

## REVIEWS

MYRA BLYTH, ANDY GOODLIFF, EDS. *GATHERING DISCIPLES: ESSAYS IN HONOR OF CHRISTOPHER J. ELLIS*. (286 PP.) EUGENE, OR: PICKWICK PUBLICATIONS, 2017. ISBN: 9781498231572

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My introduction to the work of Christopher J. Ellis was through the volume, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples* which he edited along with Myra Blyth on behalf of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. As a new pastor, with a passion for meaningful words guiding gathered worship services, this volume is greatly shaping the way I lead. It was a pleasure, then, to encounter more of Ellis' work through the Festschrift, *Gathering Disciples: Essays in Honor of Christopher J. Ellis*. This work, edited by Blyth and Goodliff, contains fourteen essays all in some way reflecting on the hymns that Ellis wrote throughout his career as a Baptist pastor, college principal, union president, and chair of various committees and councils. The contributors, an almost complete 'who's who' of British Baptist theologians, were given one of Ellis' hymns to reflect on and the result is a feast of insights into British Baptist life with which New Zealand Baptist pastors and leaders could greatly benefit from engaging. It is from this specific New Zealand and Baptist vantage point I offer this review.

To explore Ellis' liturgical theology, each author explores a different element of Baptist church life either at a local or a Union level. Themes of worship, discernment, and mission as well as a theological reflection on the Trinity and ecumenism are explored. There is an incredible breadth of reflection found within these pages.

This *Festschrift* is what Ellis himself speaks of as "Liturgical Theology" by which he means engaging in a process that explores the beliefs of a Christian community by studying its worship practices (p. 5). Despite Ellis' considerable influence on British Baptist life through the many different roles and his writing of hymns, Shona Shaw wonders "If research were to be carried out today in our UK churches, what practices in our congregational singing would it uncover?" (p. 49). I also wonder what would be the result of a similar exercise in New Zealand Baptist churches?

Without a doubt one of the main strengths of this *Festschrift* is its invitation for those in pastoral leadership to carefully consider the worship practices of our congregations. The convictions that Ellis holds which binds the practices of worship together are simple and profound:

1. Attention to Scripture;
2. Personal devotion and openness to the Spirit;
3. A concern for the community of the church;
4. A missiological and eschatological dimension focussed on the Kingdom (p. 6).

These convictions form the basis of Ellis' understanding that "Worship is directed to God, but also *forms* those who worship" (p. 13). They highlight the narrow nature of many contemporary worship songs, focussed perhaps too much on personal devotion to Christ or more often Christ's personal devotion to an individual. They serve as a reminder that the gathered worship service is something much more significant than a collection of individuals praying and praising God, rather, as Gardiner states, "the church is specifically called to proclaim in word and deed that Jesus is their Lord and in worship are invited to participate in a performance of Christ that names, unmasks and engages the surrounding and opposing powers" (p. 28). It is this radical nature of the gathered worship service which challenges the ease with which many approach church life. In its worship practices, the opportunity is given to the church to become, as Gardiner quoting Bonhoeffer states, "a section of humanity in which Christ has really taken form" (p. 28). The chapters reflecting on worship practices invite serious reflection on, but more significantly than that, action to be taken as a result of the church's worship practices.

With a focus on seeking together the mind of Christ being central to Baptist identity, the chapters which explore communal discernment and the practice which results are another strength found within *Gathering Disciples* pages. A fascinating reflection on the journey of the Baptist Union of Great Britain's (BUGB) discernment regarding both gender and marriage equality by Beth Allison-Glenny was, to me, the standout chapter. Allison-Glenny articulates the way in which the BUGB has committed to reading scripture together, which spaciouly gives room for dissent due to the emphasis on "the role of the local church for interpretation of Scripture" (p. 90). Whilst local churches are responsible for discerning the mind of Christ, there of course, is also a place for denominational discernment. The BUGB, then, holds as normative the affirmation of women in ministry, whilst also acknowledging that there are those who disagree. However acknowledging the space for disagreement does not necessarily result in the voices which disagree being unequivocally accepted. Quoting from a report presented to the BUGB Council in 2010, Allison-Glenny states: "Commitment to the full inclusion of women in leadership is our 'norm.' ... Those who want to disagree and want to be part of the family have to reckon with that. There is a place for dissent ... but dissent as a Baptist is to speak up for justice at great personal cost; it is not to perpetuate injustice at great cost to others ..." (p. 92). This statement holds firmly to the position the BUGB

holds, whilst enabling the Baptist hermeneutic emphasising discernment in the local church to also be upheld. An equally bold and gracious example of sitting with difference.

My one critique of *Gathering Disciples* is a contextual one. NZ Baptists have much to learn from the BUGB however as outsiders of the British and European context a few of the later chapters will likely feel bogged down in contextual detail which is difficult to translate. The exception to this would be the historical story of recent decades in the BUGB in Andy Goodliff's chapter on mission and how the equivalent of their National Leaders impacted the Union's view on mission and evangelism. Given the current space of transition that the Baptist Union of New Zealand is in, this chapter could be a helpful guide for this context.

Beyond the first three chapters, Ellis' hymns become more of a spring-board for further reflection into practice, but the writers never lose sight of the theme they have chosen to focus on from his writing. In this way there is much inspiration that can be taken from the idea of pastors writing hymns for their own congregations and contexts. If the hymns that are reflected upon in this *Festschrift* are any indication of the richness and depth that can come from doing so, it is hard to imagine what is stopping us from undertaking such a task in a New Zealand context.

STEVEN R. HARMON, *BAPTIST IDENTITY AND THE ECUMENICAL FUTURE: STORY, TRADITION, AND THE RECOVERY OF COMMUNITY*. WACO, TX: BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. (359 PP.) ISBN 9781602585706

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The content of *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future* (BIEF) directly coheres with the author's self-identification as a "Baptist ecumenical theologian" (p. ix), and is the obvious fruit of Harmon's own ecumenical engagement and writing over the years, already reflected in previous publications such as *Towards Baptist Catholicity* (Paternoster, 2006) and *Ecumenism Means You Too* (Cascade Books, 2010). The volume has sparked much engagement, including an entire recent issue of the *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* (Nov 2016) which reproduced the responses of four Baptist scholars from a May 2016 panel discussion.

On the one hand, Harmon wants Baptists to engage in the costly work, here and now, towards the "visible unity" of the global Church, instead of being content with "quantitative catholicity" (membership in the universal Church, p. 7) until the future return of Christ. Baptists need to embrace the biblical and qualitatively catholic nature and practices of the churches from