

today the book is an excellent introduction. But as regards its title, 'Understanding Christianity' I am less sure. The early chapters left me rather wondering what it was about Jesus that was so significant that he made the impact that he did. Little or no attention is given to his ministry and teaching and why it led to the scandal of crucifixion. Some engagement with recent New Testament scholars such as Borg, Sanders and Wright, albeit at a popular level, would have been helpful and might have led into a consideration of the extraordinary adaptability of the Christian faith throughout history.

The main questions that I am left with however, concern who this book is for, and how it is located in relation to the plethora of recent books introducing the Christian faith. At times the style seems geared towards the completely uninitiated (e.g. the chapter on going to church). At other points it seems aimed at a rather more informed and sophisticated audience. For an intelligent Christian reader with a reasonable knowledge of the Gospels, but seeking a deeper understanding of the development of the faith over the centuries, this would be extremely helpful. But whether or not that is for whom it was intended is another matter.

Lance Stone,
Westminster College,
Cambridge



Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition, Christopher J. Ellis. London: SCM Press, 2004, pp. 300, ISBN 0334029678. £15.99

Most studies of the theology of worship tend to be biased towards those denominations and traditions which have a written liturgy and a weekly Eucharist. Often such writing on the worship of God's people is seriously flawed because insufficient attention has been paid to the free church tradition, i.e. that strand of Christianity which celebrates Holy Communion infrequently, whose worship has no fixed prayer book, and where a great emphasis is placed on preaching. To refer to these churches as 'non-liturgical' is to insult them, for to define a

worshipping people by what they are not, rather than by what they are, is to miss the whole point of their shared life in Christ. Christopher Ellis sets out to put this fault right in a penetrating book, written unashamedly from a free church perspective and especially from his own English Baptist tradition.

However, Ellis is no advocate of a narrow sectarianism. Indeed he is greatly influenced in his analysis of worship by the work of the Eastern Orthodox scholar Alexander Schmemmann, who holds that historically as well as theologically worship comes before theology. Ellis readily adopts Schmemmann's motto, 'lex orandi, lex credendi' meaning that patterns of free church worship will be a sure indication of the heart of free church faith. In outlining the heart of Baptist and free church worship Ellis shows evidence of extensive research among the early fathers of the Baptist movement in England, especially in the formative years of the seventeenth century. Throughout he displays a love of his subject which only an 'insider' could have. One cannot help but be impressed by his confession:

It has fascinated and frustrated me that so much published church history writing is about personalities and politics, structures and strategies rather than spirituality and worship.
(p. 246)

It is important to grasp how Baptist attitudes have been shaped by their history. As a radical, anti-establishment movement Baptists asserted the 'crown rights of the Redeemer', claiming that Jesus Christ alone is Lord and that His lordship may not be usurped by a state church imposing a uniform liturgy.

Ellis takes the reader through the important 'ordinances' of Baptist worship. Free prayer is given its rightful place as a noble way of responding to the Almighty. The great emphasis on preaching is explained from the perspective of both preacher and congregation. The ever-increasing stress on hymn-singing reminds us that hymns function in the dissenting tradition in the same way that the liturgy functions in Anglican worship.

The free churches had their origins as an underground movement, often forced into meeting in secret. They flourished in the eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment. It is therefore not surprising that they tend to exalt the Word over the sacrament and to treat with suspicion the use of symbols in worship. Their observance of the Lord's Supper is often an introspective remembrance of the death of Christ devoid of any trace of celebration. Ellis expresses the opinion that it is good for Baptists, obsessed as they are with subjective faith and abstract worship, to encounter the material elements of bread and wine, God's earthly reminders of Christ's atoning death.

A most interesting chapter for those of us outside the Baptist tradition is the one describing the theology and practice of believers' baptism. Baptists feel free to make assumptions about the meaning of baptism in the New Testament and then jump over centuries of church tradition and theology to their present stance. However, Ellis makes it plain that Baptists, while disapproving of infant baptism, do not 'unchurch' those who practice it. It is also interesting to discover that for Baptists, the act of baptism does not inevitably lead to full membership of the church.

Ellis' achievement is to create a fine study of a neglected field of worship theology. It is clear to the reader that writing it was for him a labour of love. All who read *Gathering* will come to share something of Ellis' joy in the so-called non-liturgical tradition. However, the book suffers from the lack of a robust critical appraisal of the assumptions underpinning free church worship and practice. One of the buzz words of the free church tradition is 'sincerity'. It is assumed that churches without prayer books are sincere and that those using them are lacking in sincerity, surely a highly questionable conclusion. Moreover the notion that informality in worship is the mark of sincerity also deserves to be challenged. Those of us in the Free Churches who have suffered under the egotistical posturings of 'sincere' pastors know the pitfalls that lie ahead of those who dispense with liturgical planning and a proper understanding of the dignity required in the presence of God. The danger of personality-centred worship is hinted at in a

telling sentence in which Ellis indicates what way the wind is blowing in Baptist churches today:

Where other churches might have an altar, they have a table, where others process, their leaders slip into their respective places at the beginning of worship, and where others face east, Baptists face the preacher – and, increasingly, the musicians.
(p. 177)

Ellis admits that Baptists are now “part of what might be called a ‘pan-Evangelical’ shift in worship culture.” Indeed the English Baptist Union’s official hymn book published in 1991 is now out of print, having received support from barely a quarter of the denomination’s churches. But Ellis makes no assessment of what this pan-Evangelical movement, which is strong in all denominations, might mean for his and other traditions. Could it be that the free church tradition, so long the underdog, is now taking over all our churches, carried on an irresistible tide of sentimental ‘pop’ praise, shallow, over-emotional preaching, and the all-conquering Alpha Course? Ellis insists that ‘the doctrinal critique of worship is a natural part of the Protestant tradition’ (p. 249). Yet his book, excellent though it is, shies away from this much needed critical assessment.

Denis Campbell,
St. Andrew’s Church,
Blackrock,
County Dublin



Parallel Lives: The Relation of Paul to the Apostles in the Lucan Perspective, Andrew C. Clark. Carlisle: Paternoster (Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs), 2001, pp. xviii + 385, ISBN 1842270354. £19.99

The Genre, Composition and Hermeneutics of James, Luke L. Cheung, Carlisle: Paternoster (Paternoster Biblical and Theological Mono-graphs), 2003, pp. xvi + 372, ISBN 1842270621. £24.99

