

CURIOSITY: ASSET OR LIABILITY?

In this issue we have some stimulating contributions that reflect on the role of curiosity in our research.

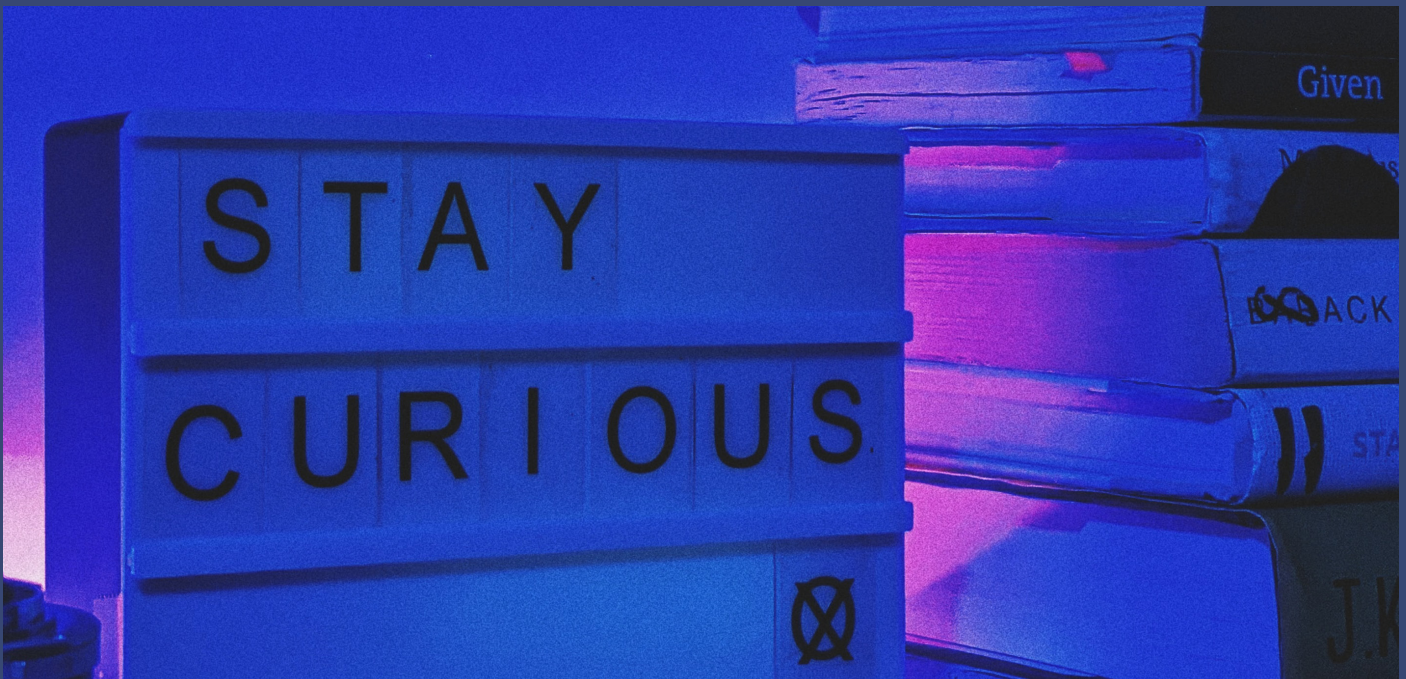
In particular, Ed Mackenzie writes of being more of a fox than a hedgehog. A fox roams around large areas investigating many different things, while a hedgehog stays in a small locality and snuffles around on the ground looking for a much narrower range of things. For Ed, being a fox has unlocked many insights, insights of the kind that can only come when we start making connections across disciplines.

Sandra Brower shares her experience of trying to take seriously the present physical embodiment of the glorified and ascended Jesus. Her chat with the great

Douglas Farrow unlocked things for her in a way that will leave you pondering!

Like Ed, I too am a fox. I am an eclectic. While I too have enjoyed the unexpected ideas that come from unexpected combinations of things, I will also be reflecting on the potentially negative side to being eclectic. I will share my pain for your gain.

Lastly, I will be interviewing Aaron Edwards whose book, *Taking Kierkegaard Back to Church*, has recently come out. If you read this you will learn not only about the Danish philosopher but peculiarities of waddling geese.





The Fox and the Hedgehog by Ed Mackenzie

Programme Lead, BThM, and Lecturer in Biblical Theology and Mission

The Greek poet Archilochus once wrote, ‘a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing’, and, while the saying has been understood in different ways, I find it helpful to apply to the scope of a researcher’s interests. Hedgehogs might be seen as those who focus on one subject or topic and know it exceedingly well. They dig deep and can spend a career unpacking their specialist area of research. Foxes, on the other hand, are those who explore a range of different topics. They might investigate a range of different areas of research with their interests changing and developing over time.

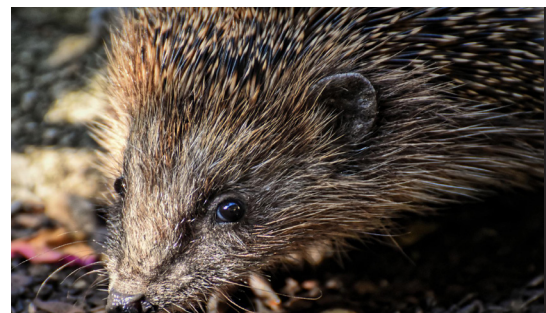
I admire the dedication and focus of hedgehogs greatly, but I’ve always been more of a fox, pursuing several different ideas and leads in my research. While I trained as a New Testament specialist with a PhD on Pauline Theology (Romans 13 specifically), my interest in the way in which scripture might speak into situations today has led me to sit somewhat at the intersection of Biblical Studies and Practical

Theology. It’s fair to say that curiosity has been a prompt for many of my research projects, even if the thread of connecting scripture to practice remains a constant.

One instance where curiosity was connected to research was my experience helping to lead a Fresh Expression church in the early 2000s. As I did so, I read widely in the literature around fresh expressions and the emerging church, since at the time a degree of symbiosis existed between the two. The question that emerged for me from my reading and my ministry was how Paul’s vision of the church and mission might relate to ideas within the broader emerging church movement. Practice and reflection led to curiosity which birthed an article on the topic (‘Mission and the Emerging Church: Pauline Reflections on a New Kind of Missiology’).

Another example of curiosity leading to research was my experience as a new dad wondering what it means to parent Christianly. Having grown up in

a family where Christian faith was not central, I wondered how I could best model and teach the



way of Jesus to my own children. That led to a co-written work with Gareth Crispin, a friend and now a colleague at Cliff, which drew on interviews with 15 different families across the UK. While our book *Together with God: An Introduction to Family Worship* was aimed at a popular audience, it was the curiosity of capturing stories of faith at home which led us to write it, as well as a desire to encourage other Christian parents (new and old) to pass on faith within the household.

I’ve no doubt that hedgehogs are driven by a degree of curiosity, but – as a fox – it’s my curiosity for connecting Scripture and life in all sorts of ways which continues to drive my research.

A Chat with a Scholar by Sandra Brower

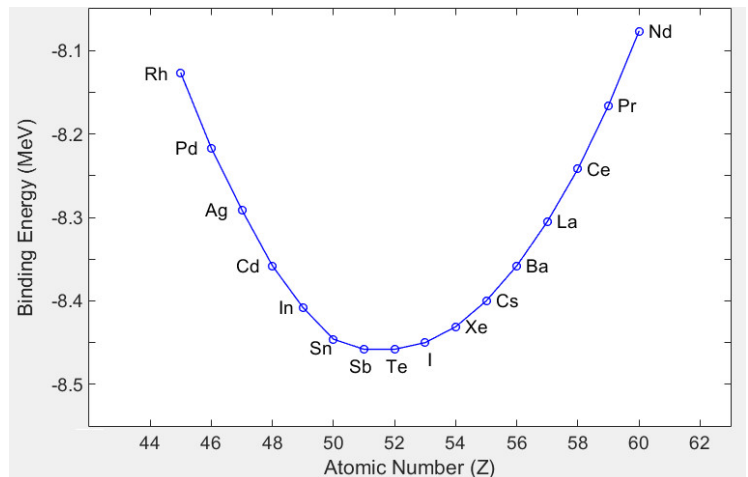
A few weeks ago, I was asked to preach in my local church. It was the Sunday before the Feast of Ascension, so I was keen, given that was the subject of my doctoral research. I began by saying that perhaps we're somewhat relieved Ascension falls on a Thursday, and can easily pass us by, because – let's face it – what are we to say? We talk about Jesus ascending to the heavens and sitting at the right hand of the Father. But post-Copernicus, we know heaven isn't 'up there'; we can't just get into a rocket and go find him, so where is he?

For those who are happy to treat the resurrection metaphorically, the 'where' question is not a troublesome one. But for those who dare to believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that the narrative about an empty tomb holds too much significance to warrant any articulation of the ascension that dispenses with Jesus's body forty days later, the 'where' question cannot be ignored. This underlying curiosity drove my research – what could be a plausible answer that didn't make me the 'flat earth theory' person at dinner parties!

The journey towards an answer led to other, equally significant, puzzle points. I particularly remember two related moments, one early on in my research and one sometime later. My research was not only about the ascension but also about the implications of it for a doctrine of Christian worship. I was at the stage where I was trying to get to terms with the salient issues, and I

was thinking about how the movements of Christian worship (God's movement towards us and our response) related to Christ; within his very person we have both these 'movements', so the argument was that worship is mediated for us in and through Christ's person. So how, then, did this discussion map on to incarnation and ascension, and the familiar saying – attributed to the Church Fathers – that 'God became man that man might become God'?

These movements, whether describing the nature of our worship, the person of Christ, or the events of incarnation and ascension, could be pictorially represented by a parabola. It was at this point in my thinking that I had the chance to sit down with Douglas Farrow, an expert on Irenaeus and the doctrine of the ascension. We were talking through my ideas and I had a piece of paper showing the parabola. And he took my pencil and said – as he drew a line from the top of the right side to connect to the top of the left side, making a loop – the problem with Barth is that you can never get free of the loop (paraphrased). I didn't quite understand, but pretended



I did. And I'll never forget finally understanding exactly what he meant, further along in my research. Despite the very helpful critique that particular theologians articulated against the work of Christ being separated from his person, the ascension needed to be articulated in a way that didn't close the parabola into an eternal loop. Only in discovering that, could I reach some understanding of the 'where' question.





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Interdisciplinary Multiverse of Madness

My interdisciplinary learning has been so wide ranging that, for the past two years, I have frankly lost my way as a researcher. I am on the road to recovery, but this has come the other side of a total loss of direction.

My very first serious reading, when I was 23 and only four years into my life as a Christian, was in the book of Romans. I read it intensely. I began to acquire a small library of books that could help me understand its theology. I even taught myself New Testament Greek purely so that I could study Romans and, with still barely any vocabulary, I cut my exegetical teeth on the first verses of the first chapter of Romans in my brand new Greek New Testament. I loved it. As an offshoot of that, I developed a theological interest in the atonement and began

learning Hebrew so that I could dig into Isaiah 53. Gradually, I became more interested in how the atonement sits with all the other doctrines of Christianity: justification, sanctification, the attributes of God, the Trinity, the incarnation. I became a systematic theologian before I really knew what systematic theology was. Then, in 2001, I got onto a Master's degree at Regents Theological College. I wanted to do the MTh in Applied Theology but this was for people with at least two years full time ministry experience, so I went for the MA in the Study of Pentecostal and Charismatic Issues. Hence, I found myself funnelled into the subdiscipline of Pentecostal Studies – an area that is itself eclectic, dominated mainly by church historians, New Testament scholars, missiologists

and a few systematic theologians who are all, like myself, Pentecostals and using their skills to reflect upon their own tradition. During my MA, I developed an interest in Pentecostal history and ended up doing a PhD on the history of British Pentecostalism. By the time of my first lecturing opportunities, which were all in India, I was straddling church history and systematic theology, with a bit of a Pentecostal Studies focus and an ongoing interest in the New Testament! My subsequent lecturing opportunities were all in very small institutions. It was all-hands on deck. I had to produce whatever was needed: Old Testament Survey, the Trinity, Ethics, you name it. When I started at Cliff College, a few more things were added to my teaching repertoire:

leadership, discipleship. However, by then, I had decided there was only one focus to my research and writing: the atonement. I had embarked upon a ten-year research project, which produced three books and a few articles. I ended up making full use of my interdisciplinary tendencies but tried to tame them: I looked at the atonement first through the lens of historical theology, then through church history and then through the New Testament. Along the way, as though unable to cope with maintaining that level of focus, I dabbled in neuroscience, spirituality, addiction recovery programmes, the Hero's Journey monomyth; I produced a book about charismatic theology plus a couple of SCM Study Guides: one on contemporary theological debates and the other on philosophy in relation to Christian faith.

At the end of all this, sometime around 2018, I surveyed my bookshelves in my office, scanning my eyes over all the un-pursued, half-pursued and fully-pursued

interests, and felt sick. I surveyed the bewildering diversity of books I had written myself, and felt depressed, almost tearful, especially seeing as many of them, from a sales perspective, had been a flop.

The pandemic happened just after I had finished the third and last book of the atonement project, and from then on, I lost my way. I tried studying Henri de Lubac in the original French. For a while I routinely read *Le drame de l'humanisme athée* in the bath, for as long as I could stay awake. My school-boy French wasn't really up to it. I revisited Anselm. I loved his *Prayers and Meditations*. I had already studied *Cur Deus Homo* quite closely for my work on atonement. 'Shall I try to acquire a proper mastery of Latin?', I thought. 'Or maybe I could read Luther or Barth in the original German.' As the Covid restrictions eased, I started teaching some lectures on contemporary culture and, as a result, wrote a couple of papers about secularism and presented them at PhD weeks.

But when I tried to publish them, the peer review feedback told me what I already knew: they were too brisk, never drilling down to any level of detail, they were too wide-ranging and made far too many sweeping generalisations. Yep: they were the work of a still pathologically eclectic person. All the tell-tale symptoms were there. I withdraw both articles.

My cure began to come in the form of a preaching series on Romans at my church. As I write, the very last of these is coming up this Sunday, and I have the honour of delivering it. These sermons have given me the excuse to revamp my Romans notes for my BA class and produce a little self-published book of these for people in my church. The series has brought a new lease of life. I have finally come home. I am back at the place I should never have left, the place without which I would never have entered academia in the first place, Paul's letter to the Romans. So, if you'll excuse me, I have a sermon to prepare.





Taking Kierkegaard Back to Church by Aaron Edwards – An Interview with the Author

Q: What made you want to write this book?

When I first started reading Kierkegaard and seeing what others wrote about him, I was intrigued how so many scholars seemed to ignore his radically overt Christian emphases. Although most know that he was a Christian, it was his more ambiguous and pseudonymously written books which caused his fame to skyrocket when he was first “discovered” by twentieth century thinkers. Given that Kierkegaard wrote so much, and in such interesting and

bizarre ways, it’s not surprising that non-Christian scholars often chose to focus on the less obviously “religious” aspects of his writings. However, to do so is misunderstand his entire authorship, because Kierkegaard had a very specific theological strategy in mind when constructing it.

Much of Kierkegaard’s theological writing offers a critique of Danish Christendom, especially the ways the Gospel had essentially lost its teeth within bourgeois society. So, because Kierkegaard spent so much time directly critiquing the church, many Christians today

aren’t quite sure what to do with him either! I wrote my book because I wanted to unpack the interesting ways Kierkegaard saw the impact of the Gospel upon the church, and how the church ought to conduct itself in light of it. This includes reflections on things like preaching, pastoring, and mission, which reveal to us the “kerygmatic” heart of Kierkegaard’s theology. This is something we desperately need to recover in our churches today, where we too often find ourselves suspiciously distracted from fulfilling our primary purpose.

Q: What was the most important chapter for you and why?

Asking a writer what their favourite chapter is like asking a parent who their favourite child is! Nonetheless, if I had to pick one, it would probably be 'Waddling Geese in the Pulpit: The Perils of Reading and Preaching the Bible'. This was the first piece of work I ever did on Kierkegaard, though I significantly revised and expanded it for this book. In many ways it was actually the catalyst for me getting into Kierkegaard at all! But it's also a topic close to my heart which tackles a significant problem I see in many different ways right across the church and the academy today.

Q: Explain to us Kierkegaard's idea of the waddling geese. Who are today's waddling geese do you think?

The waddling geese are based on a parable Kierkegaard told about the church within Danish Christendom endlessly listening to sermons about the use of their wings, applauding the sermon, and then waddling on home. So, the waddling geese are essentially anyone who dares to say what the Bible says to others without allowing what they say to shape their own lives first. This means we (even we!) are always in danger of waddling along with the

ganders in Kierkegaard's parable, especially those who posture as "theologians" or "preachers" of the Word, in whatever capacity we find ourselves doing it. Kierkegaard's concerns with how the Bible had come to be read and preached in the modern era are very insightful, and remind us that our desire for affirmation, comfort, and worldly relevance can make us do all sorts of strange things with the text, however "objective" we think we are being when we read it.

Q: Given the theme of this issue, in what ways has curiosity played a part in your research on Kierkegaard, and what have been some of the most notable fruits of your curiosity about Kierkegaard?

All my work on Kierkegaard, in a sense, is the fruit of curiosity. I first got into Kierkegaard somewhat accidentally, when writing a book review, which I only agreed to do on a curious whim because I didn't know much about Kierkegaard at the time and was suitably intrigued. At first, it had virtually nothing to do with my doctoral studies. Happily, it eventually had more to do with my topic than I could have predicted. Having accidentally opened the trap door to Kierkegaard's world, I was amazed by what I found there. In one sense it was like entering

Middle Earth, and yet - just like Middle Earth - it had so much direct resonance and relevance to the many challenges facing Christians in our world today. Having once studied under John Webster at Aberdeen - who wrote a brilliant article about the "dangers" of curiosity - I'm always slightly cautious when using that term. Curiosity can often be our way of capitulating to the whims of the moment rather than the mission. This is something especially problematic within a postmodern culture which regularly tries to seduce us with tangents, that we might forget to follow the light of the Word on our path (cf. Ps. 119:105). However, we still need curiosity on the path, lest we miss the many interesting things God might want to show us "on the way". Jesus' ministry with his disciples encompasses this powerfully. It seems he is often challenging his disciples to see beyond the banal, that they would grasp the truth of the Word for themselves, not merely follow the direction of "the crowd", whoever that crowd happens to be. Such an approach is germane to Kierkegaard's theology, enraptured as he was by the significance of Christ's ever-present challenge to humanity, and humanity's ever-present avoidance of true discipleship in the world.

News from Our Research Centres

Generation (The Centre for the Study of Youth, Children and Families Mission and Ministry) held its fourth forum in June on the theme 'Sexual Ethics and Contemporary Culture'. The forum was a hybrid event, and over seventy people attending on site and online. Ian Paul and Rachel Gardner presented, with Ian presenting a biblical-theological understanding of sexuality and Rachel reflecting on how evangelicals can help young people with sexual ethics today. The presentations were excellent and prompted some great discussion. Videos from the event and from previous forums are also available via the Generation website (<https://www.cliffcollege.ac.uk/about-cliff-college/centre-ycf-mission-ministry>).

We are now preparing for our next forum which will explore how class shapes mission and ministry to youth, children and families. We're delighted to have speakers contributing from Innovista, a charity which equips local leaders to grow church in under-reached and under-resourced places (<https://gb.innovista.org>), as well as **Jemma Wraight**, an Outreach Coordinator at Capernwray Bible School (<https://capernwray.org>) and an MA student at Cliff College. The forum takes place 17th October, and booking is available [here](#).

Bible, Gender and Church Centre. This centre is a joint initiative between Cliff College and The University of Manchester, directed by Drs Kirsi Cobb and Holly Morse, that has now hosted numerous one-off events as well as an online short course, delivered by Kirsi, called ['Women in the Bible': Women in the Bible - online course - Cliff College](#)

The most recent event hosted by the centre was 'Preaching Problematic Passages: How to Teach Difficult Texts with Sensitivity' in November 2021. The speakers were Rev'd Dr Lynita Conradie, Methodist minister in the Harrow & Hillingdon Circuit, who spoke on domestic violence in the Methodist Church and the practice of preaching on the topic, and Bekah Legg, CEO of Restored, a Christian charity with a mission to speak up about violence against women and equip the Church to stand against domestic abuse and to support survivors. She focused on the Levite's Concubine in Judges 19 and constructing a sermon on this difficult passage. You can watch the recording here: [The Bible, Gender and Church Research Centre - Cliff College](#).

The first event of the new Abusing God Network funded by the AHRC took place at the University of Manchester on Saturday 10 September. The theme of the day was

coercive control, with the title: 'Reading the Bible in the #MeToo Age.' Videos from this event will be available on our website soon.

Samuel Chadwick Centre. Our fifth Samuel Chadwick Lecture will take place on Monday 17 October 2022. The title will be 'The Holy Spirit, Christian Unity, and Church Union: A Challenge from Samuel Chadwick,' which will be delivered by Dr James Pedlar of Tyndale University, who holds the Chair of Wesley Studies at Tyndale University, Toronto. He will be joining us remotely at 2pm to address the subject of Christian unity and church union in the light of the thinking of Samuel Chadwick. There will be a formal response from Rev'd Dr George Bailey.

Like other figures of his time, Samuel Chadwick, can easily become an object of sepia-tinted nostalgia today. This event will be the product of unsentimental in-depth research, which could prove to be of profound relevance to church life today. As with all the Samuel Chadwick Lectures, the tone of the event will straddle the academic and the devotional.

You can book in for this event here: [The Samuel Chadwick Lecture 2022 - Cliff College](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

Generation Forum: 17 October at 9:15am, at Cliff College and online.

Samuel Chadwick Lecture: 17 October at 2pm, wholly online.

Didsbury Lectures: Monday 24 October until Thursday 27 October. Speaker: Dr David Wilkinson

NTC One Day Theology Conference: 16 June 2023

Manchester Wesley Research Centre Annual Lecture: 20 June 2023 (Dr Cheryl J. Sanders)

NTC Practical Theology Colloquium: 26 June 2023

Sydney Martin Lecture: 26 June 2023



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