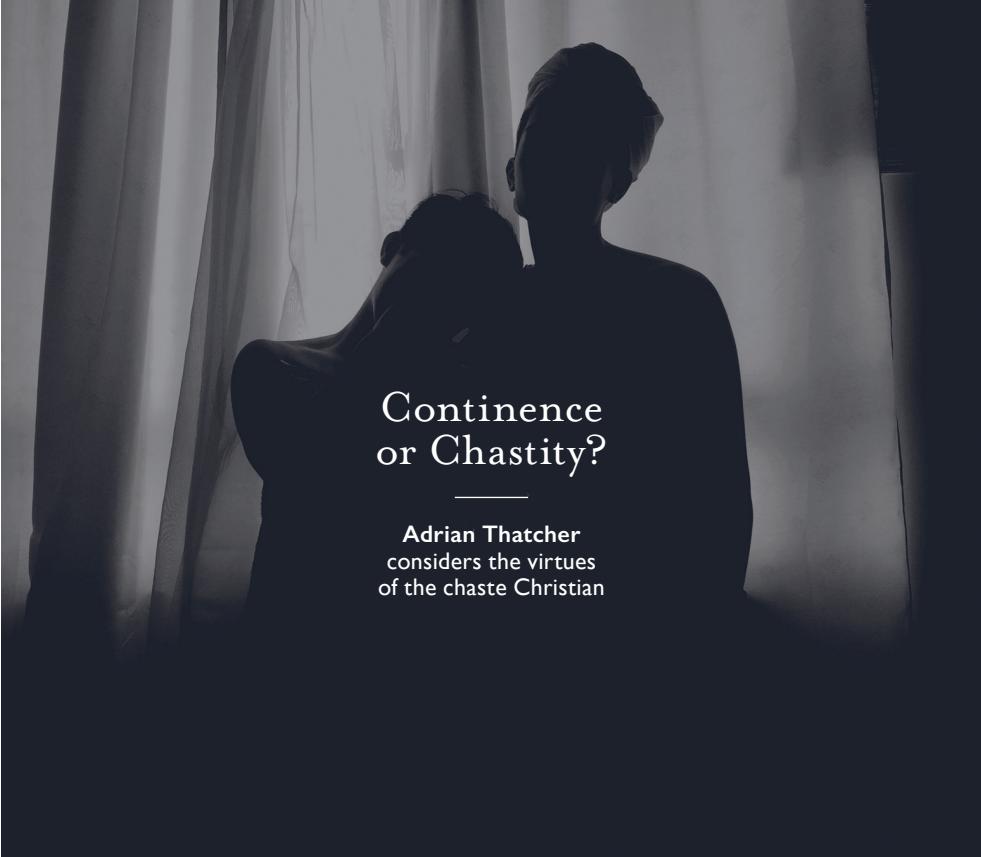


SPRING 2026

# SIGNS OF THE TIMES

FEATURES, COMMENTARY AND REVIEWS FROM MODERN CHURCH



## Continence or Chastity?

**Adrian Thatcher**  
considers the virtues  
of the chaste Christian

What  
the Heck  
is the Bible?  
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Reflections  
on the Modern Church  
Annual Conference  
Alison Webster

A Tribute  
to David  
Driscoll  
Richard Truss

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Modern Church is an international society promoting liberal theology. Founded in 1898 to defend liberalism in the Church of England, we now work ecumenically to encourage open, enquiring, non-dogmatic approaches to Christianity.

## SIGNS OF THE TIMES

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*Signs of the Times* is published in February, May, August and November. It provides news and information about Modern Church and offers members an opportunity to communicate with each other in print. We welcome articles, notices, poems, suggestions, comments and suitable accompanying images. Articles published do not necessarily reflect a Modern Church perspective – in keeping with our commitment to liberal theology we believe that other views should be heard. Send material to the editor by 28th December, 28th March, 28th June or 28th September. Articles should not exceed 1,000 words. We prefer email but will process typed or handwritten text (phone for a postal address).

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## EDITORIAL



**Anthony Woollard**  
Editor

# “THE WORD” AND “THE SIMPLE-HEARTED”

**O**ne of the hymns that many of us may sing from time to time, especially on Bible Sunday, speaks of the pleasures that “the Word” imparts to “the simple-hearted”.

As Amanda Higgin’s article below reminds us, Scripture is by no means “simple”. Those who look in it for absolutely straightforward “messages” are all too often disappointed, as they wrestle with the many apparent contradictions not just between but even within the contributions attributed to particular authors. The picture becomes yet more complicated when we consider the real and often painful conflicts between certain texts and our lived experience.

A very topical case of the latter relates, of course, to same-sex love. Whatever may be the case in other denominations, the Church of England is really at sixes and sevens on this one. The extremely courageous sermon preached on 26 October by the Dean of Southwark, Mark Oakley, a distinguished theologian who is himself gay, is well worth watching on YouTube. For him, as for David Runcorn in his recent book *Love Means Love*, the texts of terror in parts of the New Testament must be read as expressions of belief in a particular time and place, which must never obscure the basic message that God loves us all “just as we are” and blesses all genuine *continued >*

*Continued from page 3*

human love.

But many of our more fundamentalist co-religionists cannot accept such a way of “twisting” what “the Bible says”. The struggle for some kind of mutual understanding between these two approaches – in which is involved our very understanding of God and of humanity, with wide implications far beyond the issues around sexuality – is central to our mission today.

### **“The Word of God”**

At least I hope that most of us can agree that “the Word of God” is something far more than such individual texts. Scripture itself speaks of a person – Jesus of Nazareth – as “the Word incarnate” to which both Old and New Testaments as a whole point. The habit of reading small selections from these, whether in worship or privately, all too easily obscures the need for such a holistic approach. And, to take

Scripture itself speaks of a person – Jesus of Nazareth – as “the Word incarnate” to which both Old and New Testaments as a whole point. The habit of reading small selections from these, whether in worship or privately, all too easily obscures the need for such a holistic approach.

this still further, the past century or two has seen the development of broader definitions of Christian authority on the lines of “Scripture, tradition, reason and experience”. I personally would prefer to avoid any narrower definition and speak of “the Christian story” as a whole – including your and my own stories.

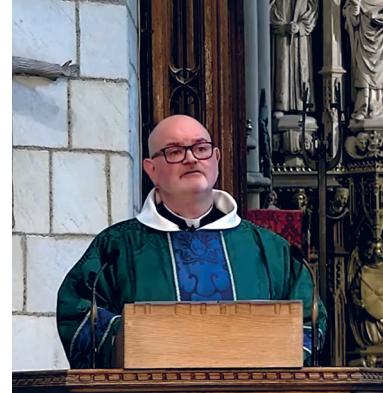
### **“The simple-hearted”**

All this may or may not immediately comfort “the simple-hearted”. Within my own parish there has been much discussion about how we present the faith with equal relevance to high-powered intellectuals and to those at the other end of that spectrum. A deepening sense of community, within and outside worship, would seem to have much to contribute here. The true Word still comes to us through PEOPLE! And within the Body of Christ there is room for people of many different intellects,



MADELINE CRANE/UNSPLASH

SOUTHWARK CATHEDRAL/YOUTUBE



The extremely courageous sermon preached on 26 October by the Dean of Southwark, Mark Oakley is well worth watching on YouTube.

temperaments and insights, sharing that Word in the wider context of the whole Christian story including the diversity of the Scriptures. And that is the vision for which Modern Church stands.

### **“Enabling Hope”**

Our second article, by our General Secretary, Alison Webster, is on our Annual Conference in October on the theme of “Enabling Hope”. In these difficult times for so many, it was felt impossible to devote more than one day to such a vital topic. And the day in question turned out to be affected by a rail strike! Yet, against these odds,

The Annual Conference attendance included a high proportion of people who were new to Modern Church and younger than most of our membership. I understand that most of them have subsequently joined us – and indeed our membership, after a serious post-Covid dip, is now steadily growing again.

the conference was itself hope-filled in more than one way. Not least important was the fact that the modest attendance included a high proportion of people who were new to Modern Church and younger than most of our membership. I understand that most of them have subsequently joined us – and indeed our membership, after a serious post-Covid dip, is now steadily growing again.

### **Same-sex relationships**

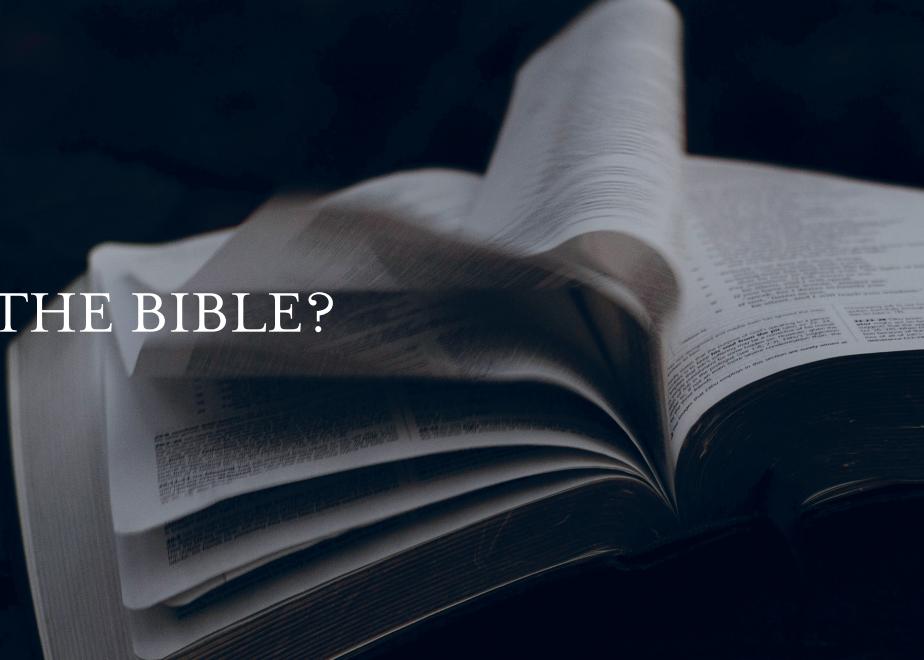
Third, returning to the theme of same-sex relationships, we have Adrian Thatcher’s further reflections following his November posts on the Modern Church blog.

### **David Driscoll**

The final article is a tribute to the late David Driscoll, long one of our leading members, who embodied our vision and values, and has often delighted readers of this journal by his articles and book reviews. He will be sorely missed, but it is clear that new voices (such as Amanda) are coming forward to take the place of those of us in an older generation who have kept alive that vision and that spirit of hope for Church and world.

# WHAT THE HECK IS THE BIBLE?

By Amanda Higgin



PRISCILLA DU PREEZ/UNSPLASH

**I**n the church where I grew up, it sometimes sounded like the author of the Bible was the Bible. I would hear, “the Bible says this,” “the Bible says that,” as if the Bible was the fourth person of the Trinity. Then, when I went to university to study Theology, I was introduced to J, and E, and D, and P, to Deutero-Isaiah, the ecclesiastical redactor, pseudo-Paul and the Fourth Evangelist. I got to know the multiplicity of authors behind each of the Bible’s 66 constituent texts: authors known, unknown, anonymous, pseudonymous, and hypothetical.

The Bible stopped being one harmonious book to me, and became a discordant

amalgamation of ancient texts of a range of genres, eras, and theologies. Maybe that experience feels familiar; I have certainly met many people who struggle to find a new paradigm for what the heck the Bible is.

Well, we are far from the first generation of people to wrestle with the Bible, so let me tell you a story. We get just a hint of this story from the church historian Eusebius, so I will add the details myself.

The year is roughly 200 CE, and the congregation of Rhossus, now in Türkiye, has a question for their bishop, Serapion. Can he please advise them on reading a text known as the Gospel of Peter?

Now getting hold of a new piece of literature is no mean feat. The congregation has acquired a

Serapion tells the church at Rhossus to keep it, read it, and let him know what they learn. There is, however, one big problem with the Gospel of Peter: Serapion hasn’t read it.

handful of papyrus or parchment sheets, maybe lent from another church, carefully handwritten by a skilled professional at not insignificant cost. They probably do not have many of the texts we now know as the Bible, and are hungry for more. They want their bishop’s advice: is this text OK to own? Is it OK to read in gatherings? Should they spend the time and money to make their own copy?

Bishop Serapion writes back:

Yes. A gospel? Stories about Jesus’s life are very precious. And by Peter? He’s an apostle, the rock of the church; we want to keep hold of everything he’s written. Serapion tells the church at Rhossus to keep it, read it, and let him know what they learn.

There is, however, one big problem with the Gospel of Peter: Serapion hasn’t read it.

By all likelihood, neither have you; very little of the Gospel of Peter survives to us today. What we do have includes a striking story about Jesus’ resurrection. When the tomb is opened, Jesus is led out by two angels on either side of him, whose heads, it says, are really tall: “the head of the two reaching unto heaven, but that of the one being led out by a hand by them going beyond the heavens”. Their heads are tall, but Jesus’s is taller! Behind them walks out none other than the cross on which Jesus was crucified. A voice from heaven asks, “Have you made proclamation to those who have fallen asleep?” and the cross answers “Yes”.

This is not the apostolic gospel that Serapion might have hoped. Instead, it is written pseudonymously in Peter’s name.

What Eusebius records is Serapion’s retraction, that he has heard this text includes the Gnostic heresies associated with the false teacher Marcion, and it should not be read. We don’t know how the congregation at Rhossus responded, but they were only one of hundreds of early *continued >*

Continued from page 7

Christian communities whose decisions influenced whether the Gospel of Peter entered into the biblical canon. Overall, these communities decided not to read it in worship, not to make copies of it, not to recommend it to other churches, and so it has not been passed on to us as Scripture.

This story speaks to a few common myths about what the heck the Bible is.

***Misconception 1: if you don't read the Bible, you can't call yourself a Christian.***

**Reality: faith is older than the Bible.**

Like most other Christians around 200 CE, the church at Rhossus probably only owned a few odd Christian texts. Nevertheless, they were faithful Christians committed to the Way of Christ.

***Misconception 2: the Bible was decided by a group of old men, sitting in a room with a list like judges on X-Factor designing boy bands.***

**Reality: the community forms the book, and the book in turn forms the community.**

Every early Christian congregation had to decide which texts to read, which ones to recommend, and which to invest in copying before the material degraded. They asked for advice from others, including authorities like Bishop Serapion, but clearly that advice was sometimes fallible.

***Misconception 3: the Bible is one book, with one author and one voice.***

**Reality: the Bible is not a soliloquy, it is a choir of many voices, sometimes harmonic, sometimes discordant.**

The Bible is not one text but many: not a lecture but an assembly, a great cloud of witnesses. We could even call it a church: full of wonderfully faithful voices sharing wisdom, humour, stories, myths, and sometimes some pretty strange opinions.

I come from an evangelical Christian tradition which loves Scripture and distrusts Tradition, so here is today's hot take: Scripture is Tradition. The Bible has been passed down to us hand to hand in a centuries-long, faithful game of pass the parcel by every congregation, pastor, and scribe who decided what texts were important to them.

I love that. I am tired of a world that demands I only want the New Thing, the shiny innovation, with all of its consumerist, planned obsolescent enshtification (that is a technical term). Give me the fusty, boring, outdated thoughts of centuries-old writers. Give me something that's not polished and clean but properly old, that's been tested, critiqued, and honoured for hundreds of years. Just like God's people the Bible is messy, precious, and absolutely worth our time.

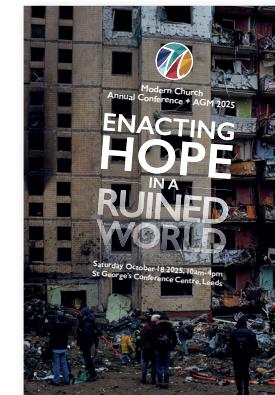
**Amanda Higgin** is a Baptist minister at the inclusive Oasis Church Bath ([oasisbath.org](http://oasisbath.org))

# Enacting Hope in a Ruined World: Reflections on the Modern Church Annual Conference

By Alison Webster

For our 2025 national conference in Leeds, our theme was Hope, and in the months leading up to the event we were resourced by a prayer, written specially for us, by the conference worship co-ordinator, Andrew Nunn:

*Hope-full, hope-filled God, you sustain us through the darkness and bring us to the light; enable us through your Spirit to be your co-workers in bringing hope to the world as you companion us on your kingdom journey. Amen*



Optimism is merely 'hoping for the best'. She gave a clear and stimulating overview of how theologians have thought about hope over the centuries – highlighting the importance of anger, and of hope as something that is enacted, not simply a feeling an individual has.

She also drew our attention to the need to get the balance right between human and divine action.

Graham Brownlee of Citizens UK picked up the theme of anger as the energising force behind our social justice work. He was joined by Laura of 'Complete Woman', a member institution of West Yorkshire Citizens. Laura spoke of her appreciation for the everyday acts of kindness and solidarity shown to her as someone seeking asylum in the UK. Such kindness gives her hope, and she *continued >*

*Continued from page 9*

spoke of how community organising had enabled her to find her voice and her agency.

### **Reality as the starting point**

Al Barrett's inspirational theological reflections again took reality as the starting point. He characterised our context as one of denial (we deny the systemic and historical violence in which we are complicit; we deny our entanglements with others and with the earth; and we deny the expropriation and exploitation upon which our lifestyles are founded). It is time to discern what is at work in the ruins – to look to salvage, grieve, leave, (re)weave, descend, decompose, dream and dance. He told the story of how his congregation chose to respond to angry demonstrations outside their local asylum seeker hotel. Having engaged with the residents and staff, offering their church as a safe space whilst the demonstrations were happening, church members then circulated amongst the demonstrators, offering fairy cakes and conversation; choosing just to listen, not to argue back; a countercultural and difficult approach, with results that are hard to measure.

Charlotte Naylor Davies chose to focus on popular exhortation to gratefulness, which she said, 'nearly killed my ability to hope'. She said, 'I always believed I was a hopeful person – I worked in very

difficult community situations and I held (and hold) a deep belief that change was possible and worth making the effort for. But in 2009 I got sick with a virus... I haven't had a day since when I've been fully myself. I have lost much to this illness. When I went into spaces that were supposed to help, I was told to do 'gratitude lists'. Pastorally, giving someone like me a gratitude task without allowing them to be annoyed at the pain and suffering they are going through is dangerous... Gratitude with no context, no allowance for yearning, left me thinking all my hopes were deferred and that I was failing. It became impossible to hope for good things as I was beaten into submission by the demand that I be grateful for the crumbs under the table.'

### **'Hope is a position'**

She continued, 'I thought I'd lost the ability to hope. And then I got angry. And then I found my hope again.' Her conclusion? 'Hope is a position we take in the world. It is position that acknowledges two things can be true at the same time – that the world is the way it is, and that the world shouldn't be as it is. That pain is real, and pain is not our only option. That sorrow is there, but that love encompasses it. Gratitude asked me to pretend the bad wasn't there. Hope said, 'It is bad. What else might there be as well?'

Finally, as a biblical scholar, Charlotte pointed us to the Jesus

of the Synoptic Gospels, to his parables, and to the power of imagination:

*'Imagine with me, Jesus says, as he describes a world where good spreads throughout everything, and the tiniest bit of love can shelter many.'*

*'Imagine with me, Jesus says, as he speaks of parents who love beyond measure, and forgiveness that makes no sense.'*

*'Imagine with me, Jesus says, as he describes workers getting enough food to live, and hurt, wounded people being looked after by strangers and enemies.'*

Imagination, then, is a key to Hope. Castor Bending, Modern Church's Communications Officer, offers a poem to conclude these conference reflections – a poem written out of their experience of the event:

### **The Orchard**

*You did not need to invite me to the edges  
for I live there  
constantly dancing on the  
wasteland's edge  
anxiously toeing the line of discomfort  
counting my steps like a  
playground game:  
one  
two  
three  
we all fall down?*

*You did not need to invite me to the edges  
for I walk that route daily,  
checking my defences:*

*crumbling stone walls,  
lines of untended brambles,  
thorns to keep the danger at bay.*

*Discomfort has become comfortable.*

*Threat become my safe space.*

*Grieving, my life.*

*Inarticulation on my tongue,  
the constant stuttering record on loop.*

*I do not know what to say,  
I do not know how to say it,  
not even how to think it:*

*...hope.*

*If hope is a bird, it has flown from me  
trailing feathers in the air.*

*Out of reach. Near out of sight.  
Beyond the thorny edges  
that pin me in.*

*But you invited me to the core,  
to the thick gnarly trunk  
with its deep knotted roots  
and you asked me what lay here  
at the heart.*

*...love.*

*and isn't that all hope really is?*

*Love...  
that flows and feeds  
and turns the mulch of decay  
into life.*

*And lets a thing with feathers  
settle in its branches.*

**Alison Webster** is General Secretary of Modern Church.

## Continence or Chastity?

Adrian Thatcher considers the virtues of the chaste Christian

### Just what do same-sex couples get up to when they have sex?

That is of course a highly prurient question from puzzled gay-curious people that is best left unasked. No-one would publicly ask straight couples what they do when they 'have sex', but the imagination of Anglican bishops and their advisors seems particularly troubled even by the thought that there are people having sex differently from them. In the General Synod paper GS 1430 (para. 81) they get quite worked up about it. They say

'The Church's teaching, as reflected in its formularies, maintains that sexual intimacy is rightly ordered only within marriage between one man and

one woman. When a rite publicly blesses a same-sex couple, and does so without any indication that same-sex sexual expression may be morally problematic, there are many who conclude the effect is to normalise something that the Church has taught is inconsistent with its doctrine'.

Sometimes homophobia is too deep-seated for some people to recognise. The bishops and their advisors entirely fail to recognise that much straight sex is morally problematic too, whether protected by the obscuring shield of marriage or not. Christian marriage is not exempt from manipulation, from physical and psychological violence: indeed in some cases the doctrine of

headship (that also requires uxorial obedience) makes an imbalance of power unavoidable.

The Church's teaching about sex is blandly and misleadingly summarized in this paper. Sexual intimacy is rightly ordered only within marriage between one man and one woman? And this after decades of reporting, listening, and arguing! Not only does this latest attempt to express Anglican 'orthodoxy' fossilise any development of the church's teaching: it implies (and may actually assert) that touching, kissing, cuddling, fondling, and so on, is 'disordered' too unless the (straight) couple engaging in such natural delights has passed through the marital gateway.

There is no room in dogmatic binary thinking (gay/straight; married/single; male/female) for the middle ground. But the middle ground is where most people are, whether traversing it or remaining there for longer.

God-given eros makes most of us seek physical intimacy at some time in our lives. Intimacy is exciting and dangerous: exciting because through it we come to a greater self-knowledge of ourselves and our partners; dangerous because sex cannot be abstracted from power and vulnerability, and the misuse of power can have catastrophic results. But even the GS paper is a misuse of power because it imposes life-denying restraints on faithful Christians who instead

require understanding and prayerful help when occupying the middle ground, not the assertion of fixed, yet glib certainties.

The neo-biblicists are not interested in virtue. If they were, they might reconsider the great virtue of chastity. Instead they require continence. 'Continence' is a horrible word. Incontinence is the inability to retain bodily fluids and its application to sexual activity (or rather inactivity) is about avoiding male ejaculation. The paper doesn't mention continence but that is what it requires from all but the married. It doesn't mention chastity either, to its great detriment.

Chastity is a lot more wholesome, for many reasons. First, chastity is about responsible restraint, not about abstinence. Second, chastity is a virtue all Christians whatsoever are summoned to demonstrate in their lives. Third, chastity is about exercising restraint according to one's state in life. It is relevant to circumstances, and these include people's sexuality. How could it be otherwise? Fourth, cultivating virtue and perhaps the virtue of chastity is also about inwardness and acquiring a benevolent state of mind that embodies divine love. It is not about obeying commandments (except for the two Great ones) but allowing the love of God to flow through our relationships and shape our characters.

The bishops would *continued >*

find the Catholic 'law of gradualism' better suited to exercising their pastoral responsibilities to both straight and queer people. The law of gradualism states that people grow toward their full humanity step by step, and the Church should accompany them patiently as they progress. For people contemplating marriage for the first time, gradualism helps them understand what is going on. They become married gradually. Only when they get there do they ask the church to 'solemnize' what they have already accomplished.

Chastity is a necessary feature of the Christian life. It is sexy to be chaste. Chastity mandates upon us restraint and respect. Chaste Christians will restrain themselves from all sexual expression with their partners, actual or prospective, that is not loving. And the appropriate inwardness that Christians are summoned to cultivate is a basic respect for their bodies and those of their partners. They are 'temple[s] of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 6:19). Chastity rules out promiscuity absolutely, and permits virtuous expressions of bodily love whatever sexuality one happens to have. Amidst the strenuous disagreements about sex among Christians, chastity has the power to draw us together.

Adrian Thatcher is a Trustee of Modern Church.

## A Tribute to David Driscoll

By Richard Truss

**D**avid's death in November was a great shock to many of us and especially for his family, as he was just back in Bradford-on-Avon from walking Hadrian's Wall with his wife Lindsay. He collapsed in the street on his way from his weekly stint picking up litter along the Kennet and Avon Canal to lead the Sabeel prayers for the Middle East in the town's little Saxon church. These two activities speak volumes about David, the link between a very practical local social concern and a passion for God's justice in a suffering world.

I have known David for about 40 years, so it was surprising to learn at his funeral many things about him of which I had no idea, for instance that before ordination for a year he taught maths in Karachi. This led later to an amusing incident in an East End Pakistani restaurant recalled by his son Richard at the funeral:

"We were enjoying the delicious lamb chops and curries and a big party in the VIP section next to us was obviously having a fantastic time with lots of laughter. At the end of the meal, as they stood up to leave, one of the party came over to us to apologise for

all the noise they had made. She explained it was a big reunion from their high school in Karachi. We said, no problem at all; glad they had had fun. At that point there was a pause and a look of astonishment from one of the group. This was followed by a shriek of "Mr Driscoll!" It was a truly amazing coincidence. It was a student who had been taught maths by Dad at Karachi grammar school all those years ago."

David was one of those people who is difficult to pigeon-hole. He was catholic in his tastes and in his embrace of an inclusive faith, but protestant in his astute critiques of church and society. His leading role in the campaign for the ordination of women was noted at his funeral, as was his co-founding with me of the Public Square Group.

David was always concerned that the gospel should relate to and be rediscovered afresh in our world, not just in the individual soul but in the transformation of social and political structures. One of his sons recalled that the family were drawn into this endeavour, taking part in marches such as *Walk for the World, Drop the Debt and Stop the War*. From his work with SCM, in parishes in the East End, and his long-time involvement with Modern Church and membership of the Labour Party, and most recently his leadership in the weekly Sabeel prayers for the Middle East in his local church, he saw clearly that

people need food for the body and for the soul, and that a true love for humanity must include justice.

The two poems read at his funeral bear witness to this concern and to his own warm humanity. The first was Gerard Manley-Hopkins' *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: I say more: the just man justifies; Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces; Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is – Christ – for Christ plays in a thousand places'* *Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his To the Father through the features of men's faces.*

The second Simon Armitage's *Feathered Footman* – David had apparently recently become an Armitage aficionado.

David was a great raconteur. He would be sure at any meeting to have a fitting anecdote to share, a salutary lesson for the more agenda-driven among us. But these anecdotes reflected his way of teaching using his own experience, and he had a gift for this, evident not only in his time in Pakistan but also later as senior tutor on the Chelmsford Course of Christian Studies and then as coordinator of the education programme at the Royal Foundation of St Katherine's in Limehouse.

He was a great traveller and his marriage resulted from this. David first met Lindsay in 1974 in Nairobi. Lindsay was working as a senior government lawyer there and David travelled to Kenya to visit his sister Diana who was

Continued from page 15

teaching there and a great friend of Lindsay. After a long distance relationship, David and Lindsay got engaged in December 1977 and married a year later. I know how much David relied on Lindsay and, for instance, would turn to her as consultant in Public Square Group matters.

Along with many others, I will miss David, not only for his clerical and theological skills but just for being a good and often amusing friend.

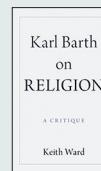
He enjoyed life, particularly music. He told me that as a boy he had been in the choir which sang at the opening service for the Festival of Britain which was held in my old church of St. John's Waterloo. Latterly he belonged to the Bradford-on-Avon Choral Society and the local church choir. But all this was capped by his longtime membership of a barber's shop quartet.

We won't forget David; he is unforgettable. He gave so much to so many and enriched all our lives. I was often inspired by him, and we shared so many passions – from a faith which is open and adventurous and relevant, to our mutual support for Arsenal Football Club.

Dr Richard Truss is a member of Council of Modern Church.

## REVIEWS

# Devastating Critique of Barthian Dogmatics



Keith Ward,  
*Karl Barth on Religion:  
A Critique*  
Cambridge University Press,  
2024

**K**eith Ward has treated us to a very readable and quite devastating critique of Barth's work and especially of his Church Dogmatics. He argues that Barth is wrong on a number of fronts; first in his dismissal of philosophy and natural theology, secondly in his antagonism to liberal theology, thirdly in his aversion to the concept of "religion", both in its Christian guise and in other faiths, and finally in his conviction that all human actions are inherently sinful.

Barth's work can be seen as his reaction to the 1914 "Manifesto of the Ninety-Three" in which ninety-three German intellectuals, including the theologian Adolf Harnack, gave their support to the German cause in the First World War. Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (1918) is his response to this. In it he set out what he saw as St. Paul's

presupposition, that God is completely other, or as Barth puts it, God is pure negation, everything that humankind is not. The church, or at least the reformed church, belongs to a different space, separate from and opposed to the world. Barth's position was reinforced later with the Nazi takeover of 1933, when he was instrumental in the creation of the Barmen Synod of the Confessing Church. Given these events, we can understand how Barth's theology arose, yet as Ward sees it, he was profoundly mistaken.

### Antipathy to Enlightenment

Barth's dismissal of philosophy goes with his antipathy to the whole Enlightenment project. Kant is dismissed as having an "arbitrarily devised image of God", a suggestion which Ward calls totally unjust, as Kant spoke of God (as does Barth himself) as one who cannot be proved by reason, but whose existence must be posited as the basis of morality. Hegel likewise is castigated for devising a mythological description of reality which subordinates religion to philosophy. For Barth all philosophy is vain, as we can only know God through revelation; but, as Ward points out, to make this claim is in itself to make a philosophical assertion. So for instance: 'some initial philosophical commitment (one that admits the possibility of a superior spiritual, conscious, reality) is necessary before it

claims that Jesus mediates such a reality can gain any purchase'. In fact no theologian, Barth included, can avoid metaphysical speculation, i.e. philosophy.

### "True" religion

Barth's antagonism to "religion" stems from the conviction that it is a human construct, rather than what he calls the "true" religion of the Christian revelation. Ward points out Barth's category mistake here. Religions cannot be true or false, any more than we can speak of "true art" or "true music". Religions, Ward says, are not catalogues of belief, but ways of life. Here he turns to Barth's treatment of other faiths and particularly Buddhism and Hinduism in their varied forms. Barth's view was that Christianity should be kept secure within its own revelatory framework. Later he was to acknowledge that other faiths might dimly reflect imperfect understandings of Christian faith, but he remains adamant in his conviction that Christianity is the only vehicle of salvation. For Ward this is an unjustified denial of the work of grace in other faiths, and ignores the fact that as Christians, our faith can be supplemented by other religious insights, for instance the compassion for all living beings in Buddhism as opposed to the predominant anthropocentrism of much Christian theology, or the Hindu emphasis *continued >*

on “God within” which has led to new understandings of prayer. Some of the most interesting parts of Ward’s book are those which deal with examples of how other faiths both complement and supplement Christian faith.

Finally, Barth’s adherence to a doctrine of original sin, with “man a downright monster”, whilst at the same time being completely redeemed by God, is essentially problematic. As Ward says, there is no justifiable way in which human beings can be condemned for sin and esteemed for righteousness at the same time. Barth’s dialectical theology leaves no room for a realistic faith which recognises human ambiguity and necessary theological relativism. Barth espouses certainty in faith: “Uncertainty in the concept of revelation... means lack of faith”. Ward’s rejoinder is that “this seems to me to misunderstand completely what faith means”. What Barth calls “the revelation of God” is no more than what he believes to be the revelation of God.

#### The liberal case

Ward sets out the liberal theological case against Barth thus, in words which Modern Church members would echo:

“It is incoherent to say that a loving God determines what every person will do, and then say all of them, even the best and most morally heroic of human acts, are

condemned by a God who created them. It is incoherent to say that all religions are faithless and then say that one of them is directly given by God.”

#### One route to sanctification

Ward recognises that Barth, in his later works, modified some of the more strident of his assertions, but he never relinquished his foundational belief that there is only one route to sanctification and that is the Christian one. Ward’s coup de grace comes in the final paragraph of the book:

“The great contradiction that I find in Barth is between his affirmation that God is unlimited in love and kindness and his assertion that all religion and seeking for God, as such, is faithlessness and abominated by God. I find that assertion unwarranted and uncharitable, and devastatingly harmful to the development of a truly loving and compassionate Christian faith. That is why I have written this critique - and I perhaps need to point out that all the sometimes blunt and even offensive language I have used has been taken from Barth himself and was used by him to castigate theologians like myself.”

Keith Ward has thrown down the gauntlet and we now await the Barthian response.

— Richard Truss

Dr Richard Truss is a member of Council of Modern Church.

# A Timely Reminder of the Importance of Hope



Matthew Barber-Rowell,  
*Curating Spaces of Hope*  
SCM Press, 2025

**A**s a child, I attended a school that had a rather pretentious Latin motto – *Spero. I hope*. This caused me to reflect many times in what does hope mean, what does it look like, or indeed smell and feel like? I knew what fear felt like, especially when the occasional playground brawls burst into life, but not hope. How could I be a hopeful person, does this just relate to personal success or is there more to it than just a personal feeling?

Over the course of almost 30 years in ministry in various places of transition and turbulence, especially in Hackney and Somers Town/Camden Town where I served as Vicar, and in shaping an Episcopal Area across North London as Bishop, I reflect that the work of curating churches, communities, neighbourhoods of hope that dare to live out a different, Kingdom- and Spirit-fuelled imagination was paramount. This proved to be invaluable after the terrorist attacks of 7/7 in Kings Cross, and then through the aftermath of the riots of the summer of 2011 in Hackney, when the Church needed to lead in community rebuilding.

Over the last three years I have been associated with Church Urban Fund, a creation of the Faith in the City Report into Urban Priority Areas. Over this time we have witnessed further disturbances, a new Labour Government and significant upheaval in public attitude and character. We have witnessed the turbulence too in the Church of England, though safeguarding scandal, deep division over sexual and relational ethics and the resignation of an Archbishop of Canterbury. As the former CEO of ACEVO recently shared, we now live in the never normal, and it certainly feels like this.

Barber-Rowell’s book is both timely and insightful. It draws upon the deep wells of William Temple for the shaping of its theology, amongst others from Gramsci, Bonhoeffer and more recently Reddie. It reminds us of the importance of different kinds of hope, personal, shared and resilient as basic themes for shaping community in the current climate.

It especially speaks of vulnerability in leadership, and the need to build trust within *continued >*

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any given organisation in order for spaces of hope to be shaped, shared and developed, and that this is lived out in the local. Churches are often at the forefront of this work.

### **Community development**

The book helpfully draws too from the principles of asset-based community development, rooted in the unique places where round tables and discussions challenged. The book also recognises the importance of community organising, shaped by a communal experience or issues that need to be addressed, which may not be as paced in its approach. The reference to Rules for Radicals by Saul Alinsky and his experiences in Chicago is especially welcome. This is an approach that has recently been spotlighted through the work of the Centre for Theology and Community in East London, through their organising for growth programme.

Ultimately the book is helpful in setting out the principles of transformational leadership, shaped in the Temple tradition, of freedom, fellowship and service. In the charity and faith sector, where I now find myself, this is countercultural and prophetic. It seems that, as needs increase, much programme-based work is in danger of becoming more transactional in its approach – shaped by KPIs, target setting and the increased need to fulfil the

requirements of funders (mimetic isomorphism). In a context of increasing scarcity of resource there is a danger that the big picture becomes obscured. We (humanity) are not transactional beings but relational, made in God's image. We live out the Trinity, immersed in the perichoretical reality of the Spirit. Curating spaces of hope is therefore a theological necessity, not purely for what can be achieved through them, but in the act itself. This makes 'us' part of this living experience, of God's love affair with His creation.

### **Our time of turbulence**

This is a helpful book for our time of turbulence. Many areas of deprivation, as I witnessed over many decades of ministry, therefore will provide the answers of what this looks like in practice, as communities live with a greater insecurity and greater turbulence. Once again, we are reminded of the Beatitude, Blessed are the poor, and not blessed are those who care for the poor. This is hope in our time, hope for the church and hope for the world.

I'm once again that small child on my way to school, pondering again on the meaning of Spero.

– **Rob Wickham**

**Bishop Rob Wickham** is CEO of Church Urban Fund