

FOUNDATIONS

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WATSON HOUSE

11, STATION ROAD

CLIFFORD PARK GL13PT

TEL: 01452 308097

FAX: 01452 503949

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FOUNDATIONS

Foundations is published by the **British Evangelical Council** in May and November; its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics – and to indicate their relevance to pastoral ministry; its policy gives particular attention to the theology of evangelical churches which are outside pluralist ecumenical bodies.

Editor **Rev. Dr Kenneth Brownell**
6 Elrington Road
Hackney
LONDON
United Kingdom
E8 8BJ
Tel: 020 8980 6125 (Office)
020 7249 5712 (Home)
E-mail: k.brownell@solfa.co.uk

All MSS, Editorial Correspondence and Publications for Review should be sent to the Editor.

Editorial Board **Rev. Christopher Bennett MA**
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Editor's Notes

Elsewhere in this issue I have an article on evangelistic catechising. There is also a related article by Robin Weekes on the *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored* courses. In these notes I simply want to direct your attention to some other catechising materials, particularly for instructing children and families and adult Christians. On the whole subject of catechising **Tom Nettles** has many good things to say in *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts* (Calvary Press 1998). Here Nettles introduces the place of catechisms in Baptist church life with an introduction that helpfully spells out their benefits. Contrary to what some might think catechisms are not only the preserve of Presbyterians and have played a vital role in shaping Baptist spirituality and life. Evangelical Press has published a useful introduction to much of the Shorter Catechism entitled *Firm in the Faith* by **Dennis Hustedt**, a South African pastor. There is a student's book and an accompanying leader's guide. The catechism has been reduced to 52 questions and answers for each week of the year. Each chapter has some questions on a passage of Scripture, a memory verse, an exercise and an action point. I am not quite sure who it is aimed at. It would be useful with older children, but it seems a little too basic for thoughtful adults. Much shorter, but very helpful is **William E Payne's** *Life Transforming Truth* (Joshua Press 2001). This is a short, ten chapter introduction to the doctrines of grace. Although not called a catechism it could be used to catechise new or older Christians in doctrine. Also very good is *Light for Life* (CPO/FIEC 2000). This is a repackaged version of an older FIEC publication explaining its doctrinal basis. Written by members of the FIEC Theological Committee it presents the essentials of the evangelical faith in a clear and compelling way. Each chapter has questions to aid understanding and application. This would be very useful in small group study. On a much grander scale is *Guilt, Grace and Gratitude* (Banner of Truth 2001, two volumes) by **George W Bethune**. Bethune was a minister in the (Dutch/German) Reformed Church of America in the 19th century. He had a much blessed ministry in churches around and in New York. This book is his sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism. They are full of good things – doctrinally solid, spiritually rich, practically applied. Tragically Bethune died before he completed them, but they are to be treasured nevertheless. If you are not familiar with the Heidelberg Catechism (its opening question and answer is one of the most wonderful in all confessional literature) read these volumes. There are two catechetical works I would like to recommend for children. *Small Talks on Big Questions* (Joshua Press 1999) by **Selah Helms and Susan Thompson** is a very useful tool. Each section has several questions from the *Children's Catechism*, a Bible story, a story from church history, some relevant Bible verses and some questions. But the book I am encouraging everyone to get is *Training Hearts, Teaching Minds* (Presbyterian & Reformed 1999) by **Starr Meade**. In this book there is a chapter on every question of the Shorter Catechism, each of which is divided into a day of the week from Monday to Friday. On each day there is a one paragraph family devotional on the theme of the question with appropriate Scripture passages. We have been using it in my family and it is just right. At the time of the terrorist attacks on the USA we were dealing with the decrees of God. It was all very relevant and led to interesting after dinner discussions on the sovereignty of God and

evil. Even if you don't have children around I recommend this book as an excellent resource for household devotions. And if you are a Baptist like me you can just amend or skip the appropriate bits.

If you haven't read it yet let me draw your attention to **Iain Murray's *The Unresolved Controversy*** (Banner of Truth 2001). I warmly recommend this booklet which is the published version of an address Mr Murray gave at the Shepherd's Conference in California. It is really a summary of his book ***Evangelicalism Divided*** (Banner of Truth 2000). This is a very important book that deserves a much fuller review than I can give here. Suffice it to say that while I agree with some of Murray's reviewers who say that he hasn't given enough credit to positive developments within Anglicanism (i.e. Proclamation Trust, Reform, etc.), overall Murray has exposed a deep fault-line at the heart of contemporary evangelicalism. The attitude of evangelicals to non-evangelicals is crucial to the future of the movement. Where Murray is so good is on the explanations of this division among evangelicals—the question of what is a Christian and fully appreciating the significance of the reality of sin, both in ourselves and in others. This booklet and the book on which it is based need to be seriously considered by all evangelical leaders.

Finally let me say a word about this issue. Broadly the theme is mission within our culture in Britain. Our rapidly changing culture demands that we think carefully about how we do mission. For those of us in pastoral or evangelistic ministries these are challenging and exciting times. I want to particularly recommend David Smith's article that I heard when it was first delivered at this year's Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference sponsored by Rutherford House. I found to one of the most thought provoking things I have recently come across. Not only does it contribute to the on going debate about the biblical basis of revival, but it also makes us think about what it means for Christ to build his church in our culture today.

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A leaflet about the conference can be obtained from Rev. Reg Burrows, 32 Common Road, Wooler, NE71 6PB (tel. 01668 281263; e-mail: reg.burrows@btopenworld.com).

God's vision for the church

Donald Macleod

What is God's vision for the church?

As we ask that question we are faced with many imponderables. One thing we do know, of course. The church is in safe hands: very safe hands. But beyond that we know little. We don't even know how much time is left to us. We're living in the Last Days, but then we've been living in them since Christ came 2000 years ago, and they will last till He comes again. No one knows when that will be. The church may be still in her infancy and may last, on earth, for a million years. We simply do not know; and even if we did we have not the remotest idea what such a future might hold. We can see only a few steps ahead of ourselves; and even then only dimly.

Keep our nerve

First, surely, this is a time when we must keep our nerve. By every human criterion the church in Britain is in a bad way. Observers constantly tell us that attendances are on the decrease. The church itself is in confusion. It is increasingly marginalised and irrelevant.

In the face of these sombre analyses it is tempting to press the panic-button and to resort to policies which in the long term can be only destructive.

Part of the difficulty is that we live in a market economy where people instinctively turn to market solutions. The church, they insinuate, is merely a part of the entertainment industry which has lost its audience; or it is like a commercial company which is losing its customers and needs to diversify. It must do some consumer research and find out what people want. Let's abandon traditional styles of worship! Abandon old-style preaching! Bring in musicals, drama, dancing, the Internet. Take a soft line on Christian ethics. That's what consumers want. Go for the sound-bite: the 30-second advert.

All over the world there are signs of Christian capitulation to this kind of market-driven analysis. But these options are not open to the church. We have clear Rules of Engagement. The Lord, the Head of the church, has told us what our business is. We are here to preach the gospel. We are here to care for the poor. We are here to worship God. It may be that men don't find any of that attractive. They may want to worship a different kind of God or to do something other than worship; and we, of course, have to keep asking ourselves whether we are fulfilling our Rules of Engagement in the most effective way. But we have no right to tear up our Commission or to change our God-given product in favour of others which we think more marketable or to abandon the activities assigned to us and concentrate on others which we think more promising. Even though our churches emptied to the point of extinction we must remain true to our mandate. We have to contextualise, of course, and adapt to our own time and place. But we cannot change our core business: 'Go! Make disciples of all the nations and tell every human being, "I have good news for you!"'

A missionary footing

Yet, keeping our nerve cannot mean simply remaining as we are. The church must be put on a missionary footing. In a way this should not need to be said. We have always known, in the words of Alexander Duff, that Mission is the chief end of the Christian church. Everything we do in discipling our own people, organising our structures and elaborating our theology bears directly on our missionary responsibility. Yet it is easy to forget it; and sometimes the priority of evangelism is masked from us by the social conditions in which we operate. For centuries after the Reformation we lived in what was officially a Christian society. Virtually every child was baptised. The whole nation accepted the Christian world-view. Schools taught the Bible and every child had some knowledge of its contents. Everyone received Christian burial. Public life, in Parliament and elsewhere, professed Christian values.

All this dulled our sense of missionary obligation. When we thought of pagans we thought of Darkest Africa or the great masses of India and China. These were our spheres of missionary obligation.

But in the last hundred-and-fifty years we have lost so much ground that we are now struggling in a sea of paganism. The tide of faith has ebbed and in its place there has come, sometimes silently, sometimes fiercely, but always relentlessly, the flood of unbelief. Even in the Western Isles, so long immune to these forces, the signs of the ebb-tide are all too evident. At no point since the 6th century has Scotland shown such disregard for Christianity as it does today.

And we are ill-placed to respond to it. In fact, we are no better organised for mission than Britain under Neville Chamberlain was organised for war. Here in Scotland, the church, since the days of John Knox, has been on a pastoral footing. Our primary concern has been to hold fast what we have. Evangelism has meant only fishing in the pool of unconverted adherents who came to our churches every Sunday. Now that pool has evaporated. Few attend church unless already driven by a marked degree of commitment. The uncommitted are no longer sitting in our pews. We cannot reach the people unless we go among them; and that means going outside our churches to where Britain really is.

That implies, first of all, that the unchurched must be our priority. One of the best descriptions of the church is that it is the only society on earth which exists for the benefit of non-members. That may be a cliché, but the great merit of clichés is that they are true. The Great Commission didn't say to the apostles, 'Go and comfort your brothers and sisters. Go and give them great expositions.' It said, 'Go! Make disciples of all the Gentiles.' We need to ponder that. We exist for the benefit of those who spend their lives in the public-houses, betting-shops and discos of our land; those whose lives are spirals into addiction, despair and moral chaos; those who mock religion and spit on Christ.

How can we make our meetings relevant to them? Too often our only anxiety is what some prominent elder or some 'mother in Israel' or some Christian bully will think of our proposals. If they're offended, we drop them. Is it not time to apply a different set of controls: to assess our activities on the basis of their relevance to those who never attend church and have never heard the gospel? That means letting the world set the agenda. In that sense we are reactive, not proactive. We are willing to be all

things to all men, adapting to changed circumstances in order to ensure that our message is heard by those who need it. Paul challenged the Corinthians as to what a stranger would think if he chanced into one of their meetings. Would he think they were mad? He didn't allow them to say, 'Oh! we can't be governed by the feelings of outsiders!' That, said the apostle, is exactly what you must be governed by. That stranger, that chance visitor, is the most important person in the whole building.

The problem faced by many churches is that the moment they take up some proposal to reach the unchurched they immediately find huge obstacles placed in their way. Where do these obstacles come from? From the world? From atheists and humanists? From those they're trying to convert? No! From fellow Christians! That is one of the saddest features of the church's history in the last hundred years. We have so often let ourselves be held to ransom by fellow believers who said, 'If you evangelise like that, I'm going to disapprove! If you bring in a modern version of the Bible, I'm going to disapprove! If you replace pews with chairs I'm going to disapprove! If you replace the sermon with Bible Study I'm going to disapprove! If you use *Mission Praise* I'm going to disapprove!'

It seems to me that DL Moody had the perfect answer to such intimidation: 'I prefer the way I evangelise badly to the way you don't evangelise at all!' The challenge we face, particularly if we are Christian leaders, is whether 'for the sake of peace' we are prepared to deprive the world of the gospel. The Christian evangelist will invariably find that the greatest danger he faces is friendly fire. The church is brilliant at turning its missionaries into Inoperative Combat Personnel, casualties to frustration, discouragement and spiritual intimidation.

Secondly, being on a missionary footing means that less and less of the church's work will be done within its own buildings. We will need to go where the people are; and we will need to think very carefully about what we actually mean by preaching. One of the great watchwords of the Reformed churches is *the primacy of preaching*. Unfortunately, it is easily confused with something completely different: *the primacy of the pulpit*. These are not the same. In the New Testament, preaching is whatever vehicle we can use to put our message across. Jesus never had a pulpit. Sometimes He preached on a hill, sometimes from a boat, sometimes round a table, once at a well. Preaching does not necessarily mean a large, passive, receptive audience. Nor does it necessarily mean an elaborate structured discourse. These things are, of course, preaching. But when Jesus spoke to the woman of Samaria, that, too was preaching. When he spoke to Nicodemus, that was preaching. When Philip spoke to the Ethiopian Chancellor or Paul to the Philippian jailer, that was preaching. Our four written gospels are preaching: perhaps the greatest preaching of all time. They were evangelism. They told the Good News.

Preaching is whatever gets the gospel across. That is really the only criterion. That's what we have to ask. Do our means of communication enable us to tell the story of God's Son, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised again the third day? Are we delivering *that* message? As far as the New Testament is concerned, it is *what* is conveyed that matters, not *how* it is conveyed. We can put it in a structured discourse or we can put it in a tract or a conversation or a video or a book. We have to

speaking it where the world can hear us and challenge us and even where it can heckle, blaspheme and contradict.

Thirdly, being on a missionary footing means being faithful to the gospel. We hear a great deal about faithless ministers and faithless churches. No doubt there are such, though it should be our own faithlessness that troubles us, not that of others. But what is this phenomenon, so much spoken of among the Reformed? What is a faithless ministry? Some say there are faithless ministers who never preach about hell, election, sin or false ecumenism. No doubt that is lamentable; even, possibly, deplorable. But it is quite possible to preach every Sunday on death, judgement and eternity, on hell, sin and damnation, on the mysteries of election and on the solemnities of reprobation, and still be a faithless minister. A ministry without Good News is a faithless ministry. A ministry that doesn't give hope to the wildest prodigal is a faithless ministry. A ministry that doesn't major on the most incredible fact in the moral universe, the fact that God is love, is a faithless ministry. A ministry that boasts that it's never preached on John 3:16 is a faithless ministry.

We are not faithful to Christ's Rules of Engagement unless we proclaim the promises of God; unless we tell every man and woman, and every boy and girl, 'You can go to God in your rags, because that's what the Prodigal Son did. Straight home! Just as he was, in the spiritual clothes he stood in! Only after he got home did he dress up, and then it was the Father who did it.'

I don't think for a moment that men and women find this easy to believe. Many preachers, unfortunately, do. Indeed, their starting-point appears to be that modern man finds it all too easy to presume on the love of God and to believe in the forgiveness of sins; and the preacher's task, conversely, is to contradict such dangerous teaching, knock such presumption out of men and confront them with the divine awesomeness, not with flabby notions of grace.

Such attitudes, in my view, are heresy. They betray the gospel. As if God had left His church in the world to be a purveyor of darkness, an extinguisher of hope and a messenger of doom! As if our mission were to make men and women feel even worse about themselves than they already do!

Is this what Jesus did? Is this the charge He gave us? Did He not tell us we are the light of the world: the only light it has? Did He not send us forth with the incredible message that God is love? Every tribal demon in the pantheons of Greece and Rome was an angry god, consuming sinners in hell and striking terror in the souls of all their devotees. None of these gods loved. None of them cared. None of them wiped away tears. None of them clothed prodigals or put shoes on their feet or rings on their fingers.

A faithful church is a gospel church; a good news church; a hope church; a love church. It is a Christ-church: one that majors on the fact that God has taken our nature, shared our experiences, borne our sins and conquered death. Let us be faithful to that gospel.

Going about doing good

But we cannot be on a missionary footing unless we are also going about doing good. There is nothing new or radical in that. It goes back to Jesus Himself and every one of His disciples has to emulate Him in this respect. The responsibility is not confined to

individuals, however. It falls equally upon the church as an institution. The church as a church has to go about doing good. It's not simply a matter of providing pews and organising meetings, important though such things may be. Jesus went about and mingled, listening to people, meeting needs, practising compassion, showing sympathy and actively healing. The apostles healed. They cared. They remembered the poor. Their great modern successors did the same. John Knox cared deeply about the poor. Thomas Chalmers gave himself heart and soul to the problems of pauperism in his Glasgow parish. General Booth sought to provide work, food and shelter for the thousands of London's submerged poor. Spurgeon and Whitefield had their orphanages.

These men didn't simply preach. They were concerned for men's bodies as well as for their souls. They knew that there was no point in preaching to a drowning man. You had to throw him a life-belt. You had to meet men's desperate temporal needs. You couldn't simply be a church which listened to sermons. You had to be a community which went about doing good.

What might that mean? Well, whatever else it means it means that the church has to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. How often did Jesus defend the defenceless and speak up for those for whom no one else would speak! He spoke against the powerful and influential, not for them. He spoke for the publicans and sinners; for Samaritans and Syro-Phoenicians; for Roman centurions and fallen women.

That is one of the greatest tests we can apply to the church. For whom is it speaking? Is it saying what everyone else is saying? Is it obsessed with political correctness? Is it baying with the mob against asylum-seekers? Is it speaking only on behalf of those for whom the media and the politicians are speaking already?

Or can you hear it speaking for those for whom no one else is speaking? In Nazi Germany, when Hitler began to attack the Jews, the churches stood back and said nothing. They didn't want to be involved. They didn't want to meddle in politics. They couldn't come down. They had to attend to their high calling: their meditation, their prayer and their preaching. They may even have said that expository preaching would solve everything. No one spoke for the Jews or the gypsies or the psychotics: not until the tiny sparks of harassment had become the fireball of persecution and Europe found itself engulfed in Holocaust.

People tell us, of course, that there is no poverty in modern Britain. Something (the Welfare State, perhaps, but definitely something) has banished poverty. Certainly, if you organise your life properly and take a care where you walk (or drive) you need never see it. No one on your street is poor. But if you are the children of a single mother, an alcoholic who hasn't signed-on for three months and hasn't received a penny, that's poverty. In every city in Britain and every village in this island such problems are within helping distance; but never so pressing that we can't walk by on the other side, chanting a hundred pious reasons for doing nothing.

But desperate reactive measures are not enough. The church has to throw the weight of its influence behind every force for good in the community. It is part of our ecclesiastical heritage here in Scotland that the church has never been concerned only with spiritual things. John Knox wanted a school in every parish and a university in

every large town because he sought not only to save souls but to civilise and moralise a nation. One of the most intriguing things about Chalmers mission in Edinburgh's West Port in the 1840s is the bill for soap. They were teaching girls to take in washing and thus provide themselves with a living. It seems a long way from John Seventeen and the Upper Room, but that's where the needs were. The gospel has to descend to Lazarus' sores. Any activity that offers the hope of raising the tone of a nation deserves our support. And we must do it from the bottom up. In the upper and middle levels of our society there is affluence, education and security. In the basement there is ignorance, squalor and violence. Our task is to raise the level of the basement.

One of our biggest problems in the Scottish Highlands has been the church's coolness towards all cultural activities. As a result, it became all too plausible to argue that there was nothing for young people between the pub and the prayer meeting. You turned to either religion or drink. The whole Common Grace area was lost. It is part of the prophetic role of the church to persuade government and community to care for the young. I don't believe the church itself should be the provider of recreational and leisure facilities. But it should be an instigator and encourager of those responsible for making such provision. It should not be content merely to tell individual parents how to raise their families within their own homes. It should address the community of parents and urge them to take their collective responsibility seriously. We have to create not only child-friendly churches but child-friendly communities.

There is much in the realm of art and culture behind which the church should throw its weight; and there is much in all of these areas which deserves criticism. But where is the Evangelical criticism of literature and art? We have ignored it, when what it needed was Christian evaluation. We have been Protestant monks and nuns, making daily sallies into the world to earn our livings, but otherwise content to let it go to the dogs.

Fellowship

I want to focus briefly on one final area: fellowship. The church must be a real fellowship. In the New Testament the whole idea of fellowship revolves around having things in common; and of course the one great thing we have in common is Christ. We believe in Him. We love Him. We live by Him. We are united to Him. He is our common Saviour and Lord. We are His subjects.

This Christ whom we have in common is the basis of all our fellowship; and that fellowship obviously cuts across all denominational barriers. There are many denominations (too many) in Stornoway, but there is only one church. There are many denominations in Scotland, and many more in England, but there is only one church. There is only one Body of Christ in the whole world; and we are one not on the basis of a common theology or a common polity or a common order, but on the basis of the miracle of the new birth and the wonder of adoption. God has made us all His own children. All those who call Him, 'Abba!' are one.

Out of this come other things. We love to get together, as people do who have common interests. The more we do it the better, but we shouldn't imagine that it carries no risks. All social interaction carries risks. You can probably avoid all the pain in the world by avoiding relationships. I once heard an old Christian lady say, 'The longer I live, the more I love the Lord's people and the less I trust them!' I now know

what she meant. But that shouldn't make us hermits. We need the support, encouragement, admonition and rebuke of other Christians. We need to come together; simply to be together. We need to be part of a critical mass in which faith stimulates faith and launches it into explosive activity. If you've been hurt by some Christian group don't say, 'I'm never again going to expose myself to being hurt by Christians.' We have to stick with the Lord's people. They're our people. They're inseparable from Himself.

But fellowship also involves caring for each other. One of the biggest changes in the Christian ministry in my life-time has been the emergence of a specialist domain of pastoral counselling. Such specialists have their place, as do professional psychiatrists. But let's remember that in the last analysis every Christian is his brother's keeper: not in some meddlesome way, interfering, prying and bossing; but really caring. Paul told the young church in Thessalonica that they had to take care for each other (1 Thess. 5:14). They themselves had to warn the unruly. They had to comfort the feeble-minded. They had to strengthen the weak. He didn't say, 'If you see someone feeble-minded or weak, find a counsellor for him. If you see someone backsliding, go and get someone to admonish him.' He said, 'You do it. He's your responsibility. Sort it out before it gets serious.'

Conclusion

But what I yearn for above all is enthusiasm for the gospel. There is much talk of evangelistic methods. People want courses and debate techniques. But the greatest evangelist of all is a man or woman who loves the gospel: who so loves it and is so thrilled by it and so sure of it and so overwhelmed with gratitude for it that he simply cannot keep quiet about it. There is no course on any campus in the whole wide world that can give you that; or make up for it if you lack it.

One of the men to whom the Scottish Highlands owe most is the itinerant 19th century lay-evangelist, Finlay Munro. He wasn't far removed from being a simpleton and in his later years he suffered serious mental deterioration. But he knew the gospel, he loved the gospel and he couldn't keep quiet about it. He was fully aware that the learned ministers despised him and that many even of the godly frowned on his quaint ways and bad grammar. But he wasn't deterred. He trecked and trecked, sleeping in barns and preaching wherever he could gather an audience.

Of course the church couldn't survive if it had nothing but Finlay Munros. It also needs its Augustines and Calvins. But I'm not sure but that at this juncture in our history it's Finlay Munros we need: men of simple faith but strong conviction; men of indomitable courage; men the world thinks mad.

If I have one prayer above all it is that God would give us an overwhelming belief that this gospel is true; an irresistible urge to preach it; and courage to keep on propounding it at every possible opportunity.

This is the substance of a lecture delivered in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, on Friday, 14 January, 2000, under the auspices of the Lewis Evangelical Lecture Fellowship.

Donald MacCleod is the Principal of the Free Church College, Edinburgh

Learning Christ: some thoughts on the recovery of evangelistic catechesis

Kenneth Brownell

One of the more encouraging developments in recent years has been the recovery of the ancient practise of evangelistic catechising. Although not known as such, inquirers courses such as the *Alpha*, *Christianity Explained*, *Christianity Explored*, *Coming Alive* and others are in effect contemporary forms of the evangelistic catechising that earlier generations of Christians used with great effect. The purpose of this article is to explore biblically, historically and practically the significance of this development and to suggest ways in which the practise of catechesis in the past can inform our practise of catechesis in the future for the advance of Christ's kingdom.

What is catechesis in general and evangelistic catechesis in particular? Catechesis is simply instruction in the essentials of the Christian faith. The word is derived from the Greek word *katecheo*, to instruct, and embraces the whole range of Christian instruction, both of believers and non-believers. Conceptually catechesis overlaps with the ideas of preaching and teaching which can be catechetical, but is distinguished by its more structured and systematic nature. The word 'catechesis' is more commonly used in Roman Catholic circles, but the related word 'catechism' is more familiar among Protestants and means a manual, usually brief, of basic Christian instruction.

But what is *evangelistic* catechesis? Historically three forms of catechising can be distinguished. First, there is family or household catechising. This is the form that is most familiar to Protestants even if it is little practised today. In this form children and households were instructed in the essentials of the faith. Second, there is congregational or pastoral catechising. In this forms individual members or whole congregations are instructed in the faith. Perhaps the most famous catechism in the English-speaking world for achieving these first two forms of catechesis is the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism. Catechisms such as the Larger Catechism were designed to help ministers and catechists do this. The third form of catechesis is evangelistic catechising. In this form non-Christians or new Christians are instructed in the basics of the Christian faith. Such catechesis is related to but different from the public preaching and teaching of God's word and it is my argument that, while never totally neglected, this form of catechising is being revived with potentially great effect.

Some Biblical reflections on evangelistic catechesis

It is evident in the New Testament that evangelistic catechesis was practised by the early church. The verb *katecheo* is used eight times, four by Luke and four by Paul. In Luke 1:4 Luke informs Theophilus that he is writing that he 'may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (*katechethes*)'. While Theophilus could have been taught as a Christian, it seems more likely that he was taught the faith so that he might become a Christian. In Acts 18:25 we read of how Apollos had been '*instructed (katechemenos)* in the way of the Lord' albeit inadequately. Priscilla and Aquila sought to rectify this situation by teaching him more adequately. In Luke 21:21,24 the verb is

used in the sense of to report or inform. The word is used four times by Paul. In Rom.2:8 it is used in relation to instruction in the law, but in the other texts (once in 1 Cor.14:19 and twice in Gal.6:6) the meaning is instruction in the Christian faith. While we must be careful not to read back into the NT use of the word later understandings of catechesis, nevertheless the basic idea of instruction in the faith is there. It is significant that as early a document as Second Clement uses the word in the sense of instruction given to inquirers and candidates for baptism. K. Wegenast sums up the NT use of *katecheo* by saying that it 'supplied the early Christians with a specific word for an essential aspect both of their evangelistic work and of their church life: teaching the saving acts of God'.¹

However evidence for evangelistic catechising is not restricted to the usage of the word *katecheo*. The practise of Paul also reveals that he not only publicly proclaimed the gospel, but that he also spent time instructing both inquiring non-Christians and new converts. A number of words are used for Paul's communication of the gospel and he used a number of methods, but in all of them he instructed people in the essentials of the faith. When he spent longer periods in cities such as Corinth or Ephesus he taught the word of God (Acts 18:11; 19:9–10). That this instruction was a standardised pattern is evidenced in expressions in his letters such as 'the form of teaching' (Rom. 6:17) or 'the pattern of sound teaching' (2 Tim. 1:13). The 'faithful sayings' of the pastoral letters indicate a form of memorable teaching as do some of the hymnic passages such as Phil. 2:4–11. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul reminds his readers that they 'did not learn Christ that way' (4:20), which seems to indicate that what he wrote in that letter, and others like it, was the substance of what he had taught them before and after their conversions.

All this seems to indicate that evangelism in the NT was not only a matter of public preaching, but also a matter of systematic instruction in the Christian faith. Especially when dealing with pagans or new Christians from pagan backgrounds, Paul saw the need to instruct them since, unlike Jews, they would have been ignorant of biblical revelation.

What early church history can teach us about evangelistic catechesis

When we turn to the church history we see that during periods of significant advance the church practised evangelistic catechising. I will illustrate this from three key periods in church history.

The *early church* has much to teach us about evangelistic catechesis. It is well known that during the first three centuries of the Christian era Christianity grew rapidly. Rodney Stark estimates that that from a few thousand around 40 AD the number of Christians in the Roman Empire grew to about 34 million or 56.5% of the population by 350 AD.² What accounts for this rapid growth? There were many factors that could be mentioned, but one of them was the missionary nature of the early churches. As Stark puts:

Christianity did not grow because of miracle working in the market places (although there may have been much of that going on), or because Constantine said it should, or even because the martyrs gave it such credibility. It grew because Christians constituted an intense community, able to generate 'the invincible obstinency' that so offended the

younger Pliny, but yielded immense religious rewards. And the primary means of its growth was the united and motivated efforts of the growing number of Christian believers, who invited their friends, relations and neighbours to share the 'good news'.³

Alan Krieder agrees. In an intriguing booklet entitled *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* Krieder makes the point that the early church grew not only as the result of public proclamation, which in any case was often restricted, but also because of their quality of life which itself was shaped by their corporate worship. Pagans were attracted to these communities and when they were they both heard the preaching in the worship and were catechised. Initially this was an informal process with Christians instructing their inquiring friends, but later it became a more formal process. By the second century there were four stages of initiation into the Christian faith. The first was the inquiry stage which was relatively short and involved teaching the essentials of the faith and weeding out the serious inquirers from those who were merely curious or had baser motives. The second stage was what became known as the catechumenate when the candidates underwent a long period of instruction that could last from between three to six years. During this period catechumens could attend the church services but had to withdraw before the Lord's Supper. The third stage was the forty-day period before Easter when candidates prepared for baptism. The fourth stage was the period of instruction after baptism. It was quite an arduous process and yet seemingly millions went through it before the advent of Christendom in the late third century. Through it all the candidates were learning what it meant to be followers of Christ, both in terms of belief and behaviour. This process was intended 'to reform pagan people, to resocialize them, to deconstruct their old world, and reconstruct a new one, so that they would emerge as Christian people who would be at home in communities of freedom'. Early catechesis sought to replace the 'mythico-historical mix' of paganism 'by an alternative narrative, by the history of salvation as recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures which culminated in the person and work of Jesus Christ and which continued in the life of the transnational church and the sufferings of the martyrs....The pagans undergoing catechism needed to be rehabilitated so that they would react to situations of tension and difficulty in a distinctive way, not like pagans, but like members of a Christian community, and ideally like Jesus.'⁴

Understood that way, early church catechesis embraced something far wider than what I mean by the expression evangelistic catechesis. It embraced the whole process of making of disciples, but within this process was the initial contact, explanation and response that is involved in evangelism in the strict sense of the word. Nevertheless the close connection of evangelism and the later stages of discipleship, or better the placing of evangelism within the context of discipleship, is an important one to note and one to which we will return.

When we turn to the literature of this period we can see the important place evangelistic catechesis had in the mission of the early church. The very early *Didache of the Twelve* seems to contain instruction given to pagan inquirers. It is in the pattern of the 'two ways', the way of life and the way of death (an early version of *Two Ways to Live?*), which would become a common pattern in later catechetical writings. In his *First Apology* Justin Martyr assumes that those who were baptised had been catechised. Justin was something an evangelist to intellectuals and conducted a catechetical school

in Rome, which was open to inquiring pagans and intended to counter the influence of pagan and gnostic academies. Origen began his teaching career in one such school in Alexandria where he excelled at 'drawing the net' around the pagan inquirers who came to him. Irenaeus's *The Proof of Apostolic Teaching* was written to help catechists do their work. He recommended that they teach the history of redemption with an emphasis on the facts of the gospel. By the time Hippolytus wrote *The Apostolical Tradition* the four stage pattern of initiation had been established. It was the first stage of this process, the pre-baptism catechumenate, that, in the words of Glenn Hinson, 'served as a locus of direct evangelism'⁵

This lengthy catechetical process had begun to shorten by the late fourth century. In part this was due to the recognition of Christianity by the emperor Constantine and the influx of vast numbers of people into the church which the old process of initiation simply could not accommodate. Inevitably this led to a high degree of nominalism and a decline in spiritual life and vitality. Nevertheless catechesis was still widely practised. Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa and Theodore of Mopsuestia, among others, delivered still extant catechetical lectures. For the most part these were of a doctrinal nature and were often based on the Nicene Creed.⁶ By this time infant baptism was becoming more commonplace with the result that, for obvious reasons, basic instruction in the faith took place after baptism rather than before. Catechesis in the Christendom context after Constantine gradually lost its evangelistic impetus and eventually declined until revived at the Reformation.

Augustine of Hippo: a great evangelistic catechist

Early Christian catechesis reached its apogee with Augustine, bishop of Hippo. Augustine was very concerned that his congregation was thoroughly instructed in the faith. To this end not only did he preach, but he also took pains to instruct inquirers and new Christians. Two works stand out. The best known is *The Enchiridion ad Laurentium* (423) that was written as a handbook of catechetical instruction. But it is his *De Catechizandis rudibus* (399) or *The First Catechetical Instruction* that gives us the most insight into early church practise. Augustine wrote the book in response to a request from a friend for some help in teaching Christianity to inquirers. Deogratius was a deacon in Carthage who had been given the job of instructing inquirers, but he needed help, as he explained to Augustine, in order to know what to teach and how to do so more effectively. He found himself talking too long, having little enthusiasm and feeling that he was wearying his hearers. In response Augustine deals first with how Deogratius should catechise. With pastoral sensitivity to a discouraged fellow worker Augustine tells Deogratius not to be disturbed if his discourses seem to him 'worthless and wearisome' since it may not seem that way to his hearers. 'For my part', he writes, 'I am always dissatisfied with my discourse'. Like many a teacher he could not always find the words with which to say what he wants. The key thing is for Deogratius to enjoy his teaching since 'people listen to us with much greater pleasure when we ourselves take pleasure in the same work of instruction. The thread of our discourse is affected by the very joy that we ourselves experience and as a consequence is delivered more easily and received more gratefully'. But it is not an easy task and in the end the cheerfulness on the catechist depends on God's mercy. As to the hearers themselves, Augustine advises Deogratius to make sure they are comfortable by inviting them to be

seated and allowing them to ask whatever questions they may have. He is not to be disturbed by interruptions, but on the contrary Deogratius is to encourage the inquirers to express their opinions by asking questions of them, a practise that Augustine had learned from being catechised by Ambrose. He is also to keep his discourses short so as not to weary his hearers or himself. It is preferable for people to be dealt with one-to-one, especially if they are educated and have many questions. Interestingly he advises Deogratius to handle people who have a little knowledge but think they know much (the type is still with us) by putting them firmly in their place. But he is not to despise simple ordinary people, but rather he should imitate Christ in accommodating himself to their capacities in seeking their salvation. It is very important to make the discourses interesting and when someone yawns to inject 'some lively comment'.⁷

What is Deogratius to teach his inquirers? Augustine's advise is to begin at Genesis 1:1 and to teach the history of redemption in the form of a rapid survey. This is his own practise. He writes:

But we ought to present all the matter in a general and comprehensive summary, choosing certain of the more remarkable facts that are heard with greater pleasure and constitute cardinal points in history...so to speak and spread them out to view, and offer them to the minds of our hearers to examine and admire.

In giving this survey Deogratius is to keep in view the central theme of the history of redemption, namely the love of God. For 'what greater reason could there be for the Lord's coming than that God might manifest his love for us and ardently recommend it'. The Old Testament as well as the New Testament is necessary for understanding this and at this point Augustine famously writes: 'In the Old Testament the New is concealed, in the New the Old is revealed'. In the second part of the book Augustine gives an example of how he would teach the history of redemption to an imaginary ordinary man. After welcoming the man he would question him as to his motives for wanting to be instructed. Beginning with creation he would then teach the story of redemption by working through the life of Abraham, the history of Israel, the exile, the prophets, the person and work of Christ, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the history of the church up to the present time and end with the coming judgement, baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁸

Evangelistic catechesis in later periods of church history

During *the medieval period* evangelistic catechesis went into decline. Of course during the period of Europe's evangelisation there was evangelistic preaching that included instruction in the faith. Patrick in Ireland and Boniface in Germany, to cite two notable examples, were careful in instruct those who wanted to become Christians. In his preaching Boniface emphasised the emptiness of idolatry, God as Creator, the person and work of Jesus Christ, Christian practises, the creed, the Lord's Prayer and the commandments. But catechesis as understood by the early church was not practised. Because of the mass or forced conversions that were often involved there was little attempt to instruct people. There was little if any systematic instruction of children and adults were expected to learn the faith in church. In the later medieval period there was some movement towards renewing catechesis. The theologian John Gerson advocated systematic instruction of youth after trying to teach the essentials of the faith to teenage boys in Paris. In the 8th and 9th centuries a number of manuals of instruction were

produced, including a notable one by Alcuin, Archbishop of York. Many of these were written in the question and answer format that characterised later catechisms. On the eve of the Reformation confessional manuals became popular means of devotion, but these were more lists of vices and virtues to aid confession than manuals of instruction.⁹

With *the Reformation* there was an explosion of catechesis, so much so that Patrick Collinson has called it 'an age of catechising'.¹⁰ Luther was very conscious of this, writing that 'among us the catechism has come back into use, as it were by right of recovery'.¹¹ Significantly Luther spoke of a 'catechism', a manual of Christian instruction. The recent invention of the printing press enabled catechisms to be put into the hands of the common people with the result, as Steven Ozment has pointed out, they were one of the most effective means of spreading the Protestant message, especially in the cities of Europe. Catechisms, he writes, were 'detailed guides, doctrine by doctrine and practise by practise, to the reformed religion'. Their virtue was their simplicity 'that eliminates the typical catalogue of sins, vices and virtues, turns the catechumen away from the minute self-examination... and makes the communication of religious certitude, especially at the point of death, the highest priority'.¹² Of course the Reformers were working within a Christendom context in which virtually everyone was baptised and belonged to the church, but nevertheless they used catechising to evangelise the Christianised peoples among whom they ministered.

Martin Luther was not the first Reformer to make use of catechisms, but he was the most successful in using them. Within his own household he began to use charts and questions and answers to teach the essentials of the faith. By 1520 he had devised a brief form consisting of ten questions and answers as well as the Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments. But it was the Saxony Visitation of 1528 that revealed the widespread ignorance of people of the gospel that convinced Luther of the need of a popular catechism. The result was his *Small Catechism* of 1529. Luther's aim was to equip parents with the tools for teaching the faith to their children and servants. It began with the Ten Commandments, went on to the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer and ended with sections on baptism, confession and the Lord's Supper. It was very short and simple (not always or usually a characteristic of later catechisms) and soon became immensely popular, selling 100,000 copies within 40 years and being translated into 17 languages. Not only parents, but also Lutheran pastors used it as a basis for their preaching. With only a little exaggeration he could say, 'I have brought about such a change that nowadays a girl or boy of 15 knows more about Christian doctrine than all the theologians of the great universities used to know'.¹³

Catechisms became one of the hallmarks of the Reformation movement. Huldreich Zwingli produced one in 1523. William Farel's *Sommaire*, subtitled 'a brief description of all that is necessary for every Christian to have confidence in God and to help his neighbour' was written as a handbook of essential doctrine. Like Luther's, Farel's catechism was brief and to the point and focused on faith in Christ.¹⁴ Other catechisms followed. In 1537 John Calvin wrote a catechism described as 'a brief outline of the Christian faith'. This was a summary of the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He followed this up in 1542 with a catechism for the church in Geneva, which was cast in the question and answer format that would become commonplace in later catechisms for which it was a model. John a Lasco produced a catechism in Emden in

1554. By far the most popular and influential continental Reformed catechism was the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563.¹⁵

In the English-speaking world catechisms also proliferated. In Scotland there were, as well as English translations of continental Reformed catechisms, a number of native ones, including Craig's Catechism of 1581, the Little Catechism of 1556 and Craig's Short Catechism of 1592. All these were superseded by the Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1648.¹⁶ Although not strictly evangelistic in purpose, these catechisms were used effectively in teaching successive generations of the Scottish people the Christian faith. Certainly they gave many people a doctrinal framework that provided preachers with well-prepared minds to which they could address the gospel. The Shorter Catechism was in fact largely the work of English Puritan divines, but except for a brief period it was not widely used in England or Wales. From the time of the Reformation hundreds of catechisms were produced, but by far the most important were the official Anglican catechisms. In 1548 Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, composed a catechism based on one by the Lutheran pastor Justus Jonas which was revised and published as the Anglican Catechism the next year. This was included with some revision in the 1559 Book of Common Prayer and became for many generations of English and Welsh Protestants the basis for instruction in the faith. Catechising was one of the chief means by which Britain was made Protestant. Rightly could a later Archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson, say that 'catechising and the history of the martyrs have been the two great pillars of the Protestant Religion'. Nor is it surprising that at the Roman Catholic Council of Trent it was remarked that Protestants had done great mischief by means of catechisms.¹⁷

With their concern for furthering reformation and vital godliness it is not surprising that *the Puritans* were great catechists. One of the greatest Puritan advocates of catechising was William Perkins. Like most other Puritans Perkins was concerned about the ignorance of so many people regarding the Christian faith. To help remedy this he wrote his *Foundation of the Christian religion gathered into Six Principles*, dedicating it 'To all the ignorant people that desire to be instructed'. Perkins followed the traditional pattern of the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, but insisted it was not enough to know them by rote, but also by 'applying them inwardly to your hearts and consciences and outwardly to your lives and conversations'. Fundamental to Perkins's approach was his conviction that 'the mind must have certain basic information before it can think correctly about matters divine'. Perkins also listed the benefits of catechising: (1) it laid the basis of religious knowledge without which one could not be saved; (2) it enabled Christians to have a deeper understanding of the Bible; (3) it prepared them for taking a fuller part in the life of the church; (4) it enabled them to discern truth from error; and (4) it promoted Christian virtue.¹⁸

Another great Puritan catechist was Richard Baxter. Like others he was concerned for the widespread ignorance of people in his parish in Kidderminster. He composed a number of catechisms, but in his pastoral visitation he used a simple one of 12 questions and answers. He preferred to deal with people individually rather than in groups. So effective was this approach that he wrote to a friend, 'We never hit the way of pulling down the kingdom of the devil till now'.¹⁹ His book *The Reformed Pastor*

describes his approach in fuller detail. But Baxter was only one of many. Joseph Alleine also catechised house to house. John Bunyan used catechising as a means of reaching unconverted people in his community. His catechism was published as *A Catechism, called Instruction for the Ignorant* and was dedicated not only to church members, for whom it might be helpful in reminding them of the essentials of their faith, but also to 'all those unconverted, old and young, who may have been at any time under my preaching and yet remain in their sins'. Interestingly Bunyan's catechism is cast in the form of an unconverted person asking questions of a pastor. Through it all Bunyan's concern is that the truth be savingly applied to the learner, as these questions and answers show:

Q. How many gods are there?

A. To the Christians there is but one God, the Father of whom are all things and we of him.

Q. Why is not the God of Christians the God of them who are not Christians?

A. He is their maker and preserver, but they have not chosen him to be their God.

Q. Who is a Christian?

A. One that is born again, a new creature; one that sits at Jesus' feet to hear his word; one that has his heart purified and sanctified by faith, which is in Christ.²⁰

Catechising continued to be widely practised into the 19th century. *Eighteenth century* Scotland was one of the most literate societies in the world largely because of an education system in which catechising played an integral role. No doubt knowledge of the Shorter Catechism prepared the way for the preaching of the Erskines, Whitefield, the Haldanes and others. In England and Wales there was a movement to establish schools where children would learn the Church of England Catechism among other things. As one historian puts it, the aim of these schools was 'to establish the most simple and rudimentary understanding of the faith and its obligations'. Archbishop Wake said that they were intended to 'combat the gross ignorance of the common people'. This movement involved High Churchmen such as Thomas Bray as well as evangelicals such as Griffiths Jones.²¹ Ironically it was the Nonconformists in England and Wales – the Methodists (Calvinistic and Wesleyan), Baptists, and Congregationalists – who largely benefited from this. As Michael Watts has shown in his history of Protestant Dissent in England and Wales, Nonconformist preaching reaped the harvest sown by Anglican catechising. The Church of England prepared the way for Dissent. In large measure the remarkable growth of Nonconformity from 1790 to 1830 can be attributed to this.²² Nor were Nonconformists themselves inactive in catechising. For example, John Sutcliffe, the Baptist pastor in Olney and supporter of William Carey, used a catechism evangelistically. Across the Atlantic Robert Ryland wrote a catechism for the evangelisation of slaves.²³

Some practical conclusions regarding evangelistic catechesis

This survey of evangelistic catechesis in history is relevant for us today. As I indicated at the beginning of this article there has been something of recovery, albeit unconsciously, of an evangelistic practise with an impeccable historical pedigree as well as a biblical basis. Evangelistic catechesis reminds us of the need to be teaching

non-Christians the Christian faith. Like the early church, but also the church in other periods, we live in a time when people are ignorant of the truth. Of course we must try to teach them in the course of our preaching, but there is also much we can do alongside it. Scripture and history teach us the need for systematic instruction of those who express interest in learning more about Christianity. Such catechesis will not take the place of public preaching, but rather supplement it. Of course we need to adapt our approach to our own culture. The lengthy catechesis of the early church would probably be too long today and it is questionable whether baptism and admission to the church should be delayed for such a long time after conversion. Likewise the question and answer format of the Reformed catechisms may be pedagogically inappropriate (although perhaps not for children, but that's another matter). The format of recent evangelism courses shows us how the faith can be taught in a way that makes learning accessible and comfortable (something of which Augustine would approve). But there is also much we can learn from history as to the content of modern catechesis. Like the early church in particular we need to teach both the essentials of the gospel as well as what the Christian life involves. In other words we need to link evangelism and discipleship without confusing them. Non-Christians need to both what the gospel is and how it will work if they become Christians. Also we should take a leaf from Augustine's notebook and develop courses that introduce non-Christians to the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption and consummation. In a culture that loves stories but has forgot the Big Story is this not a wise thing to do? In my own experience with catechising international students I find that this approach is most beneficial. Not only does this approach give the inquirers a framework in which to make sense of the gospel, but it also provides them with a worldview in which to live should they become Christians.²⁴ In short, what we need to be doing is developing introductory catechetical courses that lead on to further instruction in what it means to be a disciple to Christ. Our mandate from the risen Lord Jesus Christ is to make disciples. Evangelistic catechesis is about introducing people to the Christian life so that when they believe and are baptised they can continue to learn Christ and what it means to be his disciples.²⁵

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- ⁷ Augustine, *De Catechizandis Rudibus, or, the First Catechetical Instruction*, trans. Joseph P Christopher, Westminster, Md., 1946, pp. 13–14, 17, 30–34, 34, 50.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19, 23, 57ff. Interestingly Augustine's approach is that of little 'catechisms' such as *Two Ways to Live* and is commended by DM Carson in *The Gagging of God*.
- ⁹ D Wright, 'Cartechisms' in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, WA Ewell (ed.), Carlisle 1984, pp. 195ff.; Liam Kelly, *Catechesis Revisited*, London 2000, p. 17.
- ¹⁰ P Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants*, Oxford 1982, p. 232.
- ¹¹ I Green, *The Christian's ABC, Catechisms and Catechising in England, c. 1530–1740*, Oxford 1996, p. 13.

- ¹² S Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities*, New Haven 1975, pp. 32, 67; *Protestants*, London 1992, pp. 45, 104–105.
- ¹³ Wright, p. 196; Kelly, p. 22; G Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning*, Baltimore 1978, passim.
- ¹⁴ Ozment, *Reformation*, p. 67.
- ¹⁵ D Janz, 'Catechisms', in *Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Reformation*, New York, p. 278; Wright, p. 196.
- ¹⁶ TF Torrance, *The School of Faith*, London 1949, passim. Torrance has an extensive introduction that contains some helpful things on the pedagogy of catechesis. Some of his comments on federal theology are less helpful.
- ¹⁷ Green, p. 1; Janz, p. 278. I have not dealt with the vast literature relating to Roman Catholic catechesis. It is ironic, given who recovered it, that catechesis is today more often associated with Catholicism than Protestantism. However much one disagrees with its content, Roman Catholic catechetical methodology is impressive and has much to teach us. See Liam Kelly, passim.
- ¹⁸ W Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, Ian Breward (ed.), Abingdon 1970, pp. 34, 139, 142; Green, p. 26.
- ¹⁹ Green, pp. 223–225.
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- ²² M Watts, *The Dissenters*, Oxford 1978, vol. 1, pp. 420, 427; vol. 2, 46, 52, 63, 109.
- ²³ TJ Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts, the study of catechisms in Baptist life*, Amityville, NY, 1998, pp. 21, 25.
- ²⁴ Some the material produced by The Good Book Company (formerly Matthias Media) take this approach. I am thinking of the tracts *Two Ways to Live* and *The Pocket Guide to Christianity* as well as the course *LifeWorks*. I don't think *Christianity Explained* or *Christianity Explored* and even less *Alpha* go near enough in this direction. Another approach which we are developing and testing at East London Tabernacle is a course entitled *The Bible for Beginners* in which we try to teach the story of redemption by introducing the Bible to people with no previous knowledge.
- ²⁵ See William J Abraham's *The Logic of Evangelism*, Grand Rapids 1989. I don't agree with everything Williams says, but he is very stimulating. Williams challenges a number of traditional approaches to evangelism, namely an exclusive reliance on proclamation and a managerial approach to church growth, and proposes instead a greater emphasis on initiation. He doesn't deny the necessity of proclamation or the desirability of church growth, but says that evangelism must return to Jesus' mandate of making disciples and for him that means initiating serious inquirers into the kingdom of God.

Dr Kenneth Brownell is Minister of East London Tabernacle and Editor of Foundations

John Calvin on Catechisms in a letter to the Earl of Somerset:

Believe me, Monseigneur, the Church of God will never preserve itself without a Catechism, for it is like the seed to keep the good grain from dying out, and using it to multiply from age to age. And therefore, if you desire to build and edifice which shall be of long duration, and which shall not soon fall into decay, make provision for the children being instructed in a good catechism, which may show them briefly, and in a language level to their tender age, wherein true Christianity consists. This catechism will serve two purposes, to wit, as an introduction to the whole people, so that everyone may profit from what is preached, and also to enable them to discern when any presumptuous person puts forward strange doctrine.

The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revival and Renewal

David Smith

Introduction

The subject of the work of the Holy Spirit in revival and renewal and the assumption that the primary means of renewal is through movements of revival, is so central within the Evangelical tradition that it might be claimed that it belongs to the self-definition of the movement. This is not surprising given the fact that Evangelicalism came to birth in the 'Great Awakening' of the eighteenth century. A movement emerging from such a revival naturally enough made the need for, and the expectation of, times of spiritual renewal central to its understanding of the church and its mission in the world. Indeed, Evangelicalism has sometimes been described as 'revival Christianity'.

It is important to notice that the prominence given to the rôle of revivals in the growth of the Christian movement in the world was related to a particular form of eschatological belief which was widely, if not universally, held within the first generation of modern Evangelicals. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Christians on both sides of the Atlantic anticipated an age of unprecedented blessing and the hope was strong that the revival experienced in Britain and America would spread around the globe and usher in the millennial glory in which peoples everywhere would come to worship and honour the living God. 'A time shall come', wrote Jonathan Edwards, 'when religion and true Christianity shall in every respect be uppermost in the world'. The nations would finally abandon warfare as the ancient prophetic promises of universal peace and love at last became reality and 'the whole earth' would become 'one holy city, one heavenly family, men of all nations [dwelling] together'.¹

Postmillennial optimism of this kind played a crucial role in both the spread of Evangelicalism in the West and in the emergence of the modern missionary movement. William Carey reveals the influence of Edward's extraordinary eschatological vision at the beginning of his famous *Enquiry* of 1792, arguing that God had 'repeatedly made known his intention to prevail finally over all the power of the Devil' and to extend his own kingdom 'as universally as Satan had extended his'.² In other words, Carey—who here stands as representative of the first generation of Protestant missionaries—takes it for granted that the prophetic scriptures anticipate an era within human history when Christ would reign over the whole earth and among all its peoples. Not only that, the signs of the times seemed to indicate that the world stood on the very brink of the dawning of this golden age when still unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies would at last become reality. An expectation as great as this obviously required powerful movements of revival throughout the world, so that the spiritual awakening which had occurred in Europe and America served as a model for the church, both in its

missionary expansion overseas and in its subsequent historical development in the Western world.

The Concept of Revival in Christian History

It is perhaps surprising to discover that the term 'revival' as it is being used here does not seem to have appeared before the eighteenth century, Iain Murray suggests that it was first used in this sense in the work of Cotton Mather, in which case this particular understanding of 'revivals' would seem to be a modern development.³ It is possible to recognise the newness of this terminology while maintaining that the Evangelical stress on the renewing activity of the Holy Spirit through revivals, was a *recovery* of an aspect of biblical theology which seems to have escaped the notice of the Protestant reformers. This is entirely plausible, after all, as Carey pointed out, those same reformers had failed to recognise the clear apostolic injunction to engage in worldwide mission, Geoffrey Best has said that the Evangelical Awakening 'brought the third person of the Trinity back into common circulation'⁴ and we may argue that this renewed awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit led to the rediscovery of the biblical phenomenon of revival which had long been neglected within Christendom,

Long neglected—but not previously unknown. Six centuries before Jonathan Edwards developed his remarkable theology of revival and linked this with the hope of an era of universal peace and well-being, Joachim of Fiore (1145–1202) had expounded a Christian vision of history in which a new age of the Holy Spirit would result in love, joy and freedom as 'the knowledge of God would be revealed directly in the hearts of all men',⁵ Joachim did not use the term 'revival' to describe the means by which this vision would become historical reality, but his conviction that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit would turn the whole world into a vast monastery in which humankind would be united in the praises of God, 'entered into the common stock of European social mythology' and bears a remarkable likeness to the eighteenth century vision of the early Evangelicals.

Thus, if the term 'revival' is something new, the phenomenon to which it points is not. Indeed, it could be argued that the Great Awakening, which challenged the highly cerebral form of Christianity known as Deism in the eighteenth century, was the latest eruption of a long tradition of renewal movements by which the church has been periodically reminded of its true origin and nature. Such movements always stress the empowering work of the Holy Spirit and the crucial importance of eschatology, both themes liable to be neglected or suppressed by churches primarily concerned with the maintenance of ecclesiastical structure and order, or tempted by an unbalanced intellectualism which defines matters of faith in purely rational categories. Movements like this are, by definition, not gentle and even, but rather erupt into history, revitalising the church and frequently resulting in significant social and moral transformation. The question must be asked (and it is one to which we shall return) whether the current surge of Christianity, often in a Pentecostal form, around the world is simply the latest manifestation of this same tradition?

I want at this point to consider the distinction between 'revival' and *revivalism*. The transition from a belief in revival as all outpouring of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, as primarily an act of God, to the nineteenth century emphasis on revivals as events that could be triggered by appropriate human actions has often been noted. However, my

concern here is that even in the context of a Reformed theology stressing divine sovereignty and grace, the danger exists that the category 'revival' can become so dominant in shaping the understanding of the church and its mission in the world, that it eclipses other important biblical perspectives. In other words, revivalism is not restricted to the Arminian tradition, but may also emerge within the framework of Reformed theology,

Let me try to illustrate what I mean by this in relation to the historical experience of William Carey and his colleagues in India. The letters of these pioneers of Protestant mission in the Hindu-shaped culture of India reveals a growing realisation that their earlier anticipations of revival in that context were misplaced. Writing to John Ryland in 1800, Carey said, 'I have often thought that it is very probable that we may be only as pioneers to prepare the way for more successful missionaries'.⁶

Twenty years later Carey's colleague William Ward wrote that 'the restricted progress of Christianity' formed 'one of the most mysterious dispensations of Providence that has ever occupied human attention'.⁷ Like almost all the first generation of Baptists in Asia, Ward had gone to India anticipating the spread of millennial glory over the sub-continent but, confronted with the reality of a deeply resistant culture he was compelled to search for a new model of the church and its mission which might enable him to account for the *absence* of revival and the strange lack of converts. That quest, I want to suggest, has become common to all of us in the Western world as we seek for a broader understanding which places both revival and decline within the overarching purposes of God.

The Biblical Foundations of the Theology of Revival

The Evangelical belief in the phenomenon of revivals has generally been grounded upon appeals to two types of biblical texts. First, and perhaps surprisingly, the doctrine rests upon Old Testament texts in the Psalms and the Prophets which promise the healing, restorative activity of God. For example, in a recent study of revival with the subtitle *What The Bible Teaches The Church for Today*, Raymond Ortlund acknowledges that the term 'revival' cannot be found in scripture in the sense that it is used today, but claims that the Old Testament clearly contains the idea signified by that word. 'The Scripture is clear, God is able to rend the heavens and come down with unexpected demonstrations of his saying power (Isaiah 64)'.⁸ Like many other writers on this subject, Ortlund assumes rather than demonstrates the connection between the prophetic text he quotes and the modern understanding of 'revival'. The deep longing for a greater sense of the presence of God among his people which is evident on every page of Ortlund's book is something with which I identify without reserve, but I am left asking whether it is self evident that Isaiah had in view the phenomenon we have come to classify as 'revival'?

The second type of text to which appeal is made concerns the event of Pentecost and the post-Pentecostal works of the Holy Spirit as described in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Toward the end of his life John Wesley drew a direct comparison between the Great Awakening and the events of Pentecost, arguing that both constituted empirical evidence for the existence and power of God that all reasonable people should acknowledge. In similar vein, the Reformed theologian George Smeaton saw Pentecost as a warrant to pray for further manifestations of the power of God, dismissing as

'mischievous and dishonouring to the Holy Spirit' the idea that day of Pentecost had somehow exhausted the supply of divine life to the church.

Throughout the history of the Christian movement the entrance of new peoples into the kingdom of Christ as the result of the missionary translation of the Gospel, has often been accompanied by experiences of the Holy Spirit so similar to those found in the book of Acts that they have been called 'local Pentecosts'. I recall in this connection my own missionary service in Nigeria, where a powerful spiritual movement among the Annang people in the 1930s became known locally as the 'Annangs Pentecost', a recognition of the crucially important role this movement played in convincing traditional Africans that the Gospel was not mere 'white mans' religion' but was the power of God for salvation in the specific context of a sub-Saharan primal society. Similar phenomena have been recorded in all parts of the world, often attracting the attention of anthropologists who have clearly recognised the cultural significance of such 'revitalisation' movements. Thus, the narrative of Pentecost is clearly of fundamental importance to this discussion since it has been understood to contain the clear promise that the spiritual resources required for the life and mission of the church in the world will never be withheld from the people of God.

Central though the Pentecost narrative unquestionably is for our understanding of the church and its mission, it is important to remember that the picture provided by the book of Acts forms part of the narrative of the progress of the church in the New Testament, not the whole. Indeed, by the close of the apostolic period we are looking at a very different picture: the revival fires have cooled, the love of many has grown cold, and Christians seem to be increasingly at home in a world dominated by Roman idolatry and materialism. Certainly, the Holy Spirit is not absent from this picture, but he comes now not with the sound of a mighty rushing wind, but with a searching, critical voice, seeking for those, evidently a minority, who are still able to 'hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches'. These texts need to be read alongside the Pentecostal story because, taken together, they furnish us with the material for a theology of the Holy Spirit which enables us to account for *decline* as well as advance, placing such periods of recession and struggle firmly within the divine purpose. This perspective seems particularly important for Christianity in the Western world at the start of the third millennium since our churches look far more like those described in Revelation chapters two and three than the exploding missionary community of the book of Acts.

Revival and Mission in the Twenty-First Century

There is no doubt that the topic of revival attracts immense interest and concern among contemporary Christians. Despite the gloomy analyses of the state of Western Christianity offered by sociologists and statisticians, a veritable flood of books offer a perspective that can be described as one of revivalist optimism. Rob Warner, for example, articulates a hope which closely parallels the eighteenth century expectations of the coming of an unprecedented revival on a global scale:

For all the failings and weaknesses of the modern church, we stand at the climax of centuries which have seen, step by step, the restoration of the priorities and practices of the apostolic era. The Spirit of God has surely been bringing a continuing reformation to the church in order to equip us for an advance unparalleled since the first Christian

generation. What is more, the globalisation of modern culture and the speed of modern travel together provide the opportunity for revival not merely on a national, but on a global scale.⁹

Within the western Charismatic movement the belief that we stand on the brink an era characterised by a work of the Holy Spirit that will transcend anything, previously known is widespread. The evidence marshalled in support of this positive assessment of the condition of the churches in the West includes the phenomenon of the Charismatic movement itself which, it is claimed, provides an example of continuous revival. The 'Toronto Blessing', although having faded from view, is frequently cited as a model of the kind of spiritual stirring which can commence almost anywhere in the world and, through postmodern networks of global communication, can spread rapidly around the planet. In the era of globalisation, local awakenings which would once have gone completely unnoticed elsewhere, can quickly trigger similar movements on the other side of the globe. Thus, the next 'blessing' may be experienced in Cape Town, Mexico City or Singapore and will then rapidly criss-cross the planet with the potential to encompass the whole human race.

The language used by 'revivalist optimists' is uniformly positive and hopeful. Gerald Coates takes it for granted that 'we ate in the middle of a colossal revival', while RT Kendall believes that we stand on the edge of a work of God 'greater than anything heretofore seen' which will lead into 'a post-charismatic era of unprecedented glory',¹⁰ Rob Warner goes even further, linking 'the greatest revival in the history of the church' with the eschatological hope of the end of the world, arguing that the coming revival can be identified as that which 'precedes the return of Christ'.¹¹

Questions for 'Revivalist Optimists'

This particular form of revivalism prompts a series of important questions, I want to ask, first, *whether the notion of revival is here in danger of acting as a form of religious ideology which conceals the reality of the condition of Western Christianity and prevents believers from facing the challenges of discipleship and mission in a post-Christian culture?* At the end of the 1960s the Dutch theologian JC Hockendijk made the controversial suggestion that calls to evangelism often concealed a lingering nostalgia for the great ages of faith and were motivated by the desire to preserve the crumbling structures of Western Christianity. The evangelistic activities of churches in Europe and America, he argued, too often concealed the illicit compromises they had made with their host culture and it was simply nonsense to summon these churches to evangelism 'if we do not call them simultaneously to a radical revision of their life and a revolutionary change of their structure'.¹² To put it bluntly, Hockendijk said,

... the call to evangelism is often little else than a call to restore 'Christendom' ... as a solid, well-integrated cultural complex, directed and dominated by the church. And the sense of urgency is often nothing but a nervous feeling of insecurity; with the established church endangered; a flurried activity to save the remnants of a time now irrevocably past.¹³

What happens if we apply this analysis to the revivalist optimism noted above? Does this kind of focus on revival sometimes conceal a desire to preserve inherited forms of the church and so to evade the real challenges of *mission* in a changed cultural context? The confident announcement that revival is breaking out around us obviously reassured

Christians who are deeply troubled by the loss of a 'Christian culture', and enables them to hang a 'Business as Usual' notice on the door of the church. If revival is occurring, and if we are assured that it will be the greatest such event ever experienced in 2000 years of Christian history, then the radical changes in thought and practice which might be required to engage in the missionary task in a changed culture can be indefinitely postponed.

The connection between revivalism and a Christendom model of the church raises difficult issues. As we have seen, Carey and his colleagues discovered that inherited presuppositions concerning evangelism and revival had to be questioned in the light of experience in a non-Christian cultural context. Consequently, in parts of the world in which Christ had never been named, the category of 'revival' gave place to a new emphasis on 'mission'. Missionary societies which came into being in the nineteenth century were designed to facilitate the spread of the Christian gospel *beyond Christendom* with the result that the terms 'mission' and 'revival' came to signify models of the church and its witness appropriate in different *geographical* locations, the one overseas, the other at home.

Throughout the nineteenth century this dichotomy persisted, indeed it hardened. Mission became the form of witness demanded among primitive peoples overseas who clearly lacked the benefits of a Christian civilisation, while evangelism and revival were the means employed to make nominal Western Christians into real believers. Dissenting voices challenged this distinction and the assumptions on which it rested. Most notably, Søren Kierkegaard launched a blistering attack on Danish Protestant culture-religion, insisting that what went on in the state churches of Europe was a travesty of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Britain at exactly the same time, Edward Miall had the temerity to suggest that, at the floodtide of their influence, the Victorian churches had actually lost contact with the teaching of the gospel and had capitulated to a man-centred religion devoid of spiritual power.¹⁴ At the time these dissenting voices were ignored, but they anticipated by more than a century the perception, now common-place, that the demise of the sacral society denoted by the phrase *Corpus Christianum* requires a radical rethinking of the nature and witness of the churches in the Western world. It requires, in other words, the rejection of classic distinction between 'evangelism' and 'revival', on the one hand, and 'mission' on the other. Whatever the prospects for revival may be, the greatest priority of the churches in the Western world is surely missiological in nature, and this will involve a process of biblical reformation through which churches may become communities 'worthy of attention and respect' and marked by a way of life 'that prompts curiosity, questioning and a new searching'.¹⁵

The second question prompted by revivalist optimism concerns *underlying assumptions about the growth, expansion and success of the Christian movement*. As we have seen, the first generation of modern Evangelicals was inspired by Jonathan Edwards' vision of the dawning of an era of divine blessing which would result in the evangelisation of all the peoples of the earth. This wonderful prospect found expression in the hymns of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley and was a vital source of early Protestant missionary motivation. When Kenneth Scott Latourette began writing his massive, seven volume history of the Christian mission in 1937 (a task completed in 1945), he gave it the title *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*. Clearly, such a

notion of Christian missionary progress is entirely compatible with the biblical concern to see the reign of God extended throughout the earth. Indeed, the tap root of such concern can be traced to Jesus' instruction to his followers to pray that the will of God might be done 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

However, problems arise when this biblical vision becomes distorted through a one-sided focus on progress and conquest which ignores the realities of setbacks, sufferings and those periods of decline and loss which seem to form an integral part of the wider divine purpose in the world. More seriously still, there is a real danger that an optimism owing more to secular models of 'progress' than is often recognised, fails to reckon with the terrible reality of the divine holiness in relation to the failure and compromise of the church, and so overlooks the apostolic insistence that *judgement begins 'with the family of God'* (1 Peter 4:17).

The great temptation of the kind of optimistic revivalism discussed here is to limit the possibility of decline, loss and recession in the experience of the church to mere temporary blips in the otherwise inevitable progress toward the final and undoubted triumph. The mood of this kind of religion is almost always one of celebration, rarely of lament, with the result that entire swathes of the biblical tradition in which the faithful pour out their hearts on account of the apparent *absence* of God and the ambiguities of history, become functionally redundant. Moreover, these scriptural resources are bypassed at a time when precisely such modes of prayer and devotion are most desperately needed by a church which struggles to retain its hold on life close to 'the precipice of the valley of death'. This phrase comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, preaching in 1933 on the very day that the German Christians who sought an accommodation with Hitler appeared to triumph, provided a biblical and theological perspective on these questions which, it seems to me, cannot be bettered:

We must confess—he [Christ] builds. We must proclaim—he builds. We must pray to him—he builds. We do not know his plan. We cannot see whether he is building or pulling down. It may be that the times which by human standards are times of collapse are for him times of great building. It may be that the times which from the human point of view are great times for the church are times when it is pulled down. It is a great comfort which Christ gives to his church: you confess, preach, bear witness to me, and I alone will build where it pleases me. Do not meddle in what is my province.¹⁶

There is a third question which optimistic revivalists should consider very carefully. What are the biblical and ideological criteria by means of which we might assess whether or not a movement of revival contributes toward the extension of the reign of God in Jesus Christ? The assumption is sometimes made that any movement identified by the category 'revival' is bound to be a positive phenomenon. This must be rejected. In his valuable historical and theological survey of revivals, Richard Lovelace concluded that 'the purity of a revival is intimately related to its theological substance. A deep work cannot be done without the sharp instruments of truth'.¹⁷

Anyone who doubts the correctness of this statement should reflect carefully on the unspeakable tragedy of Rwanda. Christians in all denominational traditions have found themselves asking how it was possible that a region of Africa noted for its evangelisation and often lauded as an example of 'continuous revival' provided the cultural and ethnic context for a holocaust of unimaginable barbarity and wickedness. A distressed Catholic bishop commented: 'The Christian message is not being heard.

After a century of evangelisation we have to begin again because the best catechists ... were the first to go out with machetes in their hands'.¹⁸ For Evangelicals the questions here become especially painful, but they lead one missionary to conclude that the massive numerical growth resulting from the 'East African revival' failed to instil in converts 'a quality of costly discipleship' and resulted in a church that proved 'empty and powerless to confront the pressures of evil'.¹⁹

Roger Bowen says of the catastrophe which befell the churches in Rwanda that the issues raised by this experience 'touch us all and nearly all of them impinge all too closely on the churches in the United Kingdom'.²⁰

Dangers Confronting 'Sociological Pessimists'

I turn now to consider an approach to the subject of revival which is located at the opposite end of the spectrum to that which we have surveyed above, one which I propose to describe as sociological pessimism. Perhaps the leading exponent of this view is the French thinker, Jacques Ellul who viewed Western Christianity as a massive perversion of the gospel of Jesus Christ and argued that, given such apostasy, the present situation could only be understood in terms of the withdrawn-ness and judgement of God. In similar vein, Michael Riddell regards talk of revival as an almost insane whistling in the dark. Referring to his native New Zealand, he comments,

I have lost count of the number of revivalist movements which have swept through my homeland promising a massive influx to the church in their wake. A year after they have faded, the plight of the Christian community seems largely unchanged, apart from a few more who have grown cynical through the abuse of their goodwill, energy and money.²¹

Sociological pessimists like Riddell do not dissent from the revivalist assumption that God is still at work in his world, and in the church, including the church in the West, but what the revivalists have missed is precisely the fact that the divine purpose includes judgement as well as blessing. Indeed, throughout Christian history the will of God has often been hidden to human perception and has included times of extreme, crisis and decline, Kenneth Scott Latourette, whose magisterial history of Christian missions was mentioned earlier, understood very well that Christian expansion cannot be marked up on a map of the world in the manner in which multinational business corporations chart their growth across the globe. Latourette realised, according to Andrew Walls, that 'advance and recession, not irreversible progress, was the pattern of Christian expansion, just as Bunyan saw that there was a way to hell even from the gate of heaven'.²²

For the 'sociological pessimists' then, the category of 'revival' may actually be unhelpful if it is used to pander to the fear and conservatism of those who refuse to move forward into God's new future. In language that echoes that of the revivalists he opposes, Michael Riddell says that 'the Western church stands at the fringes of radically new terrain'. However, what lies beyond this new horizon is not, as revivalists so often seem to assume, a boom in old-time religion, but the much more difficult and demanding task of a *radical reformation* which will result in the emergence of entirely new models of the church and its mission.

Just as there are questions to put to 'revivalist optimists' so too I wish to suggest that there are very real dangers in the position just outlined. The awareness that past glories have gone and that there is need to readjust our focus and develop new forms of witness

appropriate to the calling of a 'remnant' community can easily slide over into a loss of faith in the over-arching purposes of God and a retreat from the obligations of the Christian mission. In these conditions, the biblical language of *lament* which, as we noted, is often neglected by revivalists, can become the exclusive and normative language of worship. This seems to be precisely what happened to the post-exilic community in Israel. The psalms of lament, composed at times of deep anguish and confusion, became with the passing of the years the basis of a liturgical tradition which was increasingly divorced from reality and prevented those locked into it from recognising the glorious *new things* that God was about to do. This pessimistic spirituality was challenged by the living word of God; 'Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hid from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"?' (Isaiah 40:27). The recognition that the old theocratic institutions had come to an end, that there was indeed no way back to things as they had been, should have opened the way for the reception and embrace of the radically new thing that the Lord was bringing into being. Instead of this, too many of the exiles were yielding to the temptations presented by an alien world, *either* by accepting Babylonian definitions of reality, and so to sliding into a functional atheism, or by turning this 'liminal' stage into a permanent condition, and so becoming a withdrawn Jewish sect with nothing to offer the wider world. These are, I suggest, precisely the dangers confronting 'sociological pessimists' today and both of are paths that, if taken, would lead to the extinction of biblical faith and hope in the Western world.

Revival and the Emergency of World Christianity

The revivalist claims that we stand on the cusp of the greatest spiritual awakening in history may appear bizarre in relation to the contemporary Western church, but they have much greater credibility when considered in the light of the surge of the Christian movement elsewhere in the world. Any contemporary theology of the work of the Holy Spirit in revival must take account of spiritual movements in the southern hemisphere which, when considered carefully, do look like 'great awakenings'. In Africa, for example, a whole succession of charismatic preachers have had a huge impact over large areas of the continent and have been instrumental in bringing thousands of people to faith in Jesus Christ. To cite one example almost at random, the wandering prophet-teacher, William Wade Harris, trekked across vast areas of West Africa in the early twentieth century, summoning people to repentance, with results that may well parallel, if not surpass, the impact of George Whitefield in eighteenth century Britain. This extraordinary ministry, together with very many others, remains a well-kept secret in the West.

Similar phenomena can be discovered in China where the growth of the Christian movement, and its rootedness within Chinese society and culture, has compelled Western sinologists to reassess their earlier judgements concerning what was then felt to be the 'marginal' impact of the Christian faith on this people.²³ The same thing can be said regarding Latin America, where the growth of an indigenous form of Pentecostalism has resulted in the dominant paradigm within the sociology of religion concerning the supposed inevitability of the process of secularisation being challenged. The British sociologist of religion, David Martin, testifies to the manner in which his

discovery of this explosion of Christianity in the southern hemisphere compelled a re-evaluation of some of the basic assumptions governing sociological theory:

Writing as one benevolently thrust into the epochal changes in contemporary Latin America, I can testify to the restrictive power of the governing [sociological] paradigms. Indeed, the epochal events concerned were well nigh forbidden by the paradigm, and if they were not forbidden, their recognition was seriously occluded. Forty million Latin Americans just could not have been converted to a genuinely indigenous version of Pentecostal and evangelical faith.²⁴

But of course, they were, and if these empirical facts concerning world Christianity compel reassessment within secular, academic disciplines they surely demand the most serious and sympathetic attention from theologians and missiologists. What are we to make of this still emerging global Christianity, largely Pentecostal in character, and how does this extraordinary phenomenon fit into the analyses of both the 'revivalist optimists' and the 'sociological pessimists'? Of course, the kind of evaluative questions identified earlier in relation to Western claims for the appearance of revival also apply here, so that the surge in non-Western Christianity is subject to biblical-theological evaluation. Nonetheless, the historian, Mark Noll acknowledges that the growth of Christianity across so many cultural barriers at one time is something historically unprecedented and he concludes

Such multiple translations of the Christian faith at the same time in different parts of the globe can only appear chaotic, especially to those whose Christian experience is deeply rooted in the long Western appropriation of Christianity. What will become of the simultaneous translations of the Christian faith into so many of the world's cultures, God alone knows. But a long historical perspective can inspire considerable confidence.²⁵

Conclusion

I conclude this discussion by returning to the typologies introduced earlier. I suggest that the evidence to which reference has just been made indicates that revivalist optimists are not far wide of the mark when they propose that a spiritual movement of immense proportions is taking place around the world. It is worth noting here that the empirical evidence concerning the growth of non-Western churches compelled the American theologian Harvey Cox, who once advocated an extreme version of 'sociological pessimism', to radically reassess of his earlier views. Cox, who in the 1960s famously (or perhaps, infamously) adapted his theology to fit the paradigm of secularisation we have just noticed David Martin repudiating, now asserts that 'we are definitely in a period of renewed religious vitality, another "great awakening" if you will...' ²⁶

However, it would be a grave mistake for Christians in the Western world to imagine that they are somehow in a position to predict, far less to control, the precise shape and nature of the twenty first century Christianity which is emerging with its centre of gravity firmly located among the poor peoples of the southern hemisphere. As churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America mature and seek for biblical answers to the pressing issues that arise in contexts characterised by poverty, sickness and oppression, their theologies and spiritualities are likely to take unpredictable forms and they will pose, questions for believers in the West that are likely to be challenging and disturbing. Thus, while the emergence of 'world Christianity' begins to look like a phenomenon of

world-historical significance, it would be deeply misleading to interpret it as nothing more than an extension across the globe of the kind of revivalist religion made in America and at home with Western cultural and economic values.

So far as the *sociological pessimists* are concerned, I believe they are correct in observing that Western Christianity is in the throes of a massive paradigm shift and that, in this situation, it must renounce the delusions of grandeur inherited from a now defunct Christendom and accept a genuinely missionary vocation in the context of the fragmented, hollowed-out cultures of Europe and North America. Whether the churches in the West can anticipate fresh movements of revival in a matter that lies within the sovereign purposes of God, but one is increasingly struck by the close analogy between our context at the heart of the global economy, and that of the churches of Asia Minor as described in Revelation chapters 2–3. These churches faced the temptations posed by the Roman empire and were summoned in that situation to a costly and decidedly counter-cultural stance. They were promised spiritual resources adequate to their calling in a deeply pagan and materialistic society, but it is clear that suffering to the point of martyrdom is the price they had to be willing to meet,

No doubt times of great awakening bring much blessing, but the wilderness belongs to God as much as does the well-watered garden arid sometimes his purpose of renewal may take the church into the former rather than in the latter. God only knows when the compromise and apostasy of the church reaches such a level that it requires purging through judgement. what is indisputable is that the gift of the Holy Spirit is promised to the saints whatever the terrain through which they pass on their God-ordained pilgrimage; whether in the desert or the promised land, whether facing the great tribulation or standing on the edge of the millennium, our task is listen to what the Spirit says to the churches today, and in fellowship with all who follow the Lamb of God, to overcome those many temptations and powers that would lead us into fateful compromise. Meantime, we anticipate the unfolding purposes of God with hope and joy, knowing that the One who declared to a bewildered and dispirited people, ‘Behold, I am doing a new thing’ (Isaiah 43:19) remains the Lord of our history, ‘Revivalist Optimists’ and ‘sociological pessimists’ should talk to each other, learn from each others’ contrasting perspectives, and together await the coming of God’s kingdom to which, it is to be hoped, they will respond with neither carnal triumphalism nor detached intellectualism, but rather with an awed worship of him who really does *make all things new*.

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David Smith is Co-director of the Whitefield Institute in Oxford

Book Brief

I would like to draw readers attention to the new edition of *Operation World* by **Patrick Johnstone** and **Jason Mandryk** (Carlisle 2001). Many will already be familiar with earlier editions of this most invaluable directory for prayer for world missions. Theology is nothing if not about mission. The purpose of salvation is to bring the Triune God glory through the worship of people from all nations. I particularly commend Johnstone's short essay on prayer and world evangelisation. Here is a quote: 'It is a mystery that our loving Father has somehow mimited His omnipotence to teaming up with His redeemed people so that His actions in the world are inextricably linked with prayer'. Use this book in your prayer times and with your church. **KB**

The Fountain of Wisdom

Bill Nikides

Introduction

The first significant Christian theological and apologetic answer to Islam, *The Fountain of Wisdom*, was a defence of the doctrine of the Trinity penned by John of Damascus in 717. John (675–c.749) was born in Damascus, to an Arab Christian family, thirty nine years after its capture by Arab Muslims. The Byzantine Empire of the Eighth Century that lost Damascus not only struggled to maintain its territory. It was also racked by civil war. Byzantium divided between supporters of the use of icons and the iconoclasts who likened the practice to idolatry. The subject divided both the church and state, bringing an end to the ecumenical councils and most of the creative development within the church. The Orthodox, consequently, sought a theological common denominator that could provide a foundation for stability and eventual unity. John, living between two worlds, both as a Byzantine and as a Christian citizen of a Muslim State, was able to produce a work that served both as a backward-looking preservation of accumulated truth and as a defense against the incursions of Islam.

The Fountain of Wisdom

The work was divided into three parts, 'Philosophical Chapters' modelled on Aristotle, 'Concerning Heresy', a version of a similar book by Epiphanius updated to include Islam, and Iconoclasm, and 'An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith'. The latter served as the Eastern Church's first summary of connected theological opinions. John wrote against two great threats to Byzantine Theology. The first threat was posed by iconoclast authorities threatening to tear down his carefully constructed traditionalism. The second was posed by Islam. John sought to confront the Koran's misunderstanding of Christian doctrine. He also attacked actively Islamic practices he thought had pagan antecedents, such as the correlation between the Kaaba at Mecca and the worship of Aphrodite located in the same place before the coming of Mohammed.

Philosophical Section: John uses this section to define terms such as 'substance', 'accident', 'form' and 'hypostasis' that he will use to articulate his doctrine of the Trinity. These definitions were essential because he justified Trinitarian theology as Monotheism largely on the basis of their correct understanding. His methodology in this section points out something quite distinctive about his approach. His book is full of scriptural references for those that accept the authority of the Bible. On the other hand, he makes full use of philosophical constructs, logic and language to appeal to those who do not accept the Bible.

On Heresies: John describes Muslims as not only failing to appreciate these theological distinctives, but exhibiting superstition in general. They are the antithesis of knowledge and forerunners of Antichrist. John claims, on the basis of an extensive reading of the Koran, that Islam is fundamentally not really monotheistic itself and carries with it the vestiges of the worship of the morning star and Aphrodite. In other words, Islam does not really promote or defend Monotheism, only Orthodox Christianity does.

An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith: John states that the Godhead is essentially incomprehensible. We cannot penetrate within so that we may examine its

relationships and inner workings. Not even angelic beings that attend the throne of God, such as the cherubim and seraphim truly understand God. The real essence of God is far beyond us. Every attempt to grasp his nature ends in failure. He defies categorisation because he does not belong to the orders of beings, 'not because he does not exist, but because he transcends all beings and being itself.' We, therefore, struggle to find language to describe God. This forces us to use images, types and symbols that correspond to our nature, but are of limited use in understanding God, or we describe God through negation. We describe him with terms such as 'timeless', 'without beginning', or 'invisible', because they are the opposites of our nature. We also use terms such as 'mind', 'reason', or 'spirit' because God causes these things. Even if you used virtuous terms such as 'good, or justice, or wisdom, or something else of the sort, you will not be describing the nature of God, but only things relating to his nature.' Even the titles of Father, Son and Holy Spirit do not describe the essence of God, but the mutual relationships and manner of existence within the Trinity. Therefore, in a real sense, God is nameless to us.

Additionally, God is absolutely without beginning or end. On one hand, this mysteriousness coincides with the Koran's description of God as sovereign and omniscient. God would be unknowable if it were not for God revealing himself. 'The divine nature is like a sea of essence, indeterminate and without bounds, which spreads far and wide beyond all notion of time or of nature.' The Koran is loaded with the language of revelation. On the other hand, John can use this as a foundation of a defence of Trinitarian orthodoxy. In this sense, Islam displays the lethal combination of ignorance and arrogance.

John points out that this unknowable God has already revealed himself as one God in three persons. He is, in fact, one substance in three persons. These three are the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. John categorised everything as either created or uncreated. The Trinity being uncreated remains unchangeable. 'Only the Divinity is unmoved, and by his immovability he moves all things.' This answered the Muslim charge of tritheism. Muslims had posited that a 'son' of God must mean 'created', therefore changeable and not God. If the Christians insist on giving the Son and the Holy Spirit the same essence of the Father, in other words, if the Christians were correct about Christ being God, either they are incorrect about the essence common to all three or there really are three separate gods. John points out that there really is only one God, perfect and undivided. He states that the presence of several gods would imply imperfection in all of them. Rather, he sees one essence and three different subsistences. There is 'one substance, one godhead, one virtue, one will, one operation, one principality, one power, one domination, one kingdom; known in three perfect Persons and adored with one adoration, believed in and worshipped by every rational creature, united without confusion and distinct without separation, which is beyond understanding.'

The focal point of the Trinity is the monarchy of the godhead. Though all three members are eternal God, the Father is the cause. Gregory Nazianzus states this monarchical principle clearly. 'And the union is the Father, from whom and to whom the order of Persons runs its course, not so as to be confounded, but so as to be possessed, without distinction of time, of will, or of power.' John of Damascus mirrors this thought. 'The Father derives from himself his being, nor does he derive a single quality from another. Rather he is himself the beginning and cause of the existence of all things both as to their nature and mode of being. All then that the Son and the Spirit have is from the Father, even their very being; and unless the Father is, neither the Son nor the Spirit is.' Therefore, do not call the Father, Son and Holy Spirit three gods (since their names do not refer to separate essences, but to a mutual relationship), but one God in Holy Trinity, 'in

whom the Son and the Holy Spirit are related to one Cause without any composition or blending.' God the Father is clearly the centre and cause of all things. It is not only the focal point of Trinity, it is the governing principle for the universe. It creates the harmony within the universe. John describes this in terms of overcoming contrary natures within creation. 'What is it that combined and arranged them? What is it that set them in motion and put them on their unceasing and unhindered courses? Or is it that they had no architect to set a principle in them all by which the whole universe be moved and controlled.' To John's non-Christian world, the creating and organising principle is God. To the Christian, who by virtue of adoption is granted insight into the Trinity, there is an even more refined answer. There is a centre to God.

The Damascene is careful to note that the mutual relationship within the Trinity takes place without any change or division in substance, such as that noted by Arius and criticised by Muslim apologists. John elaborates by saying that the Son and Spirit are uncreated because this hypostatic relationship exists in eternity. Interestingly, the Muslims conceded that Jesus was not just a great prophet, but the Logos of God. They differed from the Greeks, however, in seeing the Logos's begetting as his creation by the Father. This does appear, however, to insinuate a potential weakness in John's theology of the Trinity because it seems to imply an order based on chronology. I am not convinced that John's focus on the Father did not doom him to maintaining a defensive posture, forcing him to fend off the logical charges of the Muslims.

'An Exact Exposition' also dedicated a great deal of effort to expositing the exact nature of humanity and deity in Christ. Part of John's answer was that he simply did not know how God became man. On the other hand, he attempted to at least describe the relationship. Christ, John asserted, was perfect God and perfect man with one compound hypostasis. He is consubstantial with the Father, and as such is beyond time and without any sort of beginning. 'He is before all ages, we mean that his begetting is outside of time and without beginning.' He is not created brought into being *ex nihilo*. 'For the Father never was when the Son was not.' In other words, John insists that 'in God begetting (the Son) cannot mark a change or a beginning. Begetting is not creation; neither is procession (of the Spirit).' John also adds that he does not understand these doctrines, he simply accepts them because they have been handed down from Scripture.

John spent a great deal of time elaborating the relationships within the Godhead. They are of the same essence. 'We confess that the nature of the divinity is entirely and completely in each one of its persons.' 'The Son is the image of the Father, and the image of the Son is the Spirit, through whom the Christ dwelling in man gives it to him to be the image of God.' They are not, however, the same. 'The abiding and resting of the Persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but, rather, so that they adhere to one another, for they are without interval between them and inseparable and their mutual indwelling is without confusion.' John's description of each member of the Trinity exposed further weaknesses. He seems to have difficulty attributing personhood to the Holy Spirit. 'He is the median of the Unbegotten and the Begotten, joined with the Father through the Son. It is no wonder that Muslims failed to see any personhood in the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, John is quick to counter the Koranic view that the Holy Spirit is some sort of immediate force which was given by God to aid Christ. 'Now a spirit which is sent, and acts, and strengthens, and maintains is not breath which dissipates any more than the mouth of God is a bodily member.'

John also wishes to rob Islam of the complaint that Christianity is nothing more than innovation. John countered that 'The God proclaimed by the Old Testament and the New

is one. He who is celebrated and glorified in Trinity, for the Lord said: "I am not to come to destroy the law, but to fulfill." In other words, the Trinity had always been the God of the Old Testament, but Jews and Muslims failed to see it because they would not accept the key to unlocking the mystery, Christ. Faith in Christ gave a believer the means to see God, in part, as he really is, Father, Son and Spirit.

Evaluation

John of Damascus demonstrated great strengths in developing a Trinitarian theology capable of surviving the onset of Islam and the internal jihad of the iconoclasts. His work consistently relied on a scriptural defense. It also included the careful assimilation of centuries of theological study, much of it forged in battle with heresy. It is careful work. On the other hand, it spent little time on an understanding of the Holy Spirit. In particular, it overlooked any developed personhood concerning the third member of the Trinity. John needed a stronger defense against the Muslim idea of a disembodied 'spirit'. It also had to labour under Origen's concept of Trinity, with its priority given to the Father. As a consequence, John constantly had to fend off Muslim contentions that his methodology led to a natural, ontological subordination of the Son (and the Spirit) to the Father. John could have used more emphasis on the relationships within the Godhead, but his heavy focus on subsistence placed too much focus on the persons rather than the unity. Finally, the work has the feel of a rather ponderous defence rather than an evangelistic bridge. He wrote the *Fount of Knowledge* as Eastern Christendom was shifting from a forward-looking, evangelistic movement to a highly conservative imperial religion with an increasing dependence on Liturgy. This backward-looking tendency became synonymous with orthodoxy and placed Christians in a permanent defensive posture in their continuing dialogue with Islam.

We now live in a world not all that incomprehensible to John. Christianity is an embattled faith. It has grown inward-looking in an effort to rediscover both spirituality and a sense of transcendence. Its missionary zeal, at least in the West, has abated. It is once again faced with an aggressive Islam, seeking to convert the West. We need to rediscover the best that is found in the history of earlier conflicts and build a stronger, more biblically assertive, apologetic on top of it.

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Bill Nikides is a Presbyterian (PCA) missionary in London

Review Article: The Alpha & Christianity Explored Courses

Robin Weekes

On 24th May 2001 at All Soul's Church, Langham Place, a new evangelistic course called *Christianity Explored* was launched. Adapting and expanding an earlier course run at All Soul's called *Christianity Explained*, Rico Tice has largely devised the new ten-week course. No doubt some within the evangelical world wondered why a new course was needed. After all, wasn't the *Alpha* course originating from that other leading London church, Holy Trinity Brompton, clearly the most effective evangelistic course in the country?

In the promotion literature, *Christianity Explored* acknowledges its indebtedness to *Alpha* praising its 'excellent relational methodology'. However at the same time it makes clear that there are two clear distinctives, which make *Christianity Explored* quite different from *Alpha*. The first is the fact that it seeks to teach Mark's gospel. The second is that it seeks to teach the wonder of God's grace against the background of our sin and God's judgment. Thus to many minds, *Christianity Explored* is designed to be a viable and more Biblical alternative to *Alpha*, despite the promotion literature insisting that 'the two courses compliment each other'. In this article we seek to examine both courses in the light of Scripture. After Paul and Silas had preached in the Jewish Synagogue we are told that the Bereans '...examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true' and they are commended for this practice (Acts 17:11). If the Bereans examined even the apostle's teaching, how much more should we examine contemporary teaching?

Anyone involved with Christian ministry in this country, and indeed throughout the world, cannot ignore the massive impact that *Alpha* is having, and no doubt will continue to have in the future. According to its website, '*Alpha* is a 15-session practical introduction to the Christian faith. It's aimed especially at people who don't go to church.' Given this and similar statements found throughout *Alpha* promotional literature and on the back of *Alpha* manuals, we must assess the course from the perspective of the man or woman who is ignorant of the faith rather than those who are already Christians. This is particularly the case given that *Alpha* began in 1977 under Charles Marnham as a four week course for new Christians. The course grew under the leadership of John Irvine (who expanded it to ten weeks and introduced the Holy Spirit weekend) and Nicky Lee, until it was taken over by Nicky Gumbel in 1990. It was only then that the evangelistic potential of the course was realized. 'He [Nicky Gumbel] realized how this simple course in basic Christianity could be a powerful medium for evangelism. He quickly worked to give the course the kind of 'feel that would be particularly attractive to non-churchgoers'.

Among Christians *Alpha* has earned a rapidly spreading reputation based on its effectiveness. Both the *Alpha* website and *Alpha News* contain many commendations of the course from diverse theological positions. The Archbishop of Canterbury thinks,

‘...it’s superb. I commend it wholeheartedly.’ According to Steve Chalke of The Oasis Trust, ‘Alpha is the most effective and transferable introductory course to the Christian faith I know.’ Whilst we would expect high praise from the late John Wimber and Loren Cunningham of YWAM, some comments come from more surprising sources. JI Packer believes that, ‘The Alpha course is the most engaging way of passing on the basics of Christianity. It is a tool for evangelism and nurture that I highly commend.’ More plaudits could be quoted from evangelists, Church leaders and Roman Catholic cardinals, suffice to say that there is no shortage of support for the course. If popularity is the mark of success then there is no doubt that Alpha is an unparalleled one. It seems that Alpha can do no wrong.

Yet despite this Alpha has not been without its critics. Indeed Nicky Gumbel seems to respond to some of them in his book *Challenging Lifestyle*:

There is a double standard in having a ‘rosy view of ourselves and a jaundiced view of others’ (Stott), for we point the accusing finger at others, but never turn it on ourselves. It makes us feel better to gloat over the sins and errors of others – hence our love of scandals. We lap up all the sordid details and every speck we collect helps us ignore the logjam in our own eye.

This applies not only to the moral faults of others, but also to doctrinal ones as well. Some doctrinal critics may agree with 99% of their opponent’s view. We may agree on the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the nature of the atonement, the authority of Scripture, and issues of morality, but we find what is objectively a minor area of disagreement and latch onto it. We feel we are not ‘sound’ unless we are constantly denouncing and condemning. So we write with poisoned pens. Could it be that we are blinded by the log in our own eye? Often we are so defensive, rigid, judgmental, intolerant, and even nasty and petty. Unless we first remove the plank of hypercriticism and censoriousness from our own eyes, we will not see clearly to remove the splinter from the eyes of others.

We would do well to heed Gumbel’s warnings here, and any examination of Alpha or *Christianity Explored* which is written with a ‘poisoned pen’ or with a critical spirit must be eschewed. Despite the call of the New Testament not to judge, it does encourage us to be discerning, and this examination seeks only to do this in a humble, godly, and Christ-honouring way. Thus there is no malice or ill feeling intended on the part of the author. However, as WD Scholes points out, ‘Evangelism has at its core a message of eternal significance and it is therefore imperative that we convey the biblical message’. Thus it is not enough to rely on the accolades of others, or trendy presentations, or on the fact that the course ‘works’. Theology rather than pragmatism must be the basis of whether something is good. So the question we must ask of any evangelistic course is not ‘Does it work?’ but rather ‘Does it honour Christ?’

It is too early to see the kind of impact *Christianity Explored* has made. As for Alpha, it is quite clear that there are things that are praise-worthy. It is a course which is exceptionally well produced. The quality and availability of the resources provide both church leaders and their congregations with a ready made evangelistic course so that it doesn’t require a great deal of hard work to get a course going. That Alpha has encouraged so many Christians and so many churches to start doing evangelism must be a cause of much rejoicing. The other observation on these resources is that they encourage people to join in with a worldwide movement. It is always much easier to

identify oneself with something infinitely larger, and there is a real sense in which people feel that they can easily join in this huge network.

Another aspect of the whole *Alpha* initiative which is simply staggering is the intense zeal with which people long for others to become Christians. One of my abiding memories of the *Alpha* Conference I attended at Holy Trinity Brompton in February 1997 was the passion with which the organizers wished to see the world won for Christ. There can be no doubting the godly commitment to reaching those who have never known Christ, and I for one was rebuked by such commitment. The organizers of *Alpha* certainly think big, such that Clifford Longley has written, '...*Alpha* is an unqualified triumph. The reconversion of England, so oversold by Evangelicals so often, is suddenly almost believable'. Would that all Christians shared this longing for the reconversion of England!

Perhaps the most significant contribution that *Alpha* has made is the emphasis it places on the value of relationships. The practice of guests returning to the same group each week and enjoying a relaxed meal together insures that people are set at ease and are better prepared to listen to the talks and ask their questions. It is here that we part company from the otherwise excellent analysis of *Alpha* by Chris Hand. Hand is critical of that which contributes to the 'softly-softly' method including the good food, friendly conversations, and the 'small group feel'. However, this is precisely where *Alpha* is at it's strongest. It makes hearing the gospel accessible, and in part explains why so many seemingly unlikely people have wanted to do *Alpha*. It is not hard to see why *Christianity Explored* has adopted this emphasis on friendly, supper party based evangelism, and have rightly acknowledged their debt to *Alpha* in this.

There is indeed much to give thanks for in *Alpha* and there can be no doubt that there have been some who have been helped by the course. However, the observant reader will have noticed that what has been commended thus far has largely been the style of *Alpha* rather than the content. There can be no questioning the remarkable ability of the course to draw non-Christians in, but the question does remain as to what they are taught when they join the course. One of the characteristics of our post-modern culture is to exalt style over content, and we must be wary of simply assuming that because the style is good that the content is equally good.

The critical question is this: is the message of *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored* the message of the Bible? We shall attempt to answer that question by considering four main doctrines: the character of God, the nature of sin, the cross of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Character of God

Reading the *Alpha* written material, together with listening to the tapes and speakers at the *Alpha* Conference, one gets a clear and consistent message about the character of God. The message is that God is love. In the third session guests are told, 'God loves each one of us so much and longs to be in relationship with us as a human father longs to be in relationship with each of his children.' Elsewhere Nicky Gumbel makes clear that one of the foundation principles of *Alpha* is that God loves us.

What can be wrong with *Alpha* proclaiming this glorious, Biblical truth of God's love? Does not the apostle John state 'God is love' (1 John 4:16)? How can this be a problem? It is only a problem if this is the *only* characteristic of God which is

emphasized. Sadly this appears to be true of *Alpha*. To be fair we must note that the *Alpha* material does also speak of God's justice and other attributes of His character, but the overwhelming message of the course is that God is love.

Yet the Bible is clear that love is not the only attribute of the God who has revealed himself in creation and in the Scriptures. There is much that we could say about the God of the Scriptures, and yet *Alpha* appears to assume His existence rather than describe His character. So there is nothing in the course about Him being our Creator and all that the Bible unpacks from this great truth, namely that He is the great King and Sovereign over all that He has made. Hand makes the point well when he writes: 'In *Alpha* God is simply introduced to us as the one who can help us rather than as the self-existent and eternally glorious Maker of heaven and earth.'

Alongside the absence of God being our Creator is a failure to teach God's holiness. This is extraordinary given the fact that 'God is Holy' is taught far more frequently in Scripture than 'God is Love'. Indeed the adjective used most frequently in Scripture to describe God is 'holy'. At the risk of being accused of divorcing God's holiness from God's love, it is necessary to see the connection between these two aspects of God's character. The God of the Bible is a God of holiness whose love is all the more remarkable in that it is bestowed on upon wicked sinners. Indeed when we remove the holiness of God we undermine the love of God.

By contrast, *Christianity Explored* seeks to introduce even in the first week to the truth that God is our creator and has revealed Himself uniquely in Jesus Christ. Moreover, the value of working through Mark's gospel is quickly seen as we discover the awesome power and authority of this God-man, and realise that to be in rebellion against Him is a deeply serious business. To quote from the talk in week four, 'God is a God of holiness, of blazing purity, and he hates what is evil. When it comes to evil he doesn't lean back in a rocking chair and pretend nothing has happened, like a benevolent grandfather. No, evil matters to God.'

The Scriptures warn us that 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10:31). My fear is that guests on the *Alpha* course would never know this from the material they are presented with for they have only been presented with one attribute of the God of the Bible. Clearly time does not permit teaching everything about God's character in an introductory course, but *Christianity Explored* appears to be more faithful in conveying the character of God as both loving and holy.

The nature of sin

The consequences of misrepresenting the character of God are enormous. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in *Alpha*'s treatment of sin. For as one follows the argument in the course, sin is presented as being seen in the 'mess that we make of our own lives'. The problem of sin is explained as 'the rubbish that clutters up our lives and clutters our world' and as 'pollution of the soul'. At the 1997 *Alpha Leaders' Conference*, Sandy Millar defined sin as, 'the difference between what we are and what we might have been'. However these are merely symptoms of sin and *Alpha* is clear on what is at the heart of sin when it states that the '...root cause of sin is a broken relationship with God...' The consequences of sin are then spelt out in terms of the pollution, the power, the penalty and the partition of sin.

Yet one cannot help feeling that for all *Alpha's* use of Biblical words, the course fails to define sin Biblically. The main reason for this is that it concentrates on the consequences of sin rather than on what sin actually is. Man without God is the subject of God's wrath. We are not slightly displeasing to Him, with the occasional foible; rather by nature 'we are objects of wrath' (Eph. 2:3) because we have offended against God and broken His holy law. The root cause of sin is not a 'broken relationship with God'; the root cause of sin is that mankind has universally rebelled against God's holy laws and therefore offended God himself.

Here we see the consequences of failing to teach that God is holy. Hand puts it clearly when he writes:

Alpha simply has no grasp of the holiness of God and of his wrath against sin. It has no concept of man having offended God. This explains why *Alpha* curiously answers the question 'why worry about sin?' by listing four **consequences** of sin. The consequences are true enough. But is all man-centred. They are the consequences **for us**. Surely the fact that we have offended against God is sufficient reason in itself to worry about sin. ...*Alpha's* analysis simply does not go anything like far enough. Its 'Christ' comes forth to deal with too small a problem' (emphases his).

However, *Christianity Explored* explains far more coherently what the Bible teaches about sin. Quoting Mark 12:30, the course charges us with the greatest crime, that is having failed to love God as we should and robbing Him of His rightful authority. Indeed the sound bite of the course epitomises the clear emphasis on sin—'we are more wicked than we ever realised', and it is excellent to see in which the course addresses the horror of our total depravity in a way that people can understand. By the end of week three we are left in no doubt that we are rebels against God and are in desperate need of a rescue. The urgency of Jesus' rescue mission has been sounded, and against the bleakness of human wickedness and divine judgment, the wonder of God's grace will be seen all the more clearly.

As we shall discover, our understanding of sin will inevitably affect our understanding of the cross. If the diagnosis is inaccurate then the cure will be ineffective. So what do *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored* say about the cross?

The Cross of Christ

In explaining the work of Christ on the cross, *Christianity Explored* focuses on Mark's account of the crucifixion. It is one of the clearest explanations of penal substitution that I have seen—God is angry at sin, Jesus is abandoned in our place, with the result that we can be accepted. One possible weakness here is that it could lead to the impression that Jesus was an innocent third party who received God's punishment, rather than the Bible's insistence that atonement was accomplished by God satisfying Himself by substituting Himself for us.

One of the aims of *Christianity Explored* is to teach the true nature of grace. Thus the week after explaining the cross, there is a whole session on the nature of grace. Linking God's grace with God's finished work on the cross, the guests are left in no doubt at all that forgiveness is a free gift to be received rather than anything that can be earned.

To suggest that *Alpha* is weak on the atonement may seem a travesty given all that it does say. Does it not devote an entire talk to answer the question 'Why did Jesus

die?’ Are we not told that ‘the cross lies at the heart of the Christian faith’? Is not John Stott quoted when referring to 1 Peter 2:24 that the cross sees the ‘self-substitution of God’? Certainly the course gives a number of Biblical references and teaches that the death of Jesus achieved justification, redemption, atonement and reconciliation.

There is much good material at this point, and yet there are two very important weaknesses as well. The first is that *Alpha* misses the very heart of the cross and so ultimately fails to answer the question it sets up to answer, the question ‘Why did Jesus die?’ The doctrine of penal substitution is simply not taught in the course. This is hardly surprising given that the righteous wrath of God has not been explained as being mankind’s biggest problem.

This lack of teaching on penal substitution results in *Alpha* getting in a muddle at this stage. For it wants to teach that Christ died as substitute, and indeed does teach this, and yet because it is not taught that Jesus died as *penal* substitute, bearing upon himself the wrath of God, we are left without any understanding of why Jesus had to die at all. Thus the cross of Christ ends up being little more than a visual aid that proves that God is self-sacrificial and loving. As Hand says, ‘Christ’s work on the cross is demoted to being a rescue act to save us from our problems rather than fulfilling the righteous demands of the holy law and appeasing the wrath of God’. The death of Jesus is presented as an act of love but without any connection with the reality of God’s holy anger. We are left thinking that Christ sacrificed Himself to rescue us from the consequences of sin because that was required by some impersonal and rather arbitrary justice system.

The second major weakness in this area is that for all its claims that ‘the cross lies at the heart of the Christian faith’, the cross in reality is not central. Far from it. After talk two which deals with the cross it is barely mentioned in subsequent sessions. This is extraordinary not only because the cross is at the heart of the Christian faith, but in light of the fact that *Alpha* is aimed at those who know little or nothing of the Christian faith. Moreover, this is indicative of a much bigger problem with *Alpha*. This is that it assumes too much too quickly and leaves the gospel behind in its zeal to teach on Christian living. It hardly seems appropriate to cover the person of Christ, the nature of sin, the atonement and regeneration in two sessions (such that the third session is entitled, ‘*How can I be sure of my faith?*’) leaving the remaining eleven sessions dealing with Christian lifestyle (including three sessions – as many as the evangelistic section – on the Holy Spirit). One of the great strengths of *Christianity Explored* is that it always roots Christian living in the gospel. Again and again we are taken back to the cross so that it’s plain that the cross really is does lie at the heart of both the way in and the way on in the Christian faith.

Given that the cross is clearly not the centre of *Alpha* there is a huge vacuum that must be filled. It is not hard to see what does fill that vacuum and therefore what the centre of *Alpha* really is. It is the Holy Spirit which ‘forms the *de facto* and *de jure* core of *Alpha*’.

The Holy Spirit

There is so much teaching on the Holy Spirit in *Alpha* with which classic evangelicals should take issue that is very hard to know where to begin. A standard Charismatic line

is taken on most aspects of the person and work of the Holy Spirit and we shall merely touch on some of the more alarming teaching of *Alpha*.

In the talk, '*How can I be filled with the Spirit*', a traditional Charismatic line is taken on the 'fullness of the Spirit' being a subsequent experience to conversion. As John Chapman has commented, 'This previously would have been called the 'baptism in the Spirit'. The name has changed but, alas, the understanding has not. This 'double phased' experience is argued from Paul's 'double experience' on the Damascus Road and later with Ananias (Acts 9), from the Samaritans (Acts 8), and from the Ephesians (Acts 19). What is disappointing is that these tired arguments were refuted decisively years ago'. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest anything other than that the believer receives all of the Holy Spirit at the point when he or she puts their trust in Jesus and are justified. Thus the teaching, 'Every Christian has the Holy Spirit, but not every Christian is filled with the Spirit' is seriously at odds with Biblical teaching.

Equally alarming is Gumbel's view of conversion. He writes, '...coming from the New Age movement [some] find that rational and historical explanations leave them cold, but at the weekend away they are on more familiar territory in experiencing the Holy Spirit'. As Scholes points out, 'Nicky Gumbel's reasoning suggests that there are two equally valid ways to become a Christian; one is to be persuaded either by 'rational and historical explanations', or alternatively by 'experiencing the Holy Spirit'. To think thus is to ignore the fact that it was always the apostles' priority to present 'rational and historical explanations' to all sorts of people (Acts 2:22-41; 8:26-38; 17:16-33 etc.) wherever they proclaimed the gospel'. This appears to be yet another way in which the apostolic gospel is bypassed in an effort to make the gospel as accessible as possible.

Furthermore we are told that 'For many the decisive moment is the Saturday evening of the weekend'. For *Alpha* the decisive moment seems not to be the preaching of Christ and Him crucified, but when the Holy Spirit is invoked. But if, as the Scriptures teach us, the Holy Spirit comes at conversion this is quite extraordinary. Surely the moment when the guest repents and believes must be the 'decisive moment'. However this would explain why so much emphasis is put on the weekend when the Spirit comes. This came across very firmly at the *Alpha* Leaders' Conference in 1997 when the 'model' talk was the one entitled, '*How can I be filled with the Spirit?*'. Sandy Millar said that, 'HTB has a reputation for the Holy Spirit coming at these weekends'. Speaking of his own conversion he added that he feared that the speaker had left and that 'the Holy Spirit would have left with him'. There was almost a peculiar mystique about giving this talk. So Nicky Gumbel said, 'I knew that the Holy Spirit wouldn't come when I did it... I could see myself doing every talk but this one'. The message is consistent: the highlight of *Alpha* is the Holy Spirit weekend.

Yet isn't this teaching both to demean the Holy Spirit and to misunderstand His work? We cannot control the Holy Spirit in the way that *Alpha* implies; for like the wind that blows wherever it wishes (John 3:8) the Holy Spirit moves wherever he wishes and without human control. The Spirit is sovereign and He will work as He chooses and as God has promised, namely when the word of God preached. Ironically then *Alpha* ends up limiting the Spirit, the very thing which it accuses others of doing when it claims, 'For a long time in the church the person and work of the Holy Spirit

has been ignored, misunderstood and resisted'. Moreover if the Spirit's longing is to point to Christ and to bring Him glory then isn't it rather strange that Christ is so infrequently mentioned?

This lack of focus on Jesus is seen very clearly in the testimonies people give, testimonies, which *Alpha* quotes with approval in its literature. The first of five main *Alpha* testimonies in *Telling Others* is particularly revealing. It reads:

The one thing that stuck in my mind was how the work of the Holy Spirit was described as of paramount importance. I knew in my heart I had to have this power in my life at any cost so I found out where the church was, enrolled on the course and focused on the weekend. I felt like a dying man waiting for a life-saving operation. Never mind the weeks of pre-med, I just had to get into the operating theatre... I looked at the order of play, saw that the third session (which I had identified as the main one) was at 4.30pm and simply hung on like a marathon runner weaving his way up the final straight with nothing but the finishing tape as the focus of his attention. I'll never forget that session. I felt as though I was being torn in two. Halfway through I just couldn't stand it any more. The prize was so near but we were getting there so slowly! I literally wanted to scream out, 'Do it now! Do it now! I couldn't hold out any longer. I'm not exaggerating when I say I was in agony. Then God came and then came the relief'.

Having no idea who this person is, we have to say that this is deeply troubling. They regard the talks on 'Who is Jesus?' and 'Why did Jesus die?' as 'pre-med'. The focus of their attention is specifically identified as being not the Lord Jesus, not the Cross, not even the Holy Spirit, but the third session, 'How can I be filled with the Spirit?'. Sadly such a testimony is repeated again and again. This is hardly surprising given that guests are taught, 'Physical heat sometimes accompanies the filling of the Spirit and people experience it in their hands or some other part of their bodies. One person described a feeling of 'glowing all over'. Another said she experienced 'liquid heat'. Still another described 'burning in my arms when I was not hot'. Still another said, 'I didn't want to come to the weekend and I did. But I would call myself a Christian now. I would say that I felt the Holy Spirit. I was feeling I was loved. It was really a tremendous overwhelming feeling of love'.

Many more things could be said about *Alpha*'s pneumatology, but in concluding this section we must say that this isn't simply a case of Christians having different views on whom the Holy Spirit is and what He does. It is that, but it is considerably more than that. For it seems that what is being presented is an entirely different view of conversion. More often than not *Alpha* seems to invite people to have an *experience* of God's love and of the power of the Spirit rather than calling for obedience to the message of the gospel. Scripture commands us to believe that Jesus is Lord which must lead to repentance of sin and a belief in the good news that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Tim. 1:15). Then, and *only then*, will the regenerate person be justified before a Holy God, be filled with all of the Holy Spirit, and have absolute assurance of anger propitiated, sins forgiven, and of heaven ahead. Needless to say that to be born again in this Biblical sense is a profoundly *emotional experience*. We are not suggesting for a moment that we must shun emotion or experience; rather we are insisting, as the Scriptures do, that there is content to what we believe and substance to our experience of God's grace.

Christianity Explored has seen the value of having a weekend or day away, but the content and expectation of the weekend/day is vastly different. Under the title 'You're never Alone', there are four talks—the church family, the Holy Spirit, prayer, and the Bible – as well as two Bible studies. Far from being ignored, there is faithful teaching on the person and work of the Spirit: his indispensability in bringing people to Christ; his indwelling of every believer; his illuminating the Scriptures; his gifting of believers and his enabling us to fight the Christian life. Thus both Biblical teaching and weight are given to the Holy Spirit.

The best thing about *Christianity Explored* is its commitment to teaching Mark's gospel. In so doing it is able to make the transition from evangelism to discipleship smoothly as it follows the two key questions of Mark's gospel: who is Jesus? (chs 1–8) and what does it mean to follow Jesus (chs 9–16). Thus after the weekend/day away, there are four more weeks focussing on what it means to follow Jesus. One church I know has split the course in two so that after seven weeks of *Christianity Explored* they encourage guests to do the next four sessions under the title of *Discipleship Explored*. In so doing the course avoids the confusion of *Alpha*. The more one investigates *Alpha*, the more it seems that the authors haven't decided whether it is a discipleship course (as it started out) or an evangelism course (as it's ended up).

In conclusion, it would seem that for Bible-believing evangelicals there should simply be no choice between *Christianity Explored* and *Alpha*. Whilst until now it has been popular to use *Alpha* whilst making amendments to avoid some of the charismatic emphases, it seems that now that there is an obvious Biblical alternative there will be no need to do so. *Christianity Explored* faithfully and relevantly presents the apostolic gospel in all its majesty and splendour. May God use it to bring many to a saving knowledge of Himself.

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Robin Weekes is the Curate of Emmanuel Church Wimbledon

Systematic Theology Literature Survey, 1997–2001

David Field

Introduction

‘True concentration is the fruit of calculated dispersion.’ So runs the quotation from Basil Liddell Hart in what is undoubtedly one of the most helpful theological books published over the last forty years, never mind the last four, *The Greenhill Dictionary of Military Quotations* (Greenhill Books, 2000) edited by Peter G Tsouras. What follows is an attempt to discuss a number of books published over the last four years in the field of systematic theology in order to facilitate ‘calculated dispersion’ in the reading habits of *Foundations* subscribers.

Apologies and Qualifications

1. I make no claim whatsoever that what follows is comprehensive. As Frederick the Great said, ‘petty geniuses attempt to hold everything’ (*ibid.*, p. 105) and since I am no genius and wish to avoid pettiness, what follows is selective, subjective and a lot more dispersed than calculated. Feel free to play ‘unforgivable omissions’ and expect high scores.

2. I am not trying to review the works mentioned—that has been done elsewhere in this and other journals. Rather I am bringing to readers’ attention a number of pieces which appear to me to be important and, generally, give a reason why I think they are noteworthy.

3. There is, of course, material overlap between the sub-disciplines of theology. I do not propose to deal with ‘Jesus studies’ which belong to a New Testament literature survey even though some fascinating work is being done here which will have important implications for systematics. Similarly, I have kept away from biblical theology. In the theological programme, ethics rightly falls under systematic theology but it will not be covered here as the sheer volume of publications in ethics warrants a separate review. If, however, one is looking for a one-volume introduction to Christian ethics then be assured that nothing has been produced in the last four years which betters the dense but rewarding *Resurrection and Moral Order* by Oliver O’Donovan (Apollos, 1994, 2nd edition) and the more accessible and pleasingly theological *Biblical Christian Ethics* by David Clyde Jones (Baker, 1994). Apologetics, too, requires its own survey but mention must be made of one massive and important work, Greg Bahnsen’s posthumously published *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998).

4. Two works published just before the opening date of our survey have been hailed as supremely important contributions in their fields. Time will tell whether these claims are exaggerated but certainly attention should be drawn and given to *The Desire of the Nations* (CUP, 1996) by Oliver O’Donovan and *The Word Made Strange* (Blackwells, 1997) by John Milbank. The prestigious *Journal of Theological Studies* describes Milbank’s work as ‘a simply magnificent achievement ... a formidable landmark.’

5. Articles appearing in journals and periodicals are also not covered here both because the literature is too vast and because what is of lasting importance in journals will eventually generate book-length expositions or responses.

6. I have pitched what follows at the theologically alert and competent pastor and have therefore rarely mentioned mass circulation popular works which will have already hit the radar screen. Similarly, reference to works produced in the secular academy for the secular academy (of which there are far too many) has been kept to a minimum.

Desert Island Dogmatics

If you were allowed only one single author or single volume systematic theology on your shelves which would you choose? How about two? Three? And should anything published in the last four years affect your choice? Even amongst readers of a journal like *Foundations* one suspects that there would be a great variety in the selections made and the reasons given but, for the pleasure of having them at the front of your mind again, let me remind you of some of the leading candidates: John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Robert Dabney, Charles Hodge, William Shedd, Heinrich Heppe, Karl Barth, Louis Berkhof, GC Berkouwer, Hendrikus Berkhof, Herman Hoeksema, Carl Henry, Wayne Grudem, Thomas Oden. (And some runners-up, some of whom lag badly: John Gill, AA Hodge, Augustus Strong, Otto Weber, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Helmut Thielicke, Jürgen Moltmann, Geoffrey Wainwright, Charles Ryrie, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson, RJ Rushdoony, James Garrett, James Montgomery Boice).

The last four years have seen some notable contenders enter the lists. Worthy of first mention is Francis Turretin's three volume *Institutes of Elencntic Theology* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997). This work first published in Latin in 1679–85 was translated into English in the nineteenth century by George Musgrave Giger at the request of his friend Charles Hodge and Giger's 8,000 handwritten pages sat in the library at Princeton available to be consulted by students whose Latin was weak. James T Denison Jr has produced a magnificent edition of Giger's translation and lovers of profound, precise and reverent Reformed theology are greatly indebted to him.

In 1999 a further section of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* was released by the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. Bavinck lived from 1854 to 1921 and his eleven chapter, four-volume dogmatics had great influence upon the likes of Louis Berkhof and GC Berkouwer. Two of the eleven 'chapters' have now been issued as sample volumes. *The Last Things* (Baker 1996) followed by *In the Beginning* (Baker 1999). Prescient of theological developments over the next three generations and always readable, Bavinck's work deserves a wide readership. The translation of the whole work is now complete and the DRTS anticipates the appearance of the first cloth-bound volume in 2002.

Little needs to be said about Robert Reymond's *New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nelson, 1998). Major reviews have been published by Mark Karlberg here in *Foundations* (Spring, 2001) and by Robert Letham in *Westminster Theological Journal* (Fall, 2000) which in different ways undermine the book's claim to be a 'new standard of Reformed theology'. Amongst the criticisms which Letham regards as exposing the book's 'serious and crippling inadequacies' are that the book does not engage with serious theological thought in the academy, discussing neither recent attention to trinitarian theology nor feminist theology, liberation theology, Islam or the charismatic movement; that it is rationalistic and individualistic; that it is flawed by Reymond's

position that the Reformation view of the trinity is radically different from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan teaching; that it opposes the eternal generation of the Son, argues that Calvin rejected Nicene trinitarianism and has a weak sacramental theology.

Two major and recent systematic theologies which have drawn a great deal of attention are Robert Jenson's two-volume *Systematic Theology* (OUP, 1997–9) and Wolfhart Pannenberg's three-volume *Systematic Theology* now in English translation (Eerdmans/T&T Clark, 1991–8). There are many features which these two share: both are dense, demanding, often provocative, rarely comfortable and built upon a non-evangelical doctrine of revelation. Both are 'confessional' in the sense that they are the work of committed insiders writing prescriptively rather than that of pretended objective dispassionate commentators writing descriptively. Jenson has described Pannenberg's work as 'complexly rewarding and sometimes utterly exasperating'. Pannenberg has written that Jenson's work has 'learning that is both vast and profound ... and frequently exciting flashes of insight.' What each has said about the other is not only correct but also true of himself.

Pannenberg is less terse in his expression and more recognisably a post-Enlightenment liberal in his methodology than Jenson. He is also more prone to exploring the historical development of various positions which he invariably does with sureness of touch and immense erudition. Certainly this is not a consistently reliable guide to the dogma of Christian orthodoxy. Equally certainly it is challenging, imaginative and suggestive for those whose foundations are firm.

In these ways, too, Jenson can be a delight. For example, he reminds us, 'As faith is precisely finding oneself beyond oneself, the criterion of its authenticity is necessarily its object and not any form of self-analysis by the believer. The question "Do I really believe?" is already an unbelieving question.' (I.28) A score of qualifications and objections, exegetical, evangelistic, pastoral and dogmatic present themselves no sooner than one has read this statement. But then at least half a dozen fruitful developments and applications also present themselves. This is the joy of reading Jenson. Another example: 'The difference of past and future, and their meeting in a specious present, is the one unavoidable metaphysical fact, the fact of our temporality. As religion is the cultivation of eternity, or some or other bracket around our temporality, triple patterns are endemic in religion' (I.89). Or this: 'God will let the redeemed see him: the Father by the Spirit will make Christ's eyes their eyes ... The point of identity, infinitely approachable and infinitely to be approached, the enlivening *telos* of the Kingdom's own life, is perfect harmony between the conversation of the redeemed and the conversation that God is' (II.369).

Well-marketed and superficially attractive from the evangelical left are Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Eerdmans, 1994, 1999) and Alister McGrath's widely used text-book *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Blackwells, 2001, 3rd edition). These books approach neither the depth and precision of Turretin on the one hand nor the creativity and suggestiveness of Jenson on the other. Over-respectful of apostasy in the academy they strive for mature moderation and achieve a slightly tired fashionableness.

And, of course, it remains a sadness to many of us that there is no complete systematic theology from the pens of either John M Frame, author of *The Doctrine of the Knowledge*

of God (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987) and Cornelius Van Til: *An Analysis of his Thought* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995) or JI Packer. By way of consolation, we do now have four volumes of the *Collected Shorter Writings* of Packer (Paternoster, 1998–9) and these are predictably reliable, nutritious and inspiring.

Dictionaries/Encyclopaedia

The *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (IVP, 2000) has many helpful features and very many excellent articles but the unforgivable lack of indices, the unevenness of approach in its articles and the glaring gaps in its entry list make it something of a disappointment. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Baker, 1995) is more helpful.

The *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (OUP, 2000) edited by Adrian Hastings et al. is also a disappointment. Promising much and of prodigious size for a one volume work, it tries to cover too much ground—theological concepts, significant people and movements, biblical cyclopaedia and history of doctrine—and turns out patchy in its coverage and uncertain in its aim.

In contrast, the signs are that the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker, 2001)—which I have not yet seen—will not disappoint. The previous edition (Baker, 1984) remains the best one volume theological dictionary of its type and there is every hope that its successor will fill an important gap on the shelf.

Series produced by particular publishing houses

Paternoster's series of *Biblical and Theological Monographs*, largely consisting of PhD dissertations published as written or only slightly revised, currently has around 25 titles. Items such as 'An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae' and 'A Kierkegaardian Reading of Charles Williams' may not gain a wide readership there are some in the series which deserve notice. Jonathan Bayes' *The Weakness of the Law* (Paternoster, 2000) is an exegetical work focussing upon four passages in Paul which appear to be 'negative' about the law of God and its conclusions provide important support for proponents of the 'third use' of the law. David Powys' *Hell: A Hard Look at a Hard Question* (Paternoster, 1998) is learned and temperate but reaches this conclusion: 'The tentative finding of this study is that the unrighteous will have no life after death, save possibly to be raised temporarily to be condemned. The unrighteous, whoever they prove to be, will find that God respects them in death as in life—true to their own choice they will have no part in the restored Kingdom of God, indeed, severed from the source of life, they will be no more.' Although more a piece of historical theology, G Michael Thomas's *The Extent of the Atonement* will be of interest to those who have followed these (Armstrong, Kendall, Nicole, Helm, Clifford et al.) debates. Thomas argues that the free offer of the gospel is incompatible with absolute personal predestination and that this has produced a radical and as yet unresolved tension at the heart of Reformed thought. His description of the problem may or may not be historically accurate but it is theologically overstated and certainly his proposed Barthian solution is weak.

Zondervan's series *Three [Four] views on ...* has received a number of recent additions. Of particular relevance to current debates are Darrell Bock (ed.), *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Zondervan 1999), JP Moreland and John Mark Reynolds (eds.), *Three Views on Creation and Evolution* (Zondervan 1999), and Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips (eds.) *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Zondervan

1996) although when, as in this last item, John Hick and Clark Pinnock are two of the protagonists, one wonders how precisely the centre of gravity in these debates is determined. With collections of this type the reader must always remember that the centre ground is on castors.

The *Bible Speaks Today* series edited by Alec Motyer and John Stott and published by IVP has made a splendid contribution to the thinking and especially the preaching of evangelicals for over twenty years now. A related series, *Bible Themes* is edited by Derek Tidball and so far just three titles have appeared: Peter Lewis's *The Message of the Living God* (IVP, 2000), Paul Beasley-Murray's *The Message of the Resurrection* (IVP, 2000) and Derek Tidball's *The Message of the Cross* (IVP, 2001). The attraction of the series is, of course, its biblico-theological approach and the corresponding danger is that it is easy for the books to feel sermonic and to avoid the demanding questions which the systematician is required to face.

IVP's other series, *Contours of Christian Theology* was established well before the period covered by this survey with Gerald Bray on *The Doctrine of God*, Robert Letham on *The Work of Christ* and Paul Helm on *The Providence of God* all appearing as far back as 1993. Subsequently volumes appeared covering *The Holy Spirit* (Sinclair Ferguson, 1996), *The Church* (Ed Clowney, 1995), and *The Doctrine of Humanity* (Charles Sherlock, 1996). To this point the series was uneven, not so much in quality as in pitch, with, for example, Helm's philosophical treatment of providence reading very differently from Clowney's more biblico-theological approach to the doctrine of the church. Donald Macleod's volume on *The Person of Christ* (1998) was a very welcome addition to the series. Macleod's passion and reverence combine with his theological precision to warm the heart as well as to stretch the mind. Further volumes on *Revelation* and *The Last Things* are intended but the feeling remains that the series as a whole is something of a missed opportunity—less rather than more than the sum of its parts.

A very different series is currently being issued by Cambridge University Press. The *Cambridge Companion to ...* series endeavours to combine authoritative status reports on scholarship in given areas with original contributions to that scholarship. The series has attracted an impressive array of contributors and a number of the volumes already published deserve attention. The *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (1997) edited by Colin Gunton has essays on the traditional theological loci by writers of the calibre of Gunton himself, Kevin Vanhoozer, Robert Jensen, and Geoffrey Wainwright. The *Cambridge Companions to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (ed. John de Gruchy, 1999), to *Karl Barth* (ed. John Webster, 2000), to *Liberation Theology* (ed. Christopher Rowland, 1999) and to *Ethics* (ed. Robin Gill, 2001) are all as rewarding as they are demanding.

Twentieth Century Surveys

For those seeking an introduction to the development of non-evangelical systematics over the twentieth century two recent publications may be of help. *Contemporary Theologies* (Fortress Press, 1998) by Ed Miller and Stanley Grenz is a very readable survey with chapters on Barth, the Niebuhrs, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, the Death of God, Process Theology, Moltmann, Pannenberg, Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, Global Theology (Hick) and Postliberalism (Lindbeck). It suffers from the common fault of soft evangelical treatments of apostates, namely that of trying too hard to appreciate the positive and to avoid denouncing the heretical.

The Modern Theologians (Blackwells, 1997, 2nd edition) edited by David Ford is a mine of information and insights. Thirty five chapters, each by a different author, cover very many of the significant academic theologians and theological movements of the twentieth century. The book has a strongly ecumenical and international perspective and its value is in highlighting the distinctions, questions and flaws of others rather than in making a positive theological contribution of its own.

On A Few Particular Doctrines

On God and creation

In *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God's Action in the World* (IVP, 2001) C John Collins discusses supernaturalism, providentialism and occasionalism and argues that the first of these which, he believes, is somewhat out of fashion is yet both exegetically warranted and logically coherent. Collins provides an interesting and helpful introduction to the debates as well as useful background to the growing literature on 'intelligent design'.

Of late there has been a strong renewed interest in trinitarian theology and particularly in the concept popularised by John Zizioulas in his *Being as Communion* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985) of the being of God as 'persons in relation'. As Colin Gunton puts it in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (T&T Clark, 1997, 2nd edition) 'God is no more than what Father, Son and Spirit give to and receive from each other in the inseparable communion that is the outcome of their love. Communion is the *meaning* of the word: there is no 'being' of God other than this dynamic of persons in relation.' (p. 10). Gunton's work is technically demanding but does clarify many of the issues at stake in current trinitarian debate. More accessible and somewhat predictable is Millard Erickson's *Making Sense of the Trinity* (Baker, 2000). Don Carson provides a thoughtful and enormously helpful clarification of the Biblical data and their implications in *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Crossway, 2000)

The Openness of God

The debate around the 'openness of God' gives a dispiriting view of the state of evangelical theology. A time-bound, dependent, changeable God who does not know the future and whose love is measured not by what he gives but by his vulnerability to 'feeling our pain' is a parody of the God of the Scriptures. No surprise, then, that he (she?) should be so adored by liberals whose method and agenda have been determined by Enlightenment humanism and relativism, whose refusal to believe in a sovereign God means that post-Holocaust theology is regarded as qualitatively different from anything that had gone before and whose invention of strategies for avoiding uncomfortable truths has been fuelled by the abuse of hermeneutics and the philosophy-theology divide. But the ready capitulation of so many evangelicals before the charges that, for example, the doctrine of impassibility is a Greek philosophical imposition upon the Christian faith or that the suffering of the divine Christ in his humanity is not enough—God the Father, if he loves, must take our suffering into his divine nature, is dismal. The debate is extremely important and well documented elsewhere. Important additions from the last four years include Gregory Boyd's *God of the Possible* (Baker, 2000); Gerald Bray's *The Personal God: Is the Classical Understanding of God Tenable?* (Paternoster, 2000) which is

characteristically lucid and forthright; Bruce Ware's excellent *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Crossway, 2001); *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock* (Paternoster, 2000), edited by Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson; *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* (Eerdmans, 2000) edited by John Cobb and Clark Pinnock.

Superior, in my view, to all of these, however, is Thomas Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?* (T&T Clark, 2000) which is a deeply impressive work. Weinandy, a Franciscan who lectures in History and Doctrine at Oxford, handles the biblical data, the philosophical concepts and the theological implications and interplays of both in a masterly fashion. His introductory survey of the literature and the debates is nuanced and scrupulously fair, his development of his argument inexorable and his exposition of the suffering of the divine Christ both passionate and reverent. From a Franciscan comes orthodox and authentically evangelical theology conducted with seriousness and intellectual rigour.

Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspective on Election, Foreknowledge and Grace (Baker, 2000) edited by Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware is a reissue of 14 of the essays which appeared in their earlier two-volume, *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will* itself a response to Clark Pinnock's *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* (Zondervan, 1989). With contributions from John Piper, Jim Packer, Wayne Grudem, Ed Clowney, and Don Carson, amongst others, *Still Sovereign* is an excellent and readable defence of a strong Calvinist position on these issues.

On sin

Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Eerdmans, 1999) will strike some as quirky and others as compromising but will certainly stimulate thoughtful readers. Iain Campbell's *The Doctrine of Sin* (Mentor, 1999) surveys the biblical, reformed and neo-orthodox views of sin and concludes that neo-orthodoxy's view represents a retreat from a doctrine capable of sustaining full-blooded personal responsibility and guilt. Before the period of our survey but an outstanding book is Cornelius Plantinga's *Not the way it's supposed to be: A breviary of sin* (Apollós, 1995).

On atonement and justification

The growing literature on the 'new perspective' on Paul cannot be dealt with here. Instead, mention should be made of *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet* (Paternoster, 2001) edited by David Peterson. This is a robust defence of the doctrine of penal substitution on exegetical and systematic grounds and is particularly welcome in view of the way that the doctrine appears to be one about which some evangelicals are becoming embarrassed. Norman Shepherd's *The Call of Grace* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000) is more likely to stir memories and passions in North America than in the United Kingdom but its treatment of grace and merit in covenant theology deserves attention.

Eschatology

Unsurprisingly a large number of books on eschatological themes were published around the turn of the millennium. NT Wright's Grove Booklet, *New Heavens, New Earth* (1999) provides a clear statement of his combination of a preterist reading of the synoptic apocalypse with a strong affirmation that Christian hope focuses upon the Christ-centred transformation and renewal and glorification of this universe. RC Sproul's advocacy of a generally preterist position in *The Last Days of Jesus* (Baker, 1998) is, as with most of

what he writes, accessible and cogent. Robert Doyle's *Eschatology and the Shape of Christian Belief* (Paternoster, 1999) has been well received by many although his combination of chronological and thematic treatments at times feels rather schematised. For some, the publication of Jürgen Moltmann's *The Coming of God* (SCM, 1996) was an important event. If nothing else it gave us one of the clearest statements yet of just how radical is his departure from orthodoxy: 'In the divine Judgment all sinners, the wicked and the violent, the murderers and the children of Satan, the Devil and the fallen angels will be liberated and saved from their deadly perdition though transformation into their true, created being, because God remains true to himself, and does not give up what he has once created and affirmed, or allow it to be lost' (p. 255).

The debate over conditional immortality continues vigorously. In addition to David Powys' book mentioned above there are relevant contributions in *'The Reader Must Understand': Eschatology in the Bible and Theology*, (Apollos, 1997) edited by KE Brower and MW Elliott. Two of the main protagonists in the debate, Edward Fudge and Robert Peterson, produced *Two Views of Hell* (IVP, 2000) which gives thorough coverage of the arguments. And the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE) produced another helpful survey *The Nature of Hell* (Acute/Paternoster, 2000) which carefully states what is agreed and what not as well as discussing issues of conditionalism and evangelical unity. It also has a superb bibliography for those wishing to do further research into the subject.

In Conclusion

Do not live another day without ordering and resolving seriously to read Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Thomas Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?*, and Donald Macleod's *The Person of Christ*. And as you do so, remember the words of Thomas a Kempis, (*Imitation*, I.iii.4): 'When the day of judgment comes, inquiry will not be made of us what we have read, but what we have done, not how well we have spoken, but how piously we have lived.'

Dr David Field lectures in doctrine at Oak Hill College

Book Brief

Through the tragic events of 11 September Islam has been forcefully brought to our attention. More than ever we need to be informed about this religion. **Patrick Sookhdeo** is a sure guide in his superb little book *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Islam* (Fearn, Rosshire, Christian focus Publications, 2001). Very succinctly this book deals with the origins of Islam, its essential teachings, its variations and sharing the gospel with Muslims and caring for those who become Christians. At the end of the book is a very useful glossary of Islamic terms. This is just the sort of short book one needs to get a grip on a subject like this and to open the way for further study.

EDITORIAL POLICY

1. To articulate that theology characteristic of evangelical churches which are outside pluralist ecumenical bodies.
2. To discuss any theological issues which reflect the diverse views on matters not essential to salvation held within the BEC constituency.
3. To appraise and report on contemporary trends in theology, particularly those which represent departure from consistent evangelicalism.

To stimulate interest in contemporary theological matters among evangelical churches by the way in which these topics are handled and by indicating their relevance to pastoral ministry.

4. To keep our readers informed about the contents of new books and journals, as a means of encouraging their stewardship of time and money.

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BEC
1st Floor
52 New Park House
ST ALBANS
United Kingdom
AL1 1UJ

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