HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

'Vex the devil': Scripture, God-talk and holiness at Villa Road

Jennifer H. Smith

THE REVD DR JENNIFER SMITH is a Methodist minister serving two churches and as a superintendent in West London, UK. Before ordination she lectured in US history and politics; she is a US citizen.

Jennifer.methodist@yahoo.co.uk
Ealing, West London, UK

This article gives a critical account of the engagement with Scripture among a group of women and men from the Villa Road Methodist Church, Handsworth, Birmingham, UK. It presents research done in community during 2004/05 for the unpublished thesis, 'Mary in the Kitchen, Martha in the Pew: Patterns of Holiness in a Methodist Church' (MPhil., Birmingham, 2006), updated to include critical engagement with contemporary scholarship in Black British theology, womanist and feminist theology, holiness teaching and hermeneutics, and congregational studies. Working from ethnographic research, the article considers three clusters of emphasis, or creative tensions, in the use of Scripture: gender and God, thanksgiving/resistance in response to evil, and displacement/home-coming. The article argues that these themes specially concern the negotiation of identity and relationship between self, God, Scripture and context.

SCRIPTURE • HOLINESS • BLACK BRITISH THEOLOGY • FEMINIST WOMANIST THEOLOGY • CONGREGATIONAL STUDIES • ORDINARY HERMENEUTICS

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 2 (Holiness & Scripture): pp. 143–163

ISSN 2058-5969

Introduction

> The Methodist Church '… ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith …'[1]
>
> … it's like a h'urge, like a something you must do, a habit that you can't break. A good habit, a good habit that you can't break. You got to get involved![2]

British Methodism claims for its purpose the extension of something John Wesley called 'scriptural holiness': a quality of increasing sacredness, the growing association of a person with God and the ways of Jesus Christ that shows as a change in both behaviour and motive. The woman quoted above is a lifelong Methodist, Jamaican-born, who arrived in the United Kingdom in the early 1960s. That day she had settled me in the steaming warm kitchen of her terraced house just off the Soho Road in Handsworth, Birmingham, sitting me at the table with my digital recorder and a cup of tea. We had known each other for more than a year: I attended her church first on placement as a student minister, and then as a formally invited 'participant-observer' worshipping at Villa Road. She and other members of the church council and women's fellowship had agreed to work with me on a 'mutual theological enquiry' about scriptural holiness, to help train me for the ordained ministry. On that afternoon I had come to interview her in preparation for a group discussion; I had asked her what scriptural holiness meant.

Her description of holiness as a 'h'urge … a something you must do', chimes with that of recent theologians like Thomas Noble and indeed John Wesley, as 'habitual patterns of motivation that build up over time until they come to shape our character', as well as actions.[3] Scriptural holiness in Methodist, let alone wider Christian, tradition has been used as a portmanteau for diverse agendas in the evolution of Christian witness.[4] From the methodological perspective of congregational studies, Douglas J. Davies observes that 'holy status is invoked as and when it is related to the generation of meaning, morality, or identity'.[5] It is about who one is and who/how one is becoming identified with the sacred. Accounts of scriptural holiness taken together show a number of creative tensions, not least between how holiness shows and from where it comes: holiness has been taken to show in both ethics/behaviour and internal attitude, and has involved wilful intention while at the same time being

a free gift of God's initiative, graft and gift. And as John Rogerson has rightly noted, 'its meaning depends on the contexts in which it is used and the interests of those who use it'.[6] This is as true for the woman in her terraced house kitchen and me, as for any working theologian or Methodist divine.

But my host took me abruptly back to the topic a few minutes later when I moved on too quickly to ask her opinion of holiness, claiming her own reflective space alongside my abstractions. 'Yeah, it like an illness but it a good illness. [Laughter.] Yeah it's a illness but it's something good. Illness is supposed to be something bad, but it a good illness.'[7] She may have laughed at her own paradoxical use of illness as a metaphor for something healthy, but she clarified specifically that as a metaphor for scriptural holiness it pointed to a negotiation of meaning that was not just dynamic, but contested. The negotiation at the heart of scriptural holiness might not at first sight look harmless, even though she claimed it wholeheartedly as a good thing. It was in the context of this subtly developed and clarified image that we sought space for her immediate community to reflect on its engagement with Scripture, among other projects.

My purpose in this article is not to offer a full account of what scriptural holiness is, for the group of diverse Methodist folk white and black with whom I worked at Villa Road, nor to develop a full account of the hermeneutics of that community. The former project I have addressed in longer unpublished work which considered not only Scripture and related God-talk, but patterns of behaviour in worship, church life, personal devotion, physical objects, service, care, and denominational identity as part of a more fulsome account.[8] This article offers a window into a very few themes in the use of Scripture among the folk of Villa Road: after some attention to methodology and context, and place and purpose of Scripture, the article will consider three clusters of emphasis in engagement with Scripture. The first is around issues of gender and God, the second thanksgiving and resistance to evil, and the third to do with displacement and home-coming. The three clusters of emphasis in the use of Scripture represented here all concern the negotiation of identity and relationship between self, God, Scripture and context, and show some of the creative tensions present in accounts of scriptural holiness within them. However, the themes are not exhaustive nor are they intended to be. They are simply three approaches to the contested, lively devotional attention my kitchen host, and others in her community, gave to Scripture together, individually and with me.

This article thus seeks to represent engagement with Scripture as a richly textured event (place, persons, vernacular, relationships) by which a group or individual engages with a scriptural motif, story or actual passage of Scripture, telling and retelling it, arguing to negotiate its meaning. In suggesting this definition I am extending Chris Shannahan's observation in relation to Scripture, that 'meaning rests not within the text or the interpretative community, but in the relationship between reader and scripture'.[9] I am further responding to the challenge offered by Anthony Reddie in relation to Black British engagement with Scripture, to recognise the authority of hermeneutics in which people 'become part of a process that allows them to enter into the performance of theological activity and bring their lived experiences into the very heart of the biblical text'.[10] In response I posit that where God-talk takes place, what happens, who is there, what if any food is eaten, what is said, who is silent, and the whole context is a potential part of the meaning arrived at. For example, in contrast to the warm kitchen off the Soho Road, one senior local preacher (a man already accredited as a lay preacher when he came from St Kitts in 1955, and widely invited as a guest, but discouraged from offering for the ordained ministry) chose to meet me in a church office and sat behind a desk in an authoritative position. He told me of a previous occasion where he had not known that a researcher was writing things down, and was then surprised to see someone else making a name out of his insights.[11] The geography of this network of historical and present relationships must be part of the meaning we arrive at. This article treats the record of these thematic patterns as a series of richly textured events, setting them in critical conversation with other theological voices as appropriate. I am convinced that as shared group moments these encounters with Scripture are part of the process of scriptural holiness in this place, but what we say here serves only to open that conversation.

Methodology and context

Over the past fifty years to 2004, Villa Road had become a black-majority church as its white members had moved away and/or died, and the generation of Afro-Caribbean migrants who renewed the membership lists in the 1950s and 1960s aged.[12] In the words of one member, herself coming to Villa Road in the 1960s after leaving another Methodist church because of racial prejudice, 'They see coloured people going there – out they come, out they come, out they come. And white people they trickle out … [smiles ruefully] so that's how it goes, that's

how it comes down there, to call it a black church now, innit?'[13] 'Black church' as a label came from outside the Villa Road church itself. I was told the congregation was struggling, and in numerical and immediate physical terms it was: they had sold their building in November 2003 with the promise of rented worship space within it, only to have the transitional time lag from months to years. As of May 2005, the congregation still worshipped in a borrowed room in the adjacent school's athletics building, using a kitchenette for a vestry. It has since moved back into leased space within the church building, including an unheated basement fellowship room and kitchen.

I was introduced to members at Villa Road as part of my training for ordained ministry in the Methodist Church in Spring 2003. This meant that I was identified from the outset as an authoritative person in the community, privileged by education and vocation. I am also middle class and from the USA: I was readily identifiable to all in the congregation as one of three regular white congregants among 40–50 people present most Sundays, and one of the only congregants under the age of 40. In September 2004 I had permission from the minister and church council to join the church as a participant-observer until June 2005, with the goal of undertaking a shared enquiry into the meaning of 'scriptural holiness' in the life of the congregation, and to write an account of our work for a research degree and later publication. A small group of seven self-nominated women met five times for recorded 'themed discussion' after the women's fellowship, which I facilitated. I conducted up to three semi-structured interviews each with ten individual members, eight women and two men, over the course of the nine months (17 in total, lasting one to one and a half hours each). I gave the whole congregation feedback in the context of worship, at Pentecost. The discussion group was majority Jamaican-born, with one Ghanaian and one Nigerian woman and included other occasional participants. Of the interviewees, three were White British, the others Jamaican, Ghanaian, Nigerian and from St Kitts. In the group and in individual interviews, I used a digital recorder and revisited people to ask them to reflect further on comments that interested them or me especially, to test my initial understanding. I have not quoted specific comments made to me 'off the cuff', for example during car journeys or after worship, except with specific permission, though these have certainly informed my understanding. Only one interviewee asked that I not record her, nor quote her specific comments.

During the research, I attended weekly worship and all other social and business meetings of the church, the weekly women's fellowship, and other occasional discipleship events. As people got to know me, I was called on for

lifts in my small blue hatchback to and from church, as well as occasional help in transport for medical or other appointments, and also invited to family and other social gatherings at church members' homes. The Villa Road community expected to care for me physically and to help me grow; I put on half a stone (seven pounds) in weight during the course of the research, not entirely unrelated to its progress! Their interest in me was and has remained warm and proprietary – I felt taken in as 'their' student and they were more than free with strong advice on everything from sermons to hair style. Some ten years later I am still in regular contact with one of the participants individually, the women's fellowship group collectively, and their (now retired) minister. The work was done with the ethical oversight of the Department of Theology at Birmingham University, supplemented by strong theological supervision and reflection offered by staff of the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, to whom I was accountable in my formation for ministry.

I am conscious of the position of trust I occupy, especially the necessity of representing my status as an evolving insider and outsider with integrity, in the finished record of research.[14] But, beyond that, I remain acutely aware of my power as a white person, minister and researcher: representing those less powerful or less present in academic circles in its very fact may fulfil and reinforce expectations of their own inadequacies as self-advocates. American womanist bell hooks has written:

> No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak yourself. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own … I am still the coloniser, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.[15]

The awareness of myself as an inevitable coloniser remains a continuing goad, a tension which should not be resolved. And yet, this community also exercised authority over me, and largely scoffed at or brushed aside times when I directly expressed disquiet about representing them. They helped to set the agenda for our meetings, and changed it when it did not suit. If I did not write about something when they told me it was important, and with as much integrity as I could muster, then why were they bothering? That does not make the reality of the sin of white-skin privilege, education privilege and community status for the ordained any less real as part of my presence with them, but it is a no less real part of our power exchange.

The tensions presented by my situation as a participant-observer were themselves formative in preparing me to exercise authority in the presbyteral role I hold now. In both situations full reflexive practice and supervision are essential to negotiate an inevitable tension between the abuse of power and the abdication of power. The Villa Road community was explicitly aware of exercising a general authority over my formation as a minister and a specific authority in relation to the research, over the 'texts' I chose to represent and how to represent them, as this record will show. Many layers of meaning may be drawn from any story or talk about ourselves and God, Scripture or the Church: all may be valid, but must be honestly negotiated amid and mediated by the historic power inequalities we inherit. To paraphrase the prophet Isaiah, 'How long, O Lord, will your people listen but not comprehend, look but not understand?'[16] This lament describes to me my own limitations in hearing the breadth and depth of meaning in the spoken reflection at Villa Road.

Place and purpose of Scripture

'And I don't leave out, my everyday my breakfast, is Psalm 27,' said one woman of her everyday scriptural 'food', in addition to her 'daily list'. '[E]very morning I get up I do it, that's my comfort, I read the Psalms and I don't do without it.'[17] This kind of talk dominated people's descriptions of the Bible in their daily devotions. I asked a standard question about where folk kept their Bible: the most common answers were on the nightstand or kitchen table, with favourite passages read and reread for material comfort. Individuals talked about Scripture as food, comfort or salve, and about repeating specific passages from memory on their own as a way of re-orienting themselves in a moment of difficulty. Significantly, this re-orientation touched much more than attitude: said one woman with bad arthritis, 'Some of these days, you feel like you can't move … you take your Bible, you read a few verses, it will comfort, it bring healing.'[18] The way she spoke of the Bible in healing was anything but abstract: her legs felt less stiff and her pain immediately reduced. After a fellowship meeting another woman asked me privately if I thought reading special verses would protect against the effects of sugary foods (she was an insulin-dependent diabetic); I answered no. Other women took up the refrain, telling her to keep with the insulin and medical advice.[19] However, the exchange confirmed for me that the accepted positions of Scripture in authorised church life (personal devotion, worship, study) were only one part of the 'where' and 'when' of Scripture's importance in people's lives.

For formal worship, the church used the *Good News* translation of the Bible, but the words on people's lips in conversation and prayer tended towards the language of the Authorised Version. Almost without exception whenever someone read or quoted a passage, whether in a group or in formal worship, others in the group would pick up the words and finish the phrase out loud together to signal their assent to the point being made. So for instance, when during a sermon a visiting minister referred to Psalm 27:14, 'be strong, and take heart, wait for the Lord', the whole congregation recited the verse with her. In group discussions, people often slipped into recitation to show their conclusion, or to add scriptural depth to an image of God. The speaker might twist a phrase or verse ever so slightly to make a theological point, often with sharp humour. In one example a woman stood up during discussion and shook her finger at all of us. 'God says, "My peace I give unto you …' [the group began to speak along with her, with increasing speed and emphasis; they had heard this recitation before] '… And my peace I expect to find when I get back!'[20] In fact John 14:27 is specific that the 'peace of God' is not given 'as the world gives', but is without condition. Laughing, I challenged her about this: she said she was not intending to disagree with the verse, but just wanted to be clear that she thought we also had responsibilities. There was much laughter and repetition of her version, it clearly appealed to the people present.

Theme one: God, gender and Scripture

It is no surprise that self-identified Christian women (and men) should use Scripture to 'counteract negative stereotyping which at times has been used to justify their marginalization'.[21] But at the same time, as Anthony Reddie has observed and the woman of the 'h'urge' whose words began this article implied, the negotiation of scriptural meaning may include both reading 'against a text and with it, depending upon how the text aligns itself with the popular imagination of Black people from within a wider framework of Diasporan African cultures and the often troubled and stunted humanity residing within such socio-religious settings'.[22] Reddie's research shows that there are moments in Black British engagement with Scripture 'in which a contradictory, liberative/anti-liberative dialectic is played out', especially (but not exclusively) seen in a contradiction between 'liberationist and subversive' readings to do with slavery or race, and 'conservative or reactionary' readings to do with gender.[23]

An argument broke out just at the end of one small-group meeting, as I was putting things away. Using language from John 20:17 (Jesus saith unto her, 'Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to the Father …'), two women argued about the legitimacy of expecting intimacy from Jesus, and more generally with what obedient submission from women would look like in church.[24] One woman illustrated a warning not to put oneself 'forward' as a woman by singing a chorus from childhood: 'Woman no touch me, woman no touch me. Woman no touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the father …' Waiting somewhat impatiently for the chorus to finish, the other responded in heated tones that 'woman been worthy enough to see the resurrection!', and by implication should be worthy enough to lead the Church.[25] They agreed that 'man is the head', but in a metaphor offered by a third woman by way of reconciling the divide, '… woman the ground, the earth … the source of everything'.[26] Thus I heard a mixing of scriptural language about gender and God with the negotiated gender balance in their own lives, and an intense theological disquiet about how much support any one of them might expect from Jesus in challenging traditional patterns of privilege for men.

Although addressing a North American context, Jacquelyn Grant has observed that black women often articulated their own liberative Christologies.[27] Yet there was a present tension in the corporate account of who Jesus was, mirrored in a tension between how much present patterns of gender and race power structures should be challenged and changed. The tension about where a woman (or any other 'moaning sinner') sat in relation to Jesus was not resolved among the members at Villa Road.[28] The heat in the argument at the end of that session showed that more than a few of these women were unwilling to give up the Jesus who defended them in all ways, but especially as women, in a world where men had more domestic and economic privilege. But this was a contested reading, resonating with Anthony Reddie's observation of a 'contradictory … liberative/anti-liberative dialectic' in the interpretation of Scripture among some Black British communities.

Theme two: thanksgiving, Scripture and resistance

The two women who had argued over closeness to Jesus agreed that cheerful endurance in evil circumstance was an act of positive resistance. By their reasoning, if one gave thanks and suffered cheerfully amid ongoing difficulty, 'it vex the devil so, he hop around like Rumplestiltsken!'[29] The conversation that culminated in this repeated statement happened not at one of our

research group meetings, but at an ecumenical Lent Bible study on 1 Thessalonians, led by their minister. The two women were responding to the verse at 1 Thessalonians 5:18, 'In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.'[30] They were fully aware that their minister favoured the immediate challenge of injustice by tangible pastoral, political and economic means. It was not that they disagreed with what the minister was teaching, but they returned again and again to the motif of cheerful thanksgiving in suffering to 'vex the devil', teasing her good-naturedly and with increasing seriousness.

As these women talked about it, giving praise and thanks to God in the face of suffering was not a passive acceptance of the status quo but a mode of active resistance to evil. Those working from a hard liberation perspective might dismiss their view as false consciousness; the minister did not. She understood and adapted the 'official' account to include 'vexing the devil' as the Bible study continued, at the same time teasing the two women back that the community might need more than just thanksgiving. There is resonance between the use of 1 Thessalonians 5:18 to authorise thanksgiving as 'resistance' (vex the devil) and the theory of atonement articulated by womanist theologian Delores Williams, who has equated salvation with survival.[31] Williams has argued that some liberation theories do not adequately include the experience of women of colour in post-slavery, western culture, in which finding spiritual and physical energy to resource endurance is anything but simple. For the two women in that Bible study, the account of 'vexing the devil' was a way of resourcing and giving purpose to an endurance in the face of racism, sexism, displacement and class bias, among other hardships. Where an 'official' view of Scripture did not equip these women adequately, they were theologically subtle and socially adept at negotiating space for their own language and imagery about God, while preserving a respectful relationship with their minister.

There were instances where members at Villa Road did actively 'read against' (using Reddie's language) the text of Scripture to resist oppressive mis-treatment of people. Realising that my original scheme of group exercises did not have enough space for reflection about the use of Scripture, I swapped in a group activity I hoped would draw out discussion comparing different ways of regarding the Bible. The training material in the course then used by lay preachers in the Methodist Church included a section on becoming self-conscious in one's own scriptural hermeneutic. The prospective preacher was asked to rank for herself four sources of authority: reason, Scripture, tradition and experience. Later in the course, she was asked to identify herself with one

or more of seven distinct camps of scriptural authority. With some subtlety of overlap, these camps ranged from a position of assumed literal inerrancy of the text and absolute authority for Christian living to an approach saying that the Bible is an interesting anthology one might dip into along with other resources, but without significant ethical authority.[32] I planned to ask the five women in attendance that day to do both exercises. In what became one of the most memorable and instructive sessions of theological reflection with that group (unrecorded, happening before my 'exercise'), another woman pre-empted my exercise asking if we could instead study a passage that had been troubling her: 2 Kings 10:18–32. The discussion that followed gave me a clear lesson on how to read the Bible with absolute authority, but against the recommended culture of present-day leaders in and out of church and in support of those without power.

In the passage, the King Jehu affects a conversion to Baal worship, then rounds up (on pain of death) all the Baal worshippers in the land, declares a festival of sacrifice and worship and packs them into Baal's temple. After professing his fealty to Baal, he asks if there are any followers of the Lord there. No one comes forward; he orders that they search for any non-Baal worshippers, and there are none in the temple. As the worship begins, he has his guards rush in and massacre the whole congregation; afterwards God expresses pleasure that Jehu has done 'what was right in my eyes', by eradicating Baal worship from the land. Despite his own idolatry, Jehu is rewarded with the throne of Israel for four generations of his descendants.

There was silence in the group, broken by the angry declaration of our leader: 'It a trick! … the point is he trick them … So I say, those might have turn up who you know, scared.'[33] I pointed out that the text clearly stated that there were no 'followers of the Lord' in the temple: we might argue with the premise of killing them, but the text said that all who had died had been Baal worshippers. She was unconvinced: 'I have my doubts … According to the threatening that he done to them, I don't know, maybe I would have been caught up in the massacre as well, through no fault of my own. You know … those poor people, they were scared, you see. They have to be a martyr.' I asked what she would say to God about the blessing of Jehu's actions. The vehement response, after considered pause: 'I say, "Are you sure?"'

In relation to the seven categories of scriptural authority that Methodism identified, this woman put herself close to claiming the literal inerrancy of the Bible.[34] But the official Methodist exercise I offered, and the women eventually

undertook, measured only an incomplete part of that woman's reading and appropriation of the text to her life. She described a sad commonplace from her own experience of needing to look carefully that those in leadership were not setting out to trick folks lower down the power stakes, using them for their own ends. As such she resisted a literal reading of the text (which said clearly that there were no 'followers of the Lord', only Baal worshippers) specifically because she was reading the text as a real historical event, and it did not equate with her experience, in which there might be people who had gone along because they were scared not to. When I asked her about this later, she repeated her assertions and challenge to God, 'Are you sure?' Her use of the Scripture resonates strongly with Anthony Reddie's observation that 'The apparent literal meaning of the text cannot constrain the prevenient spirit within the black self – our dialectical spiritualties – which speak of an ongoing reality and revelation of God that goes beyond the limited ethic of the Bible.'[35]

Lively discussion followed about whether other members of the group would have gone to the temple or not and pretended Baal worship: the lesson finally agreed was that 'if you hold fast to your faith no matter what, and don't be afraid, God will protect you'. One who said she would not under any circumstances deny her faith was more explicitly challenged: 'You say, if Jen axe you – [turning to speak directly to me] no offence – if Liz [their minister] axe you, you still wouldn't go?'[36] The women here worked from their experience to 'read between the lines' (the leader's phrase) of the text to get at its 'true' meaning. Scriptural holiness is associated in womanist or black liberation context as beginning with a process of conscientisation: people can only grow in holiness if they learn to name their oppression and oppressor. One way this happens is through a rereading of Scripture on behalf of oneself and one's own cultural experience: part of what holiness does as an acquired identity, built in part from this kind of reading of Scripture, is to resource for the resisting of representation by others with their own agendas.[37]

Certainly there was some of this conscientisation gently present in our study of Jehu. However, in the discussion of King Jehu there was unresolved conflict between the counter-claims of simple endurance, showing as non-resistance to (if not respect for) present leaders, laid against the promise that God would favour the less powerful. That this conflict played out in the context of talk about Scripture showed how important such talk is as part of the continuing re-formation of community identity. I would describe my own reading of Scripture as showing a 'chastened historical critical approach', I would represent what I saw operating in talk about the text at Villa Road as 'wary obedience.'[38]

The study of the Jehu story is not the only example I could use to represent the out-working of scriptural authority in this place, but it showed the variety, conflict, and commitment to arriving at consensus in talk about the Bible.

George Mulrain has written of a distinctive 'hermeneutics within a Caribbean context'. He suggests that a specifically Caribbean scriptural hermeneutics is characterised firstly by a world-view that takes seriously the presence of an unknown but populated spirit world. In relation to the members at Villa Road, this recognises there is a real 'devil' to be vexed. Secondly, Mulrain identifies the expectation that God understands the oppression of the readers' forebears and sides with them in suffering. Thirdly, by his account this Caribbean hermeneutics acknowledges a multi-faith context in the way it reads texts. Finally, he identifies a 'preference for texts that deal with liberation from forms of oppression'.[39] I am interested to expand this account of biblical interpretation with the particular insights about the culture of black elders (especially women) who moved to Britain and have lived there for the better part of their adult lives, which Anthony Reddie offers in his account *Faith Stories, and the Experience of Black Elders*.[40] Several layers of hermeneutical emphasis operated among the women and men at Villa Road, black and white. Certainly, the expectation that Scripture would reveal a God involved on their side against racism, poverty, illness, displacement, neglect and other forms of suffering was present in the treatment of King Jehu. Certainly there was a 'preference' for texts associated with liberation, like Psalm 27. And certainly I saw models of talking about and interpreting the Bible that expected it to make the world a better place for the impoverished and underprivileged.

However, there was not universal agreement about the lessons of Scripture or the way it should be used among the people at Villa Road and I am wary of representing the way their fellowship positioned and spoke of the Bible in such a tidy package as Mulrain's scheme suggests. Present in their conflicts about the meaning of texts, I heard conflicts about how to respond to the present and past legacy of racism within the Church and without. I heard conflict about what place race, and their particular culture in Handsworth, should play as part of Christian identity: should the Church be challenged? And if so, in what way and to what degree? Or was race less important than Baptism as part of Christian identity, racism an embarrassment for victim as much as perpetrator and thus best forgiven and forgotten? For myself I hope that the Bible and talk about Scripture might be part of an identity I call holiness, serving to resist oppressive denigration on the basis of race, sex, illness, age or other category. As told at Villa Road, the Bible and use of Scripture did become this means.

However, it was also the ground over which these women were negotiating the conflict between a more or less useful, more or less oppressive identity for God and self, Church and world.

Theme three: Scripture, home-coming and the person of Jesus

Feeling rejected in a foreign culture and keeping a secret sense of home alive was a theme that recurred in multiple conversations about Scripture and how to use it. The pain of displacement from home was real, and acknowledged: take for example one woman's explicit link between low-level cultural hostility of the early years of her time in the United Kingdom, and the development of a secret spiritual identity, the song 'behind the teeth'. Telling me about 'the things you cannot do in England,' she explained that she had had to learn not to sing hymns in public after getting odd looks in the street, and how different this was from the Jamaica of her girlhood. 'Now I keeps the song behind the teeth,' she said, smiling broadly and laughing to show me.[41] To resist the daily cost of fitting in to avoid hostility, she spoke of developing a second self 'behind the teeth' of her smile, where she could sing and pray and be at home. I was able to meet that woman only once for an individual interview, and she preferred not to be recorded; in the moment, I responded with silence. I wish after the silence I had thought to open Psalm 137: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept, when we remembered Zion … for there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'[42] These verses were favourites among the discussion group, quoted and requoted as part of the general vernacular imagery in conversation. In retrospect I find in the woman's description a specific echo of the 'required mirth' of the exile, as she described her smile and the song it had restrained over the years. I do not know if she would have claimed the specific association with her song 'behind the teeth', or not.

In the way many spoke about Jesus, he represented the secret self of home or home-coming, associated with Old Testament stories of the suffering of exile and abandonment by the world. The Jesus of the Gospels (prefigured in Old Testament texts) at Villa Road was not an abstract Christ or saviour, but an intimate co-sufferer who had triumphed over all the things that troubled people in this place and life. Even when not explicitly scriptural, the cadence

of psalms and lament helped build a scriptural vernacular about Jesus as shared story became group text. Consider the following exchange from the first recorded group session, in which I had asked if there were times in life when people had been especially aware of God's presence. After a pause, one woman recited the story of her mother's deathbed, as others around the table encouraged her, and told me to pay attention:

> When my mother was dying I can remember this.
> She called me by her bedside, and she said …
> 'I am going home to Jesus …
> [another woman makes an aside to me: 'Aw, ain't that nice …'],
> … and 'Take care me Jesus now.'
> But the most important and the most shocking thing to me …
> 'Lord Jesus, my name is Viola Rice!
> I am coming home Lord Jesus.'
>
> It was the most sincere thing I ever heard, it was so touching to me.
> And then she saying,
> 'Yes Lord, Yes Lord here am I Lord,
> I am coming I am coming.'
> And she says to me …
> 'Jesus is coming, He is coming,'
> and she says 'My name Lord is Viola Rice!
> My name is Viola Rice, I am coming,'
> and touch me, and up to now,
>
> And I'm saying, 'Lord, will I hope to say what my mother said?'
> And that lived with me for the rest of my life.
>
> [Other woman, to me: 'That's a good thing for your book, that's a good verse, good thing for your writing, that is nice, very nice …']43

The comments in brackets were interjections made directly to me by another woman; her spoken approval recommended the story highly, over others, as one she wanted to exemplify God's activity and their individual and group response. I was not to miss the point that this story was owned as a family jewel among them, a formative text. The group had heard this story before, and joined in to say the repeated phrases together by way of affirmation. Viola's daughter told the story with poetic cadence and emphasis, a recitation in what was almost a singing voice.

God was intimately present in the day-to-day conversations and banter among the research group, but this story stood out as an illustration of that usual reference spilling over into a profound sense of the numinous presence, Jesus' coming and coming to him and home at the moment of death. In the telling and hearing of this story there might be a variety of richly layered meanings, but its point was explicitly catechetical: 'Lord, will I hope to say what my mother said?' Viola's daughter made her mother's experience of naming herself to Jesus into a lesson to instruct not only about who God is, but about how we should all hope to respond, naming ourselves in God's presence and coming to him. Treating this not only as a personal anecdote but as a group-owned text (a 'verse', as the other woman described it), what lessons do I draw from the story about who God is, in the lives of the women present?

Telling the story of Scripture to emphasise naming oneself before Jesus seemed to me an antidote to public anonymity or 'nobodyness' in much of ordinary life. Viola Rice's naming herself to Jesus in her daughter's presence taught others that they could, should, name themselves to Jesus: and perhaps in the here and now. This resonated with Jacquelyn Grant's argument that for black women ignored by the mainstream of the cultures in which they lived, Jesus was the person who would know you, when the world does not. Writing about the differences in black and white women's understanding of Jesus, Grant has talked of black women's Christology emerging from the reality of the convergence of racism, sexism and classism to 'convey to their children that in spite of the world's denial of you, Jesus (God) affirms you'. This she called a 'theology of somebodiness'.[44] But why, then, did Viola Rice need to name herself? According to the group, Jesus knew her already: this was about saying her own name out loud in the world, a sign to demonstrate her presence and coming home to Jesus, over and again.

Conclusion

As I said in the introduction to this article, my purpose here is not to offer a full account of what scriptural holiness is at the Villa Road Methodist Church, nor how it is 'spread'. That project would require wider reference to worship and sacrament, fellowship and pastoral life, music, denominational identity and the physical spaces and artefacts of church life, among other themes. These are of course negotiated in relation to each other and to the use of Scripture and scriptural vernacular, but move well beyond the conversations represented

here. Nonetheless this article does highlight three emphases within the hermeneutics of the Villa Road community which are significant in the formation of holy identity. These three emphases are worthy conversation partners with the voices of Black British, and womanist, theologies, and congregational studies, both as they challenge, and confirm, the insights of those disciplines. Neither the clusters of emphasis I have identified here, nor the conversation partners included, is exhaustive. That said, negotiating expectations of gender justice, thanksgiving/resistance, and homecoming/identity are significant areas where people I worked with at Villa Road used Scripture to resource themselves for particular purposes. I observe that they built identity using Scripture as a powerful and authoritative dialogue partner to serve purposes presented by the particular historical and cultural context.

Not all of the community's purposes nor mine show in this article, but the hope is that what is represented here will provoke further questions about how we create space in congregations for reflexive practice about the use of Scripture, especially among black and ethnic minority people in congregations. This question becomes far more layered when we move to include a wider generational spread of people, and come to reflect on the multiple ethnic and cultural identities many of us own, in relation to faith formation. I also hope that the powerful humour among many of those represented here is evident as a tool not just in relation to engaging Scripture, but also for engaging those in power. I would be pleased for others to ask critical questions about the character and use of that humour in this and other specific pastoral contexts.

In the introduction I set the particular clusters of emphasis about the use of Scripture at Villa Road in the context of a wider conversation about scriptural holiness as a process of identity formation. My first host, quoted at the outset of this article, identified that process of identity change as a wholly good thing – 'an h'urge, like a something you have to do' – and also as an illness, if a 'good illness'. Clearly, the ground of what it means to be and become Christian is and always has been contested ground. I am convinced that as shared group moments, the encounters with Scripture which I have represented here are part of the process of scriptural holiness, being formed gradually into an identity in Christ that helps to resist the evils of racism, sexism, displacement and other hardships. Scriptural holiness can be reclaimed as a positive theme in Christian apologetics, despite its wildly diverse content in different contexts: I hope this article contributes to that ongoing project.

Notes

1. Paragraph 4, 'Doctrine', 'Deed of Union of the Methodist Church', *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, 2004, Vol. II, p. 213.
2. ED, 20 January 2005, 3:00ff. Quotes from taped interviews or group work will be referenced with the speaker's initials, date of recording and time tag on mp3 file. Where a quote comes from an untaped interview, it will be referenced by initials of speaker and date, with indication of whether it is an exact quote or paraphrase.
3. T. A. Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People – A Theology of Christian Perfecting*, Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2013, p. 106. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777).
4. See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas' (1998) collection of essays concerning topics as diverse as the ethics of disability and gay liberation within Christian communities, the nature of truth-telling in relation to the Decalogue, and role of narrative in theology. For a critical account of the different strands of holiness in British Methodist tradition, see Jones 2004.
5. Douglas J. Davies, 'The Sociology of Holiness: The Power of Being Good', in Barton 2003, p. 51.
6. John Rogerson, 'What is holiness?' in Barton 2003, p. 3.
7. ED, 20 January 2005, 5:20ff.
8. Smith 2006.
9. Shannahan 2014, p. 158.
10. Reddie 2008, p. 163.
11. HS, 21 April 2005, paraphrase comment, unrecorded at end of 1.05 hour recorded interview.
12. Of 81 members, 77 are black; I observed no white occasional worshippers between September 2004 and May 2005. The majority of the black members are Jamaican, with one native Ghanaian and one Nigerian. Of the white members, two are long-time local residents, the other two joined in 1987 and have kept their membership despite moving some 15 miles away in 1998.
13. VC, 26 January 2005, 5:30ff.
14. Many criticise an assumed dichotomy between insider and outsider in ethnographic research, rejecting these categories in favour of opening the relationship itself (of whatever degree of participation) to reflection instead as a text for research. See, for example, Eleanor Nesbitt, who argues that written research should 'interrogate the evolving relationship between researcher and community' instead of negotiating insider/outsider status. 'Quaker Ethnography: A Reflexive Approach', in Arweck and Stringer 2002, p. 135. Lowell Livesey echoes Nesbitt, arguing that 'we are almost always both insiders and outsiders, albeit in a variety of respects and dimensions, in different degrees, and in a partly negotiated balance between the two'. 'Epilogue: Ethnography and the Quest for Meaning', in Arweck and Stringer 2002, p. 157.
15. bell hooks 1990, pp. 151–152.
16. Paraphrase, Isaiah 6:9–11.

17. VC, 26 January 2005, 31.30ff.
18. LW, 31 January 2005, Group Exercise, 14.34ff.
19. RT, 6 December 2005, Group Exercise, untaped comment.
20. VC, untaped banter, 22 November 2004.
21. Henry-Robinson 2014, p. 59.
22. Reddie 2008, p. 170.
23. Reddie 2008, pp. 170–175.
24. John 20:17, Authorised Version.
25. LW, ED, 7 February 2004, 0.45ff.
26. MP, 7 February 2004, untaped.
27. Grant 1989, p. x.
28. LW, Group Exercise, 31 January 2005, 15.22ff. LW here was talking about the necessity of giving thanks and praise, arguing that 'moaning' in suffering demonstrated contempt for God.
29. ED, 2 May 2005, untaped comment in response to 1 Thessalonians 5:18. Also quoted in article title.
30. 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Authorised Version.
31. Williams 1996.
32. *Faith and Worship* 2003, Unit 5.
33. ED, Group Exercise, 31 January 2005, untaped.
34. *Faith and Worship* 2003, Unit 5.
35. Reddie 2008, p. 174.
36. ED to LW, Group Exercise, 31 January 2005, untaped.
37. See hooks 1994; also Ela 1986, and Kanyoro 2001, pp. 101–113.
38. I borrow the first phrase from John Muddiman and John Barton's description of their editorial approach in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). In relation to my own approach to Scripture, I take 'chastened historical critical' to mean that I read the Bible as edited faithfully into one book and expect the Word of God to become present in the words of text, with historical critical methods as one but not the only aid.
39. George Mulrain 1999, pp. 123–124.
40. Reddie 2001.
41. LW, untaped comment, 22 November 2005.
42. Psalm 137:1–4, Authorised Version.
43 MP, Group Exercise, 22 November 2005, 8.22ff. Bracketed asides, VC.
44. Grant 1989, p. ix.

Bibliography

Ammerman, Nancy Tatom et al. 1997. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Arweck, Elisabeth and Stringer, Martin (eds). 2002. *Theorizing Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual*. Birmingham: Birmingham University Press.

Astley, Jeff. 2004. *Exploring God-Talk: Using Language in Religion*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

Barton, Stephen C. (ed.). 2003. *Holiness Past and Present*. London and New York: T & T Clark.

Brueggemann, Walter. 1997. *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

Casadáliga, Pedro and Vigil, José-Maria. 1994. *Political Holiness: A Spirituality of Liberation*, trans. Burns, Paul and McDonough, Francis. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, vols I and II. 1988. Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House.

Denzin, Norman K. 1989. *Interpretative Biography*, Qualitative Research Methods Series 17. London: Sage Publications.

Dube, Musa (ed.). 2001. *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Geneva: WCC Publications.

Ela, Jean-Marc. 1986. *African Cry*, trans. Barr, Robert. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Faith and Worship. 2003. Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House.

Grant, Jacquelyn. 1989. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. Atlanta, GA: Scholar's Press.

Grey, Mary. 2000. *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope: Prophetic Dreams for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

Guest, Matthew, Tusting, Karen, Woodhead, Linda (eds). 2004. *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian World*. Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Hauerwas, Stanley. 1998. *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified. Scottish Journal of Theology*, Current Issues in Theology. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

Henry-Robinson, Tessa D. 2014. 'Qualitative Account of a Relationship Story between the URC and BME Women', *Black Theology: An International Journal* 12(1) (April): 58–79.

hooks, bell. 1990. *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, bell. 1994. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge.

Hopewell, James.1988. *Congregation: Stories and Structures*. London: SCM Press.

Jones, Margaret. 'Growing in Grace and Holiness', in Marsh, Clive, Beck, Brian, Shier-Jones, Angela (eds). 2004. *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. London: Continuum, pp. 155–165.

Kanyoro, Musimbi. 'Cultural Hermeneutics, An African Contribution', in Dube, Musa (ed.). 2001. *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Geneva: WCC Publications, pp. 101–113.

Leech, Kenneth. 2001. *Through Our Long Exile: Contextual Theology and the Urban Experience*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

Long, Thomas G. 2004. *Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, Practices of Faith Series. San Francisco, CA: Jersey-Bass.

Moody-Adams, Michele. 1997. *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Mulrain, George. 'Hermeneutics within a Caribbean Context', in Sugirtharajah, R. S. (ed.). 1999. *Vernacular Hermeneutics*. Sheffield: Continuum, pp.116–132.

Porter, Fran. 2004. *It Will Not Be Taken Away from Her: A Feminist Engagement with Women's Christian Experience*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

Reddie, Anthony. 2001. *Faith, Stories, and the Experience of Black Elders: Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Reddie, Anthony. 2006. 'Another Way of Doing Black God-Talk', *Theology* 109(850) (July/August): 252–261.

Reddie, Anthony. 2007. 'Re-imagining Jesus: Jesus as One of Us', *The Epworth Review* 34(3) (July): 42–50.

Reddie, Anthony. 2008. 'Re-imagining Black Biblical Hermeneutics in Britain: A Participative Approach', *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 5(2): 158–177.

Shannahan, Chris. 2014. *A Theology of Community Organising: Power to the People*. New York and London: Routledge.

Slee, Nicola. 2004. *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*. Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Smith, Jennifer H. 2006. 'Mary in the Kitchen, Martha in the Pew: Patterns of Holiness in a Methodist Church', unpublished MPhil. thesis. Birmingham.

Stringer, Martin. 1999. *On the Perception of Worship: The Ethnography of Worship in Four Christian Congregations in Manchester*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press.

Sugirtharajah, R. S. (ed.). 1999. *Vernacular Hermeneutics*. Sheffield: Continuum.

Williams, Delores. 1996. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.