



# Lobotomised Christians and the Colonial Cringe of New Zealand

Steve Taylor

## An interview with Rev Dr Steve Taylor

Senior Pastor at Opawa Baptist Church and Lecturer in Practical Theology at Bible College of New Zealand (Christchurch). He is the author of *The Out of Bounds Church?* (Zondervan, 2005) and writes regularly at [www.emergentkiwi.org.nz](http://www.emergentkiwi.org.nz)

For some years Opawa Baptist, Christchurch, has been interfacing with art. The church's new minister, Christchurch-raised Dr Steve Taylor, is engaging his congregation in new ways of seeing and of being a church. His PhD thesis (Otago University) was titled *A New Way of Being Church?* His book *The Out of Bounds Church?* (Zondervan) contains a whole chapter on creativity and play, as part of the future of theology. He and his wife Lynne planted an Auckland church (Graceway) and before that Taylor was an orchard manager in Otago. He grew up in Christchurch in a Christian household; his parents had been missionaries in Papua New Guinea.

'Opawa Baptist is on a journey. We're exploring the Christmas and Easter journeys. I'm working hard to help the congregation realise that Easter and Christmas, through art, are a way of us connecting with the Jesus story in fresh and new ways. The longer you are a Christian the more you need those fresh connections. Art opens up different perspectives.

'We have also showed the Allie Eagle film. That was us trying to dialogue with issues outside normal church issues, like abortion and faith, but with new lenses. It brought fresh questions.

'At Pentecost we're running an outdoor creative project where everyone will make kites, and do metal work. It will be tied in with teaching, as a way to access more than our heads in our spirituality.'

**JS: You see art as a mechanism for stepping outside the intellectual headspace of theology, more of the 'feeling/heart space'?**

'I don't like the phrase "art as a mechanism", because it sounds like art is something you use for another good. There's something intrinsically worthwhile about art in its own right. Certainly it provides ways. I often think Christians are lobotomised, walking around with heads that have no appreciation of beauty, creativity or image. Art, or engaging with film, reminds us that we are made whole in 'the image of God'. To be authentic disciples, to be a true church, a whole church, we have to have these kinds of discussions.'

Over the last few years, prior to Taylor's arrival, the Majendies have created Christmas and Easter Journey installations, each year with a different focus, reworking the themes in different ways.

'My primary task has been to give Peter and Joyce (Majendie) the space to do it. And to increase our

# // Why are New Zealand films so dark?

*A Christmas Journey* (exterior), Peter & Joyce Majendie, Shipping container: 6 x 2.4 x 2.4 metres, Fourth of eight *A Christmas Journey* installations erected for the two weeks preceding Christmas 2006, Various inner city Christchurch locations. Photo: Andrew Clarkson.



church's sense of involvement with art.'

## Did you come from a culture of that?

'I have no art background in my heritage. My pastoral ministry at Graceway (Auckland) was a journey of discovery. It was really a theological insight: we're whole-bodied; made whole in the image of God; heart, mind and soul. Art and creativity are one of those dimensions. So what does that mean? Why do we just sing in our worship?'

## What is the relationship between art and theology for you?

'I draw them as two separate circles that overlap. Neither should domesticate nor serve the other. In the middle is a very fertile zone for discussion and debate. Sometimes theology won't meet art and vice versa. There shouldn't be a pressure from either side to do that.'

## How does art shape our view of God?

'Art asks us fresh questions about our views of God. We have this Jesus, and our impressions. If we really love Jesus then we will check whether our impressions of Him are the 'real thing'. That's why we study the Bible or do theology, because we love Jesus so much. Art throws in fresh questions and challenges presuppositions. It helps our pursuit of understanding.'

## What is the future for the arts in the church and how might the two interact?

'I was in a new library recently. It had a big reception area, was freshly carpeted, two storeys, and someone said to me, "This could be your church building! Big 2000 seat auditorium." I replied, "Nothing could be worse. If you offered me an art gallery and a café and separate diverse worship spaces, maybe." So right there are two very clear differences on the future of the church.'

'My dream would be that church was an art gallery and people worshipped inside that. At the same time, the church has to be wary of domesticating art for its own use, or even just hanging it on the walls to

appreciate beauty. We must continue to accept that art is a worthy pursuit in itself.'

## What are the main challenges for the church wanting to embrace the arts?

'We have to confess our lobotomy, that God is much bigger than our heads. It's something I've learned more deeply from doing the *Gospel and Film* course at Bible College, and the *Easter Journey* this year at Opawa Baptist. One of the things we offered this year for the *Easter Journey* was tour guides. Part of me said, "We don't need to do 'explain art!'" and another part said, "but people don't have the skills to interpret like they used to". A few frameworks help things to "click" and enhance appreciation. So I think the church has a training role - helping to regain lost skills.'

## What about the role of film? Is that a medium the church could interact with more and how can it do that?

'It could run film festivals. At Opawa we're working toward regular monthly films, with discussion and interaction after that, to get discussion going. In the lead up to the UK elections, there's a Christian group showing films around what they feel are key election issues. That's a good way of entering into debate, into a conversation. The danger for the church is that it thinks it always owns the conversation. Film is a chance for us to listen to someone else's voice. We need to listen in a way that respects that voice and doesn't colonise it. That's the danger of using film. The other danger is it just becomes an illustration of your point. So the use of movie clips in sermons etc. It's like going to kindergarten, it's a good start.'

## Steve, some reflection on movies that have been an 'other voice' to you of late, the stories of those movies and how you're thinking about those from a theological point of view.

'*The Motorcycle Diaries*<sup>1</sup>. In many ways it's an incarnational film about a person who swims across the Amazon to get to the lepers on the other side. It's an example of Jesus coming to us, crossing over to our side. I liked the way in the movie that it was the stories of people that turned a rich young medical student around, changed his value systems. A trend in theology is to listen to people's narratives as a starting point.

'*In My Father's Den*<sup>2</sup>. I hated that movie in some ways. The whole Maurice Gee "New Zealand is horrible, religion is repressive" thing. It was weird to see a wonderful New Zealand movie that paraded our movie-creativity, while telling a story of how oppressed New Zealand was and how Kiwi identity could only be found in Spain. A great movie but a very sad movie. I spent time in Roxborough in Central Otago, so it was a landscape I could identify with. I've walked orchards in blossom. I've been in the spray sheds.

'But why are New Zealand films so dark?'

## John Stringer

- 1 *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), director Walter Salles, Fr/Gy/UK/S. America/USA collaboration, writer Ernesto (Che) Guevara.
- 2 *In My Father's Den* (2004), written & directed by Brad McGann (based on a novel by Maurice Gee).