

CITYtheology

MAGAZINE OF LEEDS CHURCH INSTITUTE

ROOTED IN JOY:
PROPHETIC
ACTIVISM IN THE
METACRISIS

CHANGES OF
MIND:
CHRISTIAN
IDENTITY AND
ANIMAL
ETHICS

JOURNEYING
TOWARDS
LEEDS CHURCH
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SPRING 2025
ISSUE 42

Welcome to CITYtheology

Identity runs as a theme through this issue of CITYtheology – the articles explore how our unique journeys and experiences have shaped us and our faith.

Some people assume that in order to do theology well, we need to adopt a 'neutral' position. That the only way to see the 'truth' is through a perfectly objective lens. But in our increasingly pluralistic society, it's time we learn to embrace the individual perspective we each bring, and work together to discover the image of God which is in all of us. Good theology can only be done in community, in dialogue with others, sharing our embodied wisdom.

When we celebrate our Christian identity, staying rooted in the joy of our faith, we can also embrace difference and learn from others. We are empowered to challenge injustice, and walk in the way of Jesus with hope. And we can be honest in confessing the failings of the Church to love the marginalised.

I hope you enjoy reading the perspectives shared here, and that this edition of CITYtheology helps you reflect on your own identity and journey of faith.





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Design: Daniel Ingram-Brown
CITYtheology is published by Leeds Church Institute.
Registered Address: 43 The Calls, Leeds LS2 7EY
Registered as a company (00155840) and as a Charity (220966)

Rooted in Joy: Prophetic Activism in the Metacrisis

Meg Thomas is studying a BA in Politics, Sociology and Theology at Durham University. Originally from Leeds, she spent a year before university in Christian Aid's Prophetic Activist Scheme, a year-long training programme for young people exploring faith and social justice. Using these skills, Meg now spends her spare time organising free political education sessions about prison abolition, and facilitating letter writing to political prisoners through the grassroots group – 'The Compassion Project'.

This article is adapted from a sermon she preached at All Hallows Church in Hyde Park.



Let me start this by telling you about 14-year-old Meg.

Like a lot of teenage girls, I was very angry. I was angry at me, I was angry at my family, but mostly I was angry at the world.

I'd come of age in prime COVID-populism-Brexit madness, and I grew up thinking that the world was full of hatred.

I gave myself a hard time and tried to grow up too quickly, which resulted in all sorts of disasters. Granted, it did not make me very happy, nor did it address the underlying source of anger, and it probably wouldn't be the Meg people know now.

Even though I am a lot more joyous now, there would still be reason to reignite that angsty little girl. The things that made me angry then still do make me angry. War, climate breakdown and poverty do not seem to be going away anytime soon. The core difference is that I now have hope in the radical

framework of change that is laid out in the Bible. The Jesus-sized hope we can all have in our lives, to fuel us to look after our planet and its people a little more!

In relation to climate change, it is hard to have this sense of hope as things are quite bleak, and they are not fair. Black children in London are 4.2% more likely to be hospitalised because of dangerous levels of nitrogen dioxide exposure than anywhere else in the country. The World Bank estimate that if action is not taken to mitigate the effects of climate change 216 million people (mostly from developing countries) will be forced to flee their homes by 2050, and just 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global greenhouse gas emissions. It is very easy to become apathetic and detached. It is hard to see where the Kingdom of justice and peace comes into this.

In Romans 8, Paul says that he is 'convinced that neither death nor life, neither present or the future, nor any other powers' would be able to separate us from the love of Jesus Christ. We can apply this to present day evils, as the problems caused by

capitalism, consumerism and imperialism are symptomatic of a greater spiritual illness – greed and hate.

We cannot attempt to combat the physical without addressing the spiritual: action to combat climate change therefore needs to be rooted in love and forgiveness.

We are never alone in our battle against such evils. As Christians, we are bolstered on by a much stronger force – love.

This year I had the privilege of working with the charity Christian Aid on their Prophetic Activist Scheme. This year-long training programme aims to equip a

group of young Christians with the skills to engage with climate activism through the lens of faith. Our final product was a resource pack that we sent to churches across the country, filled with different ways they could engage with climate action. This included things that would already be within a church's toolbox, like Bible study guides and theology, as well as things they may find they hadn't engaged with yet, such as getting involved in protest.

We all came from different backgrounds and had different stories when it came to our faith, but we were all united in love for the planet and its people. We all had in common an understanding of the massive challenge that humanity faces and its potentially disastrous consequences, but we knew that approaching it from an angle of Christlike love was the way to go.



But what does this Christlike love look like, tangibly, in climate activism spaces? The face of Christ shows up at the front of protests, but just as importantly, the face of Christ can be seen within community kitchens, like Rainbow Junktion at All Hallows, helping fight food waste. It can be seen in an allotment doing your part to eat sustainably, or within the group of people you cycle to work with to combat being overly dependent on cars.

I think that a lot of mainstream politics is based within drawing dividing lines between you and your perceived enemies. Making what could be productive discussion into petty and cruel name-calling. To be a voice for Christ in the climate movement is to advocate for creation even when it will make you unpopular, and to cross cultural lines when engaging in discussion, reaching out a hand in love. We will not solve this crisis within the four walls of the white-British church, so standing witness to how the crisis affects others is a good place to begin. And it must be rooted in joy. Anger burns out too quickly.

As I have alluded to, I did not grow up in the church. I became a Christian in my late teens after struggling with my mental health for most of my teenage years. Without a framework of hope, I often found myself feeling like I had been born in a doomed time; therefore, it did not really matter whether I was kind, or looked after myself, because the world really did seem to be ending. Statistics such as the ones I have previously mentioned used to bring anger, and then hopelessness. These feelings are not productive when trying to engage with politics, or even just generally trying to be a better human.

We must not become numb to how truly radical and exciting the Gospel is.

When I first became a Christian, I wanted to tell everyone how revolutionary these ideas were, and I still find myself biting my tongue whenever someone brings up that they feel hopeless. As you can imagine, other



20-something-year-olds who are complaining about politics outside a nightclub are reluctant to hear about Jesus.

We follow a God who tells us that we can be a part of bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to earth, and that those who have been pushed down will one day be first. If applied to climate justice, this means that those who unfairly experience the ramifications of the relentless hunt for fossil fuels are bound to one day be liberated. For example, villages and towns in Nigeria who have been devastated at the hands of Shell, whose headquarters are in London. If we follow the framework of justice outlined in the Bible, injustices like these are bound to be undone.

Going back to young Meg – when I was 17, I was pushed to the brink of hopelessness. It got so rough I decided I must need divine intervention. I read Matthew 5. Only seconds after reading the Beatitudes I realised that my life could not be the same from here on out. *'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.'*

I'd had – as many of you surely do – an insatiable hunger for a better world all my life. A hunger so persistent that I secretly thought it would be impossible to fill, and that the world would forever be unequal and unfair. Yet, here is God telling me that I am bound to be satisfied. That it is destined that those who are oppressed by forces of evil are liberated. In fact, we are invited to come together on this exciting quest for liberation. We get to be God's hands and feet, laying the groundwork for the Kingdom of Heaven that is rooted in values of justice and peace.

This is all wonderful to believe in theory, but the world offers us many setbacks when we try to believe that this could be a reality. Weapons companies have roots everywhere, and profit from genocide. Climate protesters are jailed on what seems to be a disproportionate scale, all while the government plods on and on maintaining the very same status-quo that got us into this mess in the first place. These massive challenges attempt to tear down our Jesus-sized

optimism, and we become disillusioned in the battle to bring justice to earth as the Beatitudes promised.

What would happen if we acted like these Beatitudes were an immovable truth? How would our duty to protect creation change if we believed firmly that those who were abusing it were destined to fail?

I'll tell you what would happen if we believed justice to be an immovable truth: we would act. Any action to protect God's planet need not be rooted in despair, but in the joy that we get to be a part of rebuilding the paradise that God declared good. There would be a Jesus-sized revolution if we engaged with climate action from a point of joy.

Not only does this revolutionary love – hopefully – heal the planet, but it can also heal ourselves. Since using the Gospel to sustain any activism I have done, I have a renewed, genuine love for people and their stories. I no longer feel only anger at the world, but hopeful that I can be a part of rebuilding it.

The Gospel is so exciting, we are promised that our desires for equality will be fulfilled. We must muster up the energy to be enthused by these promises, as if we were hearing it for the first time.

Let this energy sustain your difficult conservations and tiring actions. When climate doom, details of war and poverty inevitability get you down – you must remember that you serve a God who has promised to fulfil your thirst for justice.



Journeying towards Leeds Church Institute: The gift of spiritual care



This is the first in a series of reflections from John Richardson, who is studying an MA programme with sponsorship from LCI. He shares how his experience in his career and his early life has led him to the focus of his research, and what to expect from his learning going forward.

My name is John Richardson, and I am Associate Priest - a 'Rev' - at St Oswald's in Guiseley. I am also studying for an MA in Religion at the University of Leeds in partnership with Leeds Church Institute (LCI). My research interest is in what Christians mean by the word 'Gift' in our lives and work, towards ourselves and

towards others, which is often expressed as Spiritual Care. I am particularly interested in developing a 'Language of the Gift', perhaps expressed as 'Speaking Christian in and into the World'. This will be the first of a few articles that I hope to write for City Theology, and perhaps a good place to start will be to tell you a bit about my own spiritual

journey and how it fits with LCI.

I am from Newcastle upon Tyne originally and now live in Otley with my partner, Linda, and we have two daughters and two grandchildren. I have had two career paths, one is social and youth work as both a practitioner and lecturer, and the other is with the Church of England as a SSM (Self Supporting Minister).

Journeys themselves are perhaps only understood at journey's end, and I am still very much a traveller, a searcher, a seeker on this journey, not yet completed. Throughout my journey, I have been helped, guided, challenged, and brought through so many wonderful landscapes and borderlands, exploring philosophy, theology, mysticism, contemplation, art, poetry, and spirituality.

Perhaps I can begin at an unusual place for a Christian

journey, with the Chinese philosopher Laozi. He is credited with the saying, and indeed, there are various interpretations of it: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." In the Dao De Jing, Laozi, teaches that even the longest and most difficult ventures have a starting point; something which begins with one first step. According to Wikipedia, the phrase is also translated as 'A journey of a thousand miles begins under the feet,' and 'a thousand-mile journey begins where one stands.' But where does one stand? In the words of the French philosopher, Paul Ricouer "d'où vous parlez?" – from where do you speak?

I speak from a place, which has developed over the years, of participating and watching different workers and volunteers in various projects give spiritual care to their communities. When asked why they make this commitment, they will often reply that they are 'called to give', or it is their vocation, and I would like to use the MA studies to provide a language of this gift – how can I make visible, what is essentially invisible?

In my own practice I also speak as the embodiment of all my history and traditions and this constructs and impacts on my world view. The seeds of 'liberation theology' - faith, love and justice - were sown in my life experiences and continue to be now.

I empathise with others who may feel that they are 'inadequate', 'don't belong', feel less than others or not up to the mark, and I can certainly locate myself in the 'hidden injuries' that I have incurred from early childhood, youth and continuing experiences.

My own upbringing in the Northeast of England in a very traditional, working-class community socialised us all into thinking that we all had a 'place' in a highly stratified society, in terms of class, gender, racist, colonial and imperialist structures. I remember lots of debates about the working class or even the underclass, the 'deserving and undeserving

poor', the need to provide opportunities or else we would become criminals or 'disaffected' or alienated, folk devils creating moral panics! In one sense we were taught and managed by 'Victorian Values', with an appropriate theology, informed by very austere methods instilling discipline backed up by the threat of some form of punishment. It did not only exist in the wider world but was 'internalised' to feelings of low self-esteem and self-worth. Above all was the feeling that whatever we might achieve or do, it could be taken away - we could never relax or take it easy or for granted. We were taught 'deference' to those who were 'our betters' and we adopted the appropriate demeanour in our thoughts, actions and behaviour.

This same attitude exists today in the debates about those on the margins as well as those who are 'mainstream' and yet suffering. Issues such as 'free school meals', 'mental health issues for young people', 'gangs and knife crime, older people and the cost of our care homes, rising unemployment, addictions and substance abuse,

crumbling schools and the NHS, immigrants and asylum seekers, all are problematised and represented as 'Other'. All these groups and issues are seen as a problem, a burden, surplus to requirements, and above all, a liability, something to be dealt with! They reflect the deficit model and bring nothing to the table and are not valued in themselves.

It may be that we live in a 'post-structural' world, but it seems that the capital, wealth and financial 'structures' that dominate 'globalisation' are certainly fluid, flexible, plastic and yet remain strong, growing stronger. We are encouraged to think that the old structures of class, race and gender have broken down in favour of diversity and celebrating difference but the base of a capitalist system, the power that wealth and privilege can bring, remains as solid as ever.

Our society has become more and more unequal, the wealthy becoming wealthier and more and more people 'struggling to make ends meet'. The power of the wealthy is everywhere – it determines arguments that suggest that being on the margins is not only a lack of resources but also a lack of morality – it's your own fault if you are experiencing any form of deprivation. To be marginalised is to be morally inept, to lack motivation, to be deficient in many ways. It appears that Victorian attitudes are alive and well, in which those on the margins are to be dealt with – 'if only they weren't here then all would be well'.



Perhaps there is not just one real issue here, but a myriad of issues that coalesce into 'place, meaning and hope'.

In spite of what I have outlined above, there are so many who refuse to give in or give up but are determined to overcome whatever they face.

I am hoping that my research will contribute to this 'practice' by showing that 'Speaking Christian' is to reach out in love to show solidarity with the world, to support, encourage, enthuse, facilitate,

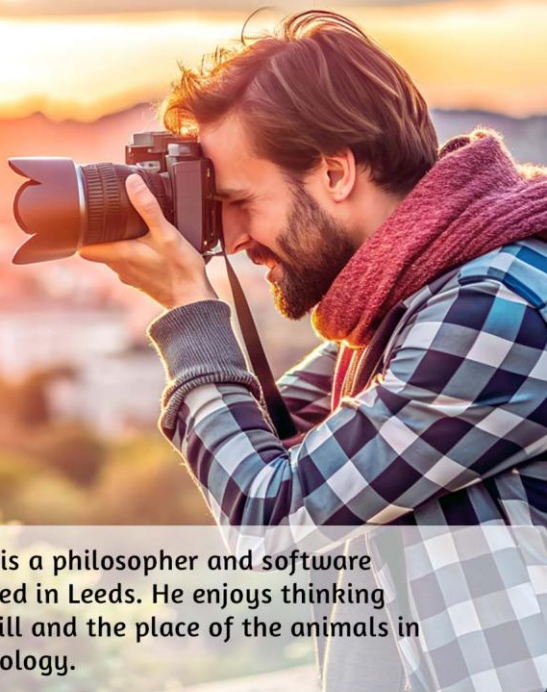
empathise, to walk alongside, so that individuals and groups may take control over choices and decisions; in essence, to be free!

My research will centre around giving a voice to the voiceless; to value the extraordinary contribution so many make in their everyday lives by enabling them to speak about the amazing 'Gifts' they give. I'm hoping that I can chart this journey of discovery through a series of blogs from its origins, to the present and then towards a possible future.



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Changes of Mind: Christian Identity and Animal Ethics



Simon Kittle is a philosopher and software engineer based in Leeds. He enjoys thinking about free will and the place of the animals in Christian theology.

Have you ever had the following sort of experience: upon taking up a new hobby, you find yourself *noticing new things* and *thinking in new ways*?

Suppose, for instance, that you take up photography. Wherever you go, you now notice people walking around with cameras, or you picture how scenery would appear as a photograph. You find yourself wondering what other people are taking photos of, whether their photos are any better than yours, and so on. Your taking up photography hasn't changed, except by one, the number of people walking about with cameras. But it has changed whether you notice such people and how you think about them.

Or suppose you take up ballet. You become more attuned to how you yourself move, how those around you move. You notice those with good posture, those with builds that would make a good dancer. You wonder whether the graceful movements of that person over there are due to hours of ballet practice, and perhaps at parties or concerts, you immediately intuit those who have had dance training. And all of this happens, for the most part, automatically and involuntarily.

Such experiences are commonplace and reveal something about the way we



humans are wired: from the motions which jostle afore our eyes, to the bangs, fizzes, and gurgles as well as the aromas, stenchs, and whiffs of our surroundings...

Both *what* we notice and *how* we think about what we notice is often affected by our interests and desires, our projects, our worldview.

This can lead us to engage in something called *motivated reasoning*: we think and form judgements in ways that serve to confirm those beliefs we already hold, or justify those practices we are already engaged in. If, after you've taken up photography, someone were to remark that they never took it up because it's a very expensive hobby, you are likely to be put on the defensive, to feel the need to justify the expense you have outlaid; if, after taking up ballet, someone were to suggest that it's bad for the joints and leads to arthritis, you may feel an urge to disagree.



One reason this happens is because we frequently come to *identify with the beliefs we hold and the practices or projects we are pursuing*, so that any challenge to those beliefs or practices comes to be perceived as a personal attack on our very self.

And so we become reluctant to consider any information or evidence that challenges or unsettles our beliefs and practices. As the examples above show, this can happen even with hobbies and pastimes, but the effect is often much stronger when it comes to those beliefs, commitments, or behaviours which form part of our core identity, such as religious beliefs and practices. Interestingly, sometimes the effect can become so powerful that it becomes close to impossible for us to give due consideration to any information which challenges our existing beliefs and practices. I can illustrate this latter point with an example from my own life.

For most of my life, I did not think that non-human animals should be given any moral or theological consideration. This belief was largely tacit: I had absorbed it as part of the dominant cultural outlook in the West. Of course, a significant source of the dominant Western outlook is Christianity. And it would be hard to understate the deeply entrenched anthropocentrism within Christianity. From the opening chapters of Genesis where God creates humans (and only humans) in the divine image, granting humankind dominion over other creatures, to the belief that what is wrong with the world is human sin, through to God's solution to that problem, namely, God becoming human, Christians have largely construed God and God's action as concerned primarily (and, at times, exclusively) with humans.

This theological priority of the human runs so deep in the Christian tradition that A. Richard Kingston remarked in 1967 that with only "a few noble exceptions theologians have done far more to discourage than to stimulate a

concern for the lower creatures". More recently, respected theologian John Berkman has argued that Christian theology has exhibited a "moral nihilism" when it comes to the consideration of non-human animals. In this way does Christianity undergird the dominant cultural ideology of *carnism*, an ideology identified by psychologist Melanie Joy, which works to hide and justify our abuse of those animals we consume.

One manifestation of this theology-derived anthropocentric attitude in my own life was a swift and derisory dismissal of any argument for vegetarianism or veganism that crossed my path. I remember several occasions where, upon chatting to a vegan and hearing their ethical-based reasons for going plant-based – that is, hearing about the conditions animals endure in industrialised agriculture, or hearing details of how animals are treated in abattoirs prior to slaughter – I was, *literally*, unable to process what they said. It's almost like they were speaking a language I did not understand, or better, a language I *refused* to understand. I was simply

unable to hear, as even possibly true, statements such as "Calves are taken from their mothers between 24-48 hours after birth so that we humans can take the cow's milk, and this causes both calf and mother severe distress". I didn't process such sentences *as thoughts which could be true*. I never replied, "Really? Are you serious?". I didn't think to myself, "That does sound quite bad; maybe I should see if that's really true". Instead, some unconscious part of me immediately recognised the threat which the information posed to my identity: I didn't just enjoy drinking milk, I was a milk-drinker; I didn't just think bacon sandwiches were tasty, I was a bacon-is-my-favourite type of person.

But if what the vegan said was true, all that would have to change. I recognised this implicitly, and so concluded – without conscious reflection – that the vegan must be mistaken. Of course, my attitudes towards animals were, just like the attitudes of most in the West, deeply inconsistent. I had no qualms about eating pigs, but I would have been horrified at the thought of eating my cat.

The fact that pigs and cats are comparable cognitively and emotionally, such that it makes no sense to eat one and exhibit kindness to the other, was an inconsistency invisible to me, given how embedded I was in the dominant Christian ideology and the carnism it supports.

Today I find these past experiences fascinating, not because I now strive for a non-violent, vegan diet, but because of how I got there. Consuming dairy and eating animals was such a central part of my identity that I doubt any amount of information on the animals' plight would have changed my food practices. Instead, a change in practice came first and, I suspect, *had* to come first. So, after learning that animal agriculture is a significant contributor to the climate breakdown we're living through, I very reluctantly reduced my consumption of animals. This was an attempt to help other humans by cutting my carbon footprint. But in doing that, space opened up in my own identity: as I ate fewer animals, I identified less as a meat-eater, and that shift enabled me to evaluate the considerations vegans present, to which I had

previously denied any possibility of truth. I became able to take a question like, "If I wouldn't dream of eating a cat, why do I think it's okay to eat a pig?" and, without my identity feeling threatened, actually try to think it through.

In the process I discovered that what we now know about the sentience of our evolutionary cousins, not to mention the scale and scope of the violent processes through which life on earth has evolved, poses several significant challenges to the dominant Christian theology of previous centuries, and I'm convinced that Christians need to take these issues seriously.

Far from being a secular movement trying to play the role of a religion, as some Christian commentators have seen it, ethical veganism is a set of evidence-based moral judgements that promise (or threaten, depending on one's point of view) to unsettle a variety of traditional takes on some key Christian doctrines.

In the experience recounted here, I've described how one aspect of my identity precluded me from assessing evidence in the manner in which it deserved. Of course, we cannot do without identities, nor the narratives we use to structure and navigate our lives. Sometimes those beliefs with which we identify don't block us from, but drive us towards the good and the just.

Identity and ethics are intertwined, and sometimes ethical reflection can be both difficult and messy, not to mention unsettling.

This is good reason for approaching the issues with humility and an attitude of

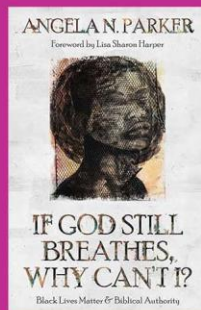
kindness towards others, and one's (past) self.

The dominant forms of Christianity are undesirably anthropocentric – on this there is wide agreement – and it is unsettling to have this challenged. But challenged it must be, if Christianity is to continue to cohere with what we know about the world and the other sentient creatures we share it with.

While Christianity has in the past entrenched injustices in the worldviews it generates – historic and present racism, complicity in the slave trade and imperialism, and the oppression of women are glaring examples – it also has a strong focus on repentance, conversion, and humility with respect to judging others. These are resources from which we can draw when wrestling with tough ethical issues.



Book Review: If God Still Breathes, Why Can't I? Black Lives Matter and Biblical Authority



Angela N. Parker, 2021

Faith at the Margins Lead Paul Coleman shares his reflections on one of the books shaping LCI's current work.

“What I am called to do is to tell the Jesus Story in such a way that it is not reduced to creedal ideas alone and to show that biblical authority is inspired and breathing. It must move all folks who hold the biblical text as sacred to a nuanced engagement with the actual bodily experiences of people across all diversities.” (p.92)

For me this quote encapsulates the central theme of the Dr Parker's work: the way doctrines which stress biblical inerrancy and infallibility have been used to silence the voices of those who are marginalised, particularly people of colour. Dr Parker argues for authentic engagement, which allows Scripture to be read and interpreted in light of lived experience and embodied wisdom.

Despite its stated focus on race in a North American context, this book is tremendously relevant to the work of Leeds Church Institute on issues of marginalisation due to race, sexuality, economic deprivation and disability.

Online descriptions of this book begin by saying the following of the author:





Angela Parker wasn't just trained to be a biblical scholar; she was trained to be a white male biblical scholar.

She is neither white nor male.¹



I, however, am both. I started reading with the expectation that I would find my world view being challenged. However, right from the start I found myself agreeing with the arguments put forward. This is not to say that Dr Parker's writing has not challenged me, it has simply challenged me in the ways I did not anticipate, particularly in relation to the concerns she raises over the way in which Paul co-opts the experience of slaves or women in childbirth without truly understanding either of those experiences. For me this is a salutary reminder to be careful in how we use and share other people's stories and experiences.

In Chapter 1, titled "Stifled Breathing," Dr Parker reflects on her experience in theological education, where she was trained in the methods of white male biblical scholarship. She critiques scholars who neglect to acknowledge their own

contextual influences when studying and teaching theology. Through her journey Dr Parker discovered her voice as a Womanist biblical scholar. It was this realization which led her to question traditional interpretations of the Bible and their implications.

Building on her own life story, Dr Parker criticises the doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility, exposing how they have been used to uphold white supremacy. She describes her perspective on biblical authority as a dynamic and evolving "living" and "breathing" conversation. She challenges readers to move beyond bibliolatry and embrace a form of biblical authority which encourages freedom and inclusivity. Her concern lies with the ways Scripture is often weaponized to control others, particularly regarding their bodies, and to delineate who belongs and who does not. She highlights how these doctrines are frequently employed to

¹ (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2024)

maintain power and privilege within academia, the church, and society at large.

Following her examination of inerrancy and infallibility, Dr Parker delves into the issues of gaslighting and microaggressions. She explores how doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility are used to force minoritized groups to conform with ways of engaging with and reading Scripture based on

traditional straight, white, able-bodied, male interpretations of the biblical texts.

In her conclusion, Dr Parker speaks of "breathing Womanist air," extending an invitation to all readers to engage with Scripture in a manner free from White supremacy and privilege. She suggests a new approach to biblical interpretation through the acronym AIR:

- **Accept:** An acknowledgement that no one possesses a complete understanding of the biblical texts and recognition that doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility have been used to justify the mistreatment of marginalised people.
- **Interrogate:** To examine our own identities and biases so we can approach the biblical texts more authentically.
- **Read Womanists:** Finally, she encourages us to engage with interpretations of Scripture from Womanist scholars to gain diverse perspectives.

This framework encourages readers to approach biblical texts with humility, self-reflection, and openness to marginalized voices.

This is not a particularly long book, nor is it overly academic, but it is a book which I find myself constantly having to

re-visit as I explore my own faith and relationship with the bible. It is a book which I wholeheartedly recommend for anyone who is passionate about social justice or who cares about the ways in which Scripture has been, and is still used to justify the oppression of those at the margins of society.

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