**Project Violet International Symposium**

**The Descent of Man?**

**The meaning of Mary’s Magnificat for British Baptist women in ministry**

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I could talk for hours about the marginalisation and rejection I have experienced as a female accredited evangelist within Baptists Together, but space and grace do not permit me to go into details. As the Project Violet researchers so eloquently put it, ‘*the ideal minister [is] often [assumed to be] a man… freed from domestic responsibilities by his wife and so able to overwork.’[[1]](#footnote-1)* Writing a 1000-word reflection for the Project Violet researchers towards the start of the process was triggering for me: it made me face up to the many ways I had been disadvantaged, put down and pushed to the margins by the system, as well as the ways in which I had internalised this rejection. I have never assumed that there is a place for me, that I am wanted, valued or should be paid equally. These thoughts were not pleasant but I am grateful to Project Violet for waking me up. There are women in Baptist churches all over the UK whose gifts are dismissed and who are held back - and who dismiss their own gifts and hold themselves back - and perhaps, like me, they do not even realise it is happening.

The title of this paper is borrowed from the Turner-Prize-winning artist, Grayson Perry. In his book, *The Descent of Man*, Perry describes ‘Default Man’ - the straight, white, middle-aged, middle-class man without a disability whose perspective is so often unconsciously seen as ‘normal’ and everyone else’s as a deviation from this norm.[[2]](#footnote-2) Default Baptist Minister is probably a little younger - after all, if he has a few young kids that will “bring in young families” - but I find the concept extremely helpful nonetheless in describing the predicament of Baptist ministers who are not straight, white, male and able-bodied. It is not that we always experience overt prejudice or discrimination – although this does happen – it is often more subtle and therefore harder to call out. We are not the default; we are not the norm; we are other. Perry encourages Default Men everywhere to ‘sit down for their rights.’[[3]](#footnote-3) This descent, he argued, could be like sinking down into a comfy armchair.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In Luke chapter one a young woman living in relative poverty under violent foreign occupation[[5]](#footnote-5) speaks of the descent of the powerful and the ascent of the powerless. She declares:

*‘[The Lord] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
 and lifted up the lowly;*

*he has filled the hungry with good things,  
 and sent the rich away empty.*

(Luke 1.51-53)

Mary the mother of Jesus is an ambiguous figure in feminism, having often been idolised as the patriarchy’s perfect woman: docile, subservient, defined by motherhood.[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps this is the way we would like our female Baptist ministers to be, if we must have them. I was once asked without irony, at an Alpha Course meal to which I had been invited as the visiting speaker, who was cooking my husband’s tea tonight. Some people make their peace with women’s ministry by telling themselves and others that women after all have soft skills like collaboration that complement those of men: they’re not really trying to be in charge, they’re better at teamwork, and they are wives and mothers first, ministers second. But Mary is not quiet and subservient here. She is speaking of lowly people like her lifted high. She undermines the image of the ideal docile, family-oriented, collaborative woman. She is talking about power and claiming it.

As a female Baptist minister, revelling in the power and majesty of this passage, I ask myself, *What does she mean?* And then, the more intriguing question for practical theology, *what does this mean for me?* What does it mean to declare, not even that God *will* lift up the lowly, but that God *has*? In true prophetic fashion, she is so certain that this is what God does that she declares it as a done deal. If non-male Baptist ministers are the lowly and hungry in this scenario, including Black, queer and disabled ministers, what does it mean to declare that God has lifted them up, filled them with good things? And if male Baptist ministers are the powerful and well-fed here, what does it mean to say that God has brought them down from their thrones and sent them away empty? For Luke’s Mary sings woes over the rich and powerful as well as blessings over the lowly, in the same way that Luke’s beatitudes include woes too:

*‘But woe to you who are rich,  
 for you have received your consolation.*

*Woe to you who are full now,  
 for you will be hungry.  
Woe to you who are laughing now,  
 for you will mourn and weep.’* (Lk 6.24-25)

I preached on the Magnificat for the first time a couple of years ago, and as I looked out at the congregation, a white majority congregation with a large minority of people of colour, I wondered whether part of the answer might be the knowledge that God is on the side of those of us that experience marginalisation because of our gender, our ethnicity, our disability or our sexuality, because marginalisation brings shame and stigma. There is shame that comes with sexism and racism and ableism and homophobia. It’s shame that women and Black people and people with disabilities and the LGBT+ community should not have to carry, but sometimes do. There is internalised marginalisation – when you start to believe that you are not as valuable as others. And here Mary declares that you are the ones on whom God’s favour rests, because God will be turning the tables. Seeing some of my story reflected back as part of Project Violet has brought me something that felt very like shame, and it has taken a while for me to realise that what happened to me is not okay and not my fault. Perhaps for me, and for women like me, to be lifted up is to have the burden of shame lifted. Ταπευνωσιν – lowliness – can refer to an attitude of humility. God wants people considered lowly to step into their power, and for people with privilege to be humbled. Perhaps for male ministers, to be brought down from their thrones is for the burden of shame to shift, with men taking their share, recognising how they have benefited from a system that gives them an unfair advantage.

A few years ago, I was part of a conversation online about the positives of being a woman in ministry, and I suggested that we have the advantage of being on the edge. This is what I wrote: *I have begun to wonder if the marginalisation we can… experience is a positive benefit - we are able to empathise with the marginalisation and vulnerability of others and experience in a deep way the wounds of the Christ who spent his time with the broken and became broken himself. He gave up his power so when we are disempowered, we are strong.* My impression was that God was with people experiencing powerlessness, people on the margins, and thatit is therefore when I am on the margins that I truly experience God. And thus when I am in power, I am missing out on God. There is danger here: that we sentimentalise poverty and do nothing to right injustices. Yet I do still feel that there is an important truth here. Perhaps part of being lifted up is about being lifted up to God, and filled with good things is about being filled to the brim with God. It has been my experiences of brokenness and vulnerability that have led me to experience God at a depth I had not reached when I was whole, and I would go so far as to say that without being broken I do not believe that we can experience all there is of God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As well as indicating humility, however, ταπευνωσιν can refer to lowly status too. When Mary speaks of the lowly lifted up, she may mean something more tangible than relief from shame and identification with Christ, wonderful though these emotional and spiritual blessings are. Luke’s beatitudes, after all, are not spiritualised the way Matthew’s are:

*‘Blessed are you who are poor,  
 for yours is the kingdom of God.  
‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
 for you will be filled.* (Lk 6.20-21)

The Baptist settlement process, for all the spiritual language we use to describe it, is a zero-sum game. When a woman or non-binary person is called to a church, a man cannot be called there. When a Black minister is called to a church, a white minister cannot be called there. If prejudice against female ministers lessens, including ministers of colour, ministers with disabilities and queer ministers, there will be fewer posts for able-bodied cishet white men, and able-bodied cishet white men will wait longer on the settlement list than they have in the past. This is simple logic. Mary is singing of a world in which the lowly are lifted up *and the powerful are brought low*. What might it look like for men to descend into the comfy armchair of which Grayson Perry speaks? I’d like to offer two examples. These are real examples from the practice of two Gen X ministers I have worked with.

The first is a man who is intentional and disciplined about noticing whose voices are loudest and using his authority to make space for quieter ones. At my probationary review, after I had spent three months working for him, he gave me lots of positive feedback but also encouraged me to have more confidence and to assert more authority. In conversations among the wider team, he has used the phrase: “Step up, step back.” He asks people to monitor how much they are speaking in meetings: to ‘step up’ and speak if they haven’t yet, and to ‘step back’ and allow others to speak if they have. In one meeting I attended he had a colleague literally sit making a note of how many times each person spoke so that she could give people feedback about the amount of airtime they were taking up. When planning conferences, both online and in person, he is intentional about not having only white men on stages, encouraging us to use our networks to recruit women, nonbinary people and people of colour to speak. I remember once talking with him about a meeting I was planning to discuss leadership development, and I said “it’s just me and three white men.” His response was, “thank God for you.”

One memorable incident that happened when he was on annual leave demonstrated for me powerfully how much his presence created a truly inclusive space where everyone’s contributions were equally valued. I was in a Zoom meeting with a number of men and two other women. None of the women could get a word in. About half an hour went by and no women had spoken. Eventually I raised this issue by writing in the general Zoom meeting chat: ‘Can I just point out that none of the women have been able to speak yet’; at this point the men stopped speaking and the women spoke. I realised afterwards that this wouldn’t have happened if my line manager had been there. The discipline to allow everyone to speak and to ensure diversity on stages involves men stepping back as well as women and nonbinary people stepping up. Being intentional about diversity means inviting fewer white people onto stages and white people having less airtime in meetings.

My second example is a pioneer minister who deliberately subverts power dynamics in everything he does. He planted a network of house churches twenty years ago that is underpinned by radical inclusivity and whose members include a very high proportion of people experiencing poverty and marginalisation. This educated middle class pioneer works hard to avoid centering educated middle class people. “Preaching” is discussion-based and in a circle. Questions are valued over answers. The church has frequent camping weekends away because camping is cheap and it builds community. At these weekends, everyone is encouraged to take a turn cooking, including people who may not have much in the way of cooking facilities at home. People seeking asylum cook food from their home culture and share it with everyone.

I have never felt “less than” as a woman because the whole culture of the church is predicated on the belief that everyone is equally valuable and power is shared. Introducing Project Violet to the leadership was easy: they were curious, open, interested to hear my story and motivated to raise their inclusivity game. I never feel disempowered as a woman in this church, but equally I never feel able to rest on my laurels with the power I do hold as a white, educated, cishet person. I am constantly challenged to consider how I can give away the power I hold. How I can avoid centering myself as a minister with theological training who loves (as most people in caring professions do) to “help people.” When I help, I am powerful and you are vulnerable. When I allow you to help me, the tables are turned. *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.*

When Mary declares what God has already done, she is telling us something about God’s priorities and promises but she is also calling us to action. Her song is a rallying cry to make this prophetic prayer come true. A call for men to sink down into that comfy armchair and make space for women. A call for all ministers to check the ways in which they are privileged over others, and to step back so that others may step up. To stop eating so that others may be filled.

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1. Project Violet Commitment to Action Report: <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=362964>, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Grayson Perry, *The Descent of Man*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), Kindle edition, p. 11ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 149f. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The comfy armchair analogy was given in an interview Grayson Perry gave on Radio 4 to promote the book around the time of its publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Elizabeth A. Johnson, ‘Truly Our Sister. A Feminist Hermeneutical Disciplinary Approach’in Diego Irarrazabal, Susan Ross and Marie-Theres Wacker (eds), *The Many Faces of Mary*, Concilium 2008/4 (London: SCM Press, 2008), p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Johnson, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I explore this idea in more depth in this paper, presented at Bristol Baptist College’s Hearts and Minds conference in June 2024: <https://www.brokentheology.org/post/infertility-and-unknowing>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)