

## Michael Goulder: Memorial

Michael was one of the liveliest, funniest, warm-hearted scholars that you were likely to hear or read. We have heard a range of wonderful and moving reflections on Michael's life, and I hope you will forgive me if I focus specially on his scholarship, explaining why I think he was so brilliant a scholar, why people liked him so much, and why – at the same time – the road to recognition was sometimes a rocky one.

Michael was a true Biblical scholar, rare in crossing the boundaries and having expertise and multiple publications in both testaments. His interests ranged widely into other areas too, more broadly theological and philosophical subjects, but his heart was in the historical study of the Bible. He lived, loved and breathed the Bible and he knew it better than anyone. He had a remarkable command of the detail, and would quote chapter and verse, from memory, in the original languages. Even his elegant handwriting seemed quasi-scriptural, with those Greek epsilons for “e”s. Scriptural phrases often came to him, and he could not resist slipping them into conversation or correspondence at appropriate moments, usually with a playful smile.

Those wishing to learn about the Bible would come to understand the contours of its books, its writers and their minds. His students could not have wished for a better teacher, whether they had come in to the Black and White Christian Partnership, to a Saturday School here, to a course elsewhere in the Midlands, or to hear him at one of the

conferences. To listen to him debate was to gain a clarity in understanding the issues and to find fascination in searching for answers. Time and again, I have heard people say that even when they did not agree with all of his conclusions, his approach was scintillating, his manner open, honest and fair.

Those who knew him more through his writings had similar experiences. His books on the Gospels show him to be an admirer of Matthew's fine poetry, of Luke's skill in storytelling, of Paul's ability – like Disraeli – to steal his opponents clothes while they were still bathing. His best book, he said, was his longest, *Luke: A New Paradigm*. In it, Michael's admiration for Luke and his pleasure at explaining his mind, is clear. By the end of the book, the reader feels that he knows Luke too, and would have enjoyed meeting him. The gifts he saw in the Biblical writers were often gifts he shared. Like Luke, he told a great story. Like Matthew, he had a fine and memorable turn of phrase. Like Paul, he could anticipate his opponent's arguments and trump them.

Michael's approach was a rigorously historical one. He used to say that he would have made a good detective, and this was an aspect of his scholarship that many of us found appealing. There is a thrill in the act of discovery, in putting together the pieces, in noticing important but neglected clues. Sometimes this was a matter of making connections. Sometimes it was a matter of seeing things that others had missed, whether through misplaced reverence or a lack of imagination, dare I say like the overtly sexual nature of the Song of Songs? I remember blushing when I first read his little book on the

topic, and I suspect he took an impish pleasure in earnestly explaining what the Scripture said to the assembled faithful at his Saturday school on the topic.

Without wishing to labour the point, there was an intimate connection between his scholarship and his rhetorical skill, in the elegance of his prose and the authority of the oral presentation. His levity was not in competition with his scholarship but was an expression of it. He could be both forensic and frivolous, as the occasion required. After all, the degree of earnestness does not correlate to the skill of the interpreter or, more importantly, to the rightness of the idea. The fact that Michael was such a compelling speaker is a mark of the compelling nature of his ideas. When we laughed, we laughed out of recognition as well as out of admiration.

Michael's real legacy as a Biblical scholar will probably only be fully appreciated now after his death. The difficulty with being a creative thinker, and of having unusual ideas, is that it takes a while for their value to be grasped. Biblical scholars can be creatures of habit. They can be tribal. Everyone knew that Michael was clever, and funny with a combination of dignity and mischief that was uniquely his, and it is a shame that in spite of this – perhaps even because of it – his ideas were dismissed too quickly, as if sharp observation and rhetorical skill were things to be denigrated.

I remember once discussing with Michael the difference between scholars of the bold hypothesis, like him, and scholars of excessive caution. He conceded that we need

scholars of patience and detail but added, “Of them, the Lord said that they shall never come to a knowledge of the truth.” In my experience, what Michael joked about, in comments like that, were actually not distractions but went to the heart of the issue. Michael cared passionately about “the truth” and he disliked fudges. He knew dishonesty and insincerity when he saw it.

Ultimately, this is what is so admirable about his decision to resign his orders. He had come to a point where he could not reconcile the contradictions inherent, as he saw it, in belief in God. It would have been dishonourable to pretend that he thought differently. Although the decision itself, in the end, was straightforward and inevitable to a man of integrity, I don't think we should underestimate how difficult it was to live with its consequences. He spoke about it with sadness and he did not become aggressive in his non-belief. Several of Michael's role models, like Austin Farrer and R. O., were devout – he called them “saints” – and he loved the church, its traditions, its calendar. Once, when I sent Michael a Christmas card with a nice nativity scene of the traditional kind, he replied, “It is so nice to have a *proper* Christmas card. Some of my friends say, 'Since you have left the church, you'll have to make do with a robin.'”

But what of the substance of his scholarship? In what ways will people continue to learn from his approach? His work was characterized by the desire to see texts as a whole, to discern patterns, to reflect on how they worked in worship. There was no place for a piecemeal approach, whether in removing parables from their contexts in the Gospels,

or in analysing the Psalms in isolation from one another. Thinking across the boundaries, he was one of the first to see that in order to understand Saint Luke's Genesis, you needed to understand both St Luke and Genesis. To understand Matthew the scribe, you needed to see the sequences and patterns in his use of the Old Testament. The brilliance of Michael's scholarly projects were matched by the scope of his ambition, and if he made a mistake in strategy, it was that he sometimes threw too much at the reader all at once – in Gospel scholarship you needed to dispense with Q, and M, and L, and buy into a liturgical origin of the Gospels. But to those who appreciated his work, his ideas are interconnected: the patterns, the distinctive characteristics, the minds behind the texts.

And it is not true, in fact, as some critics said, that it was a matter of “all or nothing” with Michael. One of the things that appealed to me as a research student was that one could actually conduct research on his theories: he did not simply state vaguely that something was persuasive or unpersuasive; he did not criticize other scholars for “special pleading”. He made his case with boldness but also with a thoroughness in the presentation of data that could be tested. He was not a trendy scholar, riding on the latest wave, but one who thought independently and originally through reading and re-reading the texts. Did not our hearts stir within us as he opened up the scriptures to us and explained one of his ideas over lunch in Staff House? Or at his home in Valentine Road, or in debate at a course or conference?

This is, of course, a eulogy, and I imagine that Michael and Clare asked me to do it not

only because I know his work well but also because I admired him so greatly. Although he was never my formal teacher, he was for me so much more than that, from the time when, as a schoolboy, I got a taste of the fascination of Biblical scholarship, when I came to Saturday schools with my mother, to the point where I wrote a book about his ideas when I was at university, and then took a job here in Birmingham and had the pleasure of getting to know both Michael and Clare as friends. Throughout that period, Michael was a great encouragement. And that's a word that I have heard again in recent weeks from others – he was a great encourager of younger scholars, always taking an interest, listening and engaging with them. On one occasion he wrote, when I had my first teaching job, in Greek letters, *archē euangeliou*, “the beginning of the gospel” (of Mark!), and he used to speak of my work as a “hope for his ideas”. But there were, as I have mentioned, sceptics. When I asked Michael about them, he replied, “Of them, the Lord said, 'Even if someone should be raised from the dead, they would not believe.'”

In recent weeks, we have all been thinking of our enduring memories of Michael and one of mine is a recent one, and quite frivolous. He was recounting a piece of P. G.

Wodehouse, the description of Honoria Glossop's laugh as sounding like “a squadron of cavalry charging across a tin bridge”, and he was convulsed in laughter for several minutes. His love of life, and of finding the fun in it was infectious, and our best tribute is to celebrate those characteristics that made him so delightful, his uncompromising integrity, the pleasure of intellectual exchange, his love of laughter. We will miss him.

Mark Goodacre, 25 February 2010