



MISSION

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CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture

POWER



Are we holding on to it?

Q&A:

JUSTIN WELBY

04// *The Archbishop of Canterbury on power and the World Church*

02// *POWER, STRATEGY AND TACTICS* 06// *Q&A WITH BWA CHIEF, ELIJAH BROWN* 08// *WOULD BREXIT HAVE HAPPENED IF WOMEN WERE IN POWER?* 10// *ANDREW GRAYSTONE: POWER, PRIVILEGE AND THAT VIGIL* 11// *SHOCK NEWS: A WHITE MAN GETS A CHANCE TO SPEAK* 12// *GOD AND THE BIG BATTALIONS* 14// *HAVILAH DHARAMRAJ ON HAGAR*

ARE WE THE MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE?



“I have the power!” is a quote not brought up often enough at the Global Leadership Summit or in the *Harvard Business Review*. It seems to me the definitive quote on power relations considered through a Marxist, feminist, post-colonial or Christian lens. It was, of course, spoken by He-Man in the classic 80s cartoon. And the image of the undeniably male, unfeasibly muscle-bound, intensely Caucasian, Lego-haired hero being struck by lightning and somehow managing to still look smug and triumphant is a great place to start in any serious discussion of power. Perhaps the only place.

Stay with me.

Power in the hands of unmerited privilege (in Prince Adam’s case, hereditary privilege) is something we can all, in 2019, agree is probably a bad thing. The disproportionate overrepresentation of Anglo-Saxon and male decision makers in the halls of power like Government, corporations and the Church must, at this point, be a problem most of us want to address, too. After all, regardless of your ideological bent, limiting the pool from which we draw our leaders to something so narrow must consequently feel shallow, no? Power dispersed through diversity just makes good efficient sense if you believe it can be exercised well.

Of course, you may not. Anarchists of various stripes (including some emerging churchpersons, very serious nonconformists and prophetic progressives) have expressed severe misgivings about power itself. Indeed, the Right Reverend Justin Welby, not an anarchist of any stripe I think, says in an interview in this issue of *Catalyst* that power has a tendency to corrode, if not corrupt. And there are other voices within

“Power in diversity makes sense”

the church, getting louder as our political and corporate leaders become more and more appalling, who say that the very exercise of power is unrighteous. Whether we believe them or not has significant implications for mission and for the body of Christ generally.

After all, can we really say that we are partnering as equals with the Majority World Church if we have the power to pull tight the purse strings? I would argue yes, as almost every blessing or privilege carries with it the responsibility to do all we can to use it wisely. But the temptation to control, for the best reasons, will always be strong for those in (or with, or exercising) power.

One way we can perhaps avoid the pitfalls of power is transparency and openness to having our privilege and its blind spots and assumptions called out and examined. The humility to recognise that inherent in our relationships we may have dominative power just by virtue of having strength. And hiding it, like Prince Adam hid his He-Man identity, is not only disingenuous, but actually dangerous.

But so is the assumption that divesting ourselves of any and all power is always heroic. Sometimes it is. And sometimes it is running away from a responsibility and a duty. I would personally rather have leaders exercise power to coerce taxation out of citizens so that our National Health Service continues to alleviate suffering. You might enjoy the security that comes from the exercise of policing

or military power. We must not kid ourselves that a withdrawal from power leaves an egalitarian utopia. Remove the government from Somalia and the warlords rush in. Remove government regulation and banks run amok. Leave things as they are and the Northern and Western Church will continue to dominate the Global South. Paradoxically it takes the power of leadership and institutions with money and influence to tip that balance at anything more than a glacial pace.

So, in the spirit of the little “Hey kids...” He-Man homily at the end of every episode of *Masters of the Universe* (the more you think of it, the more it just screams hegemony, right?), can we commit to a new way of power? Can we forge a new approach to dealing with those over whom we have influence or control, where we use our power for ‘their’ interests rather than our own? If that is our aim, then we need to be proactive and serious in our attempts to understand our own biases and blind spots. And we need to exercise our power in a way that always makes space to give (or lend) some of it to others who are not like us. Power is at its most useful, perhaps, when it is following and learning from others rather than trying to lead and teach them. But that involves humility. And humility is almost always painful at its start, if it is real.

I’m personally not naturally gifted at this (the homilies or the humility). But, then, I was always more of a Skeletor man myself.

Jonathan Langley
Head of Creative Content
BMS World Mission



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Director for Training and Hospitality at BMS World Mission

STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS

THE POWER AND PRIVILEGE OF CONTROL

BUSINESS, POLITICAL AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP HAVE IN RECENT YEARS SEEMED OBSESSED WITH STRATEGY. COULD WE BENEFIT FROM RELINQUISHING THE PRIVILEGE OF POWER AND EMBRACE TACTICS IN FAVOUR OF STRATEGY?

In his intriguing book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau, the French Jesuit philosopher, provides insight into the exercise of power, or control, in his reflections on strategy and tactics. He notes that strategy is the preferred practice of those who think themselves in control; those with the big picture, the deep pockets and the long view. He points out that strategies are worked out in rarefied environments, by self-selecting groups. Such groups, we may add, armed with a blank piece of paper, assume an access to the future which they can describe in the past tense, for the purposes of planning. They also have a mastery of sequential logic, enabling them to work from effects back through causes in order to plot a route to their preferred future.

De Certeau's objection is that the closed room shuts out more than it captures in terms of understanding of the world. The blank piece of paper cannot do its task; it lacks the contours and texture of reality. The segregated group of strategists needs to get out more often. Or perhaps to invite others in. Big problems, like Brexit, making America great or doing mission within secularism, reveal that we still hold a nostalgia for heroic leadership, that can emerge from the bunker to plot a path to success and demonstrate the determination to get there.

Reflecting on Complexity Theory in her classic book, *Leadership and the New Sciences*, Margaret Wheatley points out, though, that change happens at the boundaries rather than in the boardroom. She also notes that

in order to address the complex issues of a globalised world, which have a dizzying number of moving parts, the key capacity is to be able to open the door, get out of the room and around the right tables, and work with what comes out of the mix. Kester Brewin points out in *The Complex Christ*, that when measured against traditional metrics of power, "complexity theory... provides us with a form of leadership that has very little power." De Certeau, on the other hand, points out the weakness of our habitual notions of control.

Whereas tactics are normally considered as subservient to strategy – the means of its implementation – De Certeau, straying from the military realm into ordinary life, sees them as a means to subvert strategy. Or at least of coping with it. Tactics are the response of ordinary people to the strategies that were decided upon in closed rooms, at a distance from the environment they aim to change. We may think of the traffic planners and the Deliveroo courier who must navigate space quickly and efficiently, cutting corners where necessary. We could also think of the difference between the Chancellor of the Exchequer and a homemaker, making ends meet on a tight budget, or even environmental policy makers and Extinction Rebellion.

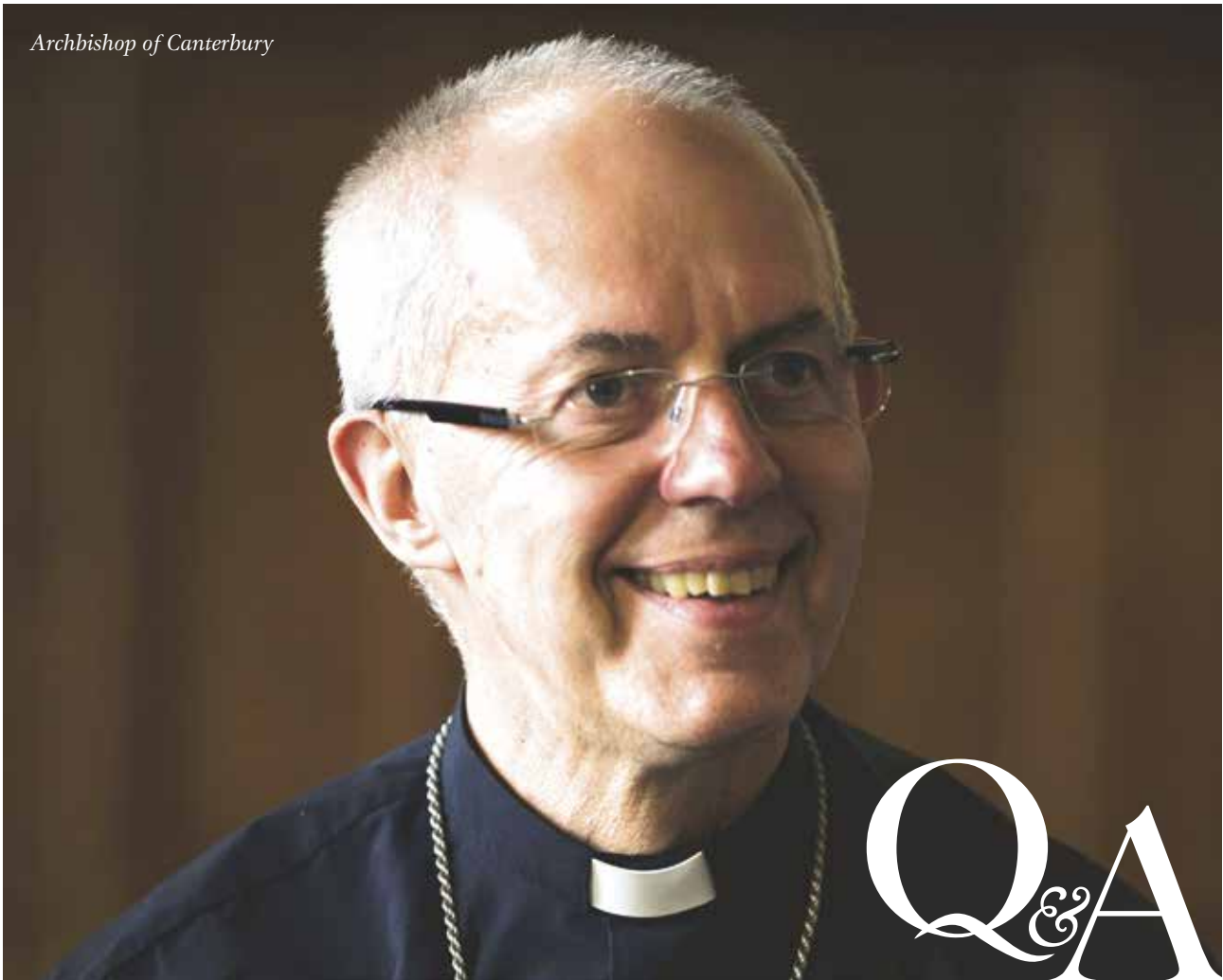
Tactics are taken up with reacting to the environment, making do, taking initiatives and assessing their impact. Tacticians don't assume the ability to make sweeping changes but, as able improvisers, they engage with things as they are and require skill in observation and adaptation. Imagination. De Certeau credits those who

operate at a tactical level with a different relationship to the future. Rather than setting up camp in a certain future and working backwards through cause and effect, they have an orientation towards the present that sees possibilities, and at best glimpses destinations. Tacticians act into an uncertain future.

"A tactic... must accept the chance offerings of the moment and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse."

I imagine that for most of us the description of the strategist sounds like the exercise of real power, proper leadership, while the portrayal of the tactician seems whimsical. Strangely, though, it is the tactician who grapples with life as it is lived, where it is lived. While he makes tacticians sound more playful than many may feel while they are coping with other people's strategies, de Certeau does enable us to imagine a kind of action that doesn't require the illusion of control in order to get started. It doesn't entail giving up on the hope for change, or the will to be part of it. It recognises that change is a complex phenomenon which requires the coincidence of multiple actors and circumstances and is aimed at a future that is only fleetingly glimpsed. Action on a wing and a prayer: 'your kingdom come'.

Archbishop of Canterbury



JUSTIN WELBY

ANGLICANISM'S MOST POWERFUL PERSON ON POWER DYNAMICS BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE REST.

Do you recognise the contention that it's time the Church in the West and the North listens better to the Majority World Church, or do you think that's a red herring?

It's certainly not a red herring, whatever it is, but listening isn't enough. We have to change. This has been a real thing of mine for a very long time, most of my life, since being greatly influenced by Kenyan Christians in the 1970s. But in just the last few months I've been enormously struck by Robert Heaney's book called *Post-Colonial Theology*. Anyone who's

concerned about differentials of power should read that book. It's uncomfortable reading. A very powerful book. The point is that we've moved from a point of straightforward colonialism through to saying: 'It's a very good thing that local people are made bishops', through to where we are now which is to say: 'We must listen to the Global South.' We love our sisters and brothers in the Global South, provided they agree with us. If they don't agree with us, then to quote Bishop Jack Spong in the 90s: "Well then they're just one generation away from barbarism."

Wow. That's horrendous.

It's the other side of horrendous. I mean nowadays, I think it would genuinely be called racist, and quite rightly. I've had a theologian in this country say to me: 'Why are you so concerned about Global South theology? There aren't any serious theologians in the Global South.' So, it's a long answer, but it's a very profound question, of course we've got to listen. We could go a long way beyond listening. We've got to allow ourselves to be changed.

How do I listen to my Ugandan brothers when they're pro-death penalty for homosexuality or some of my brothers and sisters in India who don't believe women should speak in church? How do we negotiate that without enforcing a new liberal imperialism?

Well, we do enforce a new liberal imperialism. We're there already. And not just within the Church. It's part of the overall way in which the global system runs. Many of those things are really good things, let's be clear. I'm not saying it's wrong to oppose the death penalty for homosexuality, I'm not saying it's wrong to oppose all kinds of female mutilation. But first of all we have to know our own history. It's a century since General Dyer's troops opened fire on an unarmed crowd and killed probably over a thousand people. The world trade system, the world economic system are Global North controlled. And the theology is simply part of that system. So, how do we listen? We recognise the situation we're in. We know our history and we don't say: 'oh well, the Global South is right because they're the Global South.' We must find ways of not arguing from a position of power and leverage with the implicit threat that if you don't agree with us, you can't participate.

Should the aim be to try and strip cultural context from our theology or to try and make it ever more contextual but in different modes?

To strip cultural context from our theologies is like saying: 'Should the aim be to levitate?' It isn't a physical possibility, it's a not a psychological possibility either. The longer this goes on, the more I think about it, the more I am deeply, deeply aware of my own inset prejudices. Deeply felt, right down in the depth of my being. And we can't strip our theology. I think like a middle class 63-year-old English man. That's how I think, from my particular background and history – I can't help thinking like that, there's no switch you can turn. But I can be aware that I think like that. 1 Peter 5 says, 'Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God so that in due time he may exalt you.' Humble yourself so that he exalts you. And then it goes on to say, and it's all part of the same sentence, 'cast all your cares on him, for he cares about you'. Now the second part is as important as the first part – we only ever quote the first part, or the second part separately – but they go together. What does humbling ourselves mean? It means giving the problems to God.

“ We could go a long way beyond listening. We've got to allow ourselves to be changed ”

As Christians we say: 'I can't cope with these folk, because everything in me says they're wrong. So, God, how am I going to deal with this?' We've got to take it to God. It's not just about being able to pray together and say 'amen' and sing happy songs together. We don't want Kumbaya Christianity, we want Christianity that deeply opens up our gut and changes our inside.

Does western liberal (for want of a better word) Christianity have something to offer the rest of the world? And what is it?

At its best it's a humble and confident engagement with the world as it is, not hiding in a bubble and seeking to make the world as we'd like it to be. In other words, it says: 'Well, this is reality, how are we going to deal with it?' You know, you mentioned the issue of people's sexuality... Some people are gay. Let's not say there are no gay people. Let's say some people are gay. They are human beings within Christ's eyes, they have the same human dignity as every other human being on the face of the planet. So, what are the consequences for that? How do we think this through with our sisters and brothers whose cultural instincts – put there by us, very often, the law was put there by us, just let's be clear, in our history – are very different? I think at its best, liberalism says this is the structure, this is the reality.

This sense of saying: 'my conclusion is right and you ignorant people have to learn how to be less ignorant,' which isn't said explicitly but it is implicitly, is liberalism at its worst. You find it in every part of the Church, in every theological approach.

Can evangelicalism survive this new world?

Christianity will survive. I'm not a party person, I don't carry a party card. To describe yourself nowadays as an evangelical means you have to say: 'yes, but I'm not one of that sort, or of this sort'. I'm a Christian. I'm an orthodox Christian,

for whom the Bible, properly interpreted, is my final authority, in matters of faith and praise. That's what I am. Will that survive? Yes, absolutely! And there will be a load of arguments about what properly interpreted means, but would you call it evangelicalism? Some evangelicals say, 'yes of course it is,' others will say, 'well no, that's not real evangelicalism because it doesn't tick this box or that box', and liberalism will be the same and Anglo-Catholicism will be the same and traditionalists will be the same. The labels are less important than whether we love and serve Jesus Christ. Do we come back for Jesus Christ, are we humbled by the beauty and glory and grace and love that reaches out to us every morning as sinners and lifts us up?

Does institutional power always necessarily have to corrupt? Or can it be useful for making change?

Oh it can certainly be useful for making change. 'Corrupt'? I think I would go for the word 'corrode'. I think it's corrosive. I think what it can do is like rust, it weakens the structure, and in the end the structure fractures. But it takes a while.

How hard is not leveraging your power when you're the head of the Anglican Communion?

First of all, it's complicated. Hard is probably the wrong word. It is very complicated.

There is power and you can misuse it. You learn to be extremely careful about what you say. And to regret when I'm not very careful about what I say.

You've got to constantly hold yourself back, and rather than saying, 'that sounds like a good idea, we'll do that', you say: 'that sounds like a good idea, I need to ask a dozen people what they think'. And every now and then, just very occasionally, the whole lot will say, 'that's a really bad idea', and I say: 'I'm going to do it.' And then I'm usually proved wrong. Jesus washed feet, if we're not washing feet, we're not doing the job.

General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA). Dr Brown specialises in human rights and religious liberty, and helped launch Christian human rights organisation 21Wilberforce.



Q&A

ELIJAH BROWN

DIVERSITY, UNITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: ELIJAH BROWN, GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE BWA, SHARES HIS THOUGHTS ON POWER IN THE BAPTIST COMMUNITY – AND WHETHER WE SHOULD HAVE IT AT ALL.

We hear a lot about the shifting demographics of the Church in the world. Does power shift with those demographics and have you seen that from a BWA perspective?

The BWA continues to affirm that multicultural diversity in leadership is positive. It's biblical. In Acts 13: 1-3, you read about the first church in the world where they're called Christian, and there are five leaders listed: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manean, and Paul. This is the church that started the mission movement, and five leaders

led that church: Jewish leaders, African leaders, religious leaders, community leaders. Multicultural diversity is biblical, it's healthy, it's positive and at the BWA we continue to try to model that. This is a healthy model for the entire Church to embrace, even in our local contexts. Investing in young leaders, in multicultural leaders, in different perspectives.

And why do you think, when we know that in theory, we don't see that much of it in practice, even in places where there's enough diversity to make it possible?

It remains a challenge. It remains a challenge to allow the Holy Spirit to speak into our lives with humility and with grace and to sense that the histories, the passions, the perspectives, the giftedness, will enrich the kingdom and will enrich our own lives as we open our hearts up to these other realities.

What can Baptists offer the rest of the Christian world in terms of an approach to power?

We really believe in the dignity of each individual. God created all people in his

image, male and female. First of all, we have a responsibility to mission. It's a gospel proclamation, believing that if all people are made in the image of God, then we have a responsibility to introduce them to the God in whose image they are made. Politically, Baptists have long embraced this real distinctive around freedom of religion, freedom of the conscience and that we ought to protect the conscience of individuals who want to live out their convictions. That's our responsibility, that's our heritage. Let's keep pursuing that strong belief in the conviction of conscience and the belief in human dignity.

What are the traps the Church can fall into in terms of power?

We can fall into traps of security, we can fall into traps of nationalism, we can fall into traps of personal ego. We can fall into the trap of thinking that our perspective is the only perspective. We can fall into the trap of not recognising how much culture and politics influences our reading of Scripture and our understanding of reality. I hope that we will be bold in our faith, that we will hold on to a sense of humility and a sense of grace, that recognises our own limits and believes that Jesus has called us to build relationships with one another. We are stronger together.

Can power corrupt, and can context corrupt?

Power corrupts and indifference corrupts. The question is, how are you building accountability? How are you recognising the temptations that are in your context and then building accountability around that? Think about Elijah and Elisha. Elijah is the classic prophet who stood outside the system and tried to use his voice to change the system. Elisha is the opposite. He is in the throne room, giving advice, and living more within the system. There is a biblical way forward for both. The question is, how are you working to ensure that you're pursuing intimacy and building an appropriate accountability?

There seems to be a real resistance among Christians, particularly in a North American context, to empowering the State. Opposition to the State having the power or responsibility to provide medical care, for example, or to help refugees. What are your thoughts on that,

“Multicultural diversity is biblical”

and how can we challenge that, if it needs challenging?

I think the Lord knows the way of a heart. And there will be ongoing policy disputes, even in a North American context. Where policies are at their worst is when we try to politicise a value. And so when you have one side which says: “Well, because we provide for government care, that's obviously because we care for the refugee and the people, we need to do this,” and others who say: “No, you don't.” I think there can be people on both sides who are going to debate about the solution. Whether that solution is empowerment to the Government or empowerment to local agencies or empowerment through other venues, the important thing from a Christian perspective, is to come back and say: “What is the value which you're using to drive this conversation?” One of my concerns is that too often today we have

not my first priority. It's not my first value, so let's not fall into the trap of the idol of security.

I was some years ago in Lebanon and we had gone up to near the border of Syria. We were with a local Baptist church which was engaging in incredible ways with a Syrian refugee population, and I asked the pastor this question. I said: “Pastor, if there is one message you want me to communicate back to our broader world, what would you like to say?” And he said: “Tell them that we are living in the conflict zone but experiencing victory. You are living in the comfort zone and experiencing fear.” Perhaps there's something to be said about finding our identity with Jesus in the margins and finding in him victory for the gospel.

Is it easier for Christians not to have power at all?

I think we have a responsibility to use our voice appropriately. Think about the story of Jesus' crucifixion: two people come and collect him off the cross, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus. These two individuals were members of the Sanhedrin – they had positions of influence and a voice that could really create change. And yet they identified with a Jesus who had just been crucified and had not yet been resurrected. What an incredible moment to

“Power corrupts and indifference corrupts”

idolised the value of security.

Of course, I lock my door, I have young children, we try to teach common sense security. But in our 21st century, as I look around the world, especially in many of the developed contexts, it seems as if many Christians over-emphasise security, as if security is the number one biblical value that they are called to emulate. And that concerns me. We're not called to security, we're called to a dangerous faith, that leads us, like Abraham, to other countries. That leads us, like the disciples, to drop our nets and to follow a Saviour. That leads us to follow a crucified Saviour who defines power by a cross. And so, while I understand the importance of security for a nation, as a Christian, that's

choose to identify with Jesus. Now that was a political statement. And they were able to make that political statement because they were already in those institutions of influence. There are many men and women around the world who are elected to various offices, who are in denominational entities, who are in businesses with large budgets, who have incredible influence. Use your voice. Use your influence to identify with a crucified Christ, believing that the resurrection will come. Every one of us has a voice. Let's use the influence we have.

Edit by Laura Durrant, interview by Jonathan Langley

Alison Jasper

Research Fellow and former Senior Lecturer in Religion and Gender at the University of Stirling. Dr Jasper is the author of Because of Beauvoir: Christianity and the Cultivation of Female Genius.



Greta and Margaret prove that female leaders cannot be reduced to their gender.

WOULD BREXIT HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT *if women were in power?*

WHAT EFFECT HAVE ATTITUDES TO GENDER HAD ON
BRITISH POLITICS OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS?

Is there anything in the news right now except Brexit? I have been watching and reading the news more compulsively than I can ever remember. Like many British people, I guess, I'm partly fascinated and entertained, and partly horrified and alarmed by what I'm seeing in the media and beyond. It's hard not to see a disturbing power dynamics at work, driven by vested interests that have little genuine concern for 'the people' who are so often appealed to. So I'm glad of an invitation to stop just watching or simply 'consuming' the news and to spend a little while considering more carefully how this is connecting with the other parts of my life where the discussion of power has

“ In the present British situation the floor is littered with both male and female failures ”

been my daily bread for many years. Until recently my day job was as an academic, teaching and writing about Christianity and also about gender. And if you spend a lot of time thinking about these two things, the question of power – the theme of this issue – is bound to come up sooner or later.

I'd have to say that I've not noticed the Christian Churches in the UK saying a

great deal or expressing themselves very powerfully about Brexit – at least not in any formal or public way. They seem largely paralysed, as if waiting for a wave to break whilst British life and politics goes on underscoring the differences between us in thick red lines. I suppose it's not hard to find some reasons for this. Church communities cannot escape the ebb or flow of these powerful tides of conflicting

national feeling. Though we often think of the Churches in Britain as being marginal to our national life, anyone connected with them will be fully integrated into that national life at every moment, whether they are at work or worship. You might be able to discount the Churches within this heated national argument – even if they did choose to speak – but you can't take strong feelings out of the people who make up the Churches! Taking sides could make things worse, perhaps by exposing subtle constructions of class and political identity that are normally kept hidden for good reasons... or bad.

But on the other hand, surely there is something absolutely crucial that ought to be said in the meantime about loving our neighbours even when we don't like them, about not judging everyone apart from ourselves or about not indulging our sense of entitlement to whatever outcome, to the detriment of the weak and the vulnerable? Don't Christians and Churches have some really good resources on hand, relating to the practice of faithfully and persistently searching – when it seems lost – for what holds communities together or binds us as a grounded body? There's a palpable sense of division and polarity in the air – in the media but also in how we're thinking about each other – a kind of violence in opinion and intention that suggests a fair number of us have decided it's okay to take a holiday from kindness, civility, community solidarity or any sort of patient pragmatism as a basis for moving forward in good faith. Surely Christians of every kind can and should feel empowered to say these things?

So, what, if anything does this have to do with gender – and power? I won't insult anyone's intelligence by suggesting that this crisis can be 'gendered' in a simplistic sense. We are not in this unsettling situation just because those who exert power, including our politicians (and church leaders) are all men. Obviously, they aren't. Nor do I think that if men were made powerless, women would achieve a deal to satisfy everyone in short order. Interestingly, Naomi Alderman explored that idea in her book *The Power*.

Whilst obviously feminist in intent, Alderman pulled no punches when it came to speculating about how women might get on, were power relations between men and women absolutely reversed. And I don't think you could make a convincing case either, for arguing that being a woman makes one inherently better at one's job, whatever it is. Sadly, in the present British situation the floor is littered with both male and female



“ Toxic masculinity regards any kind of vulnerability as something to be mercilessly repressed or stamped out ”

failures (though I am bound to point out that in our British parliament, men still outnumber women). But, for all that, I do believe that gender still comes into this debate about powerful divisive currents in our society. In my view they are, at the very least, aggravated by the sense in which masculinity continues to be thought about – and privileged – within our national life. There's a lot of work being done at the moment on the idea of 'toxic masculinity' and it strikes a chord with many of us. Characteristics of toxic masculinity include the tendency to regard any kind of vulnerability as something to be mercilessly repressed or stamped out, rather than as an opportunity for growth in self-understanding or empathy with others. Or, say, as a means to move towards compromise and agreement in making a deal when relations with our neighbours have soured. If you doubt whether this is a gendered issue, watch Elderbrook and Rudamental's recent music video (in *Delve Deeper*, page 16) and be honest about how this display of masculine vulnerability, gentle solidarity and kindness strikes you. Can you watch without a flicker of emotional dissonance? And to the extent that you are made uncomfortable, recognise how this courageous performance challenges our

expectations of what power ought to look like.

We exercise a great deal of power over each other whilst hardly noticing it. Having been disciplined (with greater or less cruelty by our parents and nursery teachers onwards) never to break down in tears or admit to any kind of weakness as the price to pay for power and status within a male normative society, is it any surprise that we (women too) seek to preserve the existing way of doing things, a system for which we've already sacrificed so much? Finally, you could argue that Christians themselves hold some responsibility. For centuries, Churches have sought to sacralise a masculine form of power in which whatever is associated with the feminine – including our vulnerability to both suffering and affection/love – is always ultimately swept up and away in an apotheosis of Invulnerability and Might.

So, to go back to the title – the answer has to be that just having more women in power would not have produced a better Brexit as things stand. What we need is a much bigger vision of society in which we actually learn to listen to quieter voices and different priorities. You could argue that Christians already have a blueprint if they'd care to look at it.

Andrew Graystone

Author of *Too Much Information?* Ten essential questions for digital Christians. In the past, Andrew has been a religious programme producer at the BBC, led the multifaith chaplaincy team at the 2012 Olympics and served as Director of The Church and Media Network.

Toughening up and powering down

BAPTISTS MUST BE AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE FIGHT
FOR ALL RELIGIOUS GROUPS' LIBERTIES.

After the horrific attack on a mosque by a white supremacist in New Zealand in 2019, Andrew Graystone went viral by standing outside his local mosque in Manchester, holding a sign proclaiming friendship and solidarity. *Mission Catalyst* caught up with him at Greenbelt Festival, where he's been talking about small acts of resistance.

How do we resist in the face of the incredible power of our economic systems and Government?

I think Christians have an opportunity to put up signposts in the culture, to do small things that say a lot. But that takes a bit of courage, because you always run the risk that you'll be misunderstood or you'll be laughed at, or people won't like you. When I went and stood outside that mosque on the morning of the Christchurch massacres, I had about 50,000 personal messages from people, and I would say that about 99 per cent of those were positive. You're going to get the one per cent of people who say unpleasant things about you.

What did the negative messages say?

I got some messages saying: 'You wouldn't get Muslims standing outside a church if the church was under threat.' To which I was able to say, here's some photographs when the Catholic churches in Sri Lanka were attacked. Muslims around the world in many places went and stood outside churches and did exactly that.

So that does happen. But this is not a time for Christians to be too precious. We are going to have to toughen up. Our kids and our kids' kids are going to have vastly more difficulty living as Christians than I have or my parents' or grandparents' generations did, so they're going to have to toughen up. Christians are a bit like bananas, we bruise easily. We've got to get

“ The man who stood watch while Muslims prayed after Christchurch believes Christians should rejoice at losing power ”



we should fight that, but I rejoice in it because Christians belong with the weak and the powerless, and we really do, that's not just words. We really belong with the people who are poor, the people who are actually poor. The towers have got to fall for God to start to rebuild. And that will mean treasured Christian institutions losing their power. I'm not going to spend my life fighting what God is trying to do in humbling the Church.

Can rejecting power be a form of privilege in action? How does rejecting political power help someone affected by changes to the NHS or benefits system? If we model a better way but don't affect laws, how does that help them?

One of the things we need to do is work to maintain and enhance the places where the State is able to support the poor. We need, though, if we're going to enter that political sphere, to do it in a distinctly disempowered way. We need to disempower ourselves, we need to enter that sphere with humility. What we shouldn't be doing is saying, 'Well, I will fight all the battles that the rest of the world fights and fight my way to the top, to the place where I'm powerful, and then I'll use my power for good.' Of course, that's a model that some people have adopted, but it's not the Jesus way. It's simply not the Jesus way.

This is a condensed edit of a longer interview by Jonathan Langley, made possible by Greenbelt festival.

over all of that.

Do you think that the reason why it's going to be more difficult for them to be Christians in this world is because we're losing power?

I think we Christians are losing power and conventional forms of influence, and I'm just so pleased about that. The more Christian privilege we can lose in my lifetime the happier I will be, because it doesn't belong to us. Civil power on the basis of being Christian does not belong to us and it's something that we should actively reject – and we should reject it because it corrupts us. It corrupts Christians and I see God taking power away from his Church and I rejoice in that. I know there are some people who think

Why I've started writing to white men about gender



POWER, PRIVILEGE AND PRAGMATISM – AND THE LIBERATION OF MOVING PAST THEM.

It has taken me 40 years to accept my privilege as a white, middle-class man. I hated this idea. Hated it.

Because I've always prided myself on something: that I am a GOOD GUY; one of the proverbial good guys in fact. I help other people; I empower women and people of colour. I worked hard to get where I was, and I made sure I didn't tread on anyone else along the way. I didn't go to one of those evil private schools, and although I happened to attend an elite university, I only got there through hard work, not breeding or nepotistic connection. Privilege is a cultural 'thing' of course, and something to get self-righteous about on the internet. But it's never been a feature of my journey. I'm one of the good guys.

Except, that's not really true. Now, I'm not going to waste my limited space here in explaining to you in depth why I'm privileged, or why I've always had access to far more power than most of the people around me. But it's true: I was born into a middle class area, in which my parents owned their home. That meant I was in catchment for a well-performing primary school, which sling-shotted me through a grammar school to the University of Cambridge – after which my career options opened up rather wide. At the same time, I was born as a man into a system which is historically skewed to favour my gender. And on top of that, I was born a rather brilliant, dulux-shade of English white in a culture which only half a century ago still had hotels with window signs that read 'No blacks, no Irish'. I get it now: privilege was

“ I was born into a system which is historically skewed to favour my gender ”

layered on top of privilege.

What bothers me though is how long it took me to get there. Because as a white, middle-class man, I was also part of a system which came with a pre-installed set of defences against the accusation of unbalanced power. The myth of working hard – as if those from working-class backgrounds defy their very category; the argument that things are changing, and that the world won't rectify itself overnight – which always leads to tokenism and a pragmatic continued embrace of the status quo. I was happily pottering along in what Richard Rohr calls the first half of life, convinced that having an answer for everything was enough to prevent me ever having to listen to the arguments.

Eventually, a few things shook me out of my bubble. As a hopefully-maturing Christian, I began to think a bit about systemic sin, rather than just personal sin. Jesus came to liberate the entire world, not just people who once got road rage or had a fake ID when they were 17. He came to break down systems – the very systems that elevate one person above another based on history, greed, prejudice and luck – and as his follower, I think I'm meant to play a part in that. So this led me to listen to a few people who were different to me; people who I'd usually put up those

tried-and-tested defences against. And do you know what? When I actually listened, I started to see the fault lines in the 'good guy' defence.

So, aged 40, I started to write a book for my teenage self (or more practically, for the teenagers I work with today as a youth leader). I wanted to short-circuit the ponderous journey of my own life, through which I've unwittingly overpowered so many people who don't share my privileges. My starting point is this: if you're presented with the facts about your gender as a man – and particularly a white, middle-class one – and a biblical rallying call to decide what kind of man you want to be in this broken world, then maybe you'll choose to be the sort of guy who doesn't just pragmatically accept the state of the world but decides to live in contrast to it.

To do that means engaging in one of the hardest things of all: the relinquishing of power and privilege. And that's why Jesus is the best possible role model you could have as a guy: he had power and privilege to a level that we can't even comprehend, and yet he gave it all up for the sake of this broken world. His subversion of power is miraculous and beautiful – it is the beacon of light by which we might actually see powerful men change their hearts.

REPAY NO ONE EVIL FOR EVIL, BUT GIVE THOUGHT TO DO WHAT IS HOPEFUL

IS HE
WILL HEAR BURN
JESUS ANSWERED
IF MY KINGDOM WERE
DO NOT ENVY
EVERYONE
AND YOU

GOD AND THE BIG BATTALIONS

THE ECHELONS OF POWER MAY BE AT ODDS NOT ONLY WITH
THE ETHICAL LIFE BUT THE PERSON OF JESUS AS WELL.

When I was growing up the popular saying was, “God is on the side of the big battalions.” That was a nice squeezing together of a number of similar quotations from the 19th century with God as a substitute for providence. Earlier versions are attributed to the Comte de Bussy-Rabutin in the 17th century: “God is usually on the side of the big squadrons against the small.” This was typically and wittily countered by Voltaire: “God is on the side not of the heavy battalions but of the best shots.”

Only when I was older did it occur to me that the big battalions and the best shots did not need God to be on their side. All that they needed was for God not to be on any side at all and they would triumph. In their day the Sanhedrin chose to cast their lot with the Roman battalions of Pilate rather than the Galilean Jesus whose kingdom was not of this world.

The same Jesus told stories about kings

“Rome had the big battalions, but we believe God was with Jesus”

which, even to this day, the Church has dubiously interpreted as being pictures of God: most appallingly in the parable of the king’s wedding feast as told in Matthew 22. The king not only sets fire to the villages where the invitation was not accepted but ends up by sending into weeping and gnashing of teeth a guest who wasn’t properly dressed. The story goes that Rev Ian Paisley was thundering forth on this text until a little old lady near the pulpit interrupted and says to him, “That’s all very well, Reverend, but what about those of us who don’t have any teeth

left to gnash?!” Without pausing in his stride, Paisley comes back with, “Mother, have no fear! Teeth will be provided!” Do we really want to take the picture of this vindictive king as a prototype of God? No-one wanted to attend this wedding. Ancient literature is bulging with stories of dinner parties that were the sort of events from which sensible people tried to excuse themselves.

The Greek in the introduction to this parable could easily be translated, “the kingdom of heaven may be compared with a man, the king...” Compare and contrast

THEY HAVE SAID THAT IT LIVES
 SAID
 'AN EYE FOR
 AN EYE AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.'
**BUT I SAY TO YOU DO NOT
 RESIST THE ONE WHO IS EVIL.
 BUT IF ANYONE SLAPS YOU ON
 TURN TO HIM THE OTHER ALSO.**
HONORABLE IN THE SIGHT OF ALL. IF POSSIBLE SO FAR AS IT DEPENDS ON YOU LIVE
**PEACEABLY WITH ALL. BELOVED NEVER AVENGE YOURSELVES
 BUT LEAVE IT TO THE WRATH OF GOD FOR IT IS WRITTEN "VENGEANCE IS MINE
 I WILL REPAY," SAYS THE LORD. "TO THE CONTRARY, "IF YOUR ENEMY
 HUNGRY FEED HIM; IF HE IS THIRSTY GIVE HIM SOMETHING TO DRINK; FOR BY SO DOING YOU
 ARE PUTTING NAILS ON HIS HEAD. "DO NOT BE OVERCOME BY EVIL BUT OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD.
 "MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD. IF IT WERE OF THIS WORLD MY SERVANTS WOULD
 HAVE BEEN FIGHTING.
 BY A MAN OF VIOLENCE AND DO NOT CHOOSE
 WHO HATES HIS BROTHER IS A MURDERER HIS WAYS.
 KNOW THAT NO MURDERER HAS ETERNAL LIFE ABIDING IN HIM.**

was the classic question on the university essay paper. What if we interpret the king in this story as being the emperor Tiberius? Suetonius described him and Caligula and Nero as “exhibiting the most flagrant acts of licentiousness and perverted authority. The most abominable lust, the most extravagant luxury, the most shameful rapaciousness, and the most inhuman cruelty constitute the general characteristics of those capricious and detestable tyrants.”

Assume for one moment you were sitting next to the man who did not conform and witnessed his embarrassment at the hands of the king, and then saw the slaves bodily throw him out into the abyss. What if he were your friend, your father, your son, your husband? Would you be able to eat your canapés with joy after that? John the Baptist had been beheaded for refusing to refrain from criticizing Herod’s marriage to Herodias. At a banquet of sycophants, he remained obstinately non-conformist. He had refused to dance to the music of the pipes. But then so did Jesus.

How did the original listeners interpret this story? That is of course a difficult

“ At a banquet of sycophants, John the Baptist remained obstinately non-conformist ”

question but, in this case, we can find an answer. The story is immediately followed up with the lines: “Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They asked him ‘Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?’” In other words, they interpreted his parable as being subversive to the Romans. At no point had Jesus made it clear enough that he was talking about Caesar’s corrupt banquets and political wedding feasts for him to be indicted. So, they sought to trap him with questions about Roman taxation and force him to come out openly as a dissident.

Dramatically, Marianne Blickenstaff has suggested that the silent one who is cast out represented Jesus himself. Jesus, enigmatically taking upon himself the

title of Son of Man, resolutely refused to wear a garment thrust upon him by either his opponents or his supporters. The cardboard cut-out of warrior Messiah was spurned whether it was placed on him by Peter or Caiaphas. He was the one thrown out into darkness and the gnashing of teeth, silently bearing the wrath of the regime because he alone would not conform to a code of ostentatious righteousness that was at odds with his humanity and fellowship with the poor and sinful. Many (which usually means all) indeed were called: few (in fact only he) was chosen. In the power games of the Roman Empire, Rome had the big battalions, but we believe God was with Jesus, even when he was cast out into weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Three mistakes we make when reading THE HAGAR STORY

THE STORIES OF ISHMAEL AND ISAAC ARE OFTEN USED TO JUSTIFY OPPRESSIVE POWER DYNAMICS BETWEEN THOSE WHO CLAIM THEIR LINEAGE FROM THEM. THIS READING OF THE STORY CHALLENGES OUR OWN BIASES AND ACCEPTANCE OF PRIVILEGE. IT ALSO SHOWS THAT AS ABRAHAM WIELDED POWER UNJUSTLY, GOD INTERVENED TO CORRECT HIS ACTIONS.

1. We think that Hagar isn't a part of Abraham's family

It is true that there was a time when Hagar wasn't a part of Abraham's family. In her home country of Egypt, she was a free woman, until she entered Abraham's household as a slave. Perhaps she was an "item" in the parting gift that Pharaoh made to Abraham (Gen 12).

When we first hear of Hagar, a decade has passed since Abraham has emigrated to Canaan. By now Sarah is persuaded that she cannot conceive. So, she falls upon an alternative – Hagar as surrogate. The common reading of this action is in condemnation of Sarah's lack of faith. Should she not have waited until God fulfilled his promise in his own time? Is hers a fainthearted faith that cannot leave things with God?

Such an assessment of Sarai should be considered against the legal-cultural backdrop of ancient West Asia. There is evidence that the pre-nuptial contracts required that a barren wife would make arrangements for the husband to have children born to him through surrogacy. The surrogate is usually a slave woman, who becomes a "wife" only in that she has intercourse with the man. The child belongs to the mistress and her husband, and is the legal heir. A couple of generations later, Rachel takes a similar initiative and Leah picks up the practice even though she has four sons already (Gen 30: 3-13). In both cases God demonstrates his approval with conception (Gen 30: 6, 18). So, Sarah may only be

“ Sarah thinks hagar has risen above her station ”

acting from her understanding that God works through human agents. The ancient world firmly believed that conception was divinely facilitated. “The LORD has kept me from having children,” she says (16: 2). By removing herself from being an obstacle, her hope is that God would grant the child promised to Abraham through Hagar. Abraham, like Jacob later, agrees and Hagar conceives.

Domestic conflict results. Sarah thinks Hagar has risen above her station and mistreats her so harshly that the pregnant Hagar runs away, preferring to die in the wilderness – for that is what would have happened if she had kept on the southerly route she set herself, in the hope of going back to her home country. By the time she returns to Abraham's home some strange things happen.

For the first time in the scriptures, a human being has met an angelic messenger from God. What is more, Hagar becomes the first person in the Old Testament to give God a name. That name, born out of her experience of God, declares to us many centuries later that our God is One who sees (16: 13; 29: 32; 31: 42) and hears—*Ishmael* meaning “God hears” (17: 20; 21: 17; 29: 33; 30: 6, 17, 22). It is a sharp reminder to those of us who

think of God as operating only on behalf of a given community. Here, God sees and hears the distress caused to this Egyptian by Abraham and his wife, just as he will later “see” and “hear” the distress Egypt causes Abraham's descendants (Exod 3: 7). God does not play favourites! In this case, he has shown that he is not exclusively and solely committed to Abraham alone. In the future, Hagar's line and Sarah's will marry between themselves (Gen 28: 8-9; 1 Chron 2: 17; 27: 30-31); Abraham will be buried peaceably by both sons (Gen 25: 9).

The conflicts that have since arisen over the land of Israel are far too complicated by regional and international politics to be simplistically applied back to this ancient text, as we often do. When the story of Genesis 16 ends, we see that God has resolved the crisis precipitated by an arrogant maid, a harsh mistress and an irresponsible master. His plan has widened in scope to accommodate the fallout of Sarah's mis-planning. But that's not all.

Fourteen years pass. Abraham's family now has two sons, Hagar's Ishmael and Sarah's Isaac.

In between the stories of their birth is the account of the covenant of circumcision, established as the primary identifier of the unique relationship



“ Ishmael’s freedom is depicted as against his mother’s bondage ”

between the Lord and Abraham, and his descendants. Thrice in this account, we are told that Abraham circumcised “his son Ishmael” (Gen 17: 23, 25, 26). Here is the first instance of the expansion of election to include the proselyte who undergoes circumcision. That is why, in the tabling of Abraham’s descendants, rightfully, Ishmael’s genealogy is rehearsed first (Gen 25: 12-18). Ishmael belongs in the family of the elect.

2. We think Ishmael was cursed from birth

The angelic messenger directs the runaway Hagar to return to Sarah. At this point, Abraham’s home is the only option. But, perhaps the present – under a difficult mistress – can become bearable if Hagar can glimpse her future. So, in words that remind us of the promises to Abraham (Gen 16: 9-10), God allows Hagar to see a vision of a people group that will

descend from her child-to-be-born.

The prediction that Ishmael will be a “wild donkey of a man” is not necessarily negative (see Job 39: 5-8) – it depicts his freedom, as against his mother’s present bondage. That he will “live in hostility toward all his brothers” is again a common feature of nomadic tribes. We know that the angelic words are a blessing, for Hagar accepts this future for her son as a gift from God, as if it demonstrates God’s sympathy for her. In her opinion, this is divine compensation for human ill-treatment (Gen 16: 13). Ishmael received a pre-natal blessing, not a curse. Ishmael’s genealogy (Gen 25: 12-18) lists twelve nations, living in fierce independence as promised, holding their own against competing people groups.

What is more, the irony is that God’s care of Ishmael even overflows to Isaac, albeit inadvertently. At a later time, Isaac takes up residence in the area of Hagar’s well (Gen 24: 62; 25: 11). In a land where

water is scarce, Isaac is sustained by water that first quenched his half-brother’s thirst.

3. We think God didn’t care for either Hagar or Ishmael

A careful reader will find it hard to miss that Gen 21, the expulsion of Hagar, and Gen 22, the binding of Isaac on Moriah, run like two parallel panels of tapestried story. In both, Abraham receives communication from God, apparently at night. Because, in both cases, the action begins “early the next morning” (21: 14; see the same phrase in 22: 3). Abraham speechlessly makes provisions for the journey: for Hagar, food and water; for himself in the next story, he loads the donkey with wood.

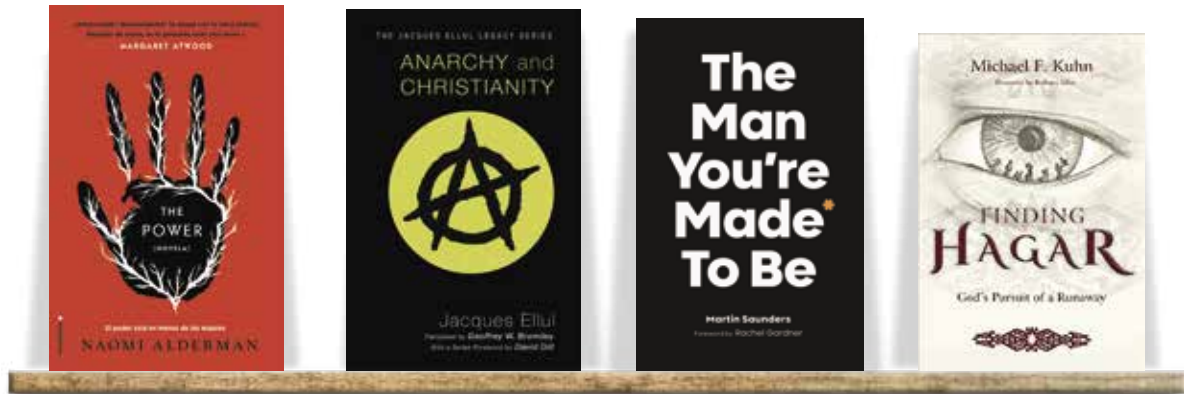
Hagar heads towards Egypt, via the desert of Beersheba (21: 14). A mother and son are in the wilderness, just as father and son will be by themselves, climbing up into the wild mountains of Moriah. If Hagar lays Ishmael under a bush, Abraham lays on Isaac’s back a bundle of wood. Hagar sits down resigned to her belief that Ishmael will die, Abraham moves forward in the trust that Isaac will somehow survive (Heb 11: 17-19). Hagar sobs (21: 16), while Abraham speaks in faith that God will provide (22: 8).

God provides for both the boys. The angel of God halts Ishmael’s death cries, while “the angel of the Lord” (22: 11) intervenes to save the unresisting Isaac. Both references are to the same being, a divine messenger. The angel calls Hagar by name just as he will call Abraham by name (22: 11). As Aryeh Cohen puts it: “Both times, the angels call from the heavens, as if the urgency to comply with the sacrifice – Abraham’s volition and Hagar’s despair – did not leave time for a terrestrial visit to undo the harshness of the decree.” Both Ishmael and Isaac are guaranteed a blessing, each to his own measure (21: 18; 22: 17-18). Both Hagar and Abraham saw alternatives by which to save their sons’ lives (21: 19; 22: 13). God showed Hagar a well that she had not noticed so far. Abraham, similarly, saw a ram for the sacrifice. Just as Ishmael received a life-giving drink, Isaac was literally released from death. Ishmael receives the promise that he will become a “great nation”. Isaac received the promise that his descendants will be as numerous as the sand and stars.

In recognition of the look-alike stories, Gen 21 and 22 are read on successive days in the synagogue at Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Ishmael wasn’t the son of the promise, but there can be no doubt that he was on God’s heart. Just as the peoples who now claim descent from him should be on ours.

POWER

Sure, you could read Foucault (again) or dust off *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and some vintage Chomsky. You could even break out the old Sun Tzu or Machiavelli. But really, what you need in your life (and your contemplation of power) is this list right here.



BOOKS

THE POWER

Naomi Alderman

Alison Jasper recommends this classic feminist novel for its exploration of women and power. Called *The Handmaid's Tale* for our era by *The Washington Post*.

WHILE THE BRIDEGROOM IS WITH THEM Marriage, Family, Gender and Violence in the Gospel of Matthew

Marianne Blickenstaff

The parable of the wedding feast reimagined. Comes highly recommended by the Head of the Baptist Peace Fellowship.

ANARCHY AND CHRISTIANITY

Jacques Ellul

Christianity has more in common with anarchy's rejection of hierarchical power than you might expect.

TOO MUCH INFORMATION? Ten essential questions for digital Christians

Andrew Graystone

The power of new digital environments examined by the guy who tried to subvert the power of fear and islamophobia.

POST-COLONIAL THEOLOGY

Finding God and Each Other Amidst the Hate

Robert S Heaney

If it's good enough for the Archbishop of Canterbury, it's good enough for us. In a non-hierarchical, nonconformist way, of course.

THE MAN YOU'RE MADE TO BE A book about growing up

Martin Saunders

Young men have an identity problem that is also a power problem. This well-written book attempts to fix that.

FINDING HAGAR

God's Pursuit of a Runaway

Michael F Kuhn

Hagar is a displaced and oppressed woman, relentlessly loved by a just God.

THE THEOLOGY OF EVERYTHING Renaissance Man Joins the 21st Century

Keith Eyeons

Science, philosophy and the human condition – Christian theology holds it all together better than atheism. Recommended by Justin Welby.

BECAUSE OF BeauVOIR Christianity and the Cultivation of Female Genius

Alison Jasper

Women, while being disempowered by patriarchy, have been the shapers of spiritual knowledge – a fact secular feminism and the mainstream Church need to recognise.

WEB

BAPTIST PEACE FELLOWSHIP

A space for Baptists who find that the use of military force cannot be reconciled with the teaching of Jesus Christ and His acceptance of the Cross. An important witness in the area of power and its uses.

www.baptist-peace.org.uk

SOMETHING ABOUT YOU

Elderbrook and Rudimental Masculine vulnerability, gentle solidarity and kindness are showcased in this rather lovely music video that undermines unhealthy gender roles and the power they hold. It's beautiful. Catchy, too.

<https://binged.it/2NhL28w>

Also highly recommended by BMS General Director Kang-San Tan: *Beyond Empire* by Jonathan Ingleby

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