a sense of Bonhoeffer 's life, where should they start?

Tim: I would encourage people differently based on where they're at. There might be some people who listen to this who are feeling, as Bonhoeffer was later on in his life, really disappointed and disillusioned with the church, and who might just think the church is just too far compromised in whatever way to bear thinking about, which is something Bonhoeffer really struggled with in prison. He famously wrote that the church has been so much more concerned about its

[120] https://religionnews.com/2024/10/21/stop-taking-bonhoeffers-name-in-vain-scholars-warn-eric-metaxas-and-other-christian-nationalists/.

own self-preservation than anything else, which I think is a very sharp criticism that we might want to take on board as well.

If there's anyone like that, I'd recommend reading *Ethics*, which is a posthumously pieced together bunch of essays, which was potentially going be his *magnum opus*, but he didn't get to finish it.[121] The essays are put together and it's really in those essays Bonhoeffer is really thinking more broadly about what it means to be in the form of Christ, to let the form of Christ take place in the world. He's writing there in a broader sense than just the church and Christian discipleship in its most sort of sharp focused sense. There he addresses, ethical frameworks in general, public life, and what we consider to be responsible, and the relation between church and state and those sorts of things. Really thought-provoking essays. Some of which are quite easy to read and will probably provoke further questions, which is not necessarily a bad thing because it engenders a certain humility.

For those people who are really dialled into the church in its current form and maybe involved in Christian ministry in a conventional sense, I totally recommend reading *Discipleship*. It's a Christian classic. Having come back to it later on, having done some theological study, trained for Baptist ministry, and exploring it for my PhD, I was struck by — you know how you watch a Disney film as a kid and then you watch it as an adult and there are loads of jokes and things that you just didn't pick up as a kid — I think it was like that. I'd come to it again and think, oh my goodness, what he's saying here is massive and it would cause me to ponder and to reflect and see.

In terms of secondary stuff reading about his life, there are numerous biographies. The most established one really is the one written by his best friend Eberhard Bethge, which is over 1000 pages. I'd recommend

[121] Dieterich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. DWB Vol 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). It should be noted that in the UK, SCM Press have also recently republished *Ethics* (London: SCM, 2024), *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 2017), *Life Together* (London: SCM, 2024), and *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 2024).

though two books. One which is written by Renate Wind, called *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel*, which was published in 1991.[122] A really interesting story about his life and a bit of his own personal experience as well. The other is by Christiane Tietz and called *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.*[123] Tietz has written more extensively in Bonhoeffer scholarship as well, but gives a kind of concise backdrop to the historical background of what's going on, why Bonhoeffer says what he's saying, what's going on around at the time, and the different events, and his theological thinking, how it developed at that time as well.

So, both really good and I'd say accessible texts, if you want to get a sense of Bonhoeffer's life without having to waste your time too much.

Craig: Another short and accessible book is Stephen Plant's book, simply titled, *Bonhoeffer*,[124] and we referenced earlier, some of Keith Clements's writing. Maybe if you want to read Bonhoeffer through the eyes of another Baptist scholar picking up some of Keith's work is particularly good, and especially his most recent book,[125] which offers insights into the valuable contributions of Christian living from Keith as well as into Bonhoeffer.

In terms of reading Bonhoeffer, I'd agree with Tim, it depends where you're at, as to where you want to start. There is something wonderful about reading other people's letters, particularly when they weren't intended to be published. There's a module waiting to be written or a book waiting to be written, on people's letters and the spirituality that is revealed as they unpack their soul in correspondence with a close confidant rather than the neatly polished stuff that comes for the publication. And so maybe starting with *The Letters and Papers from*

---

[122] Renata Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel* (London: SCM, 1991).
[123] Cristiana Tietz, *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Fortress, 2016).
[124] Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (London: Continuum, 2004).
[125] Clements, *Appointments with Bonhoeffer*.

Prison gives you a sense of who the man is, what preoccupies him, and what his focus is in his most challenging times.

I want to mention *Discipleship* and agree with Tim there, but maybe from the other side, and even shorter, but just as radical, is *Life Together*. This is the little book that he wrote about what it is to live with other Christians, what it is to live in a community. It seems to me that there are so many occasions when our witness in the church, in our Baptist Union, or within a local congregation, is jeopardised, because we just don't love one another, and we haven't learned how to practise living well together with one another. And so I regularly return to *Life Together*. It's a short little book, that has wonderful phrases that can stop you in your tracks and say 'that's a sentence I can to live my life by'. It's about a balanced life that nurtures a personal individual spirituality but also is accountable to those around you. It's about how we do community living well. It is also where Bonhoeffer talks about the 'deed that interprets itself',[126] as an act of witness. And the deeds that interpret themselves before a watching world very often are simply how do Christians behave. It's by our love that we're supposed to be known, that's our greatest witness. But if we cannot love one another, and if we cannot live well together in accountable and responsible relationships, then we compromise our witness, we compromise anything else we might dare to say about Christ.

Life Together is one of the few books that I read at least once a year. It continually throws up something — and, not that I'm recommending that people should underline things in their books — but if you do, then *Life Together* continually challenges me when I find a phrase that I underlined last year, but it's the very next sentence that jumps out at me this time.

Tim: It's a bit, particularly that first chapter on community, it's almost like Bonhoeffer the mystic there, isn't it? I think we can sometimes

---

[126] 'The Nature of the Church' in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932*. DWB Vol 11 (Mineapolis: Fortress, 2012), 314, fn.329.

think, he's a German systematic theologian, he's written two doctoral theses, but there is a very kind of contemplative, mystic side to him, which comes out, you know, particularly later in life, which I think is very interesting. You should write that book next, Craig, I think.

Andy: if there are any listeners to our conversation, hopefully you've had a rich engagement with Bonhoeffer. There are rumours that every night before his children go to bed, Tim reads them a passage of Bonhoeffer to his children so that they will, you know…

Tim: …go to sleep.

Andy: I know for Craig that there are other theologians, but for Tim, there is no other theology, but Bonhoeffer. I guess a small plug here is Tim's got another book out in 2025 called *The White Bonhoeffer: A Postcolonial Pilgrimage*,[127] and so Tim is continuing to engage with Bonhoeffer, as I'm sure Craig is in other ways as well.

What a wonderful conversation we've had with Craig and Tim. Thank you both. They've given lots to think about and go on and read if you want to do more with Bonhoeffer. And I'm sure that Bonhoeffer will continue to be a theologian and a life that speaks to Baptists, and long may that be so.

Notes on Contributors

Craig Gardiner is Tutor in Doctrine at Cardiff Baptist College. Tim Judson is Lecturer in Ministerial Formation, Regent's Park College, Oxford. Andy Goodliff is Lecturer in Baptist History, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

[127] Tim Judson, *The White Bonhoeffer: A Postcolonial Pilgrimage* (London: SCM, 2025).

Journal of Baptist Theology in Context

Aims

- To encourage the sharing of good theological, biblical and historical research by Baptists
- To support pastor–theologians in academic publishing
- To offer the wider Baptist family thoughtful work which will aid their life and mission

Submitting to Journal of Baptist Theology

We welcome submissions from Baptist pastor–theologians.

All submissions to be emailed to Andy Goodliff (andy@goodliff.com) as Word documents with footnotes. Submissions to be no more than 7,000 words.

Cover Image

Designed by Micky Munroe. The image is based on a painting that was for many years displayed in Helwys Hall, Regent's Park College, Oxford and was designed by Henry Wheeler Robinson (College Principal, 1920-44), representing the five principles of Baptist life: faith, baptism, evangelism, fellowship and freedom. See H. Wheeler Robinson, 'The Five Points of a Baptist's Faith' *Baptist Quarterly* 11.2-2 (January-April 1942), 4–14.