

LAURIE GUY: A CRITICAL APPRECIATION

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I have had the privilege of engaging with Laurie Guy across his entire quarter century of teaching at Carey Baptist College. In 1990 I was completing my undergraduate degree via the Auckland Consortium for Theological Education's arrangement with the University of Auckland. In that final year I included a number of history papers, in order to prepare me for subsequent postgraduate study at the University of Canterbury. Laurie had begun teaching part-time at the college and was also completing history papers, in his case for the Master of Arts. On Tuesdays we would travel together to the Auckland campus, discussing method, politics, church trends, our current essays, etc. This was the fertile beginning of a connection that would a few years later cement itself around our collegial relationship as lecturers at Carey. Laurie was appointed to the lecturing staff in 1991; I began in 1995. We would be close colleagues for thirteen years, until I departed to take up my current role at Laidlaw College.

Laurie and I had much in common: a background in law (Laurie as a trained Barrister and Solicitor, I as a Court Registrar), training in history, and a commitment to mission as the context for theology. This did not mean, however, that we naturally agreed on all or many issues. The shared shaping of our backgrounds had one obvious effect, which could be at times a little disturbing to our other colleagues: we argued a lot. Both of us were used to environments of robust debate and the need to penetrate to the source of an issue to wrestle the truth out of it. Staff meetings and tea-room conversations could frequently narrow to the two of us contending for strongly held positions. There was much (then, as now) on which we did not agree, but the robust contention did not (as was sometimes feared by those around us) signal or create a lack of friendship or respect. Indeed, in my case, I came to regard Laurie as one of those few in whom one could fully entrust one's soul. We would tussle over college policy and plans but just as frequently, and to more lasting effect, we would engage issues which touched our teaching and research interests. I have therefore walked with most of Laurie's projects as a critical friend and it is in that spirit that I offer this reflection on his work.

The focus of this essay will be on Laurie's multi-faceted published work, but note must first be taken of Laurie as a teacher. This is no mere polite aside, as the concerns Laurie brought to his research both reflected and informed his teaching. In small colleges one is often handed, at short notice, classes and themes which are not particular areas of expertise. In our recently-completed joint history of Carey Baptist College, Laurie notes that, in his first years, he was called on to teach "church history, homiletics and missions courses, but his initial primary responsibility was New Testament." There was in fact some

student concern that his qualifications in New Testament studies were inadequate. As he suggests, at least on appointment, Laurie was “the last of the generalists.”¹ This is a tough assignment, especially when one has to take over a course another lecturer has been teaching, often with the dubious advantage of using their notes and materials. It takes some time to develop one’s own voice. But develop his own voice in the classroom Laurie most certainly did. Gradually he became able to specialize, primarily in history but, fruitfully as will be seen, also in aspects of New Testament studies. Laurie became one of the most popular lecturers, with a keen eye for application and for the essential points that students needed to absorb. As crucially, his sensitivity to his students, especially those whose cultural backgrounds made western-style learning a challenge, reveals his dual commitments to mission and to stripping away the unnecessary. Both may be observed in his scholarship.

By any analysis, Laurie Guy’s scholarly output is impressive, especially given the fact that he made a late start. Almost all his published work has come within the last 15 years of his career. It would be wrong, however, to conclude he was a late bloomer. Laurie was marked for academic success from High School. He was successful in the national scholarship examination system of the day and could have taken up a range of tertiary options. In the event, he pursued history and law at the University of Auckland. Here too he gained some distinction, completing an LLB (Hons) with a dissertation on the arcane legal concept of “The assignability of choses in action.”² The course of Laurie’s career, however, was not to be a straight line into specialized jurisprudence. After a period practising law, he trained for Baptist ministry. Typically, however, church ministry alone was insufficient to contain his restless mind and after a time he returned to part-time legal practice alongside his pastoral work. By now his concern for mission was clarifying. In 1983 the family moved to West New Britain in Papua New Guinea under the auspices of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society. As that season came to an end, Laurie’s academic skills and interests meant that first study, then a secondment to the N.Z. Baptist Theological College (later Carey) made sense. He arrived there on this basis in 1990 and was appointed as a permanent full-time lecturer in late 1991.

Conscious of his “generalist” demands and aware of his thin academic preparation Laurie speedily completed not one but two Masters degrees—the first in history, the second in New Testament. This established a pattern, whereby Laurie’s growing confidence in scholarship would never become limited to one field or discipline. An engagement with his published work must thus recognize at least four strands, each of which reveal aspects of his central concerns.

- a) *Ways of reading the New Testament*, represented in The Master of Theology thesis, which produced a chapter in a *festschrift* for Principal Brian Smith, and then powerfully in his study on the book of Revelation which is in turn about to be supplemented with a forthcoming second book on the apocalypse.

¹ Martin Sutherland and Laurie Guy, *An Unfolding Story: a history of Carey Baptist College* (Auckland: Archer Press, 2014), 183.

² This dissertation is held in the Davis Law Library at the University of Auckland (Laurie Guy, 1969). For the uninitiated (including me, I had to look it up) “choses in action” are legal rights or claims which are valid but need to be established as such through legal action.

- b) *The experience of the early church*, found most extensively in his 2004 volume *Introducing Early Christianity: a Topical Survey of its Life, Beliefs and Practices*.
- c) *The experience of the church in New Zealand*, including a source book of Baptist documents, a small number of articles and the college history.
- d) *The church's response to public issues in New Zealand*. This will be seen to be Laurie's principal focus, at least in terms of the extent and significance of his published work.

READING THE NEW TESTAMENT

When he commenced as a lecturer in 1991 Laurie was conscious of the essential truth behind some student concerns that he was not sufficiently qualified to teach in his designated area of New Testament studies. With his historical studies for the moment cleared away he launched into a Masters degree in the subject. This was awarded in 1996 by the Australian College of Theology for a thesis entitled "Here, there, among and within: a critique of western dichotomous approaches to the Kingdom of God with reference to selected passages in the Gospel of Luke." Although skilled in Greek, Laurie did not limit himself to a merely technical exegesis here. This was a thesis inspired by the mission field rather than the lexicon. In a later essay, drawn from this material, he notes that "missionaries have the privilege of being allowed into another world, of being enriched by another culture and of recognising that what our own culture takes for granted is often, in fact, not to be taken for granted, that there are other ways of thinking and perceiving and valuing."³ Addressing this missionary insight to the world of biblical interpretation Laurie cites the Chinese concept(s) of Yin and Yang as an example of an alternative way of understanding which enables a release from "western dichotomous approaches" to reading New Testament texts. His test case is Jesus' enigmatic response in Luke 17:20-21 to the demand from the Pharisees as to when the Kingdom would come. Reading with different eyes enables us to recognise "the possibility that Luke has intentionally juxtaposed present-and-future-oriented material in Luke 17:20-18:8 in order to express a total understanding.... His language is allusive, suggestive, equivocal. It embodies a richness of meaning which is lost if one views the Kingdom solely, or even primarily, as either present or future in Luke."⁴

Laurie's concern is typically missional: how are we to read the Scripture more effectively? For a time he now turned his focus elsewhere. A more conventional New Testament PhD thesis might have been the logical next step, but not for Laurie. He needed to return to history. However the concern for better reading of the scriptures did not disappear. It surfaced again in 2009 with his short study *Making Sense of the Book of Revelation* in the Regents Park Study Guides series.⁵ Disturbed at the poor use of Revelation in popular Christianity Laurie sets out to bring the fruits of good scholarship to bear in a manner which enables the glory of the text fully to be captured. Employing his expertise as both an

³ Laurie Guy, "The Kingdom, Present and Future," in *Mission Beyond Christendom: exploring the site* (ed. Martin Sutherland; Auckland: Carey Baptist College, 2000), 63-78, 63.

⁴ Guy, "The Kingdom," 78. See also Laurie Guy, "The Interplay of the Present and Future in the Kingdom of God (Luke 19:11-44)," *Tyndale Bulletin* 48, 1 (1997): 119-37.

⁵ Laurie Guy, *Making Sense of the Book of Revelation* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2009).

historian and a biblical scholar he includes a key chapter on “The Social Context of Revelation” which begins:

It is a great pity that there is commonly a huge gulf between the insights of academic scholars and the views of much populist writing in relation to the Book of Revelation. For this gulf, academic scholars are significantly to blame. Commonly they write primarily for fellow academics. The result is that their arguments are often too dense, too complex, too rarefied for the non-expert. A main purpose of this book is to attempt to bridge that gap.⁶

It seems Laurie largely achieved his goal. The book is often cited in ministry and preaching websites and a second volume “Unlocking Revelation” is to be published by Paternoster.

THE EARLY CHURCH

Laurie has never regarded himself as a New Testament specialist. His areas of greatest concentration have been historical. As indicated, however, even here his interests are many. Most closely linked to his teaching is his work on the early church. The outstanding contribution in this area has been the 2004 *Introducing Early Christianity: a Topical Survey of its Life, Beliefs and Practices*.⁷ Here Laurie deliberately took an unusual approach. The topical arrangement, as compared to the more complex and potentially confusing chronological approach, sets this textbook (for that is what it is intended to be) apart from most others in the field. This is Laurie the up-to-date scholar once again writing with a mission. It is another attempt to bridge a gap. It is “a book for the educated layperson and the undergraduate student....seeking to make modern scholarship available to a more general audience.”⁸

Introducing Early Christianity is Laurie’s best seller. It may not be found in too many airport bookshops, but it remains in print ten years on and the paperback version has been reprinted at least ten times. Reviewers have been enthusiastic, if a little cautious about the limitations of the format. Such reservations are of course unfair. There is no value in reviewing a book the author has *not* written. Accepting what the volume sets out to be, Peter J. Judge, in a lengthy review in *Review of Biblical Literature* sums up its value:

[The author] does not take too much for granted, but he does not insult his reader’s intelligence; he provides plenty of detail but does not sink into a morass of intricacy that can frustrate one who wants intelligently to grasp the big picture.... Guy demonstrates his own command of the material in his comments and analysis along with that of other scholars, as he appropriately draws on the secondary literature as well. This, again, is a rewarding way to

⁶ Guy, *Making Sense of the Book of Revelation*, 15.

⁷ Laurie Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity: a Topical Survey of its Life, Beliefs and Practices* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).

⁸ Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity*, 7.

be introduced to these materials, a way that inspires confidence in the student who wishes to go further.⁹

Judge is describing, of course, the ideal textbook. One which succeeds when the user can say, “I know how to explore further!”¹⁰ It is Laurie Guy at his communicative best.

Laurie has published little else on early church topics. However, one of the secondary items he cites in his textbook is his own article on baptism rituals. “‘Naked’ Baptism in the Early Church: The Rhetoric and the Reality” appeared in the *Journal of Religious History* in 2003.¹¹ Potentially prurient interest aside, this article reveals another aspect of Laurie’s scholarship. Although a generalist in many matters, he at times would get the bit between his teeth on a particular fine point. In this case the issue at stake is the use and meaning of the word *gymnos* in early references to baptism. Always alert to the social context, Laurie was able to argue that the literal sense “naked” need not be assumed and that the shedding of outer clothing only was more likely, especially in the case of female candidates. A strange point to argue? Actually one with significant ramifications, as it potentially called into question whether baptism of females was regarded in the same sacramental light as that of males, and thereby requiring to be performed by a male priest. It is difficult to make original contributions in early church studies, especially from New Zealand. However it is a shame that Laurie, clearly with such a grasp of the overall picture, was not drawn to more such targeted work.

THE CHURCH IN NEW ZEALAND

Sources and gaps in early church studies may be difficult to pursue but the same is clearly not the case for the history of the church in New Zealand. Here too Laurie has played his part. Most recently he provided new impetus and the final sections which enabled the completion of the history of Carey Baptist College, cited earlier. Yet, it is clear that the internal life of the church has not been a principal interest. Once again we come up against the outward, missional focus Laurie brings to all matters. This is illustrated in his volume of documents on Baptist life in twentieth century New Zealand (2005).¹² This was a companion to a volume covering the colonial period, which I had edited a few years earlier. Laurie and I worked closely on the planning and production of his volume. I remember well his natural inclination to focus on mission and society issues and his concomitant reluctance to seek out material illustrating the internal and constitutional dynamics of the denomination. He was eventually persuaded, but the debate indicates the commitment he has shown to public and social issues, which we will discuss in greater depth below.

As with the early church, Laurie’s interest could be piqued by particular issues. He once considered a major study of the ructions at the Auckland Tabernacle in the 1940s—a series of controversies that

⁹ Peter Judge, review of Laurence D. Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity: A Topical Survey of its Life, Beliefs and Practices*, *Review of Biblical Literature*, 9 (2007), 489-93.

¹⁰ Judge, review of Laurence D. Guy, 490.

¹¹ Laurie Guy, “‘Naked’ Baptism in the Early Church: The Rhetoric and the Reality,” *Journal of Religious History* 27, 2 (June 2003), 133-42.

¹² Laurie Guy, ed., *Baptists in Twentieth-Century New Zealand: documents illustrating Baptist life and development* (Auckland: Baptist Research and Historical Society, 2005).

rocked the entire denomination—but felt the outcome could only be negative. Of greater interest has been the more flamboyant public ministries area. In 2005 he was published in the Ecclesiastical History Society proceedings on the ministry of A.H. Dallimore.¹³ In a 2007 article in the *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* he related the Ivor Powell mission of 1955-56.¹⁴ And in 2010 he joined a number of scholars in a book on spirit possession in which Laurie examined the deliverance ministry of the Auckland Assembly of God.¹⁵ Yet, these exceptions prove a rule. Laurie is largely impatient of church-focused, “in-house stuff.” Missionally, theologically, historically, personally, his chief interest lies elsewhere, in the challenging and complex world of social issues and public engagement. It is in this area that the bulk of his published historical work is to be found and arguably where he has made the greatest contribution to scholarship.

PUBLIC ISSUES

Given Laurie’s particular attention to the issue of homosexuality, his many contributions on that subject need to be treated separately as a group. He has, of course, turned his attention frequently to wider public issues. This interest runs right back to the early 1990s with his 1992 M.A. research essay on “The cinematograph film censorship debate in New Zealand, 1965-76.” This would be summarised in his first publication in the *New Zealand Journal of Baptist Research* in 1998.¹⁶ He would follow this up with studies of pacifism,¹⁷ prohibition,¹⁸ and sabbath observance.¹⁹ In 2009 this attention to the regulation of public morality and in particular the role of Christians and the churches in the issues broadened to a re-examination of the 1954 Mazengarb enquiry into underage sex.²⁰ All this is an impressive enough list of studies but they were but preparation for a much larger overview of related questions.

Shaping Godzone: Public Issues and Church Voices in New Zealand 1840-2000 appeared in 2011, published by Victoria University Press.²¹ At over 600 pages it is clearly Laurie’s “big book” and it examines all the types of issues that have compelled his religious history writing. Racism, biculturalism, sex and sexuality, prohibition, war and pacifism, sabbath observance, censorship: subjects he had written on and spoken to for years. It is a massive effort, though not, in my view, his most important. For positive reasons outlined below I will suggest that another of his books deserves recognition as his most significant contribution to

¹³ Laurie Guy, “Miracles, Messiahs and the Media: the Ministry of A.H. Dallimore in Auckland in the 1930s,” in *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representations of Divine Power in the Life of the Church* (eds. K. Cooper & J. Gregory; Studies in Church History 41; Woodbridge: Ecclesiastical History Society, 2005), 453-63.

¹⁴ Laurie Guy, “‘The Man from Wales’: A Study of the Mission of Ivor Powell in New Zealand 1955-1956,” *PJBR* 3/1 (April 2007): 21-46.

¹⁵ Laurie Guy, “Spirit Possession and Deliverance Ministry in the Auckland Assembly of God, 1970–1983,” in *Spirit Possession, Theology and Identity: A Pacific Exploration* (ed. E. Wainwright; Hindmarsh, Sth. Aust.: ATF, 2010), 209-40.

¹⁶ Laurie Guy, “The Cinematograph Film Censorship Debate in New Zealand, 1965-1976,” *NZJBR* 3 (1998): 19-39.

¹⁷ Laurie Guy, “Baptist Pacifists in New Zealand: Creating division in the fight for peace,” *Baptist Quarterly* 40/8 (2004): 488-99.

¹⁸ Laurie Guy, “‘Romanists’ for Rum, Baptists against Booze: Two Churches in the struggle over prohibition in 1919,” *PJBR* 2/1 (April 2006): 63-82.

¹⁹ Laurie Guy, “The Rise and Fall of the Sabbath in New Zealand 1860-2000,” *PJBR* 5/2 (October 2009): 5-38.

²⁰ Laurie Guy, “‘Moral Panic’ or Pejorative Labelling? Rethinking the Mazengarb Inquiry into Underage Sex in the Hutt Valley in 1954,” *Journal of Religious History* 33, 4 (December 2009): 435–51.

²¹ Laurie Guy, *Shaping Godzone: Public Issues and Church Voices in New Zealand 1840-2000* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011).

New Zealand religious history. What, then, of *Shaping Godzone*? Is it open to critique? In my view, yes. Laurie will recognise echoes of tea-room wrangles when I suggest that there is not enough church in his big book. Naturally I wish to avoid the reviewer's curse, already mentioned, of demanding a book not written. This book is a huge achievement, one which probably no-one among us but Laurie could have pulled together, but I wonder if the churches don't disappear into the issues. More than one reviewer (some pushing their own barrows) has pointed out that the author's disapproval of a number of historical church attitudes or campaigns comes through clearly, at times sharply.²² In and of itself I do not regard this as a fault. The best history (or at least the most influential) is usually opinionated in some way. However, what I would have valued, and what Laurie's natural impatience with "in-house stuff" perhaps precluded, was a more sensitive exploration of *why* our forebears thought as they did. By such, I suggest, we are more likely to recognise our contemporary blind spots. So, extensive as it is, in my view *Shaping Godzone* does not provide a full picture. In the final analysis no one book could, of course, and despite my questions, it comes closest yet to a Christian narrative of the New Zealand story.

I turn, finally, to the corpus of work Laurie has produced on the social issue which has clearly fascinated him and which was the focus of his PhD research: the New Zealand debate over homosexuality. His work in this area has been prodigious, leading to a stunning range of article-length treatments and of course the monograph (also with Victoria University Press) which contains the findings of the PhD research. I will return to the monograph with its infamous pink cover directly. It is, however, worth noting first the remarkable nature of the project itself. As do many Christian historians, Laurie elected to conduct his research under the auspices of a secular institution, in this case, the University of Auckland, where he was ably supervised by Linda Bryder and Judith Bassett. This in itself was clearly the sound choice. Christian historians, no less than any others, will be credible only if they are attuned to the conventions of the discipline and its debates. However, to choose a topic imbued with this level of passion and controversy and to submit methodology and findings to that wider environment was a bold decision. The project without question would have failed had he not done so, but it is the measure of Laurie's commitment to this level of public engagement that he pursued it in the way he did. He built relationships with many among the gay community and gained access to key players and archives. The result was a thesis produced in not much longer than the minimum time, during most of which he was carrying a full lecturing load at Carey.

In 2002 the thesis was published as *Worlds in Collision: the Gay Debate in New Zealand, 1960-1986*. It has become one of the standard texts on this area of social history in New Zealand. Reviewing the book in the *New Zealand Journal of History*,²³ David Hilliard of Flinders University concluded it was "to be warmly welcomed as a significant contribution to our understanding of New Zealand society in the latter half of the twentieth century." Importantly, Hilliard also ponders the unexpectedly measured and even handed treatment of the issues.

²² See eg. Jonathan Beazer, *New Zealand Sociology* 28/1 (2013), 175; Paul Morris "Retro Righteous Indignation," *New Zealand Books*, December 2011; Mike Grimshaw, *NZ Journal of History* 46/1 (2012), 110.

²³ *New Zealand Journal of History* 37, 2 (2003): 220.

As a lecturer in the New Zealand Baptist Theological College, in a denomination whose members were mostly vehemently opposed to relaxing the law on male homosexuality, Guy understands the mind-set and rhetoric of religious conservatives and fundamentalists but he maintains a critical stance. Not many historians of this subject have managed to present the views of both sides with such balance.

This is a fair assessment and a stunning endorsement for any historian. That more can be and has been said on the subject matter is obvious, but the tone and excellence of Laurie's work was such that his standing as a voice to be heard on the matter was securely established. It is, moreover, research which has continued to bear fruit.

Some half-dozen substantial papers and articles plus numerous columns have appeared.²⁴ Laurie has presented in medical forums and in various news media as well as to a wide variety of interested church groups from youth to retired ministers. Indeed, here we get to the nub of the significance of this body of Laurie's work, and in fact his contribution to Christian scholarship in New Zealand. Laurie has been invited to address the fraught and complex, certainly controversial issues of human sexuality in many places, to many audiences. He has done so with aplomb and with wide acceptance. He has taken stances, most recently over marriage equality with which not everyone agrees. Yet, he remains a voice to be heard in the public square and among the churches. That is a massive achievement. There are many voices on such issues, clamouring to be taken notice of, but few achieve the audiences that Laurie has. Why? Because his views are anchored in a deep, scholarly understanding of his subject matter. He is in fact a great advertisement for the PhD process. Few others reach the audiences he does—because, put simply, most know little about which they speak. Laurie has shown what genuine scholarship can produce.

There is another sense in which Laurie's work in issues of sexuality is significant for all of us seeking to be Christian scholars in the contemporary world. Here is someone who has successfully tackled the most controversial of issues and more than held his own in the marketplace of ideas. Peter Lineham has recently noted that, although the flourishing of religious history in this country has yet to register a major impact on general histories, "as the single narrative of New Zealand history is slowly dislodged, it is bound to happen."²⁵ It will be work of the calibre of Laurie's which achieves this breakthrough. He has shown that, if prepared well, Christians can indeed live in the public square. If this can be done with a question as divisive societally as homosexuality has been, then other issues need not intimidate us. Christians in universities have known this for a long time but scholars in the denominational and independent colleges have often found it easier to recycle the same issues to the same weary audiences.

²⁴ See e.g. Laurie Guy, "'Straightening the Queers': Medical Perspectives on Homosexuality with Particular Reference to Mid-Twentieth Century New Zealand," *Health and History* 2, 2 (2000): 101-20; Laurie Guy, "Between a Hard Rock and Shifting Sands: Churches and the Issue of Homosexuality in New Zealand, 1960-86," *Journal of Religious History*, 30, 1 (February 2006): 61-76; Laurie Guy, "Evangelicals & the Homosexual Law Reform Debate 1985-1986," *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 13, 4 (2005): 69-77; Laurie Guy, "Is gay good?: Responding to Brian Harris's discussion of Stanley Grenz in the context of the Gay Marriage debate," *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 19/ 3 (Nov 2012):18-26.

²⁵ Peter J. Lineham, "Trends in Religious History in New Zealand: from Institutional to Social History," *History Compass* 12/4 (2014): 333-43.

Laurie Guy has shown us a better way.

Not bad for a generalist.