

## IN THIS ISSUE: WHAT'S IN A NAME?<sup>1</sup>

What, indeed, is in a name? “Bible and the Contemporary World,” the name on this masthead, is descriptive although not trendy. The challenge for an editor is to make each issue live up to the name and give readers a few prompts for how the articles can be read as more than a strip of unrelated offerings, excellent though each might be, encouraging readers to think further about how papers on disparate topics might talk to each other. Our hope is that each issue of the journal is a true neighborhood of valuable resources for the long-haul that are at the same time contemporary enough to be germane in a serious way both to current events and biblical texts.

Realizing that hope in 2020, in the midst of pandemics, economic upheavals, protests peaceful and not so peaceful, and climate catastrophes, proves dizzying. In Oscar Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Markby tells Mabel Chiltern, “You are remarkably modern, Mabel. A little too modern, perhaps. Nothing is so dangerous as being too modern. One is apt to grow old-fashioned quite suddenly.” Wilde, of course, never met an epigram he didn’t like, but usually behind the playfulness there’s a point. Today’s modern is tomorrow’s passé. For proof, we need look no farther than our closets. This is not unique to theology. “Post-contemporary art” has been a school since, apparently, 2005, and must by this point itself be old news.

So, editing a journal like this in times like this can make one feel a bit Mabelish. Nevertheless, contemporary relevance does not have to mean surfing the waves of incoming fads. Relevance means responding to current concerns by critically-appropriate ancient wisdom, in a manner dynamic in the light of often rapidly unfolding situations. Take, for example, the first paper in this issue, “Green Gospel,” by Nicola Bull. Bull is a 2011 graduate of the program, so we knew early on, given developments in environmental science, policy, and politics, that it would be appropriate for her to write a short addendum to her paper. Except that the pandemic hit after she wrote the addendum, and she had to supplement the addendum with its own addendum, about the environmental implications of the Covid shutdown. In the case of Gray Gardner’s thoughtful dissertation on virtual worship services, just the reverse happened. How could Gardner, writing in late 2019, have known that the challenge of worshiping faithfully without meeting in person would

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be the front and center problem for churches around the world just a few months later? Scripture surprises us that way, tenacious in retaining its relevance.

Thus, Bull's paper on Christian environmentalism, Jenny Lunn's paper on social care of the aged, and David Conway's research on troubled children all confront problems that are both contemporary and ancient: "*And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it;*" "*Honor thy father and thy mother;*" "*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.*" These three offerings share more than that: they all ask what the common good demands of us. Gardner's paper, in turn, asks a contemporary question about a teaching straight from Matthew's gospel: what does it mean for two or more of us to gather in His name?

Bob Phillips paper on the *Left Behind* series of books, on the other hand, asks something of the obverse question. Can a worldwide cultural phenomenon such as a set of mass market paperbacks, complete with improbably-named characters, movie tie-ins, marketing souvenirs, and product placement, have any real basis in Scripture or theology: in this case, the Book of Revelation and premillennial dispensationalism? Do they, in fact, deal in any sort of serious way with eschatological questions that were asked before and will continue to be asked by Christians everywhere? The intersection of High Theology Street and Lower Culture Boulevard is always full of noise and activity, blaring car horns and shaking fists, with the more-than-occasional collision, but, Phillips asks, can anything profitable thrive there?

If our troubled times teach us anything, and as (I hope) the contents of this edition show us, the truths taught us by the Bible – compassion, community, justice, faith, and hope – are not only contemporary without being faddish. Ancient, maybe old-fashioned, wisdom is critically re-appropriated in the articles in this issue. Let us all pray for better times soon to come.

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