

## Interview with Malcolm Cox Author of An Elephant's Swimming Pool

### **DPI: Why did you write this book? What motivated you to choose the Gospel of John to write about?**

Cox: I love books. When I'm reading I'm breathing. I have learned so much from books. I have been transformed in my thinking and my living by books. I wanted to write a book to give something back. I felt I *could*, but have struggled to find the confidence to do so (I was also going to add that lack of time was a problem, but the truth is that confidence was the real issue).

Two years ago I read a magazine interview with Max Lucado, who was asked how he started writing and what tips he would give to aspiring writers. The suggestion I remember was to write small articles for the church newsletter and see how things develop from there. At the time we were planning a sermon series on the gospel of John. I spent many hours reading the gospel and commentaries. I fell in love with the book of John in a whole new way and grew very excited about our sermon series. At the same time I realised that we were simply not going to be able to cover every part of every chapter. So I decided to write a one-page summary of each chapter and publish it in the church newsletter each week. That way some of what was not preached would be covered. I hoped to give the congregation some balance in case the preacher (often me!) emphasised one point and missed others out.

As the series went on, it occurred to me that these one-page summaries could be expanded into chapters of a book. And that was when the idea of doing a devotional book on the gospel of John hit me. One chapter of my book for one chapter of John. I had struggled to believe I could write a book, but now I realised that I did not have to write a book. I just had to write a chapter. Although I felt overwhelmed by the prospect of writing a book, I only felt *challenged* by the prospect of writing a chapter! Turning 500-700 words into 1500-2500 is not impossible. Now I had some base material of my own as well as the gospel itself, and I had a structure. All that was needed was an injection of imagination and a determination to set time aside to write.

### **DPI: How would you say your treatment of this material is unique?**

Cox: Hmmm. I am not sure, but here goes.

First, I wanted to make sure that the imagination was engaged. I mean the imagination of the reader. Without the application of the imagination words are but squiggles on paper. Words may inform the mind, but unless they go deeper and penetrate the heart, they are likely to have very limited effect. I was not about to spend hours and hours writing only for my book to bore the brain. Making sure the imagination is active is a two-part process. It depends on the willingness of the reader to use their imagination, but this is so much easier for the reader if they can

tell that the writer has used their imagination in the creative process. I wanted to help the reader to kick-start their imagination by getting mine up and running first. This is why I have included a fair amount of autobiographical material and such like.

Second, I have intentionally used humour. I believe humour is one of the great under-used resources of Christian writers today. We are wired for laughter. God made us that way. I'm not talking about using humour for its own sake or to cover over a writer's insecurity (I hope I have not done this in the book), but humour as a way of seeing a different angle. Satirists are popular because they expose things that the people they are satirising do not want seen in that way. To be frank, so much Christian writing is worthy but dull, in my opinion. I suppose I didn't feel good about criticising that without trying to do something to improve the situation.

Third, I wanted to write a book with a distinctively British flavour. This is the first book published by DPI written by an Englishman. Others from many nations have lived on this island and written for DPI (and that is a good thing), but no one from the churches here, baptised and raised in Christ here, has written a book. I did not write this book as some kind of protest about that situation (it certainly is not the fault of DPI!), but I felt that after almost 25 years since the founding of the congregation in London, it was time for someone to fly the Union Jack back at DPI HQ. Not only that, I believe it is *vital* that people in different cultures write about the gospel, the faith and the Christian life. I need to read books written by Americans, Zimbabweans, Germans, Russians, Serbians, Iranians, Indians and Australians etc. I am narrow. God is huge. People standing and looking at God from within a different cultural situation see and communicate things I need to know about Him. I hope to contribute something to this picture.

Fourth, I have a passion for the devotional life and helping others develop this in their lives. I am frequently inspired by the dedication to devotional life demonstrated by many inside and outside my fellowship of churches. So many people know the Bible better than I. They practise the spiritual disciplines more thoroughly and pray more fervently than I. I believe that there is a partnership between the outward and inward mission of the Spirit. His outward mission is to send and accompany God's people out into the world to demonstrate and take the saving message of the kingdom to as many people as possible. His inward mission is to transform God's people from the inside out so that day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year they become more and more like their Lord and God. One mission without the other is a perversion of the gospel and a religious tragedy. What God has joined together, let man not separate. In my book I have tried to do what I think John was doing - to inspire the inner devotional life while making outer practical application a natural part of the process.

### **DPI: What was most challenging about writing your first book?**

Not knowing if it was going to be any good! I have read some pretty awful books by really good people. I don't expect my book to top the best seller list, but I did want it to work. I was insecure about doing John justice. It was so hard to know what to include and what to leave out. I could have added 15 appendices! Finding time was a challenge, but that worked out like anything does when you are motivated enough. I had several Baalam's donkey experiences where I got stuck on a chapter or idea that refused to go the way I wanted. That was very frustrating until I realised that God wanted me to go in a different direction with the chapter or idea!

**DPI: What do you hope people will come away with after reading your book along with the Gospel of John?**

I hope, I desperately hope, that people will do three things:

1. Study more of John for themselves - using their imagination and engaging the heart.
2. Use these principles in the rest of their Bible study.
3. Either become a Christian or be so strengthened as a Christian that they will persevere to the end.