

Ways in which God may have acted in my life which were totally unexpected: 'I wouldn't have done it like that.'

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When Terry¹ asked for contributions on this theme, I was spoilt for choice because my life has been a series of events like this; so I thought I would start with the one which Terry had reminded me about the previous week.

Throughout the four years I was at The Queen's College in Oxford, I never went to anything associated with a Baptist church in Oxford; yet in those four years, my understanding of what it means to be a Baptist Christian grew more quickly than in any other four years in my life.

The college chaplain was David Jenkins and I soon found that he had a rock solid faith based on Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection. His constant theme was the gift of the relationship that God had opened up for us through the resurrection of Jesus and how we should respond to that gift. He spoke about it in his sermons and it was always in the background of the bible studies.

Some years later his colleague and my tutor, Jim Bolton, published a book in which he argued that Christianity differed from all other religions in that, in all other religions, people give to God but in Christianity God gives to people. It would have been very interesting to eavesdrop on their conversations.

Outside the crucifixion, death and resurrection and the apostolic succession, David Jenkins was happy to discuss anything; since then I have met people who claimed to have been his students and who said he didn't believe in anything. Yet I had debated a range of issues with him and every time I challenged him on one of the central issues, it was like hitting a brick wall. He was adamant about the centrality of the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday and would not concede anything in these areas. I have never been rude enough to tell any of his former students that they had obviously never discussed anything important with him; had they done so, they would have found as I had that he was as solid as a rock on the central issues of our faith.

The only other area in which he refused to make concessions was his belief in the apostolic succession, the idea that you can only be a priest if another priest has appointed you. He always resisted my suggestion that priesthood got in the way of the relationship possibilities that God has given us.

But pre-reformation Oxford colleges are supervised by an archbishop and not by the local bishop — in our case this was the Archbishop of York — and David had discovered that the

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legislation covering the colleges had never included a clear statement that they had to use the Book of Common Prayer. So he had opened the chapel to all Christians and begun to use what at the time were experimental forms of worship. We had open communion round the table — something I knew about from the chapel I had attended in India because it had been planned that way but which I had never taken part in because I had not given my heart to Jesus at the time.

We even had joint communion services with the Catholics in which we moved to separate rooms for the bread and wine; it was sad that we could not be together for the central act but, as the Catholic priest told me, we had gone to the very boundary of ecumenical possibilities in the Catholic church at the time. These were both heady and inspiring times for us.

Because the law forbade Anglican churches from using anything other than the Book of Common Prayer, there was nowhere for the Anglican commission exploring new forms of worship to try them out. So the Archbishop asked us — a completely interdenominational congregation — to become the guinea pigs who tried out the first drafts of the new forms of Anglican worship; this led us into some very deep discussions of what worship meant for us and to creating our own services at a time when, in most churches, the idea of a group of untrained lay people devising a new form of worship would have been frowned on.

If someone had said to me that I would never attend a Baptist event in Oxford in the four years I was there, I would have dismissed the idea as virtually impossible; after all, I had a friend at Regent's Park College and my father was a well-known former student.

Yet, out of my experience of the interdenominational congregation and open communion at The Queen's College, I came to see the centrality of the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday to my faith; I began to realise that many arguments in the Christian community are excuses for avoiding the real issues in being a Christian; as Screwtape says to his nephew in C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape letters*, by diverting people's attention to marginal issues, you stop them thinking about the central issues. I began to think about forms of worship in a way I had never done before and I found that the Baptist principles I had learned really made sense: the whole point of the resurrection is that we can have a new relationship with God and, through that, new relationships with everyone else; moreover, anything, including a priesthood or, dare I say it, an accredited ministry, that stands in the way of that relationship is an obstacle to experiencing the fullness of the relationship which God offers us through the sacrifice of His Son.

My whole life since then has involved a variety of relationships and, as God has led me through other unexpected turns of events which brought me into contact with new types of relationships and new experiences of relationship, so my relationship with God has deepened. But my recognition of the centrality of my relationship with God goes back to my time at The Queen's College and the sharing of my Christian life with David Jenkins and with others in that remarkable congregation.

Much as living among pupils of many faiths in India had helped me to crystallise why I wanted to serve God as a Christian, so living among Christians of many denominations crystallised what would be the central themes of my Christian faith and my Baptist identity. In retrospect, it seems obvious that, before God launched me on a career so focused on relationships, He would want me to understand the centrality of my relationship with Him and that He took me into a relationship with David and with the others in the congregation which would enable me to understand that but, at the time, I had no idea what He had in store for me and it was only later that I realised how important my time at The Queen's College and at the University more generally had been for what God wanted me to do in the rest of my life.

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