

Directions for MPhil research proposal.

What I hope to gain from the study.

I am an ordained Minister within the Baptist tradition, currently based in Morecambe in the North West of England. One of the biggest challenges for the church in the UK is the rapid decline of the churches. This challenge is causing me to take the challenge mission seriously within my own context. My primary motivation for conducting research through a degree is to provide a thinking backdrop to my developing practice.

A secondary motivation for investigating a research degree is that it may provide opportunities for the future of my own ministry. At the back of my mind rests the idea that some time in the future I would like to contribute to the training of future ministers.

How I intend to fit the study into my existing program.

Recently I have had cause to reflect upon the nature of my working life and as a result I have set aside one day a week for personal study. I would devote this day to my research studies. Within my agreed terms and conditions, my church allow for one week a year study leave. In addition to that, once every seven years I am allowed a further three months for sabbatical study. My first sabbatical is due in approximately 4 years time, when I would hope to devote the time to the completion of my thesis.

Direction for my study.

I am fascinated by the way the purpose of the people of God is constantly re-imagined throughout the biblical narrative. We observe that when the nation of Israel is exiled, the former members of the nation state find themselves in a new cultural setting where the life of the nation does not revolve around their religious practices. During this time they re-imagine their community and spiritual life, for the first time they become known as Jews. The cultural identity of the people is reformed as their sacred texts are collated and rewritten. A debate about the nature of their community develops as they ask themselves if they are they to become an exclusive or inclusive people. This debate is reflected in the exclusivity of the narrative recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah and the inclusivity of the Jonah-Ruth-Esther narratives.

A similar re-imagining of community life is found as the early church struggle to cope with the inclusion of Gentiles into a Jewish sect. We observe that the primarily Jewish community develop an ethic of inclusion towards the Gentiles which becomes less restrictive as the Jewish sect moves further away from mainstream Judaism. It is evident that those converted from within Judaism find the cultural practices of those converted from a Gentile culture difficult to include. Eventually the restrictions on the Gentile believers are relaxed to allow Gentiles to be converted and practice their faith from within their culture.

In the nineteenth century missionaries left the culture of the west to explain the message of Christianity to people who had never had the opportunity to encounter it. Those missionaries were faced with the difficulty of separating the message of Christianity from their own western culture. Hudson Taylor pioneered missionary work in China by rejecting his western culture and adopting some cultural practices of the people in which he wished to introduce the message of Jesus. Vincent Donovan faced the same challenges as a catholic missionary to the Masai Tribe.

Schooled in modernity the 21st Century church face emerging cultural perspectives of

Post-Modernity. It is struggling to come to terms with its own culture and the culture it lives within. The debate about the kind of Christian Community that there will be in the future rages within the contemporary church. Will Christian community become inclusive or exclusive. As churches mourn the loss of their position central to the cultural identity people leave the church in droves. Small pockets of the church re-imagine their mission, some lead to more people coming to understand the essence of the Christian faith for the first time, others do not. Other small areas of the church resist the changes in culture by marking out their religious existence, they become more distinct and exclusive. Meanwhile the middle ground is swallowed up by the competing culture.

I suspect however these interests may be too broad and vague for a research proposal. It has been suggested that I need to narrow my focus down. A few things occur to me that might present me with a narrower focus, should that be necessary.

1. Compare the ministry by Paul to the Greek culture, with an identifiable local sub-culture.
2. Contrast the debate about the nature of the community of faith seen during the exile, with the debate about the nature the community should take in the book of Acts.
3. Contrast one of the biblical debates about the nature of the community of faith with the ongoing debate about the nature that Christian Community should take as Modernity loses its stronghold and new forms of thinking dominate the overarching cultural perspective.

Possibilities for an Indicative Bibliography

Theological development during the exile.
Brueggemann.

Early Church
Wright,

Nineteenth Century Mission

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Contemporary Culture.

Social theory: Giddens.

Postmodern thinkers: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, Fish, Nancey.